



Stained-glass sleuths rewarded at St. Alphonsus

By Beth Donze
Clarion Herald

Although they are difficult to make out from the ground floor of St. Alphonsus Church in New Orleans, the unpretentious stained-glass emblems located along the church's balcony level hint at a much larger story.

Each of these lofty images has a thematic connection to the main stained-glass scene directly below it.

► For example, stained-glass renderings of a priest's chalice and the Ten Commandments loom above the ground-floor window depicting the teenage Jesus preaching in the temple.

► Three lilies and a dove holding an olive branch in its mouth adorn the upper reaches of the main church window portraying the Annunciation – reminders, respectively, of the Blessed Mother's virginity and the Holy Spirit within her.

► An ark carrying a church sails above the window that chronicles the Three Kings' visit to Bethlehem – connecting our earthly pilgrimage as "church" to that of the royal trio.

Artistic storytelling

"When church artists lay out their designs, they lay them out to tell a story, so the images along the balcony were deliberately laid out to correspond to the window scenes down below," said Armand Bertin, a tour guide at St. Alphonsus Church, built in 1856 by the city's Irish Catholic immigrants and now managed as a center of Catholic culture by the eponymous "Friends of St. Alphonsus" group.

Bertin said the riveting connections between St. Alphonsus' upper and lower stained-glass panels, installed in 1890, were lost in translation after second-floor balconies were added to accommodate the church's



Top photo: A crown of thorns and a scepter-like cattail foretell the taunting Christ will endure as "King of the Jews," while a rooster (perched between a scourging whip and a cluster of thorny reeds) predicts St. Peter's denial of Christ. These emblems, on the balcony level of St. Alphonsus Church and often overlooked by ground-floor visitors, are located above the church's main stained-glass window depicting "The Agony in the Garden" (bottom photo).

growing congregation. The balconies blocked sight lines, preventing observers from appreciating the full story the windows were designed to tell. Because modern-day visitors to the Irish Channel church rarely are permitted to climb the long and winding stairways to the second level, inspection of the windows' upper panels is next to impossible.

"But back when the church was full – it was built for 2,000 congregants – the balconies were used, so the images would be seen," Bertin said.

Reading stained glass in ornate churches such as St. Alphonsus provides hours of educational and spiritual fun. It is gratifying, for example, when even a child can understand why the stained-glass artist decided to place the Alpha and the Omega atop the main church window depicting the Nativity.

Some of the symbols require a bit more legwork to decipher.

For example, the stained-glass rose on the balcony level of a church window seems purely decorative



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Top photo: A chalice and The Ten Commandments are symbols of the priesthood located high above St. Alphonsus' main stained-glass panel portraying Jesus preaching in the temple (bottom photo). The window captures the moment Mary (her arm outstretched) and Joseph find their lost son.

until the observer walks downstairs to see the flower within its larger context – as part of the magnificent window depicting the marriage of Mary and Joseph.

Next to this rose, a stained-glass monogram uniting the initials "A" and "M" remains a mystery until research reveals it to be shorthand for "Ave Maria" (Hail Mary) – a 19th-century "shout-out" from the stained-glass artist to the bride pictured below.

Symbolism is particularly rich in the window that illustrates "The Agony in the

Garden." As the Apostles sleep, the friendless Jesus is visited by the Angel of Death (artistically identifiable, says Bertin, through his multi-colored wings).

The foreshadowing of Christ's Passion continues in the window's upper reaches: a rooster alerts viewers of yet another apostolic betrayal – St. Peter's three-time denial of Christ; a scourging whip and cluster of thorny reeds foretell the instruments of torture to be used against Jesus; and a crown of thorns, spiked by a cattail, are paro-

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