OUR PATRON SAINT

Born in 1567, Saint Francis de Sales grew up to become an inspirational preacher; a powerful writer; a friend of the poor; and a saint who, like his model, Saint Francis of Assisi, promoted a simple and devout life.

Some of his story was told by stained glass artist Niccola d’Ascenzo in the lower half of our long windows. On the St. Joseph side of the church, starting at the left, is young Francis learning the catechism from his mother in Savoy (France). The middle window has him receiving his First Holy Communion, and the window on the right shows him receiving his father’s blessing when he took Holy Orders in 1593.

Across the aisle, on the Saint Mary side of the church, Saint Francis de Sales is a priest, preaching a mission at Annemasse. The middle window shows him as a bishop, co-founding the order of the Visitation, an order of nuns, with St. Jane Chantal. The right-hand window depicts his deathbed in 1622.

What happened in the spaces between the windows? Francis was appointed Bishop of Geneva in 1602, but resided in nearby Annecy, because Geneva was under Protestant control. There, he worked with gentle firmness to keep the Catholic faith alive in his diocese. He is known for sliding written sermons under the doors of the faithful who could not, by law, attend mass -- which is how he came to be named the patron saint of journalists. He is also patron saint of the deaf, based on a miracle he performed.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

There are many ways to connect with us! Some of these include RCIA religious instruction for those who wish to learn more about Catholicism; SFDS School; and the PREP (Parish Religious Education Program) for children who do not attend Catholic School. IHM Literacy Center volunteers teach English to recent immigrants from around the globe, and the knitting Crafts Ministry creates items for the needy. Knights & Ladies of Peter Claver offer various activities through the year. Thanksgiving and Christmas Outreach always needs volunteers. The Parish Choir is always looking for new members.

Sunday Masses:
Saturday 5 PM (vigil)
Sunday 7 AM, 10:15 AM (choir)

Daily Masses:
9 AM Saturdays and holidays

Rectory Phone: (215) 222-5819
desalesphilly.com

The Religious of the Assumption associated with our parish offer prayer and Scripture groups.
Contact RAphila1001@outlook.com

Find more parish stories and historic photos at https://sfdshistory.wordpress.com
A BRIEF TOUR

Architect and parishioner Henry D. Dagit designed our church with its distinctive Byzantine domes and Romanesque arches. He planned many local churches, but this – his family parish – may be his most notable work. Construction began in 1907 and finished in 1911.

The domes were crafted by Rafael Guastavino, who perfected a traditional Spanish technique for constructing arches and domes using layers of tiles without interior framework and bracing. Much prized, Guastavino arches and domes are featured on landmark buildings nationwide, including Ellis Island Registry Hall, the U.S. Supreme Court building, and the Penn Museum. Our 62-foot diameter main dome is unique among them because it does not have exterior copper or other roofing above it. A long-term church restoration project is currently underway (Donations always welcome!).

Dome Symbolism

Our church interior is rich with symbolism inspired by Byzantine art from the Greek-speaking part of the Eastern Roman Empire 500 to 1450 AD. Following that tradition, the dome symbolizes the heavenly realm, with the Eye-of-God peering down through an oculus window in the center.

The six-pointed stars in the dome represent the six days of creation -- and also the House of David – the lineage of Jesus. The cross at the center recalls the Easter story. Four rays extending from the cross form the eight-pointed Star of Bethlehem that heralded Jesus’ birth. So, all together, the star designs symbolize creation and salvation; Old Testament and New; in the unending circle of eternity.

The dome is supported on four columns with mosaic medallions representing the Gospel-writing Evangelists: Matthew (angel), Mark (lion), Luke (Ox), and John (Eagle).

Sanctuary

Threaded around the top of the Sanctuary walls, at the front of the church, is a quote from the 26th Psalm: “I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of thy house; and the place where thy glory dwelleth.” A separate quotation behind the altar, “Indeed, the Lord is in this place”, is Jacob’s exclamation after dreaming of angels on a ladder to heaven (Genesis 28:16). The two inscriptions remind us that we are in sacred space.

Above the Saint Joseph altar is a Christogram (the overlapped first three letters of IHSOUS, the Greek name for Jesus) centered in a triple-entwined vine representing the Holy Trinity of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The mosaic above the Mary altar features another Trinity-entwined vine, with a dove and triangle at its center signifying the Holy Spirit. The rose window in the arch of the sanctuary, with God the Father at the top, offers a third interpretation, to create a trinity of Trinities across the sanctuary.

The glass mosaic crucifixion scene above the altar, crafted to shimmer mystically in candle light, was designed by local artist and British immigrant Frederick Dimble Henwood. He also painted a series of murals at Most Blessed Sacrament.

The forward-facing marble altar, with its relief sculpture of the Last Supper, came from Most Blessed Sacrament when the two parishes merged.

Italian Sculptor Adolfo de Nesti carved many of the marble sculptures in our church, as well as the friezes on the façade (He is also known for designing the sculptures on the exterior of the Wilson Building – the Mayor’s Office -- in Washington DC).

Rose Windows

D’Ascenzo Studios of Philadelphia crafted the four large round “rose” windows. Records confirm that the one behind the altar depicts the Trinity, and the window in the choir loft shows St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music, but the other two are unrecorded.

The Saint Cecilia window is based on an altarpiece by Raphael. The other figures shown are Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Paul, Saint Augustine of Hippo, and Mary Magdalen.

The window on the 47th Street side of our church is based on a painting by Andrea del Sarto, and features Mary on a pedestal, holding Baby Jesus, with Saint Francis of Assisi on one side, and Saint John the Evangelist on the other. The opposite window shows Mary in heaven. The two windows may commemorate the founding date of the parish and laying of the cornerstone.

Long Windows

The long windows show scenes from the life of Saint Francis de Sales in the lower half, and the life of Jesus in the upper half. On the Saint Joseph side of the church, the story of Jesus begins with the Annunciation, followed by the Adoration of the Shepherds, and a scene of Life at Nazareth (note that young Jesus is helping to build a cross!). On the Mary side of the church, the Sermon on the Mount is followed by the Naming of Peter, and the Agony in the Garden. The top of each window features a related Old-Testament prophecy in Latin.

Finally, at the back of the church, look for two angel sculptures above the holy water basins between the doors. Architect Henry Dagit’s young daughters modeled for these exquisite pieces by Adolfo de Nesti around 1910.