PACIFIC NW
The Seattle Times
APRIL 27, 2025

# *The Saint and the Window*

NEW STAINED-GLASS WINDOW HONORS A SAINT WHO DIED IN SEATTLE

BACKSTORY

# Incorrupt saints: *What's the deal?*

By Brendan Kiley /
*Pacific NW magazine writer*

**THE BODY OF** St. John Maximovitch, a Russian Orthodox saint at the center of this week's magazine cover story, is said to be "incorrupt."

St. John died in 1966. His unembalmed body, witnesses say, did not decompose in the days between his death in a Seattle church and his funeral in San Francisco — and was still intact (though showing signs of mummification) 27 years later when his coffin was opened for examination.

How is that possible? Depends on what you believe.

Incorrupt relics are a long-standing tradition in older Christianities (Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy) and some corners of Buddhism and Islam.

They can be body parts, like the 794-year-old tongue of St. Anthony of Padua, still displayed at a basilica in Italy. They can be full bodies, like the remains of Sister Wilhelmina Lancaster, a Black American nun who died in 2019 and is now interred in a glass reliquary at an abbey in Missouri.

To believers, they are a sign from God. (Though theology doesn't insist the remains be 100% unchanged — the faithful still venerate some relics that have been touched up with wax.) To skeptics, they're either fakes or the result of biological abnormalities.

A few scientists have taken a look. Ezio Fulcheri, a professor of pathology at the University of Genoa, has examined allegedly incorrupt saints in Italy, with the permission of the Catholic Church. He found a few had, in fact, been artificially mummified (organs removed, body covered in salt), but other cases are more mysterious — seeming instances of spontaneous mummification.

In a 2013 paper, Fulcheri suggested some saints, interred in many-layered arrangements (a coffin inside a sarcophagus inside a cold stone tomb), might have been "confined in a particular microclimate" hostile to putrefying microbes.

And when it comes to decomposition, microbes are the engine — particularly those in the human gut (you have 2-5 pounds of microbes in there, roughly the weight of your brain), which kick-start the process by multiplying and spilling into the rest of the body.

KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

**Glass artist Tami Bogdanoff,** who attends St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral, touches handwritten petitions to St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco. Bogdanoff led the charge to make a new stained-glass window for St. John's chapel.

Some, like historian Carmel Ferragud at the University of Valencia, suggest the condition of saints' guts might be a factor in the relic phenomenon. Certain illnesses or fasting regimens might alter the microbial landscape, interrupting the process of decay.

Intriguing case in point: In years past, some "self-mummifying" Buddhist ascetics have embarked on a yearslong discipline including a strict diet involving tree parts (sap, needles, seeds) and reduction of liquid intake, plus other practices and preparations. They would die in seated meditation and their bodies (presumably with a dramatically altered gut microbiome) would not putrefy. Such mummies still dot the Buddhist world, from India to Japan.

As Ferragud wrote in a 2015 paper about holy incorruptibility: "The rhythms and forms that the decomposition of a corpse can take are very diverse."

So are the forms of human understanding, including our understanding of death — and why, on occasion, some corpses don't seem to decompose like the rest of us.



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**ON THE COVER**

Glassblower Jim Flanagan, pictured on the cover, created the stained glass for a new window at St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral, installed in a chapel honoring St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco.

PHOTO BY KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

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**The chapel of St. John,** with its new window, is quiet in the minutes before its blessing at St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral on Capitol Hill.

KAREN DUCEY / THE SEATTLE TIMES


COVER STORY

# Through a G


# lass Darkly

## Illuminations: How a saint and a window help us see

By Brendan Kiley / *Pacific NW magazine writer*

Photos by Ken Lambert and Karen Ducey / *The Seattle Times*

**LET'S BEGIN** with the window, since it's the crux of the matter — the axis that binds the saint to the half-naked cereal eaters, the devout icon-makers to the merry glassblower.

The center from which all else radiates.

The window is roughly 4 feet high by 5½ feet wide, 200 pieces of stained glass depicting the newly resurrected Jesus Christ standing before his orangey-red rock tomb. He appears supremely serene. Two angels kneel beside him. They look serious, brows curved in concentration.

Around his head: an ocher aura. Around his body: three oblong halos in ever-lightening shades of blue (midnight to denim to turquoise) punctuated by 70 bright yellow stars.

This glass is special: not factory glass made in sheets, but mouth-blown in the old-world style using techniques and tools that (apart from the gas-fired furnaces) aren't so different from what glassblowers have been using for centuries. ▸

KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

**Glass artist Tami Bogdanoff,** who is also a parishoner at St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral, designed and made the new window with help from Greek Orthodox iconographer Effrosyni Kolarou. Bogdanoff sandblasted each star from stained glass made in layers of blue and yellow.

The result is an almost textural color, a vividness, a way of bending light toward the human eye that cameras cannot capture.

This glass also holds secrets: the 70 stars, for example. The glass of Jesus' innermost halo was made by layering colors (blue, yellow, more blue) into a single orb of molten glass. That orb was blown into a long cylinder, cooled, sliced lengthwise, then reheated and flattened into a sheet for cutting.

By sandblasting just so, through one layer of blue, the yellow emerged — a process of uncovering. Each star a revelation.

Below the Resurrection scene, rectangles of blood-red glass have also been sandblasted, revealing a prayer in white lettering. This prayer is rendered in English and old orthography Russian. (That is, in the pre-1917 alphabet, before authoritarian Bolsheviks meddled in the education system to simplify it.) It reads, "O Holy Hierarch John Pray to God for Us!"

**THIS NEW WINDOW** (which, in a few minutes, will be blessed by a bishop) adorns a small chapel dedicated to that hierarch: St. John Maximovitch, also known as St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco, also known as St. John the Wonderworker.

This is where he died — or "reposed," as the faithful say.

St. John died quite suddenly in 1966 in a small, upstairs room of a building behind St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral, a distinctively onion-domed church on an otherwise architecturally unremarkable street of houses and apartments on Capitol Hill.

Some in this congregation still remember St. John: a small, frail-looking man with bright eyes who literally and repeatedly gave people the shoes from his feet and the coat from his back.

He wasn't an official saint the day he died, not yet — he wouldn't be canonized until 1994.

But people had their suspicions.

**ONLY 1% OF** U.S. adults identify as Orthodox Christians, according to Pew Research Center. Because Eastern Orthodoxy isn't terribly well understood outside those circles, here is a three-sentence history:

The Eastern Orthodox church is actually a communion of self-governing churches, often called a "community of

**"To this day Orthodox worship** is an earthy experience that rises to a transcendental spiritual experience," Father John Anthony McGuckin wrote in a 2020 history of the Eastern Orthodox Church. "All the senses are engaged: chanting, incense, lights, icons, relics of saints, full-bodied sacramental rituals — all being conducted with gusto."

KAREN DUCEY / THE SEATTLE TIMES

**Tatiana Vereshchagina,** a chanter at the "kliros," during a service at St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral. A chanter chants the readings of the liturgy. A kliros is a place in the church next to, but separate from, the altar.

KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

equals," and includes Russian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Romanian Orthodox and so on. It traces its lineage to communities founded by Christ's apostles in the eastern Roman (aka Byzantine) Empire. The Orthodox and Roman Catholic streams split in 1054 over major differences, including the nature of the Holy Trinity, the significance of icons and the jurisdiction of the Roman pope.

From a certain point of view, other forms of Christianity (Roman Catholicism, then the thousand flavors of Protestantism) are novel, branches off the Orthodox trunk.

During a service at St. Nicholas while reporting this story, I noted the absence of pews. Everyone was standing.

"Yes," said Tami Bogdanoff, a parishioner who helped make the stained-glass window, with help from Greek Orthodox iconographer Effrosyni Kolarou. "In the old days, when you went to listen to the Lord, you didn't sit in a chair! You stood! Or sat on the ground." She shrugged. "Which you can do, if you want."

I stayed on my feet.

But I couldn't help thinking: *This form of Christianity is so old, it's pre-chair.* ▶

# Through a Glass Darkly

**AS HIS NAMES INDICATE,** St. John lived a peripatetic life and was known for miracles.

Born in 1896, in what is now eastern Ukraine, his arc followed an Orthodox diaspora as it fled violently atheistic uprisings: from the Russian Revolution to China, from the Chinese Revolution to Europe and the United States.

St. John is revered for many things: his good works (he founded orphanages, particularly for children traumatized by war and poverty), his asceticisms (he slept in chairs, never beds), and the frequency and intensity of his prayer.

He also is revered for miracles attributed to him in life — healing, clairvoyance — and in death.

**ST. JOHN'S UNEMBALMED BODY,** eyewitnesses say, never decomposed. Not in the week between his death in Seattle and interment underneath a cathedral in San Francisco, nor in the 27 years between that burial and the reopening of his sepulcher in 1993 to examine his remains.

They were, in church terms, incorrupt.

"There was no rigor mortis, no deterioration," says Sergei Kalfov, whose family was close with St. John, hosting him for meals during visits to Seattle. Kalfov says his father (then a boy) met St. John in a Shanghai hospital, where the saint cured his near-fatal case of peritonitis (an often life-threatening inflammation of the abdomen).

The two remained in contact. Decades later, St. John was assigned to San Francisco — though he traveled to other parishes, including St. Nicholas. By then, the elder Kalfov had moved to Seattle and begun a family, who got to know the saint.

They were with him the day he died. The younger Kalfov served as altar boy while St. John celebrated his final liturgy, and his father served as choir director. Everything seemed normal.

But a few hours later, Kalfov says, St. John fell in the upstairs room. The elder Kalfov heard the crash and rushed up to put St. John in a chair. "I never felt like this before," the saint said, then quietly died in the arms of Kalfov's father — the man he'd saved as a boy.

After a scramble to return the saint's body to San Francisco (special permissions must be acquired to transport an unembalmed body across state lines, and it must be done quickly), Kalfov's father flew down to attend the

**David Sarksyan holds** a censor that will be used to bless the stained-glass window during a celebration in the chapel of St. John at St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral.

KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

KAREN DUCEY / THE SEATTLE TIMES

**Born in 1896,** St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco is revered for his good works (he founded orphanages), his asceticisms (he slept in chairs, never beds) and miracles (healing, clairvoyance). The face of stained-glass artist and St. Nicholas parishoner Tami Bogdanoff is reflected in the glass protecting St. John's icon.

funeral held several days later. (For more about the tradition of incorrupt relics, see the Backstory, Page 2.)

"I hate to use the word 'aura,' but there are certain people," Kalfov says, and pauses. "There's something special — he had that aura of holiness."

Kalfov served in a tank division in the U.S. Army and later worked in software development. He doesn't normally go in for what he calls "mumbo jumbo." But he, like others, attests to St. John's gift for reading minds and foretelling the future.

Can he share an example?

These are personal experiences. Ones he'd rather keep to himself.

"I hate to use the word 'psychic,' " he says. "But when he looked at you, he could read right through you. He knew that you knew that he knew. And he prayed almost constantly. But he was also a normal person — he laughed, told funny stories. It's very hard to describe. He was completely unique."

**STEP BACK FROM** the Resurrection window and admire the chapel: its altar and its large, metal-plated Bible; its many candles; its many, many icons of saints, angels, the Virgin Mary, church fathers.

One prominent icon, with handwritten petitions stuffed into the frame, depicts St. John: robust beard and enigmatic eyes that somehow look simultaneously gentle and severe. (He was known to be both.)

The little chapel is quiet now. But not for long.

Moments later, the upstairs of this building is sardined with people: children, adults, clergy in black and gold. A choir jams into the hallway, singing haunting, gorgeous harmonies in Old Church Slavonic.

They've come for the blessing of this new stained-glass window, officiated by Bishop Theodosy Ivashchenko in regal purple and gold, with incense, candlelight, sacred singing, holy water.

It's intense, almost overwhelming. Solemn, yes, but very much alive.

Bogdanoff, a bundle of energy who led the charge to make this window, is in the crush — her head, like other women, covered in the Orthodox fashion.

Bogdanoff is a glass artist ("glass is my drug of choice!") who designed the window, cut the glass, sandblasted. She revealed the stars.

**BOGDANOFF GREW UP** nonreligious in Seattle, but married a Russian Orthodox man. She was baptized in 1986, after the birth of their first child. Three children later, she fell in love with glass. She'd taken a six-week class — a break from the four small kids — and was hooked.

Buying high-quality glass isn't cheap. At one point, Bogdanoff's husband noticed the mounting expense. "You can pay for me to see a psychologist every week," she declared, "or you can pay for stained glass. Which is it?"

Glass won.

Bogdanoff is an incredible enthusiast, and explains the medium's peculiar magic: There is a galaxy of beauty in "white" light, but our human eyes can't catch it without some help. A piece of stained glass is that help. It absorbs some frequencies of light while letting others pass through — allowing us to appreciate one sliver of color, while ▶

inferring a spectrum of beauty normally unavailable to us.

It reveals what is hidden. It helps us see the invisible.

**AFTER THE BLESSING,** Bogdanoff and I head next door to visit Father Alexei Kotar and his wife, Natalie. Their large goldendoodle, Kashtan (Russian for "chestnut"), roams the room, hungry for petting.

Father Kotar has been ill and has a little trouble speaking, but Natalie elaborates on the miracles of St. John, including his incorrupt state after 27 years.

"This did not prove his sainthood necessarily, but it's a good thing to check," she says. "Incorrupt relics kinda seal the deal — confirm what people already suspected."

She looks toward Father Kotar.

"Father was a deacon in San Francisco at the time," she says. "He was there for this, checking the sarcophagus. He prayed to St. John that they'd always stay connected." She chokes up a little. "So when the opportunity opened to serve here … "

Father Kotar speaks up, slowly and deliberately: "It was like the decision was already made."

**ST. JOHN WAS** canonized in 1994. The Kotars came to St. Nicholas in 2001. Soon afterward, they dedicated the upstairs chapel to St. John.

So why the new window?

"Ugh," Bogdanoff exclaims, suddenly vexed. Natalie Kotar explains.

For years, the window behind the altar was clear glass looking onto an adjoining property. No problem. Just a nice view of trees, birds, squirrels —

"God's creation," Father Kotar adds, opening his arms.

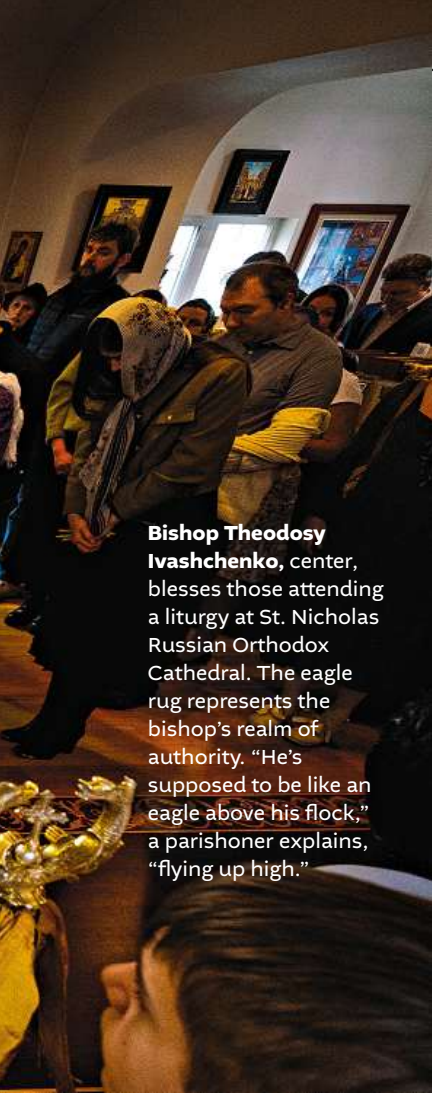
But in 2021, that little patch of God's creation was sold to a developer who promptly erected million-dollar town houses just feet from the chapel.

The view changed. Dramatically.

"It's a sacred space," Natalie Kotar explains. "The liturgy was being performed and we'd see people in their underwear eating breakfast." (The new residents, identified through property records, did not respond to requests for comment.)

"They're half-naked eating cereal in their pajamas!" Bogdanoff says. "I told myself: 'That's it! Before I have the nerve to pass away, I'm going to replace

**Glass artist Tami Bogdanoff** led the charge to create the new stained-glass window in part because worshippers in the chapel and the residents of new next-door town houses could see each other during services.



**Bishop Theodosy Ivashchenko,** center, blesses those attending a liturgy at St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral. The eagle rug represents the bishop's realm of authority. "He's supposed to be like an eagle above his flock," a parishoner explains, "flying up high."

PHOTOS KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

**St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Cathedral** on Capitol Hill.

that window.' "

She knew just the person to make the glass.

Only two studios in the U.S. mouth-blow stained sheet glass in the old style: one in Kansas City, Mo., and one in Fremont. The guy in Kansas City trained under the guy in Fremont.

She called the guy in Fremont.

**SOME SAY JIM FLANAGAN** looks like a willowy Santa Claus, and they're not wrong: big white beard, ruddy complexion enlivened by 2,000-degree fires, a happy twinkle in his bespectacled eyes.

Is it meaningful that a man who looks like Santa is the go-to glass guy for a church called St. Nicholas?

I'll leave that to you.

**"IT'S A TIME CAPSULE** in here!" Flanagan shouts over the raspy roar of furnaces and fans. He's not kidding.

Old photos of this studio, from a 1987 article in Stained Glass Quarterly, could've been taken five minutes ago. There's the cluttered, concrete cathedral of a room. Four battered furnaces. Long pipes for gathering molten glass into balls (often in layers of different colors, to tweak the final hue), then blowing them into orbs. Charred cherrywood tools for shaping them. (Softwoods have pitch, which can scuzz the glass.) The wooden platform, like a small stage, is where Flanagan performs his signature act: blowing orbs into cylinders.

It's a hypnotic sight. Flanagan stands in front of the furnace, spinning a long metal pipe with glass on one end, inserting and withdrawing the orb from the fire, inflating it with his breath. He steps to the edge of the platform, gently swinging the orb off the side, letting gravity (plus more blowing) pull and push it into cylindrical shape.

Flanagan is a grandfather clock. The glass is his pendulum.

One of his assistants comes to snip the end off the cylinder with metal shears, red-hot glass thwapping to the floor. Back to the oven for reheating, then back out. With the help of a metal stand, Flanagan holds the pipe parallel to the floor, spinning it as an assistant widens the cylinder's open end with long cherrywood tools that look like large, flat-sided chopsticks.

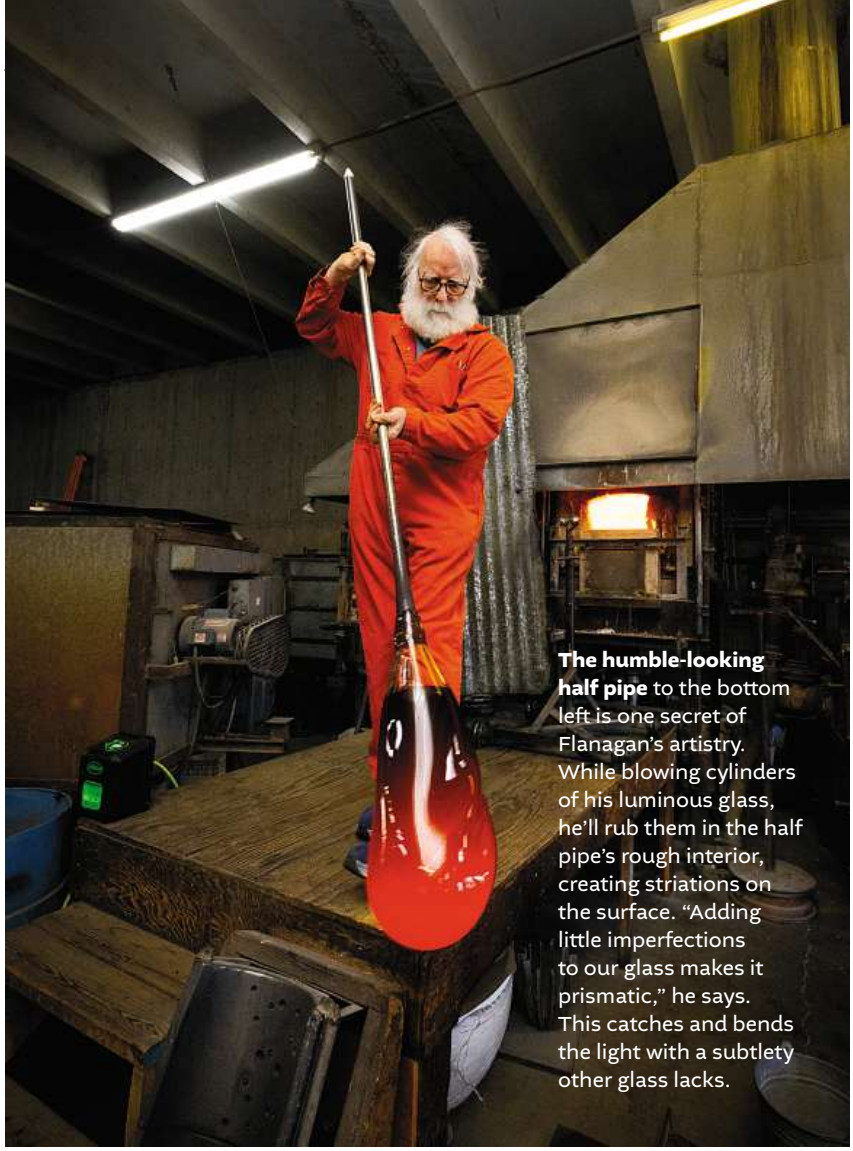
The cylinder blooms like the world's hottest tulip.

All the while, three assistants are in motion: gathering new orbs of clear glass, withdrawing them to shape with wood tools and on steel furniture (metal tables, wood chairs with long metal arms), adding layers of molten colored glass. ▶

If you saw the shop from high above, the glassblowers would look like four slow-motion moths, dancing in oblongs and figure eights: to and fro, always drawn back to the light of a furnace.

**FLANAGAN CAME TO** glass in the mid-1970s, as part of Seattle's art-glass upwelling, and founded Fremont Antique Glass in the early 1980s. Now in his 70s, he's still innovating and experimenting: "You think you know everything, then you have to go back and study again!"

**Glassblower Jim Flanagan** founded Fremont Antique Glass in the early 1980s. Only two studios in the U.S. feature mouth-blown stained sheet glass in the old-world style: one in Missouri and Flanagan's in Fremont. The glassblower in Missouri trained under Flanagan.



**The humble-looking half pipe** to the bottom left is one secret of Flanagan's artistry. While blowing cylinders of his luminous glass, he'll rub them in the half pipe's rough interior, creating striations on the surface. "Adding little imperfections to our glass makes it prismatic," he says. This catches and bends the light with a subtlety other glass lacks.

PHOTOS KEN LAMBERT / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Fremont glass is renowned for many reasons (customers say it "cuts like butter"), but its real treasure is near-radiant color.

About half its hues come from premade color bars. Half Flanagan makes himself with a stash of minerals and oxides: cobalt ("a little cobalt," he says, "will turn the entire earth blue!"), chromium (for greens), gold (pinks) and many others.

"The earth's crust," Flanagan enthuses, "is raw material for glass!"

But his big secret is a humble-looking, metal-studded halfpipe he salvaged from the defunct Satsop nuclear plant on the Olympic Peninsula. While blowing each orb into a cylinder, Flanagan periodically rubs it in the halfpipe, creating striations on the surface.

"Older glass has texture because of impurities in the materials, and melting at lower temperatures," he explains. "Adding little imperfections to our glass makes it prismatic — very subtle in the way it catches and bends the light."

**DAYS LATER,** it's noonish in St. John's chapel. The window is aglow.

If you get close, right up against the glass, you can see the siding and windows of the town houses. But it takes a little effort.

Nearby, the icon of St. John the Wonderworker, St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco, keeps watch over the sacred room.

A question, perhaps a slightly blasphemous question, bubbles up: Why saints? Why are they so important to us? What's the point? (Or, if you're a strict secular materialist, take "saint" in the colloquial sense: What's the point of very, very good people?)

It's a mystery, of course. The ways of this infinitely complex universe — or the ways of the Lord, depending on the tint of your worldview — are not fully knowable.

But that doesn't feel very satisfying.

Today, the window is especially stunning: 200 pieces of glass, bits of the earth's crust suspended in fragments of frozen fire, made radiant at this precise moment by our planet's nearest star.

It's like a miracle of its own.

A possible answer appears: Maybe saints are like stained glass. A little earth infused with a little fire, bending some beauty — normally invisible to us — toward our eyes. Helping us to see.

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**Editor's note:** *Shortly before this story went to press, Father Kotar was admitted to hospice. He died the following day.*