

Toward the Altar of God

Completion Edition

The story of the men who did the work.

Though Stathopoulos is not a household name, the contributions from the father-son team bearing this name will affect the household of God for generations.

In the past seven decades, their artistic gifts of restoration have benefited thousands of parishes around the world. Locally, John and Jim Stathopoulos have restored several churches in the Diocese of La Crosse. Most recently, they completed restoration work at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Marshfield.

Fr. Sam Martin, pastor of St. John the Baptist noted, "our church was built by generous, faithful, hard working people. We wanted to honor them and praise God by restoring the splendor of their handiwork. We hoped to find artisans who could restore their original splendor - God answered

our prayer in the persons of John and Jim Stathopoulos."

Growing up during the Great Depression in Greece, John, at age seven left home. He explained in broken English, "We had little to eat. I didn't want to live that way." He stowed away on a train to Athens and there lived on the street making money selling

lottery tickets, newspapers and chalk. Though he did return to visit his family, he never stayed. It was not an easy life in the city, but still he felt it was better since there was more food for each of his family members without him there.

"I had no bread, no cot, no blanket," he recalled. "One day a friend died. The next day, two friends died. The next day, I figured it was my time." But he not only survived, he thrived as he found his "calling."

When he was about 12, he found himself sitting in a church mesmerized by a man repairing a fresco on the ceiling. After watching a second day, John said "the man asked me 'Why (are) you here. What (do)

John & Jim Stathopoulos, both from Greece recently completed the gold leaf restoration work as part of the Altar of God Campaign..



you want?' I told him, I want to do what you're doing."

That very day, he began his apprenticeship living out a passion and developing gifts he had not yet known. The artist mentor was known just by his first name: Apostolo. His one passion was restoring churches. In his aging years with no wife or children, he gladly began teaching John his trade. Apostolo also took John into his home to provide for his needs, including ensuring that John attended school.

"He taught me secrets that no one else knew," John explained with a gleam in his eyes. During the next few years, he learned not only the intricacies of his trade but possibly more importantly a reverence for the art and architecture whose function is to lift hearts and minds to God.

Early on, his mentor promised him a gold bracelet. "I was young. I thought he mean an actual gold bracelet," John recalled. He held Apostolo in his arms as he died. Some of his last words were, "Now you have the gold bracelet. You don't need me.' He had taught me everything," John said with a



smile. With the apprenticeship now complete, John needed to prove his own skills. A short time had passed when he read about archeologists seeking someone to restore Metéora. This is one of the largest and most important complexes of Greek Orthodox monasteries in Greece which sits upon a sheer pillar of rock about 1000ft in the air. The archeologists wanted to preserve the unmatched beauty of this place of great national and historical significance. Not only was the

iconostas woodwork hundreds of years old, it had been severely damaged by wood boring insects. Artisans bidding for the work had to provide an estimate. Though only about 17, he was chosen for the job.



The communion railing was also restored.

"I had a secret that you don't learn in school," he explained when asked why he was chosen. "I use a syringe to put into the wood a special (mixture) that you make from certain plants. I put it into the wood to make it hard (again)," John explained of the secret he learned from his mentor. "I succeeded and my name got out and I had lots of business," John noted. But this early success had to



take a pause as he completed his two years of mandatory military service in Crete. It was the people he met on this island that changed the course of his life. Shortly after completing his military service, he met his wife Dspina and settled in her hometown of Herekloin, Crete. Once he re-started his business, he was not lacking for work. "There it was from hill to hill; village to village doing churches. When you do one church the next church wants to be

his trade is in decline, but not for need of it. "I put ad in paper, saying I will teach you to do this. People only want to know how much I would pay," he said with sadness explaining that no one today wants to earn a 'gold bracelet.'

While the money has been able to provide for a comfortable life, it is the inner



This required working both high and low.

made beautiful again too," John explained.

Like his father, John's second son Jim took an interest in his trade and began following him around at an early age to the point of skipping school. "One day he say 'the school is closed.' The next, 'there is no teacher,'" John recalled with a smile.

Jim followed his father and their shared passion every possible moment. By the age of 12, Jim had completed his first solo project: a gold-leaf altar. John is grateful to be able to share with his son this labor of love using rare skills. "I thank God because today young people only want to make money," John explains with a sadness resigning that

satisfaction that fuels their drive. "We feel like we work for God," Jim says with a chuckle. His father John, explains, "the money come and go. But this feeling, in my heart more rich, more powerful. Inside my heart, I say all the time 'thank you God.'"

Though his fame took him throughout Europe, his friends through the military base kept inviting him to come to America. So in 1970, he moved to the Chicago area. The move was not easy, it took several years before being able to re-establish his trade. The language barrier and lack of local references proved to be a challenge, but this was minor in comparison to obstacles overcome by this one-time street urchin. A few years after



BEFORE
AFTER



moving, he secured his first work at St. Martha Catholic Church in Morton Grove, IL. Following the successful restoration there, the recognition and requests for service have been steady. In 1975, the father-son duo formed their own business, Religious Arts Company. Since then, they have completed various restoration projects in more than 1000 churches across the country. In addition to St. John's in



John Stathopoulos at age 86 never tires of sharing his passion for restoration. He instructs Elizabeth Kitzhaber, 9, of St. John's parish, how to apply gold leaf to the adhesive.

Marshfield five other parishes in the La Crosse Diocese have been blessed by their skills: SS. Peter & Paul of Wisconsin Rapids, St. Patrick in Halder, St. Mary in Colby and St. Damiano at Viterbo University in La Crosse.

The main task for John and Jim Stathopoulos while working at St. John the Baptist in Marshfield has been applying gold leaf. To complete this work, John, who is retired and again lives in Greece came to help Jim just for this project. "I picked him up from the airport on Wednesday and he was working here on Thursday," Jim pointing out his father's dedication.

Fr. Martin recalls, "What I remember from our first meeting was their genuine appreciation for the beauty of our altars - they marveled at the ability of the craftsman and remarked that such skill in carving and woodwork was rarely found anymore. I could see in their enthusiasm a true love for such work and a desire to use their gifts to bring our altars back to their original

glory."

"Not many people can do this. People think it is easy. Put on glue, then put on gold sheet. But is not that simple," John says explaining that this is one of the more difficult tasks they perform. "You have to put (the gold leaf) on when it is ready, not when you are ready."

They use a special slow setting adhesive with experience the only sure guide to knowing when it will be ready. Thus, sometimes the lights have been on at St. John's at 2am as that was when the

time was right to apply the gold leaf to bring back to life the more than 100 year old altars. Once the leaf is applied the process is still not complete. The wrinkled appearance is smoothed out through the process of burnishing. When Jim was asked how this is done, he just smiled and said "that is a secret."

What is not a secret is their hard work and dedication. Fr. Martin affirmed as much stating, "watching John and Jim work was to witness a true labor of love. Some people work hard but their heart seems disengaged. Jim and John were different from the start and I could see a real gratitude in them that they were allowed to work on such breathtaking altars. It was Confucius who once wrote that 'when you

find a job you love, you'll never work a day in your life.' John and Jim have truly found their vocation and we are all better for it."

The people in any of the parishes that have been blessed by their work most likely have never heard (or even know how to pronounce) the name Stathopoulos, but will forever remember the beautiful restoration work accomplished by the hands of this unique father-son team.

- Written by Dan Kitzhaber



ALL ARE WELCOME!