

Michael Alexander/CNS

A stained-glass work of art, the "Glorified Cross," hangs in the church of St. Philip Benizi in Jonesboro, Ga. The 11-foot work in circular design was created by Cistercian Father Methodius Telnack, who is pictured inspecting the window with Andy Allen.

Monk's artwork shines in churches

Priscilla Greear/CNS

CONYERS, Ga. — Father Methodius Telnack's artistic vision shines through windows in churches and other institutions from Blue Ridge Mountain towns in Appalachia to a Native American mission in Arizona.

The 75-year-old monk from the Trappist Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers has been designing stained glass for more than 45 years.

His art ranges from a current project — windows in the style of ancient Celtic manuscripts for the chapel of St. Thomas More in Decatur, Ga. — to the tall windows in shades of blue, pink and white that he began making in 1957 for the church at his own abbey.

A one-time Marine and student of art and architecture, Father Telnack entered the monastery in 1949 after having attended an Easter retreat there, he told the *Georgia Bulletin*, newspaper of the Atlanta Archdiocese.

When the Trappists — also known as Cistercians of the Strict Observance — first came to Conyers in 1944, the monks planned to stick to the order's medieval tradition of shunning stained glass for a simpler, more Puritan-like style for the monastery. But an abbot general who visited during a record summer heat wave persuaded them that using stained-glass windows would make the structure cooler.

Construction of the monastery took until 1961 to complete, after years of money shortages and the monks doing much of the labor themselves.

"I did a good deal of the architecture, too," Father Telnack said. "The bell tower was my design."

His education hadn't covered stained glass, however.

So, after volunteering to make stained-glass windows, "I got all these books from the Atlanta public library," he said.

Father Telnack said that while some materials have changed the monks make the leaded-glass panels basically the same way French artisans did in the Middle Ages.

On a cold December morning, he and his assistant for the day, novice Bernard Stocker, a former pre-med student from Florida, stood in the monk's high-ceilinged studio.

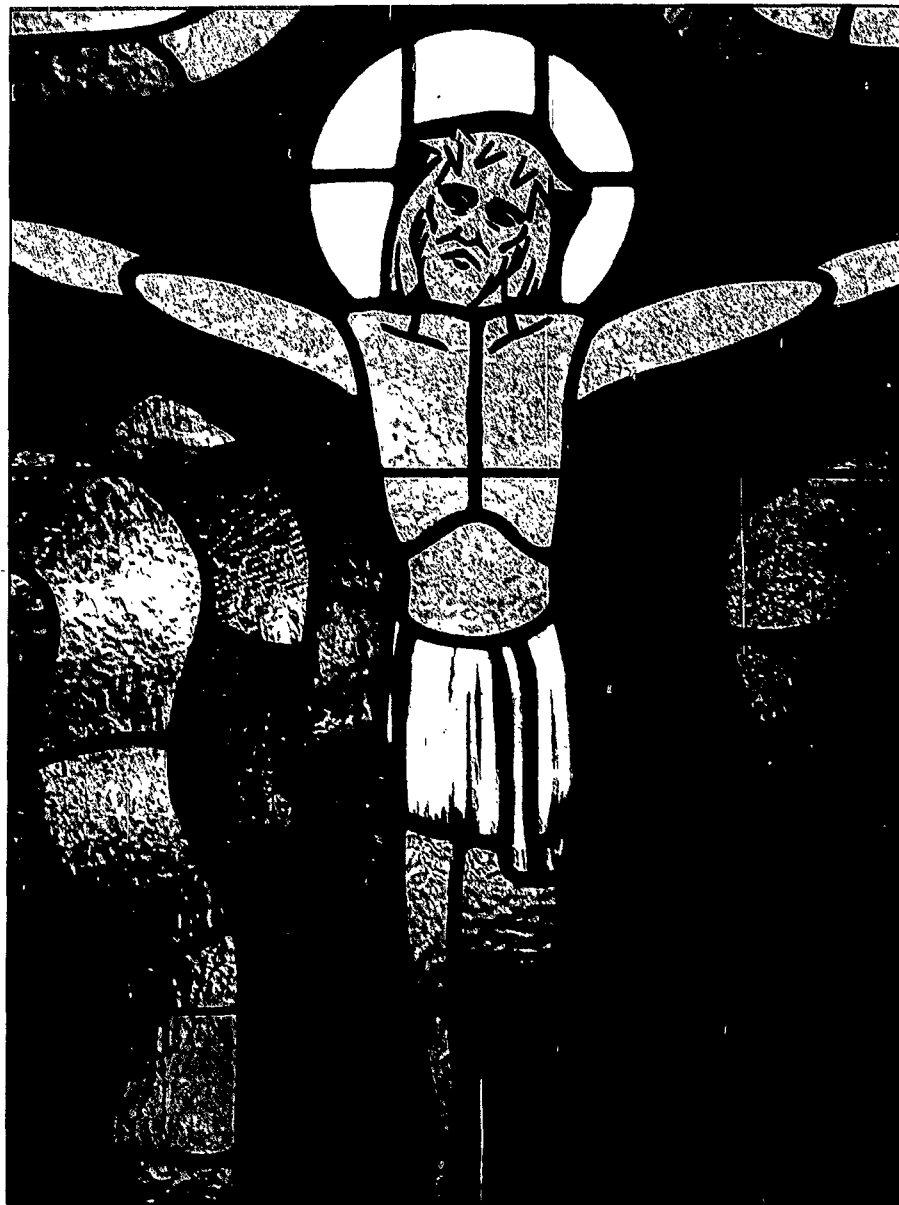
Stocker, who was working on design patterns, described his fondness for the work.

"It's just very creative," he said. "I love the design aspect, tracing and cutting up the glass."

Father Telnack spoke with quiet enthusiasm for the work he does five hours daily.

"I like to think I'm working in isolation, not influenced by other trends in stained glass," he said.

Each project takes at least four months, unless Father Telnack uses a subcontractor in North Carolina that provides about 25 helpers.



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Christ is depicted in earth tone colors in the "Glorified Cross," a stained-glass work of art in the church of St. Philip Benizi in Jonesboro, Ga.

Father Telnack and his assistants specialize in working with hand-crafted glass that comes in square sheets from the Blenko Glass Co. in West Virginia. Walking over to a large blue sheet of Blenko glass on a window sill, Father Telnack pointed out thick and thin sections, which create natural irregularities and variations in shades of blue in the same piece.

After a full-scale design is made on a computer, a pattern is made and used to cut the glass.

"They say in the Middle Ages stained-glass windows were instructional to teach the illiterate," Father Telnack said.

Referring to his ancient Celtic manuscript design for the Decatur church, he said, "It's just meant to make a very beautiful space. ... It will be a little jewel box meant to enhance the temple of Jesus, the sacred presence."

After the glass is arranged in a design on the table, flexible strips of lead are bent around the edges. The strips are soldered together, and a special cement is brushed on the

window panel to make it stronger and waterproof.

Father Telnack said making windows is also a spiritual experience, pointing out that many Scripture readings and feast days coincide with the designs. And as a "professional monk," he said, it is especially satisfying to create windows suited to each faith community.

"Each church has its own spirit," he said. "All I try to do is reflect the attitude and aspirations of the people I work with."

One project for a mission in Solomon, Ariz., was designed to recognize the Native American community's Aztec ancestors. He created six big and two small windows with a pantheon of Aztec gods in the background and in the foreground Christian mystics and saints, including Our Lady of Guadalupe, St. Juan Diego and St. Francis Xavier, the patron of the Southwest.

Father Telnack said the windows' non-Christian elements attest to how Aztec beliefs helped prepare for the later mass conversions to Christianity brought by the Spaniards.