

The stained glass windows of Margaret Agnes Rope (1882 – 1953)

NEWPORT: OUR LADY HELP OF CHRISTIANS WINDOW¹

Our Lady Help of Christians is one of the many titles with which the Catholic Church honours the Virgin Mary. She has been given this particular title because of her care for the Church, the Kingdom of her Son, and because Catholics have often received protection and deliverance from peril through her intercession: under this title she is the principal patron of the Diocese of Shrewsbury and of Shrewsbury Cathedral.

The main panel of this window, between the St Winefride and St Nicholas windows in the wall to your right as you face the altar, shows Mary with the Christ Child. Mary is wearing a long white robe and over it a blue cloak lined in red. The white symbolises her purity and the red a mother's love, passion and devotion. Blue is a colour traditionally associated with her. In Medieval and Renaissance Europe, blue pigment was derived from the rock lapis lazuli: this was imported from Afghanistan and was more expensive than gold, so its use was a way of honouring Our Lady. Around Mary's head is a halo, and within it is a circle of stars, a reference to St John's vision, described in the Book of Revelation, of a woman having "on her head a crown of twelve stars"² which has been interpreted as referring to Mary. Her face is being restored in 2021 thanks to a generous grant from the Rope Family Trusts.

Mary is standing on a serpent: in the Garden of Eden God said to the serpent, which had persuaded Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, "I will make you enemies of each other: you and the woman, your offspring and her offspring. It will crush your head ..." ³. This was seen as a prefiguration of the coming of Mary, the Second Eve, to bring about the conquest of sin, represented by the serpent, through her willing acceptance of her role as mother of Jesus our Redeemer.

The Christ Child is sitting, supported by his mother, who is gazing lovingly down at him. He is grasping a spindle in his left hand⁴. The spindle was used for spinning yarn, traditionally a woman's task, so in Mary's hand it would have been a symbol of her domesticity, but in Christ's hand it becomes a sceptre, symbol of his kingship. This is another reference to St John's vision: he wrote that the woman "gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with an iron sceptre"⁵.

¹ An undated leaflet (presumably contemporary with the window) in the Shrewsbury Diocesan Archives has been very helpful in the preparation of this commentary.

² Revelation 12:1.

³ Genesis 3:15.

⁴ It is difficult to see because a horizontal window armature cuts across it, but there is a similar one in the Christ Child's hand in the artist's Holy Family window at Blaxhall, Suffolk.

⁵ Revelation 12:5.

The symbolism used in this depiction of Mary with Jesus emphasises that Jesus is King and that Mary is his mother. We Catholics believe that as such she enjoys a particularly privileged position in his heavenly kingdom: she is Queen of Heaven, and can help us by interceding with Jesus on our behalf⁶.

Around Mary's feet are the flowers which are associated with her: Lady's Slipper, Marigold (Mary-gold), Lady's Seal, Lady's Bedstraw, Lady's Thimble, Lady's Cushion, Lilies of the Valley (also known as Our Lady's Tears), Roses and Madonna Lilies. There are many legends and traditions explaining these names: Lady's Bedstraw, for example, is so called because it is said to have formed a bed for the infant Jesus in the manger.

At the top of the window an angel kneels in prayer. Below is a crown, a symbol of Our Lady's Queenship. To the right is a lily, surrounded by the branches of a thorn bush. This is an allusion to a passage in the Old Testament book the Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon, in which the bride, or beloved, identified by Catholics with Mary, is described as a "lily among thorns"⁷. As the lily was surrounded by thorns so Mary was to be surrounded by sorrows, culminating in the crucifixion of her son. This metaphor is reinforced by the inclusion to the left of a honeysuckle: one of the traditional names for that plant is also "lily among thorns". Above the honeysuckle is a rose, another metaphor for Mary from the Song of Songs⁸. The lily and the rose are also symbols of Mary's purity.

The lower panel illustrates the Battle of Lepanto, a naval engagement which took place off the western coast of Greece in 1571 between the fleet of the Holy League and the navy of the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman forces had invaded Cyprus, which was then part of the territory of the Republic of Venice, and Pope St Pius V had organised a coalition of Catholic states, the Holy League, to support the Venetians. The Holy League was victorious and the Ottoman navy greatly depleted, and this success was credited to Our Lady: the Pope had asked the faithful to pray the Rosary, placing the Holy League fleet under Mary's protection. The title "Help of Christians" is thought to have been conferred on Mary after the battle. On the left of the battle scene is a ship of the Holy League, bearing crosses on its mastheads and flying pennants displaying the crossed keys of St Peter, symbol of the papacy. Also visible are flags showing the Venetian Republic's winged lion of St Mark. To the right is the Ottoman fleet in confusion: on the ships' masts are pennants showing the star and crescent, symbol of the Empire. One Ottoman pennant is in the sea. In the corner of the panel is an inset showing the Pope kneeling before a crucifix with rosary in hand. Behind him is a torch: he was known as "Pius, the flaming torch" because of his zeal for guiding the Church along the right path at a time when it was in danger of losing its way. The Battle of Lepanto is also shown in Hardman's 1856 east window in Shrewsbury Cathedral, with which Margaret Rope would have been familiar. The two depictions have some similarity in their general layout, but the Newport one is far more realistic and far more detailed.

⁶ The artist shows Mary doing this in the English Martyrs window at Holy Name Church, Oxtun, Birkenhead.

⁷ Song of Solomon 2:2.

⁸ ditto 2:1.

The feast of Our Lady Help of Christians, May 24th, was instituted by Pope Pius VII in 1815 in thanksgiving for the restoration of the liberty of the Church by the prayers of Our Lady following the defeat of Napoleon, by whom the Pope had been imprisoned.

At the top of each side border is a golden crown, another sign that Mary is Queen of Heaven, and below are representations of some of Our Lady's other titles, these taken, as is "Help of Christians", from the Litany of Loreto, a prayer consisting of a series of invocations of Mary each followed by the request "Pray for us". "Mystical Rose" and "Tower of Ivory" are metaphors derived from the Song of Solomon⁹. "Ark of the Covenant" and "House of Gold" draw parallels between the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant containing the stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments, the Word of God in stone, representing God's covenant with his people, Solomon's gilded Temple which was built to house it, and Mary, who bore Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh, through whom came the new covenant between God and all mankind. Mary is the "Gate of Heaven" because she was the portal through which God the Son, Jesus Christ, passed to reach earth from heaven, and she is also the way that baptised Christians on earth can hope to reach heaven, by following her example and seeking her help, and she is the "Morning Star" because just as the appearance of the morning star is followed by the dawn of a new day so Mary's acceptance of God's will was followed by Christ's birth, the dawn of a new age. In the centre of the bottom border is a golden shield bearing the crowned Marian monogram MR = M(aria) R(egina) = Mary Queen (of Heaven).

Two shields in the borders bear the arms of Our Lady and of the Diocese of Shrewsbury. Our Lady's arms, on the left, consist of a winged heart pierced by a sword. This is a reference to the prophecy made by Simeon to Mary when the child Jesus was presented in the Temple that a sword would pierce her soul¹⁰, a prediction of the sorrows which she was to suffer. The diocesan arms, on the right, combine elements of the arms of the 13th century bishop of Hereford St Thomas de Cantilupe, an inverted leopard's head and fleur-de-lys, and the arms attributed to the 7th century bishop of Lichfield St Chad, a cross. The Diocese of Shrewsbury covers parts of these two ancient dioceses.

At the head and the foot of the main panel is the inscription HELP OF CHRISTIANS PRAY FOR US. The inscription at the base of the window reads PRAY FOR THE SOULS OF FELIX GILES WHO DIED MAY 5TH 1898, AND MARIA GILES WHO DIED JULY 23RD 1896 · R·I·P · Felix and Maria Giles were the father and stepmother of Fr. Chichele Giles, parish priest of Newport during the period when the Margaret Rope windows were installed. Fr. Giles' mother Sarah had died before his first birthday¹¹. Below the inscription is the crowned monogram of Our Lady, MR, standing for Maria Regina (Mary Queen [of Heaven]).

⁹ Song of Solomon 2:1 & 7:4 respectively.

¹⁰ Luke 2:35.

¹¹ 1851 census (National Archives ref. HO107/1506/196/1), 1871 census (RG10/431/144/4), General Register Office Births, Marriages & Deaths indexes.

The window was unveiled on Sunday 7th July 1912¹² “without ceremony, and without anything savouring of ostentation”, according to the report in the local newspaper – I think that Margaret Rope would have liked that. The report goes on to say that “just before the celebration of High Mass¹³, the Rev. Dr. Hazlehurst¹⁴, from outside the Church, undid the veiling which hid the beauty of the window from those within; and, in a moment, the sunlight filtered through the storied glass, and splashed the assembled worshippers with glowing tint.”

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¹² Shrewsbury Diocesan Archives leaflet and *Newport & Market Drayton Advertiser* 13th July 1912 p.7.

¹³ A full ceremonial Sung Mass with incense.

¹⁴ Henry Edward Hazlehurst (1879-1952) was Assistant Priest to Fr. Giles.