

INCLUDES TEXT USED IN JUNE 2008 INSERT

1954 Common Room Ceiling Reliefs:

Poured concrete, each 4' x 6'

The moulds for these figures (all negative) were made of sectionalized plywood with hardboard inserts for detailing. When completed they were lacquered, oiled, and nailed on top of the deck. Filled with a special mix they were covered with steel and the final pour of the cement slab.

The ceiling is divided into four bays by cross beams. The first as you enter is the southwest bay. Crossing the room we come under the second or southeast bay. Skirting the central pillar we reach the third or northeast bay and finally, turning west we come to the fourth or northwest bay over the fireplace. Each of these bays has four reliefs.

When asked to design 16 biblical or symbolic animals for the ceiling I found four words in a psalm – mercy, justice, fidelity and peace – that inspired the unifying theme. “Mercy and fidelity shall meet, justice and peace shall kiss. Fidelity shall sprout from the earth, and justice shall look down from heaven.” Ps. 85, 10-11.

The Southwest Bay
Misericordia – Mercy

The Lamb of God: as sacrificial victim which John saw in the Apocalypse, “standing as though it had been slain” Rev. 5, 6. and before whom the living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down singing a new song: “Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God” Rev. 5:9. The Paschal Mystery – slain by risen! Blood pours from his side into a chalice while he carries the cross as a banner of resurrection.

The Unicorn: to the right of the Lamb, standing rampant or running depending on your point of view is a mythical horselike animal with a single horn growing from the center of its forehead. This fierce creature, wild and elusive, could only be tamed and captured if nurtured by a virgin in whose presence it became docile, gentle and obedient. In medieval tapestries it is often shown under the tree of life, thus becoming a symbol of Christ the resurrected one. “I died and behold I am alive for evermore.” Rev. 1,18.

The Pelican: above the doorway feeding its young. In Thomas Aquinas’ Eucharistic hymn *Adoro te devote*, in the sixth stanza we read “pie pellicane, Jesu Domine! Me immundum munda tuo sanguine.” O loving Pelican, Jesus Lord cleanse me the unclean one in thy blood. The popular medieval belief was that the Pelican pierced its own breast to feed the young with its blood. This became a symbol of the Eucharist where Christ gives us his blood from his opened heart.

The bronze Serpent: left of the pelican. When Moses prayed for the people afflicted with fiery serpents because of their murmuring. “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole’s and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.’” Num. 21, 8. Jesus, speaking to Nicodemus fulfills this sign saying, “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes

in him may have eternal life.' John 3, 14-15. The pole becomes a cross while the sun and moon are darkened at his death.

The Southeast bay

Fidelitas – Fidelity

The Raven: these next four reliefs are drawn from the life of St. Benedict. The flying bird next to the pillar is connected to the tale of a jealous priest, Florentius, who tried to undermine the work of St. Benedict. The saint's reputation for holiness, however, continued to grow and Florentius blinded with jealousy sent a poisoned loaf as a token of Christian good will. Benedict, suspecting his motive, commanded a raven he had tamed, "Take this and carry it, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to a place where no one will be able to find it." So the raven obediently carried out his mission.

The Winged Serpent: to the right of the raven, we have an earlier attempt at murder. To repeated requests of the monks of Vicovaro Benedict consented to become their abbot. It was not long, however, that the monks chafed under his strict discipline and plotted to poison him. Presenting at table a glass of lethal wine intended for him, Benedict blessed it and it was instantly shattered. The evil serpent that lurked in their hearts and in the cup was revealed. Benedict said, "Why did you conspire to do this? Did I not tell you at the outset that my way of life would never harmonize with yours? It is impossible for me to stay here any longer." Then he went back to the wilderness he loved.

Two Fishes: to the left of the serpent. One day Benedict had the Goth, a new monk, take a brush hook and clear away briars at the edge of the lake. While the Goth was hard at work the iron blade came loose and flew into deep water. When Benedict heard of it he came and taking the handle from the Goth, he thrust it into the water. Immediately the iron blade rose from the bottom, reattaching itself to the handle. Two fishes marvel at the miracle. Benedict merely said, "Continue with your work now. There is no need to be upset."

The Winged Seraph: to the left of the two fishes – the *Ora* to the Goth's *Labora*. "let us consider how we ought to behave ourselves in the presence of God and His angels, and so assist at the Divine Office that our mind may be in harmony with our voice," as "the prophet says: 'Serve the Lord with fear;'" and again: "Sing wisely," and, "In the sight of the angels I will sing to Thee."