



4th Sunday of Advent – December 21, 2024

Christmas Roses for the Son of God

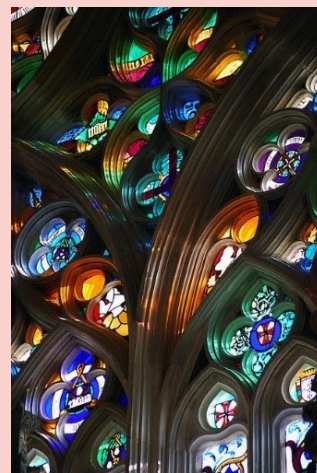
Dear Thomas,

The angels sang with heavenly grace to the newborn Savior on the night of His holy birth—I would love to have heard that song with my own ears! **Shepherds, wise men, and little drummer boys** all offered some gift to the King when He came.

In times of great joy like that singular moment in history, it seems like there is a **spontaneous desire in every human heart** to give in turn, especially to those who have given so much to us, as God has.

So, in the midst of our generosity to family and friends this season, let us not forget to offer something to Jesus Himself on His birthday. Even acknowledging our *human poverty*, we must know that **Jesus accepts all that we have to offer Him**, no matter how humble the gift.

The cost of the gift is irrelevant to the One who owns everything. The heart is the key. There is nothing He loves more than a generous heart.

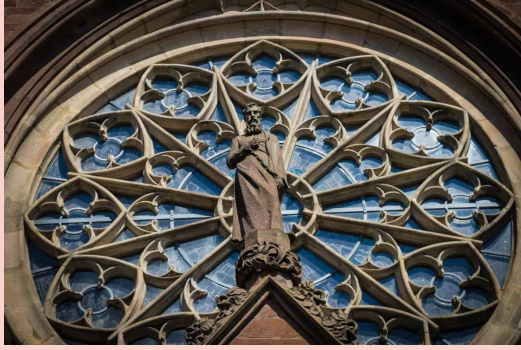


Rose Windows for the King

I, too, would like to offer the Lord what I can in these days leading up to Christmas. My gift is in the form of a **virtual bouquet of roses** from the Internet. (It's a perfectly modern gift, isn't it?)

Thankfully, the Catholic tradition provides a breathtaking range of colors, fragrances, and delights in the magnificent rose windows that grace our cathedrals everywhere, works of art that seem **as if they came already gift-wrapped for the King**. In fact, there is such an abundance of riches in this area that it took me more time to whittle down the selection of pictures below than it took me to write this article!

Rose windows are those majestic round, flower-like **portals of colored light that pierce the high walls of Gothic cathedrals** at the ends of the aisles. (The *nave* is the central aisle, while the *transepts* are the

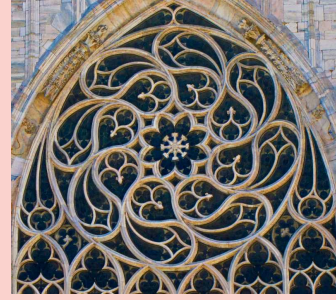
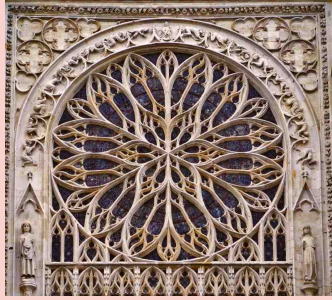
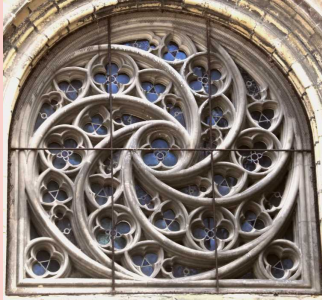


aisles that form the arms of the cross-shaped churches.) Whether entering or leaving the church, you only need to look up and feast your eyes on them.

From the outside, all you will see is the stone framework of the window (called the *tracery*) that holds the glass in place, but when you are inside and the sun is streaming through those colored prisms, there is nothing more inspiring and wonderful to behold. They are in the very best sense

“sacred windows” that lift our minds and hearts to the eternal.

I’ll show more colored windows below, but here are a couple more examples of some of the magnificent tracery of the Gothic tradition:



How Did We Get Them?

Like so many things in Catholic history, rose windows (and stained glass in general) did not emerge from a void. They grew organically in **the lived experience of worshipping Christians**.

In particular, in the early Middle Ages, the walls of churches were so thick that very little light could get in. They were dark places. Up to about the year 1100, church architects just **put huge holes in the walls** for light to shine into the aisles, and soon they began filling those holes with colored glass.



They kept the walls from collapsing around the holes by inserting what to us look like spokes of a wheel to stabilize the window. [At left is a good example of an early rose window in a **medieval English church**.]

But the French, of course, could never be satisfied with something so—*gasp!*—primitive, so they gradually at first, and then exponentially, improved on it (but of course, *mon frère*.)

I’m sure it would surprise no one that **the inventors of Gothic architecture** were also the inventors of the elaborate rose windows that have come down to us from that era.

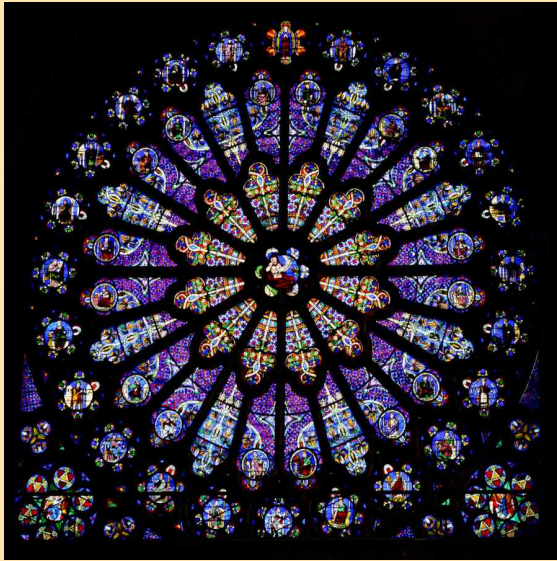
But what might not be clear is the phenomenal diversity of rose window styles, even though all rose windows are the same shape, round. In essence, the French invented the kaleidoscope.

The “wheel” style of window gradually transformed into another new and more beautiful round image of a flower, and since the most representative and beautiful round flower is the rose, the window style took on that blessed name.

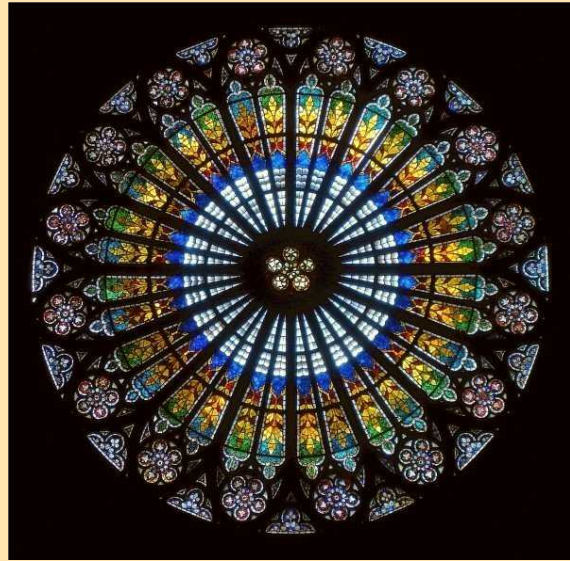
Rayonnant

First, we see the wheel style morph into a kind of sunburst or stylized variation on the wheel theme. The French call it **the “Rayonnant” (that is, radiating) style**, and I’m sure you’ll agree that it is just magnificent. Many other European architects adopted. These French windows date from the 1200s.

St. Denis (Paris)



Strasbourg



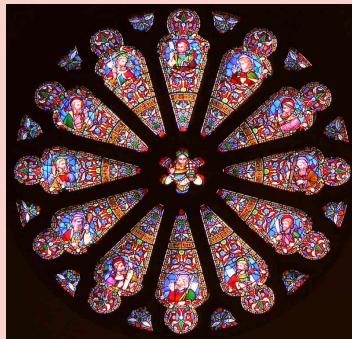
Consider this: each color, **each speck of light is an individual piece** of colored glass placed deliberately in position by an artist who crafted it to fit precisely in that spot between ribs of carved stone.

It's hard to get perspective when we are looking at small pictures. The marvel of the windows above is that they contain literally *thousands* of pieces of glass nestled in a massive framework that **spans 25-30 feet in diameter!** The rose window is truly one of the greatest creations of human art.

As the style developed over several centuries, there were even more wonderful **variations on the theme**, such as these beauties:



St Nicolas du Port
(France, 1500s)



Richmond (London,
1850s)

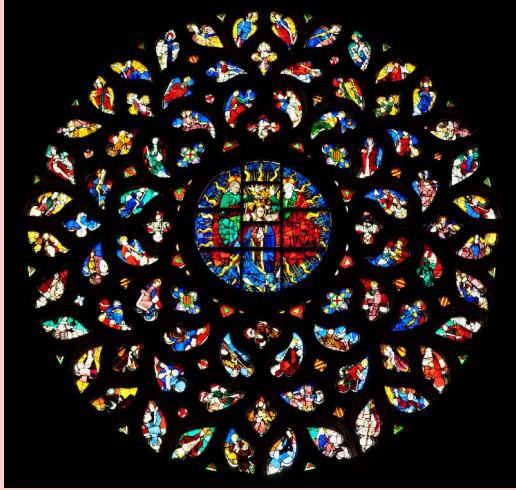


Trondheim (Norway,
1900s)

Flamboyant

But the French would not rest, even after these magnificent works of art became commonplace. The Rayonnant style “blossomed” if you will into something even more elaborate: the Flamboyant style. The name was adopted into English directly from the French and **means, literally, “flaming.”**

When you look at the next set of rose windows, the name certainly speaks for itself. Oftentimes **the flames take the form of little hearts**, which also has deep significance in our Tradition. These windows were crafted in the 1400s.



Barcelona, Sta. Maria del Mar, 1459



Abbeville, Saint-Vulfran, 1400s

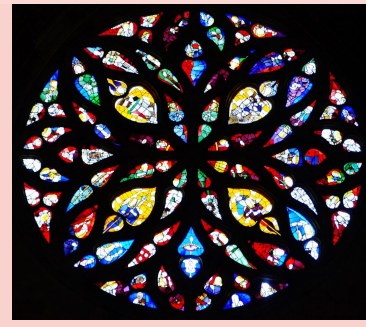
And speaking of blossoms, here are some more amazing Flamboyants from that same time period **that look like flowers**:



St-Herbot, France



St Laurent, France



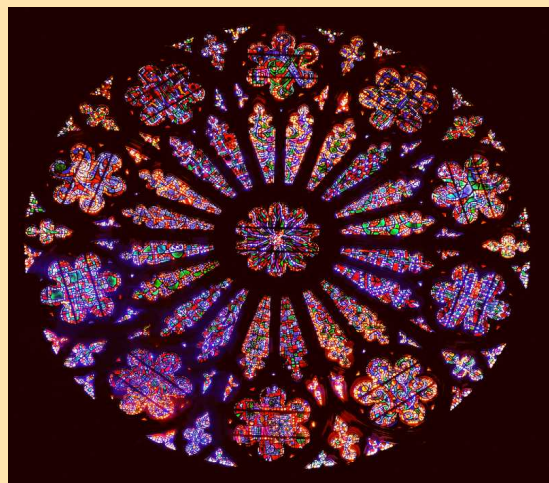
Bordeaux, France

Modern Windows

For all the degradation modern art has inflicted upon art history, in the area of stained glass, **the moderns have a wonderful track record**. Here are just a few, a couple of which come from the Episcopal churches in the United States. The last one is from a church in which my brother was married:



Sagrada Familia, Barcelona



Washington National Cathedral



St. John the Divine, Manhattan, NYC

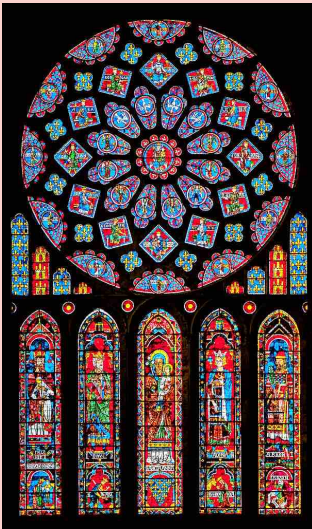


St. Thomas More, Nassau, Bahamas

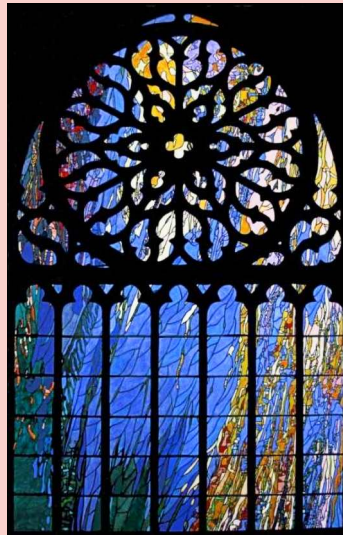
Lancet Windows

The final testimony to glory belongs to the rose windows with lancet windows below them. **Think of the lancet window as a pointed and decorative “lance”** symbolically positioned to hold up the window. The earlier windows like Chartres usually contain images of the patrons (usually royalty) or the patron saints of the cathedral.

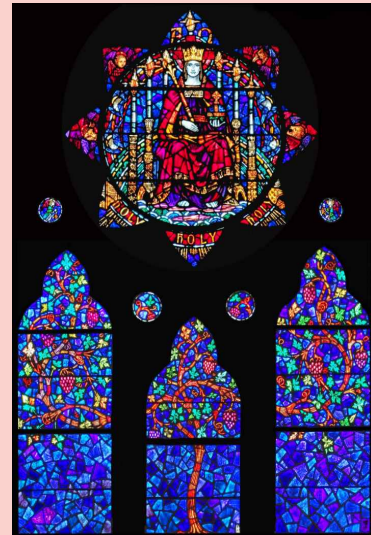
The tracery of **the central window below** derives from 1400s but its glass is modern. No medieval artist would have even conceived of such a glass design! They are all beautiful in their own right



Chartres Cathedral,
North Rose, 1200s



St Tremeur Church, Carhaix
France, 1600s



St Barnabas Episcopal,
Irvington, NY, 20th C.

In closing, I must admit that here I am confronted by my own poverty in trying to show you the wealth of rose windows of our Tradition. **I didn't even scratch the surface** of the varieties and magnificence of these windows!

But that sense of poverty is fitting for the season. As we approach the Nativity scenes in our parishes, we are reminded of **Him who lowered Himself to our condition and was born in human poverty and uncertainty**. We each have a gift to give Him, and these rose windows are mine!

May the Lord Jesus be pleased with this **humble gift of beauty this Christmas** in gratitude for the infinite gift of

Himself to us!

[In The Bleak Midwinter Christ Comes to Us as Family](#)



Feature Video

[View Video of Christmas Hymn](#)

A Blessed Christmas to all my Sacred Windows readers and to your families!

Peter Darcy

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