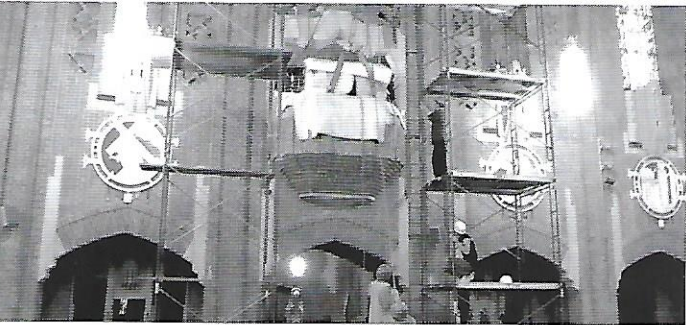
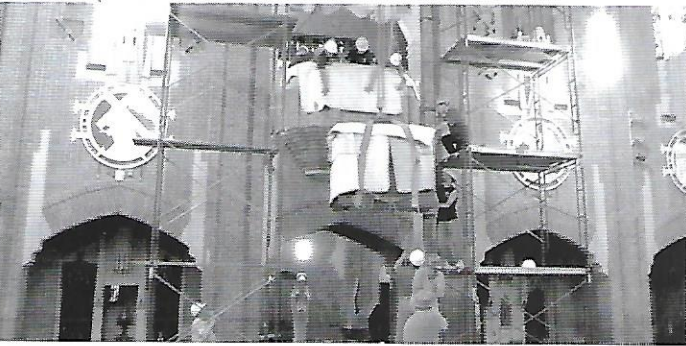


The Organ at Our Lady of Refuge Church: “Yes, God Provides”

by JOSEPH F. DZEDA



Photos of the organ console being brought back into the church and being rigged into the organ loft.

The restoration of the pipe organ at Our Lady of Refuge was not something that was planned. Had it been, the obstacles might have seemed too daunting and the project, in all probability, would never have been undertaken. Instead, a parish priest said “Yes” to someone he had just met, initiating a sequence of events that culminated in our sitting here tonight, listening to the organist of Notre-Dame de Paris play a concert in the heart of Brooklyn. This is a story of the power of faith, as exemplified by a parish priest whose confident litany was “God provides.”

In 2006, Fr. Michael Perry and Joe Vitacco met in the School Hall at Our Lady of Refuge after Mass one Sunday. Joe asked Fr. Perry, the pastor of the parish, if he could drop by later to have a look at the pipe organ, which had not been used for many years. Its problems were obvious—the leather on two of the six bellows had rotted away after 73 years and a rush of air could be heard. The organ pipes were choked with dirt, out of tune, and out of regulation. Hundreds of them no longer could be played, or worse, would continue to play with minds of their own.

Fr. Perry lamented that he did not have funds in the parish’s budget to repair the organ. However, those who have met Joe Vitacco know that he is not one to be deterred, and he offered to have at least the two bellows rebuilt by a friend in Alliance, Ohio. With the help of local organ builder Jim Konzelman, the leaking bellows were removed, shipped to Ohio, rebuilt and reinstalled. The old pipe organ sort of worked, but it still had a great many problems.

In addition to the organ’s troubles, the building itself had become inhospitable to the instrument. Water managed to penetrate the deteriorated pointing of the church’s masonry construction, causing damp and crumbling walls in the organ chamber and elsewhere. Dampness is very damaging to a pipe organ. In order to safeguard the instrument and preserve the church building, the masonry had to be repointed and the walls of the organ chamber ripped down to the brickwork and replaced. This meant completely removing the organ. Fortunately, Fr. Perry was able to find the needed funds for this work. All of the organ’s 1,800 pipes were removed from the church, along with the mechanism that makes them play. Most of the instrument was shipped to Alliance, Ohio, for safekeeping, and what parts remained in Brooklyn became unsightly additions to

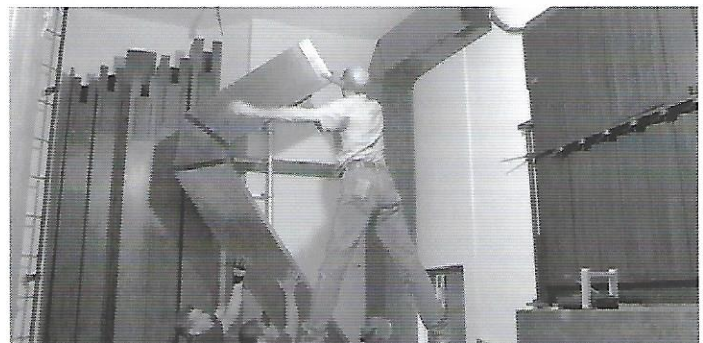
the parish's dining room for several years. The question, however, remained: How could a parish like Our Lady of Refuge raise the money needed to restore and reinstall the organ? The church's more than 1,000 parishioners are a devoted group and due to their sacrificial generosity the church is financially stable—but Fr. Perry could not justify asking them to undertake the organ project as an additional burden. Where, then, would the money come from? “God provides,” chided Fr. Perry.

The Internet and social media have revolutionized the world. Since 1997, Joe Vitacco has operated an Internet-based business that specializes in recording pipe organs. Thinking that this was the way to raise the needed money to restore the organ, he asked Fr. Perry to trust his fund-raising abilities. Fr. Perry told him to “Just do it.” Stephen Tharp, a highly respected concert organist, donated his services to record the tired, old organ before it was removed from the church. Joe then built a website for the parish and encouraged them to open a separate parish bank account for donations to the organ fund. A PayPal account was established in the parish's name to allow online donations.

A century ago there were several pipe organ factories in New York City, but not one of them exists today. For a variety of reasons, several other organ builders were not interested in doing the job. Not to be thwarted, Joe asked his old friend Bob Schopp of A.R. Schopp's Sons, Inc., the largest supplier of new organ pipes in America, for help. Mr. Schopp consented when Joe agreed to see the project through to the end. He provided Fr. Perry with a practical plan to restore the organ's many thousands of intricate parts. Then Joe asked Michael Quimby of Quimby Pipe Organs to find a way to fit in the organ's reinstallation between the firm's much larger projects, such as the restoration of the famous organ in New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The two organ builders cooperated with each other to make this project happen.

For six long years, Joe and Fr. Perry kept working on the organ project. Joe came up with creative ways to raise the money; Fr. Perry wrote personal thank-you notes to each donor, large and small alike. Finally, on the morning of June 17th of 2013, two large trucks pulled up to the doors of the church. After eight men worked hard for more than four hours, the parts of the organ were back inside of the church, sprawled all over the building like some giant Chinese puzzle waiting to be assembled. Six weeks later, a team of capable people led by Eric Johnson of Quimby Pipe Organs put the finishing touches on the organ. Through careful regulation of the mechanism and pipework, along with

Photos of the largest pipe in the organ being taken off the truck and finally placed on its windchest inside the organ.



architectural and acoustical improvements in the building, the organ probably sounds better today than it did when it was installed in 1934.

The organ we hear tonight in Our Lady of Refuge is proof of what can happen when dedicated and talented people get together with a common goal to achieve something very special. Fr. Perry, smiling knowingly in the background, would only add, “God provides.”

Joseph F. Dzeda is Associate Curator of Organs at Yale University, and co-director of A. Thompson-Allen Co., LLC (with Nicholas Thompson-Allen)

KILGEN ORGAN HISTORY

George Kilgen came to the United States from Durlach, Germany in 1849, and began his career in this country with the New York organbuilding firm of George Jardine. In 1873 he moved to St. Louis, Missouri and set up his own firm: George Kilgen and Sons, Organbuilders.

The Kilgen firm is said to have built more than 7,000 organs. Many of their pipe organs went into Catholic Churches around the entire United States, the most famous being installed at St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York.

Some of the finest Kilgen organs were built in the early 1930s. According to the August 1933 issue of the *Diapason* magazine, Belgian recitalist and organ architect Charles-Marie Courboin (1884–1973), organist of St. Patrick's Cathedral, was responsible for the tonal design of the organ at Our Lady of Refuge.

Unlike most pipe organs—which are placed either on a gallery at the liturgical west end of the church or located next to the chancel in organ chambers—the Kilgen organ at Our Lady of Refuge is located in the tower of the church, in two chambers. It speaks through a grille mid-way down the nave on the liturgical north side.

The clear intention for this organ to accompany Catholic liturgy is evident from the church dedication brochure of 1934:

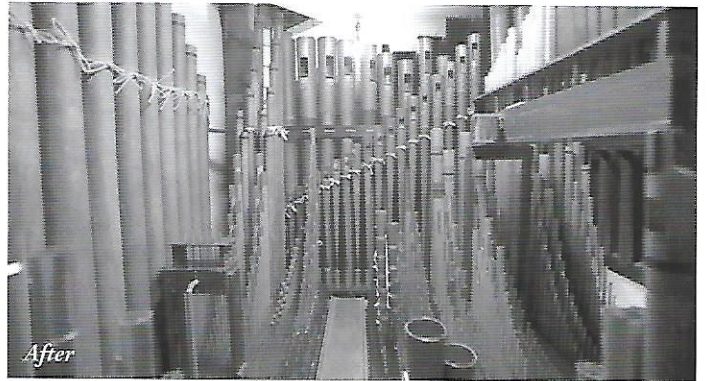
The organ is a most ecclesiastic and traditional design being of the distinct liturgical type, having its tonal plan arranged so that it will conform with every need of Catholic services.... While the instrument has only been completed a few months, it is already known as one of the most outstanding liturgical organs in the East.

Upon removal of the instrument, the windchests, reeds, and most of the wood pipes were delivered for repair and restoration to A.R. Schopp's Sons, Inc., in Alliance, Ohio. David Schopp thoroughly checked and performed corrective voicing as necessary on all of the reed ranks.

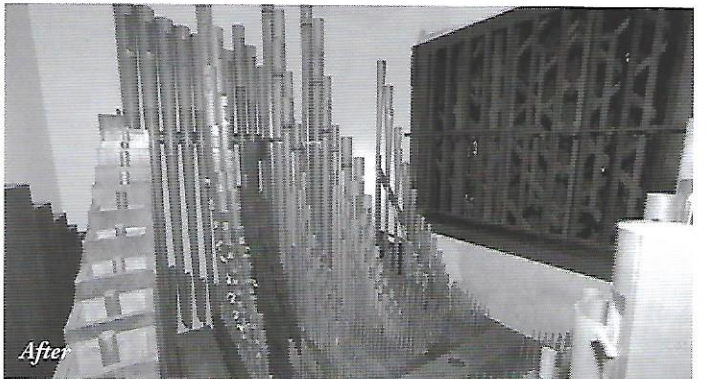
The remainder of the instrument—which included structure, windlines, console and remaining pipes—had cleaning, repair, and restoration performed by Quimby Pipe Organs, Inc., in Warrensburg, Missouri.

Upon return of the instrument to Brooklyn, the reinstallation began in June under the leadership of Eric Johnson, Head Voicer of Quimby Pipe Organs, Inc. The installation team included David Berman, Chaz Dewsbury, Eric Johnson, Kevin Lors, James Marchant and Richard Nickerson.

Provisions were made in the console for the future addition of a Tuba stop, which would be the crowning glory of the instrument. If you are interested in donating toward this final, glorious rank of pipes, please see Joe Vitacco after the recital.



Before and after: Great/Choir division



Before and after: Swell division