

The Holy Spirit and the Cathedral

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I am writing this on Pentecost morning. Images of the Holy Spirit - usually a dove with rays of light emanating from its outstretched wings - are rushing through my mind. My old parish church had one above the altar with the beams hovering over the altar of sacrifice. Older Catholic churches in our archdiocese and elsewhere often had an image of the Holy Spirit looming over the sanctuary. It is the Holy Spirit that is the “power” behind the sacraments.

Our Cathedral once had an oval window of the Holy Spirit over the high altar. The original church was a bit smaller (it was lengthened in the renovations after the fire of 1935 to make a larger sanctuary).

I’ve never seen a picture of this window, but read descriptions of it. One author suggests it was a smaller version of the famous alabaster window of the Holy Spirit over the Altar of the Chair in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome.

During the 1890s, Father James Keogh, Cathedral Rector, renovated the interior of the church and covered over the window. This was met with some grumbling from older parishioners. Keogh made it up by installing beautiful new windows in the body of the church.

A dimension of the history of this great church is the choice of the sacred art that adorns its interior and exterior. Each piece has a history. The original eagles on the exterior, the symbol of St. John, were donated by a man who had only recently converted to Catholicism. One of the paintings in the cathedral, a portrait of St. Charles Borromeo, was donated by the people of Milan, Italy (St. Charles had been one of their archbishops). Other statuary, icons, images were donated by various groups and individuals in Milwaukee. The organ (destroyed in the fire) had been the gift of the estate of Patrick Cudahy. The origins and timing of these donations will tell us a lot about the previous generations who left us this house of God.