

St. Alphonsus Church Chicago, Illinois



Corner of Southport, Lincoln and Wellington
1429 W. Wellington, Chicago IL 60657
773-525-0709 - www.stalphonsuschgo.org

A brief history....

St. Alphonsus was founded in 1882 as a German national parish by the Redemptorist Fathers. Its patron, St. Alphonsus Ligouri, was the founder of their order.

While no longer a national parish, it is the only church in Chicago which continues to celebrate mass in German each month, and on Christmas and Easter.

The first church was a wooden structure at Southport and Oakdale. The first school was built next to this church. It contained eight classrooms, and opened with 70 students in 1882. The School Sisters of Notre Dame staffed the school and their convent occupied the top floor of the building.

In 1889, the cornerstone for the present church was laid. It was completed in 1896.

In 1902, ground was broken in a former cabbage patch for the current school building on the corner of Wellington and Greenview. It opened in September, 1903 with 1600 students. The building was rededicated on September 14, 2003 and was formally renamed the Alphonsus Academy and Center for the Arts.

In addition to the church and the school, the parish plant came to include a rectory, a convent and the Athenaeum Theatre. The Athenaeum was a German community center, including an opera house and bowling alley. The building also housed a two-year commercial high school for girls.

The parish suffered two devastating fires. On November 27, 1939, the Athenaeum burned. It was rebuilt and welcomed back students ten months later. On October 23, 1950, the church roof burned, heavily damaging the interior. On Thanksgiving, 1952, the church reopened.

The neighborhood around St. Alphonsus has changed dramatically in the last 40 years. The German immigrants were replaced by immigrants from Latin America. Currently the neighborhood is also the home to many young adults beginning their careers in Chicago. The ministries in the parish reflect these realities. Mass is celebrated in Spanish, as well as English and German.

In 1997, the School Sisters of Notre Dame concluded more than a century of service to the parish. In 1999, the Redemptorists handed the parish over to the care of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

The Athenaeum continues as a cultural center, providing a home to various arts organizations, as well performance space on the main stage and in smaller theaters. The Lakeview Pantry is also housed in this building. The former convent is now a transitional living center for homeless women, sponsored by Deborah's Place, while the rectory has become the parish center and offices, as well as living space for the priests.

Between 2002 and 2008, extensive renovations were made to the physical plant. This was capped by a full restoration of the interior of the church.

Exploring the Interior of the Church...

Starting from the narthex, as you enter the church, you will see a panoramic view of the Italian marble altars. As you walk toward them, note a "leaf and acorn" motif in the decoration in the capitals of the pillars. This was a reminder to

the original German congregation of their homeland, especially the Black Forest region. The architecture follows a Gothic design, with soaring, pointed arches directing your gaze to the heavens. It was traditional to paint the ceilings of Gothic churches blue, with gold stars, for this reason. We've recaptured the tradition here.

The whole design of the church reminds us of the earth, with the trees reaching up toward the heavens. We are still "of the earth", but are destined for heaven. The stained glass provides glimpses of that eternity.



The Baptistry:

As you move down the aisle, you will see the baptistry. It incorporates the original font acquired in the 1880s. This has been joined with a new marble font for the baptisms of adults and older children. Both fonts are octagonal. This symbolizes the seven days of creation, and then Jesus' resurrection on the 'eighth day'. All who are baptized are reborn into this new creation. The gold cross set in a field of blue inside the font mirrors the ceiling and its symbolism of heaven, as baptism opens the way to eternal life. The marble pool incorporates symbols also found in the apse of the church over the altar. These are symbols of Christ and their repetition reminds us of the connection between baptism and the Eucharist.

The fonts are set on an axis with the large mission crucifix. This crucifix was placed here to

commemorate missions preached in 1899, 1905 and 1913. It is made of oak, while the corpus of Christ is carved from walnut. It continues to link the parish to its Redemptorist history. The Paschal candle is also placed by the font.

The Altars:

The two central altars are made of Italian marble. Together, they made up the old 'high altar' in place before the liturgical reforms of Vatican II. This altar was commissioned for the church in the 1930s, but because of the war, was not installed until later in the 1940s. It was still new at the time of the 1950 fire, but emerged unscathed from the collapse of the roof. The ornate carvings are meant to symbolize flames, from which this style, 'flamboyant', (from the French word for 'flame') derives its name.

The altars contain three mosaics. At the left on the back altar is Melchizedek, making a sacrifice of bread and wine. (Genesis 14:18). The letter to the Hebrews recasts Melchizedek as a forerunner of Christ and the priesthood. (Hebrews 5 through 7.) The mosaic on the right depicts Abraham beginning to sacrifice Isaac. (Genesis 22.) The angel stills Abraham's knife, with the message that God does not ask the Hebrews to sacrifice their children. Yet, God chose to sacrifice his own son, Christ, for our salvation.



The mosaic in the center of the main altar is of the risen Lord revealing himself to two disciples at Emmaus, as they broke bread. (Luke 24.)

The wall above the sanctuary:

On the left is a picture of the Holy Eucharist. In the center is a study of the Trinity, with God offering the crucified Christ to us. At the right is another image of the Holy Eucharist with the triangle, a symbol of the Trinity.

The bas relief images:

Jesus is shown holding a lamb, a reminder that he is the Lamb of God, the ultimate sacrifice. On either side are the Alpha and the Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. These symbolize that Christ was present at Creation, the beginning, and will be present at the end of time.

Figures of the four evangelists:

Nearby are images of the four Gospel writers:

- A man for Matthew's gospel, which tells us of the human genealogy of Jesus.
- A lion for Mark's gospel. John the Baptist appears at the beginning of the gospel, like a lion 'crying in the wilderness.'
- An ox for Luke's gospel. Luke has references to the sacrifices in the Temple, including the story of the Presentation of Christ, in Luke 2.
- An eagle for John's gospel. This represents the divine nature of Christ as described by John.

The tabernacle:

The tabernacle is behind the bronze door in the center of the high altar. The Eucharist is kept there, to take to the ill and for devotion.

The saints depicted in the high altar:

Above the tabernacle, left to right are St. Aloysius, St. Gerard Majella, St. Alphonsus, St. Clement (all Redemptorists). The two women are St. Teresa of Avila, a Doctor of the Church, and St. Agnes, an early Roman martyr.

In between the statues are images to remind us of Christ's passion: a whip, crown of thorns, hammer and nails.

Far above those images are figures of the four archangels, Michael, Raphael, Gabriel and Uriel.

The windows in the sanctuary:

All of the windows in the church are the work of the Mayer company from Munich, Germany. Above the right sacristy doorway is one of St. Gerard Majella, the patron saint of pregnant women. The other is St. Alphonsus preaching at Foggia about his love for the Blessed Mother. As he spoke, the Blessed Mother appeared to him. He was elevated from the ground. The

congregation also saw the apparition.

Above the left sacristy doorway, one window is of St. Clement Hofbauer, who brought the Redemptorist order to Germany. The other is of St. Alphonsus adoring the Eucharist.

The shrines at the front of the church:

On the left, the shrine honors Mary, the Mother of God under her title of Our Lady of Perpetual Help.



The original of this image was placed under the care of the Redemptorists in Rome and one finds it duplicated all over the world. The image tells a story: the child Jesus had been frightened by two angels bearing the instruments of his torture and death.

He ran to his mother for comfort and help. (His sandal has come loose in his haste.) The image is to remind us that even Jesus asked for Mary's help and prayers. We can do the same.

The shrine on the right is dedicated to St. Joseph.

The walls behind the shrines are stenciled in a pattern reminiscent of the Victorian era, when the church was built. At that time, all the walls and ceilings were stenciled.

Above these shrines are two murals, which were uncovered during the church restoration. Above the shrine of the Blessed Mother is a depiction of St. Alphonsus, St. Clement Hofbauer and St. Gerard Majella in prayer at the altar. Note that the base of the altar contains an image of St. Peter's basilica in Rome, a symbol of the dedication of the Redemptorists to the service of the church.

The mural above the St. Joseph shrine shows the earliest Redemptorists who came as missionaries to the United States in the nineteenth century. They are on the shore, in prayer to Christ, who is shown with Sts. Alphonsus, Clement Hofbauer and Gerard Majella.

The shrine on the south side of the church:

This shrine contains images of Our Lady of Guadalupe and El Señor de Esquipulas. Both of these show the influence of Latin American immigration into the parish. Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to St. Juan Diego in 1531 near Mexico City. She appeared as an Indian woman, not a European, standing upon the moon and in front of the sun. Both the sun and the moon were Aztec gods. She is wearing a black sash, as Aztec women did to show they were pregnant. The child she bears is greater than the Aztec gods and is being born for the Indians as much as for the Spanish.

The crucifix is a duplicate of the original in Guatemala, a site of great devotion.

The shrines on the north side of the church:

The shrine on the right is dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. To the left is a statue of the Infant Jesus of Prague.

Also on the north side of the church you will find the ambry, containing the oils used in the celebration of the sacraments. These oils are blessed each Holy Week by the Archbishop and brought here from the Cathedral.

The stained glass in the north side of the nave:

(From the front to the back.)

- The marriage of Mary and Joseph
- Jesus and the children
- Jesus condemned by Pilate
- Burial of Jesus, with St. John holding the crown of thorns as Mary, Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea mourn
- The Resurrection
- Jesus visiting with Martha and Mary
- A woman washes Jesus' feet
- St. Catherine of Alexandria, martyr

The stained glass in the south side of the nave:

(From the front to the back.)

- St. Alphonsus praying to Our Lady of Perpetual Help
- The Holy Family

- Mary with her parents, St. Anne and St. Joachim
- The Adoration of the Magi
- The child Jesus in the Temple
- The Transfiguration
- The call of the rich young man
- The Sistine Madonna and Child (after Raphael)

Statues in the nave of the church:

St. Alphonsus was named a Doctor of the Church for his writings on moral theology and spirituality. His statue (polychromed wood and with a real feather!) is off the main aisle.

Above the pillars are other Doctors of the Church, four from the Greek East and four from the Latin West: St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory Nazianzen, St. John Chrysostom, St. Athanasius, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, St. Gregory the Great, and St. Jerome. Like all statues in churches, they remind us of the communion of saints that gathers with us at the Eucharist. ("We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses..." - Hebrews 12:1). By being integrated with the pillars, these figures also call to mind the way our faith is supported by and deepened by the faith of other Christians through time.