

The Sacred Images of the Cathedral

No image dominates the interior of St. Mary's Cathedral as does the life-sized crucifix attached to the first column on the right. This image of the dying Savior was commissioned by Father James Cassidy (later to be bishop) when the Cathedral was undergoing major renovations just prior to World War I. The man who accepted the commission was the extraordinary German carver Johannes Kirchmayer. This artist was well acquainted with the gospel accounts of the passion and death of Christ, from having played the role of Joseph in the famous Oberammergau Passion Play. Kirchmayer had emigrated to New York while a young man and became associated with some of the great architects of that era.

The crucifix was formally blessed at a service on the evening of Good Friday, 1909, when the church was filled to capacity. The commission cost \$800 (equal to about \$21,000 today), which had been raised by contributions from parishioners during the parish retreat in the fall of 1908.

Jesus is depicted at the moment when his life is ebbing away but not yet completely gone. The strain of hanging on the cross is represented by the muscles of his torso pulling against his rib cage, but the carving is restrained in its depiction of his agony. It is not a gory image but a sympathetic portrayal of an ideal body brutalized. What Kirchmayer produced is not a wreckage of a body but an anticipation of the restored and glorified body that came forth from the tomb on the third day. The oak carving was initially not stained, and as it hung on the first column left (opposite its current location) for many years, the corpus was nearly white.

High above the Kirchmayer crucifix, on the wall above the rosary windows the most significant painting in the church is the image of Mary at the top of the apse, painted by Conrad Schmitt, whose liturgical arts studio was located in Milwaukee. The image shows Mary in the almond shell setting that was frequently used for sacred images in medieval times. In this case, the surrounding panels are covered in vines made of gold-leaf, beautifully enhancing but not competing with the icon of the Blessed Virgin.

The stations of the cross, which line the east and west walls of the church are presented in small Gothic structures, as if in a medieval passion play. The style of each station is in keeping with the general artistic plan of the Cathedral, with each one being akin to a small Gothic chapel. The fourteen stations constitute something like a small-scale pilgrimage, especially for devotions in Lent and especially on Good Friday.

Although it gets less attention than it deserves, the tabernacle of the altar of reservation (the east side altar) where the Eucharist is kept, is a unique work of art. The wooden carved image on the tabernacle is that of a pelican. In medieval legend, the pelican was believed to feed its young by opening its flesh and providing the chicks blood from its own body. In the hymn "Adoro te devote" St. Thomas Aquinas refers to Christ as the "loving divine pelican." Hence the appropriateness of the pelican on the tabernacle as a symbol of Jesus whose blood saved the world.

When the new marble altar was placed in the Cathedral at Christmas time 1900, the image on the high altar was a marble carving of the Last Supper. In keeping with the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council, that altar was replaced by a wooden altar at which the priest now faces the congregation. The marble carving of the Last Supper was retained and is incorporated into the current altar in the middle of the sanctuary.