Sacred Heart Catholic Church has launched a campaign to restore murals in the sanctuary that were controversial when they were painted.

Dom Gregory deWit, a Dutch Benedictine monk, was commissioned to create the murals and other works as Sacred Heart built its new church in the early 1940s. DeWit caused a stir with his muscular, bold figures that were very different from the images of Christ and the saints to which Catholics of that day were accustomed.

Now the murals are looked upon as a significant part of the church's history that the pastor, the Rev. Kenneth Smith, believes is worth preserving.

"One of the reasons we want to restore them is because of the art value that's there, and another is that the people of that day... came up with the funds to have him do this. Although they were rather controversial, it's still a legacy that they have left to us," Smith said. "I feel that it's our obligation to keep it going for the future generations."

The 14 murals depict several saints and various scenes from the Bible.

The most striking work is that of Jesus, which looms over the congregation from the apse, or the semi-circular end of the church where the altar is located. Smith says that many children in the parish are frightened of this "Triumphal Christ," and feel he is watching their every move during Mass. The pastor attributes the fear to deWit's style and the optical illusion of Christ's eyes following as one moves.

Given the task of restoring the murals is Craig Crawford, a paint conservator who assisted in the restoration of other deWit works at St. Joseph Abbey in Covington. The project is expected to take about four months, but the work will be spread out over a 12-month period.

Crawford is excited about his task. "The murals are wonderful," he said. "You don't see many murals in churches in this country, and the fact that he (deWit) did live in this area, that makes them part of the cultural heritage here."

Someone who has taken a great interest in the cultural and spiritual significance of Sacred Heart's artwork is parishioner Mary Lee Eggart.

"Being an artist myself, I was interested in (what the art represents). I came to see the connection between the symbolism of the things in Sacred Heart Church with the overall symbols of Catholicism," Eggart said.

The third generation of her family to attend Sacred Heart, Eggart translated her interest into the book, "A Guide to the Art and Architecture of Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church, Baton Rouge, Louisiana," a comprehensive history of Sacred Heart, with a detailed description of the church's art and architecture, including the symbolism and purpose behind each piece.

Eggart believes that the design and furnishings of Sacred Heart make it a special place to worship.

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