

## **A History of St. Thomas of Canterbury Church**

*By Joseph Malham*

God's providence, like His grace, knows no boundaries and always manages to surprise us in the varied ways in which it is manifested. The way churches in Chicago were conceived and created is no exception. There are churches organized along ethnic lines and proximity to factories and stockyards. There were also churches built to reflect the homeland of the community and the wealth they were blessed with in the New World. However, St. Thomas of Canterbury in the heart of Uptown is the only church in Chicago history to have originated in a snowstorm.

A severe blizzard in the winter of 1916 kept numerous Catholics in the Wilson Avenue District (soon to be known as "Uptown") from reaching either St. Ita in Edgewater or Our Lady of Lourdes in Ravenswood. A compromise in the form of a new church halfway between the two was proposed to the new Archbishop of Chicago, George W. Mundelein. Find 500 families who could be potential parishioners, His Excellency said, and you have your church. In less than a week the requisite number of families had been found, and St. Thomas of Canterbury Church became a reality.

It was fitting that St. Thomas of Canterbury began as a response to the spiritual and practical needs of the community. That is a spirit of spiritual care and communal outreach to a wide and diverse group of people that continues to this day.

While Mass was celebrated at various venues in the Uptown Theater District, the founding pastor, Fr. Francis M. O'Brien, began the expensive and arduous process of building a

permanent church, school, rectory and convent for St. Thomas of Canterbury Parish. His choices were two of the greatest ecclesiastical architects in the history of Catholic Chicago.

Joseph W. McCarthy (1884 – 1965), despite being New York-born and raised, is credited with designing over forty churches, hospitals, convents, rectories and even apartment buildings throughout the Chicago area. The surfeit of work he received from the Catholic Church in Chicago was due both to his virtuosity and extraordinary talent and the fact that he was a personal favorite and friend of Chicago Archbishop George Mundelein. McCarthy's favorite architectural styles were Gothic, Romanesque and Tudor, but he did not dwell in the past of Catholic memory in his work. He boldly employed elements of the Art Deco style that was the rage in the 1920s and 30s in churches like St. Joseph in Wilmette, and he was a pioneer in the use of Colonial Meeting House architecture in the styles of his churches.

Among aficionados of architecture, art and trivia regarding the Archdiocese of Chicago, it is widely believed that the first Catholic use of the Colonial Meeting House style in the United States was when McCarthy built St. Mary of the Lake Seminary in Area (now Mundelein), Illinois just northwest of the city. That belief is mistaken; the construction of St. Thomas of Canterbury marks the first use of the style for a Catholic setting.

If McCarthy was the wizard who conjured up the sublime and -- for its time -- daring design of St. Thomas of Canterbury, it was Archbishop Mundelein who was the prime mover behind the decision to employ the Colonial style in both the church and at his new seminary. George Mundelein (1872 – 1939) was a German/Irish native of New York who came to Chicago as Archbishop in 1915 and in 1924 was named the First Cardinal of the West. Mundelein was not only a visionary; he was a builder who transformed the Archdiocese from an aggregate of

disparate ethnic parishes clinging to their language, neighborhoods and customs into a synthesized unity of American Catholics under his unchallenged rule.

Mundelein was emphatic about the dual loyalty of American Catholics to their Church and the United States and made that idea one of the central themes of his cardinalate in Chicago. Even though by America's entry into World War I in 1916 tens of thousands of Catholic men had enlisted to defend their country, American Catholics were still not seen as reliably loyal and patriotic. Catholics in the New World were still seen as "foreign" and owing their loyalty to the Pope rather than the Constitution and government of the U.S. As late as 1960, when John F. Kennedy was running for President, Catholic Americans were still seen as people of divided loyalties despite having shed their blood for their country in two World Wars. The burden of patriotic proof was still on the recently immigrated Catholics, and Mundelein wanted to forever resolve that suspicion in words, actions and stone.

Mundelein wanted McCarthy's use of the Colonial style to be more than an architectural novelty; he wanted it to be a bold proclamation that Catholics could be American with no conflict in their hearts. And what better way to manifest that sentiment visually than the style of church in which our Founding Parents would have worshipped?

As he would with the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception at Mundelein Seminary, McCarthy based the interior layout for St. Thomas of Canterbury on the 18<sup>th</sup> Century First Congregational Church in Old Lyme, Connecticut. The Georgian Revival style he used, which remained popular from the 18<sup>th</sup> century into the 1960s, did not strictly adhere to the mathematical sense of symmetry and proportion that governed authentic Georgian architecture. Georgian Revival was looser, freer and more adapted to the needs and practicalities of Yankee life, and St. Thomas reflects this adaptation.

While Georgian Revival generally consisted of a façade with five windows on the top row of a two-story edifice, St. Thomas nearly doubled this due to the building including both a worship space below and a school upstairs. The façade boasts two rows of symmetrical windows, with a niche holding a statue of St. Thomas of Canterbury above the center door, imparting his blessing on all those below. The lower-level windows, unlike the upper square windows, are rounded at the top, giving a contrapuntal accent of the male (square) and feminine (rounded) that adds not only to the grace and symmetry, but the feeling of the Holy Family welcoming and protecting us.

The uppermost point of the building is the pediment, the triangular device taken from Georgian architecture, which in turn adapted it from the temples and shrines of Ancient Greece and Rome. In Greek and Roman temples, the pediment usually contained the frieze, the sculptured groups of gods and heroes performing magnificent mythological feats. In Christian architecture, the heroes are gone and what remains is the simple triumph of the Cross, towering victoriously over the ancient order.

The cornerstone was laid in October, 1916, and the church rose according to the plans of McCarthy and the vision of Archbishop Mundelein. Unlike the soaring naves of French Gothic and the rectilinear lines of Romanesque, both of which focus our attention both on soaring upward and focusing toward the sanctuary, the box-like Colonial Meeting House style had an almost prophetic dimension in terms of liturgy. Instead of the architecture compelling us to look upward and forward, the eye is naturally drawn to those around us, in front and behind us. This element is very much in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council which called for “full and active participation” in the liturgy with an awareness of a unity of the assembly. However, unlike a Meeting House, at the sacrifice of the Mass, our eyes are focused on the *Ad Orientem*

(facing east) sanctuary where on the altar and in the ambo the Bread and the Word are broken -- though we remain aware of the assembly.

The interior of St. Thomas of Canterbury is a bit more in line with classical Georgian architecture, as would be seen in the great churches and country homes of England rather than New England. The boxlike design is rendered graceful and light by slender columns, a Greek key pattern running across the entire upper portion of the space, chandeliers, and delicately embossed and raised patterns on the ceiling and columns.

## **WINDOWS**

The majority of Chicago churches built between 1893 (in anticipation of the Columbian Exposition) and World War II (after which churches began to be built predominantly in the booming suburbs) had windows designed and executed by the world-famous Zettler Royal Bavarian Studio in Munich, Germany. The glass for these churches was painted by master artisans to tell richly chromatic tales of Scripture and the lives of the saints. The colors were primary and threw heavy shafts of polychrome light through the church in bold and dramatic ways. With St. Thomas of Canterbury, a different approach was used.. In the style of Colonial Meeting Houses, the windows are a non-representational pattern of squares rendered in pastel shades of rose, blue and seafoam green. Instead of telling stories, the windows simply celebrate light and materials and the effect is peaceful, calming and meditative. The sense of gentleness and maternity is fostered by the rounded window tops.

Because the building was built to serve a dual purpose with the church below and the school above, there are no clerestory (second story) windows, and all the light comes through the large arched windows on the north and south walls.

## SANCTUARY

The sanctuary of St. Thomas of Canterbury, like all sanctuaries in Catholic churches, is the holy place, the culmination of our pilgrimage. While the eye may be taken around by the beautiful art and architecture, it is the sanctuary that forms the source and summit of our Eucharistic life within the space.

The most recent renovation of the St. Thomas sanctuary was undertaken by former pastor Fr. Richard Simon, who served at St. Thomas from 1986 – 2000. The old sanctuary consisted of an altar of sacrifice made from plywood wall paneling that sat on an old rug. According to Fr. Simon, “The altar of repose had been over on the side, another set of plywood boxes. I wrote a letter to the parishioners that if no one objected, I was going to move the tabernacle back to the middle and my chair over to the side. I was sick of sitting on the throne that belonged to the Lord.”

Fr. Simon’s renovation saw the creation of a new wooden altar of sacrifice with a gilded bas relief of a pelican and her brood. The image of the pelican is a very ancient and highly resonant symbol in Catholic art. The pelican plucks her breast and nourishes her young with her own blood; a rich and deeply Christological image of the Eucharist and how we are nourished and given life through the Body and Blood of Christ.

Over the reredos is a renovated and gilded *baldacchino*, or canopy, the significance of which goes back to the Middle Ages and ancient Rome, with origins with the potentates of Syria and Arabia. The *baldachin* was traditionally a cloth draped over the emperor, basileus or authority figure as a sign of authority and respect. In Catholic liturgical art, the cloth *baldacchino*

was used over the throne of bishops and cardinals in their cathedrals, while larger ones of wood, marble and even bronze, such as the massive one Bernini made for St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, were and still are used over altars.

The baldacchino over St. Thomas' altar, originally designed by Fr. Simon as a smaller tympanum to only go over the tabernacle, was fabricated by the Chicago firm of Daprato-Rigali and almost did not happen due to a miscalculation of size.

Again, Fr. Simon explains: "The altars of sacrifice and of repose I got from a catalogue ready-made, as was the sanctuary lamp. I designed the baldacchino as a much smaller tympanum only to go over the tabernacle. Rigali Brothers made it and changed my design to the arch shaped design it actually has. When they got it to the church they realized they had made it way too large and had to cut it in two just to get it in the front door. When they got it into the sanctuary we realized that it fit perfectly over the whole altar area! The Lord must have liked their design better than mine and must have wanted it to cover the altar and not just the tabernacle."

The exquisite gold-framed painting of the Crucifixion is a reproduction of a work by the great 17<sup>th</sup> century Spanish painter Diego Velazquez. The original painting, created in 1632, now hangs in the Museo de Prado in Madrid. The stark black background, a *contrapunto* against the peach walls and gold of the tabernacle, emphasizes Christ's solitary suffering and, as He looks down on the tabernacle and altar, His Real Presence in the sacrifice of the Mass.

### **OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP SHRINE**

In every Roman Catholic church, it is traditional to include in the sacred architecture the placement of a Marian altar to the left of the sanctuary and a St. Joseph altar to the right. This is

custom, however, rather than a hard and fast liturgical law, and a variation of this honor is uniquely presented in St. Thomas. While the Marian altar remains, the St. Joseph altar has been replaced with the image honoring the church's patron saint, Thomas of Canterbury.

The image of Our Lady of Perpetual Help represents a unique devotion originating with and centered on an icon of the Virgin and Child. The icon is of a style known as the Virgin *Theotokos* ("God Bearer") of the Passion and the *Hodegetria*, in which the Virgin engages our eyes and points the way to her Son.

The icon shows the dominant figure of the Virgin, dressed in the royal blue reserved for the emperors and empresses of Byzantium and Rome, tenderly holding the Christ Child close to her breast. The golden crowns on both the Virgin and the Child are later additions; hers denotes the devotion to the Queen of Heaven, which is not observed in Orthodox Christianity.

Unlike traditional iconographic renderings of the Christ Child in His mother's arms that use a large forehead and aged look to convey his attribute as the Fullness of All Wisdom, the Perpetual Help icon shows the infant Jesus looking like a real baby. On either side of the panel, the Archangels Michael (left) and Gabriel (right) appear holding the instruments of the Passion (Cross, nails, lance and sponge). The Christ Child, seeing in them the price he will obediently pay on the Cross for our salvation, reacts as any child would and clings to his Mother so abruptly and tightly that a sandal falls from his foot. It is a very human and a very warm rendering not only of the Paschal Mystery but of the real and tender love between the Child and his Mother.

The original icon, which hangs in the church of Sant'Alfonso di Liguori in Rome, was originally believed to have been painted by Saint Luke the Evangelist, but this theory is not supported by facts and carbon dating. The original was likely painted by the great Cretan iconographer Saint Lazaros Zographos (Lazarus the Painter), who created a great and diverse

body of work during the 9<sup>th</sup> Century Iconoclasm Heresy. The icon was reportedly stolen from his monastery on Crete by a wine merchant and taken to Rome in 1499, where it has been ever since. The Popes have placed the icon in the care of the Redemptorist Fathers and Sant'Alfonso is their worldwide Generalate.

The 17"x21" reproduction hanging in St. Thomas is a superb and masterful work of art (the exact same size as the original which hangs in Rome), but unlike the oak original, is painted on metal in egg tempera, with a 24k gold background. The icon panel is encased in a heavy wrought iron and glass case painted gold. Both the icon and the case were restored in 2020.

Below the icon of the Virgin on the altar is a row of 1<sup>st</sup> Class Relics, which means they are actual bones from the saint.

### **ST. THOMAS OF CANTERBURY SHRINE**

To the right of the sanctuary, where the altar of St. Joseph is traditionally located, is the shrine to the church's patron, Saint Thomas of Canterbury. St. Thomas (1120-1170), also known as St. Thomas Becket, was an Englishman of minor Norman nobility who was the boon companion and Chancellor of King Henry II of England. Hungry for advancement and power, Thomas became close to the old Archbishop of Canterbury and was ordained Archdeacon. However, it was as the King's Chancellor that Thomas excelled, becoming one of the most ruthlessly efficient enforcers of the King's tax and revenue laws.

When the old Archbishop died, Henry hoped to checkmate the power of the wealthy Norman bishops and abbots by making his friend and right-hand man Thomas Becket the new Archbishop. To Henry's everlasting regret and rage, Thomas underwent a startling spiritual

transformation and instead of rubber-stamping the King's laws to get more wealth from a weakened English Church, he became a staunch defender of Church rights, property and honor.

Thomas, although warned by the Pope to tread wisely, rigorously defended the Church and clergy against the State and soon was at odds with Henry. Threats, excommunications and more threats from all sides led to Thomas fleeing England for the continent. When he returned in 1170, he was murdered during evening Vespers in Canterbury Cathedral by four of Henry's knights. Such was the outrage and devotion of the people to their beloved archbishop that Pope Alexander III canonized Thomas almost immediately.

The icon of St. Thomas of Canterbury is by Chicago artist Joseph Malham, and shows the saint in the full vigor and strength of middle age. He is dressed in the red vestments and miter that connote martyrdom, and on his shoulder he holds a heavy broadsword (the knights killed him with swords). There is a small nick in the sword that shows the ultimate failure of the temporal City of Man to overpower the eternal City of God. On his miter are seven blood red stones representing the Seven Sacraments and on his chasuble are twelve stones representing the Twelve Apostles.

Below him on the altar is an antependium with St. Thomas of Canterbury's coat of arms: a white field with three Cornish Choughs (a bird in the crow family), recognized by its black plumage, red legs and long red beak.

## **STATIONS OF THE CROSS**

The life of faith lived inside a Catholic Church gives priority to communal prayer, in which we remain in one place as the assembly. But here is also movement within the confines

that manifests how churches are living spaces that proclaim the mystery of pilgrimage to our eternal home.

There are processions, recessions, Eucharistic processions, individual prayer in which one moves from shrine to shrine, and myriad other ways to travel throughout the holy place while never leaving. This sense of journey is singularly proclaimed in every Catholic church through fourteen images symmetrically placed, generally on the walls of the side ambulatories off the central nave, called the Stations of the Cross. Usually representational images such as paintings or carvings, the Stations could also be three-dimensional images or even just crosses marked with numbers. The essential element is that it allows the faithful to make the the Via Dolorosa with Christ on the road to His Passion and death for our salvation.

The St. Thomas Stations are bas-relief, a flat stone surface with the images carved to stand out from the background. The foreground characters are “dusted” with wiped paint in order to allow them to stand out against the white plane of the background surface.