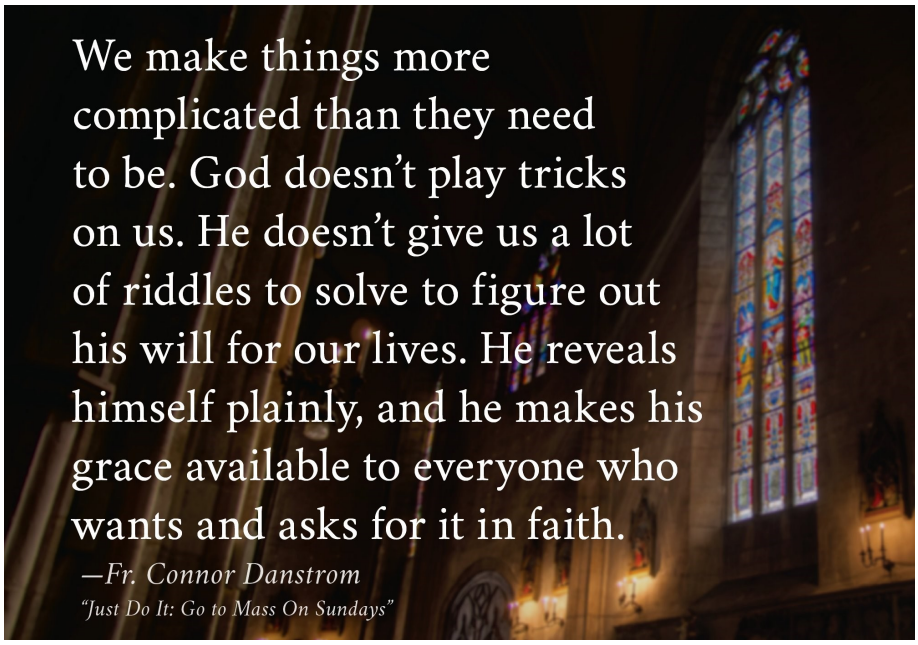
Evangelization: Why Does Beauty Matter?



"To the hard of hearing you shout."

When Fr. Connor Danstrom received his assignment to the St. John Paul II Newman Center in 2018, the building was fine. No major roof renovations were needed. No structural damage was present. The chapel in the building, used for Mass and other liturgical functions, was a classic mid-century modern interpretation: some light tan brickwork, carpet everywhere, a soft Resurrected Jesus raising his arms above the congregation. It was an adequate space.

The chapel sits amidst the stark concrete buildings of the University of Illinois-Chicago, a few steps from the university classrooms and hallways. The Newman Center's community is a diverse segment of young Catholics — undergraduate and graduate alike gathering to meet, worship, and grow.

This past year, Fr. Danstrom arranged for a renovation of the chapel. The new crucifix now is surrounded by rich inlaid woodwork, framed by gold-foiled stenciling. Painted details, various marbles, and tile floors replace what came before. What used to be described as "cozy" has taken on a different feeling — now it is a reverent space of worship.

What was Fr. Danstrom's inspiration? Why did he see it necessary to renovate something that was acceptably functional?

Fr. Danstrom's first response to the posed question was a quote from Catholic American author Flannery O'Connor, *"to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures."*

"In these days," Fr. Danstrom says, "when there are so many distractions, people need something attractive enough to make them put down their phones or turn off their music, so they can get out of themselves and encounter the Lord."

The cardinal who celebrated the dedication Mass commented that everyone seemed movingly prayerful in their new space. The Newman Center staff has received positive verbal feedback and, more importantly, the vote of feet — more people are attending daily Mass and Sunday Mass in the renovated chapel than before.

Fr. Danstrom expounds that in every age, the church has surrounded the Eucharistic mystery with art and music — beautiful paintings! Soaring chapels! Exquisite compositions! He continues, "in a particular way, now it is so easy to mute the richness of the mystery and to forget what's going on — treat church like a meeting room or a place to listen to a homily — but this is a place to encounter the triune God where he gives you his flesh to eat."

Catholics have long referred to beauty as one of the transcendentals, along with goodness and truth, the ways that God reveals Himself to the world. Beautiful spaces, beautiful liturgy, beautiful music, all of these can lead to deeper prayer and relationship with God Himself, as distractions are lessened, and attentions are directed to something great and profound.