

The Story of a Toronto Church



M. O'Connor

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FOREWORD

In this pamphlet the writer reproduces a series of articles which first appeared in the columns of the Catholic Register. The date of the opening one was July 12th (the appropriateness of which will appeal to readers) and of the last was August 16th. of the present year (1923). In the reprint there is no change beyond that of the omission of some now unnecessary repetitions and the addition of a brief sketch of the opening of the church, with two illustrations, one depicting its exterior in its completed form and the other a view of its interior.

Instead of the heading "From the Church to a Church," under which the articles originally appeared, they shall now, in their corrected form bear the title,

"THE STORY OF A TORONTO CHURCH."

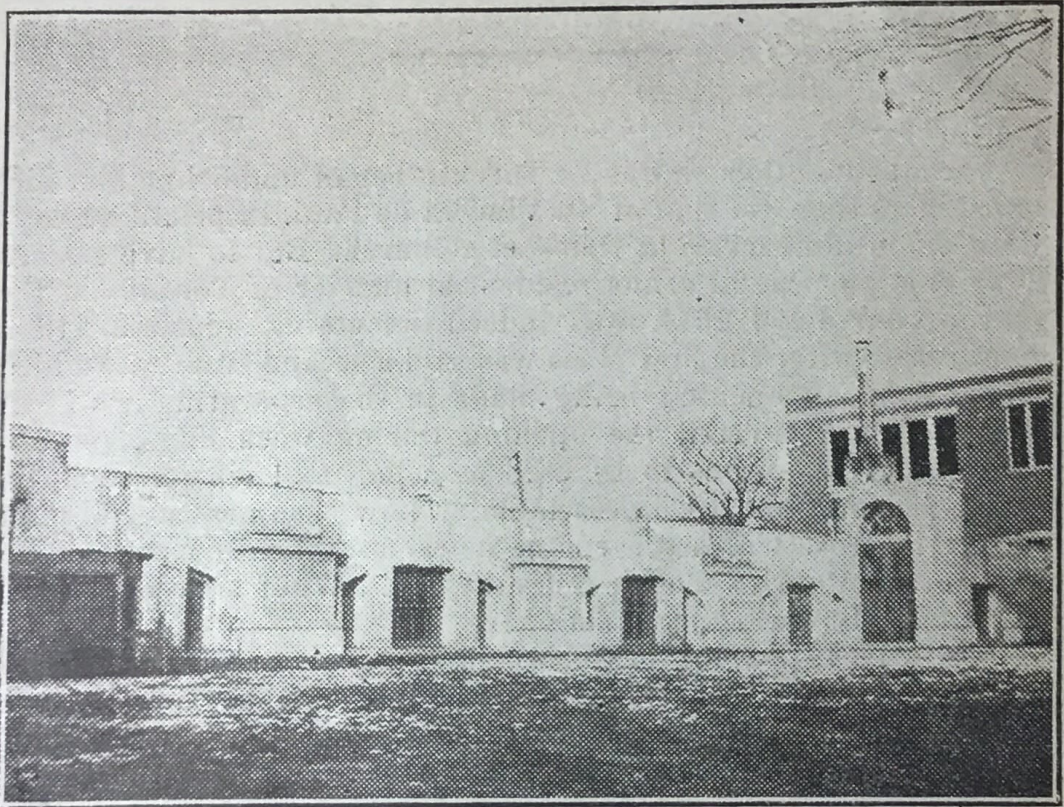
The Story of a Toronto Church

Perhaps no other church in Toronto began under humbler circumstances than did that of St. Vincent de Paul. In primitive days a log cabin did service at times as a church. But to have a store serve this purpose in a fine residential quarter of Toronto in the year of our Lord 1914, was indeed something unusual. In a month or so after the first Mass was said a second store was added to the first, an opening being made in the separating wall. A heavy curtain covered the opening during week days, permitting one of the stores to be used as a hall and school-room. (I might remark that a Chinese laundry now occupies, and has for years, the store which served the newly established parish of St. Vincent de Paul as a chapel for a year. What a descent from spiritual to material purification!

Early in 1915 the necessity of more adequate accommodation for religious and school purposes was apparent. A meeting was held in which encouraging enthusiasm and support were manifested and a resolution to prepare plans for a structure along Grecian lines was supported by all present. Grecian architecture, to be at its best, must be in stone. That is true of Gothic architecture also, but it is easier to adapt other materials to the pointed and sky-piercing Gothic than to the lower and more earthly charm of Athenian halls and temples. The design adopted copied in a general way the Madeleine of Paris, France, the most successful adaptation of Grecian architecture to Christian worship, but with modifications rendered necessary by situation and financial resources. A young architect living in an adjoining parish, J. M. Cowan, prepared a drawing which gave entire satisfaction.

The Great War had entered on its second year, material was scarce; prices had leaped upward; the parish was young; the

cost of completing in stone a structure such as that outlined was beyond the resources of the congregation. Therefore, very unwillingly it was resolved to construct the basement for the present—to serve as a church until the growth of the parish would render the completion of the plan possible. Work started in early summer and progressed so rapidly that the corner-stone was laid on Sunday, August 15, 1915, by His Grace Archbishop McNeil, who officiated at the dedication of the basement church on Sunday, Oct. 24th, of the same year.



No 1

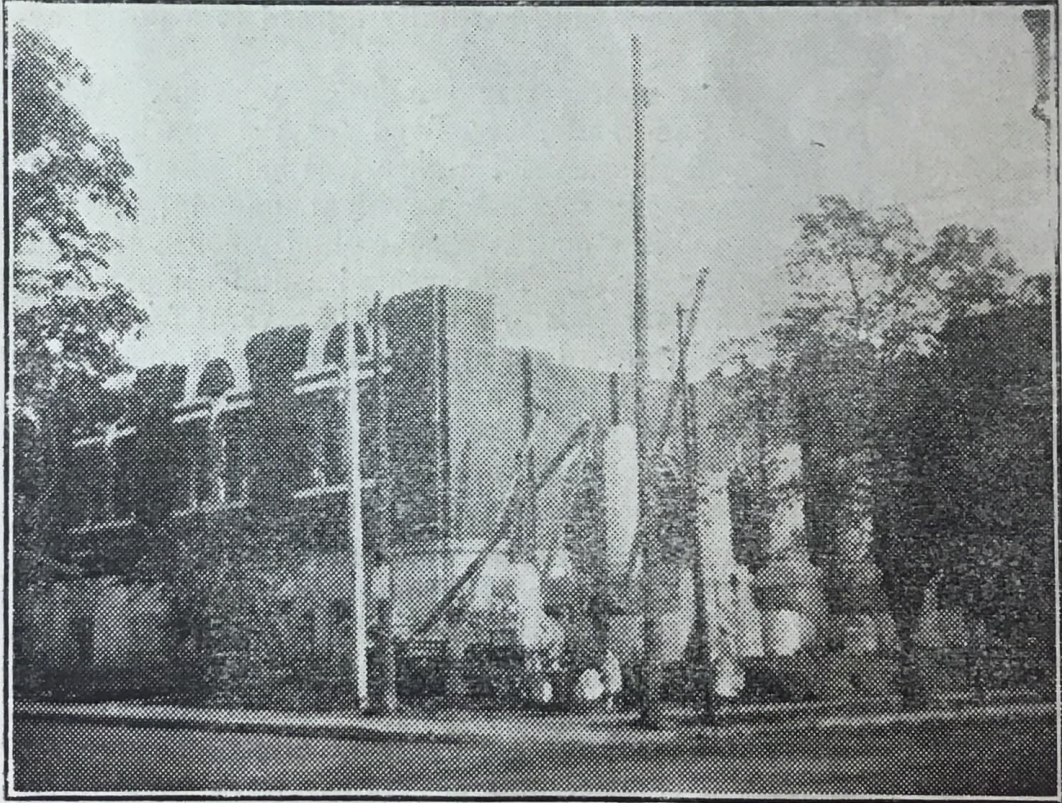
We now introduce our readers to the basement church, which served without change the religious and social needs of St. Vincent de Paul for almost seven years.

The picture reproduced represents developments, when to the east of the church a fine four-roomed school was erected by the Toronto Separate School Board. Before that, for a couple of years after the vacating of the stores, a partitioned portion of the basement served for two school rooms. It will be noticed in the illustration that the school building towers over the basement church. That was a grievance with the writer. Whenever he essayed to get a snapshot of the Church of St. Vincent

de Paul from the south or west, the school building would always lord it over the lowly basement. When he sought to avoid this humiliation by taking a position to the north, another lofty structure in the background performed a similar disservice. The offending structures were not alone in this. "St. Vincent de Paul Church—where is that?" was a query to which he was constantly treated. During war time individuals whose sense of humor was of the rough variety were reminded by it of dugouts and similar constructions principally subterranean. Their wit, being of the same variety, made such sallies quite popular with those whose hits were principally of the "Aunt Sally" variety.

Such are the tribulations inseparable from beginnings which have something in common with the days of the Catacombs. However, the writer had a chance of getting even with his persecutors by helping in the September of 1916 to close, or at least suppress very much, one of the springs of their wit. If he had to conduct worship underground, they had also to fly to subterranean places and methods, so that in this instance, as in many others, the biter was bitten.

However, a higher satisfaction soon dawned, as may be seen from our second illustration.



Picture No. 2 gives a glimpse of the Church of St. Vincent de Paul emerging from the subterranean condition which gave rise to the remarks commented on and which was not ideal from the standpoint of comfort. There was no vestry, no sacristy, no choir gallery. A basement church at best must be an inconvenient affair. Whilst that of St. Vincent de Paul was one of the best of its kind, its worshippers eagerly looked forward to the time when they would have a real church. The Great War, first of all, and then the wake of discontent and strife it left behind, made the period of waiting longer than anticipated. But after the second decade of the new century was completed, it was felt that an effort should be made to have a temple instead of a tabernacle. In 1921 a committee was formed to take up the question of completing what was begun six years before. The response to a canvas for funds was encouraging, so much so that a deputation waited on His Grace Archbishop McNeil, to represent to him the advisability of making an immediate effort to go ahead. Going ahead at full speed is a policy never unacceptable to the present Archbishop of Toronto when he sees the way clear. It did not, however, seem so to him just then. Prices were abnormally high, conditions unsettled, the outlook not by any means rosy. After very little discussion the deputation were convinced of the soundness of his view, and cordially agreed to a postponement for another year.

The wisdom of that course was ere long apparent. When plans were prepared and tenders received for the continuation work, it was found that the peak of high prices had passed. Another point not so gratifying was made evident, namely, that the completion of the church in stone, as was originally contemplated, was too costly to be attempted. This created a difficult problem. The basement walls in stone rose to a height of several feet above ground. To tear them down to an approach to the ground level would mean much waste of work and material; to superimpose brick at their present level would be very like the policy of the unwise man who began to build and found himself unable to finish. Happily the skill of the architect and a superb specimen of brick and workmanship overcame that very serious difficulty. And its solution triumphantly proved that a judicious combination of stone and brick will produce results in Grecian architecture which even a fastidious Athenian of the days of Pericles would admire.

These problems being solved, the financial question came up. And here His Grace's counsel and assistance were invaluable.

After some anxious waiting, the signal for work was given, and soon the growth depicted in engraving No. 2 was in evidence. Gratifying progress was made under ideal weather conditions and eager workmen. The steel trusses for the roof soon began to rear their graceful curves against the sky, as picture No. 3 proclaims.

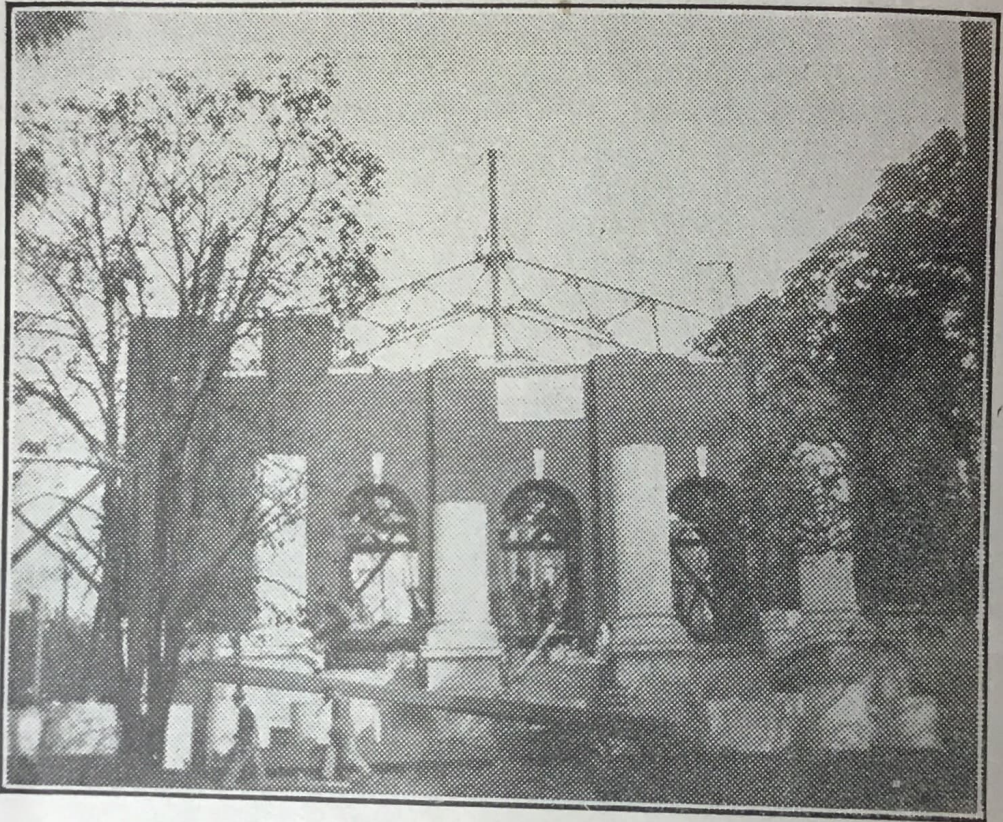
Onward, or rather skyward, the work proceeded. St. Vincent de Paul Church was no longer looked down upon from every



No. 3

second-story window around and its roof made a runway by the street arab. The school building that from its high-brow elevation cast pitying glances on its lowly neighbour, now began by contrast to lose its loftiness and good looks insomuch that it begged for a touch of the rouge pot. As the evening sunshine brought out the beautiful rose hue of the rising walls of the church, the brickwork of the school, which was of good stock, appeared commonplace in comparison. The contrast with the other buildings in the vicinity was even more marked, so that even in its early stages the new church of St. Vincent de Paul dominated the district.

This coming ahead was very marked as the massive white stone columns of the portico rose in all the grace and beauty of their proportions, surmounted by an entablature of splendid impressiveness, crowned by a majestic cross. In the evening glow the contrast between the snowy whiteness of the portico and the delightful rose red of the wall which served as its background gave a charming attractiveness to the fine street on one of the finest corners of which the church stands. Its day of triumph had indeed come, or rather had dawned, for as we shall see, it



No. 4

has by no means reached its zenith as yet. Drawing No 4 shows St. Vincent de Paul Church looking up and lifting its head in anticipated triumph.

A little drawback to the distinctness of picture No. 4 is the abundance of foilage which, whilst giving a touch of picturesqueness, interferes not a little with the clearness of outline. Had the City Parks' Commissioner been invited to do a little earlier what he did very promptly and courteously later, namely, remove three horse chesnut trees which stood in front of the church, our readers would be able to recognize in the dark spots at the apex of the truss in front a little knot of steel workers to whom

running up or sliding down steel girders four or five inches in width is child's play and who can climb to dizzy heights with the agility of cats. They had by no means an easy task. The four great steel arches had to be riveted together on a felt and gravel roof which protected the congregation worshipping beneath from the elements. On this roof, supported by a burly tree trunk standing beneath, rested the derrick which swung the big span of riveted steel into place. This was an exceedingly delicate operation. The least slip would bring the temporary roof crashing to the pews beneath and leave the congregation exposed to the weather. But such were the care exercised and the skill shown, that hardly a particle of damage was done to the roof. Some breaks were unavoidable, with the result that the basement presented a sorry spectacle one Monday morning after a night's downpour. But too much credit cannot be given to the way in which water was drained off and leaks stopped, so that right through the building operations religious services continued without interruption and with a minimum of inconvenience.

On one occasion, whilst some of the heaviest portion of the steel work was going on, the present writer officiated at a funeral service which of course had to be a little later than usual and at the busiest period of the day. The absence of noise was, under the circumstances, surprising. Steel work is necessarily heavy and rough, and steel workers are supposed to be in character, but the noiselessness with which these men carried on their work during the funeral showed that they were nature's gentlemen in the very best sense of that term. On the significance of this incident and not a few others during the course of construction, more will be said anon. Enough has been conveyed to show how the experiences met in building this church have an intimate bearing on the problems confronting the Church today.

Picture No. 5 presents the network of steel and scaffolding which the new St. Vincent de Paul church unfolded as the roof was neared. The trees have not yet disappeared, but as they are leafless, their presence is almost lost in the complicated tracery of wood and steel. The great columns in front are rising in their ivory majesty and assume a graceful slimness despite their massiveness. On the ground they seemed unwieldly, now in place they are a delight. What a lesson not to judge things in isolated fashion and out of perspective! A word, a phrase, taken by itself, out of its context and apart from the circum-

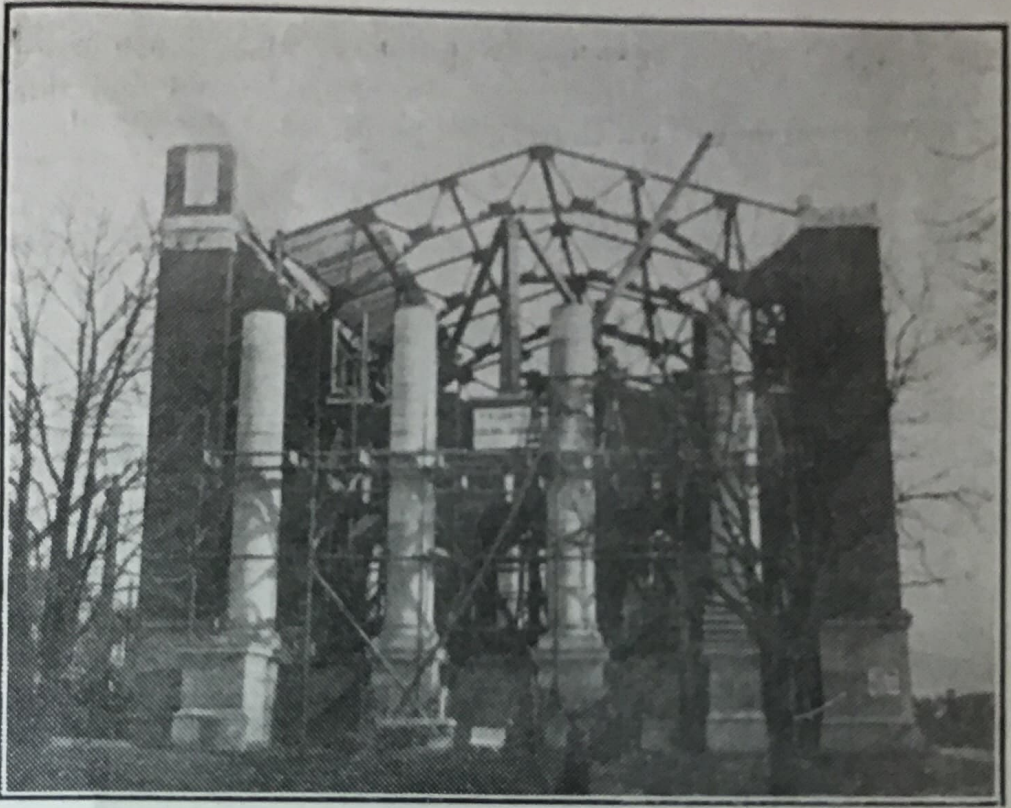
stances of time, place and manner of utterance, may appear highly reprehensible, whereas in its setting it has a very different significance. "How many things by season seasoned are to their right sense and due perfection," says the princely Shakespeare. Another bit of philosophy which is sent home by engraving No. 6 is that simplicity is not such a simple thing as it appears.

St. Vincent de Paul church is externally almost complete. Its imposing portico lacks only the crowning cross, the massive wall against which it rests, and which with its rosy hue sets off so effectively the almost snowy whiteness of column and entablature, is complete save for a stone coping. Externally the church stands out almost finished. And how nobly simple and impressive in its architectural lines it looks! From whatever side it is approached or angle viewed, it is a grand structure. It has in an eminent degree that attribute of grandeur, the charm of simplicity. Yet to attain that simplicity there was employed a complicated array of sketches, materials and contrivances. Simplicity is not a simple matter. To conceal art is the highest art. To appear simple is the perfection of thought training and perseverance. Simplicity of style is the fruit of long and strenuous endeavour. Simplicity of worship is the result of ages of true faith and high vision and earnest effort. To term any old thing simple because it is the result of neither thought nor preparation, is to confound simplicity with baldness, bareness, emptiness. From these it is as widely apart as are the Poles.

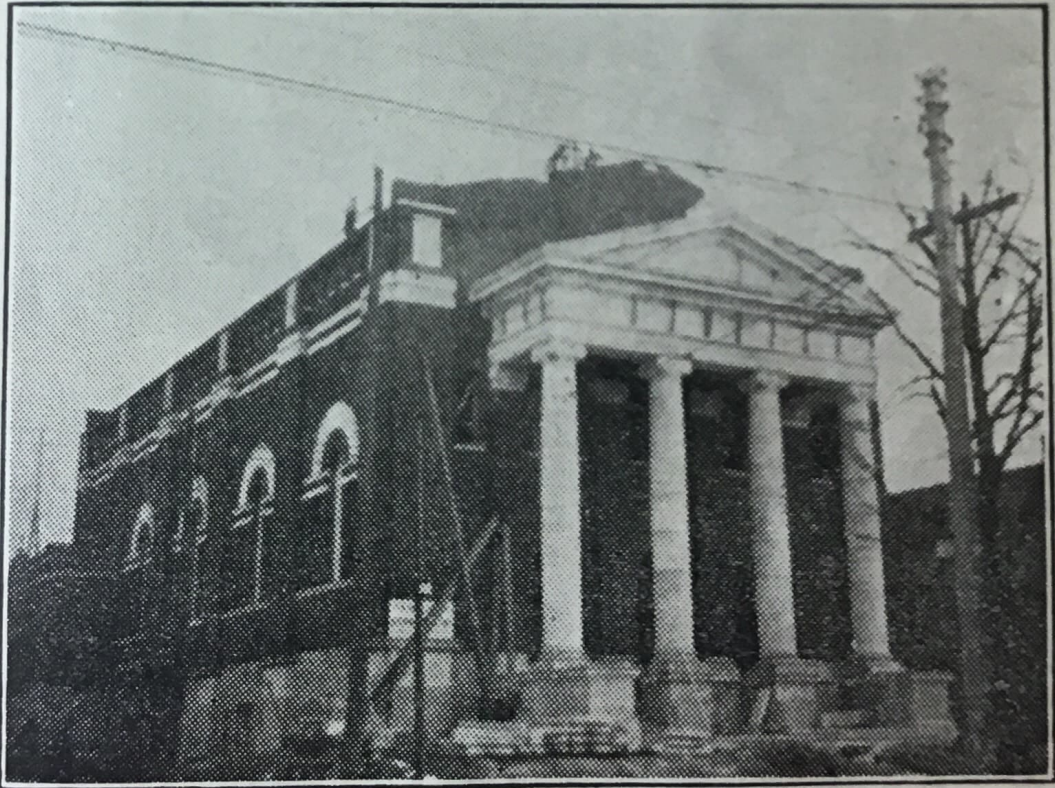
There is evidently a philosophy of building. More and more is this coming out as we proceed. We have not yet concluded our reflections suggested by engraving No. 6. We remarked that the church, viewed from without, looked practically complete. But how deceptive outside views are! A look within would show that the interior lining of the roof is not complete as yet, whereas the copper covering with its glistening reddish brown is not at all in evidence.

That look within would also reveal a vast array of scaffolding stretching from floor to roof of the interior. The carpenter is beginning his work in earnest. He has to prepare the way for the plasterers on whom so much of the interior beauty of the church depends.

We must beware of judging merely by the exterior. Much of the misery of this world, of its disappointments and tragedies, arises from taking persons and things at their face value. We are told that the face is the mirror of the soul. That is to a large extent true. But mirrors are not always reliable. They can play



No. 5



No. 6

queer pranks. So can exteriors of churches. Therefore it is well to look even the exterior over well, because a second and third look may reveal defects which were not perceived at the first glance.

The exterior of St. Vincent de Paul Church is one which will bear inspection. Its stateliness, massiveness, and grace, all accentuated by the rareness of its style of architecture in our churches, grow with study.

This is well shown by picture No. 7, which gives a rear view of the church. One of the highest compliments that could be paid to the striking impressiveness of this view came from a non-Catholic resident of the street from which it is obtained. As the imposing facade of the church was being reared he thought that all its beauty would be concentrated there, or at least so much of it that the rear aspect would be unattractive. Under such circumstances he contemplated shifting his domicile to Roncesvalles Ave., where he would have the advantage of a view of the church's pillared front. But when the rear neared completion he saw with joy that it was almost as attractive as the front and enhanced his outlook. No finer compliment to the all-round excellence of the exterior could be paid.

But an exterior, however imposing and graceful, is only an exterior after all. It raises our expectations, but it is wise to defer our final judgment until what is within is revealed—a rule which applies to individuals even more than to churches. Is there not an intimate relation between the two—a relation on which the inspired penmen love to dwell? Man is a temple made by God Himself to His honour. Of that temple the body is the exterior. On that body the stamp of nobility has been impressed by its Maker. And if that stamp has been marred the result is due to sin inherited or personal. Had sin not entered into this world to mar the perfection of God's work, there would not be a defective or repulsive body.

But even then the glory of the body would be from within rather than from without. The innocence and grace of the soul would constitute its principal charm. And innocence and grace can even now undo to a large extent the result of ancestral sin, as the opposite can destroy the effects of ancestral virtue. Many an ungainly and defective exterior has been relieved, yea ennobled, by the cultivation of grand traits of character, as many fine inherited facial charms have been destroyed by vanity, insolence, gluttony and sensuality.

What is true of faces which are God's work, marred or otherwise by man's conduct, applies to churches into which man's work

enters more largely and which are therefore more indicative of his character. The history of a nation, of a diocese, of a civilization, is written more legibly on its churches than on anything else. And what a record of the history, of the spirit, of the standing, of a parish is to be found in its church. Its stateliness, its exterior impressiveness or the opposite, bear eloquent testimony to the intellectual and spiritual level of its pastor and people. Neither may have been responsible for it in the first place. It may be a heritage of other times, times of grander aspirations or power, times, it may be, of poverty and struggle. But whatever it may



No. 7

have been, its present appearance, external and internal, is a fairly accurate index of the standing of those who worship therein. It may be incomplete, but its very incompleteness speaks of what is contemplated and what efforts are being made to have dreams come true.

This applies to the exterior, and even more so to the interior. When it has been rightly said that we must not judge by the outside, this saying does not mean that the outside is not to be an important consideration in our judgment. It is. The interior must be profoundly affected by the exterior. Where the latter is small or mean or disproportioned, the interior cannot be spacious or

noble or harmonious. But at the same time the promise of the exterior can be marred by the incompleteness, or gaudiness, or crudeness of the interior. In the case of St. Vincent de Paul Church, the interior will be found to more than fulfil the expectations raised by its exterior. When the former receives its final touches, as will be the case very soon, we hope to prove this by an illustration and by an invitation to see the reality. We are not afraid that the verdict will be in this case that the face value was deceptive. The one opinion expressed by all who have seen the unfolding beauty of the interior is that it realizes the highest expectations inspired by an outside view.

In answer to the questions which may be raised as to the justification of such an expense, let one incident be related as throwing light on a discussion of this kind. After the bricklayers, stone and iron workers, had completed their work, a banquet was given in appreciation of their services. It was a most enjoyable affair. The vast majority of the workers and bosses were not of the creed of the church building committee. Yet the former acknowledged that they rarely, if ever, received such a token of appreciation. Some few remembered an experience of the kind long ago; for the great majority it was a completely new event. All were delighted. And the remark passed by not a few present was that if the spirit manifested on that occasion were only general, our industrial and political and social tangles would be solved in a wholly excellent way. It was felt all round that a big constructive work was done that evening. And the inspiration of that work was that it had been done in a generous spirit. The bigness of the undertaking brought out the best in all concerned. The men who plied their tools were proud of their handiwork. The spirit of the enterprise had its effect on all engaged in it.

An incident, one of many, will bear out this. During the noonday hour the toilers after their meal engaged in games. Baseball and football were the favourites. Bats and balls were of a very primitive kind, made on the premises, but all the more enjoyed on that account. The play was usually fast and furious and was watched with great interest by the occupants of the many apartments overlooking the church grounds. And the verdict of all was that a more decent band of workmen they had never seen. No rough conduct was witnessed, no profanity or coarse language was heard. The proximity of the workmen instead of being the least annoyance, was a source of unflinching interest and pleasure, and (it can be added) edifi-

cation. The spirit of the place and of the work had caught the workers.

Not alone on them had the majestic beauty of the structure its effects. Never was such an interest shown in any other structure in the neighbourhood. All in the vicinity took a pride in it and acknowledged that it would add to the attractiveness of their fine business street. Street-car conductors observed that they had never seen such a craning of necks as when the corner of Roncesvalles and Westminster Aves. was approached. The upward view was certainly stimulated physically.

That the same is true morally has been indicated by what has been related of those immediately concerned. Such an undertaking meant sacrifice of no ordinary kind and sacrifice must have an uplifting and broadening effect. Those who faced such a responsibility felt that an opportunity of service to the community such as they had not before, now presented itself. Their basement quarters were not attractive. Now, however, they had a church edifice in which the whole neighbourhood took a pride. This kindly feeling must be cultivated. All around must be made to feel that they have a proprietorship in this new and noble structure in their midst. Hence a proposal was made to the business men's association of the district that when the church was completed, just before its dedication, they and their friends and acquaintances would be invited to view every detail of the edifice from floor to ceiling and would be told on that occasion that this church and all pertaining thereto was at the service of the community and would gladly place its hall and grounds at the disposal of the business men's association or any similar organization aiming to develop a community spirit. Its ambition was to promote good will, co-operation in everything that made for material, intellectual and moral betterment. To those not of its faith it wished success in every well-meant effort. Whilst it stood loyally for its own convictions and was bound and glad to maintain that they were indeed the best, it respected the honest convictions of others and would be very sorry to see them (derived as all best in them was from the Mother of all the Churches) replaced by laxity and indifference.

Such is the programme to which St. Vincent de Paul Church now on the eve of its completion, is eagerly looking. In working out this programme it has come to the divide which turns the waters of our continent either to the chill North or the sunny South. The experiences of a church ought to (if properly grasped) be a guide to the solution of the problems confronting the

world-wide Church. And that solution is: "Treat men as men by being one of them." Centuries ago when employer and employee knelt at the same altar and worked side by side at the same bench or in the same furrow, there was no labour question, no warfare between labour and capital, no social discontent. The brotherhood of religion permeated every branch of social life. Let that condition be brought back and every one of our social problems will be solved. In the course of the construction of St. Vincent de Paul Church the pastor found himself at times confronted with the necessity of getting into the midst of what would be called rough, physical work. Articles were delivered at unexpected times and had to be taken care of immediately. He took off his coat and pitched into the work side by side with the workmen, who expressed their surprise and did not hide their gratification at his willingness to take his part in the work of the digger and the drayman.

To some indeed such a thing would seem altogether beneath their dignity. Could not others be got to do such jobs? Yes; they might, at the cost of delay and inconvenience, where by personal effort the work could be done in far less time than it would take to hunt for a substitute. The great Apostle of the Gentiles, when the solicitude for all the churches pressed heavily upon him, worked at times at his trade of tent-making. And if the chasm dividing at present the men who work with their hands from those who work with their brains or with the brains of others, is to be bridged over, this result will be achieved only by those who, like the great Apostle, "labour, working with their own hands," as well as with their brains and hearts and souls. If we were to have a Religious Order whose members would not only study the life and spirit of Jesus, the Workman of Nazareth, in the class-room and the chapel, but would follow Him into the workshop, take a place at the bench and between the plough-handles, such an Order would do wonders in revolutionizing the present attitude of the labour world. Treat men as men should be treated, be their brothers not merely in a theoretical way, but at the dinner-pail hour and at the fellowship of the dray, the drill, the plane and the furrow; face their problems from their own level, but with your higher viewpoint and larger horizon; and you will bring out the best in them and find difficulties melt away. Our class distinctions, with contempt on one side, envy and resentment on the other, false impressions on both—these are the springs of our social unrest. And it goes without saying that both can be traced to lack of true, practical religion.

The writer is aware that in giving personal experiences as a basis for general conclusions he lays himself open in certain quarters to the charge of self-advertisement. There is a class that can conceive of no other motive for public action than the one assigned. It never occurs to these that there can be such a thing as zeal for truth, desire to promote the public welfare, not to mention something away beyond their horizon, namely, solicitude for the advancement of the kingdom of God. St. Paul had to deal with "pious" folk of this ilk. He calls them "dogs." To count them as a force worthy of any consideration would be a sad waste of energy. Away with them! They will not be permitted again to wriggle across our pages. They may be a useful study for the entomolo-



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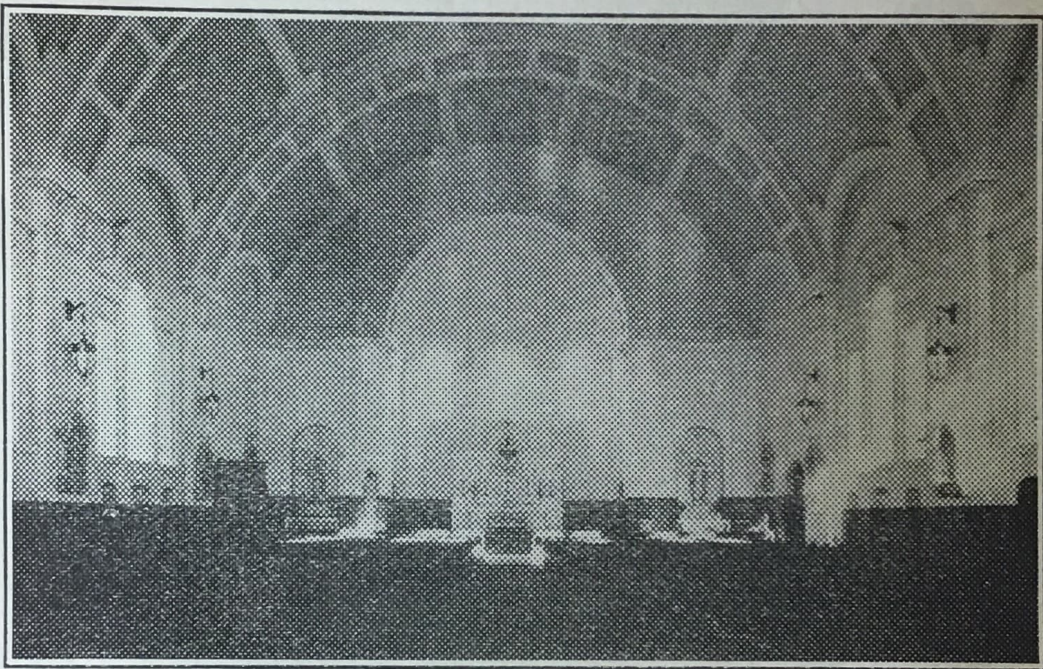
gist, but for those who see in the particular problems confronting them in social and religious life the out-cropping of world-wide conditions and think they have found in their own experiences points helpful towards the remedying of these conditions the wriggler may be left to the element in which it is at home. Dante's prescription for a much worthier tribe is in order. "Do not discuss them, but give them a look and pass by." Big burdens have to be carried, big questions insistently demand all available en-

ergy. May God grant the patience, and courage and perseverance and hopefulness and charity that to work for God in face of good report and evil report demands. With such gifts, grappling with the problems of a church can indeed be made to contribute notably to the work ahead of the Church.

That a good beginning was made towards the realization of the ideals set forth was the verdict of all who witnessed the scenes which took place immediately before, and during the dedication service. On the Friday evening before Sunday, Sept. 16th, the date of the dedication, the completed St. Vincent de Paul church was thrown open to the whole neighbourhood. Its majestic facade and finely designed approach were flooded with the clustered lamps of two massive supports. Up its array of steps which beginning at each side, and from a broad landing ascending to the towering portico, gave an impression of ease and spaciousness, streamed an unbroken procession for upwards of two hours. All classes and creeds were represented. Stations, altars, confessionals—all were scrutinized. The beautiful and effective system of lighting which revealed every detail of the exquisite panelling and decorations of walls and ceiling, the delicate and harmonious tinting simple and refined, the white and gold of the altars, the marble whiteness of the Grecian mouldings, the spacious view unbroken by column or projection, the dark oak of pew, pulpit and altar rail—all challenged the admiration of the procession of visitors. Members of the executive committee were kept busy answering the many questions asked about every detail, and great satisfaction was expressed at the assurance that church building and hall would be as far as possible at the service of the community at large.

On the following Sunday at 10.30 a.m. a big gathering assembled to witness the dedication of the church, which was so thoroughly inspected on the preceding Friday. Already three Masses had been celebrated in the basement for the parishioners, so that as much space as possible would be left for guests from outside. Of these there was a large turnout. When the doors were thrown open for admission, the waiting crowd surged forward, but the services of three stalwart members of the Police Force from No. 6 Station, kept excellent order by their tact and experience in handling crowds. Soon every available seat was occupied, and High Mass in presence of the Archbishop began, the President of Church Extension being celebrant and the pastors of Holy Family Parish, Toronto, and St. Columbkille's, Uptergrove, being respectively Deacon and Sub-Deacon, whilst the pastor of Corpus Christi, Toronto, was Master of Ceremonies.

After a few words of welcome and gratitude from the incumbent of the new church, the recently-appointed rector of St. Peter's, Toronto, preached a sermon which had for its central idea Christian charity as embodied in the greatest apostle of charity of modern times, St. Vincent de Paul. It need not be said that the discourse was worthy of one who for years as rector of Newman Hall has been a power for good in university circles and in every department of civic life in Toronto, and as a patriotic Canadian has thrilled audiences in every part of Canada. In conclusion the Archbishop of Toronto felicitated the congregation on the possession of a rarely beautiful place of worship, and referred



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in a very kindly manner to the beginnings of the present St. Vincent de Paul Parish.

That the church dedicated so auspiciously under almost ideal conditions of weather and accommodation is already making itself felt in the community is evidenced by the exceedingly fine attendance at the Forty Hours' Devotion held there three weeks after the first Mass was said. We cannot better conclude our little brochure than by a view of the altar during this devotion and by a prayer that the fervour and enthusiasm of that demonstration of loyalty to our Eucharistic Lord may usher in a fresh and unflagging advance in every parish activity.