

This House of Prayer

2nd in a series of 5

Transfiguration of the Lord August 6, 2006

Our Cathedral is a tangible invitation to prayer and reflection. During the coming weeks, in this Year of Prayer and Renewal, we will visit different places in the Cathedral, and explore how they call us to prayer. Last week, we meditated on the altar. This week, as we celebrate the Transfiguration of the Lord, we take a closer look at the stained glass windows.

While he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white (Luke 9: 29)

WHY STAINED GLASS?

For most people, the very word “church” evokes images of stained glass, dim aisles, and vaulted ceilings. We have Abbé Suger, the brilliant mind behind the 12th-century church of Saint-Denis in Paris, to thank for that. It was Abbé Suger who helped turn stained glass into an art form, and who helped to inspire a new kind of architecture—the Gothic style with its flying buttresses—in order to allow room for more and more windows.

For Suger, stained glass windows were not simply decoration; they were a way to connect with God. “The dull mind rises to the truth through material things,” he wrote. Colored glass took the daylight, and transformed it into something new—carrying the viewer to a new place, somewhere between earth and heaven. Sometimes, Abbé Suger exclaimed, “the multicolor loveliness of the gems has called me away from external cares, transporting me from material to immaterial things. Then I seem to exist on some level, as it were, beyond our earthly one, neither completely in the slime of earth nor completely in the purity of heaven.”

Charles Connick, the artist who created most of the stained glass windows at St. James Cathedral, underwent a similar conversion when he first experienced the stained glass windows at the great medieval Cathedral of Chartres, France. “So many windows alight, caroling together within sympathetic walls, seemed to combine into something new and strange.... They were like a new wizardry of sound, a strange music.” A stained glass window, Connick discovered, should be “the color of the weather. It is at the mercy of light and of all that happens in the path of its light.”

STAINED GLASS AT ST. JAMES CATHEDRAL

Connick sought to bring that same magic to the windows he created for St. James Cathedral between 1917-20 (they were installed following the collapse of the great dome). He used colors to express ideas, surrounding the figures of the saints in the west nave with earthy tones, browns, ambers, greens. In the transept windows, representing Easter (south) and Christmas (north), gold and green predominate, suggesting the life



that flowed from these great events when heaven reached down to touch the earth. And in the clerestory, the highest windows in the Cathedral, where Connick depicted symbols of the Ten Commandments and the sacramental life of the Church, he used heavenly colors—blue and white.

The stained glass in St. James Cathedral can transport us to a spiritual place; but they also call us to justice, here and now, especially in the East Apse windows (1994) by Hans Gottfried von Stockhausen. The two outer windows recall the traditional works of mercy through images of Christ’s passion and resurrection. These windows challenge us with words from Matthew 25: “When did we see you naked and give you clothing?” The center window, representing baptism, first dazzles us with its beauty, then challenges us to ask how we are living our baptism through loving service of those around us.

FOR REFLECTION

- What is your favorite window in St. James Cathedral? Why?
- It has been said that stained glass is an atmosphere before it is an image. What “atmosphere” does stained glass create, for you?

PRAYER

God our Father, source of eternal light,
fill the hearts of all believers with the light of faith.
May we come with joy to the light of your glory.

The Sacramentary

A Year of Prayer and Renewal