



## september inspiration... friends in high places

September is always a busy month in New York City- the US Open, the Yankee's pennant race, plus the opening session of the United Nations. This year, as if that wasn't excitement enough, add a visit by Pope Francis. At 6:45 PM on September 24<sup>th</sup>, he will pray at a Vespers service at St. Patrick's Cathedral.

There has been much anticipation for both the papal visit and whether or not it will coincide with the completion of the 3 year, \$175 million restoration of New York City's beloved Gothic Revival cathedral, St. Patrick's. I am sure as with all other construction projects, having a non-negotiable completion date has everyone working around the clock to insure the job is completed in time. We know what it is like to work on a construction project that runs over schedule and "praying" that it is completed in time for that wedding or other celebratory event. Knowing how things go, it is a race to the finish and in this case, I am sure it is much the same.



High Altar in scaffolding

My first visit to St Patrick's Cathedral was the fall after my senior year in college. I remember it vividly because I had just moved to New York City after returning from a summer studying in Rome. That summer, I viewed more naves, apses, high altars, chapels, spires, and crypts than I could count. After the first 20 or so, they all began to look the same. By the end of the summer, all saints, chapels, churches and cathedrals blurred together into *one large indecipherable image* in my mind. You can imagine when my roommates insisted introducing me to St Patrick's one Sunday, I felt rather underwhelmed.

I remember feeling very cavalier as I walked through those monumental bronze doors that day, "a church is a church, is a church", and after all, hadn't I just seen the *best of the best*? What immediately stood out (compared to my one" indecipherable image"), was how "American" this cathedral felt. Despite the Gothic Revival style, it was a much simpler version of what I had just studied. Designed by James Renwick in the 1850's, St. Patrick's is an American interpretation of the great Gothic cathedrals in Europe. Designed by an American and built by unskilled Irish American immigrants, it embodies the spirit that our nation was founded on. It was their home, their church, their prayers. It was built with the blood, sweat and tears of the people of this city over a number of years. With its 325 ft. spires and crosses, it has become a symbol of spirituality, solace, and hope for the people of New York and for those who visit it, regardless of their religious affiliations.

A few months ago, I was invited by a friend for a private tour of the reconstruction work. Jean Phifer, of Thomas Phifer and Partners, is the preservation architect overseeing the conservation of the stained glass windows. Jean and I have been friends since our sons attended pre-school on the Upper West Side...(in other words, a long time). We share a love of preservation and a few preservation friends. Therefore, she knew I would be thrilled to have a glimpse behind the scenes.



Jean Phifer- all in a day's work

The work that Jean was overseeing on the stained glass was monumental. There are 75 stained glass windows with a total of 3,700 individual panels of glass that needed restoration. Along with the repair of the lead and stained glass, a hi- tech protective glazing was installed on the exterior to protect the antique glass windows from sun exposure, especially on the south side. I was impressed....

What is remarkable, during all the months that the restoration continued - scaffolding going up and coming down; pipe organ cleaned and repaired; 2½ ton bronze exterior doors taken down, repaired and reinstalled; windows removed, repaired and replaced; stone repaired and repainted in the original Renwick design; all of the banging, high pitch sound of sanders and the clanking of steel beams and girders, a midst all of this... candles were lit, Mass was said, and like the immigrants who built the cathedral, the work being done became a *prayer*.

I can only imagine what it must feel like to be standing on scaffolding high inside those vaulted ceilings- listening to the murmurs of people below while the sun, moving up and down- left and right, casts colored light across the interior. How lucky am I to have a friend in high places? Special thanks to Jean Phifer for sharing her incredible experience with me.

A few weeks later, I happened to find myself on Fifth and 51<sup>st</sup> St. in front of St Patrick's. I decided to take a quick walk thru to see the progress. It was a Friday afternoon and I was amazed by the number of tourists that were walking around taking pictures with their smart phones. There were young kids with ear buds and older folk struggling to focus a shot with their phone cameras. There was still scaffolding above the high altar and the workers were still banging and clanking. Mass was about to begin.

I had a moment- a song popped into my head. I smiled to myself. It wasn't *Ave Maria*, it was an old Madonna song, "*Like a Prayer*"...it felt a bit sacrilegious, but then I thought , ok this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century and well...why not?

I think Pope Francis would approve.

***Blessings to all!***

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