



“Go and Repair My House”

A Guide for Church Renovation Committees from Mazzolini Artcraft

Church restorations are serious endeavors, no matter the scale of the project or the size of the budget. There is a great deal to consider: architecture, materials and permits. The history and future of a whole community is woven into every decision. And often, these decisions fall to lay committee members who report to busy pastors.



Since our founding in 1904, Mazzolini Artcraft has been staffed by experts in the intricacies of church renovations, and we've prepared this guide to help congregations that are considering renovation or already in the early stages of their own projects. We hope you find it helpful, and we welcome your questions.

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*Cover image: Custom marble baptismal font for St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church, Woodstock, Georgia
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Buyer beware: Tradeoffs when using reclaimed marble artifacts

A few years ago, we worked with a parish that purchased an old marble altar that had been removed from a decommissioned church in another state. The parish planned to install the altar in their newly renovated sanctuary. When the pieces arrived, however, we quickly discovered a problem: The measurements were different from the dimensions the seller had provided. It was an easy mistake to make, but one that had serious implications for the renovation. The sanctuary plans had to be altered significantly to accommodate the unexpectedly large altar.



Marble altar for Fathers of Mercy Church in South Union, Kentucky, and a close-up of the mosaic in the center.

This was an unusual situation. While we would never insist that a church buy new marble, it's vital to understand that buying reclaimed marble always involves tradeoffs that must be taken into account before purchases are made.

The most common reason for buying reclaimed marble is to save money, but the

savings may evaporate once related costs are factored in. First, we strongly

recommend hiring an experienced marble professional to survey the artifact—ideally in its original setting—and to handle the dismantling. A marble altar, for example, will appear solid but actually consist of dozens of pieces. The older the altar, the more likely it is that pieces will be cracked. Marble is

durable, but it's also more brittle than you might think. The imperceptible settling and movement of a church over decades can take a toll. A marble professional can find cracks that would elude an untrained eye and determine whether the piece is likely to withstand the stress of transportation and reassembly.

Marble pieces not suitable for reuse can be replicated, but an exact color match will be impossible to achieve, since marble is mined, not manufactured.

Some types of marble withstand the elements better than others, so marble statues that stood outside may show signs of weathering. Repairing the damage can cost more than purchasing a new statue.

Keep in mind that in many dioceses, the best pieces from shuttered churches will be claimed by other parishes, or, in some cases, by families that donated them. What's left will probably show signs of damage or age. That need not be a deal-breaker; flaws can lend an object a certain charm, or the story behind it might make the artifact the perfect addition to your parish.

Finally, shipping old marble will cost the same as shipping new. Marble, as you can probably imagine, is quite heavy — a five-foot slab will weigh about 1,000 pounds.

Our advice is to be clear in your deliberations with your church community and thorough in your research before deciding to go with reclaimed marble.

Sanctuary Design and Renovation

Before and after, sanctuary renovation at Sacred Heart Church in Peoria, Illinois, by Mazzolini Artcraft.



Restoring the sanctuary of your church is an intricate and incredibly important project. Your hard work will tell your parishioners and community the story of your church for decades to come. Below is a breakdown of just some of the many important decisions church committees will need to make when restoring their sanctuaries, and some considerations and advice to keep in mind when exploring the many facets of the project.

Altars

Whether your altar is new or repurposed, a sanctuary renovation must be undertaken with great care. Historically, marble sanctuaries were set in plaster. In the 1960s, epoxy became more common because it's easier to work with and longer-lasting. But it makes renovations much more challenging. An altar built with epoxy may defy attempts at full disassembly. And when you're moving larger pieces, there is more chance for damage. This is delicate work best handled by professionals with direct experience.



Custom marble altar at Sacred Heart in Peoria

Baptismal fonts and pools

Unless the pool will be drained and refilled frequently, maintenance will be similar to that of a swimming pool. The water will need to be treated and filtered. A slight chemical odor is likely, and noise from the filtration machinery is possible, depending on the size of the pool and where it's housed. Fiberglass is more affordable than marble and is easier to install but requires more care. Water can penetrate fiberglass over time with prolonged contact. Regardless of materials, there are important safety, liability and local building code factors to consider.

Statues



The number of options available for statues can be overwhelming. Understanding how the different kinds of statues are made can help you make the right choice for your church.

Standard statues are mass-produced from molds or, in the case of wood, from a fully or mostly automated carving process. Standard statues can be quite attractive and cost-effective, but they are not unique. Custom statues are individual works of art. The artist starts with a pencil sketch based on the client's description and then creates a bozetto, which is a miniature or full-size clay model. If the artist is using wood, the bozetto serves as the guide for carving. Wood sculptors sometimes use chainsaws in the early stages, but also use many of the same tools that were used hundreds of years ago.

For bronze statues, a full-sized clay model is used to create a wax mold that will melt away during casting. The lost-wax method is also used for custom fiberglass and aluminum statues. Fiberglass statues can be finished in bronze or painted.



From left: sketch of statue of St. Louis Bertrand; full-size clay bozetto; finished bronze statue and closeup.

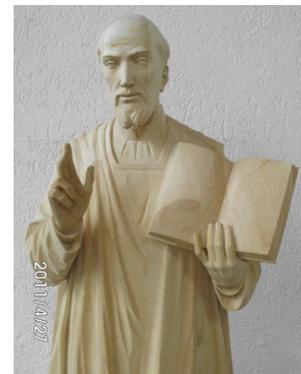
Mazzolini Artcraft works with Demetz Art Studio in Italy, the world leader in religious sculpture artistry. They are artists and craftsmen of the highest order, and have been designing stunning religious artifacts for centuries.

Here are some things to consider, including maintenance requirements, to ensure you choose the right medium for your statue:

Wood

Woodcarvings are valuable for their timeless beauty, becoming more precious with age. The character of wood is always preserved, whether left in its natural state or lightly finished in oil colors. Wood is still a “living” material, and small cracks or splits can result from temperature changes and humidity. Our partner in Italy uses wood from Linden trees imported from Eastern Europe. It’s not too hard, fairly white in color and doesn’t crack as much as pine does when dry.

Maintenance: If the statue has an opaque lacquer overcoat, dusting with a soft cloth will usually suffice. If necessary, use some water with a mild soap detergent. Avoid acidic chemicals.



An unpainted wood statue of St. Ignatius.

Bronze and aluminum

Bronze is the most durable material used for statues. Even outdoors, it ages gracefully. The patina, or finish, may darken over time due to oxidation, but this can be abated with proper cleaning and waxing at least once per year. Aluminum has a silvery appearance that turns dusty gray over time with oxidation.

Maintenance: Clean with a vegetable brush and some water and mild soap. After cleaning, apply beeswax (we recommend Johnson’s Paste Wax or Trewax) with a soft brush to seal the statue again. Let the wax dry, then rub it with a soft wool flannel cloth.

Fiberglass

Fiberglass, or glass-reinforced polyester, is similar to plastic. Fiberglass statues in bronze, aluminum or white marble finishes are treated so that they can withstand the elements. Colored statues are decorated by artists who apply oil colors by hand in the traditional way. Colored statues cannot be guaranteed for outdoor use.

Maintenance: For outdoor white, terracotta finishes, wipe clean using a soft sponge, some water and a mild soap detergent at least twice a year. For outdoor bronze or silver finishes: wipe clean using a soft sponge and some water—but never on warm, sunny days. Do not use chemicals.



Mother Theresa, fiberglass with bronze finish.

Marble

Our partner obtains marble from the quarries of Tuscany, one of which was used by Michelangelo. This type of marble is practically impervious to the elements. The carving tools used today have not changed much from Michelangelo’s time. First the rough stone is hammered with a pitching hammer, then sculpted with special pointing tools and files. Skilled marble artists are able to achieve astonishing detail from the hard, brittle stone.

Maintenance: Occasional cleaning with water and mild soap. No other maintenance is required.



From marble slab to finished statue of St. Lawrence.

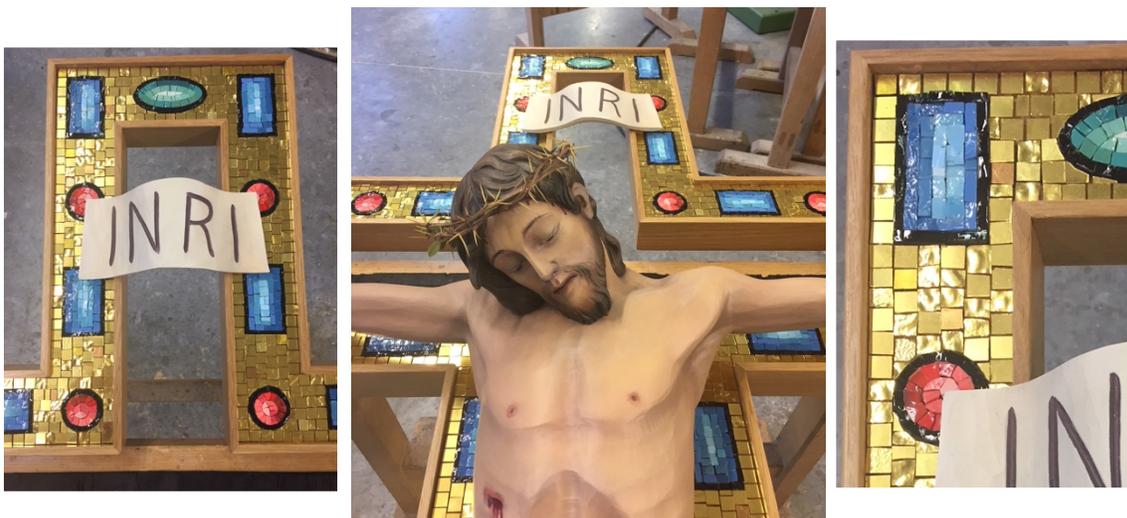


From left: Father Jean-Jacques Olier, founder of the Sulpicians order; John baptizing Jesus; St. John the Evangelist, with gold-leafed scroll; the Good Shepherd with bronze staff.

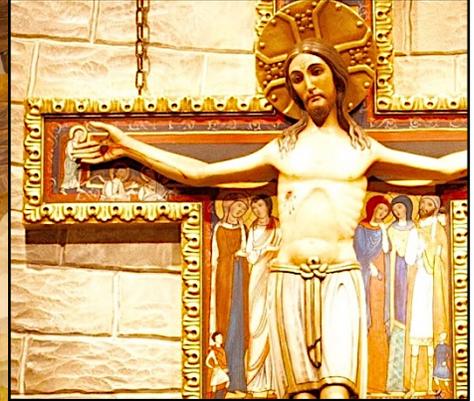
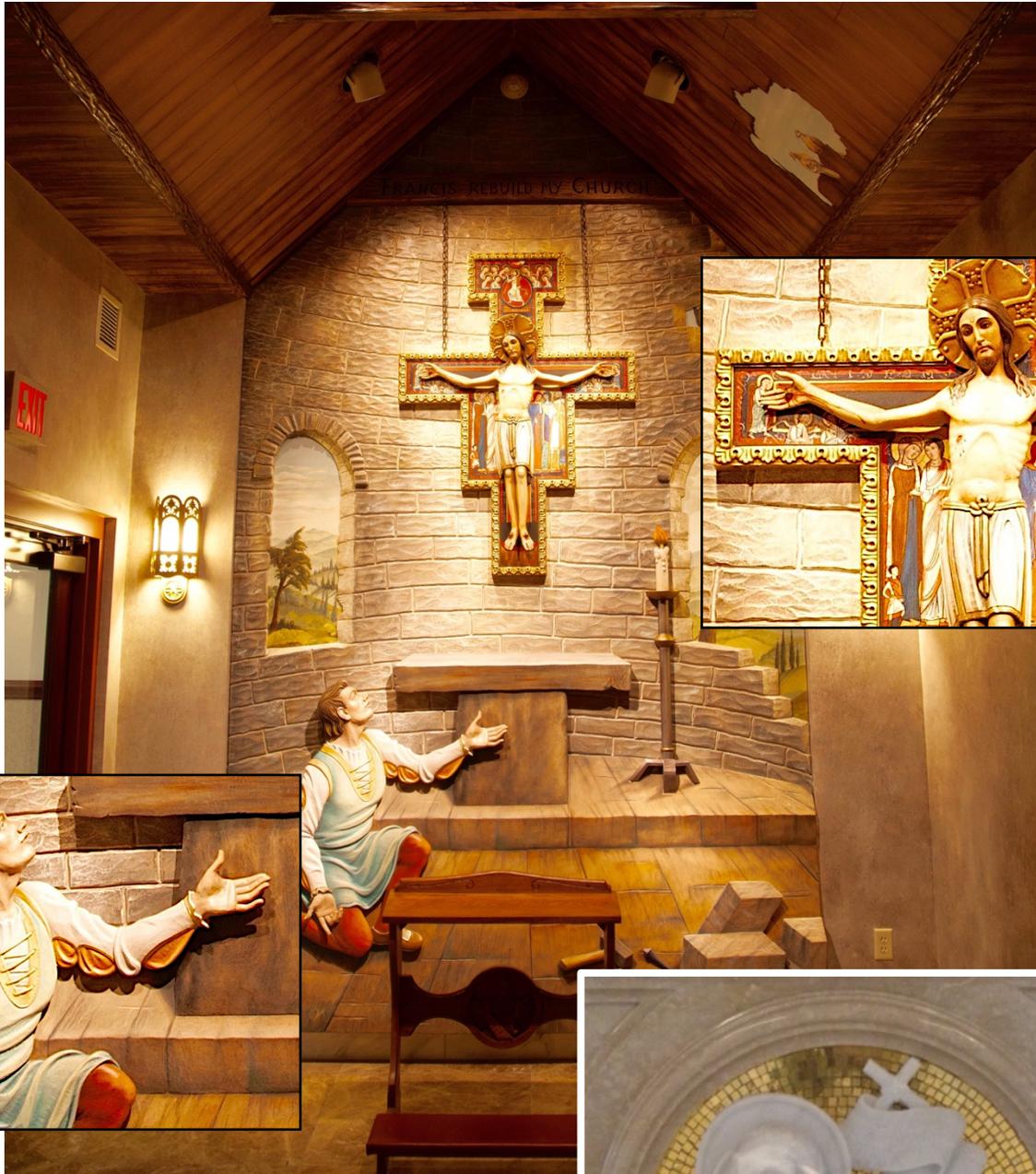
Mosaic

The pieces of marble or glass used to make a mosaic are called tessera. Marble tessera are more durable, but glass offers more color options. Both are suitable for outdoor use.

Maintenance: For indoor mosaics, simply dust with an air-brush. (If you use a cloth, fibers can get stuck between the tessera.) For outdoor mosaics, use a sponge with water and a very mild soap. Do not use chemicals.



Custom carved-wood crucifix with inlaid Venetian mosaic tiles for St. Agnes Catholic Church in Naples, Florida.



Not all sculptures are free-standing.

Above: We created this original high-relief wood wall sculpture of Francis of Assisi's vision of Christ ("Francis, go and repair my house") for Sacred Heart Church in Peoria, Illinois.

Right: hand-sculpted marble over 23-karat gold Venetian mosaic, adorning the front of the altar at Mary Queen Church in Friendswood, Georgia.



We hope this brief guide to church restoration has been helpful for you as your church embarks on an exciting project. Renovation projects are daunting, exciting, stressful, joyous and inspiring for your church, and your church community will have a good deal of work on its hands before seeing the project to fruition.

One of the most important decisions you will make is the decision on who will guide your church committee through the project. The best thing you can do is work with experts who understand the challenges you face, who have experience guiding these important projects and possess the professionalism to see it through to the end. Mazzolini Artcraft is here to answer your questions and help make your church's dreams a reality. Call 1-888-437-4499 for a free consultation.

Below: More from Fathers of Mercy Church.

