

## Our Beautiful Church

— A SERIES OF ARTICLES DEPICTING THE MAGNIFICENCE OF OUR CHURCH —

### PART THREE: A WALK THROUGH OUR LADY QUEEN OF MARTYRS CHURCH

#### WHY ROSE WINDOWS?

In part 2, we mentioned the problems faced by the medieval architect in erecting churches that would be durable, not too costly and safe from fire. Safety and structural integrity in these cathedrals might be provided by erecting thick and solid stone walls; but what of light? Gothic architects were opposed to leaving anything in darkness, and so enormous rose windows – like the three we have at Our Lady Queen of Martyrs – became the norm. Medievalists believed that *the fire of stained glass is celestial light*. More about our rose windows in later articles.

#### HOW LIGHT THE BURDEN

The gothic builder wanted to get rid of weight and mass, to let light in and arrive at the most delicate possible structure. The challenge, thus, was to relieve walls of the weight of ceilings and windows. Builders transferred that weight-bearing job elsewhere; modern architects refer to this as *point loading*. The solid black areas on the floor plan of Our Lady Queen of Martyrs refer to points in the structure that take on the entire weight of the church:



In the eleventh century, the builders of Durham were the first to begin exploring specific medieval innovations to allow this. Notice, for example, that all of the arches in the interior of our church are slightly pointed at their tops. The medieval pointed arch permits the weight of the roof and wall to *flow* or *travel* down the arch's sides and into load-bearing columns. Arches cap all side-aisle windows and appear in the back wall of the church; they also appear atop the enormous openings between the *piers* or columns running down the center aisle. The narrow *ribs* or lines you see in Our Lady Queen of Martyrs' *rib vaults* perform the same function: the weight of the building material travels to the four outer points and down into load-bearing columns.

#### RIB VAULTS, COLUMNS AND WINDOWS

*Rib vaults* form the ceilings of both side aisles and that of the *narthex* or vestibule on Ascan Avenue. The largest vault is located above the end of the center aisle, in front of the Communion rail. This point in the church is called the *crossing*; the tower we see from outside is located directly over this spot (*see photo*).

The five pairs of columns that run along the center aisle hold up the central roof and the second level – or *clerestory* – of our church. Overall, if walls can be relieved from this burden, they can be virtually eliminated. Sightlines in the church, then, are rarely interrupted. The rose windows, the choir window and the side aisle windows owe their great size to these supporting structures. On all these windows, the *stone tracery* (overlying stone skeleton)



that can be seen both inside and outside the church merely holds the glass and helps prevent damage from wind and weather. This tracery has no supporting structural role in the building. The areas in the building structure that continue, over time, to support its great weight do not do so statically; it is an active, organic process. Our Lady Queen of Martyrs church stands silently doing its work decade after decade.

#### DEVOTION'S FORM

In medieval architecture, the long perspective – or long vista – of the repetitive rhythm of arches and columns all lead to the distant mystery of the Sacrament. In the early centuries of Christianity, the Eastern or Russian Orthodox faith tended to prefer the *basilica* as its own form of cathedral. The basilica, regardless of its floor plan, would have a great dome arching far above a central location in the building. A long aisle might be incorporated, but ceremonies were held, for the most part, at the center of the church. The supreme moment would occur when the patriarch met the emperor beneath the dome, exchanged the kiss of peace and shared the chalice. The Sacrament was prepared secretly in a distant part of the church.

**DEVOTION'S FORM** (*continuation*)

Roman Catholic liturgy, however, has as its climax the elevation of the Sacrament, followed by Communion – sharing the precious Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ with the congregation. This all takes place at the end of the center aisle or *nave*, so called from the latin word for ship (*navis*), implying that the church is a refuge from life's troubled waters. All important ceremonies – Masses, weddings, funerals – begin with a procession from the back of the church to the sanctuary. All of this requires a long central aisle:



Photos by Pepa Tanousis

Our Lady Queen of Martyrs church is *cruciform*, or cross-shaped, as many early churches were. The *transept*, or arms of the cross, lies between confessionals. The *crossing*, mentioned also in the previous page, is the location where the transept intersects with the center aisle. This cruciform shape allows for smaller areas of devotion, such as our Sacred Heart chapel, to exist within the larger church. Ordinarily, churches were oriented along a west/east axis. Our Lady Queen of Martyrs church has its altar at the west end, which allows the main entrance to be located on Ascan Avenue. Upon reflection, no other entrance would have been as effective or appropriate.

**NINETEENTH CENTURY CONTRIBUTION**

Although all previous descriptions of the planning stages and building of Our Lady Queen of Martyrs church refer exclusively to its being freely rendered from the cathedral at Durham, our church actually owes much to the nineteenth-century Gothic Revivalist movement in America. In short, this is the same period that inspired Saint Patrick's cathedral, Grand Central station and a host of other buildings that have not been duplicated since for integrity of design and civic presence. There was a surge of ecclesiastical construction during this time and a number of architectural firms – among them Maginnis & Walsh, designers of Our Lady Queen of Martyrs – grew rapidly to meet the demand. Our church, although not begun until 1938, benefits from a number of the period's characteristics. Any revivalist time, in any artistic expression – whether in painting, sculpture, literature or architecture – looks with renewed interest and appreciation on the past. In the nineteenth century, architects took careful note of the building methods, decoration and arrangement of gothic ecclesiastical building and added touches of their own. They particularly admired the efficient and flexible ground plans around which the Church or monastic orders built cathedrals, abbeys and parish churches. Our Lady Queen of Martyrs "campus" resembles in the arrangement of church, school, rectory and convent buildings nothing so much as a cathedral *close* or compound. All buildings are compatible; small lanes around and between the buildings take a viewer through a constantly shifting series of pleasant perspectives. The buildings are within easy distance of one another and the entire arrangement effectively removes most awareness of the bustle on surrounding major streets. All this, and in the middle of Queens!