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Westminster & Rome

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 9, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

For my light reading these days, I am working my way through Richard Jenkyns book about Westminster Abbey. Among the more interesting architectural features in the Abbey is the Cosmati floor in the sanctuary. The intricate pattern of stones puts one in mind of San Clemente in Rome. The reason shows one of the ancient links between the Abbey and Rome. In 1222, the abbey was put under the direct authority of the Pope, freeing it from any interference by either the Bishop of London or the Archbishop of Canterbury. Even then, people prefered a boss who was far away. Upon his election as abbot in 1258, Richard Ware went to Rome to receive his official commission and he brought back with him both the stones and the Italian masons who performed the work, the only Cosmati floor of its kind in Britain.

The Abbey has since become home to a wide diversity of artistic styles, from the baroque and neo-classical funeral monuments to the neo-gothic towers designed by Hawksmoor. But, the Cosmati floorwork points to a time when Westminster Abbey still had very real ecclesial links, as befits a church consecrated to St. Peter. I hope when Pope Benedict XVI was at the Abbey last year for vespers, someone pointed this out to him. The ground upon which he and the Archbishop of Canterbury stood had evidence of a once united past.

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