

Reflecting Heaven

Notes on the OLMC Sanctuary Renovation

Part 5: Stained Glass

"In the Christian community's place of prayer, art evokes and glorifies 'the transcendent mystery of God—the surpassing invisible beauty of truth and love visible in Christ.' Therefore the 'Church entrusts art with a mediating role, analogous, we might say, to the role of the priest or, perhaps better, to that of Jacob's ladder descending and ascending. Art is meant to bring the divine to the human world, to the level of the senses, then, from the spiritual insight gained through the senses and the stirring of the emotions, to raise the human world to God, to his inexpressible kingdom of mystery, beauty, and life.'"

— Built of Living Stones §142

The above quote from the U.S. Catholic Bishops' document *Built of Living Stones* aptly sums up the ultimate goal of the art of our current renovation project: striving for a meeting of heaven and earth when we gather at liturgy, leading to a deeper relationship with Christ and his Church.

Several years ago, when talk of improvements to our sanctuary and nave began, the first topic on the table was stained glass. Our present stained glass windows, while not unworthy, are of a distinctly 1970s artistic style that most agree has not withstood the test of time. Their abstract design seems to fail to raise minds and hearts to union with Christ. For that reason, the parish leadership decided some years ago to replace these windows with more traditional, representational windows that inspire devotion and enhance the liturgy.

I don't know about you, but during this Christmas season at OLMC, I've found myself gazing on and contemplating the temporary decal of the Nativity that's been

affixed to the window to the left of the Sanctuary. I've been surprised and delighted, frankly, about how that image has helped me

contemplate the readings and homilies on the birth of our Lord and the faith of Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. If this is the result of one cheap decal, I'm eager for the effect of ten high-quality stained glass

windows on our spirituality and contemplation!

For the theme of the windows, much prayer and discussion led to the consensus to build the windows around the theme of Biblical scenes in the life of our Blessed Mother and her Son. For a parish under the patronage of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, this seems appropriate. If you do a Google image search for "Our Lady of Mt. Carmel," every image of Mary under this title has two things in common: (1) the brown scapular, and (2) Jesus in the arms of Mary. The message is clear; our devotion to Mary leads to worship of Christ, and that's the theme of these windows.

Here and in the next couple weeks follows a summary of the windows, a few at a time.



"Authentic art is integral to the Church at prayer because these objects and actions are 'signs and symbols of the supernatural world' and expressions of the divine presence."

(BLS §146)

1. **THE ANNUNCIATION** (Luke 1:26-38)



The first scene is the moment of the Incarnation, when the Word is made flesh in the womb of Mary. Most Annunciation art shares several characteristics:

- The angel Gabriel and Mary both slightly incline to the other in an

act of mutual respect and deference.

- A vertical “barrier” (in this case a prie-dieu) lies between Gabriel and Mary, indicating that God does not force Himself on Mary – or on us. As my wife points out, “God is a gentleman” in his invitation; her “yes” – and ours – must be freely given.
- A beam of light shoots from the Holy Spirit directly to the womb of Mary: the moment of Incarnation. In this window, then, Christ is present, but invisible to us. Much like in the Eucharist, no?

2. **THE VISITATION** (Luke 1:39-56)



The second window depicts Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with Jesus’ cousin, St. John the Baptist. The window shows the love and tenderness of the meeting of these two holy women in their miraculous

pregnancies, and it captures the moment when St. John recognizes the presence of Jesus, stirring in the womb of Elizabeth. Again, Jesus is not yet visible to us, but is very much present in the person of Mary the *Theotokos*, the God-bearer.

3. **THE NATIVITY** (Luke 2:1-20)



In the Nativity window, the light of the star shines on the infant Jesus, akin to the light of the Holy Spirit in the Annunciation window. The Feast of the Annunciation and the Nativity, exactly nine months apart, are

part and parcel of the same great Mystery. That is why, at Mass on both March 25 and December 25, we genuflect during the Creed during the words “and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.”

An intriguing facet of Nativity art from the earliest days of Christianity is the presence of the ox and the ass. They are never mentioned in the Gospel accounts, but, from the very beginning, they have nearly always been pictured. Isaiah, the great Old Testament prophet of the Messiah, wrote: “An ox knows its owner, and an ass, its master’s manger” (Is 1:3). The ancient tradition is that the ox, as a “clean” animal in Jewish law, represents the people of Israel, while the ass, an “unclean” beast, represents the Gentiles. The message is that God’s creatures, the ox and the ass, recognized and worshiped their Lord even before the Jews and Gentiles did so, but that we would eventually come to find Him. May it be so!