

A Jewel on the Shenandoah: Something Beautiful for God

From the new church, which sits in the quiet countryside on this soft spring afternoon, the bells ring.

A bagpiper, a cardinal, a bishop, a platoon of priests, and several altar servers slowly walk up the hill from the old church to the new and enter through the double doors, over which is inscribed, “HAEC EST DOMUS DEI ET PORTA COELI,” meaning, “This is the house of God and the gate of heaven.” As the bishop and his company process to the altar, the choir in the loft over the entryway fills the space with their voices.

During the dedication rites and Mass that follow, the bishop deposits a relic of St. Thomas Aquinas in the altar then anoints the altar and walls with chrism oil. Watching him are more than 700 ladies and gentlemen in their finest apparel, many of them donors whose generosity has helped bring this splendor and beauty to fruition.

Afterward, those present leave the church for the enormous white tent only a few yards from the chapel’s piazza, and the fragrant odors of delectable dishes mingle with the scent of wine and other spirits. Servers hurry through this crowd carrying platters of specially prepared hors d’oeuvres, and the canvas palace soon resounds with conversation and laughter.

This scenario might rouse images of 14th-century France, but in this instance we’re on the campus of Christendom College in Front Royal, Virginia. It’s April 15th, 2023, and Nigerian Cardinal Francis Arinze, a longtime friend of the college, Bishop Michael Francis Burbidge of the Diocese of Arlington, and dozens of priests, many of them Christendom graduates, have now properly consecrated and opened this Gothic church

for worship.

In 2016, with the plans for a new chapel in place, Christendom initiated its “Call to Greatness” campaign to raise money for the projected \$30 million project. With that amount collected by 2018 and following the blueprint drawn up by the architectural firm of O’Brien and Keane, work on the chapel began in 2019.

“We wanted to do something beautiful for God,” college President Dr. Timothy O’Donnell said of the new chapel. “The Gothic [architecture] speaks to that. Because of the spires and the arches, it lifts us from the mundane toward heaven. You step into another world where there is mystery and light. This church reminds us of our ultimate goal, which is to get to heaven.”

This building’s interior blends together old and new. The high altar, for instance, is a restored antique as are some of the 114 stained glass windows, many taken from churches now closed, including some from the school’s old chapel. Some of the other attractions of this gem rising above the Shenandoah River include 12 chapel bells, each named for an apostle; four side shrines; 10 life-sized statues—including the Pietà—by Spanish sculptor Edwin Gonzalez; and a 2,850-pipe organ.

These splendors are the result of the time, treasure, and toil invested by a community. The money for construction and the chapel’s many religious objects came from Christendom alumni and private donors. The architects and the project supervisors were paid but were also devoted to the cause. Several Christendom graduates, artists and artisans, also worked directly on the chapel.

One of these was [Mandy Hain](#), a 2007 graduate who had brought her artistic talents to several other churches and who was beloved in Front Royal for the art classes she taught to children. Her [work in the chapel](#) included painting the

crossing tower ceiling above the altar where she worked from a small crane elevator more than a hundred feet from the chapel's floor, an enormous project that often left her in pain.

✖ In a recent article for *Intellectual Takeout*, "[Why Architecture Matters](#)," Jordan Alexander writes: "Soulless architecture makes us feel like drones or prisoners—just another cog in a meaningless machine. It's demoralizing."

Barring some horrible disaster, Christ the King Chapel will stand for centuries as a witness of rebuttal to soulless architecture. The church's beauty and the homage it pays to tradition are signs of hope in a world all too often shorn of these values. Whatever our creed of faith, within these walls we find that "mystery and light" mentioned by Dr. O'Donnell.

But we will leave the final word to Mandy Hain. In Feb. 2023, two months before the dedication, the 41-year-old artist died of cancer in a private home across the street from the chapel. In several interviews and in her journal, Hain shared her [artistic philosophy](#): "To make things beautiful, or to make a beautiful thing, is to make Him known."

That simple and eloquent declaration sums up the aim of all those who built this place of art and tradition.

Requiescat in pace, Mandy.

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Image credit: Christendom College

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