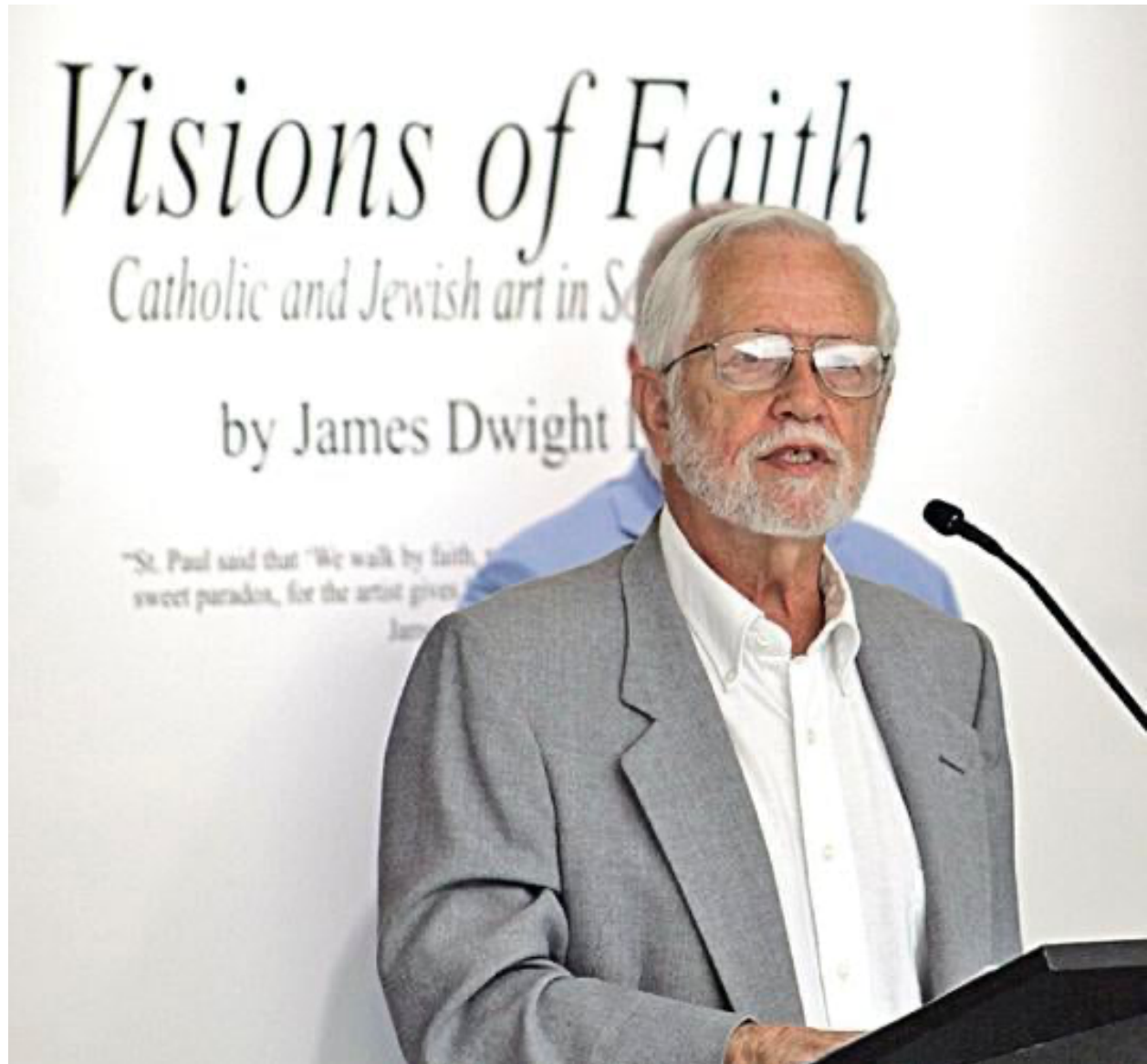


Interfaith photo exhibit opens at St. Thomas University



In 2015, the old Santo Tomás de Villanueva campus chapel in Havana shows its condition before it was fully restored over the last several years and reconsecrated in 2024 as Santo Tomás de Villanueva and San Charbel Parish. The Catholic university chapel was abruptly abandoned during the Cuban Revolution and in disuse for some 60 years. (OSV News photo/Tom Tracy)

By Cristina Cabrera-Jarro
Florida Catholic Correspondent April 18, 2024

MIAMI GARDENS | Raised in both the Catholic and Jewish faiths, Jacob Covas grew up going to churches and synagogues in South Florida. At the opening of the Visions of Faith interfaith photo exhibit at St. Thomas University (STU)

March 12, 2024, he recognized several of them, and even guided a few visitors through some of the images on display at the Reverend Jorge A. Sardiñas Gallery.

Covas, a law student at STU, has visited memorable churches and synagogues around the world. He counts Israel's Church of the Holy

Sepulcher in Jerusalem and a synagogue hidden beneath the Western Wall as his favorites. Even so, Covas says Miami's Catholic and Jewish places of worship have treasures of their own, we just need to look closely.

"Growing up, I never really appreciated going into the churches and the synagogues and seeing the different art forms. I was kind of just bored with the fact that I had to be there. But now that I'm older, it's interesting to see how I can appreciate the unique designs," said Covas.

Such was the goal of James "Jim" Davis, the photographer behind Visions of Faith, who wanted to make visible the ways that Jewish and Catholic congregations build beauty into their faith and worship.

"We may not always notice, but when we worship, we are surrounded by an embarrassment of riches. So, I've seen my calling as helping Jews and Catholics see with new eyes the beauty of their own faith," said Davis at the exhibit's inauguration.

From the early days of his journalism career he made it his mission to share that wealth, first, as a religion feature writer for the Fort Lauderdale News, and then as religion editor of the South Florida Sun Sentinel.

"I have admired faith-based art for years," said Davis in a written statement for a catalog of Visions of Faith.

The irony is that Davis is neither Jewish nor Catholic.

"I come from a Protestant movement that emphasizes the Ministry of the Word more than the visual arts. So, whenever I've entered a traditional church, I've been struck by the vivid images there: the windows, the statues, the sculptures, the bas-reliefs, the tapestries, sometimes the architecture itself," he said.

Joining Miami's Florida Catholic newspaper as a writer and photographer in 2012, Davis accumulated an incredible collection of photos of churches in South Florida. At the encouragement of Ana Rodriguez-Soto, former editor of the Florida Catholic, he began a photo essay series for the paper and the Archdiocese

of Miami website featuring one church a month.

"It occurred to me that I was compiling a visual database of religious art in South Florida," said Davis.

Over time, he decided to share his work with the museum and archives of STU. In 2022, Isabel Medina, curator, assistant archivist, and museum coordinator at STU, suggested an exhibit that would feature his best work from Catholic churches. She also added the challenge of including the best of South Florida's Jewish community. Davis immediately reached out to synagogue leaders who were delighted to open up their synagogues and share their own wealth of art.

"I've accordingly added photos of menorahs, Torah scrolls, stained-glass windows and symbolic paintings of Jewish history," said Davis.

Michael Winograd, assistant director of the Miami-Dade and Broward American Jewish Committee, has known Davis for over 30 years, and appreciated his work covering the Jewish community.

"As we say in the Jewish expression, he is a 'mensch,' a decent, honorable person who has, from the moment I've met him, been interested in reaching out and using his skills as a photographer and artist," Winograd said.

Visions of Faith also includes pictures of the Holocaust Memorial on Miami Beach, a park commissioned by survivors of the Holocaust. Its address "1933-1945 Meridian Ave." is a memorial itself to the years when the Holocaust occurred. On location is a sculpture of a four-story high outstretched arm with victims climbing upwards. Its creator, Kenneth Treister, is also the architect of the chapel at Temple Israel of Greater Miami, which Ellen Goldberg photographed for Visions of Faith.

"I started to shoot a whole collection of remarkably beautiful architecture there, especially in the old chapel. It was a visual treat for me to photograph. I'm glad it could be used here today," said Goldberg, a Miami-based author, writer, editor and photographer who

worked with the Greater Miami Jewish Federation.

Looking through Visions of Faith, Josh Heath, director of admissions at STU's college of law, points out how we take things for granted in our worship spaces.

"Sometimes I feel like we see things every day, but when we see a photo of it, that's when we go back and actually take time to look," said Heath.

Similarly, when we rush through our days, we risk visiting our places of worship in a speedy "autopilot" mode.

"And you're probably going to pray in the same way: "Our Father ... Amen! Goodbye," said Miami Auxiliary Bishop Enrique Delgado, who visited Visions of Faith.

He warns that spirituality should be anything but speedy and autopiloted.

"If you go and enjoy the time, and you rest and you meditate, probably you will notice the beauty. Art expression is part of our spirituality because this goes deeper into our hearts, and this bypasses our understanding, and just connects us with the abstract infinite of God," he said.

In the exhibit, Davis quotes St. Paul, who said, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, the things that God has prepared for those who love him."

"Yet these artists have striven to put such things into shape and color," said Davis. "I've felt an enormous honor of glimpsing what they saw and felt. And I pray through this exhibition, God will enrich and inspire you as well."

IF YOU GO

Visions of Faith can be seen now through June 12, 2024, in the Rev. Jorge A. Sardiñas Gallery located at St. Thomas University's campus, 16401 N.W. 37th Ave., Miami Gardens. Exhibition hours are Mondays through

Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Sundays noon to 7 p.m. For more information or to arrange tours, call Isabel Medina at 305-628-6769. Admission is free.