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The Graces of Sacred Art and Architecture: Seattle University's Chapel of St. Ignatius

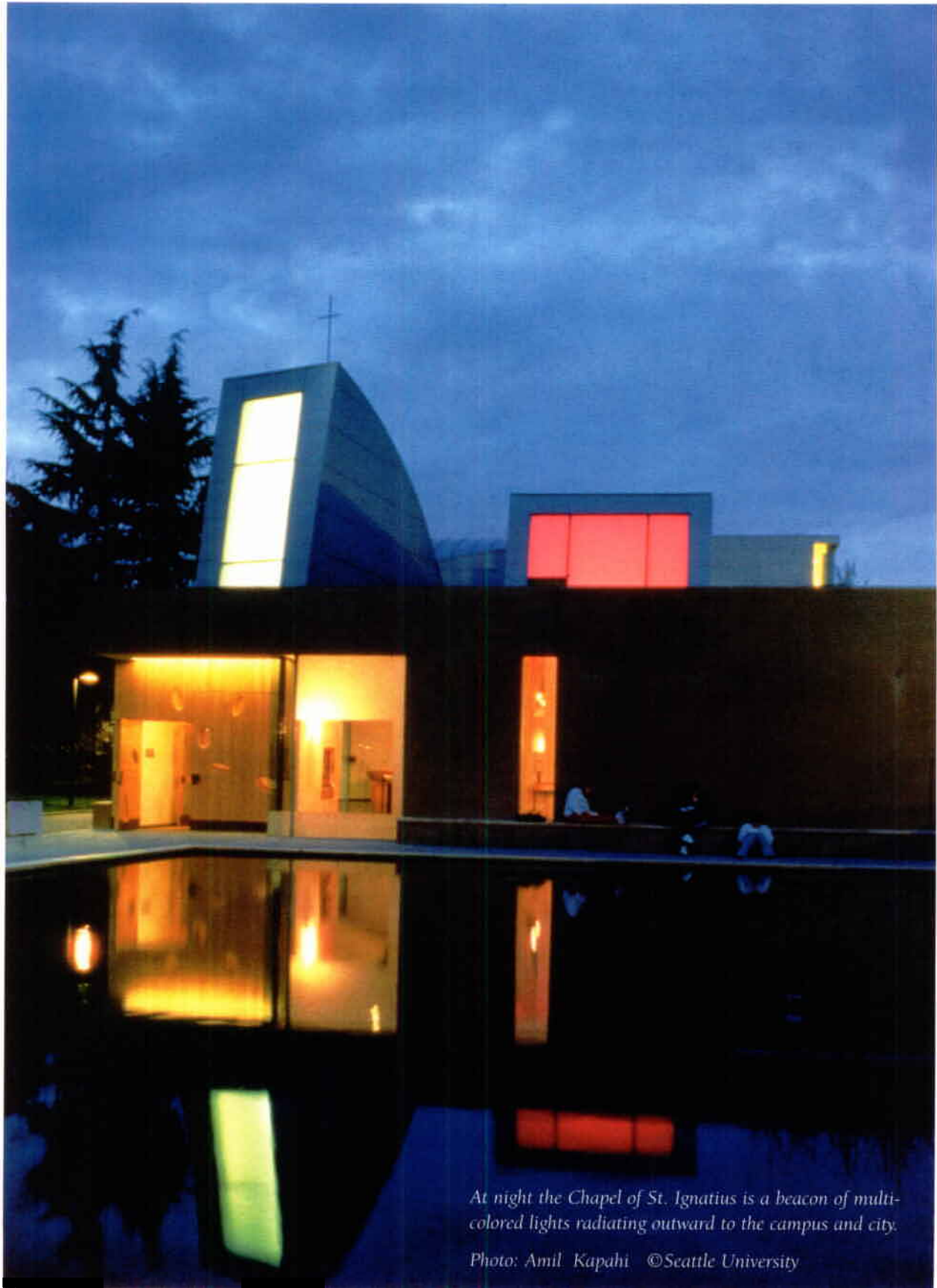
Gerald T. Cobb, S.J.

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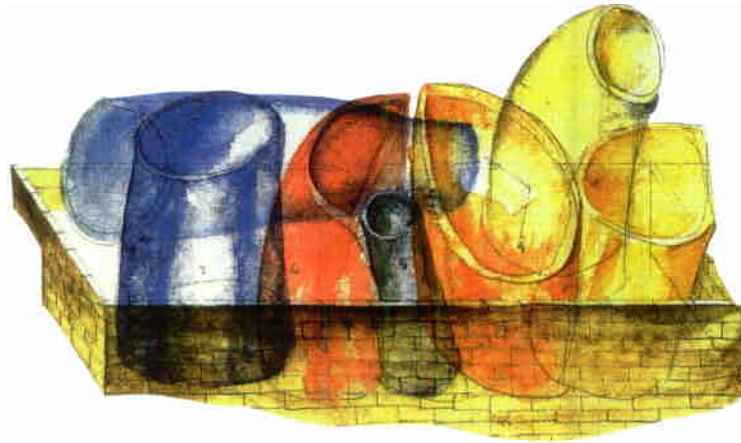
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At night the Chapel of St. Ignatius is a beacon of multi-colored lights radiating outward to the campus and city.

Photo: Amil Kapahi ©Seattle University



Architect Steven Holl's conceptual sketch:
"Seven Bottles of Light in a Stone Box"

The Graces of Sacred Art and Architecture: Seattle University's Chapel of St. Ignatius

GERALD T. COBB, S.J.

In a poem entitled, "Poor Women in a City Church," Seamus Heaney describes several women moving deep within the recesses of an urban church, lighting candles and praying for their families until they seem to become one with the building itself, living candles with what Heaney calls beeswax faces. The women have themselves become holy sources of light and warmth. Heaney's insight that sacred architecture has the power to engage and transform people is borne out in a recent commitment by Seattle University to build a new chapel that would meet the worship needs of its campus community and also serve as a compelling landmark for the surrounding civic community.

Since it opened in April, 1997, the Chapel of St. Ignatius has attracted nearly 50,000 visitors, and the American Institute of Architects recently bestowed upon it an Honor Award for architecture. An editorial in *Architectural Review* notes that the chapel "seems to be on its way to joining a select group of buildings that have become architectural touchstones." A faculty member remarked, "I'm not a believer, but I've made three visits here in the last two days," while a student rendered a more contemporary aesthetic judgment: "It rocks! Can I live here?"

Gerald T. Cobb, S.J., is chair of the English department of at Seattle University and served as chair of the University Chapel Committee.

Although Seattle University is 107 years old, it had never had a free-standing chapel, so in 1993 President William Sullivan, S.J., formed a committee to create a chapel that would meet campus needs and also serve as an architectural gift to Seattle. The process of selecting an architect was designed as an educational experience for the university community, with four finalists invited to present lectures on architecture and sacred space. The winner was a highly acclaimed young architect named Steven Holl, who grew up in the Northwest and currently practices architecture in New York, where he also teaches at Columbia University. Assisting him with the chapel project was the local Seattle firm of Olsen Sundberg Architects.

Holl held numerous conversations with students and attended liturgies with them. He read deeply about St. Ignatius and spent time in Europe visiting places that were important to the Jesuit founder. In April, 1995, Holl proposed a title concept for the chapel, "A Gathering of Different Lights." This concept synthesized two important dimensions of Jesuit higher education: first, the sense that any university gathers students and educators who tend to see matters in very different lights and are, themselves, as Seamus Heaney's poem suggests, different lights; second, the vision of Ignatius, foundational for Jesuit higher education, that the interior life consists of lights and darkneses (consolations and desolations, as he would put it), which we are called to discern before God.

Holl's concept was an architecturally provocative one as well, leading to a design he called "seven bottles of light in a stone box." The stone box consists of twenty-one interlocking concrete panels that were poured flat on the ground and then tilted into position on a single day, interlocking together as a jigsaw puzzle. The rooftop features six "light scoops" or curved window emplacements that draw the light into six different regions of the chapel, corresponding to six moments in worship. The seventh vessel of light is a 52-foot bell tower that looms over a chapel reflection pool and grass field. The building proper covers 6100 square feet, but including the pool and field and surrounding processional areas, the total for the \$5.2 million dollar project is 20,000 square feet.

Holl wanted a complex, progressive site that began with a grass field and reflection pool because in Ignatian spirituality, "no single method is prescribed—different methods helped different people."

Anyone approaching the chapel from the south must first pass the raised lawn that Holl calls a "thinking

field," which students use for studying and sun-bathing. One processes from this meditative field to a reflecting pool flanked by benches popular for contemplation, reading, or people-watching. Set into the pool are a box of wild grasses and a stone quarried from Mount Rainier—the Easter fire is lit upon this rock each year.

The prayer field and reflection pool offer a subtle experience of pilgrimage or procession. They also provide within the urban center of Seattle an outdoor sanctuary of lawn and pool, embracing a concern of the poet Hopkins in "Inversnaid":

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O Let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

(ll. 13-16)

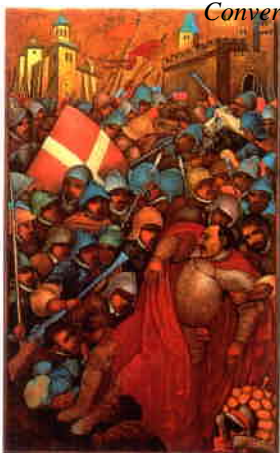
The chapel's outer precincts bring a sense of wet and wilderness to the chapel.

For many, the outer precinct is but a prelude to crossing the threshold of Alaskan cedar doors into the chapel proper. These doors appear uniformly golden from a distance, but a closer viewing reveals thousands of hand-carved facets that catch light from all angles. Seven discs of glass inset into the doors at different angles provide a sense of a permeable barrier by day and a feeling of light streaming outward in different directions by night. Small children eagerly peer through the disks, as they seem to love finding an aslant perspective on life. The door handles are modeled after a priestly vestment, the stole, and thus have the shape of human shoulders, to indicate one is entering the place of sacred liturgy.

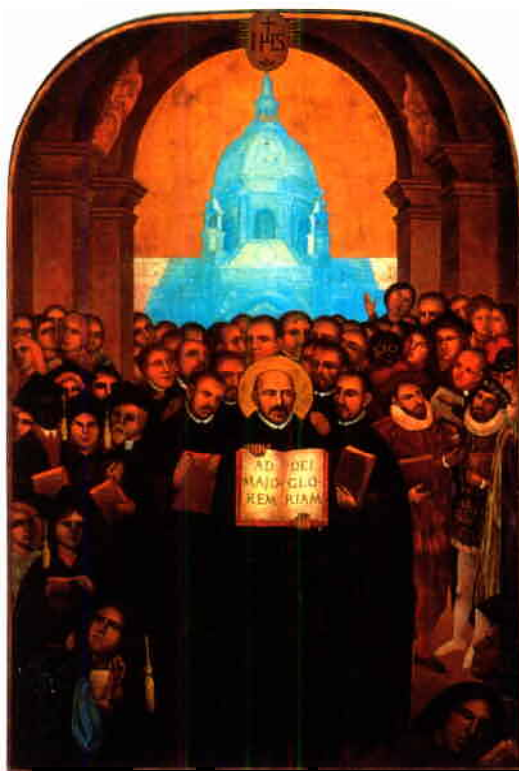
The exterior is brought into the interior of the chapel by means of the polished black concrete floor that acts just as the water in the pool, reflecting every light from above. Architectural critics have called this Steven Holl's sense of aqueous space—that everything seems to float and reflect, as one can see in the altar platform floating above the black rim which is part of the air circulation system.

Painting the Story of Ignatius

Once inside the chapel proper, a worshipper encounters five paintings portraying the "Spiritual Journey of St. Ignatius" in an iconographic style. Commissioned specially for the chapel, and painted by Dora Bittau of Rome, the paintings are windows into the world of Ignatius, and at the same time seek to shed



"Wounded at Pamplona"



"Educated and Blessed with Companions at the University of Paris"

All paintings by Dora Nikolova Bittau
Acrylic on wood with gold leaf
Photos: Ken Wagner ©Seattle University



"Transformed at the River Cardoner"



"Confirmed in Mission at LaStorta"



"Abiding Intimacy with the Trinity at Rome"

light on students' own spiritual journeys. The first panel suggests the utter chaos and conflict of the tormented soldiers and war-horses at the Battle of Pamplona, where a cannonball shattered Ignatius' leg. He has been hurled to the ground in a graphic image for whatever catastrophes may disrupt our life plans. Ignatius is hemmed in by a conflicted crowd of thirty-five figures who have little in common except terror and battle-trauma.

By contrast the second panel shows Ignatius blessedly alone beside the flowing River Cardoner, where he experiences that God's love and grace are sufficient for him, as inscribed in the open book of the Spiritual Exercises. The restorative powers of solitude and prayer have made their mark: the dented and discarded battle helmet of the first painting is now replaced by a golden halo around the head of a converted Ignatius. This painting directly asks each of us: do we believe God's love and grace are enough for us?

The third panel shifts from solitude back to another crowd scene, but this time it is an academic community at the University of Paris. The sixteenth-century scene includes a number of twentieth-century students taken from campus photographs sent to the artist. She has placed Pacific Islander and African American students side by side with Ignatius and his companions.

The fourth painting depicts the vision of LaStorta, where Ignatius saw himself placed at the side of Jesus; in the background are seen two Jesuits carrying a man whom the artist describes as "the unprotected one," the vulnerable member of any society or century who must be cared for by a community of compassion. This is an apt image for the service orientation we hope our students have.

The fifth and final painting reveals Ignatius late in life surrounded by books and sending Jesuits out to all corners of the world, a commissioning image for our graduates, surrounded by all the texts assembled in their years of study, going to serve others.



Processional corridor, looking toward the Blessed Sacrament Chapel.
Photo: Amil Kapahi ©Seattle University

In time, I believe, these five paintings will come to be seen and cherished as capturing the rhythm of our students' spiritual lives—the experiences of conflict, setbacks, conversion, and invitation into a community of learning that ultimately is sent into the world to lead by serving.

Main Worship Space

As one continues into the recesses of the chapel, sacred art is visible in several places. Steven Holl designed four windows to correspond to the four weeks of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius, and he designed a carpet in which are inscribed the names of places close to the heart of Ignatius. The baptismal font, the altar, and the crucifix are all made of the same carved Alaskan cedar used in the doors. Even the walls have an artistic character, because they are beautifully textured plaster which change with the light—receding into apparent smoothness at some places, and at other places coming into sharp relief. Writing in the *Boston Globe*,

Christine Ternin notes of the chapel, “These walls curve like praying hands.”

The walls of the Blessed Sacrament Chapel feature the texts of three ancient prayers that have been set into the walls in gold leaf letters. This small chapel-within-a-chapel was furnished by Seattle artist Linda Beaumont, who covered the walls with six hundred pounds of melted beeswax, to give the room a sense of sacredness she associated with old churches in Europe where melted wax had accumulated from years of lighting candles. Here one feels halted, called to pause and breathe in the smell of beeswax, called to consider the prayers inscribed on the walls and the engraved inscription in the floor: “We are all the temple of the living God.”

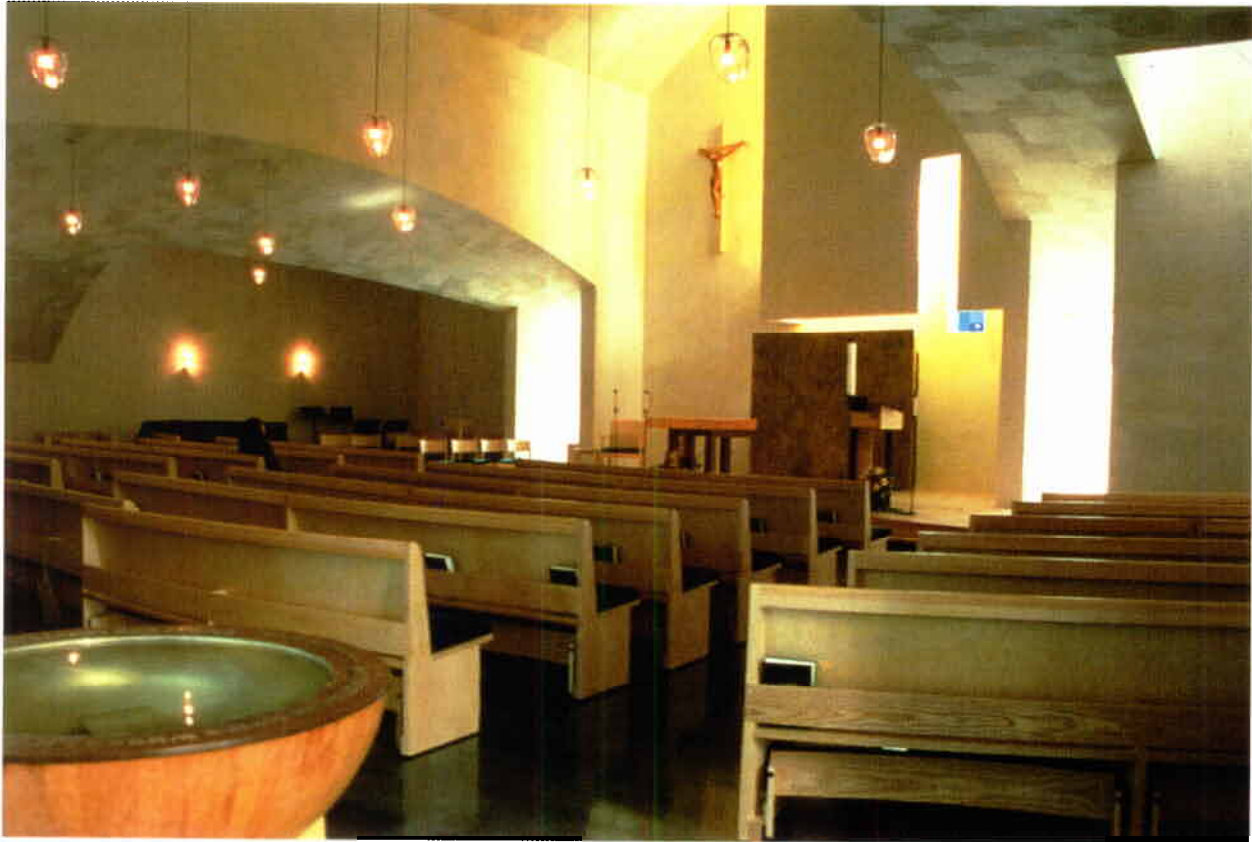
Chapel as Landmark

Because Ignatius saw no sharp boundary between the sacred and the secular, it is likely that he would recognize no sharp boundary between campus and city. While meeting the needs of our campus community, the chapel has also offered neighbors and others a new landmark place to pray and reflect. Writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff notes “the curved light towers that rise out of the top of the chapel draw you in. Each seems to tilt off mischievously in its own direction as if beckoning to the passerby and extending the chapel's presence beyond the boundaries of the campus.” The steady flow of visitors to the chapel has presented us with the opportunity and challenge to make visitors feel welcome and informed about the mission of the University.

As one leaves the chapel and looks to the east, the towers of Immaculate Conception Church emerge—the oldest Catholic Church in Seattle. Also visible is the tower of Providence Hospital, so that in one glance one can capture a diverse range of Catholic outreach to a city in a parish, a hospital, and a university.

The chapel is a landmark in a second, temporal sense in that it bridges the presidencies of Fr. Sullivan and Fr. Stephen Sundborg, providing a consoling transition and legacy for the university's mission. In the lives of individuals, too, the chapel is a landmark, because people come every day with heartbreaks and hopes, as reflected in the statements they write in the book of prayers placed in the narthex:

- A parent writes, “For a son who is experiencing a very difficult time—that he may know joy and peace again”
- Another prays, “In thanksgiving that ten years ago I had my last drink and drug”



Curved ceilings and dynamic lights distinguish the chapel's main worship area. The font in the foreground, the altar, and the cross are all made of hand-tooled Alaskan cedar. Photo: Amil Kapahi ©Seattle University

- Another writes, "For my daughter's wedding today"
- And another, "For healing in marriages, for solace in grief beyond belief"
- One seven year old writes "I prayed here for my first communion"
- Another young person writes in block letters, "I hope my dad will find a mom for me"

Visitors from around the world find that the beauty of the sacred architecture and art around them provides a fitting place for expressing their heartfelt petitions.

Thanks to the gifts of artists and architects, the Chapel of St. Ignatius has provided a new way for students and others to enter into the life and values of Ignatius and the Lord Jesus whom he served. Here we hope that students will overcome our culture's resistance to solitude and discover why silence really is golden, and that they will feel nurtured and cared for by a worshipping assembly. The chapel seems both traditional and contemporary enough to engage people of all ages and dispositions, so that God's light will be shed on the hundreds of essential and non-essential

questions that fill our lives. To use an academic metaphor, this is where students will come for God's office hours, becoming like the women in Seamus Heaney's poem, growing more and more each day into living parts of the temple of God.

In a scene reminiscent of Heaney's, Robert Ivy wrote in the April, 1998 issue of *Architectural Record*: "After visiting the Chapel of St. Ignatius at Seattle University this winter, an architect told me how powerfully the building had affected her. A lapsed Catholic, she found herself forced to sit down on first entering the interior, as she was so completely overcome by emotion and memory. The new building acted like a key for her, unlocking a wealth of internal, unspoken language with unanticipated force." The engagement of memory, emotion, hopes and questions, is exactly what Ignatius would have hoped for in all of our Jesuit university buildings—classrooms, libraries, residence halls, and chapels.

NOTE: A Web site devoted to the Chapel of St. Ignatius is available at: www.seattleu.edu/chapel