

The Chapel of the Holy Sacrifice at the University of the Philippines¹

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THE University of the Philippines is a national institution, admitting students of all religious faiths. Although Catholic students are in the numerical majority, this does not necessarily mean that they are the most influential group on campus. Various religious bodies have their own churches.

The relatively disorganized group of Catholic students was electrified into action in 1947 when a man of exceptional saintliness, energy and vision appeared on the scene. This was the new chaplain, Father John P. Delaney S. J. The biography of this extraordinary priest deserves full length treatment elsewhere; suffice to say that Father Delaney in a remarkably short period of time organized his flock into a cohesive group which quickly began to wield considerable influence within the University community.

From the very beginning, Father Delaney saw that one of his most important projects would be to provide a fitting

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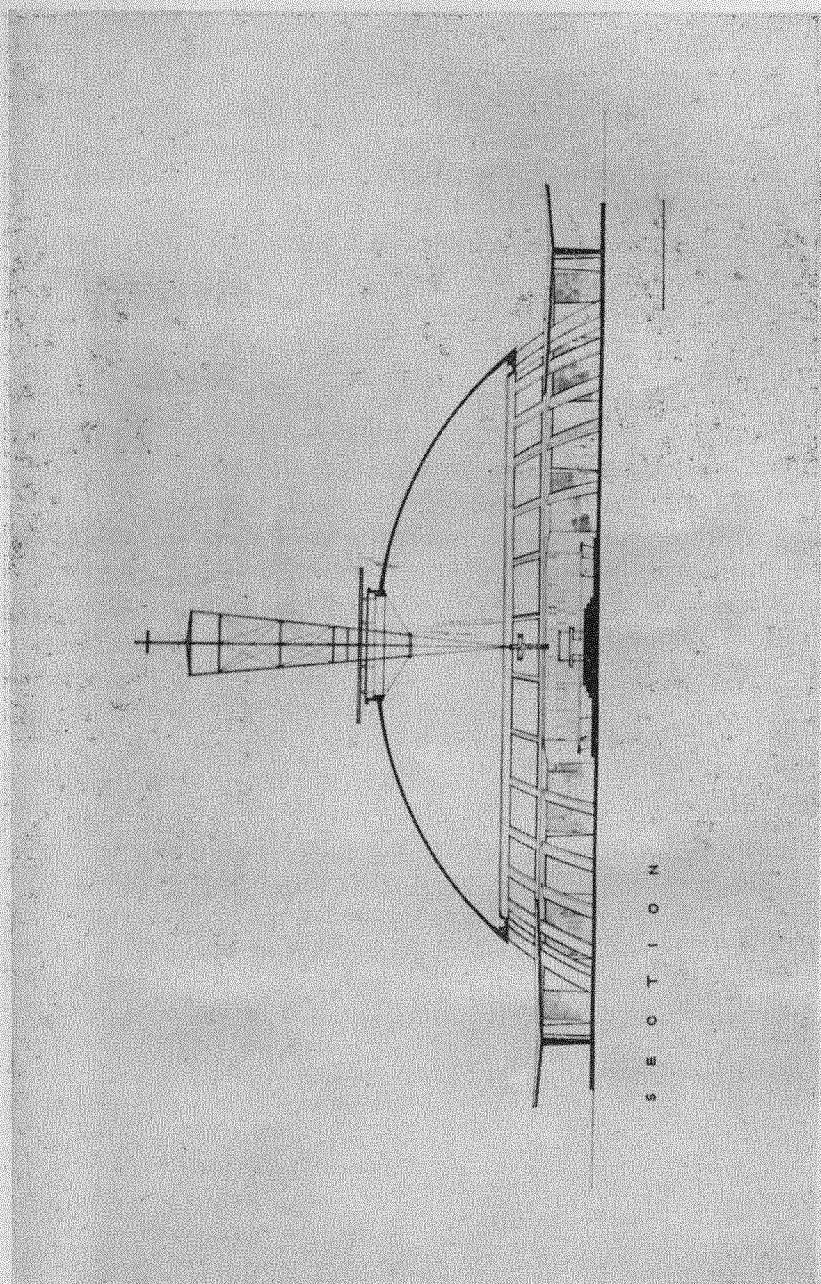
center for the religious activities for his group. He had an old and ramshackle church at his disposal; a building constantly on the verge of physical collapse. He envisioned a new chapel, one that would provide not only a dramatic setting for the daily performance of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, but one which would also symbolize the ageless modernity of our common faith.

For years the students laboriously raised funds. Finally the moment came for Father Delaney to choose people to convert his dream to fact.

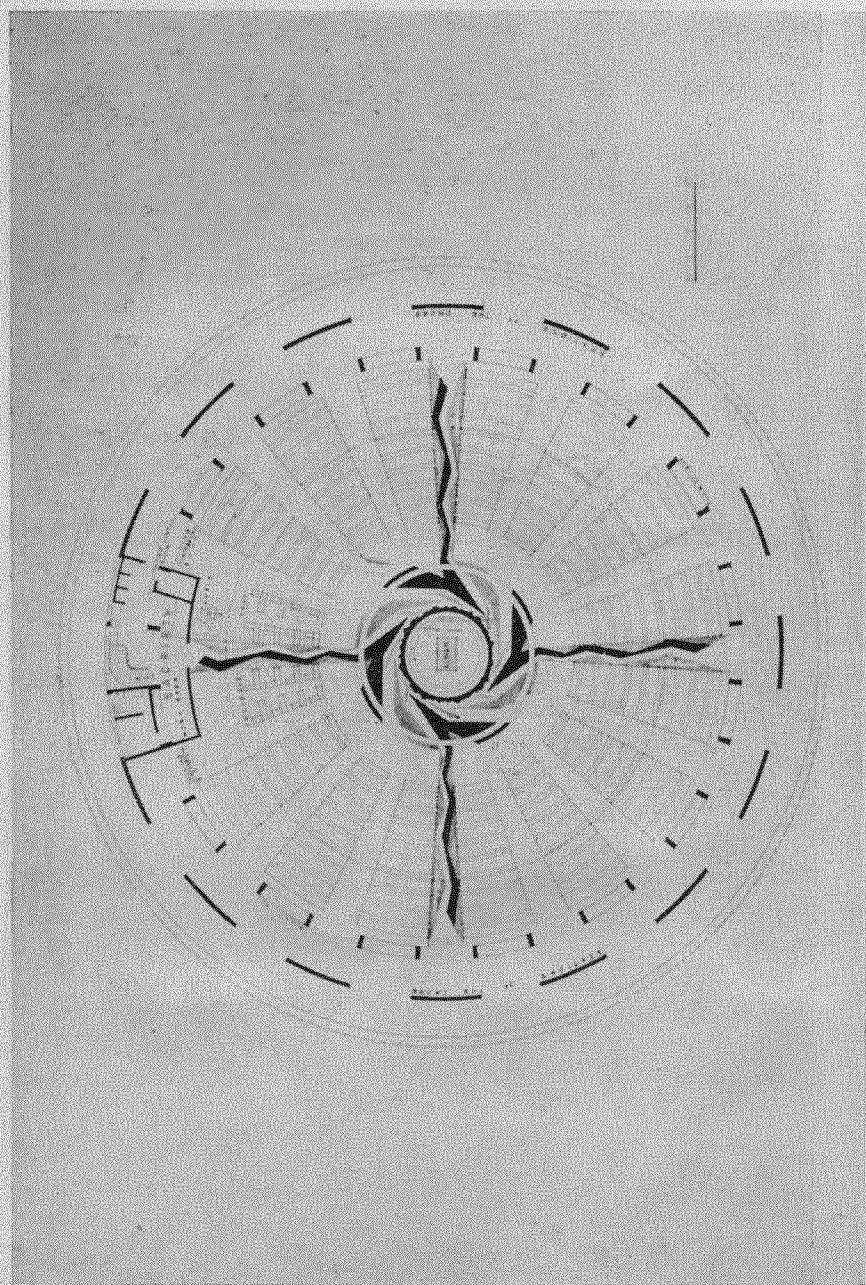
Father Delaney wanted his church to be expressive of youth. Not illogically, the people he chose were all very young, the eldest in his late thirties. As architect, he picked the 25-year-old Leandro V. Locsin, still inexperienced but respected by his contemporaries for the boldness and originality of his thought. For structural engineering, he chose the brilliant new head of the University's department of civil engineering, Alfredo L. Juinio. Another young department head, Jose Segovia, took over the delicate task of lighting. The three men made a harmonious team, finally completed by David Consunji, a most unusual contractor who participated fully with the others in planning the building to fit into the almost ridiculously low budget available.

It was a complete meeting of minds. The initial drawings convinced Father Delaney that his idea had been understood and would be clearly expressed. From that moment on, with a gesture of rare humility and generosity, he withdrew into the background of the project, giving the architect complete freedom of action. For himself, he chose the role of advising, encouraging—and praying.

The architect picked on a round plan as the one best suited to give the students a feeling of participating in a community Mass. He took into account the fact that the student body, with the musical ability that characterizes the Filipino race, already had the habit of singing the Mass in common. By use of this circular plan, the separation between choir and congregation was completely eliminated, giving each particip-









ant a most unusual sense of being both audience and participant. The ceiling of the dome, completely undecorated, also lent itself to the dramatic use of colored lights to mark different passages of the Holy Sacrifice. Finally, the advantage of ventilation in every direction, of critical importance in a tropical climate, is too obvious to merit detailed discussion.

The pouring of the dome was done in a continuous operation which lasted close to eighteen hours. A touching incident took place at that time. The skies were clear as the pouring began, but as it proceeded the sky got darker and darker. A tropical rainfall at this stage of the operation would have been disastrous. Groups of students began to form, and seeing the nature of the problem, impulsively got on their knees and began to pray. As long as the pouring continued, relays of students remained in continuous prayer until the entire operation was completed. The skies remained threatening throughout, but no rain fell and a thanksgiving Mass was said to celebrate the event.

The architect found room somehow within his budget to commission the help of a group of progressive Philippine painters. This usually delicate problem of contact between architect and artist was handled with utmost simplicity. Mr. Locsin explained what he needed and the artists picked out those projects that seemed best suited to their own talents. Father Delaney interviewed each artist and, once convinced of their skill and sincerity, gave them a completely free hand. The colorful and dramatic painter, Vicente Manansala, took on the job of doing mural-sized stations of the cross, each station covering the entire interior area of each of the rectangular walls supporting the lower roof. Arturo Luz, a painter of exquisite restraint and quasi-mathematical precision, chose the most architectural of all the projects, the creation of a floor mural radiating from the altar outwards and representing the river of life. This he executed in terrazzo. At that time, I was experimenting in large scale calligraphy and therefore the particular problems posed by decorating the exterior walls supporting the lower roof with symbols of the Sacraments and the Virtues were particularly welcome. I might mention in passing, that the majority of

Philippine painters are unable to devote their full time to painting; therefore, this phase of the work is not yet complete, although it is well under way.

The church itself was formally inaugurated on 20 December 1955 at a midnight ceremony preceded by a huge candlelight procession. Monsignor Rufino J. Santos D.D., Archbishop of Manila, presided and profoundly moved the congregation by his sincere praise of a church built in the idiom of our age.

After the ceremony thousands of jubilant students carried Father Delaney on their shoulders back to his quarters.

A few weeks later, having seen his dream in tangible form, Father Delaney succumbed to a heart attack, leaving an irreplaceable emptiness in the lives of all who had known him. The Chapel of the Holy Sacrifice has become his monument.

While finishing touches are added to the building, and workmen have cleared the last remains of scaffolding from Delaney Hall (the Catholic social center) the Chapel of the Holy Sacrifice at the University of the Philippines has already become one of the leading centers for the faithful and for visitors in the vicinity of Manila.