

# *The Spiritual Meaning of the Art and Architecture of Our Parish Church*



## *St. Francis By The Sea Catholic Church*

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### VISION

*In Christ – united in faith, love and service*

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### Acknowledgements

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**Dedicated to parishioners both past and present who have helped make St. Francis By The Sea the community it is today. We gratefully acknowledge the parish founders for their untold hours of work to build our truly beautiful parish complex. This architectural and photographic look at our parish environment would not have been possible without the help of many people who also freely gave of their time and knowledge. We thank our pastor Fr. Michael Oenbrink for his support of this project as well as the dedicated priests and pastoral staff who have unselfishly served us during the past 25 blessed years.**

**St. Francis By The Sea Pastoral Council - 2008**

## *The Courtyard, Entrance and Narthex*

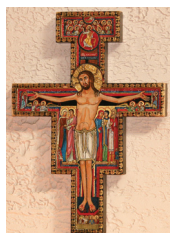
In the courtyard, an expressive Italian bronze statue of our patron, St. Francis of Assisi, stands surrounded by several animals in a welcoming posture as if greeting guests coming to God's house. The artist of this simple bronze recasting of an original statue is not known. It was placed in the parish courtyard in 1992.

Across the courtyard, the simple design lines of the entrance doors echo the Lowcountry style of architecture of the church building. Above the triple doors a contemporary round, or rose, stained glass window features the dove symbol of the Holy Spirit. It is surrounded by bright warm colors of simple geometric glass shapes radiating outward as if from a sunburst. The vibrant window is beautiful viewed from both inside and outside of the church.



Crossing the narthex, the center interior doors of the church are framed by an assemblage of contemporary style icons of saints which were placed in celebration of the new millennium of the Catholic Church. The saints represented around the doors date from earliest apostles to 20th century saints.

Before entering doors, note the stylized cross above them surrounded by two more large icons and a large rosary. It is a reproduction of St. Francis' beloved San Damiano cross. The original 12th century cross is larger than life-size and hangs in the Church of St. Clare in Assisi. The small processional cross is beautifully decorated with highly detailed icon scenes from the life of Jesus. The original masterpiece was painted in bright colors about 1100 AD by an unknown Serbian monk, to both praise God and be used as a teaching tool by the monks for the uneducated peasantry. Today the icon figures on this processional cross echo the icons surrounding the welcoming doors.





## *The Interior and Sanctuary*

Great beams of heavily grained wood spread overhead like a canopy supporting a light-toned wood-planked ceiling. The spread of the beams show the shape of the church to be a half circle allowing all who come to worship to be able to see and fully participate while in



close proximity to the altar. The natural wood pews in a half round formation lead to a slightly raised sanctuary area. In keeping with the abundant wood throughout the church, an altar of warm toned cherry wood is the focal point and centerpiece of the sanctuary area. With its graceful simplicity combining curved vertical slats and a heavier table surface, the altar echoes the designs of Frank Lloyd Wright's furniture. It has "softer edges and warmth" according to the artist parishioner, Gloria Rohr. Gloria designed all the sanctuary furnishings as well as several other aspects of the church and its decoration. Repeating the understated style of the altar are the presider and servers chairs which are covered in a soft-toned fabric. The credence table, ambo and side altars are of a similar, simple design in the same cherry wood completing the furniture of worship.

The awe inspiring, twelve foot great crucifix on the wall behind the altar is by a local artist, Wayne Edwards. The seven foot corpus is sculpted wood painted in soft, opaque colors. Note the hands of Christ stretched up in an open, raised prayer position prefiguring the Resurrection yet to come. Take notice also of the missing INRI (Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews) above the head of Christ. This is the Christ who died for all humanity and needs no title except Lord and Savior.



Looking above the crucifix, a Franciscan arch tops the great wall behind the sanctuary area. This flattened arch is repeated again over the side altars and along the light-filled window walls of the church. There are five arches on each side in keeping with the design of the Franciscan church in Assisi. The design of the arched side walls of the church is also reminiscent of interior walkways of a monastery.

Turning to the back wall of the church, your eye is drawn to the Prayer of St. Francis in beautiful Old English calligraphy which was done by an unknown Bluffton artist. It is a reminder of how we should return from the house of God to our daily lives graced by this ancient prayer of peace so beloved by our parish patron saint.



### *Sanctuary Sacred Objects*

Directly behind the Altar of the Mass is a smaller Altar of Repose which holds the Tabernacle. The simple, cube shaped, double doored Tabernacle is the designated place for the Blessed Sacrament when Mass is not being celebrated. While not an original design, the beautiful textured metal finish with overlaid

enamel surrounding a cross in the center of the doors is striking. Warm colors of orange, gold, and white draw your eyes to the locked doors of the Tabernacle holding the Eucharist. The entire Tabernacle is covered with a copper colored metal and is very heavy. Tabernacle is a word of Latin origin, meaning “tent”. In religious Jewish culture, the meaning was a “meeting or resting” place. In the Catholic Church, it is a “resting” place for the Eucharist.



To the far right of the Sanctuary is the Tabernacle Lamp made of a similar dark metal and the design details repeat the square and rectangular themes of the Tabernacle. A deep red glass cylinder contains a candle, the light of which can be seen from everywhere in the church. The lit Sanctuary Lamp is a sign that the Lord is present in the Eucharist in the Tabernacle. On Good Friday and part of Holy Saturday, the lamp is extinguished and the Tabernacle is empty.



## *Sanctuary Statues*

To the right and left sides of the sanctuary are two statues found in most Catholic churches. The wood statues of Mary as the Mother of Jesus, and St. Joseph as a carpenter, were carved in Europe. Close examination reveals details such as textured robes, fine features, and identifiable tools for Joseph to hold. Rather than using an opaque paint, these were stained in soft, but realistic shades allowing some of the depth and grain of the wood to visually come through. Each of these two hundred pound statues are mounted on an unusual “original design” base made of strategically placed bricks extending from the wall, mortared together, and supported in the wall by steel rods.

The Communion of Saints is represented by the two side alters. Mary and Joseph are patroness and patron of the church. Their intercession is requested under many titles, and forms of prayer. These prayers are noted by the presence of lit votive candles.



## *The Stations of the Cross*



On each side wall of the church, above the windows and Franciscan arches are a series of seven niches. They contain original designs representing the Stations of the Cross which are successive stages in the Passion of our Lord. The devotion associated with the Stations was begun by the Friars Minor, or Franciscans, in the mid 15th century as a spiritual pilgrimage to the holy places of Jerusalem, of which they had become custodians.

When the church was designed and built, the use of the niches had not been settled. Once again the designer of the altar furniture and Baptismal font stepped forward. She designed Stations with stark simplicity, featuring only hands and faces of those involved in the Passion. Noting the influence of the designs of the Air Force Academy chapel, she sculpted what you see today in clay in half size. These sculptural models were then commissioned to be enlarged to thirty inch square panels and executed in plaster and fiberglass by Adam Schultz, who was a senior at Savannah College of Art and Design. The fourteen bas relief panels, weighing one hundred pounds each were installed. The use of the niches was perfect as if the Stations had been part of the original design. The sculpted figures were detailed in several white tones which created highlights and shadows against a heavily textured gray clay surface providing simple, yet powerful, representations.

These contemporary and simple Stations of the Cross focus attention on exactly what is happening in each Station providing a prayerful experience for parish members as they follow Christ through His Way of the Cross.

## *Traditional Parish Icons*

On the rear walls of the church are two large, familiar icons of the Catholic Church which are executed in wood and painted with pastel colors. As with copies of many artistic representations, the style, subject, and content remain the same. Adaptations are made to fit the church in which they are placed.

### **Our Lady of Perpetual Help**

The deeply colored and Byzantine style original icon of Mary under this title dates from about the 13th century. It depicts the Mother of God comforting the Christ child because he sees the instruments of his passion prefiguring his crucifixion. She is holding him as he sees the Archangel Michael on the left carrying the lance and sponge. On the right, the Archangel Gabriel is carrying an Orthodox style three bar cross and nails. Jesus, with his prophetic childlike dangling sandal, is clinging to his solemn looking mother. Over a period of centuries the icon came to be venerated in many places in the world. Eventually this Madonna came to be the patroness of the Redemptorist Order by declaration of Pope Pius IX in 1866. The founding pastor of St. Francis By The Sea, Fr. Joseph Majewski, was a Redemptorist so this iconic figure of Mary holds a place of honor and respect in our church, our parish history, and our hearts.





## The Sacred Heart of Jesus

The second icon is of The Sacred Heart of Jesus, which is more familiar to Roman Catholics. The devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is manifested in many ways with the most familiar



form being called “First Fridays” during which the believer receives the Eucharist on nine consecutive monthly Fridays and prays some specified devotions. This devotion occurred following visions of Christ with His heart exposed, to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque, a member of the cloistered Visitation Order in the 17th century. In her spiritual journal she said He told her to behold His heart which so loved humanity. She related that she could see His

heart pierced and bleeding, flames coming from it, and a crown of thorns around it. Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus spread and it was raised to the status of a first rank feast in 1899. In a mid 20th century encyclical, Pius XII noted that devotion to the heart of Christ accords with the most fundamental truths of Christianity and how it has always existed in some form as the recognition of the divine and human love of Christ for all men.

where there is hatred let me sow love ;



## *From Baptismal Font to Columbarium*

On a graceful wood base repeating the altar furniture design, the baptismal font stands at the entrance to the main aisle of the church. The pentagon-shaped top surface holds a circular, lidded brass finished basin where the Sacrament of Baptism is celebrated. Near the baptismal font stands the large, symbolically marked Paschal candle which is a central image of the Easter Vigil. It represents Christ, the Light of the World.

On every Holy Saturday evening, the church begins a new liturgical year and the Paschal candle is lit with a “new fire” and processed through the church and placed in the stand. The “new water” which is holy water, is blessed. The Paschal candle is lowered into the water three times in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The candle and stand are placed to the side of the main altar and lit for the 50 days of Easter ending on Pentecost. Then the candle is placed by the baptismal font at the entrance to the church. It is lit again for baptisms and funerals reminding us of a new life in Christ or a new beginning for all eternity.

We are blessed at St. Francis by the presence of a 2100 niche columbarium outside the rear of the parish church, placed by a serene lagoon. The peaceful setting is conducive to prayer and remembering the lives of loved ones. The original meaning of columbarium was a “dove cote” or a resting place for doves in medieval times. It has come to mean a resting place or repository for the ashes of believers who chose to be cremated. Just as dove cotes were placed against buildings in times long ago, our columbarium rests securely near the rear wall of our parish home, both in life and death. In a sense, we can see how there is a full circle in our spiritual lives in the parish beginning with baptism at the entrance to the church. We finally complete the circle of our earthly journey by following the cross in procession after the funeral Mass to a final resting place near what has been our spiritual home during our lives at St. Francis By The Sea.

## *St. Francis By The Sea - A Brief History*

Since December 1984, our parish has evolved from a group of fewer than 100 families into today's dynamic faith filled community of nearly 2000 households serving the north end of the island. During the earliest years volunteers were abundant, talents shared, and many facilities generously provided space for liturgies and other parish functions. Sunday Masses were celebrated at The Crazy Crab Restaurant; social events were held there and at the First Presbyterian Church. By 1988, the parish had outgrown the "Holy Crab." Hilton Head Primary School was the next home for Sunday liturgies as the congregation continued to multiply.

The diocese approved the purchase of a large piece of land adjoining Palmetto Hall Plantation on Beach City Road with access to nearby Route 278. Parishioners then chose the name "St. Francis By The Sea" and exciting designs were in place. Construction budgets were negotiated, and ground was broken in March 1990 with 500 people attending the event. Less than one year later, on March 3, 1991, a first Mass was celebrated in the new church with over 900 people in the pews and standing room only in the rest of the church. The semi-circular, light filled church with white walls, natural wood finishes, and original art throughout, was now a permanent home to a rapidly increasing Catholic population. Our home for worship was constructed first, but there were more buildings to come to serve parishioners and our pastoral leaders.

The founding members of the church had also planned a rectory and office building structure. Fundraising continued and this building was completed in 1993 so the priests had a permanent home. The office staff now had space to serve the burgeoning parish needs.

The generosity of parishioners continued, and 1995 saw the completion of the Family Center with two wings for School of Religion classes. Later that same year, the bishop permitted the establishment of the first Columbarium in the Diocese of South Carolina attached to a new parish.



In addition to the School of Religion, a Catholic school was desired by parishioners. It was planned, funded and built over several years in stages. In 1998 this building project was completed with the addition of a beautiful school library. Grades were added gradually and students today attend classes from pre-kindergarten through grade eight.

Groundbreaking for the school's Fine Arts Center took place in 2007 with completion in 2008. The last building, a large Multipurpose Facility including a gymnasium is to follow in the near future to accommodate the many meetings, classes, activities and social functions of our thriving parish.

In less than 25 years, we have built extensively with bricks and mortar, but we also count more than 50 ministries serving parishioners and extending into the entire community. We hold a vision for this parish: "In Christ – united in faith, love and service." This is our grace filled early history, and we are continuing that vision in the 21st century.





R.F.M.