

St. Francis Xavier Church - Architecture

Saint Francis Xavier Church was designed by the architectural firm of McCarthy, Smith and Eppig, who designed many churches in the Chicago archdiocese including our neighboring parish of St. Athanasius. The building was designed in the English Country Gothic style, with an exposed hammerbeam ceiling.

The cornerstone was laid on August 28, 1938 by the pastor, Father Brady. It was dedicated on May 14 of the following year by George Cardinal Mundelein. Cost of construction was \$150,000, with an additional \$50,000 for furnishings.

The church is built of lannon stone, with some 70,000 bricks from the original 1904 Church also used in its construction. The pews, paneling and beams are oak. A red Verona marble is used in the vestibules, as a baseboard around the main body of the church, and on the sanctuary steps. The original floor of the Church was made of quarry tiles. These were replaced with carpeting in the 1980s.

The main vestibule has its original stenciled ceiling and bronze light fixture. A plaque of donors to the construction of the present church hangs in the short corridor leading from the vestibule to Ninth Street.

The Sanctuary, Original Altar and Altar of Sacrifice

The Sanctuary, raised several steps above the level of the nave, contains the original altar and the Altar of Sacrifice, which was installed in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council.

The original, or back altar, is built of black Grand Antique marble from France and white Carrara marble from Italy. In the center is a depiction of a pelican feedings its young, a symbol of the love of our lord in the blessed sacrament. The pelican is an example of Florentine mosaic work. Eleven different kinds of marble were used to bring out the colors and shadings desired.

When the Church was built, the golden tabernacle that holds the consecrated hosts was in the center, directly under the crucifix. Six tall candlesticks, which now stand on either side of the Altar of Sacrifice, then flanked the tabernacle. The candlesticks are decorated with grape vines and wheat sheaves, symbolizing the bread and wine used in the Mass.

The Altar of Sacrifice, installed in the late 1960s, uses the same kinds of marble in its construction as the original altar. Unlike the original altar, it is moveable.

The Crucifix over the Altar

The corpus, or figure of Jesus is carved from basswood, while the cross itself is oak. The figure closely with the symbols of the four evangelists - the angel of St. Matthew, the lion of St. Mark, the ox of St. Luke and the eagle of St. John.

The Reredos

The wooden canopy above the rear altar, known as a reredos, was carved by the same artist who created the stations of the cross. Usually a reredos is a solid wood or marble wall holding statues and paintings located behind the altar. At St. Francis it was used more as a "roof" over the tabernacle. The area usually occupied by statues or pictures was reserved for draperies which were changed according to the liturgical season of the Church year. There were green draperies for Ordinary Time, violet draperies for Advent and Lent; red Draperies for Pentecost and major Saints feast days, and gold and silver draperies for Christmas and Easter.

The Tabernacle

The tabernacle was moved to its present location in the late 1980s, in keeping with liturgical changes that derived from the Second Vatican Council. A niche was constructed corresponding to the one on the other side of the sanctuary which provides entry to the original pulpit. The Sanctuary Lamp over the tabernacle was added at this time. Although the tabernacle is 50 years older than the lamp, the manufacturer was able to recreate the original design from the tabernacle on the rim of the lamp.

The Side Altars

Two side altars, one dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the other to the Blessed Virgin, flank the main sanctuary. Each is built of the same kinds of marble as the main altar, and supports a life sized statue in colored marble. The Blessed Virgin's altar also contains a tabernacle, the tabernacle of Repose, where the sacrament was kept during parts of the Easter Vigil.

Wood Carvings and Woodwork at St. Francis Xavier

Although its stained glass windows are the most spectacular works of art in St. Francis Xavier, the church also contains excellent wood carvings in the sanctuary and along the nave. The carvings are of fine-grained basswood and were created by German and German-American artists during the 1930s.

The Calvary, or Crucifixion Group

High above the entrance to the sanctuary is a crucifixion group carved by Wisconsin artist Fritz Muhlhauser. Also carved of basswood, the figures are somewhat stiffer and more formal than the other carvings in the church. Christ is depicted on the cross, with Mary and St. John on either side, and St. Mary Magdalene kneeling at the foot. Figure groups like this are often found in English and northern European churches - areas where wood sculpture was popular.

The Stations of the Cross

Fourteen wooden panels depicting the Stations of the Cross, line the two side aisles of St. Francis between the windows. They were carved by a sculptor from Oberammergau, Germany, a center of the woodcarving trade. Carved in basswood, the backgrounds of the panels are lined in gold leaf. Unlike most representations of the Stations, the carvings were left in their natural state rather than being painted in realistic colors.

The Stations of the Cross were developed by Franciscan friars as a devotion to help people relive the sacrifice Christ made during His passion and death. Franciscan missions often lasted two weeks. Over time, a "station" was developed for each of the 14 days. The first station is on the east side of the Church, closest to the altar. The cycle reads clockwise from there.

The Ceiling

The hammerbeams and cross beams have painted decoration. The hammerbeams are decorated with red and green lozenge shapes, while the cross beams are decorated with various symbols of the Trinity, Christ and Mary, including hosts and chalices, the Chi Rho, the Greek letters Alpha and Omega (I am the beginning and the end) and others.

The Marble Statues at St. Francis Xavier

Four statues, each of multi-colored marbles, are found at St. Francis Xavier: Jesus, the Sacred Heart, over the small altar at the west side of the Sanctuary; the Blessed Virgin, over the small altar on the east side of the Sanctuary; St. Joseph, at the rear of the church at the end of the west aisle, and St. Francis Xavier, in the Church vestibule. The first three are approximately life size, while the statue of St. Francis is about $\frac{3}{4}$'s life size.

The statues were created by Italian marble carvers. Rather than being carved from a single block of white marble, as was usually done, these statues are carved from colored marbles which were then assembled together.

Although the statues of the Sacred Heart and the Blessed Virgin are in their original positions, the statues of St. Joseph and St. Francis Xavier have been moved from their original sites. St. Joseph originally stood in a shallow niche to the left of the Blessed Virgin's altar, in the place now occupied by the tabernacle. When the tabernacle was relocated in 1988, St. Joseph was moved to his present position, with St. Francis Xavier moving from there to the vestibule. There he raises his hand in greeting to everyone entering the church dedicated to him.