Notes from Fr. Nick

The Gothic Revival

I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the Gothic Revival of the 18th and 19th centuries. This architectural movement sought to bring back the beauty of medieval churches and other buildings into contemporary life. What many people do not realize about the Gothic Revival movement is that its promoters saw themselves primarily as social reformers, and only secondly as architects.

The revival began in England during the height of the Industrial Revolution. The need for unskilled workers had uprooted massive numbers of formerly rural peasants and tossed them into squalid and dehumanizing city tenements. This was the world Charles Dickens wrote about. People with a social conscience desired a return to a simpler life in which human beings were valued.

Many Catholics and Anglo-Catholics saw the Middle Ages as the high point in civilization. They believed that if the institutions and architecture from that time were restored, the forces of the modern world could be counteracted. Thus, a vast project of building churches, hospitals and asylums was undertaken.

Among the most prominent architects and designers of the Gothic Revival were Augustus Pugin, William Morris, George Gilbert Scott and John Ruskin. U.S. Churches built in the Gothic Revival style are St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City and Grace (Episcopal) Cathedral in San Francisco.

The results of these social reformers were mixed. The Industrial Revolution continued unabated, but the reformers did raise consciousness about the plight of common people. Guilds were established for crafts people (which still protect them today) and living conditions improved. The most visible evidence of their work is in the churches and other buildings they created whose beauty can make one’s heart leap with joy.

The next time you find yourself in a church built in the Gothic-revival style, remember that its builders not only cared about beauty, but they also desired a world where everyone would be treated fairly and humanely.

Parish Movie Night:

Tim’s Vermeer

Masters of illusion Penn & Teller tell the story of Tim Jenison, a Texas inventor who spent 10 years trying to solve an enduring mystery: How did the Dutch master Johannes Vermeer paint so realistically 150 years before the invention of photography? Jenison’s adventurous pilgrimage unfolds like a whodunit, as he uses 17th-century technology to recreate what he believes to be Vermeer’s secret.

Join Fr. Nick and fellow parishioners in Norton Hall after the 5:30 pm Mass a week from Saturday, March 14th, at 6:30 pm. Bring food or drink to share!