

Q+A

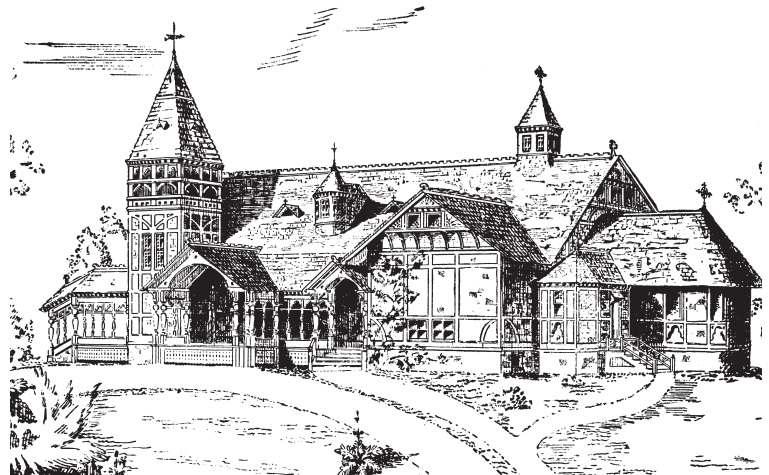
I have heard that a “tester” is being built for the Central Altar in the church and is scheduled to be installed next month. What is a tester, why have it at St Paul’s, and are parish funds being used to pay for it?

There are two kinds of canopies that historically have been put over the principal Altar in Western churches as a mark of honor. One is generally called a “baldacchino” with four supporting columns and can be made of wood, stone, or metal. The largest and best known is Bernini’s 1633 bronze baldacchino over the central Altar in St Peter’s Basilica in Rome. The second type is generally called a “tester” which is suspended from the ceiling or attached to the wall behind the Altar and can be made of carved wood or be a frame with velvet or silk hangings.

Some scholars believe that the use of an altar canopy may go back to the Old Testament *propitiatorium* placed as a mark of honor over the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple in Jerusalem. The earliest known Christian use was the gold and silver baldacchino that in the early AD 300’s the Emperor Constantine placed over the Altar in St John, Lateran, (now as well as then) the cathedral of the Diocese of Rome. The oldest existing baldacchino is in Ravenna (northeastern Italy) and dates from the AD 800’s. Although originally used as a mark of honor of the Altar, a baldacchino had the important effect of giving visual focus to the Altar in the broad crossing area of a basilica, the classical Roman form of civil public building adopted by the Church after the Constantinian establishment.

In addition to Altars, testers have been used as marks of honor over Baptismal fonts, statues, places of Reservation of the Blessed Sacrament, and *cathedras* (bishops’ and abbots’ thrones). In past centuries wood testers were also used over pulpits, not as marks of honor but as sounding boards to improve the projection of the homilist’s voice out into the nave.

St Paul’s church-proper was designed in 1883 by the great 19th century American architect, founder of the “Chicago School” of architecture, “father of the skyscraper,” mentor of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, and St Paul’s parishioner, William LeBaron Jenney in the basilican style. In 1930 the church was thought to be “old fashioned” and “too Victorian,” and the liturgical east (Altar - geographically north) end was torn down and completely replaced with the specific purpose of eradicating Jenney’s design and creating the interior optical illusion of an English Gothic church.



In addition to destroying much of literally a very significant element of the American architectural patrimony, the rebuilding destroyed the acoustics, the sight lines, spatial relationships, and important natural ventilation and lighting which a very sophisticated world famous architect had created in this building.

In 1951 (following the Great Depression and World War II) this dismantling project was completed by closing off Jenney's tower entrance, creating there a closet-like Baptistry, and adding the present narthex, destroying Jenney's very creative liturgical west (geographically south) façade. All in all the "updating" and attempted gothicizing of the Jenney church did not work architecturally, visually, historically, or liturgically.

A structural restoration of the Jenney church to its original state would be far and away beyond the financial resources of the parish, certainly now and probably at any time in the future. Several liturgical and acoustical consultants, however, advised that, while not perfect, substantial functional improvement could be made by restoring the function of the original Jenney space. In June 1981 – with the unanimous concurrence of the Buildings & Grounds Committee, the Memorials & Arts Committee, and the Vestry – the first phase of this careful step-by-step project was begun with the installation of a Nave Altar in the "crossing" of the nave and transepts and the relocation of the choir to the transept seating Jenney intended.

Through the past three decades the subsequent phases have included:

- the restoration of the Baptismal font to approximately its original position and the conversion of the tower space into a shrine with Icons of Our Lady of Vladimir and St Paul the Apostle written by iconographer Christopher Kosmos
- the installation of the Antiphonal Division of the organ (a very generous gift from Richard and Ella Lomastro to help compensate for the acoustical problems created in 1930)
- the renovation of the Chancel Division of the organ and the addition of a number of needed stops as well as the restoration of the console to its original position and now placed on a moveable platform for recitals (a gift from Father Fraser)
- the restoration of the original Sacristy (used now as a Reconciliation Chapel for the Sacrament of Penance)
- the restoration of the area of the original (band shell-like) apse that formed the sanctuary of the Jenney church and which was torn down in 1930 when the enlarged "English Gothic" chancel and sanctuary were built in its place (the line of the low semi-circular wall with the seven lamps hanging above it – representing the seven-fold gifts of the Holy Spirit – follows the foundation of the Jenney apse which is still in the crawl-space directly below it)

The design team for the whole restoration project has been David Gazeley, the internationally respected and sought-after London church interior designer at Watts & Company, Ltd; Ivor Livi, the renowned English sculptor who designed and carved the Holy Family sculpture and central Crucifix in the church as well as the chapel Deposition from the Cross sculpture (a gift from Nancy Meyer, RN) and chapel Altar (a gift from Helen Jablonski); and Deborah Yetter, Chairman of the parish Memorials & Arts Committee.

The last phase of this 31-year meticulous restoration project is the installation of a tester above the central Altar. William LeBaron Jenney designed St Paul's to be a basilican-style church. Historically in a basilica a canopy – a baldacchino in a larger interior, a tester in a smaller church – is always placed over the central Altar both as a mark of honor and to provide visual focus. At St Paul's, it is hoped, a tester

will also act as a sounding board to project the sung and spoken word, helping to compensate for the problem acoustics.

St Paul's tester was designed by David Gazeley using the pattern of the original wood ceiling with trim incorporating the design of the Jenney ceiling beams. In the center will be a panel suggesting the Jenney crossing "lantern" (cupola in a roof that provides both ventilation and natural light) which was removed in 1930 but the outline of which still exists in the ceiling. That center panel, directly below the original lantern, is a *Panagia*, painted by Ivor Livi in the Pre-Raphaelite style (thus consistent with Jenney's period and style), the fresco or mosaic of the Mother of God presenting her Divine Son to the world that traditionally is placed on the ceiling of the apse of a basilica.

The tester is being constructed of redwood and white cedar (used because of their strength but light weight) by Kevin Coghlin, the McHenry master furniture craftsman who also built the chapel Altar. It will be finished to match the faux wood graining of the ceiling.

During the entire 31 years of the project no Parish or Foundation funds have ever been used for any part of this restoration. All of the restoration of the apse space, the front (geographic north) of the church and its appointments, and the Jenney Sacristy have been paid for as gifts from Father Fraser.

The "High Altar" of the 1930 sanctuary addition continues to be used weekly for all Rite I Eucharists. This part of the church has become a Blessed Sacrament Chapel with the Eucharist reserved in the Tabernacle on that Altar. In a very real sense, the restoration project has made this 1930 addition "come into its own" as a very effective liturgical space for traditional rite Masses and for adoration and private prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.