

The St. Joseph Motherhouse Chapel

Hamilton, Ontario



The Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Canada Archives

2018



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The St. Joseph Motherhouse Chapel Bridgeview/ Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Canada Archives. – Hamilton, ON, 2018. ii, 43 p.; 1 cm.

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Deepest gratitude to the Sisters of St. Joseph in Hamilton for their enduring love for the “dear neighbor.” We hope this booklet reflects your affection for the chapel that you built, as a testament to your strong faith and spirituality.

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The Sisters of St. Joseph in the Diocese of Hamilton

Since their founding in 1852, the Sisters of St. Joseph in Hamilton have tirelessly cared for the sick, orphaned, and elderly by founding hospitals, orphanages, and senior care homes in Hamilton and the surrounding area. Their charitable missions have taken them to several developing countries around the world. Today, they work to tackle contemporary issues, such as helping refugees and addressing poverty. When writing about their work, one Sister stated, “Our works of mercy, particularly those traditional to our Congregation are of healing, education and pastoral service. Rooted in a common cause, we promote the dignity of all persons. God remains the source of our strength and the reason for our efforts on behalf of all whom we touch.” The Sisters have undoubtedly touched many lives through their charitable efforts.

In 1852, Mother Martha von Bunning, the Hamilton Congregation’s first General Superior, established the first convent at MacNab and Cannon Streets. Several years later, in 1857, the Sisters moved to another location at Park and Colbourne Streets. They remained in this convent for 94 years, before moving into the St. Joseph, or Bridgeview, Motherhouse in 1951. This new convent was built in time to celebrate the Sisters’ 100th anniversary in Hamilton and they have lived there ever since.

The Bridgeview Motherhouse

“The site of the Convent is one of the finest to the west of Hamilton.”

-Marani & Morris Architects, July 26, 1951

The convent is a large and exquisite Georgian-style stone building which sits atop a picturesque plateau, surrounded on all sides by forests and ravines. It is located in Dundas, Ontario, one of several townships that amalgamated with Hamilton in 2001. Its visibility from the top of the hill is a silent reminder to Hamilton residents of the great impact the Sisters have made on the surrounding community.

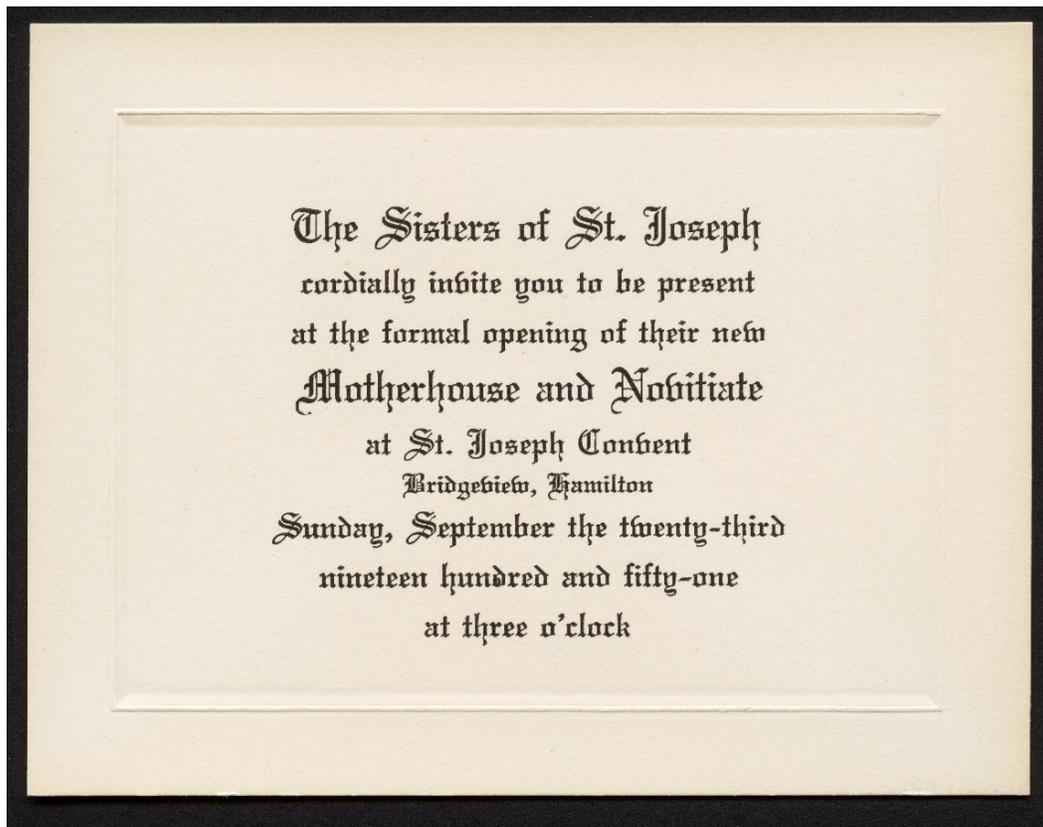


The convent was designed by Marani & Morris Architects and built by Pigott Construction between 1949 and 1951. The structure spans a length of 250 feet and can accommodate approximately 200 residents. Several locally sourced materials such as sandstone from Credit Valley Quarries and Queenstone stone from Niagara Falls were used in its construction. Limestone crosses adorn the peak of the entrance gable and south wall of the chapel wing. One of the building's most notable features is its copper roof, which has a brilliant green patina. In a 1951 report, Marani & Morris Architects explained that it would take time until the copper roof achieved this pale green appearance. A striking 12-foot steel cross sits on top of a 125-foot bell tower. The bell was originally from Dundurn Castle and was gifted by Sophia MacNab.



There were several ceremonies leading up to the move into the new Motherhouse, with the first being the blessing of the cornerstone on June 18th, 1950. During the ceremony, Reverend Father Corbett Warren delivered an eloquent sermon, in which he discussed “the beauty of the religious life and begged parents to encourage their children to follow a noble life of a soul consecrated to God.” Close to one year later, a bittersweet final ceremony was held at the old Park Street convent. During his final sermon at the site, Bishop Ryan spoke of the new Motherhouse, stating:

“Very soon the Sisters will make their habitation at Bridgeview Survey overlooking the Botanical Gardens. Many associations, many memories of joys and trials in the care of the orphan, the sick, the aged, the schools and with Catholics of the Diocese have extended through the past century and will not be forgotten.”



Although the Sisters had good memories living and working at the Park Street convent, the building was antiquated. The new Motherhouse offered a much-needed change. After much anticipation, moving day finally arrived in September of 1951. Reflecting on the excitement and challenges that the Sisters must have felt during the move, an unknown Sister wrote:

“What were the thoughts and the prayers of those Sisters who were the first of the Community to sing the praises of our Divine Lord in this, His beautiful, new dwelling? God grant that their hopes and fervent prayers for the future Community may be fully realized. Though the Blessed Sacrament was not in the Tabernacle, the chapel without pews and filled with boards and lumber, the Sisters felt the nearness of our Heavenly Father and each note was an expression of love and gratitude for the abundant blessings of the religious life.”

The first mass in the new chapel was celebrated on September 22, 1951. Bishop Ryan blessed the convent, while the Sisters sang songs of community devotion. To celebrate the Sisters’ new home, a joyous event was held the next day. Approximately 500 community members came to celebrate with the Sisters, far outnumbering the chairs ordered for the occasion! Mother Paschal Collins and the Sisters greeted their many guests, and one Sister excitedly commented that the day was “filled with sunshine and lovely beyond all expectations. The sanctuary was beautifully adorned with profuse bouquets of gladioli...” and “the marble altar ...shining gold Tabernacle and gold candlesticks [were] in keeping with [the] simplicity, the dignity and classic beauty of the chapel.” The ceremonial ribbon was cut by Bishop Ryan, while Father Harrigan announced the opening of the house.



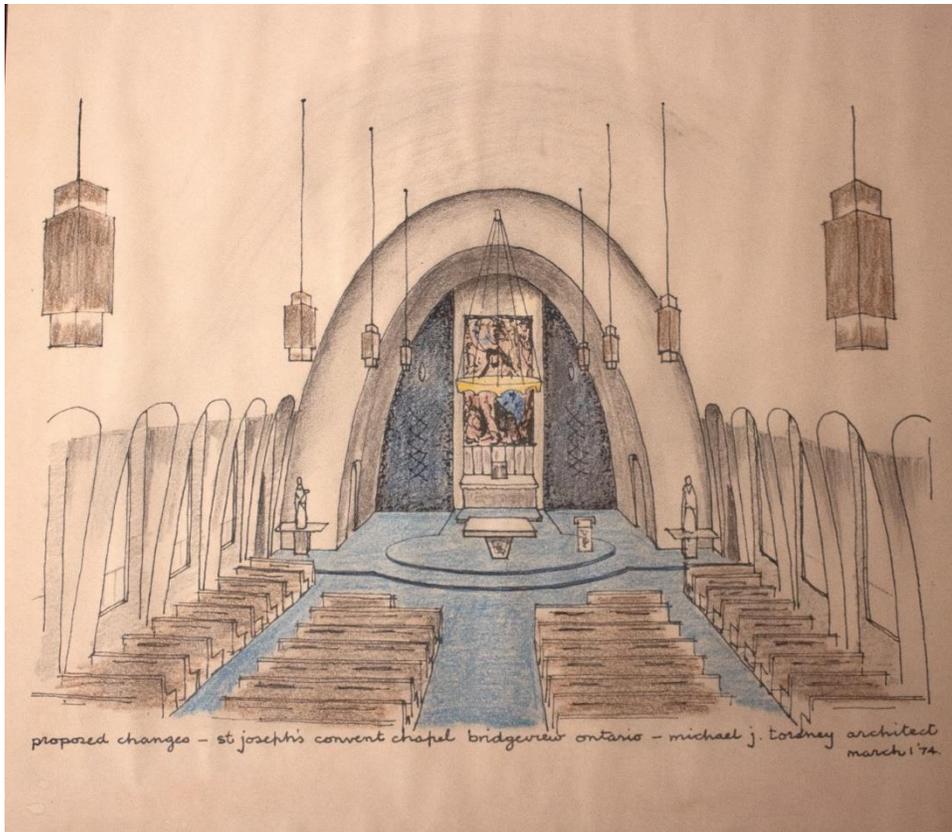
The Motherhouse is an important part of the Congregation's history. Built to celebrate their 100th anniversary, the convent has been central to the Congregation's charity work. It represents the Sisters' physical and spiritual presence within the community. It also demonstrates their ongoing commitment to living lives of selfless devotion.

The chapel, a place of community and prayer, is a central fixture in the Sisters' lives. From an aesthetic point of view, the chapel has a wonderful collection of liturgical art made by Canadian artists.

The Chapel

The chapel is a both a spiritual and physical fixture within the Motherhouse. It offers a place of quiet reflection and prayer, an essential part of the Sisters' way of life. Thus, it is no surprise that the chapel is located in the centre of the building and is accessible through the main entrance hall. The chapel is made even more special by the fact that its construction and artworks were made entirely by Canadians.





As a quiet, reflective space, the chapel has many features which help create an atmosphere of reverence. The entrance to the chapel is at its north end. To the west and east of the narthex are two smaller rooms, built originally as confessional rooms. A parabolic vault extending from the floor forms both the walls and ceiling, giving the nave a curved appearance.

At one time, the nave consisted of light oak pews which could accommodate 250 people. There was also a white and green terrazzo floor, but it has since been covered by a green carpet.



On the south end of the chapel, three curved wall panels surround the sanctuary, which originally had altar rails. The walls are painted ivory, while the altar itself is a warm brown. A white Italian Carrara marble altar is a focal point, as it contrasts with the wall colour.



Other notable features include a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Jesus to the east of the sanctuary, and of St. Joseph to the west. Both quietly face the nave.



There are 14- foot tall recessed stained-glass windows which were installed in 1977. These windows feature modern, abstract, and colourful French and German mouth-blown stained glass, which allow soft light to stream into the tranquil space. Each window has an arc that echoes the arches in the chapel itself, and which increase in size as one walks from the narthex to the sanctuary. This growth reflects the Ignatian teachings of being more attentive and responsive to God.



There are several lantern-style light fixtures suspended 16 feet from the ceiling, which are later additions replacing the earlier fixtures. Choir and organ galleries make up the second and third floors of the chapel.



The Sisters use the chapel daily, both for individual prayer and for celebrating Mass. The aesthetic and religious features offer a place of quiet reflection, community, and closeness to God.

Dora de Pédery-Hunt and the Stations of the Cross

Between each stained-glass window in the nave, Christ's journey to Calvary is depicted in bas-relief stations of the cross created in 1951 by Hungarian-Canadian artist Dora de Pédery-Hunt. Ms. de Pédery-Hunt (1913-2008) was a world-renowned sculptor and medalist with works featured in several art collections worldwide, including the National Gallery of Canada, Smithsonian Institution, British Royal Mint, and the Royal Cabinet of Medals in Belgium. She studied sculpture and design at the Royal School of Applied Arts in Budapest five years before immigrating to Canada in 1948. She designed pieces such as Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee medal, and the Canadian Olympic gold coin in 1976. Her biggest claim to fame, however, was that she was the first Canadian to capture the Queen's likeness on Canadian coins from 1990 to the present day. Her impressive artwork earned her the Order of Canada (1974) and the Order of Ontario (1991).

The 14 plaster cast stations hanging in the convent chapel were made using an experimental technique invented by the artist. She mixed plaster, sawdust, and polyvinyl acetate and allowed them to harden into blocks. These blocks became the stations of the cross in which she carved religious scenes. She later painted and treated them with gold leaf. Each station is 40 cm by 80 cm and comprises three figures, with Christ always represented in white with a gold halo. The two other figures are portrayed in muted colours. In a 1953 interview with the *Globe and Mail*, Ms. de Pédery-Hunt stated that, “I have tried to show Christ never defeated, never unwilling nor complaining under the cross.” The stations, positioned along each side of the nave, encourage quiet reflection about the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.



Each station depicts the last stage in the life of Jesus as he journeys with the cross. The first station, in the southeast corner nearest the sanctuary, shows Jesus being condemned to death by Pontius Pilate, the Prefect of Rome. Pilate's hand is firmly raised, solidifying the fate of Jesus.



From the Gospel according to Matthew 27:22-23,26: Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!" So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

Proceeding north, the second station shows Jesus accepting the cross. He begins to carry it while Pilate looks upon him.

From the Gospel according to Matthew. 27:27-31: Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.



In the third station, Jesus has fallen under the weight of his cross for the first time.



*From the Book of the Prophet
Isaiah. 53:4-6: Surely he has born
our griefs and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted. But
he was wounded for our
transgressions, he was bruised for
our iniquities; upon him was the
chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone
astray; we have turned everyone
to his own way; and the Lord has
laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

By the fourth station, Jesus has gotten back up and meets his mother, Mary. She kneels before him and grabs his hand, solemnly acknowledging her son's fate.

From the Gospel according to Luke. 2:34-35,51: Simon blessed them and said to Mary his mother: "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed". And his mother kept all these things in her heart.



In the fifth station, Jesus shares his burden with Simon of Cyrene, allowing him to help carry the cross.



From the Gospel according to Matthew. 27:32; 16:24: As they went out, they came upon a man of Cyrene, Simon by name; this man they compelled to carry his cross. Jesus told his disciples, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

In the sixth station, Veronica wipes the face of Jesus. She is shown holding up her cloth, and the face of Jesus is imprinted upon it.

*From the Book of the Prophet
Isaiah. 53:2-3: He had no form or
comeliness that we should look at
him, and no beauty that we should
desire him. He was despised and
rejected by men; a man of
sorrows, and acquainted with
grief; and as one from whom men
hide their faces he was despised,
and we esteemed him not.*



In the seventh station, in the furthest northeast corner from the sanctuary, Jesus falls for the second time.



From the Book of Lamentations.

3:1-2,9,16: I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath; he has driven and brought me into darkness without any light. He has blocked my way with hewn stones, he has made my paths crooked. He has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in ashes.

In the eighth station in the furthest northwest corner from the sanctuary, Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem, who are represented by three figures. One of the women kneels before him, and the women weep.

From the Gospel according to Luke. 23:28-31: Jesus turning to them said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never gave suck!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us'. For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?"



Continuing his journey, Jesus falls for the third time at the ninth station.

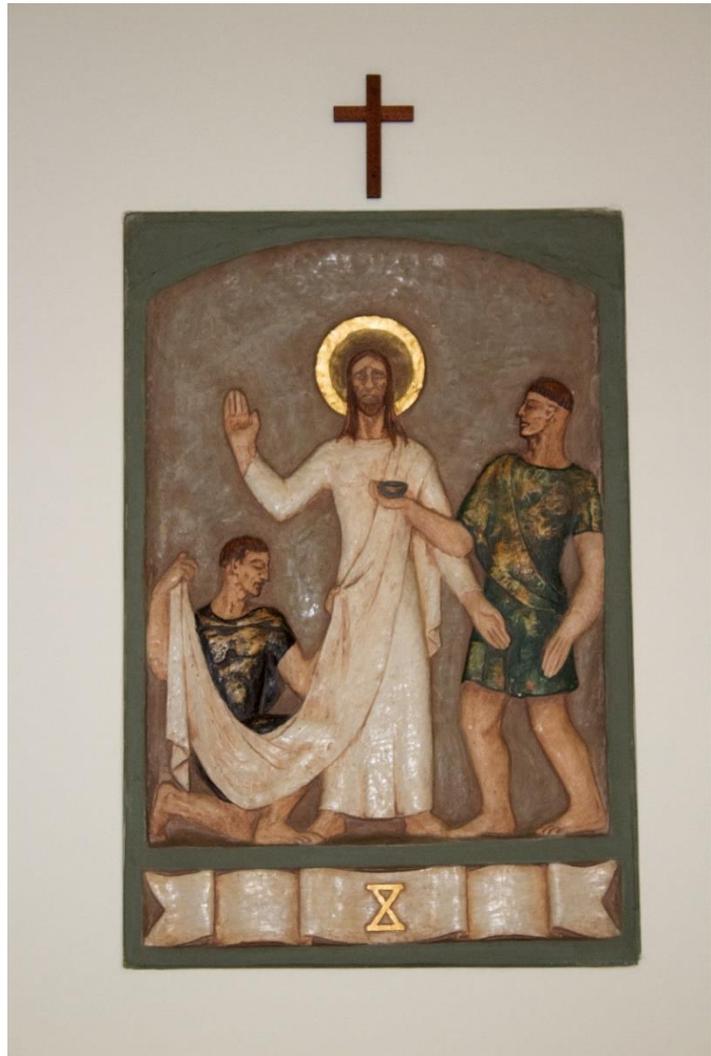


From the Book of Lamentations.

3:27-32: It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when he has laid it on him; let him put his mouth in the dust - there may yet be hope; let him give his cheek to the smiter, and be filled with insults. For the Lord will not cast off forever, but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion, according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

At the tenth station, Jesus is stripped of his clothes.

From the Gospel according to Matthew. 27:33-36: And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull), they offered him wine to drink, mingled with gall, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots; then they sat down and kept watch over him there.



As the eleventh station shows, Jesus is nailed to the cross. Pilate looks down on Jesus while this act is committed.

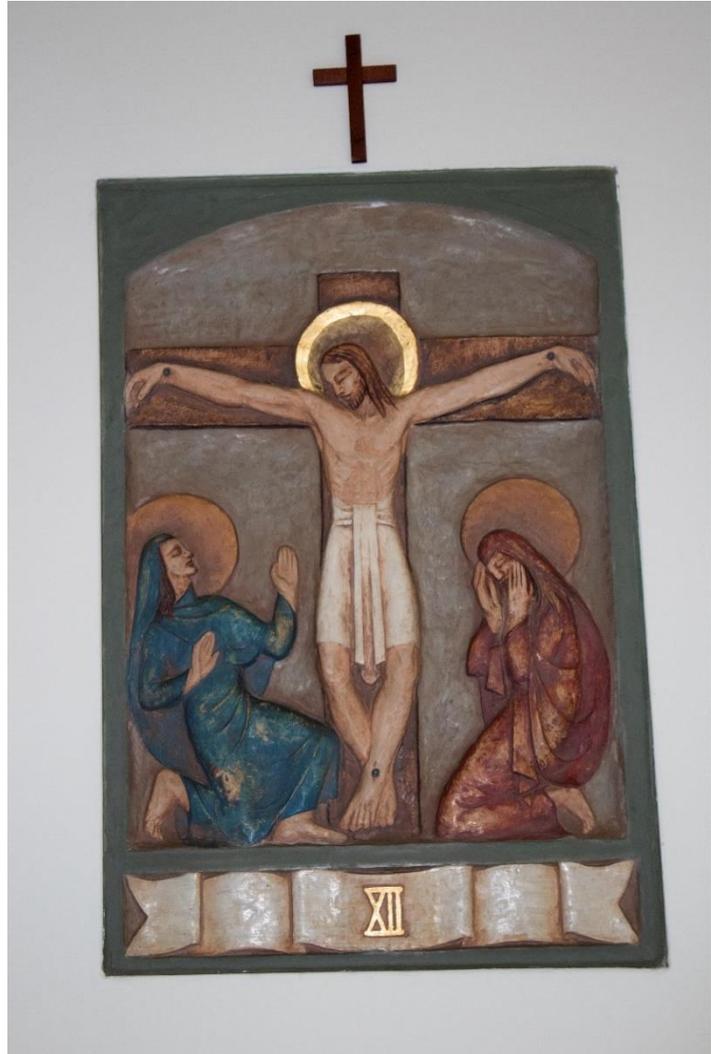


From the Gospel according to Matthew 27:37-42: And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus the King of the Jews". Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right hand and one on the left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross". So also the chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked him, saying, "He saved

others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the Cross and we will believe in him".

At the twelfth station, Jesus then dies on the cross in order to save mankind from sin.

From the Gospel according to Matthew 27:45-50,54: Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" That is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And some of the bystanders hearing it said, "This man is calling Elijah". And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah



will come to save him". And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit". When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe, and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!"

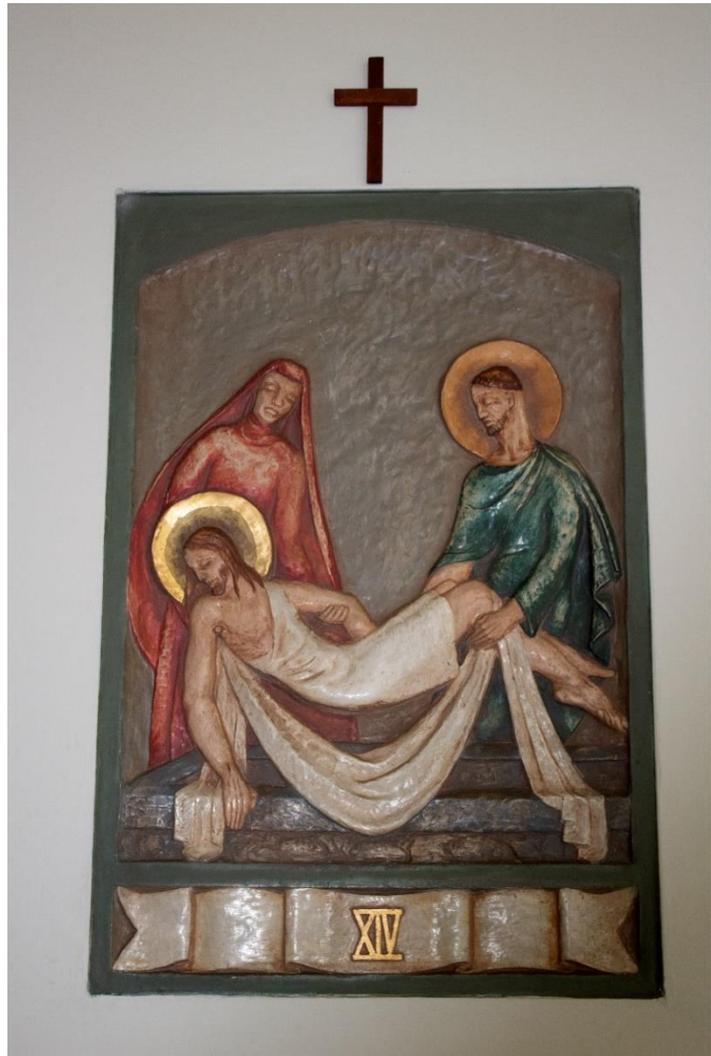
In the thirteenth station, Jesus is brought down from the cross by a group of women. His mother, Mary, and her sister Mary, as well as Mary Magdalen and a disciple are with him.



From the Gospel according to Matthew 27:54-55: When the centurion and those who were with him, keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were filled with awe, and said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" There were also many women there, looking on from afar, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him.

At the fourteenth and final station in the southwest corner nearest the sanctuary, Jesus is placed in his tomb.

From the Gospel according to Matthew 27:59-61: Joseph took the body, and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock; and he rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb, and departed. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the sepulchre.



In 1999, art conservator Julius Kalko did restoration work on the stations of the cross. He noted that inside the plaster there was deterioration leading to the paint cracking and flaking. Since the stations were mounted to the walls, this meant that restoration work was made more difficult. Kalko worked onsite to treat and clean each station. They are once again vibrant fixtures of the chapel.

Philip J. Aziz and the Nativity Altarpiece

The altar painting in the chapel was commissioned by J.M. Pigott and created in 1953 by Philip J. Aziz (1923-2009), an internationally celebrated liturgical artist from London, Ontario. As a child, one of his teachers, Sister Perpetua of the Sisters of St. Joseph, saw that he had a great talent for the arts and told him that he would become an artist. His father agreed. When Aziz reflected on his early influences, he determined that he did not *choose* to be an artist, but rather was called to it as a vocation. In 1949, he earned a Master of Fine Arts from Yale University's School of Fine Arts.



The 16-foot tall *Nativity* altarpiece was made using the method of Giottesque tempera painting originally used by Cennino d'Andrea Cennini in his *Libro dell' Arte*. Egg tempera was applied on gesso panels to create this work. Gesso, Aziz explained was not lime-based plaster of Paris, but a mixture of whiting, glue and water applied to panels. This art form was used by Byzantine artists and continued until the 14th century.

The medium is not as thick as oil paint. Aziz felt that this helped keep his images from appearing too “flesh-like.” Author Tim Wilson states that because of this medium, “there is always a sense with [Aziz’s] human figures that they are being touched by another dimension, a larger force.” Aziz felt that working in this medium was best for expressing light and dark forms.



Upon the completion of his preliminary sketch, Aziz gathered with the Sisters to discuss the different aspects of the design. He wanted to ensure that they were happy with the project before starting. He asked that the Sisters pray for him while he completed the work and hoped that through this joint effort they could create a painting that was intended for “the Glory of God.”

To arrive at the proper hue used in the painting, Aziz mixed ground pigment and water together with egg yolk. Then, local colour was applied. He stated that this “was a long and tedious process for it is impossible, in using this medium, to arrive at the desired hue and tone in one, or even two, applications of paint. Indeed, to achieve the deep penetrating reds in mankind and God the Father, for example, it was necessary to work over these areas 10 to 14 times, applying one layer over the other.” The result is a vibrant and rich painting that draws its audience into the altar’s space.



The nativity altarpiece holds wonderful aesthetic value. The *Globe and Mail* journalist Pearl McCarthy commented that the altarpiece reflects, “the elliptical feeling of the building” and that it is “rich in colour, with clean reds, thoughtful blues and muted, dull gold” but that the “greater part is in high key with effect of ecstasy in the depiction of the Nativity.” McCarthy believed that this work surpassed anything Aziz had done before. The Art Gallery of Hamilton commented

that the “heightened emotionalism” of the piece “is emphasized by the strong

diagonal swings and encompassing curls of the painting's dramatic structure." Aziz himself believed that his paintings possessed a spiritual current created by a flow of both spiritual and creative energy. It cannot be denied that this awe-inspiring work is an integral part of the chapel.



The painting is also imbued with deep religious meaning. According to the artist, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are in the painting's center. A balance of colours was used when depicting the Holy Family to symbolize the harmony found within. Mary appears to know of Jesus's fate and expresses both joy and sadness. Her left foot rests on a white rock, representing the church. One of her shoulders is thrust backwards signifying her realization that her child is not entirely her own. She

is holding Jesus on her knee, eager to show him to the world.

God is positioned above the Holy Family in brilliant gold. He commands with his right hand that Jesus, the third of the Blessed Trinity, has now arrived to begin the eternal salvation of humankind. This is announced by a choir of angels, with one angel proclaiming good tidings to the heavens, while the other declares the blessed news to fallen mankind. The seven sacraments are represented by the graces emanating from God.



The Holy Family is enveloped by an elliptical shape, representing the cave in which Christ was born and also the cave in which he will be resurrected. Aziz believed that a mural painting embraces and complements the architectural setting for which it is created. Thus, the shape of the cave repeats the curves of the chapel. Aziz

explained that a second elliptical form encircles the painting, symbolizing the unification of the earth and heaven, The curved shapes in the painting blend together the aesthetic and symbolic.

Jesus appears as a child in the middle of the painting. He is being protected by both Mary and Joseph. Aziz noted that all the lines in the painting from the periphery converged over the eyes of the Child Jesus, symbolizing that God is the source of life and at death, we return to our Father. Jesus is also depicted as restlessly stirring, eager to assume his active role as the Redeemer.

Two shepherds are found in the lower left of the painting. They are painted in earth tones as they represent earthly existence. The upper figure looks upon Jesus with awe. This figure symbolizes the contemplative aspect of religious life. The other shepherd is calling out to others to come and see, and believe in, Christ. He represents active religious life. The contemplative and the active are both essential to religious existence.

Mankind is shown in the lower left of the painting. Aziz explained that he first used this figure in his 1951 Pieta altarpiece. Since then, he has included the image in many of his religious works as a way to symbolize the salvation of mankind from his sins through the actions of Christ. The figure in this painting appears unsure, as if not fully aware of his thoughts. He is curious, and out of this curiosity, faith may develop. Hope for mankind is symbolized by the light reflected on his face.

Aziz placed the form of the “tau” cross overshadowing the entirety of the painting. In other words, all of the images depicted in the painting are grouped together in order to form the image of the cross, which represents suffering and sacrifice and is a potent symbol of Christianity.

Two paintings, also created by Aziz, frame the nativity altarpiece on either side. They were both created with oils on canvas, and then affixed to the wall. The painting on the east, the *Tree of Life*, shows the downfall of man through original sin.

The redemption of mankind through Christ’s actions is now necessary. Thus, the role of the Redeemer is important in the painting. The serpent can be seen at the trunk of the tree. He holds the forbidden apple in his mouth, representing the sins of humanity.

Adam is depicted as naked, in a state of shame, after having broken God’s covenant. Eve is also naked and shamed at having degraded the position of womankind. The Virgin Mary, the redeemer of womankind, is depicted in the painting clothed in white, the symbol of purity. Mary has the symbol of the mandorla or aureola around her head. Seven arrows surround her to signify her



seven sorrows. The center of the tree lacks leaves, symbolizing the blight of mankind during the period before Jesus sacrificed himself for the sins of humanity.

The painting to the west of the nativity altarpiece, the *Tree of Jesse*, depicts the genealogy of Jesus, descended from King David. The leaves represent the three sets of 14 generations, from Abraham to David, from David to the transmigration of Babylon, and finally from Babylon to Christ. The tree begins at the bottom with Jesse, and then extends up depicting Abraham, King David, and then Joseph who is carrying the baby Jesus. Joseph and Jesus are illustrated against a brilliant gold backdrop.



Aziz explained that his memories of working on the altarpiece at the new Motherhouse were both vivid and happy ones. He later invited Dr. Charles de Tolnay, a scholar of Princeton University who wrote a five volume work on painter Michelangelo, to view the painting. Tolnay referred to the work as the “El Greco of the 20th century.” His ability to capture deep religious meanings in awe-inspiring ways, while also using historic forms of painting has

cemented Aziz as one of the great liturgical artists of our time. The Sisters feel blessed to have this exceptional work of art hanging in their chapel to be enjoyed by all who see it.

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