

**Arriving at a Notion of “True Christian Art”:
Father Raphael Pfisterer, Father Bonaventure Ostendarp,
and the Studio of Christian Art at Saint Anselm College**

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This paper presents an historical overview of the European and Benedictine precedents that informed the foundation of the Studio of Christian Art at Saint Anselm College. Founded by Fr. Bonaventure Ostendarp O.S.B. (1856-1912) in 1893, and continued under the leadership of his successor, Fr. Raphael Pfisterer, O.S.B. (1877-1942), the Studio was an artist’s workshop responsible for producing monumental religious paintings and murals for use in the decoration of Catholic Churches across the United States. In working according to a set of codified aesthetic and ideological criteria for what could be considered “True Christian Art,” these artist-monks drew from Benedictine German tradition and set the tone for Catholic Church decoration in the United States, especially among the growing body of German Catholic immigrants.

On the campus of Saint Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire, stands an elegant if otherwise understated chapel, designed in an American Romanesque style by the Boston architectural firm Maginnis & Walsh. Built in 1924, for decades this small chapel served as the worship space for the college’s faculty and students who, at the time of its construction, consisted chiefly of monks of the Benedictine order responsible for founding the school, and young men enrolled in the college and its associated preparatory academy. Soon after its completion, the chapel’s barrel-vaulted ceiling and interior walls were covered with a series of elaborate painted murals designed and executed by the artist-monk Raphael Pfisterer, O.S.B. (figure 1).

In 1966, a new church was built on the Saint Anselm campus to serve the growing college community. The following year the old chapel was rechristened as the Chapel Art Center, and its use shifted to cultural programming and art exhibitions. Although portions of the chapel’s original polychrome painted wall decoration were covered in white paint in keeping with the minimalist aesthetic of mid-century art galleries, Fr. Raphael’s murals remain largely intact (figure 2). These painted decorations not only serve as a reminder of the building’s past identity, but also remain the most complete, and likely most significant, existing example of the work of the Studio of Christian Art, a once-prominent artistic enterprise that operated from the campus of Saint Anselm College.

The Studio of Christian Art remains a largely under-examined institution, although its artistic and cultural legacy was widespread and is still felt. Established by Bonaventure Ostendarp, O.S. B. (1856-1912) in 1893, the same year as the college’s founding, the Studio was an active artist workshop responsible for producing countless monumental religious paintings and murals for use in the decoration of Catholic Churches, Monasteries, and Convents across the

United States. Its client base was large, with clients as far afield as North Carolina, Delaware, and Minnesota. Overseen by Bonaventure until his death in 1912, the Studio's operations were continued under the leadership of his pupil and successor Raphael Pfisterer well into the twentieth century, operating until the latter's death 1942.

This paper will offer only a brief overview of the influence and body of work of the Studio of Christian Art, a topic worthy of much further study. I offer here an historical overview of the Studio's founding and a discussion of the European and Benedictine precedents that informed the aesthetic conventions and underpinning ideology of the Studio's output—a corpus of work that includes not only monumental religious paintings and mural schemes, but also an accompanying body of published writings addressing the nature of Christian art. As I hope to demonstrate, Bonaventure and Raphael's approach to their artistic enterprise was wholly shaped by Benedictine principles. In proposing a set of codified criteria for "True Christian Art," these artist-monks drew from the Benedictine German tradition and set the tone for Catholic Church decoration in the United States, especially among the growing body of German Catholic immigrants.

Part I. The Foundation of the Studio of Christian Art at Saint Anselm College

Bonaventure Ostandarp was a young monk at Saint Vincent Archabbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania when he began his formal art studies. Born Francis Ostendarp in 1856 to German parents in Cincinnati, Ohio, at the age of sixteen Ostendarp enrolled in classical studies at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania.¹ The school operated under the auspices of Saint Vincent Archabbey, the first Benedictine abbey to be established in the United States, founded in 1846 by the German monk Boniface Wimmer. Ostendarp took the name Bonaventure and entered the Benedictine order in 1875. Singled out for his artistic aptitude, he enrolled in the Royal Academy of Art in Munich at the behest of Abbot Wimmer, who stressed the importance of art and culture to the mission of the Saint Vincent Abbey and its school.² He returned to the United States in 1885, teaching for a time at Saint Vincent College before transferring to Saint Mary's Abbey in Newark, New Jersey. During his tenure in Newark, Bonaventure worked consistently as a painter for Catholic churches, effectively beginning the work he would later continue under the moniker of the Studio of Christian Art.

In 1893, Bonaventure was sent to Manchester, New Hampshire, to teach at the newly founded Saint Anselm College, which was operated remotely by Saint Mary's Abbey until 1927, when Saint Anselm Abbey was established and assumed full control of the school. At Saint Anselm Bonaventure taught art courses and continued his painting. In an act that underscores the importance of Bonaventure's artistic vocation in the eyes of his Benedictine brothers, Abbot Hilary Pfraengle, the college's founding president, made special provisions for Bonaventure's

¹ "Rev. Bonaventure Ostendarp, Death of Priest and Artist of National Repute," *Nashua Telegraph*, February 28, 1912, 3.

² Jerome Oetgen, *Mission to America: A History of Saint Vincent Archabbey, the First Benedictine Monastery in the United States* (Washington D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 150.

painting studio on the third floor of the new college building, where large windows provided adequate light for painting.³ By establishing this independent painting studio at Saint Anselm College, Bonaventure effectively laid down the roots for the Studio of Christian Art.

Bonaventure's Studio was preceded by a comparable organization that similarly operated under the auspices of the Benedictine order in the United States. The Altar Building Stock Company, founded in Covington, Kentucky in 1862, was a workshop specializing in the design and building of altars, baptismal fonts, confessionals, and pulpits in the German Gothic style for German-American Catholic churches. It was led by lay brother Cosmas Wolf (1822-1894), whose artistic education at Munich's Royal Academy was, like Bonaventure's, undertaken at the behest of Saint Vincent Archabbot Boniface Wimmer. Wolf's tenure at the Royal Academy in the 1850s was spent studying under the ecclesiastical sculptor Johann Petz.⁴ Upon his return to the United States Wolf was sent to Saint Joseph Parish in Covington, Kentucky, just across the Ohio river from Cincinnati, and soon thereafter established his Altar Building Company. He engaged the German painters Wilhelm Lamprecht and Johann Schmitt to work with him providing painted decoration for his altars. Both artists were Benedictines who likewise studied at Munich's Royal Academy.⁵ After operating for a decade in Covington, the group moved to Saint Vincent Archabbey in Pennsylvania, where it continued until Cosmas Wolf's death in 1894.

Anecdotal history indicates that the Studio of Christian Art at Saint Anselm College was an "offshoot" of Wolf's enterprise.⁶ It does appear likely that the adolescent Bonaventure, growing up as he did in the German Catholic community of Cincinnati, established a relationship with Brother Cosmas and his Company while the group was based in nearby Covington. Bonaventure's arrival at Saint Vincent College in 1872 coincided with the Company's relocation to the Archabbey the same year. A definitive link between Bonaventure's Studio and the Altar Building Stock Company, which could possibly take the form of a shared clientele network of Catholic parishes, or a common roster of lay-brother artisans or painters, has not yet been uncovered. However, Wolf's death in 1894 and the dissolution of the Altar Building Company at Saint Vincent was shortly followed by the formal establishment of the Studio of Christian Art, an event that can be roughly marked by the construction of a new building on the Saint Anselm campus expressly for the purpose of housing the Studio operations.

The new studio building was built in 1895, situated further down the hillside from the college's main building. It was a white frame structure with a gracious covered porch, and a large north-facing window to provide natural sunlight for painting (figure 3). The building was

³ Valerie Ann McKeon, "History of Saint Anselm College 1889-1985," (PhD diss, Boston College, 1985), 126.

⁴ Nathan Cochran, "Bother Cosmas Wolf, O.S.B., Nineteenth-Century Church Designer," *Sacred Architecture* 25 (2014), 28.

⁵ The noted impressionist painter Frank DuVaneck, who was born in Covington, served an apprenticeship with the Altar Building Stock Company, working closely with Lamprecht and Schmitt in the mid-1860s. At their urging, he later traveled to Munich to study at the Royal Academy.

⁶ Kimberly A. Opatka-Metzgar et al, *The Saint Vincent Basilica in Latrobe, Pennsylvania: One Hundred Years* (Latrobe: Saint Vincent Archabbey Publications, 2005), 52.

intended to serve the dual purpose of housing the lay brothers of the Saint Anselm community in addition to serving as the Studio of Christian Art's headquarters. The first floor contained rooms for the brothers and a small chapel for their use, while the second floor housed the Studio operations, as well as Fr. Bonaventure's living quarters (figure 4).⁷ The building still stands on the campus today, although it has been extensively renovated to serve as a residence hall.

Bonaventure soon found a natural assistant and successor in the operation of his Studio in his former pupil Sebastian Pfisterer, a member of Saint Anselm College's first graduating class of 1895 and a promising young artist. Pfisterer was born in Loibersdorf, Bavaria in 1877, and emigrated to the United States in 1891. After his graduation from Saint Anselm, he professed solemn vows at Saint Vincent Archabbey and took the name Raphael, but soon returned to Saint Anselm to join the college faculty.⁸ Raphael's artistic talents flourished under Bonaventure's tutelage, and at his teacher's urging he sought instruction at the Art Student's League in New York City, where he enrolled in classes between 1895 and 1896. He reportedly studied under famed muralist painter Kenyon Cox, known for his monumental, classically informed allegorical murals in prominent civic buildings, including the Library of Congress. Raphael made mural painting his specialty, envisioning the activity as a loftier pursuit than simple painting or drawing. "Portrait painting is copying," he is quoted as remarking in 1930, "but murals must have thoughts and ideas to them as well as mere painting."⁹ Raphael served as Bonaventure's assistant at the Studio of Christian Art for over fifteen years, eventually assuming directorship over the Studio following Bonaventure's death in 1912.

Part II: The Legacy of the Ludwigmissionsverein

A series of glass plate negatives, now in the collection of the College Archives, provide glimpses of the Studio building's original interior. In addition to high-ceilinged art studio and work space, the Studio also apparently maintained a "museum" containing a collection of natural and geological specimens, displayed in the manner of a traditional *Wunderkammer* (figure 5). The Studio boasted a collection of paintings and other artworks assembled by Bonaventure during his years in Munich, and occasional public exhibitions were held to showcase these treasures, which were exhibited alongside student artwork and the increasing number of painting commissions completed by Bonaventure and Raphael.

The museum-like collections displayed at the Studio of Christian Art echoed a similar art and natural history collection housed at Saint Vincent College. Emulating the manner in which his alma mater promoted exposure to the visual arts in tandem with the wonder of the natural

⁷ McKeon, 127. McKeon does not specify which lay brothers were housed in the Studio building, apart from Fr. Lawrence Lamour, a former pastor of St. Raphael's Church in Manchester and a French teacher at the college, who helped fund the Studio building's construction. Although this assertion is speculative, it is possible that select artisans from Cosmas Wolf's Altar Building Stock Company traveled to Manchester following Wolf's death, and took up work under Bonaventure at the Studio of Christian Art.

⁸ "Studio Notes," *Saint Anselm's College Monthly*, March 1912.

⁹ Quoted in Henry Gilman, "St. Anselm's Students Take to Mural Painting," *My Impressions of St. Anselm's College*, 12.

world was one of many ways Bonaventure actively followed the model set forth by the Saint Vincent Archabbey, and the influential Abbot Wimmer. The art collections at Saint Vincent consisted of over two thousand paintings, sculptures, and other artworks given to the college in the 1850s by King Ludwig I of Bavaria.¹⁰ These gifts came under the auspices of the *Ludwigmissionsverein*, a charity mission formed at Ludwig's behest dedicated to supporting German citizens overseas, particularly by increasing access to classical education, exposure to the fine arts and music, and by the building of German churches and hospitals.

When Boniface Wimmer came to the United States from Germany in 1846 to establish Saint Vincent Abbey, he did so with Ludwig's support. The complex relationship of financial backing and shared artistic and cultural ideals that took hold between the Benedictine Abbot Wimmer and the King of Bavaria gave rise to a flowering of art and architecture in the United States with a distinctive German flavor, reflective of Ludwig's preferences and the prevailing artistic styles he promoted in Bavaria at the time. Although religious historians have acknowledged the influence the Bavarian king exerted on the foundation of the Catholic church in North America, as architectural historian Kathleen Curran has observed, "the energetic role played by Ludwig as a patron of art and architecture in the United States has been completely overlooked."¹¹ The primacy given to the visual arts in Catholic churches under Ludwig's patronage promoted an environment that eventually gave rise to enterprises like the Altar Building Stock Company and the Studio of Christian Art in the United States.

Under King Ludwig I's reign, which spanned the years 1825-1848, Bavaria saw a boom of building and artistic projects, especially in the capital city of Munich, which Ludwig hoped to develop as a metropolis of art and culture, and testament to German power. The young king promoted for a reawakening of Catholic faith in Germany, which had been actively suppressed under the rule of his predecessor King Maximilian I and his chief minister Maximilian von Montgelas, who pushed for secularization in keeping with eighteenth century Enlightenment principles. Ludwig sought to unite the concepts of German nationalism and Catholic faith in the minds of his subjects, and did so through a series of building projects. He funded the construction of several large churches in Munich and reopened countless German monasteries, many of which had been dissolved under Montgelas. He was especially partial to the Benedictines, whom he saw as a "genuine German order," due to their status as the oldest monastic order in Europe, and those credited as having brought Catholicism to Germany.¹² The medieval Benedictine monastery of Saint Michael's in Metten was the first Benedictine abbey

¹⁰ In addition to works of art, the museum collections at Saint Vincent College once included geological samples, taxidermied animals, plant specimens, coins, and various other biological collections. The entomological collections were, at one time, the most complete/extensive in the United States, and were eventually donated to the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh when the Saint Vincent Museum closed in the 1980s. See Kimberly A. Opatka-Metzgar, *Saint Vincent Past to Present: A Visual Journey* (Latrobe: Saint Vincent Archabbey Publications, 2008).

¹¹ Kathleen Curran, *The Romanesque Revival: Religion, Politics, and the Transnational Exchange* (Philadelphia: Penn State Press, 2003), 85.

¹² *Ibid.*, 83-84.

Ludwig restored and reopened, and it was there that Boniface Wimmer professed his vows in 1832.¹³

To promote the arts in his capital city, and to assist in his goal of uniting the ideas of German heritage and Catholic faith, Ludwig turned to the German artistic collective calling themselves the Brotherhood of Saint Luke, and particularly to one of their most vocal and visible members, the painter Peter Cornelius. Established in Vienna in 1809, the Brotherhood of Saint Luke was a devotional artistic fraternity founded by painters Friedrich Overbeck and Franz Pforr. Inspired by the work of early Romantic writer Wilhelm Wackenroder, particularly his essays *Outpourings of an Art-Loving Friar* (1797), written from the perspective of a monk extolling the virtues of medieval and early Renaissance literature and art, the members of the Brotherhood moved to Rome to study Christian art of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. They took up residence in an abandoned monastery, converted to Catholicism, and began painting in a manner evocative of the early masters. The great advantage of fourteenth and fifteenth century painters, in the minds of the Brotherhood, was their emphasis on the faithful messages and concepts contained in their art, rather than on the artistry of the depictions themselves. In imitation of this mode of working the Brotherhood developed the concept of *Gedankenmalerei*, or “idea-painting.” Their penchant for wearing their hair long and parted down the middle, in the manner that both Christ and the painter Raphael were believed to have done, earned them the nickname the “Nazarenes.”¹⁴

Peter Cornelius joined the ranks of the Nazarenes in 1812 and distinguished himself in his ambition to put the Nazarene concept of *Gedankenmalerei* and Catholic piety to use in formulating a new kind of German nationalist art. He saw the revival of mural and fresco painting, as practiced by the early Renaissance masters Giotto and Raphael, as a means of returning public art to an elevated state not seen in centuries. To enact this goal, Cornelius urged the Brotherhood to seek out mural commissions in Rome. His effort succeeded, and the Nazarene frescoes depicting scenes from the Story of Joseph in the Roman home of Prussian consul Jacob Bartholdy, painted from 1815-1816, attracted the attention of many European artists and dignitaries passing through the Italian capital city (figure 6). This project was followed by another fresco cycle for the Villa Massimo, featuring scenes from Christian epic poems by Dante, Tasco, and Aristo (figure 7).

The young prince Ludwig I encountered the Nazarene murals at the Villa Massimo in 1818, and was particularly impressed by Cornelius’s ambition to create a new German art form in fresco painting. He invited Cornelius to Munich to paint frescoes in the newly built Glyptothek, a museum housing the Bavarian prince’s collection of classical sculpture and antiquities (figure 8).¹⁵ This was followed by a commission to paint frescoes in the newly built

¹³ Jerome Oetgen, *An American Abbot: Boniface Wimmer, O.S.B. 1809-1887* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 22.

¹⁴ Emma L. Winter, “German Fresco Painting and the New Houses of Parliament at Westminster,” *The Historical Journal* 47:2 (2004), 299-300.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 301.

Ludwigskirche, which were to become Cornelius's best known paintings, and the most influential mural painting of its time. Cornelius ambitiously reinterpreted Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes in a manner more in-keeping with the Nazarene style, and his *Last Judgement* fresco, completed in 1840, was the largest European painting produced in the nineteenth century (figure 9).

Other Nazarene painters followed Cornelius to Munich to paint murals and frescoes at Ludwig's behest. Julius Schnorr van Carolsfeld, who joined the Brotherhood in 1817, was invited to create fresco cycles for the Glyptothek, and for the Royal Palace.¹⁶ Nazarene painters Heinrich Maria von Hess and his pupil Johan Schraudolph found success as mural painters in Ludwig's Munich as well, and both rose to high ranks as instructors at the Royal Academy of Art. Under Ludwig's patronage, mural and fresco painting in the Nazarene style became the dominant artistic expression of both German nationalism and of the German Catholic Church.

Through the efforts of the *Ludwigmissionsverein* the practice of mural painting as church decoration was transmitted to the German community in the United States, particularly through the conduit of Boniface Wimmer and the Benedictine order. At Wimmer's request, German mural painters with training from the Royal Academy of Art in Munich came to the United States to decorate German Catholic churches and monastic buildings that began to spring up across the country. Many of these artists had direct ties to the Nazarene movement; for example, William Lamprecht, the talented painter engaged by Cosmas Wolf of the Altar Building Stock Company, was a pupil of Nazarene painter Johan Schraudolph.¹⁷ Wimmer also saw to it that promising young American students, like Bonaventure Ostendarp, were trained in the art of painting in the Nazarene style at the Royal Academy. As transmitted through Benedictine monasteries and the patronage of the *Ludwigmissionsverein*, mural painting in the Nazarene style became the preferred mode of church decoration in German Catholic parishes in the United States.

Evidence of the legacy of Nazarene mural tradition may be found in the promotional materials put out by the Studio of Christian Art in the early twentieth century. In an illustrated pamphlet disseminated by the Studio around 1910, featuring photographs of the Studio's paintings (primarily Bonaventure's work) and an essay on Christian Art penned by Fr. Raphael, the Studio's masters cite Peter Cornelius's *Last Judgement* mural on the altar wall of the Cathedral of St. Ludwig in Munich as an ideal example of Christian feeling carried out in a painting for church decoration (figure 10). An altar painting of this type, they assert, is the ideal form of church decoration, as it transcends the realm of "cheap decoration" and instead acts as a "grand conception, executed according to the laws and principles of true Christian Art." An imposing painting could "appeal to the human mind and aid the worshipper in his meditations, and the congregation will be pleased with it, for at last they have something in the church on

¹⁶ Keith Andrews, *The Nazarenes: A Brotherhood of German Painters in Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 62-64.

¹⁷ Paul A. Tenkotte and James C. Claypool, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Northern Kentucky* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 532.

which their mind can dwell with satisfaction.”¹⁸ To underscore the Studio’s utility at producing large mural paintings in the manner of Cornelius, the monks offer an example of Fr. Bonaventure’s altar painting for St. Benedict’s Church in Newark, New Jersey, presumably painted while the monk was living in nearby Saint Mary’s Abbey (figure 11).

Fr. Raphael’s text for the pamphlet assumes a pedagogical tone that aims both to define the parameters of Christian art and to instruct parish priests on the most effective and appropriate means of outfitting the interior of their worship space. Assuming as given that Christian art for church decoration take the form of painted figurative narrative scenes, Raphael resolutely derides the excesses of Renaissance artists, indicating that these painters “lost sight of the principle element of Christian Art, namely, the Christian concept and feeling, and ran into representation of the material, the beautiful form.”¹⁹ In upholding the Italian master Raphael as “the scion of Christian Art” and praising the work of his mentor Perugino, Raphael fundamentally allies itself with a pre-Renaissance aesthetic. While Raphael does not use the term explicitly, he is evoking the same ideas embodied in the Nazarene concept of *Gedankenmalerei*, which emphasized the importance of a painting’s concept or idea—or by extension, the expression of religious faith—over individualistic style or personal expression. “If these requirements . . . form the criterion in judging works of Christian Art,” Raphael writes:

[M]any paintings that are now considered masterpieces of Christian Art would have to be relegated to the Beulah land of pagan art. The mere fact that it treats of a Christian subject does not render it a Christian painting. . . . [T]he very conception is pagan, for it considers the mere material beauty in proportion, design, and attitude as its ideal; the artist revels in delights and falls into ecstasies when looking upon the ‘human form divine,’ and thinks to have achieved great glory, when he is successful in representing his ideal in all its charms and allurements.²⁰

While the artistic and cultural impact of the Nazarene artists on the Studio of Christian Art can be inferred from statements like these, Frs. Bonaventure and Raphael also took pains to align themselves with another German Benedictine art movement, invoked by name in their preface to the Studio’s promotional pamphlet:

[T]rue to the beautiful and praiseworthy tradition of the Benedictine Order in fostering the fine arts, artists are to be found in many communities in the present time, who devote their life and energy to the culture of True Christian Art. The Beuronese School of Art has gradually gained a firm foothold in the word of art

¹⁸ Raphael Pfisterer, O.S.B. and Bonaventure Ostendarp, O.S.B., *Christian Art* (Manchester: Mirror Press, ca. 1910), 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

and has won recognition and praise from artists and connoisseurs of art, from cultured men that can see and appreciate the beauty in art.²¹

The Beuronese School cited by Bonaventure and Raphael refers to a style of painting developed at the Benedictine monastery of Beuron in Germany by artist and monk Desiderius Lenz. Like the Nazarene artists before him, as an art student Peter Lenz (1832-1928) was disenchanted by the materialism and commercialism of modern secular art, and turned toward ecclesiastical art as a means of creating work with a higher purpose. Inspired by the Nazarenes, and by Wackenroder's *Outpourings of an Art-Loving Friar*, the same text that spurred the Brotherhood of Saint Luke to abscond to their Roman monastery, in 1862 Lenz left Munich for Rome to study art. In doing so he sought inspiration from past art movements, but instead of drawing from European Medieval and early Renaissance traditions as the Nazarenes had, Lenz fixated on Egyptian art, feeling that the painting of this ancient culture represented an apex of clarity in representation. He developed a conviction that there had once been a dogma-based religious art, which followed a law of proportionality and of the harmony of magnitudes, which the Egyptians had knowledge of but had subsequently been lost over the course of a millennia and a half of Christian history. His task was to rediscover these principles and methodically learn them, like a language whose grammar had been lost. Lenz began his search for an ideal geometrical system by which to depict the human figure, convinced that there must be a dogmatic art analogous to the dogmas of the Church. He would eventually publish his findings in a 1898 treatise titled *On the Aesthetics of the Beuron School of Art* (figure 12).²²

Lenz was granted permission to live among the Benedictine monks at the Abbey of Beuron in Hohenzollern in 1868, drawn there by the monk Benedikt Sauter who was studying and reviving the art of Gregorian chant. In this ancient musical system Lenz observed a similarity to his own work, noting that the laws of proportions appeared to form the basis of all ancient sacred art. At the Abbey Lenz was awarded a commission to design, build, and decorate a small chapel dedicated to Saint Maur, which he completed in 1870. The painted murals in this chapel, including the *Mother of God Enthroned in Glory, with Saint Scholastica and Saint Benedict* (figure 13) represented a wholly unique style of modern religious painting. Lenz eventually took a vow to join the Benedictine order at Beuron and spent much of the rest of his life studying and refining his ideas, completing several commissions in the meantime.²³ In the 1870s and 1880s, he and a group of fellow artists from the Beuron Abbey were charged with painting murals depicting the life of Saint Benedict at the Abbey at Monte Cassino in Italy, the mother house of the Benedictine order. This, along with another project painting murals in the Convent of Saint Gabriel and the Abbey of Emmaus, both in Prague, Czech Republic, brought

²¹ Ibid., 4.

²² Hubert Kris, Introduction: Peter Lenz and the Nineteenth Century in *The Aesthetic of Beuron and Other Writings*, by Desiderius Lenz (London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2002), 8-9.

²³ Ibid., 11.

the Beuronese School prominence among practitioners of religious art, and secular modern artists as well.²⁴

Benedictine monasteries in the United States showed an interest in the Beuronese school of art as well; in the 1890s two monks from Beuron were invited to Conception Abbey in Conception, Missouri to paint a series of murals in the Beuronese style in the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception. Fr. Bonaventure reportedly followed the Beuronese movement with interest while as student in Munich during the 1880s, and he was conscious of their success. In 1908 the Studio of Christian Art received a commission to paint a series of murals for Saint Mary's Church in McKeesport, Pennsylvania based on the Life of the Virgin series painted by Lenz and the Beuronese school for the Abbey of Emmaus in Prague. While Saint Mary's Church no longer stands, the murals, completed in 1910, have been removed and preserved. These colorful paintings, with their rigid figures, symmetrical compositions, and interesting use of surface patterning, stand not only in testament to the talent of Fr. Bonaventure and Fr. Raphael, but also serve as a lasting artifact of the Beuronese originals in Prague, which were sadly destroyed by fire during World War II (figure 14).

Although Bonaventure did self-consciously aim to work in a manner that echoed the Beuronese style, by their own admission the Studio of Christian Art did not adhere to the strict compositional principles laid out by Lenz. Stylistically, rather than practicing a direct historiated style of painting, the Studio's output represents an intentional synthesis of the Beuronese and Nazarene precedents, while also clearly drawing from contemporary American trends in painting and decorative art. Fr. Raphael's murals in the Saint Anselm College chapel represent perhaps the most distinctive amalgamation of these disparate elements of painting and design. Several elements in the chapel decoration clearly evoke Beuronese principles; for example, the flattened manner of painting, symmetrical arrangement, and strong use of outline to delineate the angelic figures standing and kneeling in the manner of a frieze over the chapel's altar wall (figure 15). Of the three registers painted on the chapel ceiling depicting representations of the *Agnus Dei*, the central image shows a deliberate use of Egyptian imagery and employs a flattened, simplified perspectival depiction of architectural space, a seeming allusion to the Beuronese school (figure 16). However, the set of twelve instructive scenes painted in the lunette spaces above each of the chapel's stained glass windows owe a stylistic debt to the narrative painting style favored by the Nazarenes and echo the didactic nature of Nazarene mural paintings, intended as they were to illustrate a series of allegorical messages relating the benefits of a Christian education (figure 17). Historic photographs of the chapel's interior show that before mid-twentieth century alterations took place Raphael's mural decorations were much more extensive, with a painted repeating pattern extended down the chapel walls to meet the wainscoting, in keeping with the colorful, patterned aesthetic favored in German church decoration in the Nazarene tradition (figure 18). However, the patterning and details in the Saint Anselm chapel murals reveal a

²⁴ Lenz and other artists of the Beuronese School of painting were invited to exhibit at the Vienna Secessionist exhibition of 1905, where art historians attest they exerted a strong influence on Secessionist artist Gustav Klimt. The Beuronese school likewise served as a source of inspiration for Maurice Denis and the French post-Impressionist group the Nabis.

diversity of source materials. The scrolling vine motifs and stylized floral patterns on the chapel ceiling, for example, demonstrate a clear borrowing from William Morris and the British Arts and Crafts style (figure 19).

The mid-1960s saw the Saint Anselm College chapel deconsecrated and converted into an art gallery, and portions of Fr. Raphael's murals painted over. Similar alterations took place in churches across the country where Studio of Christian Art murals and paintings had previously hung. Although many of the Studio's commissions are still extant and in situ, oftentimes the surrounding context and original painted decoration has been altered, to account for changing tastes and the dictates of simplicity in church decoration popularized in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. With Raphael's death in 1942, the Studio of Christian Art effectively closed, and the studio building was eventually renovated to serve as a dormitory, now named Raphael Hall in his honor.

For many years, the legacy of the Studio went largely unacknowledged and was seemingly forgotten. Fortunately, interest in the Studio is currently undergoing a revival among the college's scholarly and Benedictine communities.²⁵ New opportunities for research continue to present themselves, and there is a growing appreciation of the Studio's connection to a larger history of Catholic art. Although fifty years have elapsed since the Saint Anselm College chapel last served as a place of worship, the curatorial staff at the *Alva de Mars Megan* Chapel Art Center continue to care for Fr. Raphael's murals, ensuring their long-term preservation and enabling present-day visitors to experience the reverential atmosphere of the former chapel, as the artist intended.

²⁵ I would like to acknowledge Saint Anselm College Archivist Keith Chevalier whose interest in the Studio of Christian Art led to the compilation of a coherent body of material in the College Archives relating to Frs. Bonaventure, Raphael, and the Studio. Recognition is also due to Saint Anselm College student Rhonda Leigh Dauphinais, whose undergraduate thesis on Fr. Raphael and the Studio of Christian Art stimulated my interest in the Studio and its activities, and still stands as the most comprehensive work on the topic to date.



Figure 1. Fr. Raphael Pfisterer, O.S.B. at work painting the altar wall of the Saint Anselm College chapel, circa 1927.

Photograph from the Saint Anselm College Archives.



Figure 2. View of the *Alva de Mars Megan* Chapel Art Center in 2016.
Photograph by Kevin Harkins.



Figure 3. The Studio building at Saint Anselm College, built in 1895.
Illustrated in *Christian Art* (Manchester: Mirror Press, ca. 1910), 5.



Figure 4. Painting Studio in the Studio of Christian Art Building. Fr. Bonaventure is standing to the left, Fr. Raphael stands on a ladder with his back to the photographer. Photograph from the Saint Anselm College Archives.



Figure 5. Fr. Raphael seated in the “Museum” room of the Art Studio.
Photograph from the Saint Anselm College Archives.



Figure 6. Top: Friedrich Overbeck, *Joseph Being Sold by his Brothers*; bottom: Peter Cornelius, *The Recognition of Joseph by his Brothers*, ca. 1815-1816. Fresco overpainted in tempera. Murals from the Casa Bartholdy in Rome, now in the collection of the Alte Nationalgalerie,

Berlin. Published in Keith Andrews, *The Nazarenes: A Brotherhood of German Painters in Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).



Figure 7. View of the Nazarene murals in the Casino Massimo.
Published in Keith Andrews, *The Nazarenes: A Brotherhood of German Painters in Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).



Figure 8. Peter Cornelius's murals for the Glyptothek in Munich.
Published in Keith Andrews, *The Nazarenes: A Brotherhood of German Painters in Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

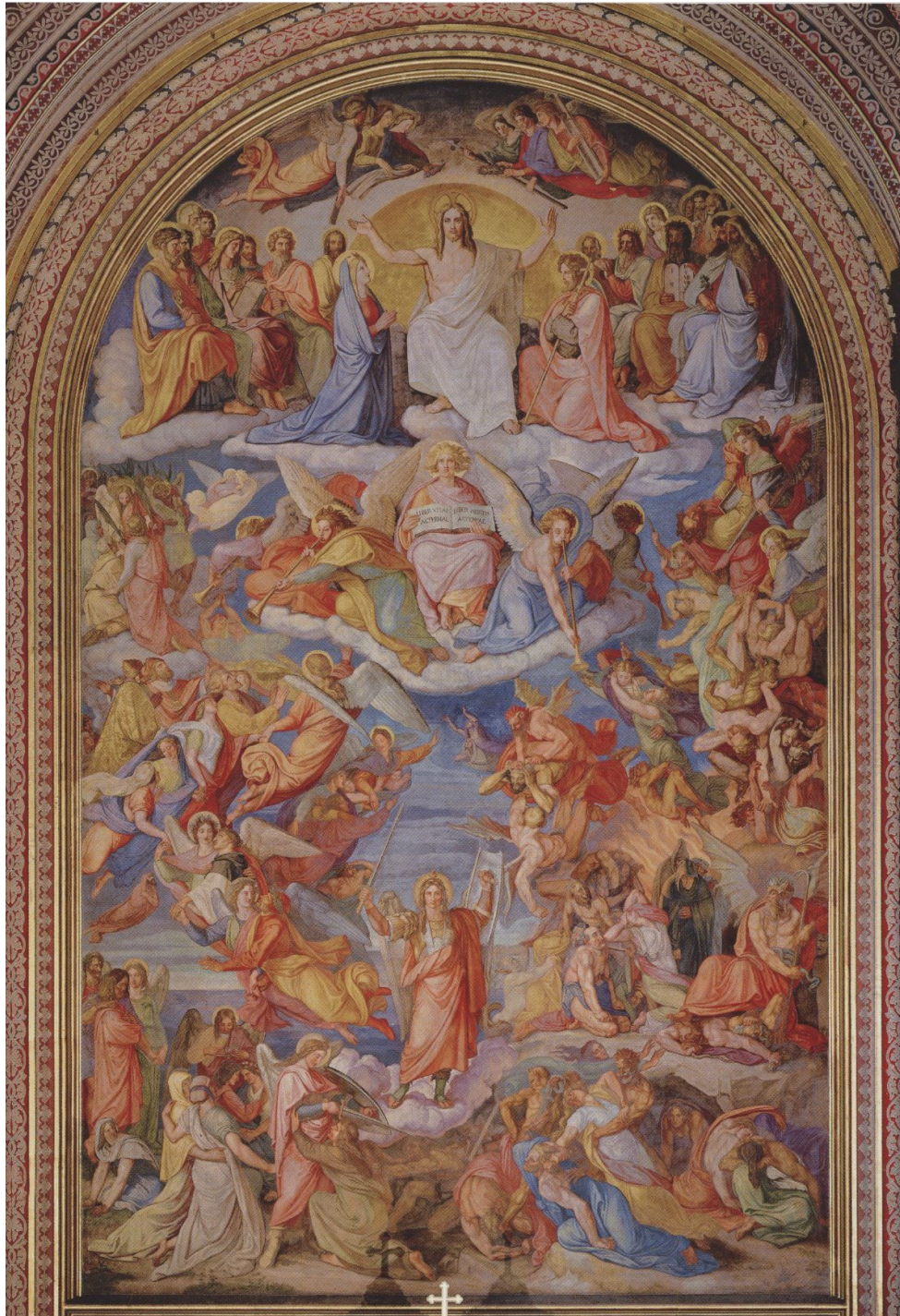


Figure 9. Peter Cornelius, *Last Judgement*, 1836-40. Fresco. Ludwigskirche, Munich.

Published in Cordula Grewe, *The Nazarenes: Romantic Avant-Garde and the Art of the Concept* (Philadelphia: Penn State Press, 2015).



St. Louis' Church, Munich

Figure 10. Peter Cornelius's *Last Judgment* fresco as illustrated in the Studio of

Christian Art publication *Christian Art*, ca. 1910.

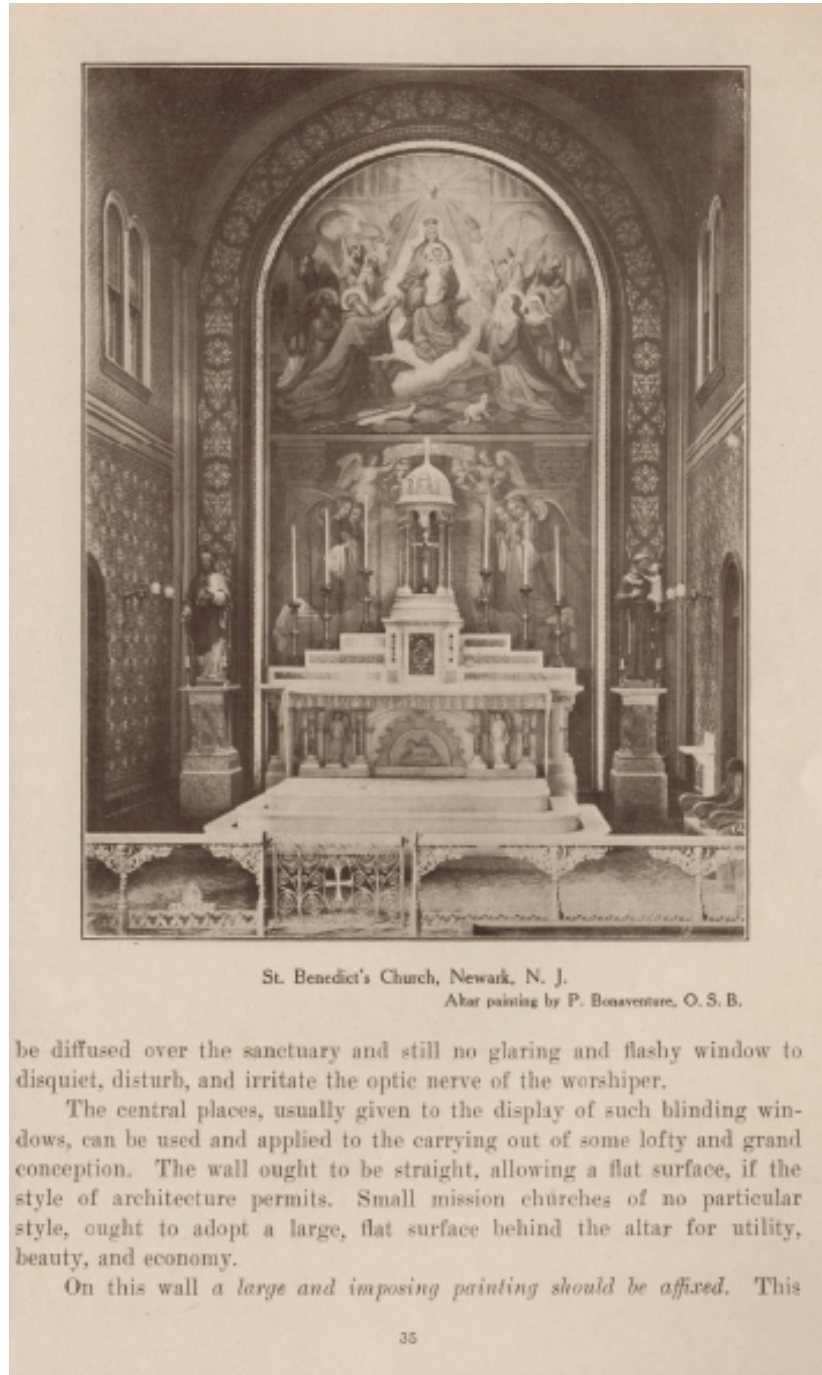


Figure 11. Illustration of Fr. Bonaventure's murals for St. Benedict's Church in Newark, New Jersey, illustrated in the Studio of Christian Art publication *Christian Art*, ca, 1910.

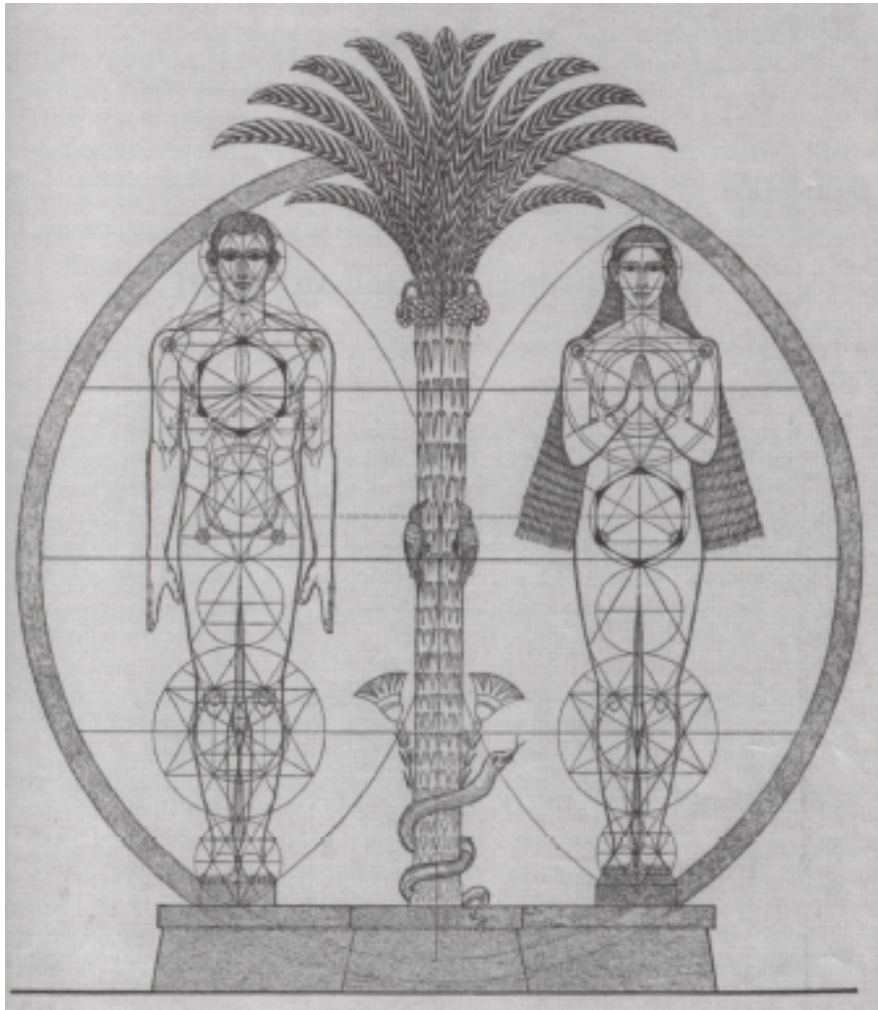


Figure 12. Desiderius Lenz, *The Male and Female Canon*.
Published in Desiderius Lenz, *The Aesthetic of Beuron and Other Writings*
(London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2002), 73.

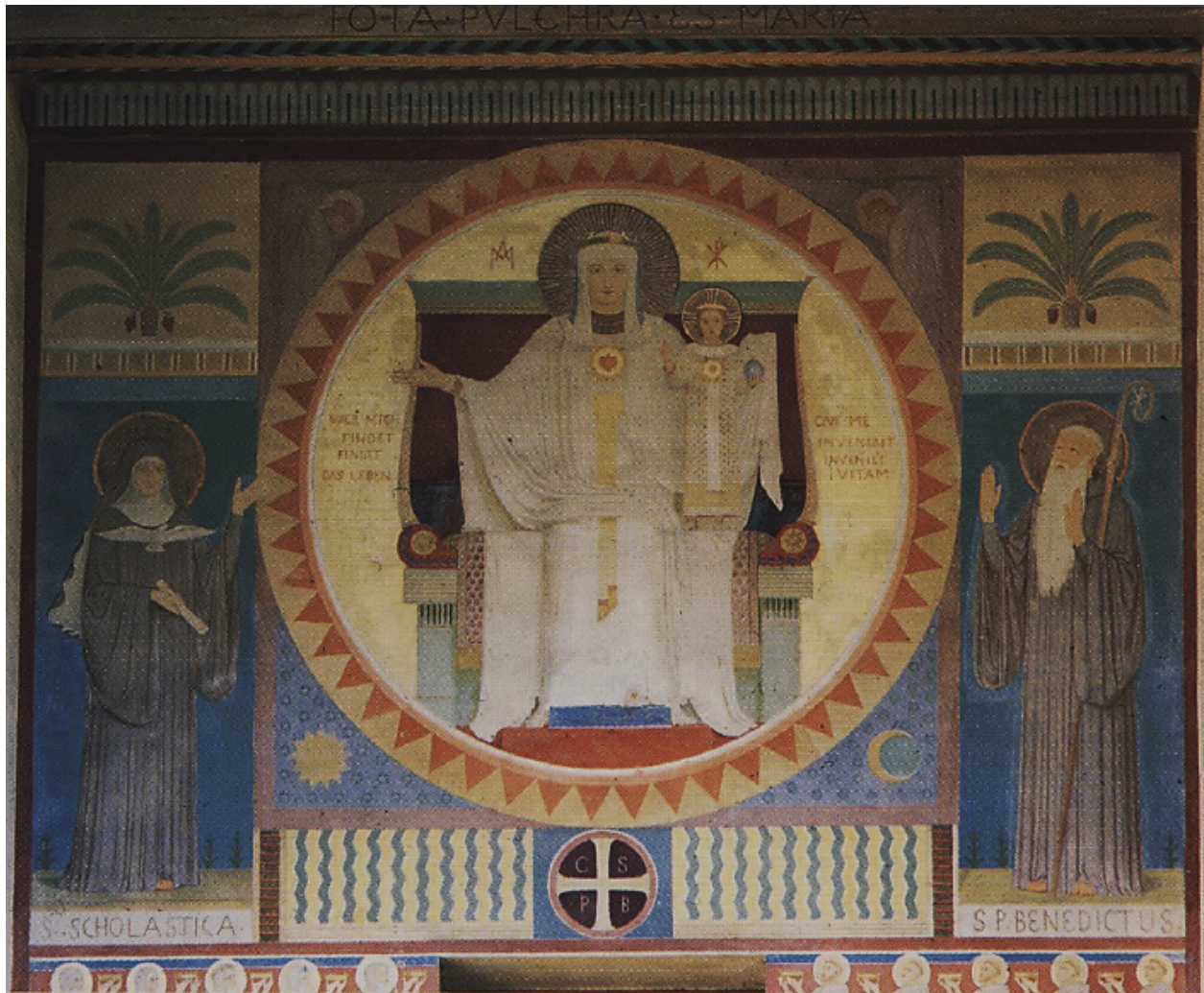


Figure 13. Desiderius Lenz, *Mother of God Enthroned in Glory, with Saint Scholastica and Saint Benedict*, 1869. Fresco at the entrance of the Chapel of Saint Maur, Abbey of Beuron. Published in Desiderius Lenz, *The Aesthetic of Beuron and Other Writings* (London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2002).



Figure 14. *The Adoration of the Magi and The Vision of the Blessed Virgin to Isaiah and David*, painted by Fr. Bonaventure Ostendarp and Fr. Raphael Pfisterer for St. Mary's Church in McKeesport, Pennsylvania.

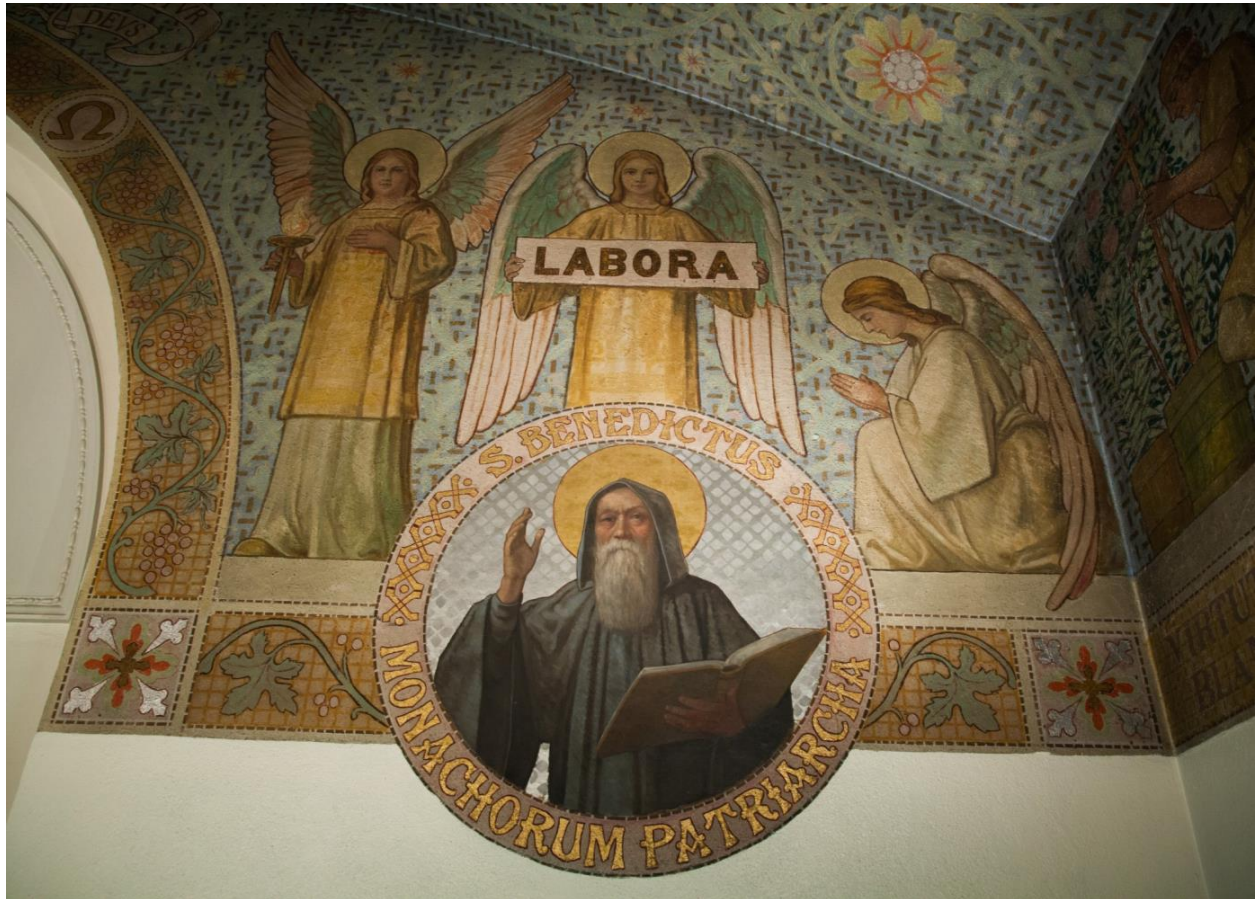


Figure 15. Angel frieze on the altar wall of the Saint Anselm College chapel, painted by Fr. Raphael Pfisterer in circa 1927. Photograph by Jeff Dachowski.



Figure 16. Central register of the *Agnus Dei* ceiling in the Saint Anselm College chapel, painted by Fr. Raphael Pfisterer in circa 1931.
Photograph by Jeff Dachowski.



Figure 17. *The Combat between Truth and Error* and *Good and Bad Literature*, narrative scenes painted in the lunette niches in the Saint Anselm College Chapel by Fr. Raphael Pfisterer, between 1927-1931. Photograph by Jeff Dachowski.



Figure 18. Interior of the Saint Anselm College chapel in circa 1927. Photograph from the Saint Anselm College Archives.



Figure 19. Detail of the altar wall in the Saint Anselm College chapel, showing repeating scrolling vine and floral pattern.
Photograph by Jeff Dachowski.

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