

A TOUR OF ST FRANCIS XAVIER CHURCH



THE HISTORY

WELCOME TO ST. XAVIER CHURCH! This building, completed in 1861, is the third one on this site. The first Catholic church in Cincinnati, a little wooden structure built in 1819 at Liberty and Vine, was moved here on rollers in 1821. In that year Catholic churches were no longer forbidden within city limits, the city became the seat of the first Ohio diocese, later to be an archdiocese, and an era of explosive population growth began in Cincinnati. Within five years a larger brick church replaced the little wooden one.

In 1840 the bishop began plans for a new cathedral at 8th and Plum, and prevailed upon the Jesuits to accept the running of this parish. When the cathedral was completed in 1845, this church was dedicated to St. Francis Xavier. Within fifteen years the parish had grown to the point of yet another expansion. In 1859 the cornerstone for this building designed by Cincinnati architect Louis Pickett was laid, and the first Mass was celebrated within its walls in 1861.

A large mid-century influx of Irish immigrants challenged the sensibilities of Cincinnati's original German settlers. In response, St. Louis church, nearby but closer to Over the Rhine, became "the German church" and St. Xavier "the Irish church". The 1882 St. Patrick's Day parade departed

from these steps. Three weeks later, on April 7, 1882, a devastating fire gutted the interior of the church, and destroyed the spire. Despite tremendous damage, the church was restored within a year, with the spire rebuilt by another Cincinnati architect, Samuel Hannaford. With the exception of two windows behind the main altar the original windows survived, although some are obscured by the 20th century vestibule and choir loft. Today this elaborately decorated building, notable for its pointed arches, spires, gargoyles, finials, and many marble altars, is considered the finest example of Gothic Revival in Cincinnati.

In 1987 the interior furnishings were reconfigured to conform to changes called for by the Second Vatican Council. The marble reredos, or back, of the main altar remains, but the altar itself, the Communion rail and elaborate pulpit were removed. The new altar is closer to the congregation, and the new pulpit, or ambo, alongside it retains the wooden sculptures of the original pulpit, symbolic representations of the four Evangelists. Two Reconciliation rooms, at the rear of the church, have replaced ten confessionals. The baptismal pool was designed and built by Cincinnati potter Michael Frasca.

THE WINDOWS

The windows behind the main altar, dating from the reconstruction of 1883, are artificially lit from behind. They show St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, and St. Francis Xavier, patron of the missions. In the round window's center, the eye of God in a triangle surrounded by rays of light represents the Trinity.

Contained in the stained glass lancet windows are painted rounds depicting Christian symbols. Clockwise from the sanctuary, the 1st pair is a host and chalice,

body and blood of Christ; and alpha and omega, first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, signifying God as the beginning and end. The 2nd shows the Ten Commandments and Holy Bible, the 3rd the Greek IHS for Jesus, and the chi and rho for Christ; and again the alpha and omega. The 4th recalls the crucifixion: nails, hammer and pliers, and behind a Roman ax and whip the monogram "INRI", Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.

The gray figures in the 5th are two symbols of the four Evangelists. The lion represents Mark and his gospel of resurrection; Luke's is the sacrificial ox representing the priesthood of Christ. The 6th shows the papal mitre and keys to Heaven; and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, afire with love, with a crown of thorns, the cross, and the anchor of hope. The next two window pairs are obscured by the vestibule and the choir loft, closed to the public, which has a magnificent Wicks organ of 39 ranks, or sets of pipes.

The 7th pair shows the bishop's mitre, shepherd's crosier, and metropolitan, sign of the archdiocese; and the keys to Heaven. The gray figures of the 8th are Matthew's winged man, sign of his gospel of Christ's human ancestry, and the eagle of John's gospel which emphasizes Christ's divine nature. The 9th are Christ's cross and crown, triumph over death; and the pelican, piercing its breast to feed its young, as Christ gave His life for us.

The 10th shows Mary's symbol, a rose, with "Ave Maria", the angel's greeting; and her heart pierced by the seven sorrows she faced. The dove, the Holy Spirit, and the Easter lamb, Jesus, are the 11th. In the 12th pair lightening marks the moment of Christ's death on the cross, and the cloth of Easter morning's empty tomb; and the monstrance displays the host.

THE MURAL

The mural was painted in 1924 by Cincinnati artist Charles C. Svendsen. The left two sections depict influential Jesuits gathered around St. Ignatius, who looks upward to see the Lord blessing this assembly of Jesuits. Faintly visible is the cross, which Ignatius embraced in his missionary work. From the far left are Claude de la Columbiere, also represented at a side altar, and Joseph Pignatelli, with a book, who kept the order intact during its suppression, 1773-1814.

In the larger grouping, clockwise from lower left are Francis Borgia, third Superior General and former Spanish prime minister; Robert Bellarmine in cardinal robes, a brilliant 16th and 17th century theologian; Peter Faber, the first Jesuit ordained a priest; St. Ignatius; and Francis Jerome, Italian street preacher credited with promoting monthly Communion. Stanislaus Kostka, Aloysius Gonzaga and John Berchmans, the “boy saints”, are represented in another side altar, inspiration for the young men who studied in this parish.

In the large section to the right, Mary blesses Jesuit missionaries, while behind her the shoreline indicates the distant lands these missionaries would seek. The central figure is Francis Xavier, raising his arms over two kneeling figures who represent the thousands he baptized. Also kneeling is Alphonsus Rodriguez, patron of Jesuit Brothers, those not seeking to be ordained priests. Standing left to right are Peter de Smet, a missionary to the Native Americans in western North America; Peter Claver, who served slaves in South America; John Francis Regis, his staff topped by a cross, a preacher in rural 17th century France; Edmund Campion, with a palm, covert minister to 17th century English; Isaac

Jogues, missionary to Native Americans in what is now New York and Canada; and Peter Canisius, apostle of Germany following the Reformation. Finally, Robert Southwell, with a palm, another secret missionary to Queen Elizabeth I's England, is next to Andrew Bobola, missionary to eastern Europe.

THE STATUES

The marble statues of the reredos, all saints from the murals, are, left to right, Peter Canisius, Ignatius Loyola, Robert Bellarmine, and Alphonsus Rodriguez, with St. Francis Xavier above. The far left side altar holds the tabernacle where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, the adoring angels and hanging lamp moved here from the sanctuary in 1987. Above the tabernacle is a mosaic of the seal of the Jesuits: rays around the “IHS”, cross, and three nails.

The diagonal altar to the right, dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, emphasizes a God who loves rather than a God who judges, as presented in visions to Margaret Mary Alacoque, a French Visitation nun. Her statue is to the right, and to the left, Claude Colombiere, her spiritual director and supporter. The altar frontal shows Jesus appearing to Margaret Mary.

The other diagonal altar is dedicated to the “boy saints”, their youth, purity and holiness shown by lilies and crown on the frontal. In the center Aloysius Gonzaga, patron of youth, died at 23 while still a scholastic. John Berchmans, on the left, was also a scholastic at his death at age 19. Stanislaus Kostka died at age 18 as a novice in the Society. The last altar is a shrine to Mary, here surrounded with lilies, the votive candles in front representing the prayers of those who light them.

There is no record of statues being in the two empty niches high above the side altars. Of those lining the church interior, clockwise from the side door and handicap access are St. Joseph, spouse of Mary and patron saint of workers; St Isaac Jogues, mutilated hands a sign of his torture and martyrdom in Canada; Patrick, patron of Ireland; Therese of Lisieux, “the Little Flower”; a painting of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patroness of the Americas; the wooden Pieta, Mary holding her dead son, carved by artists in the Austrian town of St. Ulrich, renowned for its outstanding woodcraft. Finally the image of the Divine Mercy of Jesus.

The Way of the Cross, fourteen reliefs along the walls, recalls Jesus' suffering and death. Outside the door, in the right vestibule is Anthony, patron of miracles. In the left, the large crucifix, survivor of the fire, commemorates the parish missions of 1877 and 1878.

THE PARISH CENTER

In 2015, the generous support and creative design of St Xavier parishioners allowed the church to remodel and restructure the Undercroft (basement) into a functional and beautiful parish center. The center is not only a place for parish to gather for social and educational events, but it is a facility for service and outreach to the downtown community. The galleries and décor are designed to tell the larger history of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and the Catholic Church in Cincinnati.

