

The Cathedral of St. Thomas More Tour

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts” – Psalm 84:2

God dwells in our midst among his people. *God is with us* - proclaims Bishop Burbidge in his 2020 Pastoral Letter *In Tongues All Can Hear*. Jesus is present, truly and substantially - in the Holy Eucharist, in every Catholic Church throughout the world. “I am the bread of life” he tells us (John 6:35) and elsewhere, “I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). He is present in our midst in the Cathedral. Not only in the Eucharist – but in a mysterious way through the ministry of our local Shepherd, our Bishop, whose Cathedral stands as a sign and symbol of his authority, while signifying the unity of the People of God in the Diocese of Arlington.

Prayer Before the Cathedral Tour

O Lord, Most High and Powerful God, You are present in our midst! For this, we praise and thank you. Bless us as we visit this Cathedral. May the sights we see and the history we encounter draw us unto you with an ever more fervent faith. And may we grow in our understanding and appreciation of the richness of your grace here in our local Diocesan Church. We ask this through Christ Our Lord. Amen. St. Thomas More, pray for us!

The Enduring Witness of St. Thomas More

It’s amazing that so much in the cathedral speaks of Thomas More’s arrest and martyrdom. He died as a witness to the things of God- which he set over and above the ways of man. May he be a reminder of this important truth in our times – especially here in Arlington being so close to our nation’s capital where societal and political pressure can sway one from the ways of Jesus.

Walking into the nave from the entrance of the cathedral, the visitor is welcomed overhead by a statue of Thomas More standing above. The tall windows in the nave are fashioned after the windows in the Tower of London where St. Thomas More was imprisoned. As you walk through the nave, consider looking up at the windows and imagine that Thomas would have gazed up at similar spaces. Looking up at the ceiling one can discern chains and axes denoting the martyrdom of Thomas More. Even the smaller “window”-type rectangular notches in the wall behind the sanctuary are similar in size to the small window in the cell Thomas More was imprisoned in. He met his ultimate sacrifice as he was taken away from the Tower of London. Worshippers gather in the Cathedral for *the* ultimate sacrifice: that of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, Our Lord, on the altar at Mass.

Below is a list of must see items on your tour:



Christ the Redeemer Statue

Standing tall overlooking Route 50 in Arlington, Our Lord stands with arms outstretched in compassion. Christ the Redeemer reminds us of the ever-present love and mercy of Our Lord, welcoming visitors into the Cathedral. The statue also stands in witness to the love of Christ for travelers on Route 50, which was a main thoroughfare into DC for many years. The image of Christ the Redeemer is a symbol of hope, peace, and love. He has redeemed us by dying for our sins, freeing us from the captivity of sin and in turn restoring us to newness of life. With his arms wide open, Christ invites us into His heart, our home. “But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8)

Sancta Trinitas Bell Tower

Located on the eastern side of the Cathedral, the bell tower is composed of six bronze bells imported from the Netherlands. There is room for six more bells. These bells call worshipers to Mass and other services. They also ring at noon and six o'clock in the evening to pray the Angelus. The words of the Angelus may be found inside the tower. The tower was dedicated on August 15, 1982.



Cathedral Doors



Depicted on the stained-glass doors in the main entrance are the Four Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John flanked by our Diocesan patron saints, St. Thomas More and St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. We are reminded of the Heralds of the Good News along with our local patrons, as we enter this place of prayer. The second set of doors in the narthex before entering the church were installed when the renovations to the Cathedral were made in 2015. See if you can guess which each image signifies? Hint: an anchor is a common symbol for one of the theological virtues.

Statue of St. Thomas More

Directly above you as you enter the nave (the main body of the church) is a statue of St. Thomas More. This image is visible to priests and Bishops of Arlington as they celebrate Mass in their Cathedral. May St. Thomas More watch over and pray for those called to serve in our Diocese!



Stained Glass Windows of St. Thomas More



This is a majestic site: also above the main entrance are three arched stained-glass windows dedicated to St. Thomas More.

The first window shows the Royal Crest of Henry VIII, whom Thomas More served under as Lord Chancellor. Below the crest is the Collar of Esses connected with a medallion of a Tudor rose. The collar was a symbol of the highest office in the court of the king, Lord Chancellor, which More held. Below the collar is an axe, representing his beheading and martyrdom. This window represents More's service to the King and martyrdom.

The center window shows the hand of God in the gesture of blessing, representing a blessing upon St. Thomas More who is at the center of the window behind his family's coat of arms. Above Thomas are the Ten Commandments representing the law and a lit lamp representing God's word, the Faith, and truth. Below is a ship, representing the Church. This window represents God's blessing upon St. Thomas More and his family, More's defense of the law, the Faith, and truth, and the Church's lifting of Thomas More to sainthood.

The last window shows the Papal Crest of Pope Clement VII who was the pope at the time of More's conflict with King Henry. Below the crest are three Bishops' Miters, representing the church hierarchy and below are marriage rings with a red cross, representing the Holy Sacrament of Marriage. This window represents the Pope's refusal to grant the King an annulment. The King separated himself from the Catholic Church and declared himself Supreme Head of the Church of England. More's defense of the sanctity of matrimony and refusal to take the Oath of Supremacy, lead to his death.

Ceiling Decoration

Another beautiful feature of the Cathedral is the unique ceiling. The underlying color is called “scarborough”. It is a deep blue-green over which a lighter green texturing is applied.

The intertwining circles are chains and palms. The chains represent St. Thomas More’s imprisonment in the Tower of London and The Chapel of St. Peter ad Vincula in the tower in which his body is currently buried in an unmarked grave. The palms represent the victory over martyrdom.



The cross and crown symbolize the reason for St. Thomas More’s martyrdom. The crown is below and behind the cross because of his last statement before dying, “I die the King’s good servant, but God’s first.”

As mentioned above, the axe symbolizes St. Thomas More’s beheading & martyrdom. More was known to be of good humor and sometimes made jokes. It is said that he told his executioner that his beard was completely innocent of any crime and did not deserve the axe. He then positioned his beard so that it would not be harmed.



Nave: Stained-Glass Windows and Stations of the Cross

The windows in the nave (the main body of the church) convey terrific meaning. If facing the altar, the windows on the left share instances from the Old Testament and the windows on the right depict episodes from the New Testament. Designed after the architecture of the Tower of London (pictured under the stations), where Thomas More was held captive, these windows are similar in size to windows at the Tower. Perhaps stop and meditate upon an image in a window that you connect with? For instance, the fourth window down from the altar, depicts the heart of Jesus crowned with thorns.

The Stations of the Cross were painted by a German artist. They were saved from a church in Germany at the time of World War II, brought to the U.S.A., and placed in the Cathedral during renovations in 2015. Why not pray the Stations? Or at least stop at one or two of them and reflect on what Our Lord has done for us.

First Station: Jesus is Condemned to Death

While you stand in the Cathedral named after St. Thomas More, perhaps stand at the first station, the condemnation of Jesus by the local magistrate and reflect also on the arrest and condemnation of More. Standing as you are in the cathedral whose very windows throughout are meant to remind of the Tower of London where Thomas was imprisoned for not giving in to political pressure, and whose art on the ceiling bears the marks of his martyrdom – perhaps say a prayer for those in our time who need the courage of the Holy Spirit in face of political adversity.





Sanctuary

The altar, side altar on which the tabernacle sits, ambo, lectern, and cathedra are made of white marble.

Did you ever wonder why priests kiss the altar? It's not only because the sacrifice of Jesus (a re-presentation of his death on the Cross) happens on the altar, but also because each altar carries something very special. Every altar in every Catholic church in the world holds relics of some sort. That is also true for our Cathedral, but unfortunately, we have not found any documentation telling us what relics are in our altar. It shall remain a mystery for now.



The *cathedra* (pronounced "CATH-eh-druh"), also known as the Bishop's chair, is located directly behind the altar. It represents the authority of Bishop Burbidge in the Diocese. The cathedra of a bishop is a singular seat only found in the cathedral. Particularly, it is a symbol of the bishop's teaching authority in the Church. Moses sat on a chair and taught, and many would come to learn from him (see Exodus chapter 18). Thus, the seat of Moses came to be seen as a sign of his teaching authority. Likewise, the Bishop's seat or – in Latin – *cathedra*, became a similar sign. Located at the pinnacle of the cathedra is Bishop Burbidge's Coat of Arms. Take a moment to look at the Coat of Arms. You can find out more on Bishop's Coat of Arms here:

<https://www.arlingtondiocese.org/bishop/coat-of-arms/>. Practically speaking, the cathedra is where the diocesan Bishop sits when he celebrates Mass or other important liturgies and services.



The rectangular **windows** – or notches – **on the wall behind the cathedra**, as mentioned above, are similar in size to the windows in a Tower of London cell. See photo of Thomas More's cell to the left. Prison cells in the tower usually only had one window.

Adorning the **ambo** are statues of Ss. Peter and Paul with Jesus at the center. The Gospel is proclaimed and bishops preach from the ambo. Chief apostles of Jesus and heralds of the Good News, St. Peter was our first Pope and St. Paul authored much of the New Testament.

Located above and behind the sanctuary is the **choir loft** and **organ**. The organ is composed of three manuals and pedal, with a total of 2,965 individual pipes, 25 chimes, and pontifical trumpets. It was built by Moller Oran in 1961 and rebuilt and augmented in 1979 by former Cathedral organist Robert Wyant.

The Blessed Oils and Sacred Chrism

Located behind the sanctuary you will find the Sacred Chrism and the blessed oils. These are to be kept in a special place of honor in every Catholic church. The blessed oils are the Oil of the Sick and the Oil of Catechumens. The Oil of the Sick is made of pure olive oil and is used in the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. The Oil of Catechumens is also made of pure olive oil and is used on infants and adults prior to Baptism. The Sacred Chrism is made of pure olive oil mixed with balsam and is used in the Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders and to consecrate altars and dedicate churches. The Chrism oil symbolizes strength and the fragrance of balsam represents the "aroma of Christ" (II Corinthians 2:15).





Transepts

Located in the right transept, if facing the altar, is the baptismal font framed by a stained-glass window depicting the Baptism of Jesus by St. John the Baptist. To the right and left are statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph.

Located in the left transept, if facing the altar, is a beautiful statue of Christ the King framed by a stained-glass window depicting our second patron, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. The Holy Spirit above represents blessing of St. Elizabeth, the

halo around her head represents her sainthood, and her devotion to Mary represented by an image of her as Queen of heaven and earth. Why not stop for a moment and pray at the statue of Christ the King, while imploring the intercession of Mother Seton for our Diocese?

Other Décor

The Cathedral is full of imagery and history. There are a few more items to take note of.

Throughout the church you will see red roses. These are Tudor roses, the traditional heraldic emblem of England whose name and origin comes from the House of Tudor, an English royal house. A brief history: King Henry VII's father was of the House of Tudor and his mother of the House of Lancaster, which also used a red rose as their symbol. In 1485, King Henry VII took the crown of England from Richard III of the house of York, who used a white rose as their symbol. King Henry VII married Elizabeth of York, uniting the two families that were once at war and adopted the Tudor rose as his badge. It was combined with white petals on the inside representing the House of York and red petals on the outside representing the House of Lancaster. The Tudor red rose was adopted by King Henry VIII as his badge and so it was used in many ways, including the Collar of Esses that St. Thomas More wore as Lord Chancellor of England.

Also throughout the church you will see a Celtic Cross. You will find also it above every Station of the Cross, the tabernacle, and the seat where the priest sits.

There are two statues in the church that are very important as well. They are near the front entrance in the nave. If facing the front doors you will find St. John Vianney in the left alcove. He is the patron saint of priests. Why not stop here and pray for priests - particularly those who have helped you along the way – baptized you, heard your confession or accompanied you in a difficult time? In the right alcove you will find Pope Pius X who is the patron of frequent reception of Holy Communion.



Burke Hall/The Crypt

Amazingly, underneath you as you walk about the Cathedral – is where Mass was celebrated for years before the church you are now in was built. What is now called Burke Hall was the old church. This hall serves as a gathering space for parish activities. Unfortunately, it is not currently open to visitors.

Directly under the main altar is the burial crypt for Bishops of Arlington. It is the final resting place of Bishop John R. Keating, second Bishop of Arlington.

Windows in Burke Hall

Windows are seen in Burke Hall which at one time allowed the light of day to illuminate the place of prayer for the people of St. Thomas More parish. These windows are now buried, as the earth was built up to support the foundation for the existing Cathedral church.



A few other interesting items in Burke Hall:



The life of St. Thomas More summarized



Pictures relevant to the life and history of St. Thomas More



Grotto of Our Lady

Tucked in the corner on the southwest side of the Cathedral is a Grotto of Our Lady. Why not stop for a moment at the grotto and offer a prayer for mothers, or for Our Lady's intercession for the needs of our Diocese? If the weather is nice, spend a few minutes in quiet meditation, bringing your prayer intentions before the Lord and his Mother.

Prayer After the Cathedral Visit

We give you thanks Almighty God for this visit to our Diocesan Cathedral. Thank you for your presence with us in this place of prayer and Diocesan unity! We pray for our Bishop, Michael Burbidge, and for all priests and deacons of our Diocese who serve you and your people. Inspired by the life and witness of St. Thomas More, may we boldly live the teachings of your Church, so as to one day enjoy your glory in Heaven. We pray this through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Sources Used:

Consultation with Cathedral of St. Thomas More staff, September 2020.

Historical Archives of the Cathedral of St. Thomas More, found here:
<https://www.cathedralstm.org/about/parish-history/> August & September, 2020.

The Cathedral of Saint Thomas More – Church Guide by Jack Pierce

Photo Credit:

Thomas More's cell: "Thomas More's cell bell tower of London England" by Amy Cools May 4, 2018

Tower of London: "Tower of London viewed from the River Thames" by N.H. Fischer / CC BY-SA
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