

Frank Kacmarcik 1920-2004

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From *Seeing and Believing* by Paul Philibert, O.P., (Pueblo Books, The Liturgical Press, 1995). No one has had a greater influence on the development of American religious architecture and art in the past four decades than Frank Kacmarcik. He is a rare personality who possesses understanding, experience, and vision concerning every aspect of church design, furnishings, ritual space, and art. It is a tribute to his successful initiatives that others have followed in his footsteps as artist, designer, and consultant in the sacred arts, helping parishes and other communities to develop criteria for church building and renovation. In addition, for over forty years Kacmarcik has designed the covers for *Worship*, the American journal of liturgical studies. He seems to be an inexhaustible source of creative ideas.

Formative Years

Frank Kacmarcik was born on 15 March 1920, in St. Paul, Minnesota. Both his father and mother were devoted Catholics. Frank's father earned his living as an upholsterer and refinisher. Frank grew up in a family in which both the visual arts and music were part of ordinary family communication because singing and involvement in a variety of crafts were shared by them all.

After high school, Frank attended on scholarship the Minnesota College of Art and Design, where he cultivated a special love for painting and for graphic and book design. Later as a novice in Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville in the 1940s, he became familiar with the paintings of Clement Fischeuf OSB, a monk who had been trained in the Beuronese school of religious art. Brother Clement became a devoted mentor, leading Frank to see himself as a disciple of this influential and important liturgical artist.

Frank left the monastery for the military in 1944 and served in the army in Europe during World War II. He functioned as a surgical technician in the U.S. Army Medical Corps and as chaplain's assistant. This experience in the military offered him many opportunities for travel and he became familiar with the cathedrals, monasteries, museums, and monuments of Western Europe--the largest treasury of Christian religious culture in the world.

After the war, Frank studied in Paris at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, where he was trained in painting, and at the Centre d'Art Sacré, where he developed critical skills in religious art and church decoration. Once again, these years provided him with further opportunities to get a feel

firsthand for the atmosphere and qualities of many of the Church's most beautiful religious buildings. He also began to assemble a remarkable collection of fine and rare books, manuscripts, and religious art objects. (This collection, at present at Saint John's University in Minnesota, is one of the richest private collections of its kind anywhere in the United States.)

His characteristic style evolved during these years in Europe. One sees within his drawings as within his architectural plans his interest in woodcuts, old engravings, medieval manuscript illustrations, and Orthodox icons, as well as in contemporary painting and sculpture. One can also immediately identify anything that comes from the hand of Frank Kacmarcik because, if there is an eclecticism to his taste, it has become firmly rooted in a deep and original personal vision of his own.

The Liturgical Artist

In 1950, Frank returned to the United States and became a professor of art at Saint John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. In 1950, he began creating original art work for the covers of *Worship*, a responsibility which he continues to the present. In 1953, he collaborated with the famous German Bauhaus architect, Marcel Breuer, on the design and construction of the abbey church at Saint John's--a building which has become a landmark of twentieth-century religious architecture. His stamp on this building and much else at Saint John's could only have been placed by the active patronage of Abbot Baldwin Dworschak, OSB (1906-96). Over the years, Frank has provided the abbey with a distinctive and beautiful repertory of logos for stationery, book designs, and identifying symbols. The headstones in the monastic cemetery are uniformly designed by his creative hand.

In 1955, Frank Kacmarcik moved to St. Paul, where he built a house and studio designed for him by his friend and colleague Breuer. When Breuer presented the plans for this house, he told him, "There is no bill. This is my way of telling you that Saint John's Abbey church would not be as it is except for you." This characteristically lovely creation of Breuer's, a functional modernistic house fitted into a knoll overlooking the Mississippi River, became Frank's refuge--a home, a library, a studio, and a hermitage all at once.

From this base, he worked as a full-time consultant in church design, printing, and the graphic arts. In addition to becoming one of the most influential voices in church design following the Second Vatican Council, he also designed for Benziger Brothers' publishing house many of the first generation of Catholic liturgical books in English in implementation of the council's call for a vernacular liturgy. In these books, he introduced a reform toward a simpler, more legible style. In this same period, Frank's stature was recognized by an invitation from the Royal Library of Sweden

to be one of forty-three international typographers solicited to submit typographical designs for a Bible in honor of the five-hundredth anniversary of the Gutenberg Bible. He has been one of the strongest influences for nobility and beauty in objects serving Catholic worship in the three-and-a-half decades following the council.

Frank Kacmarcik is legendary among those who have the pleasure of his acquaintance for his trenchant criticism of artistic mediocrity. He has devoted his life to creating opportunities for ordinary people to find environments that might convert them to a more wholesome vision of religious beauty. Yet Frank is personally anything but pompous. He has said of himself: "I am a very ordinary person, born of Slovak-Polish forebears. Had I been born in Europe, I would have begun life high in the Grand Tatra Mountains, would have become the official cowherder for the village of Landok, and probably would have been very happy." As Frank often acknowledges, he has been greatly blessed with gifts for identifying and creating beauty.

Achievement

In 1981 the North American Academy of Liturgy offered Frank Kacmarcik its highest award to honor his distinguished contributions to liturgical renewal. The citation for the award reads as follows:

"For more than a quarter of a century, Frank Kacmarcik has served the churches of this country as a minister of visual environment. His work in graphics and in pioneering the role of artist-designer-consultant for church building, renovating and furnishing embodies commitment to high standards, freedom from fads, conviction that tradition lives, and remarkable correspondence with the best insights of a Church in process of renewal. With admiration and gratitude, in the month which completes his thirtieth year as cover designer for *Worship* magazine, the North American Academy of Liturgy presents its 1981 Berakah Award to Frank Kacmarcik."

Later, in 1987, Frank was made an Honorary Member of the American Institute of Architects--one of seven persons selected that year "in recognition of outstanding contributions to the architectural profession and to society as a whole . . . each has effectively promoted and enhanced quality in the built environment," according to the A.I.A. news release. He has been awarded more than sixty national and international awards in book design and the graphic arts, as well as numerous awards for building and renovation projects, including six coveted national A.I.A. awards.

In 1983, Frank asked to enter the monastic community at Saint John's as a cloistered oblate and was accepted by Abbot Jerome Theisen OSB (1930-1995). He lived in the abbey as a member of the monastic community and continued his work of consultations and design in a small workroom at

the back of The Liturgical Press. So much of the abbey bears the mark of his influence, that his moving in there has been a bit like coming home. Each day those in the monastery handle liturgical books imprinted with his logo for the abbey. One walks down corridors to find in many locations sculpture and other art objects found or commissioned for the abbey by Frank over many years. His Christian humanistic vision has become embodied in the environment of Saint John's Abbey in an exceptional way. It is both his home now and a home which he helped to make for his Benedictine brothers. This place is the greatest single contribution that Frank Kacmarcik has made to helping people see and believe.

In the 1950s, Frank asked Thomas Merton to compose for him a prayer for vocations to the sacred arts. This unusual composition is also a fitting description of his career. The Trappist monk sent the artist this prayer:

"Almighty God, Father of all light, Maker of the world, who has made us in your image, seers and makers: Look down into the abysmal darkness of our hearts and see the unutterable destitution into which our spirit and our art have fallen, since we have grown blind to the splendor of your truth."

"O Lord, who once heard the cry of Israel enslaved in Egypt, who delivered the people with great power and led them with your prophet Moses into the desert, send us now people of vision who will open our eyes once again to see your incorruptible light. O Lord, who showed to Moses on the flaming mountain the plan of a perfect tabernacle, in which a fitting worship could be offered to your majesty, send us chosen messengers and teachers, lovers of worship and art, who will restore with chaste and noble works the beauty of your house! May they teach us to see with pure hearts the splendor of your Son Jesus Christ and to express what we have seen in images worthy of so great a vision: through the same Jesus Christ, your Son, your Logos, your Art and your Splendor, in whom all things subsist and through whom, by the power of the Holy Spirit, all are called to be united with you forever. AMEN."

For further reading about Frank Kacmarcik's career, see the following:

"Frank Kacmarcik--Berakah Award," *Worship* 55 (1981).

Robert Hovda, "The Amen Corner: Frank Kacmarcik--Art as Skill in Making," *Worship* 61 (1987) 358-64.

Paul Philibert, O.P. and Frank Kacmarcik, *Seeing and Believing: Images of Christian Faith*, Foreword by Gerard S. Sloyan (Pueblo Books, The Liturgical Press, 1995).

R. Kevin Seasoltz, O.S.B., "Living Stones Built on Christ," *Worship* 57 (1983) 115.

Robert L. Tuzik, "Frank Kacmarcik: Artist and Designer" in *How Firm a Foundation: Leaders of the Liturgical Movement*, R. L. Tuzik, ed. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1990) 327-33.

Arca Artium

Saint John's University

Collegeville, MN 56321-2015

Tel. 320-363-3497

E-mail: arcaartium@csbsju.edu