

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

Philippine Adventure

Ade de Bethune

Philippine Studies vol. 2, no. 4 (1954): 324–340

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Philippine Adventure*

ADE DE BETHUNE

When I was asked to decorate the facade of a new church in the Philippines, preferably with local help, the big question was, what kind of help would I find there? Few people I knew had ever been to the Philippines, and at that, some of them not for thirty years. So I could gather only hazy and inadequate notions. One person told me I should probably find all sorts of skilled native craftsmen and would have a wonderful time. But another said Filipinos were vain, lazy, and gamblers. An article appeared in the *Reader's Digest* shortly before I left, and I devoured it avidly. It said that the Philippine industries had been entirely destroyed by World War II and that every article of commerce, down to the plainest kitchen plate was still being imported from the States. This was enough to fill one with foreboding.

Just at that time a Filipino tailor moved to Newport and opened a shop right across the street from us. He

* This article appeared in *Liturgical Arts*, 19 (Aug. 1951) 110-113. It is reprinted here with the kind permission of the editor and of the author. The church in Victorias has been the subject of wide discussion in the local journals and elsewhere. Miss de Bethune's warm story of the beginning of the work should prove most interesting to those Filipino readers who were not fortunate enough to read it in its original publication.

looked like a good workman, capable, pleasant. I was packing my suitcase, so I questioned him about the climate. His eyes looked to the past and he said: "Very nice. Very nice. You will like it." All he could find to say was: "Very nice. You will like it." He was right. I did.

Providentially I arrived on the spot just two days before Christmas, 1949. The spot—in the northern part of the island of Negros—is a sugar central which mills the cane raised by independent planters for miles and miles around. From the seashore to the blue, mahogany-covered mountains on the eastern horizon, there is nothing but fields of sugar cane waxing strong and sweet under the sun. Some coconut palms, banana trees, and, by the streams, bamboo and nipa offer poor agricultural laborers the cozy shade and also the wherewithal for their little huts so cleverly built on stilts to be dry and cool.

Three thousand souls and their dependents are attached in one way or other to the mill at Victorias. Some of them even work a concrete-block machine, thus adding the smell of fresh cement to the prevailing fragrance of molasses and steam emanating from the boiler room close by. There is also a building gang which makes these blocks into houses for laborers or staff, a school or whatever else needs building. The office, cafeteria, clinic, and hospital had been put up in earlier days. The church had just been completed when I arrived. The building crew had constructed it of heavily reinforced concrete and the ubiquitous blocks, from plans made by Raymond & Rado of New York (Plate 1). Back in 1917, Antonio Raymond had made his start at modern architecture for the Orient under Frank Lloyd Wright in Tokyo.

Liturgical Arts published a photograph of his model for the church at Victorias Milling Co. in its issue dated November, 1947. To be earthquake-proof, the structure was designed in two separate sections. The nave is built on one foundation, the tower over the sanctuary on another. The two sections are connected by moveable beams.

By a fortunate accident, the blocks used in the church had been made with a light colored cement and/or sand, so that they had an agreeable golden quality instead of the grim grey look such blocks usually assume. With its airy open block work and newly varnished mahogany doors, the church looked quite fresh and handsome, if unadorned, against the bright blue sky. But how all this would weather, and how it could be decorated to withstand mold, termites, torrential rains, and even typhoons were other matters.

Of course I didn't know a word of the local language. I had never before been a conscious "white" outsider. I had never lived in a factory. I felt completely lost among a strange people. Until I had made my first friend, Marcelina, and asked her to accompany me, I was even too embarrassed to go to the market for a spool of thread. In all countries, however, it is easy to make friends with children. You can buy their affection with a trifle, and in their own way they take you to their hearts. Soon we had daily sessions. They came after school, instructed me in Visayan words and sang their songs for me. In return, I sketched their portraits for them to take home to adorn the walls of their houses. It was not long thereafter that grownups—pleased parents, presumably—whom I might meet along the road, were smiling at me. In no time I was enjoying true Filipino hospitality and feeling, though still an ignorant stranger, entirely at home.

Then people began to ask: "When are you going to start painting?" The truth was I had no idea what medium to use for an outdoor painting on a north, typhoon-facing wall eleven degrees from the equator. I had looked for the local people to tell me how such things were usually done in their country. But, there you are, no such thing had ever been done on that new frontier before. My worst premonitions were being confirmed, one by one. Back in the States, it would have seemed reasonable to work in true fresco. But here was not twelfth

century Italy. Like many other such plans, fresco had to be given up. For one thing, no one could think of any plasterer in the region. Old houses were of wood, new ones of cement. As a plasterer I should hardly have qualified. Would we have to chip down all the cement that was already there? A frantic airmail correspondence half-way across the world for technical advice produced next to nothing except delays.

I remember how hopeless the job still looked on February second. A poor woman dressed in her native costume came into the church and knelt down to say her prayers, holding a big lighted candle in her hand. The church was bare to destitution. There was no Blessed Sacrament, no statues, no pictures, no color, not even a living plant. The electricians were wiring the building. *Lumen ad revelationem gentium* . . . But the solitary woman paid no heed to their noise. She went on with her prayer of faith.

As an experiment, I had tried imbedding pieces of broken glass in fresh cement. In the end this seemed the most practicable thing to do. The materials could be gathered on the spot and we would not have to wait two and three months for supplies, as was to be the case later for the painting. That alone was a great advantage. So an appeal was made for people to contribute their broken plates and bottles. Boxes were made and the fragments sorted by colors.

About that time Alfonso Ossorio arrived from the States to decorate the sanctuary. With his help and suggestions, the facade was finally started—for better or worse, to the glory of God. The patron of the church is Saint Joseph, and I had outlined on the wall three scenes from his life: the marriage of the Virgin Mary, the workshop of Nazareth, and the death of Saint Joseph. I figured it should not hurt the poor women tramping along the road with bags of rice on their heads, or the railroad crews rolling up and down with trainloads of cane, to be cheered by images of marriage, work, and a happy death!

After innumerable delays, we started in April with the panel on the left. How exciting were those days, at work before daylight with the brilliant morning star rapidly vanishing in the impatient, tropical dawn! Naturally everything went badly. The cement went hard on us or else it liquefied. Saint Joseph's face ran down the wall with big cracks. Three times we had to take it down and start over again.

We could make a section about eighteen inches square at a time. At first, the joints presented all sorts of difficulties which resulted in ill-attached arms and wandering legs. The first panel was none too good, but the best I could honestly do at that time. Soon Romolo Santa Ana, our chief assistant, caught on to the idea. He discovered little improved ways of dealing with glass and cement. We were all new at this and learning together. By the time the second panel, the death of Saint Joseph, was finished, we were working as a perfect team.

Then we did the central panel, using for the background almost a barrel of coke bottle scraps from the Coca-Cola factory in town. We had no hitch except the constant fear of running out of a specific color before a particular area could be finished. God alone knows the ingenuities that were practiced at times to make ends meet. It was a great day when a physician sent in twenty milk of magnesia bottles, just in the nick of time for Saint Joseph's trousers. I had left them undone till the end, hoping some nice color might yet turn up. It did.

In general the colors are not bright, as I should of course have liked them. Green, aqua, milky white, olive, and amber are relieved only with pale pink and bright blue, the most precious colors. Outlines are dark brown—beer and whiskey bottles—and white china.

The other wall I was to decorate was inside the baptistry. It was to have been painted, but though a good six weeks had gone by since we started the facade, the paints had not yet arrived. We still had some glass left. Alfonso and I weighed pros and cons and finally decided to

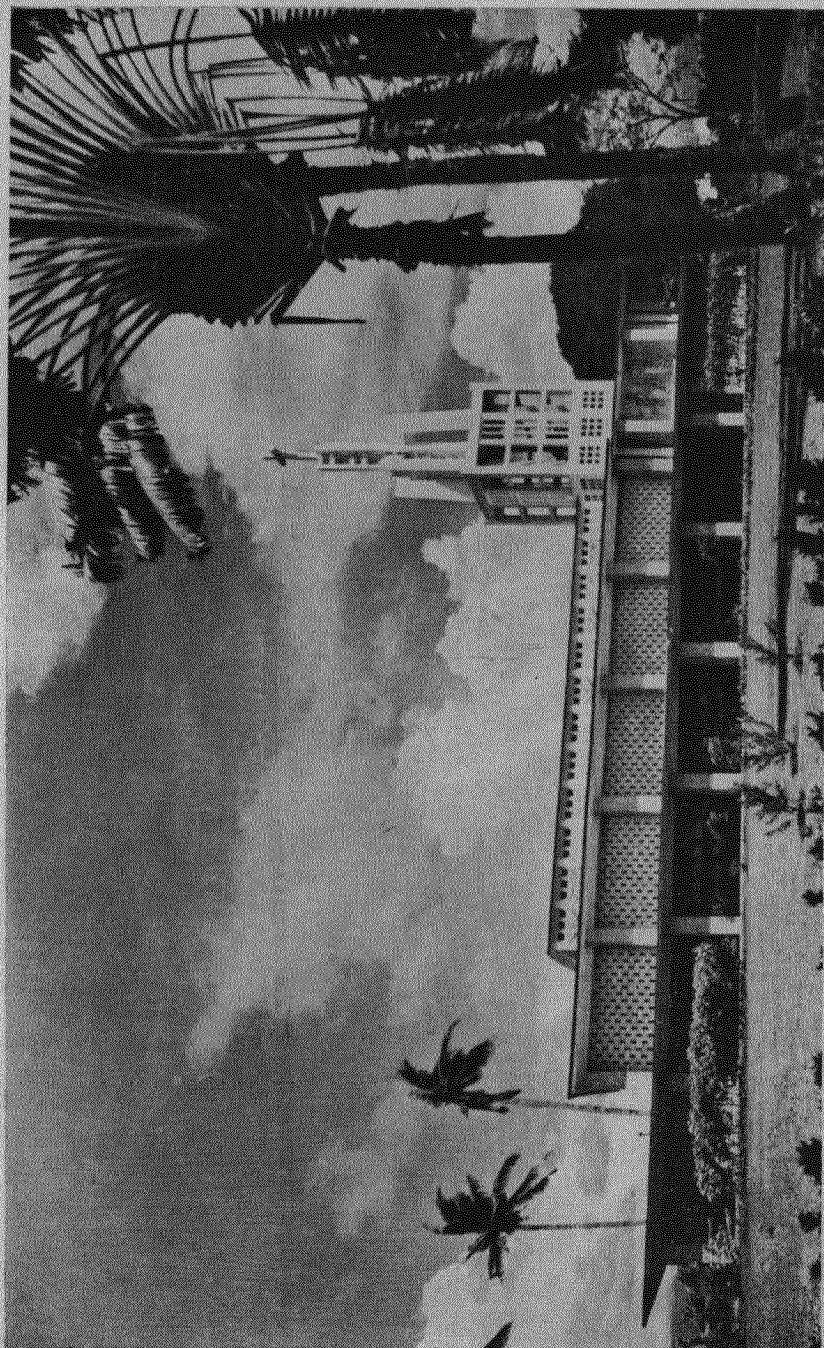


PLATE 1—The Victorias Church

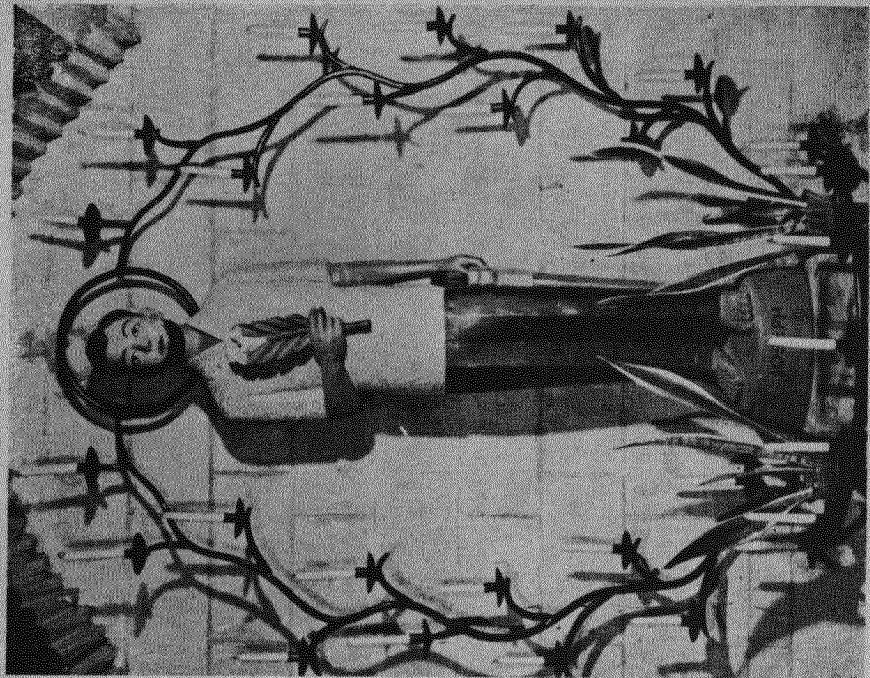


PLATE 3—Statue of St. Joseph

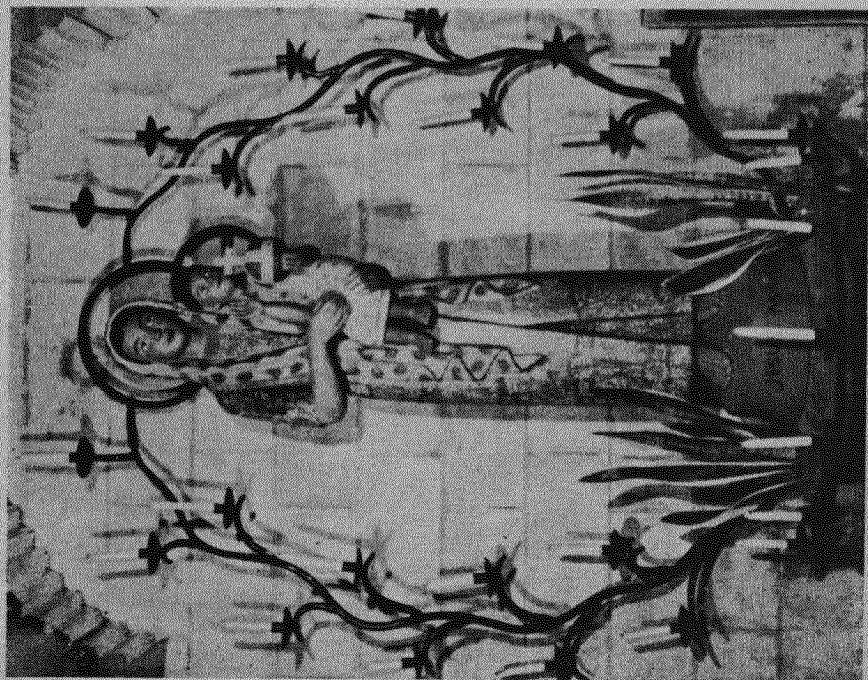


PLATE 2—Statue of Our Lady and the Infant

have the baptistry panel a mosaic also. The grass is true bottle green, the sky a graded blue; the Holy Spirit seen under the form of a dove is lemon yellow and pink (two broken platters a lady gave at that time). The water of the Jordan is of coke bottles, and continues in waves around the sunken basin which Alfonso had planned so that one had to walk three steps down to the level of the font and, as in the days of baptism by immersion, have the feel of going down into the womb of our Holy Mother the Church and rising reborn of water and the Holy Spirit, as Christ explained to Nicodemus. When God sees His Christ living in the soul of the newly baptized person, He looks down from above and exclaims: "This is my beloved Son. In him I am well pleased." To me, the baptistry is one of the most satisfying parts of the church, although I regret the glaring bands of glass bricks on either side of the decorated panel. The general lighting of the little room would have been symbolically (and aesthetically) more satisfactory, it seems to me, had it been more concentrated from the small cupola at the top.

Long before this, of course, I had made inquiries about a wood carver to make statues. At first I had naturally been assured there was no such artist on the island. The statues could probably be made in Manila if I made drawings for them. Well, you can imagine that prospect wasn't very appealing. Manila is over three hundred miles away, off on another island. What was the point of using local help and then having to go and get everything done by some foreigner in Manila, I had kept on asking, anyway? And finally it did turn out that one of the carpenters on the building crew had, at times past, carved handles for bolo knives. The following Monday morning Benjamin Valenciano came with his tool box to introduce himself as that carpenter. He was all ready to start. He had always wanted to get art lessons but had no samples of his work to show, having sold all his bolos to American soldiers during the war. At least he was not way off in Manila. There was no choice but to take him on, a "decision" for

which I was to congratulate myself more and more as the months went by.

Benjamin commenced with the statue of the Blessed Virgin (Plate 2). He was a primitive, not in the sense of one who works clumsily, but rather of one who works directly and sensitively, but with no dead academic training to distract him. The Blessed Virgin statue turned out to be charming, with the grace and beauty that all may appreciate, the old fashioned people who "know about art," or the sophisticated who have a taste for primitivism, or the plain, poor people who just love the Blessed Lady. With the years, I think the statue will be loved more and more.

At the beginning of my stay there, I had also pattered with metal stations of the cross, which might be made by enlisting the cooperation of the machine shop. None of those schemes worked out. Since Benjamin did so well with his carving, Alfonso and I finally decided to get him started on wooden stations as soon as he had finished the Saint Joseph statue (Plate 3). Alfonso, who was born in Manila and had spent his whole childhood in the Philippines, really knew what the church needed better than I, a stranger. He next got Benjamin to carve a large crucifix to be placed near the confessional, and a beautiful coffin for it. The crucifix is made so that the figure of Christ can be taken down from the cross on Good Friday (the arms move on pivots) and exposed in the coffin for the ceremonies of the *Santo Entierro*, a Spanish custom.

This crucifix is, in my opinion, the best of Benjamin's fine work. It is truly moving and beautiful. Naturally he wanted to carve a beard on it. But his attempt at a beard on the Saint Joseph statue had been one of his least satisfactory efforts. So I am glad we managed to prevail upon him to forget the beard, in fact not even to attempt making the Christ look "white" or even Jewish. Benjamin had never seen a Jew.

There is of course plenty of good precedent in early Christian art for a beardless Christ, and besides, it seems

sensible enough in the Philippines. But it caused much discussion. "We have never seen anything like this before," came as a refrain. "Neither have I," was my stock reply. I told Benjamin this might be unique now, but pretty soon people would come from all over to admire and copy it if it was good. And then discussions would veer to what Christ would have looked like had He been born in the Philippines instead of in Bethlehem of Juda. From the baptistry where I was engrossed with glass and cement, I could hear Benjamin carving in the shade of the church porch and holding the fort against a barrage of arguments from his steady circle of onlookers. True, Christ was born a Jew, not a Filipino, but He was born, died on the cross and rose again triumphantly for all, Filipinos as well as for the rest of the world. (Saint Peter says: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people God means to have for himself. It is yours to proclaim the exploits of the God who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Time was when you were not a people at all, now you are God's people. Once you were unpitied, and now his pity is yours.") Seeing Christ suffer on the cross as a Filipino may help us see Him suffer in our neighbors, and to love them as we claim we love Him. To my mind, the nobility of the crucifix is an exact expression of the carver's own serene and honest character.

The church work was beginning to take shape. Benjamin got up his courage and recommended a friend also gifted at artistic work. To Arcadio Anore then fell the job of engraving brass plates to decorate the pulpit and font. The pulpit was of concrete, poured in an unlikely pattern of five panels. How to fit the four evangelists on that? Well, everything worked itself out perfectly, with two evangelists and their respective beasts on the sides, and Christ, the sun of justice, in the middle. The font was poured of concrete also, in the traditional eight-sided pattern. Here Arcadio engraved eight small brass plates showing the seven days of creation and the "eighth day"—the day of rebirth, the new creation, premise of the re-

urrection, the rising of that Sun that knows no setting.

While all this was going on, we had finally been advised by Ralph Mayer of New York to use Carbide and Carbon's ethyl silicate 40 as a painting medium. According to all accelerated tests, the silicate could successfully be used to paint on new cement, and should withstand the warm humid atmosphere of the islands. So a load of it was steaming its way across the lonely Pacific waters. Eventually it cleared the customs in Manila and found its way to our remote outpost. A ball mill had been constructed in the work sacristy, to grind fresh supplies of paint every morning for the day's use. Alfonso had outlined his design on the sanctuary wall and ceiling. All was in readiness. At last it was going to be possible to start painting.

These, too, were exciting days. Grinding paint started every morning (the ball mill was noisy) directly the 5:45 Mass was finished. By that time we had acquired a crew of four regular men to paint. This was eventually increased to six. This local help proved most encouraging and inspiring. They picked up the idea in no time and carried it along with real spirit. Up on the scaffolding, in the airless light-well under the tower, it was dripping hot in spite of the electric fan's efforts at circulating the silicate and rectified alcohol fumes. But the work went on steadily till sundown about 6:30 in the evening.

The warm, soft, and moist atmosphere of the Philippines makes plants shoot up with a thrifty vigor which we up north know only for a few rapid weeks in Spring. There, the earth is covered at all times with an energetic growth of generous green things of every description. In other-worldly colors, therefore—pinks, yellows, oranges, violets, blues—Alfonso painted the Blessed Trinity and the economy of Redemption. God so loved the world, Saint John tells us, that He sent His only-begotten Son so that those who believe in Him may not perish but have eternal life. From above, the Father's flaming hands descend to give His Son to the world. Christ is the Father's eternal image. He sits in triumph over sin and death (the



PLATE 4—Painting of the Sacred Heart



PLATE 5—Mosaic of Three Kings

snake and skull of traditional symbolism). He came to bring fire on the earth; His Sacred Heart is aflame and His arms extended with love (Plate 4).

As you look in from the porch, all the perspective of the building is seen to focus on the Sacred Heart. This, I think, is very successful. Even from the road and from the railroad tracks beyond it, the figure of Christ calls through the open door under the mosaic facade. As you enter the nave, you reach a point where the light-well under the tower becomes visible. There, the white descending dove represents the pentecostal Spirit of God's love with outspread wings hatching the new creation. Four angels are blowing their trumpets to raise the dead on the Last Day. In the front alcoves of the ceiling, Saints Peter and Paul in traditional likeness and some angels are holding the glorified instruments of the Passion. On either side of Christ, are Saint Joseph and our Lady and the two Saints John.

The front beam is, to my mind, the part in which the execution did not perhaps live up to the excellence of the idea. The traditional eye in the triangle shows, of course, the providence or foreknowledge of God. He knows all of us whose names are written in the book of life, though the book (a huge yellow scroll held up by two big hands) is sealed with seven seals which will not be broken for us till the Last Day when Saint Paul tells us God will pass judgment through Jesus Christ on the hidden thoughts of man. Meanwhile it is not for us to judge our neighbor's motives. "Judge nobody and you will not be judged; condemn nobody and you will not be condemned; forgive and you will be forgiven," says Saint Luke, relating the sermons of Jesus. There is a wealth of meaning on that beam, yet, somehow, it may be the difficult juxtaposition of eye, triangle, circle, and scroll, that obscures the tremendous book of life and its implacable seals. On each side of the scroll, a fiery angel face is painted at the end of the two moveable beams coming through from the

sanctuary. One holds the coals of burning fire, the other, the scales of justice.

A number of people here in the States have told me that they don't like the sanctuary decoration; they are upset by the brightness of the colors, or they say the patterns are confusing. To me, the important thing about it is not this or that artistic detail, but rather what the painting means. And this is best experienced at Mass. When you are on your knees, praying, and your mind is a thousand miles from petty aesthetic sophistry, and the sacred canon of the Mass is moving from its climax to its majestic conclusion, and then you look up unawares, why, suddenly you see the immense painted figure of Christ. *Per ipsum et cum ipso et in ipso* In the same way when you lift up your head at the offertory—*Veni sanctificator omnipotens*—you look, and there on the wall is the Holy Spirit rushing down from heaven, a painted sign that He heard us and has invisibly come to bless our gifts.

Our poor gifts, they are so puny upon the altar—the canon repeats it at every turn—in the tremendous presence of God. We repeat it in the sacred words, but, lest we still miss the point, the very size of the painting impresses it simultaneously through our eyes. Still, because God is so good, He does not refuse our worthless gifts, and they are not overwhelmed, but instead, through Christ, they are sanctified at the one point where God's love is focused upon them. This is the place of honor to which all eyes are constantly drawn back. In all these ways the painting functions as it should, which is doubtless the reason why Father Reinhold was so enthusiastic about it. The sacred canon of the mass unfolds to the accompaniment of architecture and painting. That is, of course, only the way it should be. But actually I cannot remember many churches where this is the case.

Well, the work was going on apace now. While Alfonso was covering the sanctuary with an ever more refined work of brilliant flame, I started doing mosaic all

over again. Now that the facade had acquired a soft richness, the rest of the building looked a little drab and mechanical in comparison. The tower being the most important feature of this church—right over the altar—it seemed the decent thing to do to decorate it too. I am glad this came to us only as an afterthought, because by this time I was no longer fumbling so with the mosaic. Thus, to the more important place came in due time the better work. At first I had thought of putting the dream of Saint Joseph (Matt. i, 18) and the flight into Egypt (Matt. ii, 13) on the two tower panels, but later, by a gradual process I do not remember, it turned out to be the Epiphany (Matt. ii, 1) on the west side (Plate 5) and the Christ Child teaching the Doctors (Luke ii, 41) on the east side; Saint Joseph appears in both panels, of course. And Christ is shown as King of Kings and Teacher of Teachers.

Alfonso was always afraid I would not have enough to do. With evident relief and satisfaction I had now said goodbye to old broken bottles and to cut lime-eaten fingers. I was definitely through with mosaic, and struggling instead with a bronze crucifix for the altar. He persuaded me that there would be plenty of silicate left and that the outside back wall behind the sanctuary needed a bright outdoor painting. So a scaffolding was put up and my crew and I moved out there. Despite the good humored sarcasm of the passers-by, who thought us sissies—"Easy is the work!" they said (personally I am convinced it was sour grapes)—we painted the Last Supper and Pentecost.

In this way six of the sacraments had already been represented: marriage, the last anointing, baptism, holy orders, the eucharist, and confirmation. There remained sacramental penance. There just happened to be a little wall on the west of the porch forming the outside of the confessional. There I quickly painted the story of the prodigal son in twelve small frames.

And now it was time to leave. Most of the work was

done. We had big prehistoric shells for holy water fountains. There were benches, altar linens, a credence table, candlesticks, a brass wire sanctuary lamp, a crucifix contrived by the most unorthodox lost-wax method. But it seemed sad to think that the men who had been helping us so faithfully should be left with no more to do. The work must go on. So Romolo was left in charge of putting up twenty-four small panels of mosaic to water-proof the hollow concrete blocks just under the clerestory windows. Arcadio still had the baptismal font plates to finish. As for Benjamin, he was commissioned to carve two more statues, one of Saint Michael, the other of Saint Raphael. Since then, word has come that he has also made some small crucifixes for the confessional and carved a whole crib set with lots of animals for Christmas. And the choir is also carrying on. They wrote that midnight Mass was a real success and holy week observed with full ceremonies. *Deo Gratias.*
