

The windows of the Cathedral

When the first parishioners entered their new church at the end of 1855, the glass which filled St. Mary's windows was plain, as stained glass was not included in the plan for the building. It was too expensive, because the parish was already carrying a very substantial mortgage. So, the wonderful stained glass in St. Mary's had to come in stages, over the course of a century.

The great rose window over the front door (Spring Street) is undated, but certainly one of the first dramatic expressions of color to grace the church. In keeping with the neo-Gothic character of the building, it echoes the dazzling rose windows in the great European cathedrals of the Middle Ages. The petals of the rose radiate out in a double circle around the central monogram of "AM" (Ave Maria). Above the rose there are three small lancet windows (a hand, a lamb and a dove), representing the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And below the rose, in a very different color scheme, are lancet panels, which represent the Assumption of Mary. They were installed in 1952, two years after Pope Pius XII proclaimed the Assumption to be a dogma of the church.

Along the side aisles, there is a procession (or "litany," if you prefer) of saints that stretch from the front of the church to the choir loft on the east (Second Street) and west (Main Street) walls of the church. As air conditioning did not exist in St. Mary's until the start of the twenty-first century, all the windows could be opened, to allow fresh air to enter. And remarkably, for an age that did not think in terms of gender equity, the aisle windows have equal numbers of male and female images.

These stained glass windows along the aisles were created in Munich, Germany, during the time when Fr. Christopher Hughes was pastor of St. Mary's. Installed in 1891, they combine images that are naturally linked in some instances (e.g., the Franciscan founders, St. Francis and St. Clare, or St. Augustine and his mother St. Monica). In other instances the pairs within a single large frame are associated by their place in church history (e.g., the virgin martyrs St. Philomena and St. Cecilia). In some cases, the saints paired in a single window have no necessary link.

Atop each of the aisle windows there is a circular window, within which there are three trefoil shapes (each looking sort of like a shamrock) to represent the three-in-one nature of the Holy Trinity.

In the wall of the apse, behind the main altar, the sanctuary windows (1915) may be read sequentially to follow the mysteries of the rosary -- Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious (The Luminous mysteries were introduced until 2002, eighty-seven years after the sanctuary windows were installed). The central two panels, depicting Mary and the Angel Gabriel represent the Annunciation (the first Joyful mystery). Under the figure of Mary in the Annunciation window is the fifth Sorrowful mystery, the Crucifixion, and beside it (to the right) is the panel depicting the Resurrection (the first Glorious mystery). Thus, the life of Christ is summarized in the central windows, from conception in the womb of the Virgin, to sacrificial death on the cross, and to the victory over death on Easter morning.

With the exception of the Assumption panels, over the choir loft, all of the windows in the main church were installed over a century ago. They have suffered some vandalism in recent times, but by and large they have served the believing community of the parish and the diocese as reminders of our beliefs and examples of the holy men and women of our church history. At this point in time the need to restore them is imperative, as the lead comes, and transoms are all suffering from metal fatigue and require renovation, which is expensive. They are old friends and they need care.