

**St. Thomas the Apostle Church  
Irondequoit, New York  
A Walkaround Guide**

*By Father Robert F. McNamara*

St. Thomas Parish was established by Thomas F. Hickey, Bishop of Rochester, on July 21, 1922. He named Father John F. Muckle the founding pastor.

From 1922 to 1926, the parish church was little St. George's-on-the-Lake, a summer chapel erected in 1907 near the north terminus of St. Paul Blvd., on the spot where the tennis courts of Joseph Spezio Memorial Park are now located. In 1926, with the enlargement of the parochial school on Colebrook Drive, the congregation acquired a proper, if temporary, basement-church seating 500. The "catacomb church," as it came to be called, served its purpose until Palm Sunday, April 11, 1965. On that day the permanent Church of St. Thomas the Apostle, built to accommodate 1000 by the second pastor, Monsignor Richard K. Burns, was dedicated by Bishop James E. Kearney.



Planning the present handsome church had begun in 1958. Msgr. Burns chose as architect a distinguished New Yorker, Mr. Joseph Sanford Shanley. Shanley had a happy gift of being able to combine the contemporary with the traditional in his structures, as he had already demonstrated in the design and furnishings of St. Louis Church in suburban Pittsford, New York. The plan he drew for St. Thomas Church was certainly modern in lines and techniques. Its skeleton is of reinforced concrete poured on the spot and then rubbed down; its walls, inner and outer, are of pink brick. But thanks to the architect's careful attention to interior furnishings, the whole structure is harmonious and restful. His clerk-of-the-works was architect Philip R. Winkler, a parishioner.

Before we leave this vestibule or narthex, please examine the windows. None of the windows in the church proper is of “stained glass”; i.e., thin pieces of painted colored glass bound into a pattern by channelled strips of lead. Instead, they are made of thick, irregular chunks of glass bound together by what is called epoxy resin. Please look at these vestibule samples to see the technique up close. All the windows were designed by one artist. Most of them are simply in abstract patterns, breaking up the light into a host of colors. In this case, drapes are hinted at, perhaps to suggest the nets of a fisherman. (The windows in the Lady Chapel similarly symbolize the seeds cast by the sower).

Entering now the church proper (and blessing ourselves with holy water in the fonts), we look east down the nave to the main altar with its canopy, the altarpiece of the Blessed Trinity, and beyond it, the Lady Chapel, which houses the Blessed Sacrament. The floor plan is that of a Greek Cross, the Lady Chapel being the head of the cross, the nave its shank, and the transepts or wings its arms.

A.W. Hopeman, the general contractors, faced a real challenge in constructing the roofs over nave and transepts. They are thin skins of reinforced concrete, seemingly “saucer domes,” but technically “translational shells”; that is, not round but square-ended structures.

It was fortunate that St. Thomas was constructed during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), for the Council authorized many liturgical changes that required structural alterations in the traditional layout of church buildings. Luckily, Msgr. Burns guessed that the main altar would in future be free-standing rather than attached to the wall. But the liturgical revisions were announced only gradually, and the requirement of a presidential chair, for instance, or “reconciliation rooms” instead of box-confessionals, came out only after this church was dedicated. Thus it was already slightly out of date when completed.

As we walk down the slate-aisle nave towards the main altar, we will notice the cream-colored stations of the cross that run along the nave walls and around the corners into the transepts. These stations, in high relief, were carved in cast stone in a moderately contemporary style by a Lithuanian-born New York City sculptor, Vytautas Kasuba. Kasuba also carved the Last Supper, which is set into the front of the main altar. Let us pause for a few moments in front of the high altar.



Msgr. Richard Burns spent 13 happy years of his life in Rome, Italy. It is not surprising, therefore, that the appointments of this building should often reflect the best of the Roman and Italian artistic tradition.

Take the high altar, for instance. Under the crown of a sacred canopy or baldachino, it stands forth impressively in a sanctuary rich with slate and marbles both Italian and American, and marked off by a communion rail of Liotz marble supported by uprights of Francia Red. Architect Shanley designed this altar, and it was executed by Winterich of Bedford, Ohio. The altar table is also of Liotz marble. Its base is very Roman: polished Travertine decorated by “strigilation,” a favorite Roman ornamentation consisting in rows of vertical “S”-shaped channels carved into the stone.



According to custom, when the altar was consecrated, several relics of martyrs were sealed into a receptacle in the back underside of the marble table: Sts. Peter and Paul, St. Thomas the Apostle, St. John the Baptist, and the black martyrs of Uganda (canonized in 1964). In the Holy Year of 1975, Msgr. Burns set in place as a permanent cover of this receptacle a special slab of polished Roman Travertine from St. Peter’s Basilica. It was a gift from his good friend Count Enrico Galeazzi, official architect of Vatican City.



Among the other items in the sanctuary ensemble are: the rosewood pulpit, by William A. Keyser, Jr., professor of cabinet making at R.I.T., the communion rail, by Gerstner and Statt of Rochester; and the two Baroque gilded pedestal candlesticks, of Mexican origin, artist unknown.

Most eye-catching in the sanctuary composite is the round-framed sculpture of the Holy Trinity, by Herman Wiemann of Montvale, New Jersey. Of hammered aluminum, gilded and polychromed, it follows a theological pattern often used by Renaissance artists: the Father sustains the Son on the cross, and between them flutters the Holy Spirit in the form of the dove. Since Christ is shown crucified, this image also serves as the required altar-crucifix.



The windows of the church are best viewed from the sanctuary. As we remarked earlier, they are for the most part of abstract design. The chunk glass rivals even the finest stained glass, if not in detail (chunk glass is coarser than leaded glass), at least in richness and monumentality. The studio that furnished these windows was Willet of Philadelphia. The craftsman who designed and executed them was a Belgian employee of Willet, Benoit Gilsoul. Let us look now at the three windows that contain figures.

It was intended to have a Madonna and Child in the west window flanked by other saints. All figures but the Virgin and Child were eventually eliminated. This lovely window is self-explanatory.



The two transept windows do require further explanation. St. Thomas the Apostle figures in both. The founding pastor chose a St. Thomas as the parish's patron saint, but it was Msgr. Burns who specified, among the several Saints Thomas, "Thomas the Twin," picked by Christ as one of The Twelve.

The choice of Thomas the Apostle was appropriate. Like most of us, he was no saint when called. He was slow to believe and, like the rest of the Apostles, he had forsaken Our Lord after the arrest in Gethsemani. But after the Resurrection, he became a firm believer; and many years after Pentecost, a heroic martyr.

The north window is the “Resurrection Window.” We will recall that when the risen Jesus first appeared to the Apostles, Thomas was absent. The others told him about the apparition, but he said he would not believe them until he himself saw the Master and examined the wounds of His passion. A week after Easter Sunday, when Christ appeared once again to his disciples, Thomas was there. Jesus showed him the wounds in His hands. This time, Thomas was absolutely convinced. Indeed, he enthusiastically professed his faith in the divinity as well as the humanity of Jesus: “My Lord and my God!” (John, 20:38). That final confession put him on a level with St. Mary Magdalene, whom the risen Christ had first sent to the Apostles to announce the good news, “I have seen the Lord!” (John, 20:18). Here we view the doubting Apostle and believing woman kneeling in adoration before the glorified Jesus as He shows Thomas His wounded hand.



Facing this “Resurrection Window” across the church is a matching window perhaps best called the “Martyrdom Window.”

Jesus had insisted, in speaking to His disciples, particularly the Apostles, on the importance of the cross. “If a man wishes to come after Me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and follow in My steps...Whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will preserve it.” (Mark, 8:34-35). Peter may have denied Our Lord, and Thomas may have doubted Him, but Jesus is always ready to give us a second chance, to allow us time to mature through the bearing of our own crosses. He knew that Peter and Thomas, though weak in the flesh were basically strong in the spirit. Had not Peter once told Him, “Lord, at your side I am prepared to face imprisonment and death itself” (Luke, 22:33)? Had not Thomas once urged the other Apostles, when Jesus was about to return to a hostile Judea, “Let us go along to die with Him (John, 11:16)? At the end, having preached the Cross to the world, they were ready to embrace their own crosses. In this window, then, we see Christ crucified, His arms extended in welcome to the former denier and the former skeptic. They stand bearing the credentials of their own passion: Peter with the cross on which he was hung head downwards; Thomas with the spear that pierced his heart.

There are many beautiful things in this church. To my mind, the most beautiful is the face of Our Lord in this “Martyrdom Window.” Inspired, I imagine, by the stark crosses of the Middle Ages, the artist has put into Christ’s countenance a whole world of sadness.



We turn now to the Eucharistic Chapel, the heart of the church because it houses Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. But let me first call your attention to the four shrines built into the corners under the central dome. Three of the shrines feature hand-carved wooden statues from the studio of G. Vincenzo Mussner, in the famous wood-carving village of Ortisei in northern Italy. The northeast shrine is of a virile St. Joseph the Worker; the southeast shrine is of the Sacred Heart of Jesus; the southwest shrine is an unusual statue of St. Anthony of Padua and the Christ-child.



On the other hand, the northwest shrine is a painting: St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, foundress of the American Sisters of Charity. The artist, the late John C. Menihan of Rochester, has represented this very American saint in the central panel of a triptych. Against a background of scenes at her headquarters in Emmitsburg, Maryland, she points heavenward with one hand, while in the other she holds a Rule inscribed

with the two chief duties of her sisters: “Heal” and “Teach.” On either side of the portrait is a narrative panel. That on the left recalls her work with the sick as a “Protestant Sister of Charity”; that on the right shows her gathering Catholic school children together.



Although Mother Seton had no direct association with Rochester, her sisters were the first community of nuns to settle here. In 1845 they took charge of our St. Patrick’s Orphanage and St. Patrick’s School for girls; and in 1857 they established Rochester’s first hospital, St. Mary’s. Two other items of interest should also be pointed out in connection with this shrine. First, the frame of the triptych is made of wood from a pew of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, the first cathedral church of the Diocese of Rochester. Second, our architect, Joseph S. Shanley, was a direct descendant of Mother Seton, who was a widow when she converted from Episcopalianism to Catholicism.

We enter the Eucharistic Lady Chapel through a vast openwork screen of wrought iron, the work of Herman Wiemann. The Blessed Sacrament is reserved in a bronze tabernacle transferred from the old church and set on a bright polychrome wooden altar. This altar and its polychrome baldachino and spire were executed by George Betke of Troy, New York. Here all lines focus on Christ in the tabernacle. Six bottle-shaped rosewood candlesticks, the work of William A. Keyser, Jr., creator of the pulpit, mount the altar steps. Not one, but five antique sanctuary lamps hang lighted before the altar. On Herman Wiemann’s bright brass grill that rises behind the altar, the Mother of the Eucharistic King holds Him in her arms. (This polychrome wooden Madonna and Child is a copy made by G. Vincenzo Mussner of Ortisei of a tender plaster statue long venerated in our “catacomb church.”)



But let us pause now to honor Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament with a loving prayer. (The kneeler-chairs, by the way, were crafted by Stickley of Syracuse).

The Lady Chapel is also used by the choir at sung Masses. Above the shrines on either side are the chambers constructed to hold the apparatus of a pipe organ.

The right and left exits of this chapel are great, colorful double-hung wooden doors, each carved with symbols representing the four evangelists: Matthew and Mark (north doors), and Luke and John (south doors).



Incidentally, in the wall next to the south doors a brick is missing. The mason left this space for another purpose, but the plan for its use was discarded. Msgr. Burns decided to let it stay empty. Why? As a reminder, he said, that nothing created by human hands, not even a magnificent church, is absolutely perfect.



Let us stop for a moment in the sacristy, behind the north doors.

In general, a sacristy (or vestry) explains itself. It is the room containing the sacred vessels, the vestments, and whatever else is used in church services. First, let me call these two processional crosses to your attention. The lighter one dates from around 1990. Made of walnut, it was designed and executed by Joseph McCutcheon, a student at R.I.T. The corpus is bronze, cast by the famous French sculptor Lambert-Rucki. The heavier cross, by the Mussner Studio of Ortisei, Italy, is particularly interesting in that the corpus is carved in the round right into the wood of the cross. Two other small statues from Ortisei, also presumably from the Mussner Studio, are St. Peter and St. Paul, at the left end and the right end of the top of the vesting case.

If the windows in the church proper are, as I have said, of “faceted dalles” or chunk glass set in epoxy resin, the coats of arms of the Rochester bishops in the sacristy windows are true stained glass (thin pieces of colored bubbled glass bound together by lead strips). The six in the north wall are grouped in no



special order around the arms of Pope Paul VI (Giovanni Montini) whose shield, crowned with the papal tiara, shows a play on the Pope's family name, "Montini" (in Italian, "little mountains"). At the far left, the arms of Bishop John F. O'Hern (1929-1933) likewise involve a word play: three herons suggest his surname. His Latin motto, "Servire regnare est" means "To reign is to serve." Next comes Bishop Thomas F. Hickey (1909-1928). His motto is "Fides et constantia," "Faith and Constancy." The third shield is that of Bishop James E. Kearney (1937-1966), and the motto is "In Te Domine speravi." "In Thee have I hoped, O Lord." The arms of Pope Paul VI (1963-1978) occupy the central spot because he was pope when the church was built. Next to his shield on the right is that of Bishop Bernard J. McQuaid, the founding bishop of Rochester (1868-1909). His arms feature the cross of St. Andrew, who was patron saint of the ancient Diocese of Rochester in England. His motto was "Salus animarum lex suprema." "The salvation of souls is the supreme law." Next comes the escutcheon of Archbishop Edward Mooney, bishop of Rochester, 1933-1937. Since Mooney had the personal title of archbishop, he is given a two-barred archbishop's cross and ten rather than six tassels. Mooney was created a cardinal as Archbishop of Detroit in 1946, so his episcopal hat is not green, as in the other cases but red. Properly, however, the hat should then have the 15 red tassels of a cardinal. His motto, "Domine servientes" means "Serving the Lord." The last shield on the north side is that of Fulton J. Sheen (1966-1969). The motto is "Da per Matrem me venire." Let me come to You through Your Mother."

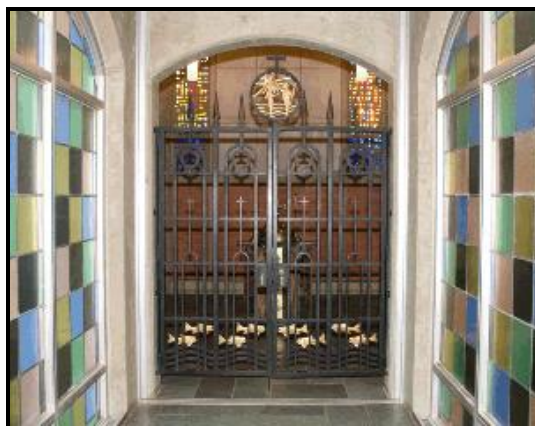
The five windows on the east side are reserved for the blazons of bishops after 1969. Two are filled. The first is that of Bishop Joseph L. Hogan (1969-1979). His motto is "Libentissime impendar et superimpendar." "I will most gladly spend and be utterly spent for your sakes." Bishop Matthew H. Clark (1979- ) whose shield reflects that of John Paul II, the pope who consecrated him, chose a vernacular motto: "God's love endures forever."

All these sacristy windows are the work of the Pike Stained Glass Studio of Rochester.



Now let us leave the church by way of the south entrance. We pass by the back of the high altar to give you an opportunity to see the slab from the Vatican that covers the receptacle of the relics. Let us also look for a moment into one of the confessionals. First constructed in the old style with a central compartment for the confessor and walled-off kneelers for the penitents, they were remodeled to permit the penitent to be seated on the one side, or to kneel anonymously on the other side. A fair enough adaptation!

Blessing ourselves again with holy water, we go out into the south vestibule en route to the baptistery. In ancient days, baptisteries were buildings outside the church to signify that baptism gave the privilege of entering the Church. Our baptistery is at some distance from the south entrance. The handsome wrought iron gates, ornamented with gilded baptismal references (John the Baptist baptizing Our Lord, and fish swimming), are another creation of Herman Wiemann. The marble font is from the old church.



Let us return, finally to the west entrance, but by a path outside the church building. There was to have been a concrete bell-tower, 143 feet high, crowning the baptistery. Money ran short, however, so all that was constructed was the base of the four-sided spire. Father Callan, who succeeded Msgr. Burns, amortized the church's building debt of over \$900,000 in 1990; but when he inquired about the cost of finishing the bell-tower he was told that it would be twice as much as in 1965. Hence the spire remains, and will probably always remain, a dream rather than a reality. Building costs in general have increased mightily since the 1960's. Take the communion rail, inside, for example. When installed in 1964, it cost \$3,700, a reasonable amount. Today it could not be replaced for less than \$15,000.

St. Thomas Church was not cheaply built, but it was quality-built.

Some will always ask, of course, would it not have been better to give to the poor the money collected for the church building? God certainly expects all of us to help the poor with a portion of our funds. But He is not displeased when we want to construct in His honor houses in which He and His faithful can meet in a special way. As the Lord said to King David, "In wishing to build a temple to my honor you do well." (I Kings, 8:18). Msgr. Richard Burns, at the dedication of St. Thomas, might well have said with Solomon, "I have truly built You a princely house, a dwelling where You may abide forever." (I Kings 8:13).

We are now passing the grave of Monsignor Burns. The Town of Irondequoit gave special permission for him to be interred in front of the church that he had so lovingly raised up on St. Paul Blvd. With the psalmist he had often sung, "O Lord, I love the house in which You dwell, the tenting place of Your glory" (Ps. 26:8). Let us say a brief prayer in the memory of this man who believed that nothing was too good for God:

"May his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen."

