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Repairs Almost Done, St. Patrick's Cathedral Is Set to Shine

Job took three years and about \$177 million; Pope Francis to visit soon



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By **MELANIE GRAYCE WEST**

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After three years and about \$177 million, New York City's most famous cathedral is nearly ready for its close-up.

From the spires 330 feet above the sidewalk to boreholes 2,000 feet below ground, nearly every inch of the Roman Catholic St. Patrick's Cathedral has been freshened.

The final touches are continuing and the remaining scaffolding that surrounds the altar will be removed by the end of the month, at least in August and—even if it takes divine intervention—“certainly before September,” said Msgr. Robert Ritchie, the cathedral's rector.

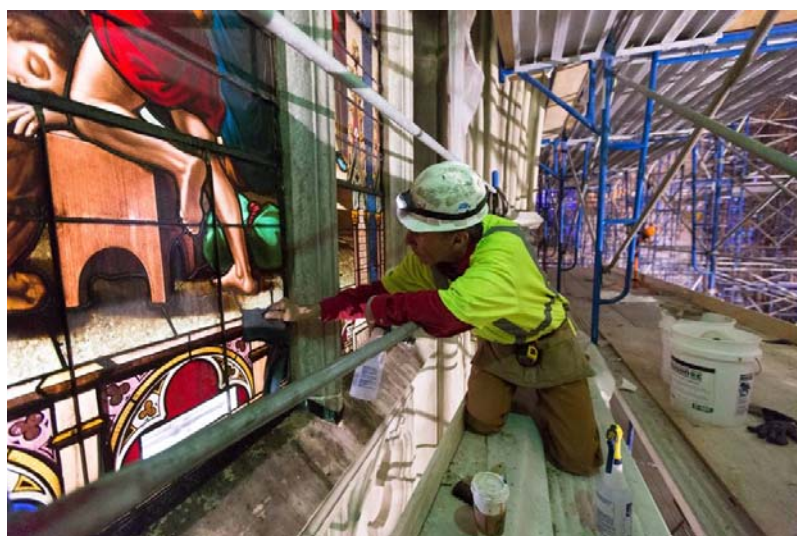
Though the final push is in anticipation of a visit by Pope Francis in September,

the restoration is decades in the making.

The last major overhaul of the cathedral was in the late 1970s, about a century after its opening. The late Archbishop of New York, Cardinal Edward Egan, set the planning for the restoration, which has run in fits and starts since May 2006.

Cardinal Timothy Dolan picked up where Cardinal Egan left off and widened the scope of the restoration to include the entire site, a full square block stretching from Fifth Avenue to Madison Avenue in Midtown Manhattan.

“St. Patrick’s Cathedral was falling down,” Cardinal Dolan has said. “Literally, stones were falling.”



Roger Geier, a worker with Botti Studio, restores stained-glass windows in St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Midtown Manhattan in June. About 4,000 stained-glass panels were cleaned. *PHOTO: CLAUDIO PAPAPIETRO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

The restoration comes amid two milestones for the Archdiocese of New York: the fall visit by Pope Francis, who will lead thousands of the faithful in a service at the cathedral, and a major regional reorganization that will result in 368 parishes consolidating down to 296.

Archdiocese officials have said the realignment is necessary to trim costs and better serve the region’s 2.6 million Catholics. But parishioners at some affected churches have criticized the St. Patrick’s restoration as wasteful when many parishes face closure.

Archdiocese spokesman Joseph Zwilling said the restoration has been financed through private donations.

Cardinal Dolan likes to call the cathedral “America’s parish church,” while touting it as a city landmark that draws five million visitors, many of them tourists, a year. That pitch has drawn \$100 million in donations for the restoration from a variety of New Yorkers, including many non-Catholics. A

donation of \$5 million came from a prominent Jewish philanthropist, according to Cardinal Dolan. The name of that donor hasn't been made public.

Principals for the restoration project say no decision was compromised in their work, which is a blend of artistry and technology.

On the outside, the cathedral's marble suffered from environmental damage to the point that pieces of the discolored stones were breaking off. The marble was pressure-washed using a solution of water and crushed glass.

Because much of the cathedral's stone is Tuckahoe marble, which has a high iron content, the pressure of the wash was dialed down to prevent the stones from turning orange, said Rolando Kraeher, an architect with Murphy Burnham & Buttrick, the New York-based architectural firm that has led the restoration.

All of the concrete grout was raked out and replaced with a softer mortar so the marble has a bit more movement, allowing for less cracking. Severely damaged stones were replaced with matching marble acquired from the backyard of a private Westchester home.

Inside, the marble was cleaned with a paste called Arte Mundit, which essentially acts like a facial mask. The fishy-smelling solution is applied like paint, which then dries and peels off in rubbery sheets. Restorers did at least two applications to the stone.

The cathedral also got an overhaul of its mechanics. A misting sprinkler system was installed to avoid water damage in a fire. And a conventional heating and cooling system was scrapped in favor of a high-tech geothermal mechanical plant, one of few in the city. That system requires drilling 10 wells, some going 2,000 feet into the bedrock.

The 350 pews were sent for refinishing and all of the kneelers were replaced.

The cathedral's decorative elements were scrubbed, replaced or repaired. Some 4,000 stained-glass panels were made new with a simple cleaning solution, cloths and elbow grease. More than 100 of them were removed for intensive repair.

Bosses, the decorative elements found at the intersections of the ceiling ribs, were either sculpted anew or cleaned and their red accents touched up with fresh paint. Workers determined that each boss is unique—one has lilies, another has owls.

The cathedral's creamy ceiling looks like Caen stone, but it is wood framing and timber construction covered in lath and plaster. After repairing the plaster,

artists used three subtly different shades of Benjamin Moore paint to create faux stones.

The mortar between each rectangular block was drawn freehand with a pencil. The ceiling pattern was simply eyeballed.

“It was all in the eye of the decorative painter. It’s not paint by number,” said Eileen McCarthy, a project manager with Structure Tone Inc., the construction management company.

Restoring and cleaning all of the bronze and mosaics also required an artist’s touch. That work, from the bronze on the altars to the 7-foot spires and each 9,000-pound door, fell to the Popians, a family from Romania that runs a restoration and conservation company based in Long Island City.

Lucia and Gabriel, and their son, Ion, who is an architect, have practically lived in the hive of scaffolding, touching every inch of metal and tile. Ms. Popian’s tools include a proprietary cleaning solution, custom-made copper implements, sponges, toothbrushes, wax and a blowtorch.

Slight in frame, she curls up and perches on altars, just inches from her delicate work.

Her technique is all “between the eye, the hand and the intelligence,” Ms. Popian said, and she prefers a light touch and simple methods. “When I look to one object, I imagine how it was made straight from the artist.”

The cathedral itself has influenced the habits and routines of the hundreds of workers involved in the restoration.

Contractors labor quietly. There is no cursing. Each surprise—like the hidden time capsules or notes, signatures and old newspapers crammed into long-untouched spaces—create a “sense of awe,” said architect Mr. Kraeher.

The work, Ms. McCarthy said, “speaks to your soul.”

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