



SACRED HEART ALTAR in ROSEAU CATHEDRAL

TREASURES OF THE ROSEAU CATHEDRAL:

MARBLE ALTAR.

By Bernard Lauwyck

There are three marble altars in the Roseau Cathedral, one more beautiful than the other. I choose the Sacred Heart ALTAR because it is also the Altar of Repose.

This altar is a gift of Miss Julia L. DOUENEL and was manufactured by NOIROT-BIAIS, suppliers to Pope Pius IX, of 72 Rue Bonaparte, Paris.

The altar of pure white marble has four red marble pillars supporting the “gradin” or horizontal slab. These four pillars are beautifully carved and have white marble bases and capitals. Between these pillars are 3 panels, called escutcheons, one with the letter CSJ and two depicting a vase with flower and leaves.

Above the “gradin” or horizontal white marble slab is “the Tabernacle of Repose” framed by two pillars made in PORPHYRY, a beautiful polychrome marble, used for decoration. The door of the tabernacle depicts the bust of Jesus in a glossy colourful enamelled finish.

Above the door are the Sacred Monograms “A Ω” (beginning and the end) and CHI RHO (XP) in red, set against a gilded mosaic background. Overhead is the statue of the Sacred Heart as traditionally depicted in Christian art.



The “Altar of Repose” is the place where the Sacred Host, consecrated in the Mass on Holy Thursday, is reserved until the Mass of the Pre-sanctified on Good Friday. In the Mass on Holy Thursday two hosts are consecrated, one for consumption, and the second Host is placed in a chalice, which is covered with a white veil, tied with a ribbon. This remains on the corporal in the centre of the main altar till the end of Mass, when it is carried in solemn procession to the Altar of Repose, there to remain in the tabernacle. Catholic Piety has made Holy Thursday a day of exceptional devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and the repository is the centre of the love and aspirations of the faithful.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart is but a special form of devotion to Jesus. The Heart of Jesus, like all else that belongs to His Person, is worthy of adoration. The devotion to the Heart of Jesus, extends further than the His heart of flesh, being directed to the love of which this Heart is the living and expressive symbol. *“There is in the Sacred Heart the symbol and express image of the infinite love of Jesus Christ which moves us to love in return.”* -- Pope Leo XIII

Having explained the above, we now turn to the rich symbolism of the artwork.

The middle escutcheon has a round circular insert with the letters **CSJ**.



The background marble is engraved with diagonally gilded lines and Greek crosses. The letters C S J means “Core Jesu Sacratissimum” in Latin or Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The Sacred Heart of Jesus is usually depicted as a heart on fire, ringed by a crown of thorns, symbol of his pain and suffering. It is interesting to know that the crown of thorns with which the soldiers crowned Jesus was a parody on the roman emperor’s festal crown of roses.



Branches with rosebuds and thorns are intertwined in this artwork with the letters C J S, making a reference to the pain, grief and tribulations that Christ suffered. These blue lettering and branches are set against a gilded mosaic background, which created a very nice escutcheon.

Let us look at the symbolism of the VASE panel.

A vase holding a lily is one of the most frequently depicted objects in paintings of the Annunciation to Mary by the Angel Gabriel. The lily is associated with Mary for her perfect purity and chastity. The Fleur-de-Lys is a stylized lily, in French, *fleur de lis* literally means "lily flower". In the Middle Ages the symbols of lily and fleur-de-lys overlapped considerably in Christian religious art.



On our beautiful BLUE vase, set against a gilded mosaic background, we notice a blue-red shape of the Fleur-de-Lys sprouting out of the vase, a clear reference to Mary, the mother of Jesus.

On top we see a flower, a daisy. The daisy was used as a visual symbol to the incarnation of Christ, and is seen in paintings of the Adoration. Ascending out of the Mother of Jesus (Fleur- de-Lys) ascends a shoot called Jesus



Clearly a part of the TREE OF JESSE is shown here, limited to Mary and Jesus. The Tree of Jesse is further indicated by the curled green leaves. The Tree of Jesse, is a presentation of Jesus' genealogy which dates back to the father of David who was Jesse. The artistic motif of the Jesse tree, a highly stylized and sophisticated ornamentation, is known since the beginning in the eleventh century

Isaiah 11:1: " *And a rod shall go out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall ascend out of the root of it.*"

In the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible, used in the Middle Ages: " *here shall come from a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up...*" Jesus is the "shoot of Jesse". The Church Fathers and hymns refer to the tree of Jesse not only when speaking about the line of David (*radix Jesse*) but also when speaking of Mary (*virga ex radice* = branch or offshoot of the root of Jesse) and Jesus (*flos ex virga* = flower that blossoms on the branch). In sacred art Mary is also depicted as part of Christ's family tree named after Jesse.





But let us not forget the 4 stalks of wheat , symbol of the bread as the Body of Christ used in the Eucharist.

Jesus predicted his death, and his resurrection, in John 12:24 “I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies it produces many seeds “

This illustrates again that the treasures, in Our Lady of Fair Haven Cathedral, are rich with spiritual and symbolic meaning.

Let us take an opportunity while this building is still in use to visit it and admire the beauty of these altars.