

THE APSE MURALS

*of St. Mary's Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Portland, Oregon*





The murals on the apse wall date to the 1930s. They were painted between 1930 and 1936 by Flemish artist Emil Jacques (d. 1937). At that time Jacques was the Dean of the School of Fine Art at the University of Notre Dame. The murals were painted in South Bend then shipped to Portland and attached to the apse. The nine panels give a panorama of the Blessed Virgin's life and her prominence in salvation history.

Emil Jacques, trained in the school of the Dutch and Flemish masters, and gained some critical acclaim in the United States, for his varied works. The wide range of themes depicted in his paintings center around Flanders, religion and the West Coast.

Jacques was commissioned to to paint nine murals for St. Mary's Cathedral, the work took him five years and was his last major work before his death. The original studies of these (sketches) were shown at the Argent Galleries. Of these, the New York Sun said: *"They are carried out with an insistence on the decorative, a care for detail, a pleasing harmony of color and an apparent reverence of feeling that make understandable the widely voiced claim that they are the finest murals in the West."*

The Flemish professor painted the panels on canvas, the largest panels are 22 feet long and 6 feet wide. Oil and gold leaf were the principal mediums used. Throughout the entire series the colorings are attractively luminous. Venetian reds, soft greens, coppers, ethereal blues, mystic whites, scarlets, soft earth tones, all leading back to the Madonna and the white of the Christ Child's garments, draw the composition into religious symbolism.

An interesting feature of the murals is the extreme humanization and modernization of the figures. The faces are easily recognized as those of the man and woman on the street. This marks a departure from ancient religious paintings whose figures and faces possessed an archaic and impersonalized dignity. The Rev. Eugene Burke, president of the University of Portland (1919-1925), was the priest depicted in one of the murals, and players from the Notre Dame football team modeled many of the angels in the paintings.

As the visitor approaches within proper distance of the sanctuary, rich full-toned colors strike one's vision. Boldness is apparent, which however blends color tones into symphony. Passing from the consideration of color, attention is drawn to the symmetry of the five center panels that form the first group. The lines accentuate the objective, and unify the ensemble. Unity is further stressed by the attitude of the personages all turned in the direction of the Queen of Heaven at the center. Moreover, the saints depicted are represented in the state of glory by the golden background against which angels are silhouetted signifying heaven. Unity is preserved by the similarity of postures and grouping of the figures in the corresponding panels.

The **first panel** on the left as we look at the apse, is mostly referred to as the Immaculate Conception or sometimes as the *Protoevangelium*. The Immaculate Conception is a title of the Blessed Virgin Mary which denotes the catholic doctrine that Mary was conceived without the stain of original sin. The doctrine states that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was preserved from original sin from the very first moment of her own conception, by God's grace, making her pure and holy to be the vessel for Jesus, a dogma officially defined in 1854 by Pope Pius IX. Celebrated on December 8th, it is distinct from the Virgin Birth (Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit) and emphasizes Mary's unique role as the "New Eve," fulfilling prophecies as the perfect mother for Christ.

The *Protoevangelium*, meaning 'first Gospel,' refers primarily to Genesis 3:15, the Bible's first promise of a Messiah, where God tells the serpent (Satan) that "*the seed of the woman*" (Jesus) will crush his head, though the serpent will strike his heel (the crucifixion). It is seen as the initial foreshadowing of salvation and Christ's victory over evil, establishing enmity between humanity and Satan, and identifying Mary and her offspring as key figures in defeating sin. The panel depicts Mary exalted over the power of Satan in her shining robe and blue mantle with twelve stars encircling her head as portrayed in the Book of Revelation; "*A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars*". (Rev 12:1)

In the Book of Genesis, Adam and Eve are the first humans created by God, living in the idyllic Garden of Eden where they were given dominion over creation but forbidden to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Tempted by a serpent, Eve ate the forbidden fruit and gave some to Adam; this act, known as the Fall of Man, led to their expulsion from Eden, introducing sin, shame, and death to humanity, with God clothing them in animal skins before banishing them. Christ and Mary are often referred to as the 'New Adam' and the 'New Eve' because of their role in reversing the effects of Adam and Eve's disobedience.

The **second panel** depicts the Annunciation of Mary which is the biblical event (Luke 1:26-38) in which the Archangel Gabriel told the Virgin Mary she would conceive and bear Jesus, the Son of God, through the Holy Spirit, marking the Incarnation; her humble acceptance ("*Fiat*") makes her the Mother of God and a model of faith, celebrated annually by Christians on March 25th as the moment the Word became Flesh, a pivotal event in salvation history and devotion.

Mary's willingness to accept God's plan, despite potential personal risks, serves as the ultimate example of trust in God's plan, and Mary becomes a model of faith. The Annunciation inspired the much loved 'Hail Mary' prayer (Luke 1:28) and is a favorite, richly depicted subject in Christian art, symbolizing new beginnings and divine love.





The **central panel** (front cover) represents the glorified Queen of Heaven in royal robes with two angels in worshipful attitude holding her crown, designed with a cross and fleur de lis. Mary presents her child to the world as she holds his hands in a gesture foreshadowing the cross. Here the child Jesus appears to proclaim his mission of salvation and her share in Redemption. Below his feet are the four books of the Gospel. *“This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”* (Mk 1:15)

The **fourth panel** contains a collection of holy women who fashioned their entire lives after Mary and her son, Jesus. At the foot of the panel is St. Mary Magdalene in scarlet garments. Mary is called the Apostle to the Apostles because she was the first to witness to the resurrection and was tasked to inform the Lord’s apostles. Above is the virgin, St. Agnes of Rome, a revered young Christian virgin martyr, known for her purity, faith, and defiance against pagan persecution under Emperor Diocletian.

Close to St. Agnes is St. Genevieve, the child shepherdess and patron of Paris, she lived a life of prayer and penance, becoming a consecrated virgin at a young age and performing acts of charity. Above to the right is Queen Elizabeth of Hungary, another great saint known for her compassion for the poor and needy. Over her shoulder is St. Lucy, the early christian martyr who is patron of the blind.

At her elbow is the Maid of Orleans, St. Joan of Arc. She was a French peasant girl who, believing she was guided by divine voices, led the French army to crucial victories during the Hundred Years’ War, helping to crown Charles VII king, but was later captured, tried for heresy, and burned at the stake at age 19; she was canonized as a saint in 1920 and is a patron saint of France and soldiers.

Occupying the center of the panel is the great scholar, theologian and Doctor of the Church, St. Teresa of Avila. Active during the Counter-Reformation, Teresa became the central figure of a movement of spiritual and monastic renewal, reforming the Carmelite Orders of both women and men. Renowned for her writings about prayer, she is one of the great spiritual authorities of the Church.

At her right is St. Perpetua with her infant. Perpetua was a recently married, well-educated noblewoman, said to have been 22 years old at the time of her death, and mother of an infant son she was nursing. Above her is St. Cecilia, a Roman virgin martyr, celebrated as the patron saint of music and musicians hence pictured here with a harp, known for her unwavering faith, virginity, and the inspiring conversion of her husband, Valerian, and his brother, leading to their own martyrdom.

At the top of the panel are three angels holding items which represent titles of the Blessed Mother, the ‘Mirror of Justice’, the ‘Tower of David’ and the ‘Morning Star’. These are all titles from the Litany of Loreto.

The **sixth panel** is the counterpart to the fourth panel (holy women), containing a selection of male saints. This panel portrays holy men who fashioned their entire lives after Mary and her Son. The artist brings together a few of the sons of Mary, Queen of all the saints.

At the lower end we see St. Jerome, hermit, biblical scholar and Father of the Church. He is often depicted contemplating a skull, reminding us of our mortality and the need to be prepared for the coming of Our Lord. He is the patron saint of archeologists, biblical scholars and librarians.

Above him is St. Thomas Aquinas in his black and white Dominican habit. St. Thomas was an influential Italian philosopher, theologian, and Dominican friar who is considered one of the Church's greatest thinkers. He is known for his comprehensive synthesis of Christian theology and Aristotelian philosophy, which had a lasting impact on Western thought and became the basis of official Catholic philosophy.

Above him are St. George, the patron of England, with his soldiers' armor and St. Dominic holding rosary beads. St. Dominic, founder of the Dominican Order, is traditionally credited with receiving the Rosary from the Virgin Mary in a vision around 1208 at Prouille, France. The rosary was used as a powerful spiritual weapon to combat the Albigensian heresy. Dominic was taught to intersperse the Hail Mary with meditations on the life of Jesus, a devotion he then widely spread to convert sinners and promote the true faith.

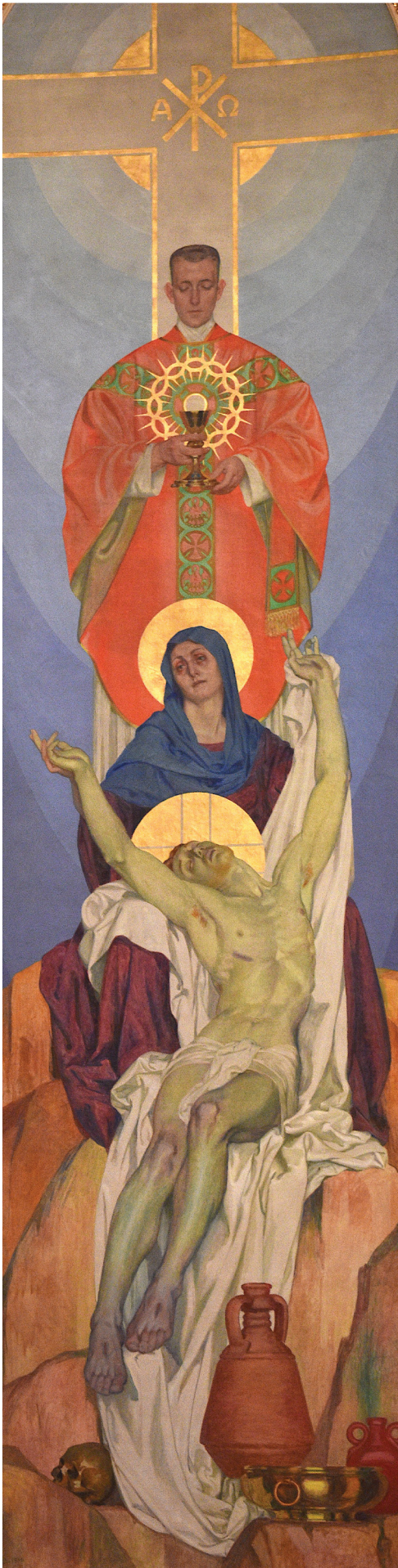
St. Edward the confessor is shown with a dove, which represents peace, as Edward is known to have brought peace to his Kingdom. King of England, known for his deep piety, gentleness, and peaceful reign, who focused on religious renewal and charity, famously building Westminster Abbey, where he was buried. He lived a simple, chaste life, even in marriage, and his legacy is that of a devout, just ruler who prioritized God over worldly power.

To his right is the Curé D'Ars, St. John Vianney, the patron of parish priests. In 1818, he was assigned to the remote village of Ars, where he found a community indifferent to religion. Through extreme fasting, prayer, and simple preaching, he transformed the parish into a global pilgrimage site. He spent 12-16 hours per day hearing confessions.

The dominant figure of the panel is St. Peter holding the keys representing the authority given to him by Christ. "*I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it.*" (Mt 16:18). St. Sebastian is the young man holding the arrows, the instrument of his martyrdom, and finally, we see St. Patrick, bishop and missionary, the great apostle to Ireland.

The three angels at the top of the panel hold the 'Rosary', the 'Mystical Rose' and the 'Ark of the Covenant', another three titles of Mary from the Litany of Mary (Loreto).





The **eighth panel** portrays Mary's role in her son's mission of redemption as she holds the body of her son after his death on the cross, a classic pietà representation. A pietà (Italian for 'pity' or 'mercy') is a work of Christian art depicting the Virgin Mary mourning over the dead body of Jesus Christ after his crucifixion, usually shown with Jesus cradled in her arms. It is a powerful image of maternal grief, most famously sculpted by Michelangelo in St. Peter's Basilica, though it appears in numerous paintings, carvings, and other mediums, often as part of the Lamentation of Christ theme.

Below the pietà there are three vessels, used for embalming and anointing, a basin, an amphora (tall Roman jar with handles), and an ampule (Roman spherical flask). There is also a skull representing Golgotha, also known as Calvary. Golgotha (Aramaic) means "the place of the skull," referring to the hill outside ancient Jerusalem where Jesus was crucified, as described in the Gospels. The Church Father, Origen, recorded a tradition that Christ was crucified on the place where Adam was buried, thus pointing to himself as the 'New Adam' who reversed Adam's sin by offering himself as a sacrifice for our sins.

Above Mary and Jesus is a priest vested for the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. He holds a chalice and host signifying the unbloody and mystical reality that Christ continues to offer himself for our salvation. In both, the victim is Jesus Christ, really present. At Mass, this occurs through transubstantiation, where the substance of bread and wine becomes His Body and Blood.

Behind the priest is a cross connecting the sacrifice of Calvary with the sacrifice of the Mass. The Church teaches that Calvary and the Mass are one single Sacrifice, differing only in how it is offered (bloody on the Cross, unbloody in the Mass). Christ's sacrifice was unique, but the Mass makes its effects and presence real and accessible today, not a re-enactment or repetition, but a re-presentation. Because Jesus is God, his historical death is an eternal act, always present to him, allowing the power of that moment to be applied to us now. In essence, every Mass brings the power and reality of Christ's sacrificial love from Calvary into the present moment, making it available for salvation and sanctification.

On the cross is the *chi-rho* symbol with the greek letters of alpha an omega. The *chi-rho* is an ancient Christian symbol formed by overlapping the first two Greek letters, chi (x) and rho (p), from the word *Χριστός* (Christos), meaning Christ, making it a monogram for Jesus Christ. The alpha and the omega are the first and last letters of the greek alphabet reminding us of the book of Revelation "*I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty*". (Rev 1:8)

"*The Eucharist as the source and summit of Christian life*" is a core Catholic teaching portrayed in this panel. Signifying that the Eucharist is the fountainhead (source) from which all grace flows and the pinnacle (summit) where believers most profoundly encounter Christ.

The **ninth and final panel** portrays the Glorious Assumption of Mary into heaven. The Dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is a central Catholic belief that Mary, at the end of her earthly life, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory. The equivalent belief in Eastern Christianity is the Dormition of the Mother of God or the *“Falling Asleep of the Mother of God”*. In 1950 Pope Pius XII defined this dogma infallibly. Pope Pius stated: *“that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory”*. While formalized in 1950, the belief stems from ancient Church tradition, with early Church Fathers teaching on Mary’s special preservation from corruption. Pius XII also stated in his encyclical: *“Hence if anyone, which God forbid, should dare willfully to deny or to call into doubt that which we have defined, let him know that he has fallen away completely from the divine and Catholic Faith.”*

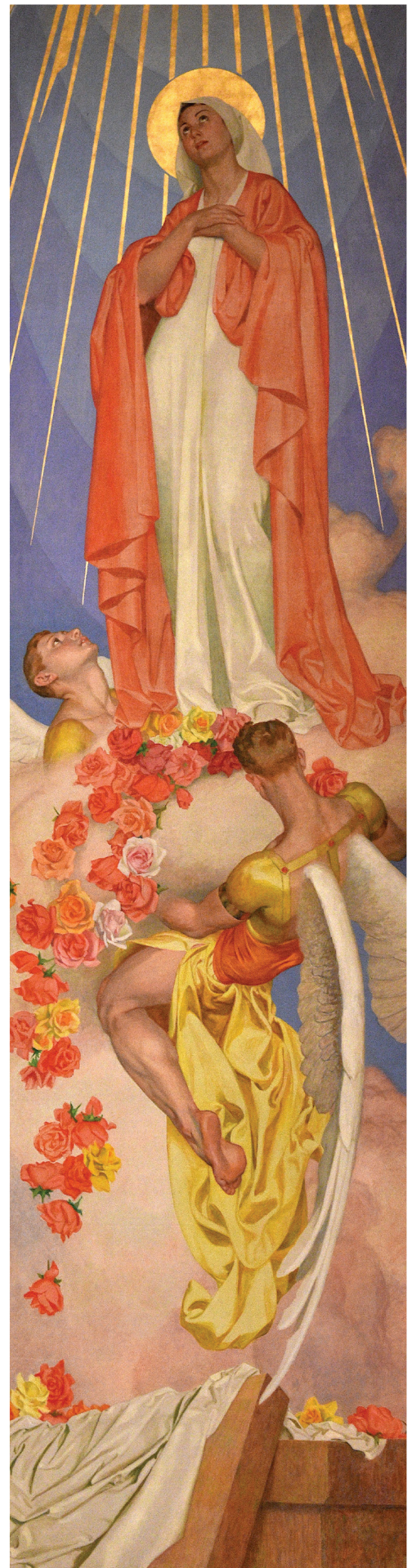
From the very first moment of her existence, Mary was kept free from the stain of original sin inherited by all humans, which is depicted in the first panel, the Immaculate Conception. This final panel emphasizes a consequence of this, that death is a result of sin and therefore cannot touch the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In this depiction of her Assumption, Mary is seen rising from an empty tomb, supported by two angels and standing on a bed of roses. The roses are representative of the motif that can be seen throughout the cathedral.

Shortly after the paintings were completed, Emil Jacques was directed to add more clothing to St. Jerome and to modify his rendering of the naked Christ Child as well as his version of Adam and Eve in the first panel. In 1961 the murals were given a light coat of wash to tone down their brilliance and match them with the overall subdued atmosphere of the cathedral at that time. In the 1996 restoration, the murals were restored to their former beauty and in January 2026 the murals were cleaned for the centennial celebrations.

After six years of work Emil Jacques completed the murals in August of 1936. Jacques painted the murals at his studio located along Lincoln Way Avenue in South Bend, Indiana. In that studio, Jacques gave private art lessons and influenced a generation of South Bend artists. This was his last commission, as he died in a tragic drowning accident in Bellaire, Michigan on 17 August 1937.

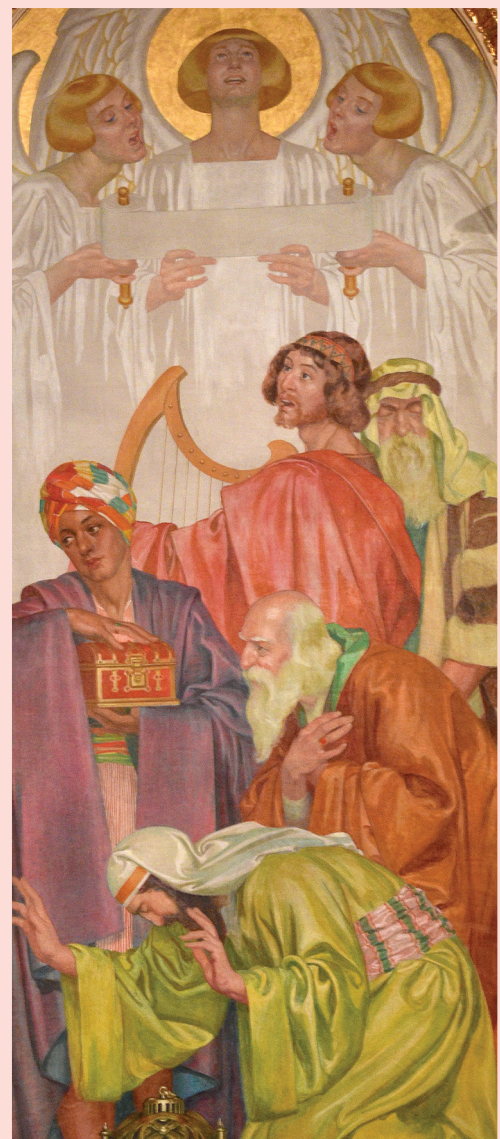
Each year, the University of Notre Dame Fine Arts Department awards its top two students with the coveted Emil Jacques Gold Award and Silver Award. Born in the Flemish region of Belgium in 1874, Emil Jacques came to the United States in 1923 to join his brother in Portland, Oregon. Jacques became a professor of art at Columbia University, now the University of Portland, until he left in 1929 for the University of Notre Dame. Jacques served as the director of the Notre Dame Fine Arts Department from 1929 until his passing in 1937. May he rest in Peace.





The **third panel** shows Mary's son came not only to redeem the great, but also those in simpler walks of life. At the bottom of the panel and to the right, are two shepherds to whom the message of the birth of the Messiah was brought by the angels. To the left is a mother with her child and above is a working man in his overalls with his wife by his side. At the top of the panel are three angel musicians that artistically bind together five of the nine panels.

This panel pays homage to the lay faithful. The purpose of the artist was to emphasize the idea that sanctity is not the exclusive property of the renowned and great, but can be acquired in a very high degree by people in ordinary walks of life. The theme is reminiscent of the universal call to holiness championed by Pope St. John Paul II, which is a core teaching from the Second Vatican Council's document, *Lumen Gentium*, emphasizing that every baptized Christian, not just the clergy or the consecrated, is called to perfection in charity and to follow Christ's path to holiness.



The **seventh panel** is a counterpoint to the third panel which depicts the lay faithful. It portrays the great and powerful figures who also await the promise of salvation. In the background is Abraham, patriarch and father of the Jewish people. In front is King David, pictured with a harp, singing the psalms which play such an important role in the prayer of the Church. Below are the three magi who traveled to Bethlehem to welcome Mary's son Jesus Christ. The three angels are singing the Litany of Mary.

The wise men's gifts - gold, frankincense, and myrrh - symbolize Jesus' identity: gold for His royalty as King, frankincense for His divinity and priesthood (used in worship), and myrrh for His humanity and future suffering, death, and burial (used for embalming). These symbolic offerings, brought to the baby Jesus, foreshadowed His entire life, ministry, and sacrificial death, acting as a tangible proclamation of who He is.