Convent of the Discalced Carmelites

1236 North Rampart Street

In May 1878, a few months after arriving, the first four Discalced Carmelite nuns in New Orleans heard their first Mass on the site of this fascinating monastery. In 1895 the convent, designed by James Freret and surrounded by 22-foot walls, was completed. It housed both extern and cloistered sisters, with separate living spaces for the two groups. The cloistered nuns could not worship surrounded by the beautiful windows of the Chapel of the Transfiguration, as they said Mass from behind a screen.

The Carmelite Order was founded early in the 13th century, during the Crusades, taking its name from Mt. Carmel, by the Mediterranean Sea in Palestine. Its early communities of friars and nuns followed a demanding regimen of silence, fasting, and prayer. Over the years, however, adherence to these rules relaxed. In the mid-sixteenth century Teresa of Avila, Spain, founded the Discalced Carmelite order of friars and nuns for those desiring a return to the primitive observance. She was also a successful advocate for contemplative prayer and a mystical approach to communication with God. Members of the cloistered order are often called the Barefoot Carmelitesin contrast to the Calced, or Shod, Carmelites, who, though still dedicated to a life of contemplative prayer, work in the world outside the convent. (Even the Discalced Carmelites have always been permitted to wear sandals, traditionally made of hemp, a harsh material.)

Although the noise from the surrounding world might seem inescapable, the convent provided an effective refuge for those choosing the contemplative life. It was so quiet, recalled a Discalced Carmelite nun who lived there for 45 years. In 1971, with their population down to six, the Carmelites retired to smaller quarters and sold the convent to the Archdiocese. The complex served for many years as a retreat center and as home for a charismatic covenant community, the Center of Jesus the Lord. (This congregation moved to Our Lady of Good Counsel Church in 2016, when the Carmelite complex was sold to a developer as a party venue.)

The windows came from many studios. The portrayal of the Religious Ecstasy of St. Teresa of Avila (15151582), founder of the Discalced Carmelites, is signed by the Franz Mayer Company of Munich. (The Mayer records refer to this window as the Transverberation of the Heart.) The Mayer order book lists three other windows from that studio were installed in 1895, but apparently the original order was expanded to a total of five. The Carmelite St. Peter Thomas, though ordered, is not in the sanctuary. The outstanding artistic renderings hint that both the St. John of the Cross and the St. Cyril windows were from the Mayer Studio.

Other windows feature characteristics of American glass at the turn of the century: three-dimensional glass jewels and opalescent glass. Differences in design and quality of construction hint that several studios created the non-Mayer windows. The rose window is a profusion of pink glass, opalescent white clouds and angel wings, and glass jewels. Other windows feature both Carmelites and non-Carmelites.

**Windows**

Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Transfiguration Elijah on Mt. Carmel

Altar

St. Cyril of Alexandria Suppressing Nestorius (Mayer?) Mary, Our Lady of Guadalupe\*

St. Telesphorus, Pope and Martyr Pope Pius V

St. John of the Cross (Mayer?) Religious Ecstasy of St. Teresa of Avila\*

Virgin Crushing the Serpent St. Joseph

St. Francis Xavier\* St. Angelus the Carmelite

Balcony

St. Teresa of Avila St. Cecilia

Mary Magdalena de Pazzi Unidentified Carmelite Nun with Instruments of the Passion

St. Albert Trapani of Sicily St. John of the Cross

Rose Window: Mary and the Child

*\* From the Mayer Studio*

*Visited*

*September 1998*

*March 27, 2011*

**Additional Comments on Individual Windows**

Behind the altar, Mary as Our Lady of Mt. Carmel is passing the scapular to St. Simon Stock, a Carmelite friar from England. Our Lady is dressed in the Carmelites brown habit, not the traditional blue of the Virgin Mary. On the right is the Vision of the Holy Prophet Elias (Elijah), also on Mt. Carmel. The historic Carmelite monastery stands on the place where Elijah lived and fought the Baal, and the motto of the order is attributed to him.

The Transfiguration is portrayed prominently in the center, as this is the Chapel of the Transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus Christ. This is a subject depicted rarely in New Orleans glass. The motto of the order also appears in this window: With zeal have I been zealous for the Lord God of Hosts.

Because the three windows behind the altar include a large number of three-dimensional glass gems, as well as opalescent glass, they are American made. The colors there are not as vibrant as many of the windows in the nave.

In the nave, the first window on the epistle side shows St. Cyril literally stamping out the Nestorian Heresy. The Nestorians believe that Jesus was born a human, acquiring divine attributes after his birth. This is a direct threat to the status of Mary as the Mother of God. Since Mary is central to the Carmelites doctrine, such beliefs must be opposed. On the basis of workmanship, it seems that Mayer produced the Nestorian window though it is not listed in the extant order book.

St. Telesphorussecond window on the leftwas a hermit and venerated as a patron saint of the Carmelites. He was also the patron saint of Jacques Telesphore Roman, who was the father of one of the original four Carmelite sisters in New Orleans and built Oak Alley Plantation. Telesphorus status as pope is symbolized by the keys to heaven, and the palm frond he carries indicates that he died a martyrs death.

Pope Pius V, across from St. Telesphorus, stands next to St. Teresa of Avila. During his tenure as pope he actively opposed St. Teresa because of her reforms, especially mysticism and personal communication with God through contemplative prayer.

St. Teresa of Avila wears the habit of Carmelite sisters. She faces, across the chapel, St. John of the Cross, who was the most famous of the male Carmelites fighting for greater austerity within the order. The excellent execution of these windowsfor example, the facial features and the folds in the cloth or the beautiful red hat of St. John of the Crossimplies that the Mayer studio created this window even though the order book specified St. Peter Thomas. Although the Carmelites observe a life of poverty and wear habits of wool, these two saints are dressed in opulent fabrics.

The portrait of St. Teresa is signed by the Mayer Studio, and a letter from the company states that they had installed windows in 1895, the year the convent was dedicated.

The dates and makers of the remaining windows remain a mystery. The artist who produced the Pope Pius V window, for example, was clearly not as skilled as those who painted the windows flanking him. Pope Pius staff includes faceted glass jewels, so we know that the window was American made. Stylistically, most obviously in terms of the framing, it pairs up with St. Telesphorus.

St. Joseph can be identified by the lilies growing out of his staff. His window is of inferior craftsmanship, even from a structural standpoint, as it bulges at the bottom. Stylistically this window matches its neighbor, St. Angelus, a Carmelite priest who was martyred while evangelizing in Italy. Similar in style on the balcony is St. Albert Trapani, a mendicant Carmelite priest from Sicily. Since many residents in the French Quarter at that time were of Italian, specifically Sicilian, origin, the inclusion of these two obscure saints is not surprising.

With the exception of the rose window, the balcony glass is of humble workmanship and badly needed repair during our tours. The rose window, however, is outstanding. It contrasts markedly with the more traditional windows in the nave. Opalescent glass forms the clouds and angels wings. The abundance of pink is unusual but fitting for a womens chapel. Each angel faces Mary. Again, glass jewels set at intersections of the leading provide sparkle. Mary carries a miniature version of the brown scapular that is part of the Carmelite habit and history.

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