

THE CHAPEL OF SAINT BASIL

Why is the Chapel named after St. Basil?

The University Chapel is named in honor of St. Basil the Great, a fourth century bishop of Caesarea in Pontus (modern Turkey), one of the seven universal Doctors of the Church; that is, a person recognized as one of her most important teachers. Early in the nineteenth century the founders of the Basilian Fathers chose Basil as their patron, largely because in his life he combined three characteristics important to their own vocation: St. Basil was a great theologian, interpreter of the Bible and teacher of the Christian faith, but, more than many others, he appreciated the value of Greek secular learning, having received the most complete education available in his day. He was also a founder of monastic life. Basil's teaching has formed the basic Rule of all monks of the Eastern Church as well as influenced monasticism of the West. When asked by the University administration to suggest a name for the Chapel, the Basilian Fathers, who established the University of Saint Thomas in 1947, were almost unanimous in proposing "The Chapel of Saint Basil."

Why is the Chapel at the end of the Mall?

The Chapel completes the University Mall. The Mall itself symbolizes the nature of a Catholic university. It is a series of buildings representing various academic disciplines and various forms of scholarly activity. All buildings face one another and are open to one another, indicating the interdependence and unity of all scholarly endeavor. Their unity is further stressed by the fact that all buildings are joined by a colonnade. Moreover, no non-academic auxiliary operations are located on the Mall. At one end of the longitudinal axis of the Mall we find the library, a place where students and faculty come to meet the great minds and scholars of the past and present through the products of their work, books and other media, thus encountering the greatest achievements of human reason. At the other end of that axis we now have a sacred building dedicated to the worship of God and to the celebration of the Christian faith. This is why the entrance of the Chapel faces the Mall, not the street.

The Chapel contrasts with all other UST buildings: white stucco and black granite as opposed to rose-colored brick. The difference stresses the uniqueness and supernatural character of what the Chapel represents. Through its height, and the increased impact of the upward sweep of unbroken white walls, the Chapel dominates the whole campus. The cross culminating its golden dome proclaims the Christian character of the University; indeed, it makes the campus visible from most high points in the city and prominent to overflying planes. But its relationship to the Mall is more complex. When seen from outside the Mall, from West Alabama, the Chapel appears to be embraced by the Mall, standing within it, surrounded by the colonnade and the brick sacristy and office building. Seen from within the Mall, the Chapel, while appearing separate, by means of the black granite wall, which is less a “wall” than a colonnade, somewhat like the ancient Roman aqueducts, reaches out to the Mall’s colonnade, thus uniting the work of the human reason with worship of God, the Creator of that reason.

Theology of the Chapel and its Architectural Elements

As Philip Johnson explains it, the building consists of three basic geometric shapes: a cube for the body of the church, a sphere for the dome and a granite plane connecting these shapes, by intersecting both the dome and the cube.

A visitor’s best approach to the Chapel is along the Mall, and then across the light gray, almost white, piazza, thus facing the vertical sweep of the white facade flanked on both sides by the series of square-topped arches of the black wall. Especially on a sunny day the impression is not unlike that when approaching a Renaissance church, an impression strengthened if we come at the optimum time, when the bells are striking the hour.

Traversing the white pavement with memorial inscriptions in honor of various friends and benefactors of the University, the visitor approaches the entrance, which is in the form of a huge tent. This tent represents the opening of the Tent of Meeting of the Old Testament. There is no door or any barrier at this point; the space of the narthex visible through the opening invites all to come in to meet their God.

The interior of the Chapel repeats in various ways the two basic geometric forms of the whole building: the straight line of the cube with its sense of imposing verticality and the elliptic shapes of the skylights corresponding to the spherical nature of the dome. These elliptic elements mark the central and religiously most important points of the Chapel: the altar and the shrine of Our Lady. They interplay with the huge semi-sphere of the dome, both enclosing the sacred space and, because of the clear space at the point

of the “cut,” opening to the light and the sky and to the infinity of heaven. Thus the dome is not a vault but an opening. At this point the visitor understands the reason for the dome being open by the black wall. Being lower than the dome, the wall creates a clerestory in the dome as a source of indirect natural light. At night this effect is imitated by externally located electric lights.

The fascinating play of natural light—from the dome, from the skylight over the altar and over the statue of Our Lady on the east wall, as well as from the tilted glass cross in the west wall—is perhaps the first impression striking the visitor. This light, reflected against the whiteness of the walls, makes the interior space alive, as it constantly changes with the intensity and direction of the light. Within this play of light all the elements of the interior cooperate to create a space of quietness -- one would like to call it of “visual silence” -- and thus a natural shell for prayer and contemplation. The rather austere character of the building, with its whiteness against the black of the back granite wall, is given warmth, even a certain intimacy, by the artwork and furniture: the rich texture and coloring of the Texas black walnut furniture, the bronze of the tabernacle, the statue of Our Lady, the candle holders, and the brightly colored icon of St. Basil with its rich greens, reds and golds.

It is no vague feeling of religiosity that one experiences. Those responsible for the building of the Chapel wanted to provide a sacred space, which, as Vatican II desired, would “express in some sense the infinite beauty of God, turn human minds devoutly toward God” (Dogmatic Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 122). This space must also provide a fitting stage for celebrating the liturgy of the Church. This decorum is measured not merely in terms of convenience for performing the various ceremonies; the interior of a church must itself help the faithful to focus on the heart of the Christian mystery celebrated and thus fulfill its other function, that of being not only a place of prayer, but also, in the words of Pope Paul VI, “a sign of prayer.” It is such when senses and, most notably, the sense of seeing, lead the heart to what is central in Christian faith and devotion.

The Chapel of St. Basil achieves this result. Because of the diagonal position of the granite wall, the axis of the building shifts almost imperceptibly as one enters it. Facing the sweeping Renaissance-like facade of the Chapel from the piazza, the visitor expects the longitudinal axis of the whole Mall to continue also with the Chapel, as it does in older churches: through the door in the middle of the facade one’s eye encounters the main altar, with the tabernacle placed on it, in the center of the apse. With our Chapel, however, this is not the case. To start with, the opening is slightly off-center; you are led away from the expected central axis. This realization is confirmed and reinforced as you enter the sanctuary area through a door which is at an angle to the walls of the cube. Consequently, what you seem to be walking “toward” most directly is not the

center of the back wall but the place on the wall where the tabernacle is located slightly to the left of the curved apse. This creates a dynamic tension between the logic of the Chapel cube and the actual logic of the Chapel interior and makes it possible for things to occupy the emotional and aesthetic center of the space without actually being at the physical center. For instance, the crucifix in the apse is not at the geometric center of the wall or the apse. This drawing of attention to the tabernacle, with its eternal light, is important for Catholics because it reminds them of the real personal presence of Jesus Christ in the consecrated Bread reserved in the Tabernacle.

There is another significant shift. For all those sitting in the pews the altar moves into the central position, stressing its role as the place of the Eucharist in the sacramental memorial of the saving sacrifice of Christ.

INDIVIDUAL ELEMENTS OF THE CHAPEL

Three artists created works which complete and enrich Philip Johnson's structure. David Cargill of Beaumont fashioned the altar, the Stations of the Cross, the statue of Our Lady, the tabernacle, the candlesticks, the stand for the paschal candle, and the processional cross. Michael Dobbins of Houston made all the wooden furniture. Michal Ploski of Poland painted the icon of Saint Basil.

Certain elements of the building and its interior deserve special consideration because of their aesthetic interest and religious importance.

The Bells

The three bells placed in the top aperture of the granite walls were cast in Ohio. They are real functioning bells. What you hear is not recorded but actual sound produced by the clapper striking the bell. The bells strike every hour and once every half-hour; at noon they ring the Angelus, and there is a special peal before Masses. Christian tradition ascribes great importance to church bells. They call the faithful to worship; they mourn the dead and escort them to their final resting place; they remind us in our daily occupations of God's presence in the world. Their regular ringing will recall and strengthen the Catholic and Christian commitment of the University of St. Thomas.

The Organ

The manual and pedal electro-pneumatic organ built by Schoenstein & Co of San Francisco is a memorial to Fr. Francis E. Monaghan, CSB, a former vice president of the University and pastor of St. Anne's Church in Houston. Though its primary function is to provide music for the liturgy, the organ possesses as much flexibility as is possible for an

instrument of modest size; much of the classical organ repertoire can be also performed with tonal accuracy. The resonance of the Chapel recreates the acoustical properties of great churches; the organ was voiced with this resonance in mind. This makes the Chapel an ideal place for performing sacred music of every period and style. The organ contains more than 1000 pipes located in chambers twelve feet above the Chapel floor. The longest pipe, which is in the mirror-finish facade, is more than twenty feet long while the shortest is less than one inch in length.

Crucifix

In the semicircular apse behind the main altar is a wooden figure of Christ Crucified set against the background of a convex cross sculpted within the wall. The Chapel Committee decided not to combine medieval carving with contemporary wood because neither an imitation of a Gothic cross nor a contemporary version would do justice to the ancient corpus. The deep brown corpus and its faint shadow against the stark whiteness of the wall create a strong impression. This Gothic figure, carved in the fourteenth century in Central Europe, is a gift of the Menil Foundation.

Altar

The altar is built in the tradition of stone on stone from royal impala granite chosen to correspond to the black wall and to contrast with the light gray floor of the Chapel. The design on the supports symbolizes water flowing from the altar, recalling both the living water given by Christ to all who believe in Him and the blood flowing from the sacrifice of Calvary.

Candlesticks

Six great candlesticks stand behind the altar, “with their lifting gesture reaching to Jesus the Christ Crucified above” (David Cargill). An expression of our worship, they also symbolize the angelic heavenly host with whom we unite ourselves when we pray. This is why the words “sanctus, sanctus, sanctus” (holy, holy, holy), sung by the angels in the vision of Isaiah, are inscribed around their bottom.

Tabernacle

In a similar sense two angels are represented on the doors of the tabernacle, like flames of love, adoring Jesus Christ, sacramentally present there. The eternal light burning to the side proclaims the same truth.

Icon of St. Basil

Above the tabernacle we see the icon of St. Basil, in its color the most dramatic element of the interior. This icon represents the style developed in the Ukraine in the fifteenth century. Its prototype comes from a church in southern Poland. Unlike paintings found in Western churches, icons of Eastern Christianity are not simply the creations of individual talents and the imagination of artists. They have been called “theology in color” because for Byzantine Christians icons are both the means by which the authentic tradition of the faith is transmitted and the means by which those who pray before them somehow come into the presence of the persons depicted, such as Christ, Mary or the saints. For this reason both the content and form of icons are strictly controlled by the teaching office of the Church. In practice this means that icon painters (iconographers, “those who write icons”) always stay within the general form of a prototype accepted by the Church and venerated by the faithful. Hence to our untrained eyes they all tend to appear so much alike.

As the Church is named after St. Basil, it is only proper that his image be displayed. Because Basil is a great Bishop and Doctor of the Eastern Church, where there exists a strong tradition of depicting him, we have decided to appeal to that tradition rather than try to and obtain a contemporary Western artist’s vision of the saint. We thus commissioned Michal Ploski, an accepted and authorized iconographer, living in Poland.

In the icon St. Basil the Great is represented as a bishop, Father and Doctor of the Church. He appears in complete liturgical vestments of a Byzantine archbishop. White garment decorated with black crosses, so-called polistaurion, corresponding to the Western chasuble, was originally reserved for the bishops of only four cities, one of which was Basil’s Caesarea. Later the privilege was extended to all metropolitan archbishops.

Green material wrapped round his neck and marked with crosses, called omophorion, is the sign of the episcopal office. It symbolizes the sheep which Christ the Good Shepherd carried on his shoulder (cf. Jn 10:1-18). Hence it is the sign of the bishop as the shepherd in imitation of Jesus. A similar interpretation sees in it the symbol of the Cross which the bishop bears, following Christ.

His right hand is raised in the gesture of episcopal blessing. The fingers of his hands are arranged to represent the Greek monogram of Jesus Christ (IC XC). The two fingers joined together remind us of the two natures of Christ united in one person, while the other three recall the mystery of the Trinity. As a successor to the apostles and Doctor of the Church, Basil holds a book of the Gospels in his left hand.

On each side of the icon are four scenes from life of the saint. Consistent with the

convention of iconography, they do not attempt a realistic account of his life but recall schematically its most essential moments. In the left column we see the following: 1) *The birth of St. Basil* (c. AD 330). His mother is resting and a nurse is bathing the baby. 2) *Basil's baptism by Bishop Dianios*. He was an adult then but is represented as a child, since newly baptized were compared to new-born children. The landscape suggests that for Basil baptism was the beginning of monastic life in the desert. 3) *Priestly vocation of St. Basil*. Deceased Bishop Dianios rests in his coffin, and another bishop, Eusebius, in accordance with the tradition of the Eastern Church, reads the Gospel read before the body of a deceased priest. Basil takes up the cross from the body of the dead bishop, symbolizing his own vocation to the priesthood. 4) *St. Basil as teacher and Doctor of the Church*. This scene is unique to this icon. It was added at our request, replacing the usual scene of a miracle worked by the saint. The column on the right side depicts the following scenes: 5) *St. Basil ordained a bishop* (AD 370). 6) *St. Basil as a protector of the poor and the sick*. He is presented freeing a sick person from the power of the devil. Basil stressed the duty of his monks to nurse the sick. He had a large hospice built at the monastery. 7), 8) *Funeral and burial of St. Basil*. These scenes are painted in accordance with the iconographic convention of representing the death of saints.

Stations of the Cross

Meditation on the Way of the Cross is for Catholics a favored devotion for contemplating God's love for us manifested in the passion and death of Jesus. For this chapel we have foregone the usual form of separate painted or relief panels hung on the wall. According to David Cargill, illusion of a convex image created when the light strikes the image carved in the wall "brings together the humanity and suffering of Jesus and the mystery of his sacrifice." The fourteen traditional stations create a story-image; following it the eye is drawn in a sustained movement from the condemnation of Jesus through his passion to his burial. To remind us that the story of the Savior does not end in the tomb but in the mystery of the Resurrection, Cargill added the figure of the Risen Christ. With arms outstretched, enveloped in a flowing robe, Christ may be seen both as "ascending to the Father" (cf. John 20:17) and as the High Priest in priestly robes, embracing the whole human race for whom He died. The shroud has become the chasuble of the Eucharistic Christ, thus pointing to the mystery celebrated on the altar.

It is worth noting that the stations are drawn in perspective. Some scenes appear to move closer to the viewer than others, and some recede, creating a dynamic quality in the narrative of the Passion, as it seems to move back and forth before the viewer.

Shrine of Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom

On the opposing (eastern) wall we see a shrine dedicated to Mary. The cone-

shaped shrine creates a quasi-separate space which at most times is more strongly illuminated from above than the rest of the Chapel. A bronze statue represents Mary in the traditional pose under the title of the Seat of Wisdom. In such representations she appears sitting in a chair resembling a royal throne or a bishop's *cathedra* (the chair from which he teaches). Here she is seated on a stool suggesting the model of the Chapel. Note the tent-flap opening intimated by what might also be seen as a fold in the material covering the stool. The artist wished to avoid all suggestions of the mother and child pose so favored by baroque and later artists, which, for all its charm, frequently naturalizes the image of that Mother and that Son. Instead, the artist returned to a more ancient mode of presentation, surviving in Byzantine icons, especially of the *hodigitria* type, where Mary is painted as seated on the throne from which her Divine Son reigns, or as the fulfillment of what was foreshadowed in the burning bush of Moses.

Mary does not embrace the figure of the child Jesus. He sits on her knees presenting the book of the gospels. Jesus, the Word of God, extends to us the written word of God. Her hands are stretched out to us in a welcoming and inviting movement appropriate to wisdom.