The Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, Savannah, GA
August 2015
Our stained glass windows are beautiful but many Cathedrals have nice windows.

Our Stations of the Cross are very special, featuring wood carved, hand painted, stand-alone figures. They are among the finest I have ever seen, but many churches have nice stations too.

However, the most extraordinary decorative feature of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist is its 34 outstanding murals.

The Cathedral exhibits an unusual amount of painted surface rarely seen in the churches of America. It has often been favorably compared to the great Cathedrals of Europe.

Michelangelo’s frescoes in the Sistine Chapel are the cornerstone of high renaissance art. Though no work of art can rival his masterpiece, our murals are masterpieces in their own right and have been acknowledged as the most beautiful in the South.

Hence the Cathedral’s appellation, “The Sistine of the South”.

From early Christianity to well into the middle ages, most people could neither read nor write, so murals were a way to teach the masses about the faith. They served as illustrated catechisms, aiding preachers with the presentation of the subject matter to their flocks. Over the centuries great artists vied with one another to create the most detailed and symbolic paintings dealing with man’s history of salvation.

The thirty four (34) enormous and elegantly detailed murals that adorn the upper reaches of our church are executed with ecclesiastical precision. They are different from frescoes, which are painted on fresh, wet plaster (a la fresca). Over 100 years old, our murals were actually hand painted in oil on canvas in New York City and transported to Savannah for installation.

In 1911, Bishop Keiley commissioned Christopher Murphy, a Cathedral parishioner and noted Savannah artist, to conceptualize and implement a program of mural decoration for the Cathedral to fill the essentially empty space then occupied by
nondescript stenciling of small ecclesiastical symbols. Murphy sought inspiration from the murals in the Library of Congress and the US Capital as well as the decorations in other churches and public buildings in New York, Boston, Montreal and Quebec. He personally planned and directed the mural development and placement. Murphy commissioned Paul Gutsche, an artist who had worked on the Library of Congress project, to execute the oil paintings for the Cathedral. A team of artists in New York painted these renaissance style pieces in Gutsche’s studio in Greenwich Village; they were later installed in the Cathedral, much like you would put up wallpaper, for the formal reopening on Pentecost Sunday, May 19, 1912. The newspaper headline at the time proclaimed, “Famous Paintings Adorn Cathedral”; The story continued, “Resplendent in its beauty, created by the touch of artistic genius, the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist is again ready to be occupied for the honor and glory of God.”

During the restoration of 1999 and 2000, Conrad Schmidt’s workers hand cleaned the murals with water and a cotton swab. The background pattern was added with a stencil as well as some brushstrokes around the haloes to highlight them. Since the Cathedral was been fully restored we can unreservedly appreciate the beautiful murals which adorn the walls of our church.

The Cathedral murals tell the story of God’s plan for the salvation of mankind beginning on the southwest transept wall with Adam and Eve, whose disobedience brought misfortune to mankind, pictured being expelled from the Garden of Eden by the Angel of Yahweh with a flaming sword. The angel stands guard to prevent their return to Paradise.

Also on the southwest wall is a panel depicting Abraham, the father of all believers, leading a procession of Patriarchs including Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Human salvation history begins with Abraham, who at God’s command was willing to sacrifice, his “only and beloved son.” This consent of Abraham foretells the coming of Christ, God the Father’s only begotten Son.
On the opposite southeast wall, Moses, the great Law-giver is shown holding the two tablets of the Ten Commandments he received from God on Mount Sinai. Next comes Aaron carrying a staff with a serpent, followed by the Procession of the Old Testament Prophets including Elias, Isaiah, Jeremiah, (and in the second panel) Ezekiel, Daniel, Zacharias and Malachi.

According to the scriptures, Aaron threw down the staff in front of the Egyptian Pharaoh. To prove the power of the Hebrew God, it became a serpent. Pharaoh ordered his magicians to turn their staffs into serpents. When they did, Aaron's serpent devoured those belonging to the magicians, thus proving the superiority of the God of Abraham.

Directly below, is a monumental (16 x 18 ft) mural depicting the Feast of Pentecost. Shown on page 2, it illustrates the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove as the Apostles gathered with Mary in the upper room of a house in Jerusalem. While they worshipped, "tongues of fire" came to rest on the head of each of them. The Apostles, thus strengthened and emboldened by the Holy Spirit, went forth preaching in tongues to all and ultimately established the Church. Hence Pentecost is known as the Birthday of the Church.
Across the way on the northeast transept wall are two panels depicting the Procession of Apostles led by St. Peter, who holds the Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, given to him by Christ to be the head of the Church on earth. St. John is depicted holding a chalice which refers to an attempt to poison him with wine; St. Matthew is shown with a sword by which he was slain; St. Simon holds a saw with which his body was rent asunder and St. Philip a cross referring to his travels and martyrdom. St. James the Lesser is also pictured.

In the second panel, St. Andrew is shown with the “X” shaped cross on which he was crucified. Mathias, the one chosen to replace Judas, is depicted carrying an open Bible. Doubting Thomas is shown holding a builders square as he built many churches.

Directly below the murals of the Apostles is the colossal Sermon on the Mount mural depicting Jesus proclaiming the Beatitudes which gave his followers instructions for a moral and upright life. (Shown on page 2)

The fourteen (14) symbols painted with blue backgrounds, in the apse above and behind the altar, refer to events surrounding the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ.
Below the Pentecost mural is a depiction of St. Anthony of Padua and the Infant Jesus. Saint Anthony of Padua, O.F.M. (1195 - 1231) Born and raised by a wealthy Lisbon family, he moved to Italy in 1220 and joined the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor. The city of Padua is inextricably linked to St. Anthony. Venerated all over the world, he is patron of the city. Because of his visions of the Child Jesus, he is often depicted carrying the Infant. He is also popularly known as the patron of lost articles

Across the way, have a mural of The Blessed Virgin and the Christ Child. Mary has been venerated since Early Christianity and is considered the most meritorious of saints. As Catholics, we believe that Mary, as Mother of Jesus, is the Mother of God and the Theotokos, or "Giver of birth to God". Catholics also believe in distinctive Marian dogmas including her Immaculate Conception, her perpetual virginity, and her Assumption into heaven.

Throughout the church beneath the murals are thirty-two (32) dark coral shields bearing Christian symbols that represent the apostles, saints and aspects of the Christian faith.
Many were created during the periods of persecution as a form of coded language due to the need for secrecy, while others represent events in a saint’s life.

To the left of the Sermon on the Mount mural is The Flight into Egypt. In a dream St. Joseph received a warning that King Herod ordered the murder of all boys under the age of two who lived in Bethlehem in order to destroy the Messiah he feared had recently been born. Joseph protected his family by taking Mary and Jesus to live in Egypt until conditions were safe for the Holy Family to return and live in safety in Nazareth of Galilee.

Directly above the confessional, is an image showing Jesus comforting a sinner. It is reminiscent of the story of the Prodigal Son and the unconditional love of the father as he welcomes home his wayward son. Allegorically, the son represents all of us when we commit sins and then return to God asking for his mercy. This mural is a departure from the biblical story as it shows the sinner being comforted by Jesus not an earthly father.
And on the opposite northwest transept wall we see the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. Forty days after his birth, Mary and Joseph, complying with Jewish law, offered two turtle doves dedicating him to God as their firstborn son. Christ is pictured in the arms of the aged priest Simeon the Just in the presence of Anna the prophetess. They embody Israel in their patient expectation and acknowledge the infant Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. Simeon said to Mary: "Behold this child is set for the fall … of many in Israel … And thy own soul a sword shall pierce."

Next to the Presentation mural is an unusual depiction of St. John the Baptist as a small child. The cross staff he carries symbolizes his life's mission. The drape on top of the staff reads "Ecce Agnus" which in Latin means "Behold the Lamb." He is shown with his parents, Elizabeth and Zachariah, as well as his aunt and uncle, Mary and Joseph. The elder standing behind the family is possibly the prophet Elijah whose mission as a reformer paralleled that of John the Baptist. Both men called on sinners to repent and return to holiness.

In the apse, high above the main altar, are four of the largest and most important murals in the cathedral, the Evangelists - Saints Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

The ten panels above either side of the central nave, portray The Procession of Saints. These murals show various groupings of Saints, including the Missionaries, Youths, Kings, Martyrs, Virgin Martyrs, Apostles to the Nations, Doctors, Founders of Religious Orders and two panels of various Women Saints, contain full figured portrayals of 46 Saints, with detailed liturgical symbols associated with many of them.

The Five Apostles to the Nations mural on the south side elicits the most interest because it depicts a decapitated St. Denis, the Patron of France. Legend states that after his head was severed, he picked it up and continued walking and preaching.

The Five Missionaries mural on the north side also draws much commentary. The central figure, St. Isaac Jogues, was a French Jesuit priest, who was martyred while ministering to the Huron natives in upstate New York. The muralist has depicted him dressed entirely in Indian garb.
HIDDEN MURALS

THESE THREE WONDERFUL MURALS THAT RARELY GET SEEN BY CATHEDRAL PARISHIONERS, ARE LOCATED ON THE SIDE WALLS AND BEHIND THE ALTAR IN THE REAR OF THE SACRED HEART CHAPEL

MELCHISEDECH  KING DAVID  OLD TESTAMENT PRIEST