

From Arts & Architecture: Mysteries in the Chancel

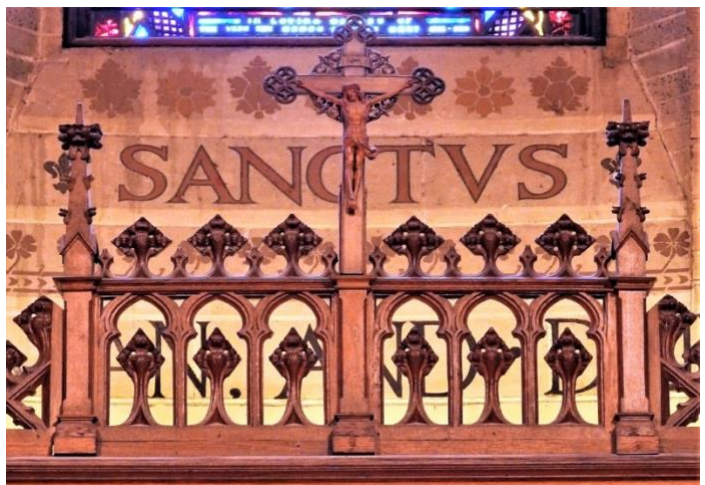
In 2001, former archivist Woody Woodward published his comprehensive history of our cathedral, *The Church of St. John's in the Wilderness*. Two years later, the Arts and Architecture Commission received his 200-page inventory of all the gifts and memorials received since 1911. This vast document included most of the furnishings in the cathedral, since almost everything in the cathedral is a gift or a memorial. With all the facts about each item, including description, size, artist, donor, location and date, it has been an invaluable source of information for the archives whenever there are questions dealing with the history of the cathedral. Helpful as this work is, however, it contains some unanswered questions, and we are happy to share with you some of the mysteries that so far do not have answers. We are calling them Chancel Mysteries, and here is a bit of background first about the chancel itself.

In every Episcopal church and cathedral, an area in the east end (in our cathedral that's the south end) is reserved for the altar, the clergy and the choir, and is called the chancel. The word actually derives from an Anglo-French word meaning "lattice", which describes the physical separation from the rest of the church, as in our rood screen. The walls of our chancel are made of brick, not the oolite limestone that frames the rest of the cathedral. This was part of the original architect's plan, so that it would eventually be possible to take the brick down and replace it with limestone as the cathedral building was extended to the end of the block.

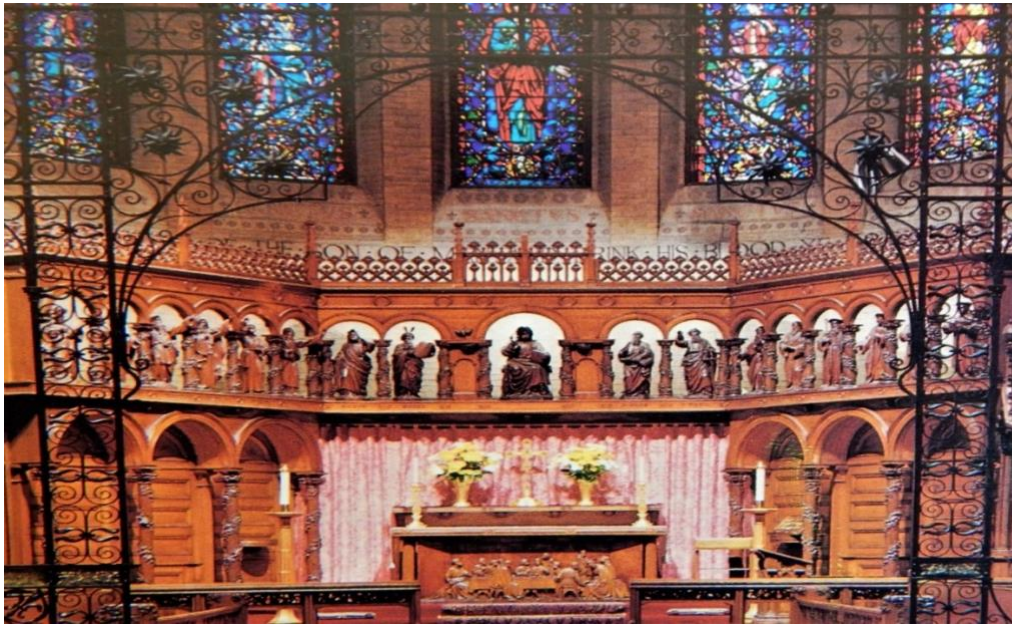
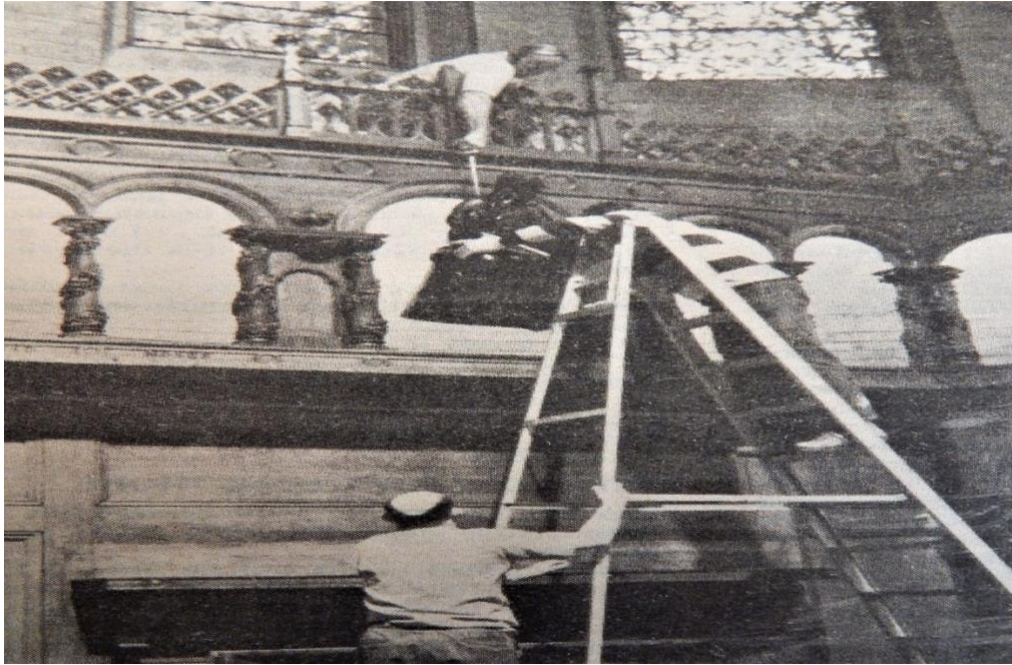
That change never happened, but there have been many other changes in the chancel through the years. In 1918 the Cathedra, or Bishop's chair was placed next to the reredos. More about that later. In the 1940's, our resident architect Burnham Hoyt supervised the renovation of the choir area with new pew frontals, and wainscot and canopy carvings depicting the flora and fauna of the Rocky Mountains. Carved stalls for the Dean and Canon were put in place. In the 1970's, needlepoint cushions for the clergy seats were created, depicting flowers from the four different life zones in Colorado. The front choir pews on either side were removed to provide more aisle space, and the altar was lowered. Also at that time, it was suggested that the beautiful gothic carvings on top of the reredos be removed because they hid the words painted on the wall behind the reredos: "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood ye have no life in you". Following some heated discussion, the carvings were not removed, and their presence still there leads to our first Chancel Mystery.

The First Mystery:

In a previous article about our magnificent reredos, first created for the old cathedral in 1880 by carvers from Oberammergau, we wrote about the gift of the gothic carvings which were added to the top of the reredos in the new cathedral in 1915. High above the altar, and often not noticed, there is an exquisitely carved small crucifix in the very center of the carvings, lovingly created by carvers who themselves took part in the famous Oberammergau Passion Play. It is a small treasure that has an interesting history, discovered from records found in our archives.



And now the mystery. After the 1930's, publications with photographs of the chancel show only a bare post (under the arm of the man leaning forward) at the center of the reredos carvings, with no evidence of the crucifix. It just isn't there, as shown in these photographs from 1977 and 1979.



Photograph taken from a St. John's brochure published in 1979 shows a bare post in the center of the carvings.

What happened to the crucifix, where did it go, and how and when did we get it back? As it turns out, there are two very different stories with answers to these questions.

1. In an article written for the Open Door in 1991, archivist Woody Woodward refers to the return of the missing crucifix as he describes renovation work being done in the chancel in the 1970's and says, "The crucifix that had originally been a part of the addition was located by

Bishop Frey (Bishop of Colorado 1973-1990), in the diocesan office and returned to the reredos”.

In a letter addressed to Woody, written soon after this article, the writer also refers to the missing crucifix and relates “Bishop Irving Johnson (1918-1938), did not approve of having a crucifix over the altar because he preferred that we celebrate the Risen Christ, not the crucified one. The crucifix was removed and nobody knows what happened to it”. She commented that she “had a problem about looking at the sawed-off post in the middle of the reredos”. The letter then goes on to echo Woody’s description of the discovery of the crucifix in Bishop Frey’s office and its reinstallation, and says that Helen Arndt, (chairperson of the Arts and Architecture Commission), was familiar with work from Oberammergau, and believed that the carving was by Anton Lang, one of the best-known of the carvers there.

2. A very different story is told by a cathedral clergyman who was at the cathedral in the 1980’s. He recounts Dean McPhail’s massive cleaning project of the walls and windows that took place in the cathedral in 1982, with ladders and scaffolding everywhere. Included in this project was the cleaning of the chancel, with the removal of all kinds of discarded items that had collected in the small circular passage hidden behind the reredos. As the story goes, carefully sorting through the debris, one of the workmen found a small, beautifully carved wooden crucifix attached to a broken dowel. It was just the right size to fit the space in the reredos carvings, and was determined to be the missing crucifix.

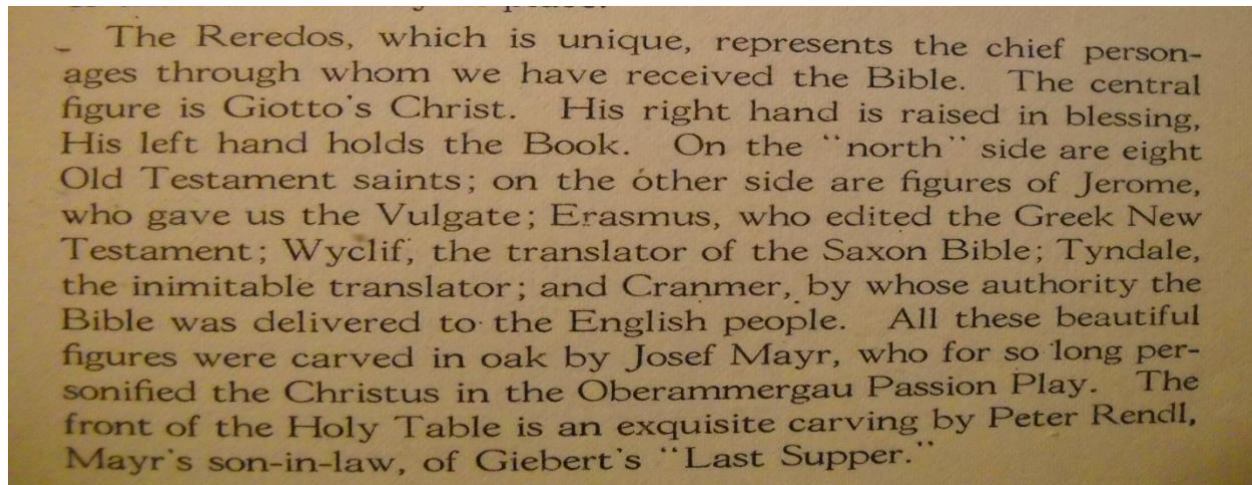
Why are there two very different stories that tell about the disappearance of the crucifix, and how it actually came back to its proper place. Which one to believe? That is still a mystery.

The Second Mystery:



As we walk up to the communion rail every Sunday, we are greeted with the magnificent portrayal of the Last Supper, carved on the frontal of the high altar. We know that this carving was created for the new cathedral in 1910 by Peter Rendl, another Oberammergau carver and nephew of Joseph Mayr who carved the reredos statues.

In Dean Hart's book *Recollections and Reflections*, he describes the reredos carvings and the altar frontal, and gives us the name of the original artist whose work Rendl copied—citing "Giebert's Last Supper".

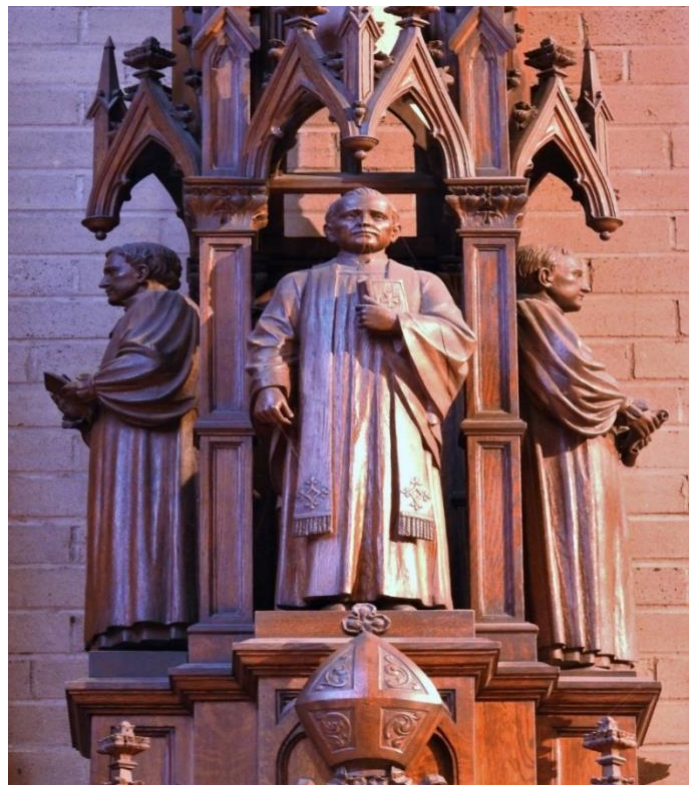


Who is Giebert? We have searched every source we can locate, but cannot find a painter or carver from that time with that name. At first, we thought that Hart was referring to famous Italian carver Lorenzo Ghiberti, but we found that Ghiberti's carving of the Last Supper, on the North Doors of the Baptistry in Florence, does not in any way resemble the carving on our Last Supper frontal. So, who was Rendl's original artist? It remains a mystery.

The Third Mystery:

At the west side of the chancel, the tall carved oak Cathedra, or Bishop's Seat, sits just behind the communion rail. It is a gothic replica of the Cathedra in Worcester Cathedral and was given to St. John's Cathedral in 1918 as a memorial from the estate of Horace B. Hitchings, early rector of the parish of St. John's in the Wilderness from 1862-1869. His grave lies beside the grave of Dean Martyn Hart outside the east wall of the cathedral.

At the top of the cathedra there are carvings of three robed figures. Names carved on the back of the cathedra reveal that the figures are The Right Rev. J. M. Randal, Missionary Bishop of Colorado 1866-1873; The Rev. H.B. Hitchings; and The Right Rev. F. S. Spalding, Missionary Bishop of Utah, 1904-1914. The figure of Hitchings stands in the center. The figure to his right, Missionary Bishop Randal, was Hitching's bishop and mentor during the years he was our rector at St. John's in the 1860's. On Hitchings' left is Bishop Franklin Spalding, the son of our first Colorado



Bishop, John Spalding. But what is his connection to Hitchings? Young Franklin came to Denver with his family in 1887, but that was long after Hitchings had left the state. In the early 1900's, Spalding became the Missionary Bishop of the territory which included Utah, Wyoming, and parts of western Colorado. Hitchings had returned to Denver by this time, but there is no known evidence of any connection or relationship to this faraway young Bishop. Why is the statue of Bishop Franklin Spalding included in a memorial to a man he probably never met? It is still a mystery.