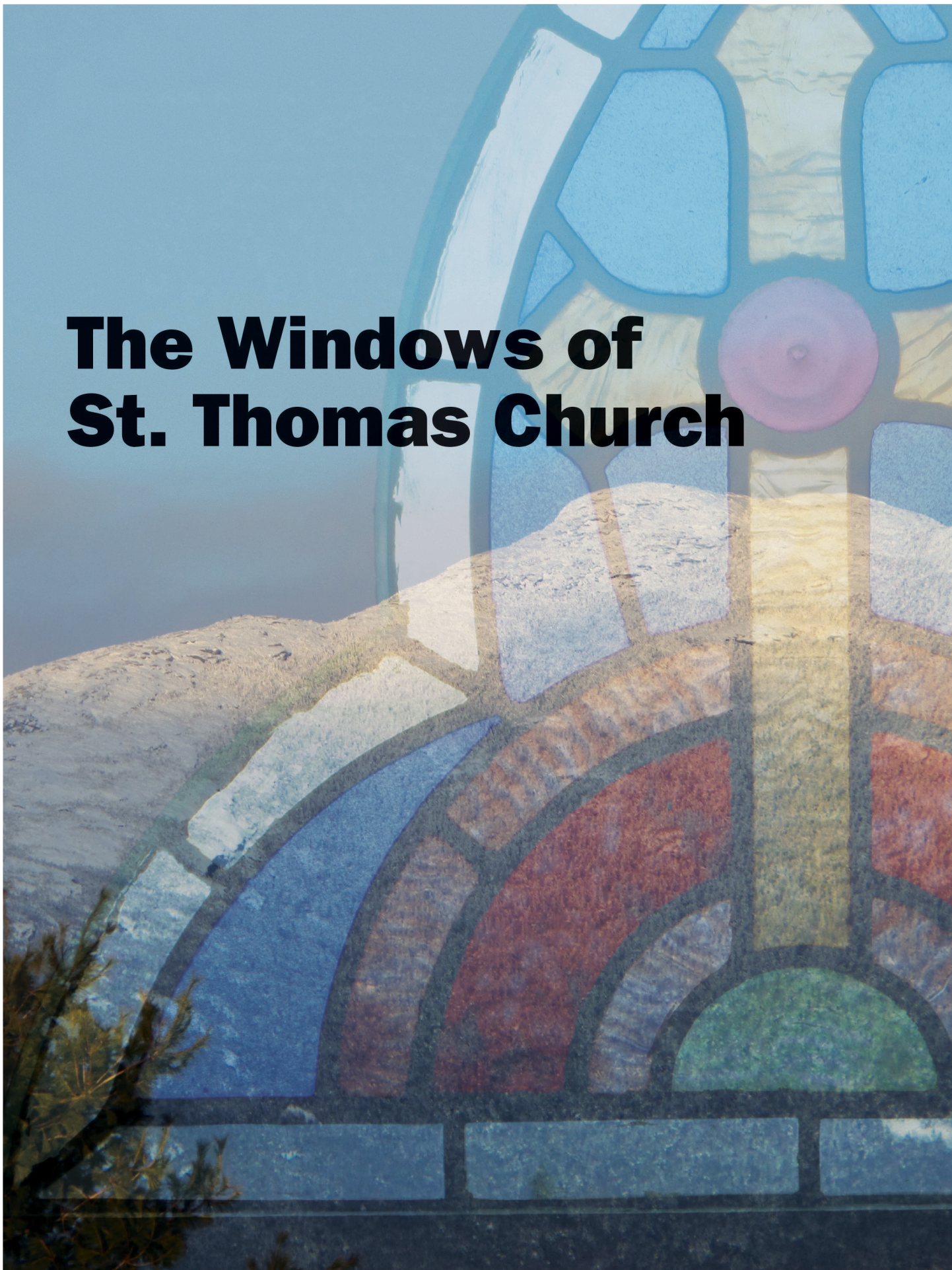


# **The Windows of St. Thomas Church**







# The Windows of St. Thomas Church

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"The Village" (1933).....

A sleepy village in a peaceful valley  
Yet, friend, there life stages its drama.  
Tragedy, comedy; nobility beside self-seeking;  
Petty crimes against the spirit;  
The wise serenity of old age;  
The rebellious passion of youth.  
There the whole of life unfolds  
From childhood's carefree days  
To that hillside with the white stones.  
Fifty houses offering the life of the race.

**Walter Hard**

In addition to the houses and stores in a village, there is usually a church with a spire reaching skyward. Our village of Underhill Center is fortunate to have at its center St. Thomas Catholic Church, built in 1891. One could say the "whole of life" in the village has unfolded about it and within it for the past 125 years. It is a local treasure that perhaps deserves more attention than it receives.

Let us take a closer look.



*Detail of Window: "I am the Alpha and the Omega" – Rev. 1:8*



**St. Thomas Church, Underhill Center, VT. The gablets can be seen on the spire above the brick level on the right.**

To a trained eye for architecture, St. Thomas is easily recognizable as a Gothic revival style structure, designed by one of Vermont's most prolific architects George Guernsey (1837-1900). He designed at least six other Catholic churches in Vermont as well as nine churches for other denominations. There may be more, but these are the ones that are documented "Guernseys". Like snowflakes, no two are exactly the same. But, they all reflect a certain style. Prof. Glen Andres, architectural historian at Middlebury College, describes his style as follows:

*"Guernsey's preferred aesthetic for churches was a robust Gothic revival with a play of pointed-arched motifs. The building facades are picturesquely asymmetrical in their design, generally with one dominant tower, balanced by a secondary vertical accent and a short, extended minor wing. It is interesting to compare Underhill with the larger St. Frances de Sales in Bennington. In these two cases, the tower has been turned at a diagonal. The towers themselves are*

*elaborate, multi-staged compositions marked by horizontal courses of textured and sometimes arcaded brickwork. Their caps tend to build up from minor pointed turrets and small gables (gablets) to a dominant, very steep spire. With his pointed arches, he tended to create a strong horizontal at the point where the vertical sides of an arched window, say, would begin to bend inward, so that the point of the arch would become a self-contained, expressed curved triangular form. Into major windows of this type, he would then insert a circular rose. This provides a sense of geometric abstraction to the historically-derived window form. At St. Thomas he used his polychromy of marble detailing to organize the facades with unifying horizontals – e.g. the string course that ties together the right-hand wing, the central gable, and the buttress caps of the tower; also the striking band of marble work on the flanks, articulating the basement from the main level, breaking upward in a lively fashion to arch over the individual windows."*

**Prof. Glen Andres, E-mail communication**





*St. Frances de Sales Church, Bennington, Vt., designed by Guernsey. Its towering spire was taken down in 1920, due to concerns that it might blow over in a storm.*

There are number of remarkable features of St. Thomas. The very fact of its existence in a small Vermont village nestled under Mount Mansfield is remarkable. How did a parish consisting of less than 200 mostly Irish immigrant families working on farms or logging for a living scrape together the money to build such a church? How did they attract one of Vermont's pre-eminent architects to design it? Where did those magnificent stained glass

windows come from, and what do they mean? These are just a few of the intriguing questions about our landmark church.

In this paper, I propose to take a closer look at the artwork displayed in the church, particularly the stained glass windows mentioned above. But first, a few words about the Gothic style they echo are in order.



*Catholics make the sign of the cross as they enter the church. This small window in the foyer symbolizes this act.*

The first true Gothic structure is considered to be the abbey of St. Denis, near Paris France, dating from the 12th century. The Gothic style flourished in Europe from the 12th to the 15th centuries and reached its zenith in Cathedrals such as Notre Dame in Paris (constructed from 1163 to 1345). For the first time, stained glass windows were used as a key component of a religious structure. The windows not only have aesthetic appeal, they were used to tell the story of the Catholic faith for the masses who were often illiterate, and to inspire all to contemplate transcendent concepts expressed in symbols. Art historian Ernst Gombrich has characterized the impact of the beauty of Gothic cathedrals in the minds of believers as follows:

*"The new cathedrals gave the faithful a glimpse of a different world. They would have heard in sermons and hymns of the Heavenly Jerusalem with its gates of pearl..... Now this vision had descended from heaven to earth. The walls of these buildings were not cold or forbidding. They were formed of stained glass that shone like rubies and emeralds..... Everything that was heavy, earthly or humdrum was eliminated. The faithful who surrendered themselves to the contemplation of all this beauty could feel that they*

*had come nearer to understanding the mysteries of a realm beyond the reach of matter."*

**E.H. Gombrich, THE STORY OF ART, pp.188-189.**

When the Gothic revival started in the nineteenth century, it was in part a reaction to the excesses of the Enlightenment period, industrialization, religious wars, etc., and a desire to return to a simpler time when the "old faith" was stronger. It was felt that the Gothic cathedral embodied and expressed this world view that people still needed in modern times. This movement started in Europe after the time of Napoleon and rapidly spread to North America. St. Patrick's cathedral in New York City (1858) is an excellent example of an American Gothic revival church.

Coincidentally, the stained glass windows in St. Thomas church were manufactured not far from St. Patrick's cathedral in the workshop of John Morgan & Sons of New York City. They were shipped via railroad to Underhill Flats and moved by horse drawn wagons to the new church. One can imagine the excitement in the community as these new works of art arrived and were seen for the first time in Underhill Center.



Today, as one enters St. Thomas Church via the tower entrance one immediately encounters stained glass windows on both sides of the entryway. Each window is the gift to the church from boys and girls of the Sunday School Class of 1892. They are identical except for the dedication at the bottom, the one on the left from the boys, the other from the girls of that class. The boy's window is shown to the right.

The entry way windows are a foretaste of the larger windows on all sides of the church's interior. There are a total of eight vertical windows with pointed arches on top, two six petal rose windows, one eight petal rose window, and the smaller "Eye of God" window above the sanctuary. There is a clear order of progression evident in the symbols depicted in the windows as one moves toward the front of the church. In Catholic religion, this progression is representative of the individual's lifelong ascent to communion with God. The theme is one of mystical marriage, or meeting the Divine, as Laura Lynch Wells, director of Religious Education at St. Thomas, explained to me on our tour of the church.

In briefly summarizing the images seen in the glass, no attempt is here made to give their full significance for the faithful. There is a quality to religious symbols which is not easily translatable into words. They are meant to be that way. They are designed to be perceived rather than just seen with our physical eyes. They have a language all their own which the faithful understand.

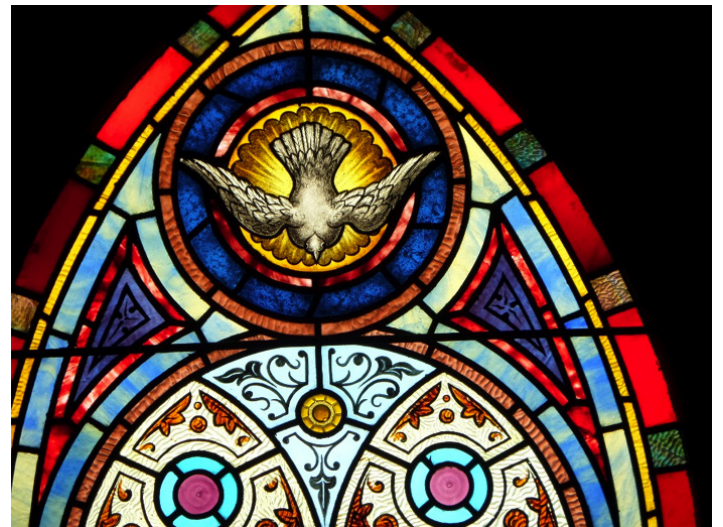
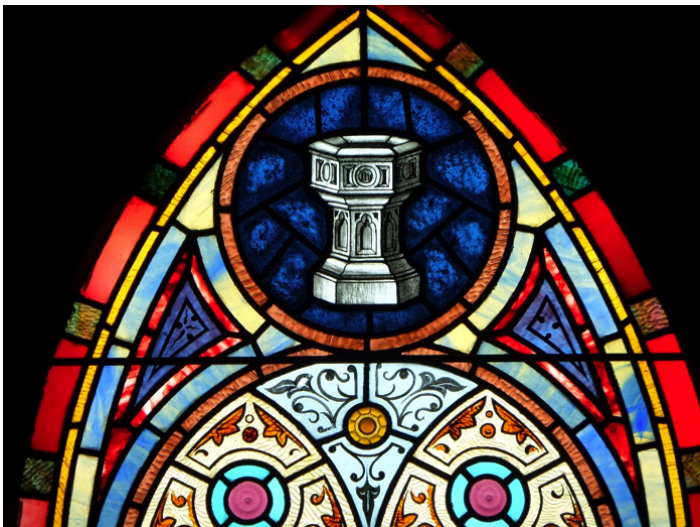


*Interior of St Thomas Church, Underhill Center, VT.*





The first window to the left as you are facing the front of the church features the anchor symbol in the pointed arch. This is a symbol of hope and steadfastness in faith. The biblical reference is to Heb. 6:19: "Here we have an anchor for our soul, as sure as it is firm, and reaching right through beyond the veil where Jesus entered before us..." To your right is a window with the symbol of the Holy Bible. It symbolizes education, knowledge and ultimately wisdom.



The next set of windows relate to the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. To the left is depicted a baptismal font, and to the right is the symbol of the dove descending from Heaven. The dove represents the Holy Spirit which came down from heaven at the time of John's baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan (Luke 3.22). The heavenly sphere is represented by the golden background behind the dove.



Midway down the aisle, one comes to the two six-petaled rose windows facing each other. At the center of the window is a heart, one for Mary and one for Jesus. The symbolism of the sacred hearts, complementing each other, is profound. They represent extreme devotion, love and purity of thought, word, and deed. The greyish triangular window below the hearts states the names of the donors.

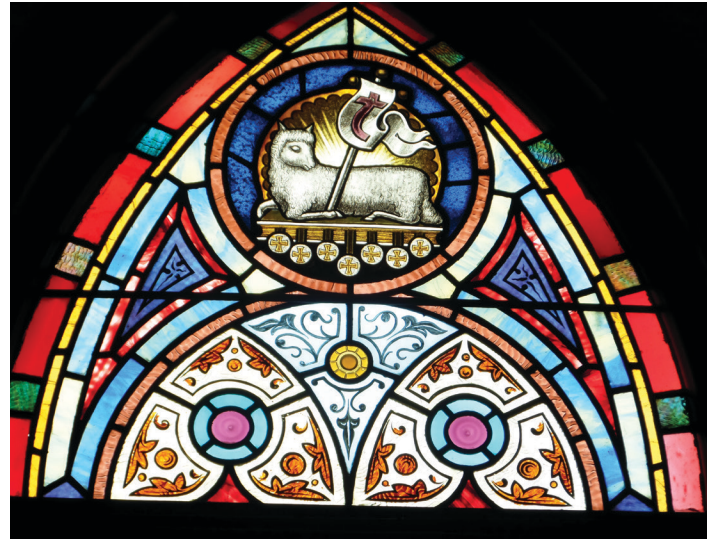


*Immaculate heart of Mary. Mary's heart is encircled with white roses and pierced by a sword, an allusion to Luke 2:35 which foretells the sorrows she will suffer in her lifetime.*



*Sacred heart of Jesus. His heart is surrounded by a crown of thorns with a flame emanating from the top indicating his perpetual love of mankind.*





*Father Brelivet's window features a crown symbolizing Christ the King.*

*Father Shannon's window features the Jesus monogram: I H S.*

The next four windows relate to the ultimate concerns of our lives. To your right as you stand before the sanctuary is a window depicting a chalice and a Host inscribed with the Jesus monogram I H S. This symbol refers to the Last Supper as well as to the celebration of the Mass. This is the sacrament called the Eucharist, one of the seven sacraments that Catholics believe were instituted by Jesus. To your left, you will see the image of the "Lamb of God", Jesus, whose sacrifice takes away the sins of the world according to Catholic teachings.

*"The cross symbolizes his victory over sin and death. He sits upon a Bible representing the Word of God....The seven crosses which come out of the Bible represent the seven sacraments .....It also represents the seven seals of judgment which will be unrolled at the final judgment."*

**Father Lance Harlow, E-mail communication.**

The last two vertical stained glass windows in the church were donated by two priests, Fathers Brelivet and Shannon. Father James D .Shannon (1861-1936) was fairly new to the parish when the old church burned down on the night of Dec. 19, 1890. A native Vermonter, born in Enosburg, this was his first parish. He was only twenty-eight years old when he arrived here in May of 1889. He served as pastor of St. Thomas for about a decade, departing for a new assignment in Middlebury in 1899. At St. Mary's Church in Middlebury, Father Shannon oversaw the construction of yet another gothic-revival church designed by George Guernsey. He served there until 1913. Then, he continued his long service to the Church in the parish of Bennington, VT. He is buried alongside other members of the Shannon family in the Enosburg cemetery.





*This portrait of Father Shannon in his later years hangs in the church's sacristy, a reminder of his many contributions to St. Thomas parish. By this point in his life, he had risen to the rank of Monsignor in the diocese.*

Father Shannon appears to have been the right man in the right place to take the disaster of losing the first church and turn it into an opportunity to create something much bigger and more beautiful. Of course, he could not have done much without the full support of the parishioners, the townsfolk, and the Bishop of Vermont, Louis De Goesbriand (1816-1899). This Bishop, Vermont's first, had purchased the land on which St. Thomas stands back in 1854. He apparently used some of the money (\$300) from his substantial family inheritance to pay for the land and the house that belonged to Martin Flannery. The Flannery house was then moved to make way for the first St. Thomas church.

The original St. Thomas church had been constructed at a cost of less than \$2,000 in the mid- 1850's; its replacement cost a total of \$21, 399. In today's dollars, that sum would be more than half a million dollars! There do not appear to have been any really big donors according to parish records. The money came in gifts of five to one hundred dollars. There was some money from insurance on the old church, but this was only a few thousand dollars. When the church was finished in 1892 the receipts did not quite meet the expenditures and the church carried a bank loan for a number of years before it was finally paid off. Unlike some other area churches that took many years to finish, the new church was ready for full service by Christmas 1892. The first mass held the year before was celebrated in the basement of the church.



*Close-up of a celtic-cross symbol in one of the vertical windows.*



*Close-up of detail work in the windows. Some of the artwork seems purely decorative, although this star symbol probably has some deeper symbolic meaning.*



Now, having completed our walk down the aisle, we find ourselves looking up to the rather small stained glass window above the sanctuary. This is the mysterious “Eye of God” window. This window has no donor’s name associated with it. Like the rose windows, it is a pointed arch with a circle in the center. At the center is a single eye looking on all that is going on below. This signifies God’s interest in us as well as His omniscience.

The “Eye of God” window above the cross on the Eastern side of the church, catches the first light of each day.

*“The eye is surrounded by two inverted triangles which represent the Blessed Trinity and surrounded by a circle symbolizing infinity. The two inverted triangles symbolize the infinite holiness of the Triune God. This religious symbolism dates back to the Renaissance. Because of its confusion with Freemasonry, it does not appear in many churches after the late 19th century.”*

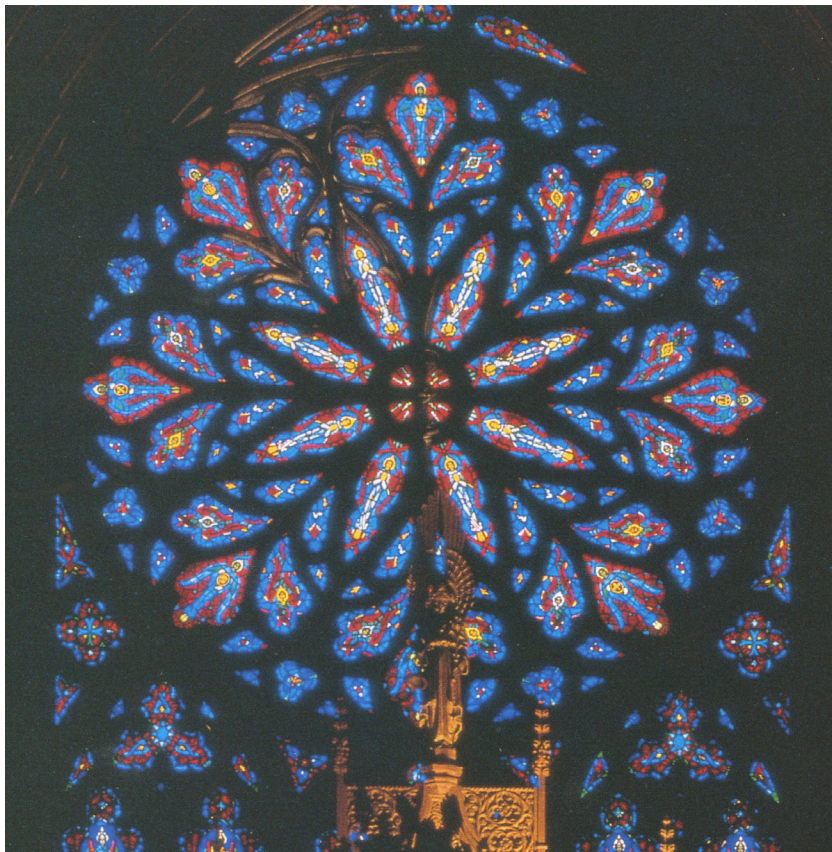
Father Lance Harlow, E-mail communication



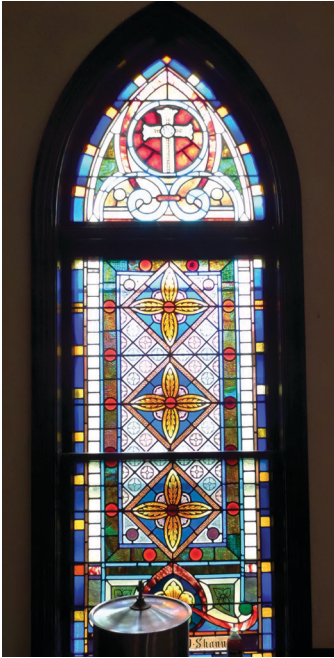




Opposite the “Eye of God” window, just above the music loft on the western wall, is the largest window in the church, the spectacular eight-petaled rose window with its vibrant musical theme. The harp or lyre at the center is a reference to King David who was a great composer of songs to the Lord.



There is a similar, albeit much larger, eight-petaled rose window above the organ in St. Patrick's Cathedral, NYC. It was manufactured in the 1870's by the same stained-glass company that made the windows in St. Thomas Church: John Morgan and Sons.



While St. Thomas Church is more modest in scale than the great cathedrals of Europe, its purpose and inspiration stem from the same source: to bring us closer to communion with the Divine. The stained glass windows help to bring about this awareness by elevating the mind from mundane matters.

The “new” St. Thomas church came to be as a result of the fire of 1890 that levelled the original St. Thomas church and created the need for a new church. But, the size and the gothic-revival look of the replacement were due to a combination of factors: the vision of a young priest and his congregation to replace it with something bigger and better; the encouragement of the Bishop; the skill of the architect and the builders and artists who made it; and, lastly, the “can do” spirit of the 1890’s in Vermont. It has been lovingly maintained by generations of Catholics in the area. Fortunately, it retains its original appearance and the remarkable windows of St. Thomas look exactly like they looked when first seen by the congregation in 1892.

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## WHO WAS SAINT THOMAS?

As the 1991 history of the parish states, we do not know exactly why this church is named for the apostle Thomas, aka “the Twin”. We do know something about the character of the saint from the gospels, particularly the Gospel of John. His devotion to Jesus is told of in John 11: 8-16 when he offers to travel with Jesus into dangerous territory: “Let us also go, that we may die with Him.”

The epithet “doubting Thomas” comes from chapter 20: 24-29. Thomas refused to believe in the resurrection of Jesus until he could actually see and feel his wounds. When he received the proof he sought, he exclaimed: “My Lord and my God”. So, seeing was believing for Thomas and his example has been used to counter incredulity about the miracles recounted in the Bible.

St. Thomas is said to have travelled far from home preaching the gospel in Persia and India. He is thought to have been put to death by an irate king on the Malabar coast of India in 72 AD. He is considered the patron saint of India. His feast day used to be December 21 on the old liturgical calendar, but it is July 3 on the revised calendar which dates from 1969.



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