

Stained glass windows teach us the 'language of light'

By Emily Morrison

"How long has it been since you really looked at the stained glass windows of your church?" wrote George Ferguson in a letter from Westminster Studios, Ecclesiastical Artists, a New York City firm specializing in the repair and protection of what might be considered a church structure's most visible assets.

Father Kevin Murphy of St. John the Evangelist on Humboldt Street, Rochester, was the letter's recipient. Considering only the practical aspects of such a question — in time to spruce up St. John's impressive array of windows for the parish's 60th anniversary celebration last year — Father Murphy had to take stock of half a century's worth of almost imperceptibly gradual damage incurred by wind and sunlight.

In a less literal sense, however, any worshipper might ask himself the same question: while dutifully sitting through each week's homily, do we really look at our churches' familiar trappings as more than background "atmosphere?"

What's in a window? Light, of course, most obviously — unless it's the ebb point of a Rochester twilight in the dead of January. Luckily, says Father Murphy, St. John's was blessed with the brilliant light of a mid-autumn afternoon on the day of the anniversary celebration itself.

Light fairly streamed in that day, through the colorful renditions of saints depicted on the 10 aisle bays. At the rear of the Gothic structure, the great west window shone like a prism. Called the Annunciation Window, this dramatic pictorial story of the Incarna-

"The basic concept is a transparent mosaic, which, of course, is very traditional in the Church," explains Father McNamara. The devotional use of such mosaic arrangements, as Father Murphy affirms, has historically been to depict the story of the saints and Scripture in graphic form. This function ties in directly with the catechetical use of stained glass: to educate, in earlier times, the considerable numbers of parishioners who couldn't read.

"Because many people didn't read, the story of salvation was told in pictorial form," Father Murphy concurs. "It was an attempt to say in visual form something about the passing on of faith."

The decorative dimension of stained glass gives the congregation something to ponder during Mass, and perhaps even attracts visitors, passing appraisers of church architecture and even potential new parishioners. For a discourse on how the pleasing visual effect of stained glass is achieved, the curious might consult either the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* or Father McNamara's formidable memory.

"The technique involves joining bits of colored glass together on the basis of a sketch called a 'cartoon' — from the Italian word *cartone*, extemporizes Father McNamara. "Then the craftsman lines up bits of cut glass on this prearranged sketch, cuts out tubular lead indented on each side, and solders these together. Any painting, of course, is done by using ground glass with color, then firing it in a kiln."

Ask Valerie O'Hara, third-generation principal designer of Pike Stained Glass Studios on St. Paul Street, whether this technique has altered much as a result of the technological revolution of the latter 20th century, and she'll answer with a surprising negative.

"The actual fabrication has not changed since the 12th century," says O'Hara, whose father, James O'Hara, nephew of the studio's original owner, William Pike, was quoted in a 1978 *Courier-Journal* article as saying, "The craft hasn't changed much in 800 years. Craft, art? Someone — I forget who — has called stained glass the 800-year-old fad."

"We still use glass that's hand-blown," explains Valerie, whose great-uncle William installed St. John's stained glass windows in 1926. Although the original work on the Gothic edifice was done long before Jim O'Hara's time, he was called in when the sanctuary was remodeled in 1976, to install a stained glass altar construction in the chancel.

"The only difference between the original windows and the altar work was the hand painting (done in 1926)," says Valerie. "A special glass paint was fired in; that's how (stained glass craftsmen) get detail, such as in the figures and drapery. It's also a way of



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Father Kevin Murphy poses before the King Solomon panel of St. John's expansive Annunciation Window, which may well be the largest single stained glass window in Monroe County.

diffusing the harsh light that can come through the glass."

Pike Studios were also asked to come back to evaluate St. John's windows for structural damage. "After about 100 years the lead has often oxidized, stretched or warped," Valerie notes. "The sun comes in through the openings in the daytime and heats the glass, which makes the glass expand. At night, when the temperature drops, the glass contracts, but the lead can't, so the window sections bow."

"The west side gets the wind all the time, so the windows were buckled in," says Father Murphy who called in descendants of the original craftsman to assess the extent of the deterioration. Later, Westminster Studios, executed the necessary repairs.

"We tend to work for many years for the same churches," says Jim O'Hara, who recalls that St. John's Annunciation Window was certainly one of the largest windows his uncle ever made.

"Now, in modern architecture, they make much bigger spaces, but the windows are usually far less elaborate," muses Jim, who points out in a corner of Pike Studios a prototypical window section William Pike once made for the windows he installed in

Sacred Heart Cathedral. "No one could afford to make those windows at St. John's today," he adds. "They're so finely detailed."

Jim — also a painter and former art teacher who has made a special study of iconography — pulls out of a drawer a faded sketch his uncle drafted of the striking fenestration of Blessed Sacrament. Every facet of color and detail is charted out on the intricate pattern of what Jim has referred to as the "Bible of the people," a remnant of an era whose most eloquent monuments are these mute testaments to light and scriptural narrative.

Maintaining such a tradition, according to Pike Studios' brochure, "calls for more than craftsmanship. It calls for an interpretation of the language of light." Such a mellifluous language, fortunately, can be understood in any culture, and survives even the ravages of time and weather.

Should you imagine that you'll need a translator, simply lift your head in prayer, as the deaf do, and look, the next time the sermon makes you drowsy. The language of stained glass has been known to communicate far more effectively than many spoken words.

'Because many people didn't read (in past centuries), the story of salvation was told in pictorial form ... Stained glass windows (represented) an attempt to say in visual form something about the passing on of faith.'

**Father Kevin Murphy, co-pastor
St. John the Evangelist
Humboldt Street**

tion is perhaps the largest single stained glass window in Monroe County.

Ask Father Robert McNamara, diocesan archivist, what he sees in a church window, and he'll give you a trinity of answers. Down through the long history of the medium, since their development in 12th and 13th century France, stained glass windows have had three primary functions: a devotional use, a catechetical use and a decorative use.

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