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# ST. MARY CATHEDRAL

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*The history and theology of a sacred building*

If we listen to St. Mary's cathedral, this church will tell us many stories. It will tell us of the confident and creative faith of the German, Irish, and French immigrants to Austin at the end of the nineteenth century. The architectural style of the building expresses not only their love of the European Catholic church which had formed them but also the Romantic sensibility of their time.

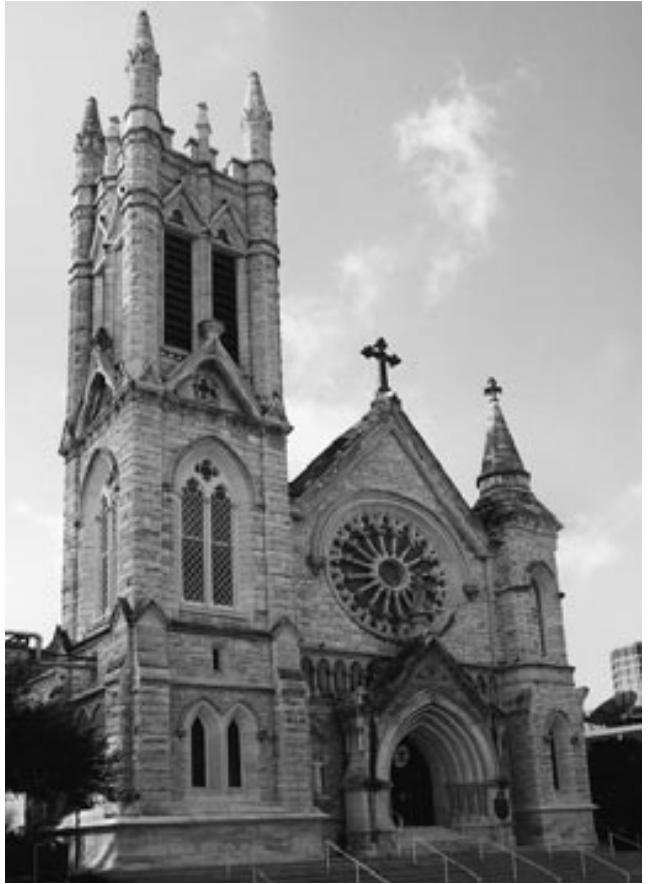
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“HOW LOVELY  
IS THY  
DWELLING  
PLACE, O  
LORD OF  
HOSTS.”

Ps. 84:1

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In the splendid stained glass windows, we see their reverence for the saints whose stories reveal many ways to love and serve God. The images of the cathedral—crosses, crowns, bells, stars, and angels—also speak of the church through the centuries who reads in sacred scripture her own history of a journey to the presence of God.



## **Austin History**

This church developed from the convergence of four movements: economic, demographic, artistic, and spiritual. As we look at this building surrounded by banks, bureaucrats, and satellite dishes, imagine the small town that was the temporary capitol of the new state in the early 1850's with about 600 inhabitants—journalists and politicians, opportunists and shopkeepers. The Catholics

among them constructed St. Patrick's, a small stone church on the corner of 9th and Brazos. Stone meant the consolation of permanence, a sign that here settlers would dwell on the frontier and worship God.

Because the city of Austin, then called Waterloo, had been laid out in 1839 according to the New England grid pattern, this church was not located at the city's hub, like San Fernando Cathedral in

San Antonio, designed according to the Spanish urban pattern, but was more anonymously situated within the grid. Austin prospered after the Civil War. When the railway arrived in 1871 bringing new citizens and materials for a building boom, Austin grew exponentially.

The Land Office building, the new state capitol, and the Methodist classic revival church were under construction when the parish, renamed St. Mary's in 1866, decided they needed a new church and could afford masonry construction. In 1872 after Austin was made the permanent capital of the state, the parish laid the cornerstone for a new church, choosing a location one block north of the first building. The local paper in 1874 referred to the valley intervening between hills of the new church and the capitol which gave the new structure an



imposing aspect. Just as the citizens of Texas saw the capitol as a symbol of their aspirations for the state, so did these Central Texas Catholics dream of a church which would memorably express their faith.

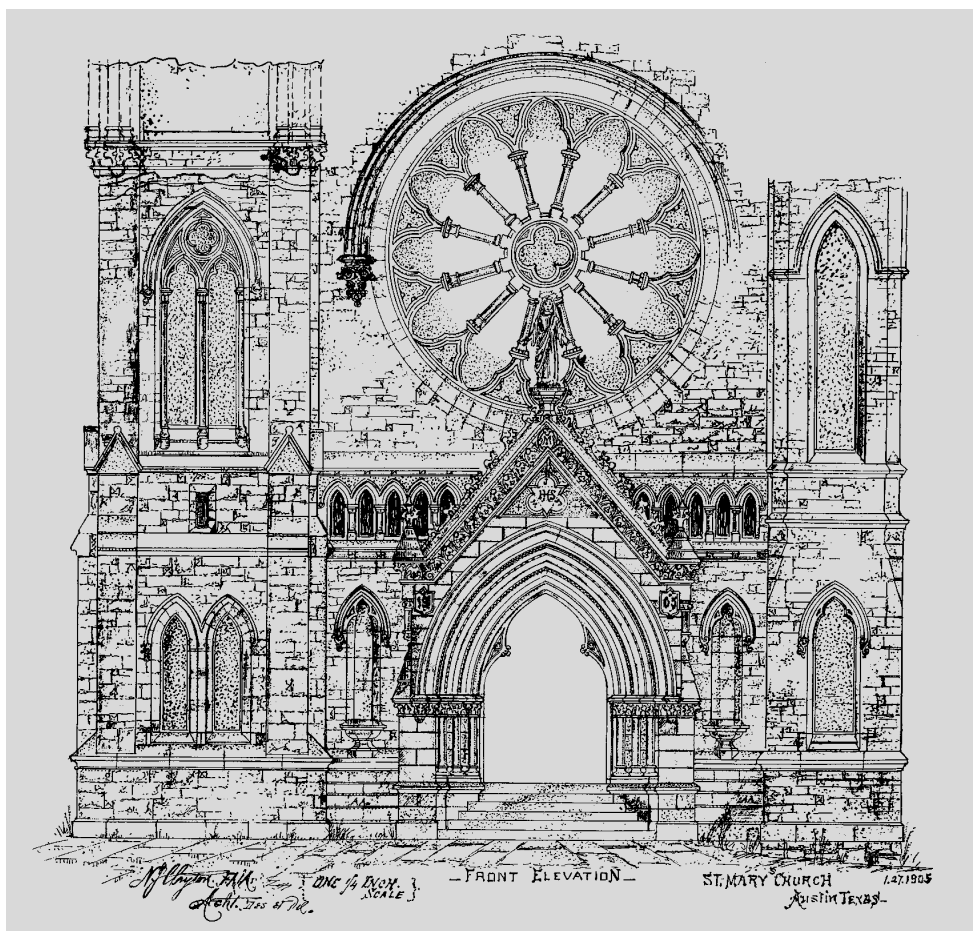
### Nicholas Clayton, Architect

Not only was the state new, but architecture as a profession was in its infancy. The parish had laid out a basilica-shaped foundation and begun raising the walls which were five feet high when the architect Nicholas

Clayton began to design their new church. Eventually to become the foremost Victorian architect in Texas, Clayton had never designed a church and St. Mary's was his first independent commission.

Born in Ireland in 1840, Clayton came to this country with his widowed mother when he was two, and grew up in the Midwest. After fighting in the Civil War, he learned masonry and building design in Cincinnati, and came to Galveston in 1872 on behalf of his Ohio firm.

At that time, Austin was part of the diocese of Galveston, and it may have been through the Holy Cross fathers that the bishop connected Nicholas Clayton with the first Catholic parish in Austin. This church began Clayton's long, prolific career, centered in Galveston, building primarily ecclesiastical struc-





tures but also commercial buildings and homes. In addition to important commissions elsewhere in the south, he designed at least 150 buildings in Texas.

A devout Catholic who attended daily mass, Clayton designed buildings for the Congregation of the Sacred Heart, the Jesuits, and the Ursuline Sisters as well as numerous parishes throughout the Diocese of Galveston and elsewhere in the south. Many of these structures built of wood were destroyed by hurricanes and fires, but the Bishop's Palace in Galveston (1886), Sacred Heart Church in Tampa (1888), and St. Edward's Main Building in Austin (1907) illustrate his genius for expressing spiritual reality in building, selecting appropriate materials, exacting fine craftsmanship from his workers, and attending to the most precise details of construction.

### **Gothic Revival**

Clayton's work is in the tradition of the 19th century architects who rejected the rigidity and symmetry of classical architecture and turned to the Middle Ages for inspiration.

The Gothic revival movement began in England, inspired by Catholics who saw in cathedrals like Chartres and Notre Dame the essence of Catholic tradition. Gothic architecture had flowered from the 12th to the 15th centuries after European society had assimilated the wisdom of the pagans-Greek, Roman, barbarians-and the church had established herself as the sole spiritual power of that world. After neo-Gothic crossed the Atlantic, liturgical churches—Lutherans and Episcopalians as well as Catholics—favored the style.

In Austin, the old Gethsemane Lutheran and All Saints Episcopal built shortly after St.

Mary's are also neo-Gothic churches.

### **Belief made visible**

St. Mary's design repeatedly evokes natural places where men encounter the divine. The tree-like columns with their foliage carved on capitals, the tracery of vines and leaves in the murals, and in the floral topped finials are like the forest. The pointed arches on doors and windows and the spires remind us of mountains. The elevated ceiling and the blue dome spangled with stars reflect the sky and the heavens.

Each detail of the façade alludes to Catholic doctrine: the triangles express the Holy Trinity; the lily, the purity of the Blessed Virgin whose statue surmounting the door welcomes all who approach. Behind her, the rose window with its elegant tracery and stained glass reminds believers of the incar-

**LEFT PANEL**

PHOTOGRAPH OF NICHOLAS CLAYTON (courtesy of the Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas); DRAWING OF FRONT FACADE (courtesy of Catholic Archives of Texas, Austin, TX)

**CENTER PANEL**

COLUMN DETAIL AT MAIN ENTRANCE

**RIGHT PANEL**

MASSIVE WOODEN FRONT DOORS

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**“The Lord  
loves the gates  
of Zion more  
than all the  
dwelling places  
of Jacob.”**

—Ps. 87: 2

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nation penetrating all matter with energy and light.

The bell tower recalls the psalmist exulting “Thou art my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy.” Ps. 61:3. The bells themselves, one from the first church, the other, given in 1886, “shout with joy to God.” Ps. 65:1. The cross-topped spire announces the victory of the resurrection to all who see it in the urban skyline.

Those who open the massive wooden doors cross the threshold from the distracting world into a space where everything speaks of the Body of Christ. The sanctuary itself is shaped like a nave, a ship, a favorite image for the church. Full of worshippers at mass, it resembles the boat full of fish which the apostles caught after they obeyed the Risen Lord’s command to place their nets in the water.

The sanctuary also mirrors the human body with its vertical

axis. The double windows near the altar suggest a transept which in a medieval church would have made a cruciform floor plan. Liturgical processions approach the altar whose central location says that this is the heart of the church. “I will go to the altar of God, the God of my joy.” Ps. 43:4. And the altar symbolizes the human heart for here the worshippers give their gifts to be transformed into the Body of Christ. Centrally placed upon the High Altar, the tabernacle where the Eucharist is reserved radiates His Presence. The crucifix suspended above it reminds us of the paradise that Jesus created by dying on the Tree of the Cross and rising from the grave.

But the dominant image of this building is the garden. Within the enclosed garden of the church, surrounded by the round trifoliate barrel vaulting, the flowering capitals, the fences behind the evangelists within the

garden, the believer is in the new Eden, in paradise. The church makes visible the Heavenly Jerusalem, the City of God inhabited by the angels and the saints.

Originally the baptismal font stood at the entrance, symbolic of the role this sacrament has for entering the New Jerusalem. Now re-located to the area in front of the Immaculate Conception altar, the font is decorated with images of the seven sacraments, the means of uniting the believer with the divine, as well as bas reliefs of the four evangelists, and a sculpture of the Lord’s baptism.

**New World and Old**

However, this building isn’t purely a Gothic reproduction. The new world unites with the old in the combination of limestone quarried near Austin with stained glass windows from Germany and France.

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I WAS GLAD WHEN  
THEY SAID TO ME  
'LET US GO TO THE  
HOUSE OF THE  
LORD.'

Ps. 122:1

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Beside the rose window are the pipes for the organ, a Barckhof organ from the famed German-American organ builder, installed in the 1890's and twice renovated in this century by the renowned organ builder Otto Hoffmann. Its tonal style is eclectic, a fit instrument for the task of preserving the full range of sacred music.

Originally this parish belonged to the diocese of Galveston. When the new diocese of Austin was formed in 1948, this became the church from which the new bishop would preside. Because the bishop is the successor of the apostles, sent to preach the gospel, his church is called a cathedral from the Latin word "cathedra," the chair from which he presides. At that time, the church was remodeled, many of its neo-Gothic decorations were removed and the neo-Gothic altars and altar rail were replaced with 20th century marble and the baldachino with its cactus and bluebonnets, evocative of central Texas.

#### **From Catholic to catholic**

In this structure we see the contribution of many cultures to the catholicity of the church. Above the altar hang lamps with the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, alpha and omega, referring to Christ who, in the last book of Holy Scripture,

Revelation, is named the Source and Culmination of all things. The four side windows nearest the altar show the four evangelists whose gospels illumine the life of Jesus: St. John with the eagle, St. Matthew with the angel, St. Luke with the ox, and St. Mark with the lion. The custom of representing each evangelist with a creature came into the church from the Byzantine east. This continues the tradition of associating each of the evangelists with Elijah's mystical vision of God in the Old Testament. The five elevated windows above the apse are from a Carmelite stained glass factory in LeMans, France, dated 1893. The first of all the saints, Mary the Mother of God, is the focus of the high central window above the altar. Here she is shown as the Immaculate Conception, a title which refers to her conception without sin. Since her purity defeats evil, she crushes the serpent with her heel, as prophesied in Genesis. Here she is shown as Queen of the Angels who crowd the window around her, and the rush of their wings, their diagonal lines, repeat the whirl of her gown as she spins ecstatically.

Beside her are four Jewish saints: St. John the Baptist, greatest of all in the Kingdom of Heaven, St. Joseph her husband, St. Peter, head of the church, and St. Paul who brought the gospel to the



St. Mary Cathedral  
Corner of 10th Street and Brazos Street  
Austin, Texas 78712

gentiles. Their elevated position expresses their preeminence among the saints. Each holds his emblem: St. John the Baptist who said of Jesus “Behold the Lamb of God” carries the lamb. St. Joseph holds the flowering rod of Aaron, a sign of divine favor. St. Peter clasps the keys with which he opens the gates to the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, and St. Paul wields the two-edged sword of the Word of God.

The side altars are traditional. On one side, St. Joseph offers the Holy Child to the delight and veneration of those who love him, and on the other side, St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception prays. Because she’s the Queen of Heaven she wears a crown and this one was fashioned from silver medals given by children at the cathedral school during the early 1900s. The bishop’s and papal heraldry are above each of these altars.

On the walls of the sanctuary process the saints who come from antiquity to the baroque era, from east and west, peasant to king, new world and old: Spain, France, Germany, Syria, and Peru. These windows also tell us of the devotions of the central Texas Catholics who commissioned them from a stained glass institute in Munich in the 1890’s and carefully identified each one by name. Each would repay attention to his history and the details in his

window: palms for martyrs, swords and stones for those who loved the Lord more than life itself, a harp for the patron of those who sing new songs to the Lord.

The exquisite balance of the rich colors of the glass, the imaginative geometric shapes which recall the lancet arches and niches of medieval chapels open the walls of this sanctuary to express the joy and harmony of life in heaven. Their large scale suggests the importance holiness has in the church.

The eight-pointed stars on the ceiling of the cathedral remind us that Mary was also called *Stella Maris*, Star of the Sea, a favorite title of Nicholas Clayton who added this image to the cathedral in Galveston. The number eight signifies her role as the New Eve in restoring perfection. Each of these stars bears an image and name of Mary rooted in the church’s understanding of her as the faithful Daughter Zion of the Old Testament, the beloved of the Song of Songs. She is also the Rose in the great window at the northern end of the church, the most celebrated flower in the enclosed garden of the church, who petal by petal unfolds the love of God.

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### *City of God*

Susan Kerr, text; Stephen Bright, design and photography;  
Ron Parks, stained glass photo.