

## THE STAINED GLASS WINDOWS OF SAINT CHARLES BORROMEIO CHURCH, BROOKLYN HEIGHTS, NEW YORK

Francis J. Greene, Ph.D.  
Professor of Fine Arts and International Studies  
St. Francis College  
Brooklyn, New York

The parish of St. Charles Borromeo in Brooklyn Heights, the sixth Catholic parish in Brooklyn, New York was formally dedicated by Archbishop John Hughes of New York on December 30, 1849. At that time there was not yet a separate Diocese of Brooklyn. From 1849 to 1869 the congregation worshipped in a former Episcopal church building just across the street from the site of the current church. When fire destroyed this edifice in March 1868, Patrick Charles Keely was commissioned, that year to design the new church and, in 1869, the structure was completed at a cost of \$75,000, including the property. The new church building was formally consecrated by the first Bishop of the Diocese of Brooklyn, the Most Reverend John Loughlin on May 30, 1869.

The church building of St. Charles Borromeo was designed in 1868 by Patrick Charles Keely. It is claimed to be Keely's 325<sup>th</sup> church. It is constructed in red Philadelphia brick with Belleville stone trim in the English Gothic Revival style with a brick tower and a metal steeple situated at the center of the façade which is pierced by three portals. The central portal is larger than the other two and is situated directly below the tower. The portals are accessed by means of a wide flight of steps. Each door leads into the rather shallow narthex. Another set of three doors lead into the nave of the church. The sides of the church reveal seven bays, each marked by a stained glass window. The central bay on each side, that is to say the fourth bay, is situated in a very shallow nave with its own exterior roof. The window of each transept is larger than the others.

The interior of the church is executed in Carpenter Gothic. The slender pointed Gothic arches rising from the columns and into the vault (or ceiling) of the nave are executed in wood. The effect is visually light and graceful. The slender columns, along with the Gothic arches, contribute to an open and spacious interior which offers the congregants optimal views of the sanctuary and the altar in particular where Mass is celebrated. As we shall see, all the details, including many symbols in the stained glass windows, create a focus upon Liturgy and Eucharist. This superb example of Carpenter Gothic is also quite appropriate for this 1868 church which was constructed, at that time, in an area better described as rural than suburban. The Brooklyn Bridge, which would lead to an influx of inhabitants in Brooklyn Heights, was still another eighteen years in the future. The ceiling and the surfaces of the arches are decorated with stencils, although these were added in later redecorations and are not original to the church. The walls themselves are plastered and unadorned.

The sanctuary was completely renovated in the mid- 1920's, under the pastorate of Monsignor Thomas J. O'Brien with the addition of the current reredos and altar, the altars of St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin, the pulpit and the communion rail. The central reredos, of excellent taste and proportions, is perfectly suited to this English Gothic Revival church. It was at this time that the large stained glass window was also installed over the reredos, also reminiscent of the fenestration of English Gothic chancels.

It was the parish's third Pastor, Reverend Thomas P. Ward, who began the installation of the stained glass windows in 1884, a process that continued slowly throughout his pastorate( 1884-1898) and that of his successor, Reverend James E. Bobier (1898-1918), for a period of over a quarter of a century. The stained glass windows of St. Charles Borromeo Church are of exceptional quality in their artistic execution and in their spiritual content and impact upon the viewer. The windows were not all created and installed at one time. Rather, as was often the case in the mid to late nineteenth century, the windows were commissioned, created, and put in place, several at a time, over a span of over thirty years, beginning in the 1880's and continuing into the early twentieth century. When a church was constructed it was not uncommon for simple, but suitable, colored glass to be put in place at the time of construction, with the understanding that individual stained glass windows would later be commissioned as donors asked for a window to be fashioned in memory of a loved one or an admired parish priest. This was certainly the case at St. Charles. All the windows are in the German style and two have the markings of the companies which produced them. One is identified as by Meyer and Company, with offices on Munich, Germany, and New York City. Another bears the insignia of the Tyrolese Art Glass Company which was based in Innsbruck, Austria, with an office also in New York City.

Meyer and Company, Munich, and the Tyrolese Art Glass Company, Innsbruck, Austria were among the most outstanding producers of religious stained glass in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, creating windows for some of the great cathedrals and parish churches of Europe. The demand for their art became so great in the United States that they soon opened New York offices to represent their interests. The windows, however, were all made in Germany and Austria and then shipped here. The fact that their emblems are found on only one window each at St. Charles is not surprising. It was often the case that, even if a company produced all the stained glass windows for a church at the same time, only one window would bear their signature and that was usually placed discretely at the bottom corner of one window where it might escape the attention of all but the most observant viewers. This is the case at St. Charles.

What does it mean to say that all the windows in the church are in the German style? Put quite simply, stained glass windows in the German style were marked by the following characteristics: (1) very high artistic quality including the workmanship (2) a pictorial style based on Renaissance painting techniques, including use of perspective (3) rich visual details, including nature scenes in the background, lavish and richly patterned garments on the figures, lush plants and flowers, and elaborate architectural ornamentation, creating a visual frame around the scene. All of these characteristics are found in the St. Charles parish windows.

One further observation about the order in which the windows were installed. It is clear from the architectural decoration around the edges of the windows that they were commissioned in stages over a period of time, over three decades. The two large windows of the shallow transept are undated, but may well have been first. They were installed at the same time. On the right wall four were installed at the same time. Further back one was installed at the same time that four others were installed across the nave in the left wall. This is the largest grouping: five. The last window on each side at the back was installed at the same time and these are among the most beautiful. The window of St. Thomas Aquinas on the left side has a border unique to the church and was clearly installed alone. There is no particular relationship, thematically, of one window to another and certainly not to its neighboring windows. However, there is an amazing thematic and iconographic unity found in most of the windows – amazing since they were installed in small groups, over decades, under at least three pastors. I will speak of this unity at the end of my presentation.

There are seven stained glass windows in each side wall. They are of equal size except for the central one on each side which marks the shallow transept space. These two windows are larger. We will begin with these, not only because of their size and location but due to the centrality of their themes. On the right side, facing the altar, is the Last Supper. By definition this window most closely relates to the chancel and to the Eucharistic celebration of the Mass each day at the altar. One notes the elaborate architectural framework for the scene, typical of German stained glass and particularly Meyer and Company. Interestingly Saint John, the youngest and beloved disciple, is depicted on Christ's left side and is resting his head upon the Lord. Traditionally in art St. John is depicted on Christ's right side, based on the description of the Gospels. Judas is seen clutching the bag with the thirty pieces of silver, the price for betraying his Master. At the decorative base of this window two sets of side steps lead up the level of the supper, as if the scene took place on an altar up to which one could ascend by the steps. This iconographical detail relates the event of the Last Supper with its continuation in the Mass, celebrated at the altar of St. Charles Church.

This window is dedicated to Charles W. B and Ellen Kitchen. Across from this window is one equally large with an identical architectural framework, indicative that both windows were created and installed at the same time. There is here no set of steps at the base, even though the other architectural decorative work is identical to the Last Supper window across the nave. It has three panels of glass, or three lights, matching the Last Supper window on the opposite side, also of three lights. Saint Vincent de Paul is depicted, holding a baby and giving bread to those in need. He is surrounded by people who reach out to him for assistance. At the base is a basket of food which will be distributed. Beneath is a prayer: "Saint Vincent de Paul, Apostle of Charity, pray for us." It is appropriate that the window opposite this depicts the Last Supper (the Eucharist) which should always lead to action on behalf of those in need. Thus, the Last Supper window is completed, in a sense, by this one across the church with its emphasis on Christian charity, expressed through the example of Saint Vincent de Paul. The Last

Supper window explains what takes place at the altar of the church, while its counterpart, with St. Vincent de Paul, indicates what action should take place after one leaves the church, having been refreshed and strengthened by the Eucharist.

We will now examine the windows in the chronological order of Christ's life. Thus we begin at the front of the church, at the left wall, adjacent to the left altar, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Here is found the Annunciation. On the left the Angel Gabriel brings to Mary the glad tidings that she will bear the Christ Child. The immediacy of the Angel's arrival (and thus his interruption of Mary's daily routine) is suggested by the fluttering of his garments. On the right side Mary is depicted as in prayer. She is robed in a beautiful and deeply rich blue garment with white and gold details. The cushion upon which she kneels is a lighter, almost sky-blue. Above, the Holy Spirit is visible in the traditional form of a dove. Fittingly this window was presented by: The Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The Nativity of Christ is commemorated in the depiction of the Adoration of the Magi, the last window at the back of the left wall. From the point of view of symbolism used, it is very rich indeed. On the right we see the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. One king is kneeling before Jesus and his crown has been taken off and laid upon the ground, in the corner, almost unnoticed. This little detail adds a real sense of the homage which is being paid by these "kings" to the new King whom they have found. The other two kings, on the left, await their turn to offer their gifts. Around the neck of the first of the two is a pendant with a radiant star, a reference to the star which they followed in search for Jesus. Behind them stands a camel, equally regal with its dignified posture and pose, quite befitting this scene devoted to human and Divine Royalty. In the roof of the humble abode of the Holy Family there seems to be thatching, but upon closer inspection it is clear that we are looking at small bundles of wheat, a clear Eucharist reference to the Bread of Life. It is in this window that we see the name of the creators of the window: Meyer and Company, Munich and New York. Finally, at the base, is found the appropriate scriptural reference: "For we have seen His star in the East and have come to adore Him." Matthew Chapter II, verse 2.

Next is the scene of the finding of the Child Jesus in the temple, instructing the learned scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures. We see in their faces both inquisitiveness and also amazement at the knowledge and wisdom coming from this child. The red garment, worn by one of the figures, occupies a major part of the window space and helps direct the eye over to the figure of the young Jesus. The window is dedicated: In the Memory of Margaret Ward, 6<sup>th</sup> January 1870.

Next is the scene of the Holy Family in Nazareth. In addition to Jesus, Mary and Joseph, we see, at the upper left, St. Anne, mother of Mary and Jesus' grandmother, entering through a gate. Thus are depicted three generations. The Christ Child works in his father's carpentry shop and is shown, symbolically, making a small wooden cross, a foreshadowing of His death on the Cross. Christ's cousin, Saint John the Baptist, is also depicted, between Jesus and Mary, holding a wooden cross, one of his attributes, and

clinging to a lamb, representing the innocent Jesus who will be sacrificed on the cross for the sins of the world. The detail of Saint Anne, entering the enclosed garden through a gate, accords with traditional Christian iconography of the gate and enclosed garden as a symbol of Mary's virginity and of the Virgin birth. St. Joseph is garbed in his traditional color of brown, suggestive of the wood he worked as a carpenter, although this brown is light and almost appears as gold when the window is in full sunlight. More specific is the purple garment (an apron?) tied around his waist with its traditional suggestion of royalty. Joseph was of the Royal line of David, thus adding an element of legitimacy to Jesus, his foster-child, as the promised Messiah. The dedication is in memory of William Nevins and son, dated January 1895.

Then follows the Baptism of Christ in the River Jordan by St. John the Baptist. Note the presence and role of the Holy Spirit, depicted as a dove in the upper left hand corner, as well as the purple robe which John the Baptist is wearing. This deep purple is the liturgical color of Advent, the season of waiting for and preparing for the coming of the Lord. The use of this color in the window reflects that, with His Baptism, the long waiting was over and that the Savior had indeed come and was beginning His public ministry. The water of the Jordan River flows down into a stone basin that becomes, symbolically, a Baptismal font. While many of the windows refer to and reinforce the liturgical action of the Mass and the Eucharist at the altar, this window commemorates the sacramental action of Baptism, Specifically, the fountain refers to the Baptismal font of the parish church. At the bottom the window is dedicated in memory of John Kelly who died on August 7, 1894.

Next is the Sermon on the Mount. The viewer's eyes are drawn to Jesus on the right side since He is depicted in a vibrant, red robe. Gathered around Him are some of the crowd, listening intently and visibly amazed at His teaching. A sense of Jesus being up on a mount is suggested by depicting, on the left, a town much lower in a valley. One observes also the wide range of listeners from youth to seniors in age. Above Christ's head are palm branches, perhaps suggestive of his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

The next window depicts the children coming to Jesus. On the left we see several of the Apostles, amazed that Jesus is calling the children to Himself. On the other side of Christ, onlookers seem equally interested and surprised. One will notice the grape vines above the scene, a clear reference to the Eucharist and the Precious Blood. One of the older children seems to be offering a piece of fruit to Jesus, perhaps an apple, which would relate back to the fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden. On the bottom left is seen a basket filled with fruit. The dedication of this window is to Michael and Emanuel Kelly, 1896.

The next window depicts Jesus the Good Shepherd, holding two sheep in His arms. On the left side stands an Angel draped in a richly decorated garment. This is clearly the Risen Christ, the Eternal Good Shepherd, as we see the marks of the nails in Christ's feet, an extremely small detail revealing how carefully the iconography was thought out and executed, with enormous subtlety. There are a total of six sheep in the window; the most interesting one is on the far right, caught in the brambles and clearly in need of rescue by

the Good Shepherd. Of course the thorns of those brambles also evoke the crown of thorns worn by Christ before his death on Cavalry. We note that in this window Christ's red garment is marked along the borders by red crosses, again reminiscent of His sufferings. The small bell around the neck of one sheep indicates that these are all sheep of the same flock, identified, marked and known to the shepherd. The Angel holds open the wooden gate into the pasture through which the sheep pass, evoking the scriptural image of Christ as the Gate through which all are invited to pass. The inscription reads: Presented by the Holy Name Society.

The last window on the right side of the church depicts the Agony in the Garden. On the left side we see Jesus in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. Near Him, asleep, is the Apostle James. On the right side, we see Peter and John also asleep. John is depicted, as he was in the window of the Last Supper, as quite young and beardless. It is striking how he rests his head on Saint Peter, who will be Christ's successor to lead the Church, just as John had rested his head on Jesus in the scene of the Last Supper. Above this group is an Angel who offers Christ the cup of suffering, referring to Jesus' prayer to His Father in the garden that He might be spared the cup of suffering, but asking, also, that His Father's will be done. Directly above the figure of the praying Christ is found a tree, symbolic of the tree of the Cross upon which he was soon to be crucified, but also of the original tree in the Garden of Eden. The window is dated January 1901. Unlike most windows there is no architectural setting at the base, but rather, a quotation from the scripture, related to the scene depicted: "And there appeared to Him strengthening Him an Angel, and being in agony, he prayed the longer." Luke Chapter XXII, verses 42-44. It should be pointed out that the window exactly across from this one, the Adoration of the Magi, which we examined, also has no architectural base, but a scripture verse—a clear indication that these two windows were installed at the same time.

The Resurrection is the theme of the next window. Jesus is depicted as Risen, carrying the banner, iconographically associated with His Resurrection. Balancing the image of Christ on the left is, on the right, a soldier, one of the guards of the tomb, fallen asleep, and an Angel; both are near the stone that has been rolled back from the entrance to the tomb. Now the border of Christ's red garment is marked by the *fleur de lys*, symbolic of royalty, and the Trinity, among other religious associations. From an aesthetic point of view, one is struck by the powerful foreshortening of the soldier, face down, formerly sleep and now dazzled by the light. The treatment is reminiscent of many Renaissance depictions in foreshortening. The dedication is to the Reverend James Bobier, December 18, 1918. It would appear that this is the last of the windows to be installed in the nave walls, as all seem to have been completed before 1920.

The next window depicts Saint Thomas Aquinas, in his Dominican habit, kneeling before an allegorical female figure seated upon a throne. She represents wisdom and also, possibly, the Church. In either case St. Thomas is submitting himself in service, it could be said, to both wisdom and the Church. The rays of the Holy Spirit pour down at the center of the scene. They are so stylized that they might appear as a flow of water. St. Thomas was known as the Angelic Doctor and, on the left, an Angel holds a monstrance

with the sacred host, the Holy Eucharist. St. Thomas wrote extensively on the Eucharist and is credited with creating that quintessential Eucharistic hymn, *Tantum Ergo*. There are many books and scrolls about, testimony to Saint Thomas' great erudition and his massive corpus of writings. On the ground, to the left, is a volume of Aristotle, with the title in Ancient Greek. St. Thomas drew heavily upon Aristotle for much of his writing and used the Aristotelian concepts of substance and matter to elucidate the concept of Transubstantiation (for the Eucharist). On the one side of the book, held by angels we read, in Latin, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The adjoining page reads: "And the Word became flesh...He humbled Himself even unto death." Inscribed at the center of the window in Latin is a phrase difficult to see and read which says in Latin: "You have well written of Me, Thomas." The window is dedicated to the memory of Reverend Thomas Ward, LL.D., one of the early priests of St Charles parish. Father Ward was, himself, a great scholar, holding the Doctor of Laws degree and he taught for many years in the seminary. Undoubtedly such a priestly scholar and seminary professor would be steeped in Thomistic philosophy and theology. In addition, at about the time of the creation of this window, there had been, from Rome, a call for renewed attention and primacy for the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, particularly in seminary education. All of these currents and trends are reflected in the iconography of this extraordinary window. Finally, it must be pointed out that Father Ward, for whom this window was dedicated, bore as his first name that of the Saint—Thomas. Of further interest is the fact that this window bears the mark of the other stained glass makers who contributed to the stained glass of this church—the Tyrolese Glass Company, located in Innsbruck, Austria.

The first window on the far right, adjacent to St. Joseph's altar, depicts the apparition of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to Sister Margaret Mary Alacoque in France in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when this window was created, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus had become very strong throughout the Western Catholic Church. Almost every parish built at this time is decorated with a statue, painting, or stained glass window of the Sacred Heart. This devotion remains popular to this day because it expresses a basic truth, evidenced by the words and actions of Jesus in the Gospels—His total and unrelenting love for each individual. It is symbolically significant that Jesus is standing upon an altar at the place where the tabernacle, containing the Eucharist, is usually located. The placement of a lit candle on each side of Christ only reinforces this identification of the Sacred Heart with the tabernacle of the altar upon which he seems to stand. . This positioning also relates the Sacred Heart to the Eucharist itself, as does a prayer commonly recited at that time: "May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be praised, adored, and loved, in all the tabernacles of the world, even unto the end of time." Finally, the window is the very first, on the right wall, adjacent to the sanctuary, that is, as close to the altar and tabernacle as is physically possible. This is the only window that is not derived from specific verses of the Scriptures; rather, it is based on a private, spiritual vision of Sister Margaret Mary. Thus, to make this fact absolutely clear, the figure of Christ has been surrounded by clouds, suggesting a private revelation and precisely separating the window's content from all the others. Clearly theological clarity and precision were tantamount in the ordering of these windows at St. Charles. The viewer

will also note the elaborate architectural framing along the borders of the window—a characteristic of all the stained glass windows in this church and a hallmark of the so-called German style. At the base of the scene is revealed the donor of this particular window—The League of the Sacred Heart.

Finally, there is the central stained glass window over the reredos at the center of the sanctuary. The fact that the wall in back of the reredos is flat, rather than a semi-circular arched apse, identifies the architectural style of Saint Charles Church as English Gothic, as do other architectural elements. This flat wall contains a great stained glass window consisting of five panels or lights, as they are called. Depicted is the parish patron, St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584) distributing Holy Communion to a man, reclining on a stretcher. He is a victim of the plague, as evidenced by a sore on his face. An angel assists St. Charles by holding the Communion plate under the host. St. Charles is remembered for his courage in visiting the homes of plague victims in his diocese and for his total attention to the physical and spiritual needs of his congregation, even when many were infected with the plague. St. Charles is depicted in his Cardinal's robes, with the large red hat, then worn by Cardinals, attached to his back, just below his neck. He holds the staff or crosier, another indication of his role as Archbishop of Milan. Gathered around him are many of the people to whom he ministered, including, on the far left, members of some of the religious orders which he had supported and to whom he had introduced spiritual reform. Every level of society seems represented in the crowd, as are a number of women and men from Switzerland, one of the regions that stood under St. Charles's protection and to which he paid many pastoral visits over the years. This window is the only one in the church depicting the parish patron. It is appropriate that St. Charles is shown distributing Holy Communion since, at the altar just below this window, every day the bread and wine have been consecrated at Mass into the Body and Blood of Christ, and countless thousands have, over the years, come to the altar, in full view of this window, to receive Holy Communion. Thus the window also relates thematically to many of the windows in the nave with their varied references to Eucharist and the Mass. It should be pointed out that the likeness of St. Charles' face in this window is exactly as he is depicted in many portraits painted of him during his lifetime. It is an exact likeness. Above this immense window are three smaller ones, all containing pairs of angels. In the quatrefoil on the left the angels bear a scroll, referring in Latin to Saint Charles' developing a catechism and catechetical programs for the parishes and Catholic schools of Milan. In the quatrefoil on the right angels bear a scroll referring to Saint Charles' emphasis on the importance of the Sacrament of Penance. In the central window two angels bear a crown, destined for St. Charles upon the completion of his life on earth—a symbolic way of denoting the holiness of his personal and priestly life.

The exquisite quality of these stained glass windows is impressive; they represent superb examples of German and Austrian stained glass artistry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Impressive and imaginative Gothic architectural details frame the scenes wherein we find beautifully executed figures, drapery, natural forms, such as plants, trees, sky and clouds, as well as illusionistic space, much in the Renaissance

tradition, and all these elements are further enhanced by the deep, rich, and vibrant colors. Completing the impact is the highly developed symbolism, or iconography, contributing to a spiritual intensity that fulfills the purpose of any religious stained glass of any era—to raise the heart and mind to God. In the Middle Ages stained glass served, as one of its purposes, the instruction of the faithful. Thus Victor Hugo called the medieval Cathedral the Bible in stone and glass. At St. Charles Church the effect of the stained glass is not so much to instruct, although it does call to mind, or remind one of the major tenets of the faith. The purpose here is more to move the viewer, emotionally and thus spiritually through the elegant and gracefully depicted scenes, as well as through the deep, rich colors, the sumptuous details of garments, folds, fabrics, vegetation and architectural frameworks—all of which accords perfectly with the elegant and graceful church interior, designed by Keely, where the slender and graceful architectural elements, especially the arches, executed in elegant carpenter Gothic style, also elevate the eyes and the spirit in ways conducive to prayer. The consistent thematic emphasis in the windows on the centrality of the Eucharist is complemented by Keely's carpenter Gothic which offers no obstruction of views of the sanctuary and the altar from practically any seat in the church. The architectural elements help direct and focus the view upon the altar

Finally, one is struck by the amazing thematic unity among the various windows, even though they were installed in groups of two to four or five over a period of more than two decades. In part this artistic unity was achieved due to the fact that each of the Pastors, during the time of the windows' creation and installation, was a highly educated and very cultured priest. Each, in his own way, drew upon the work that had already been done when considering new commissions for the unfinished windows. This only confirms the experience of any gifted ecclesiastic architect or artist over the centuries that an educated, interested, and informed client is the best partner with whom to work towards the artistic and spiritual success of any house of worship. St. Charles Borromeo Church in Brooklyn Heights is proof of how true that axiom is.