

Our Lady of Victory Chapel
The College of St. Catherine
2004 Randolph Avenue
St. Paul, Minnesota 55116

The portico and interior details at Our Lady of Victory Chapel on the campus of The College of St. Catherine, St. Paul, Minn., are faithful reproductions of those at St. Trophime, Arles, France.

Peasants living in southern France in the 11th and 12th centuries generally weren't able to read. The stone images at the local parish church, therefore, communicated the lessons of their religion.

Literature telling the story of the consecration of Our Lady of Victory Chapel on May 1, 1958, The Feast of St. Joseph the Worker, fully describes the details and their meanings making up the artistic embellishment greeting visitors as they enter the portal of the building:

Crowning the west portal is the head of Christ surrounded by the virtues of which He is the source: purity, with lilies, meekness caressing a lamb, faith clasping a cross, hope clinging to the anchor, charity swaying the censer of prayer, simplicity holding two white doves, wisdom reading from a sacred book, justice with the balance, industry bearing sheaves and a sickle and, lastly, fortitude slaying the serpent with a sword.

Sharing first and most abundantly in the divine life and virtue of Our Lord, Our Lady of Victory sits enthroned with the divine Child, surrounded by multitudes of angels. As a reminder of the source of her victory, her Child stands with arms extended in the form of His victorious Cross.

On either side of the throne, angels offer incense from swinging censers, drawing our eyes to this central group in the tympanum.

In the frieze below, the twelve apostles accompanied by divine faith and divine science teach all nations, bearing witness with Our Lady to the victory of Christ. Tall columns form niches in which like pillars in this monument to the Holy Child and His Mother stand other saints particularly invoked as patrons of the chapel. St. Michael, with a sword of flame, and St. John the Evangelist, guard the door; with them are St. Joseph, St. Augustine, St. Anthony of Padua, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Rose of Lima, St. Agnes, St. Therese and St. Catherine of Alexandria.

This last saint, as patroness of the college, is specially commemorated in the frieze. We see her first as a princess giving her riches to the poor. This, however, is only the beginning of Catherine's Christianity. The zeal of her devotion to Christ requires an active outlet, and we see her next crying out in protest as she holds a cross before a Christian who has just been sacrificed to a pagan idol. For this daring act, as the frieze shows us, she is thrown into prison by the enraged emperor where, legend tells us, she received the supernatural consolation of St. Michael the Archangel, the mighty warrior of heaven, who exhorted her to stout warfare in the ranks of Christ's army.

The next episode has been variously interpreted. It may represent the death of the empress who, though sent to Catherine by the emperor in the hope of making her renounce her faith in Jesus Christ, returned from the visit a Christian. One legend relates that she was sentenced to die and that she did so bravely, strengthened by the prayers and holy encouragement of Catherine. It is possible that it is she who is shown here bound to the wheel and that this wheel is the same one intended also for Catherine's death, but subsequently broken at the Saint's touch.

The remaining sections of the frieze tell of the events preceding Catherine's death: We see celebrated her fame as patroness of Christian learning as she instructs her jailers and outwits the pagan priests with words divinely inspired; they in attitudes of rage are about to condemn her to die and we see her next in chains, led by the emperor into the presence of forty Christians (some say, the pagan philosophers she had converted) about to be burned for their faith; but far from being shaken by the sight, the Saint reveals again the strength of her love of God. She prays for mercy for the martyrs and at her prayer they die praising God, yet miraculously preserved from the flames.

The actual moment of St. Catherine's sacrifice is depicted immediately to the right of the door leading to the altar of the sacrifice of the great Martyr. The wheel prepared for her death having been miraculously destroyed, we see her now with her head on the block as she prepares to accept the death blow which will unite her forever to Him she so gloriously championed, Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Legend tells us that after St. Catherine's death, angels bore away her body to a glorious resting place. This final triumph is commemorated in the capital of the column placed at the center of the doorway.

The animals at the bases of the pillars represent vices; vile and degraded, occupying the lowest places, they are crushed beneath the feet of the saints who in the strength of Christ and Our Lady have risen above all that is unclean or unholy. Many of the animals here are suggested by *contes* or legends well-known in southern France; the children and the lamb placed in the midst of fierce animals symbolize helpless innocence or those who are not able to fight to find the light. The goat between two griffins, according to the legend recounted by Daudet, is that young goat who, although he knew he had no chance, fought all night against two hideous monsters. When morning came, however, he gladly surrendered and let the griffins devour him, thus symbolizing the man who fights courageously all through life, but submits willingly when his Creator calls him into the morning of eternal life. The philosopher between evil beasts symbolizes the man who, having found the key of everything in Christ his Salvation, sits undisturbed between his tempters.¹

Construction of Our Lady of Victory Chapel was completed in 1924. It was designed by H. A. Sullwold. Frank Kacmarcik designed the altar, tabernacle, candlesticks, sanctuary lamp and consecration candle holders in 1957-8.

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The Consecration of Our Lady of Victory Chapel, The College of St. Catherine, St. Paul, Minn. Quoted with permission.