



DUBUQUE — Going back to the Middle Ages, stained glass windows in churches were used as tools to teach the Catholic faith and evangelize, particularly to people who couldn't read.

At this point, beautiful windows are so common in Catholic worship spaces that one might be tempted to overlook the significance of this sacred art.

That's one of the reasons why Frank Miller, a retired professor of physics at Loras College and member of Holy Spirit Parish in Dubuque, decided to lead an effort to shine a light on the windows of Sacred Heart Church.

Miller was one of the driving forces behind the completion of a recently released documentary on the windows called "The Jewels of Sacred Heart." The film, which runs about 40 minutes, explains the history and significance of a set of 14 windows, which are unlike any in the nation and perhaps the world.

"For me, it was a sermon from Father Dwayne Thoman (pastor of Holy Spirit) where he asked us to evangelize," recalled Miller. "This (film) is a unique way of modern evangelization."

The windows of Sacred Heart, one of three churches of Holy Spirit Parish in Dubuque, stand apart, even in the Archdiocese of Dubuque, which has many wonderful examples of glass art, because they portray not only Biblical events, but also events from national and local history.

With a size of between 13.5 and 16.5 feet, each window is divided into thirds. The top part shows an occurrence from the Old Testament, the middle shows something from the New Testament, which in many cases is related to the old, and the bottom section shows something from the history of the United States or the Dubuque Archdiocese.

For example, one pane depicts John Carroll signing the Declaration of Independence. He was the only Catholic to do so at a time when Catholics faced significant discrimination. Another pane shows Dominican Father Samuel Mazzuchelli, a famous local missionary, ministering to Native Americans. Bishop Matthias Loras, the first bishop of the Archdiocese, is also shown, with other local French missionaries who came to the frontier.

These local and national historical events have never been set in stained glass in such a way, other than at Sacred Heart.

"The windows were put in as a memorial to service men and women," said Miller. "The project cost \$30,000. You couldn't build one of them today for that price."

Sacred Heart was built by mostly Germanic immigrants in 1887. The current windows were installed in 1950 thanks to the vision of Msgr. J. Fred Kriebs, pastor of Sacred Heart at that time, and Msgr. I. J. Semper, a professor at Loras. They came up with the designs, which were executed by artist Conrad Pickel using vibrant colors.

Miller became interested in the windows while serving as chair of the church's renovation committee in the year 2000. After years of research, he wrote a script, which he later took to Loras College Productions, a film company affiliated with the higher learning institution, which has collaborated with Catholic organizations in the area for many years. The documentary took about four months to complete. **Although DVDs are already being distributed, the film's official premiere will be after Masses at Sacred Heart the weekend of July 11-12, according to Miller.**

“I am very grateful Frank has worked so hard on this project and pushed it to completion,” said Father Thoman. “Nothing was left to chance in the execution of these windows.”

In order to make the documentary work, Miller enlisted the help of professor Craig Schaefer of Loras’ Media Studies Department and commercial photographer Mike Schmalz.

Schmalz and Miller used a mechanical bucket lift to reach the different parts of the huge windows. Schmalz, owner of Refinery Design company, used high-resolution lenses and a computer program to assemble the window photos digitally. He put in almost 120 volunteer hours to complete the photography used in the film.

“I think it’s important to shine light on the windows of the churches in our community,” said Schmalz. “This is some of the most valuable and inspirational art we have, but people take it for granted.”

One of the great challenges was to get access to all the windows, because some of them were obscured by stairwells and other additions. The image on the front page of The Witness this week, for example, was hidden by the church’s organ. It shows Jesus with His Sacred Heart exposed, St. Michael the Archangel defeating the devil, and, at the bottom, an images of local churches.

“The degree of sophistication of these windows, how they made them and the skill of the craftsmen — there was passion and divine inspiration there. I think it brings people closer to God,” said Schmalz.

For Schaefer and Jake Roth, his production assistant, the filming process was structured around Miller’s script and Schmalz’s images.

“Frank really did all of the heavy lifting,” said Schaefer. “Jake and I had the role of taking his script and bringing it to life. There’s a tremendous amount of information in the video. We had to get it together in a way that’s interesting and entertaining.”

Over the course of production, those involved were continually discovering new things about the windows and other art in the church.

“We began to see things we didn’t understand,” said Miller.

For example, it was noticed that only 11 apostles were seated at the Last Supper. Judas was later found set apart in another section of the window. In another pane, a small building with three steps leading up to it was later identified as a tabernacle. A series of shamrocks was also found in the windows that hadn’t been noticed. Schmalz also photographed the hand painted medallions on the ceiling of the church, which depict different stages of Jesus’ life. Miller and the others also noticed small, but intentional imperfections in the windows, placed there on purpose by the craftsman to show that only God is perfect, not human beings.

“(People) think it’s just a beautiful piece of glass,” said Jake Roth, a graduate of Loras who now works with the production company. “There’s a lot more to it than that. It was interesting for me personally because I just moved into the neighborhood that Sacred Heart is in. It was interesting to hear all that history.”

Both Schaefer and Miller believe the Sacred Heart windows are on par with those at St. Luke’s Methodist Church. That church contains nationally famous window religious art by Tiffany and Company.

“If you want to see a film about some of the most beautiful stained glass in the Midwest, see (The Jewels of Sacred Heart),” said Schafer.

For information on the film or for copies, call Holy Spirit Parish office at 563-583-1709.

Photo caption: (Window1.jpg)

One of the 14 windows at Sacred Heart Church in Dubuque found behind the organ. (Photo by Mike Schmalz)