



ST. MARY'S CHURCH, NEWPORT

*Rhode Island's First Roman Catholic Parish, 1828
A National Historic Place, 2008*

For Immediate Release

Contact Pastor Kris von Maluski:

401-847-0475 or stmarynewport@aol.com

Nearly 200-Year-Old “Forgotten Woman” Uncovered in St. Mary’s Church During Restoration Project of Pipe Organ

The question is, “Who’s That Lady?”

Newport, RI – March 29, 2017 – Hidden and forgotten for nearly 200 years, mysterious carved heads of a woman’s profile with historic and religious significance have been discovered in St. Mary’s Church of Newport, RI. The rare and precious finding dates back to 1848 when the church was built by Newport’s Irish immigrants and may be the face of Mary Magdalene, a legendary figure in Christianity who is reported to have been with Jesus at the time of His crucifixion and resurrection.



“The discovery is shrouded in mystery,” said St. Mary’s Pastor Rev. Kris von Maluski. “We don’t really know the identity of the woman’s face.”

Father von Maluski explains that one reason for considering the detailed carvings to be of the likeness of Mary Magdalene is that she is described in Christian writings as the “apostle of the apostles” and the woman’s profile is set in the final arches in the rear of the Church building in the choir loft area, ending the series of 12 enormous arches, which feature the full facial sculptures of the 12 apostles.

The mysterious discovery was revealed when the Church began dismantling its massive 1,674-pipe organ for shipping and refurbishing by the Casavant Frères Company in Quebec, Canada. The restoration project is part of the St. Mary’s *Souls In Harmony* campaign to raise \$1.2 million to preserve the Church building and choir loft, restore the 1958 pipe organ and expand the music program into the community. Once the pipes and huge structure of the inner mechanics of the organ were removed, two of the same carved heads were revealed.

Plans are now underway for casting molds of the works of art to preserve them for historical and religious purposes. Once completed, the Church will create a permanent display of the casts and incorporate the original organ pipes in a memorial to the St. Mary's Music Ministry and as part of the *Souls In Harmony* campaign.

The casting work is being overseen by St. Mary's Church parishioner Robert Russell, Ph.D., a Salve University professor in the Department of Cultural and Historic Preservation, Art and Art History. Professor Russell and six of his students are also conducting historical research to identify the woman as part of the University's Spring 2017 Preservation Planning Studio program. Mr. Russell is also a member of the leadership committee of the St. Mary's Church *Souls in Harmony* campaign.

"With no clues, we may never know for certain," said Father von Maluski. "One thing is certain, St. Mary's will ensure that whoever the woman turns out to be, if the mystery can be solved, she will never again be forgotten."

For more information and media tours, please contact Father von Maluski at 401-847-0475 or stmarynewport@aol.com, or Cody Mead, Director of Liturgical Music, at 401-239-8239 or cw.mead@yahoo.com. To learn more about St. Mary's Church and the *Souls In Harmony* campaign, visit www.stmarynewport.org.

ABOUT ST. MARY'S CHURCH

St. Mary's Church was built in 1848 by Newport's Irish immigrants, who followed the architectural design of Patrick C. Keeley (1816-1896). Mr. Keeley was America's first Catholic Church architect and is acknowledged as a pioneering and eminent designer of ecclesiastical buildings in Gothic Revival style.

For two centuries, St. Mary's Church has held a prominent place in Rhode Island's history as the state's first Roman Catholic Parish, and in American military history as the Church that served as the U.S. Navy Academy's chapel during the Civil War (1861-1865). The Church has gained international acclaim as the location where President John F. Kennedy (then Senator) married Jacqueline Lee Bouvier on September 12, 1953.

In 2008, it was named to the National Register of Historical Places. With its majestic landmark steeple and presence in Newport – a worldwide tourist destination – St. Mary's Church is an important part of our nation's heritage and the City of Newport's illustrious culture. Thousands of visitors come to St. Mary's throughout the year for liturgical services, and to admire its stunning architecture and 42 breathtaking stained glass windows or to attend special music events and performances by its choirs and guest musicians.