

A History of The Immaculate Conception Church Building

During the Centennial Year, John Kent authored several articles that appeared periodically in the Bulletin and offered parishioners a glimpse into the interesting history of our beautiful building. The following represents a compilation of those articles.

On April 19, 1904 the Church of the Immaculate Conception, North Easton was dedicated by Bishop Matthew Harkins of the Providence Diocese. Father James H. Looby was pastor. Bishop Harkins also participated in the cornerstone placement on July 4, 1902. (The cornerstone is in the northwest corner of the church, in the front of the building.)

The church, of Gothic design, was planned by architects Murphy & Hindle and constructed by the J.C. Walsh Co. with the assistance of many local workmen. Much of the stone was quarried from the bedrock of the site.

Within the church, oak dominates the interior as the ribs, panels, screens and pews are constructed of this sturdy wood. The main altar was originally wood, later replaced by the present white marble altar in 1922. Above the altar is a reproduction of Murillo's "Immaculate Conception of Soul" painting, which we will discuss in the next article.

In the early decades, life size statues graced both sides of the sanctuary and high above was a fresco depicting a heavenly scene. In the 1950's, the statues were remounted outside the church for public inspiration.

Several religious themes are expressed in the stained glass windows on each side of the building and will be discussed in more detail in future articles. The primary window at the rear of the church shows Saint Michael The Archangel after his victory over Satan. Below this window is the balcony for the choir and church organ. The original organ was manufactured in Easton.

The church presently has a registration of about 1350 families as its members complete plans to celebrate the centennial of the church over the year. The events will coincide with the centennial of the Fall River Diocese.

The religious atmosphere of Immaculate Conception Church is enriched by two exceptional works of art: the painting over the main altar and the stained glass windows above the choir loft.

The painting above the altar is a reproduction of the Spanish painter Murillo's (1618-1682) painting of "The Immaculate Conception of Soul". The original painting, Murillo's most famous, may be based on a verse from the Book of Revelation "...and there appeared a great sign in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet and upon her head a crown of 12 stars." This painting was donated to the parish by Miss Rosella O'Beirne (1869-1941). Church records indicate that Miss O'Beirne lived with her parents at 54 Pond St. in North Easton. The painting appears in our oldest photographs dating back to 1912, which leads us to believe it may have been installed in the church at the time of dedication in 1904.

As a child, this writer and friends often wondered how many cherubs (angels) are in the painting. Do you know? (The answer is..... 29!)

Over the choir loft in the rear of the church are three large stained glass windows. The central window has St. Michael the Archangel after his victory over Satan. This window was designed by John Ames Mitchell, the architect of the Unity Church in 1875 and installed in that church. Mitchell later was the original publisher and editor of Life Magazine. In 1904, the east window of the Unity Church was removed and donated to the Immaculate Conception Church by the Ames family in memory of Michael O'Beirne, who was the coachman for Oliver Ames for many years. We cannot confirm that Michael O'Beirne was related to Rosella O'Beirne, although it is possible.

The artistic and religious beauty of the sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception Church, as observed from the nave (pews), has seen major changes over the past century (1904 –2004).

The main altar is the center of the sanctuary with an altarpiece of white Italian marble above and behind it. The white altarpiece matches the ornate wood screens on either side.

Painted high on the right wall above the altar is the Coat of Arms of the Diocese of Fall River, with a bright blue replica of a falling river. The Diocese is also celebrating a centennial of service (1904-2004).

Painted high on the left wall about the altar is the Coat of Arms of the Pope. Above each of the painted Arms are small stained glass windows.

A small side altar space is on each side of the sanctuary. The left side contains a stone statue of the Blessed Mother and Child.

When the church was dedicated on April 19, 1904,, the main altar piece was an ornate white wooden reredos of soaring carvings. In 1915, the walls of the sanctuary and the walls facing the nave were decorated as a colorful fresco. Photographs of the period show the uniqueness of this change. Several life size statues and a heavy wooden and bronze altar rail encased the sanctuary.

The white wooden altarpiece was replaced by the present white Italian marble piece in 1922. The list of the donors for this master piece are carved in the right side of altar piece and are also listed in the Parish Centennial Book of 1871-1971. (A few copies of this book are available for reading. Please contact the Rectory if you are interested.)

In the decades of 1950 - 1970, many changes in the Church's teachings brought about changes in the sanctuary. An open policy for the members was encouraged.

The priests now conducted the Mass facing the nave (pews), and the heavy wooden and bronze altar rail that encased the sanctuary was removed.

The life size statues that adorned the sanctuary were moved. The statues of St. Rita and St. Joseph were placed on pedestals outside the church for all the people to view. The statue of St. Rita, a gift of Mrs. John McCarthy, is on the east side of the church facing the rectory. St. Rita was canonized at the turn of the century and was a favorite of petitioners at that time, especially in impossible cases. The statue of St. Joseph, a gift of the Lyons family, is on the west side of the church facing the parking lot. The Sacred Heart statue was moved to the rear west entrance of the church and the statue of the Blessed Mother and Child was moved to the left side of the sanctuary.

In 1915, during the time of Pastor Daniel Doran, colorful frescos of angels adorned the wall of the sanctuary facing the congregation. (Fresco is the art of painting with watercolors over wet plaster.) The frescos of Immaculate Conception Church were well known throughout the diocese and area.. However, in 1955 they were painted over when no one with the talent to refurbish the frescos could be found, leaving the present dove high on the front wall.

The current doorway and vestibule that leads to the driveway on the east side of the church was added to the church building in 1922. It was dedicated to the memory of James & Anne M. Burkner, Benefactors.

The original church organ was built in Eastondale by the Williams Organ Company on Turnpike St. and installed in the early 1900's. It was an original Hook & Hastings "tracker" design which means all of the actions were mechanical and at the start, the organ was pumped by hand. This meant that there needed to be a "pumper" working alongside the organist at all times. The organ was modernized (electrified) in the early 1970's.

In the late 1980's, the Morel Organ Company of Groton, Massachusetts installed a new console , chests (for the pipes) and new reservoirs (also called bellows, which hold the wind). Morel has been servicing our organ for generations and advises that our organ is in very good condition, able to serve our parish for many years to come.

In 1992, Schulmerich Carillons were installed , replacing the original cast bells. The carillons provide true bell tones that ring automatically to announce Mass Calls, the Angelus, Westminster Chimes, or other traditional or modern hymns on occasion. The "Basilican" computer driven equipment includes six cast bell voices with a tonal equivalent of 20,612 pounds of cast bells.

The carillons were graciously donated by the Coughlin family in loving memory of deceased members of the Coughlin family. A plaque commemorating this gift is located on the wall near the stairway to the choir loft.¹

The religious atmosphere of the church is enhanced by the colorful stained glass windows on the east and west walls of the building. The sixteen smaller windows portray the Virgin Mary from the Annunciation through the Crowning of the Blessed Mother.

The three large windows on the east wall depict Jesus in the Holy Sacrament, the Good Shepherd and the Sacred Heart. The windows are "a symbol of His love for us" and the joy of God over a repentant sinner as "...He leaves the 99 sheep to search for the one that is lost." One of the windows is a gift of the Sodality. Little is known of this group in Immaculate Conception parish history. However, Sodalities are ancient groups that date back to medieval times. From the era of the Middle Ages many of these pious associations placed themselves under the special protection of the Blessed Virgin, and chose her for their patron. "The main object and duty of these societies were, above all, the practice of prayer, piety and works of charity. In the course of time other pious Church societies sprang from the Sodalities of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or were quickened by these to new zeal and fruitful labours, e. g. the work of foreign missions, the "Society of St. Vincent de Paul", the "Society of St. Francis Regis", and many others."¹

The three large windows on the west side of the church are gifts to the church. The St. Patrick's window is a gift of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Division #8. The Hibernians were organized in September, 1891 to continue the Irish traditions of many of the parishioners. The Division also donated the stained glass over the main entrance. Division #8 of the AOH was active in the parish through the 1960's.

The Assumption window was donated by the Rosary and Scapular Society. The Society was active until the 1930's. There is a modern day Rosary Society active in our church today that prays the Rosary each Wednesday evening at 6:00PM.

The Lady of Victory window was the gift of Rev. John W. McCarthy. Fr. McCarthy attended the Easton schools and graduated from Easton High School. He attended the Boston Jesuit College, graduating in 1880. Later, he was the assistant pastor of the Immaculate Conception Church in Providence.

¹ Excerpts on the carillon taken from a 1992 letter by Fr. Lou Phillipino.

