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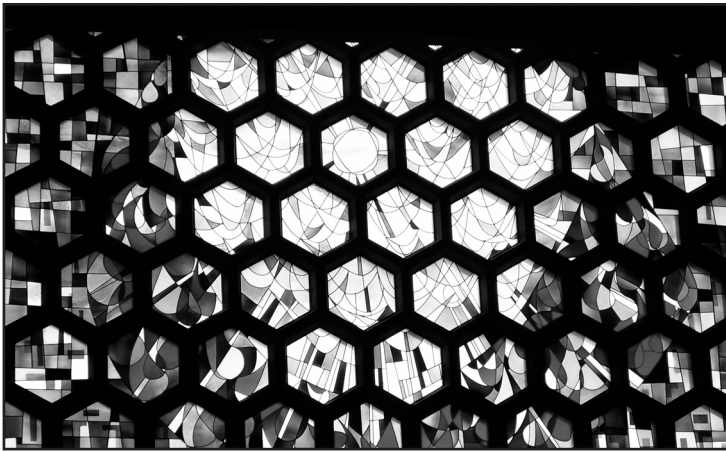
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# Visual Representation of the Liturgical Year

Judy Kniss



All photographs of the Abbey window by Judy Kniss

One of the joys of living in the Midwest is the privilege of experiencing the cyclical flow of death and rebirth throughout the changing seasons. Winter, cold and barren, gradually turns into spring, green and alive, smelling of rain and earth. Summer, with its familiar images of full-blown roses, bumblebees, and pools of leafy shade gradually fades into autumn's crunchy decay, and the cycle repeats. In the song "The Circle Game," Joni Mitchell sings of the changing seasons:

And the seasons they go round and round  
And the painted ponies go up and down  
We're captive on the carousel of time  
We can't return we can only look  
Behind from where we came  
And go round and round and round  
In the circle game.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Joni Mitchell, "The Circle Game," *Ladies of the Canyon* (Warner Bros: 1970).

Time flows on, always turning back into itself, yet continuously moving ahead into the future; we are all trapped, bound to move with the seasons through their unbroken cycle. In addition to the natural seasons, Christians experience the cycle of life and rebirth expressed through the liturgical year. Unlike the seasons of the solar year, the seasons of the liturgical year do not have commonly associated images. What does Lent look like? What about Advent? Pentecost? While you could paint a picture of an Advent wreath, would this be sufficient representation of the entire theology of the season of Advent? The theology of the liturgical year is complex, making visual imaging of the seasons difficult. The instruction, *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar*, describes the liturgical year as the Catholic Church's means of celebrating the whole mystery of Christ, from his incarnation to the expectation of

his second coming.<sup>2</sup> Is it possible to visually depict this theological concept? Bronislaw Bak has done exactly this with his stained glass window located in the Abbey Church of Saint John the Baptist in Collegeville, Minnesota. Bak's window in the Abbey Church visually depicts the complexity of Christian life expressed throughout the liturgical year.

This paper will first present some background to the aesthetic of modern art and architecture at work in the Abbey Church's design, as well as the theological and liturgical justifications for this aesthetic. Next, the body of this essay will focus on the window as a visual representation of the "life of a Christian in God"<sup>3</sup> through the liturgical year, appealing to the window's visual elements of color and shape. Finally, this paper will conclude with some remarks regarding how well the window supports its intended theology of the liturgical year.

### *Liturgical Space and the Modern Aesthetic*

In the 1950's, just prior to the Second Vatican Council, people in the Catholic Church began experimenting with liturgical celebration, as well as updating their notions of what sacred space and liturgical art should look like. In his encyclical *Mediator Dei*, Pope Pius XII encouraged the use of modern architecture in the building of new liturgical spaces,<sup>4</sup> a bold move for a church traditionally beholden to medieval and renaissance European cultural heritage. However, Pius XII did place a caveat in his encyclical, warning against modern art and architecture that becomes too abstract. Above all, the forms need to engage the people in conscious worship, not alienate the assembly.<sup>5</sup> The worship space must encourage the assembly to relate more fully to each other and to the liturgical actions through which they collectively offer praise and thanksgiving to God.

Modern liturgical spaces are often simple—nearly unadorned—in order to focus the assembly on the sacraments and on the relationship between

God and the faithful. Modern spaces are constructed with a variety of materials including steel, concrete, wood, tile, stone, and glass; these materials provide the beauty of a space rather than applied art and ornamentation.<sup>6</sup> The Abbey Church exemplifies this practice; artwork and statuary are virtually absent in the nave and sanctuary. It is the varied building materials that give the space character.

Another characteristic of modern architecture is the use of light and open space. The Abbey Church is open, without columns or side aisles, allowing everyone to be seated close to the altar and to have a clear view of liturgical actions. Finally, the use of light, particularly colored light, is an important factor in modern architecture.<sup>7</sup> In the Abbey Church, the walls are filled with clear windows that lift the building off the ground, allowing the folded concrete walls to float above the floor.<sup>8</sup> The stained glass window in the Abbey Church exemplifies the modern use of light by offering an abstract visual image of Christian life engaged in worship, in addition to filtering colored light into the nave.

### *Visible Theology: The Abbey Window*

The window in the Abbey Church completely fills the north wall of the building, stretching above the church's main entrance, which is located through the baptistery. When the monks of Saint John's began to plan for the window, they wanted an abstract design that would create a mood for the liturgical space, rather than an iconographic design depicting a specific image.<sup>9</sup> The abbot at the time of construction, Baldwin Dworshak, OSB, described the monks' wishes in a letter to the architect, Marcel Breuer: "The central portion represents the Mass, a lifting of the mind and heart to God; the side portions represent the liturgical year in its different liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost."<sup>10</sup> All of these elements necessitate a complicated design, a requirement that Bak's final design manages to satisfy. It is useful at this juncture to unpack the window's complex theology one section at a time.

At the center of the window, where Abbot Bald-

<sup>2</sup> Congregation for Divine Worship, General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar, Instruction (1970), §17.

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Goltz, OSB, interview by author, 19 October 2007, Collegeville, MN.

<sup>4</sup> Victoria Young, "St. John's Abbey Church, Collegeville, Minnesota (1953-1961): The Benedictines and Marcel Breuer Search for the Sacred" (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2003), 56.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 57. For more information regarding early liturgical reforms and modern architecture see Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei* and *Documents for Sacred Architecture* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1957).

<sup>6</sup> Young, "St. John's Abbey Church," 59–60.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>10</sup> Abbot Baldwin Dworschak, Collegeville, MN, to Marcel Breuer, New York City, 19 September 1958, typescript, Syracuse University Library Archives Box 105 Folder 2, cited in Young, "St. John's Abbey Church," 197.

win wanted a representation of the assembly lifting up their hearts to God in the Mass, Bak placed a round panel of glass meant to evoke the eye of God.<sup>11</sup> As Pope John Paul II describes in *Dies Domini*, “This is a contemplative gaze which . . . God casts upon all things, but in a special way upon man, the crown of creation.”<sup>12</sup> This pane could also be representative of the eucharistic host, another reference to the Mass, though perhaps a reference Bak did not intend. A white area representing the community of heaven immediately surrounds the eye of God; the boomerang-shaped pieces of glass in this section symbolize the heavenly inhabitants. It is unclear what the use of this shape is intended to mean, though the shapes and colors used here do seem to evoke the senses of quietness and worshipfulness, as if the inhabitants of heaven are “holding their breath in the presence of God.”<sup>13</sup> The lines radiating out from the eye of God symbolize the flow of divine grace from God in all directions.

The red portion of the window is often mistakenly interpreted as the feast of Pentecost. It seems simple enough because the predominant shapes here appear to be flames, a shape commonly associated with the feast of Pentecost. However, the red section of the window represents people—all Christians who are engaged in worshipping God. The Latin phrase *sorsum corda*, which means, “lift up your hearts,” inspired this section of the window. The flame-shaped drops in this section can be described best in terms of the fire of God’s grace enkindled in the hearts of all Christians.<sup>14</sup> The flames do call to mind the fire imagery surrounding Pentecost, the mystery that infuses our whole Christian relationship with each other and with God. Brother Andrew Goltz, OSB, one of the artisans who worked on the window’s construction, explains that the flames show “the life of the church that is on fire with the grace of God.” So, the average viewer is not completely wrong in a Pentecost interpretation, just missing the full picture.

Christians worship God through the cyclical celebrations during the liturgical year. These liturgical seasons are visually represented in different-colored columns spaced across the face of the window. According to Brother Andrew, Bak and his team de-

signed the window to reinforce the cyclical nature of the liturgical year; as Joni Mitchell sings, “the seasons, they go round and round,”<sup>15</sup> and the end of the year becomes the beginning. With this in mind, the window is anchored on both sides with columns of gold—on the left, Advent, and on the right, Pentecost.<sup>16</sup> Just inside these anchors, Christmas and Easter also share design elements; both columns are comprised of white and red glass formed in star-like pointed panes. These two poles of the Christian mystery, one of incarnation, the other of resurrection and ascension, mirror each other just as Advent and Pentecost mirror one another. Just inside the Easter column on the right hand side of the window, a purple column represents Lent. Finally, the green sections of the window surrounding the central white and red represent the tree of life and the foundation of the Christian tradition in the Old Testament.

All of these columns sit on a blue background that symbolizes the waters of baptism: both the ritual entrance into the Catholic Church, and the physical entry into the Abbey Church through the baptistery. Near the base of the window, on the left hand side, a wave of rippled blue glass springs from the wall of the baptistery and flows along the length of the window. This ripple can be seen in various locations on the window, trickling through each of the seasons. Finally, each hexagonal section of the background design has both a horizontal and a vertical component, resulting in a subtle cross shape in each hexagon and reminding the viewer of Christ. Let us now examine each column and the theology of its represented liturgical season.

The season of Advent is understood to be one of longing and anticipation. The General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar describes Advent as having two aspects: it is a season to prepare for Christmas, and a season when that remembrance directs the mind and heart to await Christ’s second coming (§39). In order to evoke this sense of expectation, Bak used arc shapes in the pattern for the Advent column. These incomplete circle shapes point toward the incarnation. Bak deliberately chose to portray Advent and Pentecost in the same gold color in order to emphasize their relation to each other as the beginning and ending of the year. However, the use of gold instead of purple or pink for Ad-

<sup>11</sup> Goltz interview. The information in this section of the paper is from this interview unless otherwise noted.

<sup>12</sup> Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Bronislaw Bak, quoted by Goltz.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Joni Mitchell, “The Circle Game.”

<sup>16</sup> This unusual choice of color for Advent and Pentecost will be addressed below.



vent, or red for Pentecost, while relating the seasons more closely to each other, obfuscates each season's unique theology. These theologies are treated in the shapes used in each column, but color would have been a more immediate means of depiction. Because the chosen color is not traditionally used to represent either liturgical season, there is some confusion when people view the window expecting to see a more clearly defined image of the liturgical year.

The Christmas column is done in white and red glass, sharp panes shaped into brilliant pointy spikes. Brother Andrew describes these as the "bursting stars" of the incarnation mystery. Jesus is often described as "the light of the world" (John 8:12) and the sun that enlightens all people.<sup>17</sup> These themes are articulated in the window through the use of star-shape patterns.

The Lenten season is one of penance, culminating in the crucifixion of Jesus; Christians mark this period with stripped-down liturgies, solemn prayer, and fasting. The purple palette of this window column uses the traditional color scheme of the Lenten season. The panes of glass in this column, shaped as drooping folds of fabric, evoke a sense of suspension, much like Jesus Christ was suspended on the cross. The swooping, drooping arcs of glass perhaps call to mind the cloth that is used to cover all art and crucifixes in a church on Good Friday.

The Easter column of the window is intended to represent the entire Easter season, from Easter morning to Pentecost fifty days later. Near the base of the window, two large ovoid shapes represent the tomb with its cover stone rolled aside. Christ rises from this tomb in "bursts of glory," indicated by the series of smaller round spots ascending from the tomb toward the top of the window. The overall pattern of the Easter column mirrors the Christmas column in its dominant use of white and red colors, as well as in the pointy, star-shaped panes of glass.

The Pentecost column mirrors the Advent column in color and position on the window. However, where the Advent window uses incomplete arc shapes, the Pentecost column is filled with water drops, not to be confused with tongues of flame. These droplets represent the Catholic Church infused with the Holy Spirit. Fifty days after Christ's resurrection, the Holy Spirit entered into the disciples and continues today to fill Christian hearts with love and fire. It is

<sup>17</sup> Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981), 123.

unclear why the artist chose for this column a water drop shape instead of flames. Flames would have been more recognizable as Pentecost; however, that motif was already in use elsewhere on the window.

As mentioned above, the green sections near the middle of the window do not simply represent the liturgical season of Ordinary Time. According to the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar*, Sundays in Ordinary Time are devoted to the celebration of all aspects of the mystery of Christ (§43). Since the window represents the entire mystery of Christ through the specific liturgical seasons, there is no need to depict Ordinary Time, a season that summarizes the others. If Ordinary Time is represented anywhere in the window, it is in the blue background, not the green columns. Rather, the green portion of the window refers to the Old Testament, the root of the New Testament and the entire Christian tradition, where the coming of Christ is foretold in prophecy. The color green is used to symbolize the tree of life, specifically Jesse's Tree and the ancestry of Jesus. The two green Old Testament columns frame the central section, stretching from ceiling to floor and straddling the baptistery.

#### *Conclusion: Effective Visible Theology*

The artists who worked on the window in the Abbey Church faced a monumental task: visually representing the life of Christians, lifting their hearts to God through the celebrations of the liturgical year. The resulting design aims to show this concept through shapes, patterns, and colors. Is the design effective?<sup>18</sup> The theology of each season is well represented through the use of color and shape, but the overall effect of the window remains mysterious. Abbot Baldwin and his confreres wanted the window to evoke an atmosphere for worship in the space; however, it is unclear whether the design was also intended to be apparently significant to the average viewer. Pius XII warned against art that is "too abstract" in *Mediator Dei*, promulgated in 1970, nine years after the Abbey window was finished. It is an interesting thought experiment to imagine what the window would have looked like if Bak and his team had kept this concern in mind. Today, many

<sup>18</sup> The artist's intention is of primary concern in this case because the window's theology is fundamental to its being. Recall Abbot Baldwin's letter to Breuer, quoted above, where he describes precisely the theological content of the design. Viewer interpretation of the window's meaning is beyond the scope of this essay.

people see the window as a fairly literal representation of the liturgical year rather than as a depiction of the relationship between God and humankind, expressed through liturgical celebrations. In this way, the window is partially effective at conveying its intended theology; at least viewers are seeing something of what the artist intended. People who view the window with no background information are not equipped to see the broader meaning: the salvation history of a people in close relationship with God. Even some members of the monastic community do not fully comprehend the symbolism at work in the window. Every person who enters the Abbey Church is meant to be able to fully appreciate the window, but if this is the case, the intended meaning of the design should be made more available. The window beautifully represents the subtle and complex theology of the liturgical year; it is a truly marvelous visual image of Christian life. The beauty of its theology would be even more powerful if everyone could fully appreciate its subtlety. †

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