SFDS CHRISTMAS TOUR

Welcome to our blended parish of St. Francis de Sales United By The Most Blessed Sacrament.

We hope you enjoy this Christmas Story, as told in the architectural decorations of our 1911 church.

(Find more of our history at https://SFDShistory.wordpress.com).

Let’s start at the very beginning...at the high pulpit on the Mary side of the church.

When the Mass was simplified after Vatican II, our pulpit survived as a part of the architecture, but it was not used for many years. Today, it is reserved for special occasions, as when the Nativity Proclamation is read just before Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. In the glittering light, the recitation of Jesus’ lineage connects us with all of the faithful down through the ages, while the eagle book rest – symbol of St. John’s Gospel – still reminds us that before everything, “In the beginning was the word...”

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” (Lk 1:31)

A few yards to the right is the statue of the Blessed Virgin.

Above her head, note the three entwined circles and triangle in the mosaic half-circle lunette. These represent the Holy Trinity of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The upside-down dove in the center of this lunette represents the Holy Spirit – especially significant for Mary, who was filled with the Holy Spirit when Jesus was conceived.

The first long window on the Saint Joseph side of the church commemorates The Annunciation, when Mary learned she would have a child. At the top of the window is Isaiah’s Old Testament prophecy (in Latin): “Behold, a virgin shall conceive...and his name shall be called Emmanuel.”

(Crafted by D’Ascenzo Studios, the six long windows tell the story of the Life of Christ in the upper half, and that of our patron Saint Francis de Sales in the lower half. Here, young Francis is instructed in the catechism by his mother, Mme de Boissey in France in the 1570s, so both window sections highlight Motherhood and faith).

“And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.’” (Lk 2:8-11)

The middle window on the Saint Joseph side of the church shows the Adoration of the Shepherds. The quote at the top is Micah’s Old Testament prophecy (in Latin): “From you, O Bethlehem...shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel.” The various artistic double cross designs in the bottom panel of each window on that side of the church symbolize Christ’s Divine and Human nature.

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will!” (Lk 2:13,14)

At the back of the church, look for two angel sculptures above the holy water basins between the doors. Henry Dagit, the architect who designed our church, had his daughters, Josephine Leonide and Anna, model for these exquisite pieces by Adolfo de Nesti back around 1910 (It is rumored that Josephine Leonide was also the model for the Blessed Mother).
A proper Nativity scene needs some animals. Step into the foyer, turn right, and look for the stairwell to the loft which the choir ascends to form a “heavenly chorus.” The stairwell window features the image of a lamb – a perfect accompaniment to the shepherds, visiting the manger. (Although this particular lamb, carrying a banner and perched on a book with seven seals, is a reference to the apocalypse – the end of the world – from the Book of Revelations).

Whew! That was intense. Now go back to the middle of the church and look up at the decorations in the triangular pendentives that support the Guastavino dome*. The four mystical creatures (also, incidentally, from Revelations) represent the four Evangelists – the saints who wrote the Gospels. Luke, who penned the story of Jesus’ birth, is the Ox – a traditional sacrificial animal and a very fitting addition to our Nativity story!

(Matthew, who related the story of the Three Wise Men, is shown as an Angel, representing Christ’s human nature. Mark is the Lion who proclaims the dignity of Christ, since his Gospel begins with John the Baptist as a herald announcing the arrival of royalty. John employs the Eagle as the symbol of divinity because his Gospel begins in the heavens before Jesus came to earth.)

“And lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was” (Mt 2:9)

Observe the stars in the sky-like dome! The six-pointed star symbolizes the six days of creation. From the 18th century, it gained new significance as the “Magen David,” or “Shield of David,” representing the House of David – the lineage of Jesus. Enclosed in an eternal circle, our star of earthly lineage has a cross at its center, representing the Easter story, turned into an eight-pointed star -- the Star of Bethlehem – of Jesus’ birth.

(Gershom Sholem, a Jewish scholar, suggests that, ironically, it was the infamous yellow badges of the Second World War – long decades after our church was built -- which turned the Star of David into a universal Jewish symbol).

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.” (Mt 2;1,2)

Near the 47th Street door, find the Builder’s Compass of Saint Thomas, the Apostle. One of Jesus’ original followers, Thomas is thought to have gone on to become a builder or architect for a King Gondophares in the region known today as Pakistan and Afghanistan. Tradition says Gondophares was Gaspar, of the Three Wise Men at the Epiphany.

Above the Saint Thomas emblem, is a big round window showing Mary holding Baby Jesus in the middle, with Saint John the Evangelist on the right, and Saint Francis of Assisi on the left. Saint Francis of Assisi is remembered as the saint who loved animals. He is also credited with organizing the first ever Nativity scene and pageant in the countryside of Assisi, so that everyone could experience the sense of wonder that came from interacting with the story.

(Our window is based on a long-ago painting by Andrea del Sarto commonly known as “The Madonna of the Harpies.” Why was the image chosen for our church? We don’t know for sure, but it is intriguing to note that the original painting was commissioned on May 14, 1515, and our parish was commissioned on May 14, 1890).

Finally, when you hear our eight tower bells “on Christmas day, Their old familiar carols play,” think of the tune “I heard the Bells” – based on an 1863 wartime poem of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow -- and join our prayers for peace on earth, goodwill to all this holiday season and always.

*The Guastavino dome, crafted of layers of interlocking tiles, is our church’s most notable architectural feature. Only 600 are known to exist (The Penn Museum and Girard Bank — Ritz Carlton Hotel are the other two local examples). Rafael Guastavino’s works are prized, and ours is unique among them because it is the only one not hidden under a secondary exterior roof. The parish is currently in the lingering stages of a long-term restoration project. Donations welcome!