

Order and Light: The Architecture of Two Benedictine Abbey Churches in
Western Canada: Westminster Abbey, Mission, B.C., and St Peter's Abbey,
Muenster, Saskatchewan¹

By Geoffrey Simmins

Introduction:

Two Benedictine abbeys for men in western Canada are graced with remarkable abbey churches designed by gifted architects sympathetic to Benedictine principles and ideals. The goal of this article is to discuss the character and assess the significance of the architecture of these two abbey churches—Westminster Abbey in Mission, B.C. (figs. 1-2), and St. Peter's Abbey in Muenster, Saskatchewan (fig. 3-4).² Although St. Peter's is older—its foundation in 1903 makes it the oldest Benedictine monastery for men in Canada, as compared with Westminster Abbey's 1939 foundation—its church was built

¹ I would like to thank architect Étienne Gaboury, who provided illustrations for this article and who offered his insights on the design process of St. Peter's Abbey. Rev. Mark Dumont, OSB, Guestmaster of Westminster Abbey, willingly provided details regarding the history and building program at Westminster Abbey. Lutz Haufschild, the stained glass artist responsible for the windows at Westminster Abbey, with the iconographical program of the Four Seasons, discussed the commission with me and gave permission to reproduce his photograph of the abbey's dedication service in 1982. I am also grateful to the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, in Collegeville, Minnesota, founded by St. John's Abbey, as well as to Saint-Benoît-du-Lac, Québec, Canada, where I spent sabbatical research leaves.

² For access to a more complete selection of illustrations, please see: <https://dSPACE.ucalgary.ca/handle/1880/45228>. With respect to Internet links within this article, all links were functional as of 8 February 2008. I understand that not all readers will feel favorably disposed towards Internet references, and provide printed references where possible.

later. I will therefore consider the architecture of Westminster Abbey first.³ And while some might expect from these ambitious building programs that the monasteries have large numbers, and ample funds, in fact both monasteries have small numbers (fewer than forty members in either monastery) and restricted funds.⁴ This makes the results in both instances all the more remarkable.

Can it be discerned whether values expressed in both these buildings constitute visible reminders of the Benedictine tradition? In responding to this question, I will explore and articulate what I understand to be Benedictine attitudes to sacred architecture. I will suggest that the forms themselves are anagogical—using that word in its exact sense, to connote “spiritual elevation, especially to understand mysteries,” according to the OED. Both buildings testify to excellence and innovation. I will also explore the extent to these qualities may be linked with the Benedictine tradition itself.

Westminster Abbey and Seminary of Christ the King, Mission, B.C.

³ I am mindful that there are many different aspects to the Benedictine tradition. These two monasteries, for example, are not members of the same administrative grouping within the Benedictine tradition. St. Peter’s is a member of the American-Cassinense congregation, founded in 1855, which consists of twenty independent monasteries with houses or dependencies in sixteen of the United States, Puerto Rico, and in six other countries on three continents. Westminster Abbey forms part of the Swiss-American Benedictine Congregation (founded 1881), which comprises nineteen independent monasteries housing 610 monks (as of 2006, the most recent year for available statistics). The complex Benedictine “family tree” is detailed here: <http://www.osb.org/intl/confed/confed.html>

⁴ At St. Peter’s for example, 2007 statistics show that there are 27 members in total—seventeen monks, and ten brothers, with half of the total membership over seventy years of age. See: http://www.stpetersabbey.ca/abbey/abbey_long_history5.html and http://www.stpetersabbey.ca/abbey/abbey_intro.html Westminster’s current numbers are 32 monks, according to the Swiss-American Benedictine Congregation statistics. <http://www.osb.org/swissam/catalog.html>

Christ the King Seminary and Westminster Abbey enjoys a site both felicitous and gracious. The abbey church and related monastery, high school and college seminary buildings stand on a broad bench nearly 200 meters above the Fraser River on a prominence known as Mount Mary Ann, enjoying close views of the fertile farmland of the Fraser Valley and more distant views of the coastal mountain range. Even though Vancouver's population has crept eastward to Mission, the monastery's high site still makes it seem isolated and rural, an impression enhanced by the abbey grounds, which include a working farm amid the 200 acres (81 hectares) of the complex.

Benedictine monks and sisters have long avidly sought beautiful sites such as this. One might compare this site with the famous precedent of the Benedictine Abbey of Melk, Austria, founded in 1089: Benedictines have long been known for their ability to select prominent locations for their monasteries.⁵ Such a decision may well relate to the Benedictine's vow of stability, unique among monastic orders. Along with vows of conversion of life (*conversatio*) and obedience, Benedictine monks and sisters vow to remain in a particular monastery for their lifetimes. Stability and a search for beauty, both natural and creatively ordered, go hand in hand.⁶ I recognize, however, that Benedictines now often understand monastic stability flexibly. That is, stability is more than a reference to place. Some Benedictines live far from the monastery yet remain very much

⁵ For Melk Abbey, see: http://www.stiftmelk.at/englisch/pages_melk/tourismusEN.html Saint-Benoît-du-Lac in Québec is also justly famous for its beautiful site. For an overview of this history of this abbey, see: Claude Bergeron and Geoffrey Simmins, with the collaboration of Jean Rochon, OSB, *L'Abbaye de Saint-Benoît-du-Lac at ses bâtisseurs* Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1997). Cistercians, by contrast, at least historically, typically favored sites in deep, well-watered valleys.

⁶ St. Benedict discusses the vow of stability in *Rule for Monasteries* (RB 58)—“On the manner of receiving brethren [and sisters].” There are many commentaries on RB. As one example, see Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1984), chapter four, “Stability,” pp. 55-64.

part of the monastic community, both legally and psychologically. “Stability” can therefore refer to a mental outlook, an attitude and a conception of inner stability rather than simply a physical or geographical conception. Nevertheless, stability as it has been traditionally understood has definitely influenced Benedictines’ approaches to architecture.

Key dates in the history of Christ the King Seminary and Westminster Abbey include: 1939, when monks from its founding monastery, Mount Angel Abbey in Oregon, came to British Columbia, and the Seminary of Christ the King (then in Ladner) was entrusted to the Benedictine monks as a training centre; 1948, when Westminster Priory became independent; 1951, when the Faculty of Theology was opened; 1953, when Westminster Abbey was raised to the status of abbey, under the title Westminster Abbey, at its present site in Mission; and 1966, when the Seminary, through its own university charter, was empowered to grant B.A. degrees as well as degrees in Theology. The monks currently direct an ambitious program of education, ranging from a high school (grades 8 to 12) through to a college and Christ the King Seminary, which grant both undergraduate and M.Div. degrees.

When the monks in Mission wished to build a seminary and abbey church in 1952-53, they invited Peter Thornton to draw up plans. Thornton was a partner in the Vancouver-based progressive Modernist architectural firm of Gardiner and Thornton. The firm enjoyed considerable prominence at that time: Thornton, for example, served as

the president of the Architectural Institute of British Columbia in 1951-52.⁷ But the community found Thornton's plans unacceptable.⁸

The firm then sent one of its newest architects to the monastery—Åsbjørn Rasmus Gathe (1921-1994). Gathe was born in Trondheim, Norway in 1921, and he studied first at the Trondheim Commercial Institute, where he emerged with a diploma in 1939, and subsequently studied architecture at the Federal Institute of Technology at the University of Zürich, graduating in 1949.⁹ He immigrated to Vancouver in 1951 (“because there have to be fjords and mountains,” he later related), where Gardiner and Thornton employed him.¹⁰ Gathe became a member of the Architectural Institute of British Columbia in 1952.¹¹ In 1954 he became a partner in a new firm known as Gardiner, Thornton and Gathe.¹² When Thornton's scheme was refused, Gathe became the

⁷ Frank S. Gardiner (1878-1966), and Peter M. Thornton (1916-1966). For an overview of their careers, see: Appendix 3 of Rhodri Windsor Liscombe's *The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938-1963* (Montreal/Vancouver: Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Douglas & McIntyre, 1997), pp. 202-205.

⁸ Rev. Mark Dumont, OSB, email to the author, 11 October 2007: “We first had Peter Thornton draw up plans for our future monastery, church and seminary, but his plans were unacceptable to us. Gathe, who was new to the Gardner Thornton firm, was given the commission, and he did his plan in 1953, which had a church with a very long nave.”

⁹ I am indebted to the eulogy of Rev. Dunstan Massey (OSB) in Westminster Abbey's semi-annual publication, *Pax Regis* (November 1994) pp. 8-9, for some biographical details, which are not given elsewhere. The following quotes in this paragraph all come from this source. See also: Åsbjørn Gathe, “Architect Envisages Monastery,” *Monastery Golden Jubilee, 1939-1989, Pax Regis*. 49, no. 1 (September 1989): 22-24. For information about Gathe's early education and working relationships, I have depended on Rhodri Windsor Liscombe's *The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938-1963* (Montreal/Vancouver: Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Douglas & McIntyre, 1997), p. 203.

¹⁰ Åsbjørn Gathe, “Architect Envisages Monastery,” *Monastery Golden Jubilee, 1939-1989, Pax Regis*. 49, no. 1 (September 1989): 22-24.

¹¹ According to information contained in Appendix 3 of Rhodri Windsor Liscombe's *The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938-1963* (Montreal/Vancouver: Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Douglas & McIntyre, 1997), p. 203. Windsor Liscombe also gives dates for the partnerships: 1954-66 with Gardiner and Thornton, and private practice, 1966-1976 (with obviously some extension beyond the latter date to oversee the completion of the monastic church).

¹² See: Åsbjørn Gathe, “Architect Envisages Monastery,” *Monastery Golden Jubilee, 1939-1989, Pax Regis*. 49, no. 1 (September 1989): 22-24. The firm was later known as Gardiner, Thornton, Gathe and Associates. Westminster Abbey is credited to Gardiner, Thornton, Gathe and Associates on B.C.'s

architect from the firm responsible for a new design. Gathe's instructions from the community, he later related, were to "express something of a Benedictine antiquity, combined with contemporary advances in structure and design."¹³ The monks found his designs agreeable for the school, monastery and monastic church at Westminster Abbey and Christ the King Seminary; gradually, they set about to realizing Gathe's vision. As Gathe later related, in the context of the monastery's jubilee celebration in 1989, the idea of a religious building taking a long time to complete was quite familiar to him, having grown up in Norway, "with a beautiful fjord, great mountains, and a majestic cathedral that took over five hundred years to finish."¹⁴

Gathe and the monastic community had on the surface quite different values, yet they found themselves united by deeper ones. Gathe was a gifted and original architect with a freethinking approach to life.¹⁵ Raised in a Lutheran home, a heavy smoker who was known to enjoy a good Scotch and was eventually married four times, it is not initially easy to imagine him working with the monastic community. Yet the community was clearly unperturbed by their somewhat unorthodox architect; Gathe likewise became deeply attached to the monastic community, and in fact would devote thirty-five years of his life to the commission. Gathe gradually entered into a quite special relationship with the monastic community—a relationship that extended from the beginnings of the commission in 1953 until his death in 1994.

DOCOMO website. See: <http://www.docomomobc.org/type/religious/index.html>. The firm did at least some work outside B.C., such as the University of Manitoba's St. Paul's College and Chapel, 1958.

¹³ Åsbjørn Gathe, "Architect Envisions Monastery," *Pax Regis*, 49 no. 1 (September 1989), 24.

¹⁴ Åsbjørn Gathe, "Architect Envisages Monastery," *Monastery Golden Jubilee, 1939-1989, Pax Regis*, 49, no. 1 (September 1989): 22-24.

¹⁵ Little has been written on Gathe. For an overview of Gathe's career, see: Geoffrey Simmins, "Åsbjørn Gathe (1921-1994)." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Online version, at: <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0010431>

Rev. Dunstan Massey, OSB, delivered a eulogy when Gathe died, stating that: “there has been a saying in the community since the early days of construction, even from the summer of 1953 when we began, that ‘Mr. Gathe would provide.’” This saying, the eulogist observed, “also reflects the complete confidence reposed in his architect by the late Abbot Eugene Medved during those long years of collaboration.”¹⁶

Gathe’s overall scheme received the abbot’s blessing in 1953.¹⁷ Contractors had the blueprints ready for tender by 1 August 1953 and by 1 November, a cornerstone was blessed.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, however, construction proceeded in a somewhat piecemeal fashion, dependent both upon available funding and labor, both of which were provided in large measure by the monks themselves.¹⁹ The functioning bell-tower (it has ten bells) holds the composition together; it was also the first part of the building constructed. Foundations for it were poured in 1954, and its upper portions constructed in 1957 and dedicated in August 1958. The seminary preceded the church: the seminary’s cornerstone was laid in 1954, and gradually the rest came into place. The seminary was blessed in December 1957.

In 1959, the community decided to go ahead with construction of the church, and asked the architect to prepare a model, which duly was complete in 1960. Construction went

¹⁶ Rev. Dunstan Massey, “Åsbjørn Gathe, Architect and Artist,” *Pax Regis* (November 1994), p. 8.

¹⁷ Åsbjørn Gathe, “Architect Envisages Monastery,” *Monastery Golden Jubilee, 1939-1989, Pax Regis*. 49, no. 1 (September 1989): 24. The 1953 drawings still bear the title block of Gardiner and Thornton. It is not clear when the monastery design became Gathe’s independent commission.

¹⁸ Rev. Dunstan Massey, “Åsbjørn Gathe, Architect and Artist,” *Pax Regis* (November 1994), p. 8.

¹⁹ The chronology here depends upon the information given in *Pax Regis* (November 1994), pp. 8-9.

ahead slowly and was finally complete in 1981. The church was finally dedicated on 10 September 1982. This long delay was probably beneficial in terms of the development of the church design. Gathe's initial scheme for the church, as set out in 1953, would have featured a very long nave and an undercrypt, which would have been in keeping with pre-Vatican II liturgical practice. As Rev. Mark Dumont, OSB, explained, the church "would have had to have a crypt with many altars for each individual priest to say Mass privately. The altar would have been on the east end of the church, and some people would be 200 feet away from the altar. As we did not start building our church till 1979, and the 2nd Vatican Council allowed priests to concelebrate the Mass, there was no longer need for an undercroft crypt. Gathe's design evolved into a Greek cross, with the altar in the centre..."²⁰ Each person present at the Mass stands no more than sixty feet from the altar. And the concelebrants stand even closer, grouped around the spacious central altar.

Viewing the entire complex from an aerial perspective, the church and the bell tower command the most architectural interest. The church is particularly notable, mostly because of its innovative roof structure: it appears as though it were drawn upwards like a purse on a cord. Credit for much of the brilliance of the technical solution is due in large measure to the consulting structural engineer, Per Christoffersen, a fellow Norwegian who like Gathe studied in Zürich and immigrated to Vancouver in 1951. Christoffersen became a founding partner that year of the now-giant Vancouver-based structural engineering firm of Read Jones Christoffersen. He was celebrated for his work in reinforced concrete: In 1958 he designed British Columbia's first post-tensioned structure (post-tensioning is an engineering technique that strengthens reinforced concrete by

²⁰ Rev. Mark Dumont, OSB, email to the author, 11 October 2007.

tightening steel rods within a concrete matrix, after the concrete has been poured and set). In 1966, the firm was responsible for the first post-tensioned high-rise office tower in Calgary, Alberta. Working with his friend Christoffersen, Gathe designed the innovative reinforced-concrete design of Westminster Abbey. Gathe willingly credited Christoffersen as his full collaborator. In 1989, for example, reminiscing about the development of the design, Gathe wrote: “I have to say ‘we’ because the man who did all the structural engineering work from the beginning to the end (?) [sic] was Per Christoffersen, today one of the greatest engineers in Canada—born in my home town, studied at the same university—and we came to Canada together.”²¹

In terms of precedents and similarities, the monastic church of Westminster Abbey belongs generally to the twentieth-century reinforced-concrete tradition pioneered by Auguste Perret (1874-1954), although it is in no way directly dependent upon it. As at the famous Perret-designed church at Le Raincy, near Paris (1922-23), the most striking feature of the church at Mission is the tall, single spire. And as at Le Raincy, the church at Mission has an austere monochromatic exterior that contrasts with an interior graced by colorful, abstract stained glass. In contrast to Le Raincy’s Latin-cross plan, however, Christ the King’s plan is centralized, essentially Greek cross plan. Other precedents to which Westminster Abbey might be compared include Werner M. Moser’s 1938-42 *Reformed Church*, in Alstetten, Switzerland, where once again a reinforced-concrete tower, 110 feet tall, provides a stark focus for a church with an austere exterior

²¹ Åsbjørn Gathe, “Architect Envisages Monastery,” *Monastery Golden Jubilee, 1939-1989, Pax Regis*. 49, no. 1 (September 1989), 24. For Christoffersen’s early work in Canada, which started in 1951, see: <http://www.rjc.ca/cms/page1108.cfm>

character.²² But the brilliance of the technical solution of Westminster Abbey—the centralized space lit from above by means of its innovative reinforced-concrete work—sets this church apart, deservedly, and marks it as a truly original design.

If the exterior of the church is powerful and evocative, the interior is serene and transcendent, just as one sees in other great domed structures, such as Hagia Sofia, which likewise feature an airily spacious top-lit central space. Four massive structural piers lead up to a coffered ceiling (coffering refers to the square recessed panels in a ceiling, which lighten its weight). Above the altar, an outer cross consisting of glazed coffers, and an inner Greek cross consisting of blind coffers. The contrast between light and dark and the interlocking crosses is highly original and successful. Rev. Dunstan aptly characterized the church by referring to its “northernness—its almost Gothic verticality, yet without any narrowness; with a great spaciousness about the altar, and the walls of stained glass, like the Heavenly Jerusalem, built up with jewels. It was a vision that swept us all along through those years of preparation from 1959 to 1979.”²³ And yet, even though the abbey church has an undeniable vertical emphasis, its plan is in fact centralized, essentially a Greek-cross form. The monks’ choir occupies one of the arms. At the crossing point of the arms stands the magnificent altar, hewn of a single slab of granite. As mentioned above, the architect’s revised scheme made it possible to celebrate Mass with no one being no more than sixty feet from the altar.

²² See, for example, Albert Christ-Janer and Mary Mix Foley, *Modern Church Architecture: A Guide to the Form and Spirit of Twentieth-Century Religious Buildings* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962), pp. 222-229.

²³ *Pax Regis* (November 1994), pp. 8-9. Other dates for the monastery’s construction: the Guest House in 1963 and 1970, the gymnasium in 1976, and seemingly endless finishing of other portions of the monastery, with the library, college residence, chapter house and infirmary following between 1983 and 1991.

Another original and powerful aspect of Westminster Abbey is its stained glass, which was designed by the noted glass artist Lutz Haufschild, a German-trained artist who has lived and practiced in Canada (mainly Vancouver) for more than thirty years and who enjoys a sterling international career. He has executed a number of remarkable, large-scale original stained-glass commissions, such as, among many others, a 14-meter high window in the Raymond-Moriyama-designed Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto.²⁴

Haufschild has garnered many honors and awards, including a 1988 Saidye Bronfman Award for Excellence in the Crafts.²⁵ The stained-glass program at Mission Abbey is vast—64 windows, each 24 by 4 feet—some 7,000 square feet of stained glass in total.²⁶ The subject of the windows is the four elements. The stained glass program dovetails with the architectural structure: each arm of the Greek-cross floor plan of the church is reserved for one the elements: blue is equated with water; red with fire; brown with earth; and grey with the air. The varied rich light of these windows, darker at the bottom and lighter towards the top, pervades the building. The effect is serene and uplifting.

Many other artistic elements throughout the monastery were designed by Rev. Dunstan Massey, a member of the monastic community who has undertaken a number of artistic commissions for the abbey, such as frescoes, as well as a series of concrete bas-reliefs inside the church.

²⁴ See: http://www.glassfocus.com/artist_english.html

²⁵ See: <http://www.civilization.ca/arts/bronfman/mcint2e.html>.

²⁶ See: http://www.glassfocus.com/four_elements/IMG0045.html

As for assessments of this church in the scholarly world, Westminster Abbey has to date attracted only two articles in professional journals (one in 1953 and the other in 1985) and one relatively brief commentary, albeit quite favorable, in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, where well-known scholar of religious architecture Claude Bergeron wrote that, along with the Québec Benedictine monastery Saint-Benoît-du-Lac, designed in the 1980s by Dan S. Hanganu, Westminster Abbey stands as one of the “two most ambitious [Canadian] churches in nearly half a century.” He further observes that “Using concrete and steel respectively, the architects have tried to reproduce the vertical movement and the skeletal quality characteristic of the monumental abbey churches of the Middle Ages.”²⁷

Westminster Abbey was Gathe’s most significant commission. Gathe’s name, however, appears frequently in accounts of modern architecture in Vancouver and area, where the firm of Gardiner, Thornton and Gathe designed a number of other buildings, both commercial and religious.²⁸ Among Gathe’s other design credits was the non-denominational Whistler Skier’s Chapel, which celebrated its first service on Christmas Eve in 1967. The building eschewed Christian symbols—a very early example of inter-faith sensitivity. Following a multi-denominational service in March that brought together representatives from the Anglican Church in the Diocese of New Westminster, the British Columbia Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, the Jewish

²⁷ See: Claude Bergeron, “Religious Building,” Canadian Encyclopedia. Online version, at: <http://thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1SEC827137>

²⁸ The partners in the firm changed over time. By 1958, the firm, responsible for the modernist Music Building at the U.B.C. campus, was known as Thornton, Gathe, Davidson, Garrett, Masson and Associates, according to an article in the UBC Reports 13, No. 6 (October, 1967), p. 2.

Community in Whistler and the Whistler United Church of the United Church of Canada, the chapel endured a mixed history: it was moved twice from its original location and dismantled in 2000 after a final service on Easter Sunday.²⁹

Westminster Abbey stands as a monument both to its community and its architect; as Rev. Dunstan observed about Gathe in his 1994 eulogy, “he felt he was participating in the building up of a community that would continue on, perhaps for hundreds of years, after all of us have been laid to rest; that such a Community should have a noble house—the house of God in which to grow in its Christian culture, and its Benedictine spirituality.”³⁰ Westminster Abbey stands as a landmark in Canadian ecclesiastical architecture, demonstrating Gathe’s originality as well as showcasing the remarkable patronage of a contemporary Benedictine community.

The Church of SS. Peter and Paul at St. Peter’s Abbey, Muenster, Saskatchewan³¹

Muenster shares with Christ the King a bucolic and pleasant rural site, although the Saskatchewan abbey lacks the dramatic hillside site of Westminster Abbey. Muenster is a prosperous town amid mixed farming country. The Abbey of St. Peter’s was founded

²⁹ For an article discussing the Whistler Skier’s Chapel, and an illustration of it, see: http://www.whistlermuseum.com/media/documents/HeritageofFaith_WhistlerMuseumandArchives_Feb05.pdf

³⁰ *Pax Regis* (November 1994), p. 9.

³¹ For St. Peter’s College website, see: <http://www.stpeters.sk.ca/>

when monks came from St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, to serve a largely German-speaking immigrant population in Saskatchewan.³² In 1909-10 the monks build a wooden church with two prominent towers. After 1919, the church was ornamented with more than eighty life-size paintings by the famous artist Count Berthold John Von Imhoff (1868-1939), a Mannheim-born German immigrant to St. Walburg, Saskatchewan, who made decorating the province's churches of all denominations his life work. (By the time of his death in 1939, he had completed painting programs for more than 100 churches in Saskatchewan.³³)

On 6 May 1921, St. Peter's Colony became St. Peter's Abbey Nullius. This is a specific term in Roman Catholic Canon Law, designating a geographical area not yet a diocese but under the direction of the abbot of a monastery. In the abbey nullius the abbot would assume the normal duties of a bishop except for the ordination of priests. In this case, St. Peter's fell under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the abbot, with St. Peter's as his cathedral church. The abbot's original jurisdiction extended for 1,800 square miles! A reorganization in 1998 led to the territory becoming part of the Saskatoon Diocese. The territorial abbey of St. Peter-Muenster was suppressed; St. Peter's is accordingly no longer a cathedral.³⁴ This church still stands, however, and is now listed on the Saskatchewan Register of Historic Property. Located about 1.6

³² See: http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/german_settlements.html and <http://www.stpetersabbey.ca/>.

³³ The artist's studio is still extant and contains more than 250 paintings left there at his death. See: <http://www.imhoffgallery.com/ImhoffArt/index.htm> In 2005, the Imhoff Studio and Farm Site near St. Walburg became recognized as a Saskatchewan Provincial Heritage Property.

³⁴ See: http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/roman_catholic_cathedrals.html and <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/ds005.html>

kilometers north of the present College and Abbey, it is still known locally as St. Peter's Cathedral.

These days, St. Peter's Abbey is best known for its undergraduate college, St. Peter's College, which is affiliated with the University of Saskatchewan.³⁵ Students at St. Peter's can take the first two years of their undergraduate education, then transfer to the University of Saskatchewan. The Centre for Rural Studies and Enrichment has become an important program at the College. The College is also known for its writing retreats. St. Peter's also publishes the feisty and editorially independent *The Prairie Messenger*, a weekly newspaper with a faithful readership extending all across the western Canadian provinces.³⁶ Amid all these other activities, St. Peter's still runs a farm, including an apiary.

Étienne Gaboury (1930-), a Canadian architect with a considerable national and international reputation, was chosen to design the abbey church.³⁷ His impressive career spans nearly forty years—from the *Church of the Precious Blood* in Saint-Boniface, Manitoba in 1968 to the skillfully engineered *Esplanade Riel*, also in Saint-Boniface, from 2004. His international credits include the Canadian Chancery in Mexico City, from 1982. Gaboury's designs are characterized by their dramatic power and clear articulation of spaces.

³⁵ See: <http://www.stpeterscollege.ca/>

³⁶ See: http://www.stpeterscollege.ca/prairie_messenger/index.html

³⁷ Gaboury, the youngest of eleven children, was born to a farming family in Swan Lake, Manitoba. For an overview of his work, see: Faye Hellner, ed., *Étienne Gaboury* (Saint-Boniface, Manitoba: Éditions du Blé, 2005).

In responding to the commission to design a new church at St. Peter's, the architect chose to mirror the existing architectural elements of the site, in particular, Michael Hall (St. Peter's College), built 1921, the dominant building on the site and the main administrative and teaching building on the grounds. Michael Hall has two visual hallmarks: its tall, somewhat austere red brick façade; and its silver roof punctuated by dormers and a single, centrally located, square tower topped with an octagonal spire. Gaboury responded to each of these design elements in Michael Hall in his design for the new abbey church. The church is a tall, narrow building, faced in red brick and roofed with the same silver metal and narrow dormers that one sees on Michael Hall. There are of course differences—the dormers on the church are gabled whereas the dormers on Michael Hall are hipped, to name only the most obvious—but overall the new design is remarkably consistent with the older buildings. The church is in fact quite a small building, which is appropriate given the small number of monks currently in the monastery. As is traditional in monastic communities, the church may either be entered via the cloister, located to the west of the church (where separate robbing and sacristy spaces are located), or else by a separate main entrance, which stands on the north. The public and guests also use this main entrance.

In terms of plan, the church is a narrow Latin-cross space with an adjacent conference room known as the Jerome Assembly Room (after the fourth abbot of St. Peter's), located on the east side of the church, on the opposite side of the cloister. This main entrance also has a generous narthex that extends the width of the church and past it, to embrace the cloister. This means that the sanctuary and altar are untraditionally located, facing south.

In keeping with recent developments in Roman Catholic architecture, the Blessed Sacrament Chapel and Reconciliation Room (formerly known as confessionals) are clearly visible parts of the church.³⁸ The Blessed Sacrament Chapel, in particular, extends from the altar end of the church, making the apse end seem like it is extended with a polygonal chevet. The church was blessed on 21 March 1991, and dedicated to SS. Peter and Paul. St. Peter's Abbey Church Bell Tower, completed in 1994, stands some distance north from the main entrance; this has the effect of extending the effective front of the church and formalizing its main entrance.

In the normal, smaller configuration of the church, used for the Divine Office by the monastic community, the narrow space of the church functions well. Choir stalls face each other in traditional monastic style. For larger assemblies, such as on feast days, the church may be opened up into the Jerome Assembly Room by means of folding walls, tripling the available capacity to 250 people.

In terms of style, the building is a modern reinterpretation of the Gothic tradition, with its tall, narrow space and clerestory windows. The monastic community refers to the building as “neo-Gothic.”³⁹ This is as good a description as any. In fact, the church recalls the Sainte Chapelle in Paris, Saint-Louis' thirteenth-century Gothic jewel. The visitors' experiences are similar: the church experienced as a tall, narrow space enlivened by and enriched with stained glass.

³⁸ An overview of efforts to clearly articulate liturgical spaces within Roman Catholic church designs may be gained from Marchita Mauck, *Shaping a House For the Church* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1990).

³⁹ For example, in a “Self-Guided Walking Tour” that is available to visitors.

The most interesting characteristic of SS. Peter and Paul Church is the underlying geometric order of the design. Reading Revelation, that allusive yet elusive final book of the Bible, inspired Gaboury. The text that Gaboury responded to reads as follows (Revelation 21:15-21, NRSV): “The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, one hundred and forty-four cubits by human measurement, which the angel was using. The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth cornelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoptase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass.”⁴⁰

This text inspired Gaboury to design a church using underlying geometry as its basis, in particular, the square as a “sign of the perfection found in the New Jerusalem.”⁴¹ In design sketches developed by the architect, he starts with squares, then circles, then extends these into more complex forms, including root rectangles and eventually a

⁴⁰ Gaboury sent this text, accompanying geometrical sketches, in a letter to the author dated 27 November 2000.

⁴¹ The architect’s assent to this proposition may be inferred, but he did not write this directly. In a letter to the author dated 4 May 1999, he observed: “I now realize that I have not written anything about the project other than the promo material here enclosed.” This included the text from Revelation underneath a square with increasingly complex derivative forms.

tetrahedron, the latter being, he writes, “implicit in the cube.” The derivation from the square is evident clearly in drawings for both the plan and the façade. One can also see sacred geometry visible in the main façade, where squares are filled with circles, and cut in half, and multiplied into root rectangles; these are ways of indicating so-called divine proportions, such as the Golden Section.⁴² The underlying geometry is immediately evident to the visitor: the canted square on the bell-tower, along with the elaborate geometrical patterning of squares and circles above the main door, serve as reminders to architectural initiates of the underlying geometrical order to the space.

The stained glass inside the church of SS Peter and Paul is indeed particularly fine and original. The stained-glass windows were designed by the architect and executed by a member of St. Peter’s, Fr. Alfred Engele, with the help of Sr. Salesia Zunti from Humboldt and Walter Zunti of Luseland.⁴³ Once more, the architect was inspired by texts from Revelation (chapters 21-22)—in this case, the description of the River of Life in the New Jerusalem. Some flavor of these chapters may be gained by perusing the first verses of chapter 22 of Revelation (Revelation 22:1-7, NRSV), where we read: “Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there

⁴² Letter to the author from Étienne Gaboury, 4 May 1999.

⁴³ This information about the design and execution of the stained glass, as well as Revelation as the source of the windows, comes from descriptive materials sent to the author by the architect.

will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. And he said to me, 'These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.' 'See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.'" These words are particularly apt for a monastic community, where prayers for the Second Coming are merged with an acceptance of the distance still yet to travel before that occurs. The theme of apocalyptic hope is entirely in keeping with the traditions of monasticism. The river imagery provides a linear motif around the interior, while adoring angels stand above the altar.

Conclusions:

Churches that have been built stand as high-water marks in a faith community's life together. They declare that those who have designed and built them care about the traditions of faith to which they have declared allegiance. If this is generally true of all churches, in the case of these two churches under consideration here, can one argue that there is somehow a Benedictine character in them? They are very different in style, so surely there is not a common "Benedictine style." Is there a Benedictine attitude? I believe that there may well be. The Benedictine vow of stability, as suggested above, subtly colors the monks' decision of how and when to build. Even if, as observed earlier, the vow of stability no longer means literally being attached to a monastery for life (although it could well be), vowing to remain attached psychologically and often

physically to one particular place makes one particularly desirous of seeking excellence and beauty within that place. Stemming from the vow of stability, Benedictines foster a tradition of excellence, combined with a willingness to encourage architectural experimentation—and a willingness to build up to, and sometimes beyond, their means, as a way of creating a fitting tribute to God. This was true, for example, of St. John’s Abbey, at Collegeville in Minnesota, who hired Marcel Breuer (1902-1981), a committed modernist, as their architect.⁴⁴ It was true of the Benedictine Sisters of Annunciation Monastery in Bismarck, North Dakota, who hired the same architect to build their own monastery—a “jewel on the prairie.”⁴⁵ And these are just two among many notable examples of Benedictine architecture, which include the more recent Monastery of Christ in the Desert (located in New Mexico, approximately 135 miles from the airport in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and 75 miles north of Santa Fe) whose chief architect for the original monastery was George Nakashima (1905-1990), the well-known Japanese-American architect and woodworker. Small communities, large communities, men’s communities, women’s communities, northern communities affiliated with universities, southern desert communities closer to nature than to cities: what they share is a commitment to excellence and architectural innovation.⁴⁶ The two Canadian monastic churches considered here need to be understood within this larger context of Benedictine architectural patronage.

⁴⁴ For the early history of St. John’s Abbey, see: Colman J. Barry, OSB, *Worship and Work* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical press, 1993 [1956]); for more recent developments, see:

<http://www.saintjohnsabbey.org/>

⁴⁵ For Breuer’s involvement at Annunciation Monastery, see:

http://www.annunciationmonastery.org/breuer_architecture.htm

⁴⁶ Other monastic and mendicant orders also have commissioned excellent contemporary architecture. As just one example, see the Cistercian monastery, Our Lady of Dallas. For this community, see: *Cistercians in Texas, the 1998 Jubilee*, ed. Thomas Pruitt [Dallas: Our Lady of Dallas, 1998] and

<http://www.cistercian.org/abbey/history/ourlady.html>

Perhaps the conception of stability also has some bearing on the ways that many for Benedictine communities develop long-term working relationships with their architects. This is true, for example, of Saint-Benoît-du-Lac, in Québec, and also of Westminster Abbey. The relationship transcends the immediate commission at hand and assumes aspects of a larger commitment to a common project—to the ideal of building a community. It is not difficult to imagine why architects would respond favorably in such a context. In a world where many clients have short-term goals and are not willing to put the cause of architecture ahead of the bottom line, it must be rewarding to run into clients who care as deeply as many architects do. Benedictines believe that architecture can affect positively the way that one lives; they believe that innovation should be welcomed; they believe that quality is visible and exerts a positive effect on people, whether they live in a particular place or just visit it. One might see the architects and the monks as coming together in a curious admixture of the secular and the sacred: to achieve a common vision. That may be why, perhaps, it wasn't always considered important for the architects to share the faith of their clients.⁴⁷ The faith is in the architecture itself, and in architecture's ability to create forms that are anagogical, in the sense defined above. This sounds like an ideal kind of client.

And yet, at the time of writing this article, there were no photographs of the buildings under review here available on the churches' respective websites, nor any mention of

⁴⁷ Hanganu comes from an Orthodox tradition. Breuer stemmed from a Jewish background. I One might presume that Gaboury would share a common basis in faith with his Roman Catholic clients for St. Peter's, although I did not have the opportunity to discuss this with him.

either architect in the literature generally available to the public.⁴⁸ This seems puzzling and unfortunate in both instances, even more so in the case of Gathe, who devoted so many years of his life to work on the Abbey and its related buildings. While it must of course be recognized that monastic life is not about architecture per se—architecture is only a means, and not the end, which is conversion of life—it does seem reasonable to suggest that both communities are most recognizable simply because of their architecture. It is to be hoped that both communities will seize the opportunity to justly celebrate and promote the architecture they have commissioned, as a matter of pride for themselves, and as a matter of inspiration for the secular world to foster excellence in architecture.

Biographical note:

Geoffrey Simmins is associate dean of research and planning at the University of Calgary, and an ordained minister in the United Church of Canada.

⁴⁸ See, for example: <http://www.stpetersabbey.ca/> and <http://www.sck.ca/pages/monks.htm>

List of References:

Christ-Janer, Albert, and Mary Mix Foley. *Modern Church Architecture: A Guide to the Form and Spirit of Twentieth-Century Religious Buildings*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962.

Gathe, Åsbjørn. "Architect Envisages Monastery." *Monastery Golden Jubilee, 1939-1989. Pax Regis* 49, no. 1 (September 1989): 22-24.

Hellner, Faye, ed. *Étienne Gaboury*. Saint-Boniface, Manitoba: Éditions du Blé, 2005.

"Light and form: Westminster Abbey Church, Mission, BC." *Canadian Architect* 30, no. 6 (June 1985): [20]-22.

Marchand, Philip. "Houses of Worship." *Western Living* (March 1985): 22-28.

Mauck, Marchita. *Shaping a House For the Church*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1990.

[Massey, Rev. Dunstan, OSB.] "Åsbjørn Gathe, Architect and Artist." *Pax Regis*. Mission B.C.: Westminster Abbey and Seminary of Christ the King, November 1994: 8-9.

Monastery Golden Jubilee, 1939-1989. Pax Regis 49, no. 1 (September 1989). Special issue.

Read, Nicholas. "Westminster Abbey's Church Rises With Help From Friends."

Vancouver Sun 26 August 26 1981.

Richardson, Peter and Douglas. *Canadian Churches: An Architectural History*.

Photographs by John de Visser. Richmond Hill, Ontario: Firefly, 2007.

Russ, Joel. "Handle With Care: Canada's Internationally Acclaimed Stained-Glass

Master, Lutz Haufschild, Brings New Life To An Old Medium." *Equinox* 9, no. 3

(May-June 1990): 82-9.

Waal, Esther de. *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The

Liturgical Press, 1984.

"Westminster Abbey and Seminary of Christ the King, Mount Mary Ann near Mission

City, British Columbia." *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada*

30, no. 9 (Sept. 1953): 250-251.

Windsor Liscombe, Rhodri. *The New Spirit: Modern Architecture in Vancouver, 1938-*

1963. Montreal/Vancouver: Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for

Architecture, Douglas & McIntyre, 1997.

Online Sources (see also notes):

Bergeron, Claude. "Religious Building." *Canadian Encyclopedia*. Online version, at:

<http://thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1SEC827137>

Simmins, Geoffrey. "Åsbjørn Gathe (1921-1994)." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Online version, at:

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ART0010431>