



PORTSMOUTH ABBEY

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Dear Oblates and Friends of Portsmouth,

One of the most remarkable features of the Bible, both in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament, is the portrayal of heroic leaders who can be flawed by faults that are shocking, not only because of what is done, but especially because the offender is otherwise an admirable, revered person, capable of deep religious beliefs, honored by the people and favored by God. Such a one is **Peter, Prince of the Apostles**, who in his triple denial of Jesus goes back on his promise never to desert him, while in the Old Testament David, **King of Israel**, reputed author of the Book of Psalms and the one who started the royal line from which Jesus the Messiah was to spring is shown to be not only an adulterer with Bathsheba, the eventual mother of Solomon, but the murderer of her husband, Uriah the Hittite. The prophet Nathan and David's trusted advisor rebukes him for his double crime and warns him of divine retribution. He instantly recognizes his guilt, repents and accepts the punishment inflicted by God, realizing that he has not only offended Uriah and Bathsheba, but, he, as an example for his people, has betrayed their trust, offending God by breaking, instead of upholding, the Divine Law. Unlike the earlier pagan concept of religion, for the Jews morality and religious practice were closely connected, with no one above the law, regardless of his station in life. But God is merciful, demanding sincere, heartfelt repentance, recognition of guilt and willingness to accept the punishment before forgiveness can be merited. The mercy of God and forgiveness of wrongdoing are the divine qualities that we are expected to show during this special year proclaimed by Pope **Francis**. No one expressed the need for such qualities better than **Shakespeare** whose anniversary it is, the fourth centenary of his death in 1616. In his play, **The Merchant of Venice**, the heroine, Portia, expresses the need for humans to imitate divinity by forgiving wrongdoing and granting mercy in her "quality of mercy speech," highlighting the principal theme of the play. Mercy, like judgment, is *a divine attribute*: we cannot expect mercy if we fail to show it when called upon to do so; we cannot judge others without ourselves being liable to judgment.



### Richard Lippold's "*The Trinity*" in the Portsmouth Abbey Church

If the Abbey church is entered by the front door, the first thing one notices is the Lippold wire sculpture over the main altar. And when it is seen for the first time, it comes as an unexpected surprise. The effect is literally breathtaking and its purpose is immediately apparent. It is intended to focus the spectator's gaze on the figure of Jesus hanging on the cross, and then follow the downward thrust of the cross to the altar which is the most sacred object in a Catholic church, since it is where the central act of worship takes place.

When the new church at Portsmouth was being built in 1959 – 1960, a generous friend of the monastery was approached to help defray the cost of *furnishing* the church, since he had already indicated that he was not interested in giving money for bricks *and mortar*. At that time a young, innovative artist, **Richard Lippold**, was making a name for himself through his wire sculptures, one called *The Sun* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, another, *The Moon*, at the Museum of Modern Art and a third was being planned for the Pan American Building, all in New York City. He agreed to come to Portsmouth to construct an original work which would focus attention on the main altar and incorporate the bronze and steel **crucifix** already in place, a modern representation of Christ on the cross made in Zurich by a Swiss artist, **Meinrad Burch**, who specialized in ecclesiastical art. Burch was also responsible for the bronze **stations of the cross**, which were to be sculptured in a form and with materials that would harmonize with the Lippold structure. These can be seen on the inside walls and side chapels of the church.

Lippold spent weeks planning his work and submitted a sketch to the monks in charge of the construction of the church. It required *an act of faith* to proceed, since even with the sketch it was hard to imagine what it would look like. The delicacy and subtlety did not come across. It looked too *busy*, like a vast spider web. But he was given the “go ahead” and he proceeded with his creation: a mass of wires, to be given shape and form, demanding infinite patience, with the help of metal tools, ladders and scaffolding. From this was to emerge the glittering, breath-taking sculpture that we now see. While he was working, his assistant spent much of his time reading aloud from *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, a mystical treatise by **St. John of the Cross**, to provide inspiration for this monumental task. Lippold was Jewish, not Christian, and so he felt the need of acquainting himself with some of the doctrine of the Catholic mystical tradition. Like the church’s architect, **Pietro Belluschi**, whose enthusiastic approval had been secured, he had a deep *respect for tradition* and was able to incorporate elements of the *baroque* into his sculpture. The radiating wires emanating from the *corpus* and the *cross* are reminiscent of Bernini’s use of rays to accentuate his sculpture in *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa*, and to direct our attention to the main object. Here the focus is concentrated on the figure of Christ and then on the altar, where the *sacrifice of the mass* takes place.

Lippold’s work is the first example of abstract art at Portsmouth, and nothing could be more appropriate to express the Godhead than this form of art. We are used to thinking of God the Father as an old, patriarchal figure and the Holy Spirit as a dove, because this is the way artists so frequently have portrayed them. But the ideal way to represent a spiritual reality is through non-*representational* forms, that is, through *abstract art*. At Portsmouth a second abstract sculpture, called by the Greek epithet that **Homer** gives to Odysseus, **Polytropos** (*the crafty one*), was designed and executed by **Gilbert Franklin**, the noted painter and sculptor, for outside viewing and is placed near the Art Center.

The wire sculpture in the Church is called The *Trinity*. The symbolism can be understood in the choice of metals used and the directions which the wires of the sculpture take. The **silver wires** made of **stainless steel** can represent the *Father*’s approval of the sacrifice of His Son, pouring down from heaven (the skylight), while the gold wires, made of **bronze** extending from the arms of the cross, represent the *Holy Spirit* reaching out to the sides of the sanctuary and into the ceiling of the nave, as if to the four corners of the world. The figure of *Jesus Christ*, the Son of God, is not abstract but concrete, since he took on human form. The effect produced on entering the church from the front door is instantaneous. We are dazzled by an explosion of silver and gold, our eyes immediately drawn to

Christ on the Cross and the altar beneath. The symbolism becomes readily apparent when we are given the key; and the key is in the title, *The Trinity*.

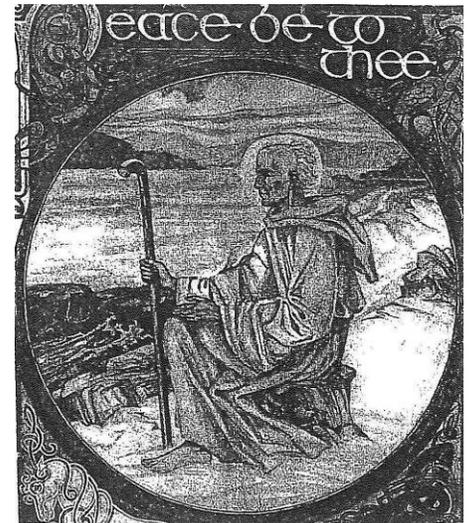
Three texts help to convey the meaning of this sculpture, each representing one of the Three Persons in the **Divine Trinity**: **1) the silver wires: The Father:** *Hic est filius meus dilectus, in quo mihi bene complacui: ipsum audite.* (“This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased; listen to Him”); **2) the gold wires: The Holy Spirit:** (*Bonum est diffusivum sibi.*) the mystical principle that “goodness is diffusive of itself,” and cannot be contained, since by its nature it is all pervasive; **3) the bronze figure of Jesus on the Cross:** *Christus factus est pro nobis, obediens usque ad mortem, mortem autem crucis.* (“Christ became obedient for us unto death, even to death of the cross.”).

In closing, it must be admitted that this is a personal view of the symbolism of the wire sculpture, and it may not entirely be what Richard Lippold had in mind when he called it *The Trinity*. But that is part of the appeal of the abstract. It lends itself, like poetry, to multiple interpretations.



## LITURGICAL CALENDAR FOR JUNE

- 1 Dedication of the Abbey Church
- 2 St. Justin, Martyr
- 3 Most Sacred Heart of Jesus
- 5 **SUNDAY 10 OF THE YEAR**
- 6 **St. Columba, Abbot of Iona**
- 11 St. Barnabas, Apostle
- 12 **SUNDAY 11 OF THE YEAR**
- 13 St. Anthony of Padua, priest, doctor of Church
- 19 **SUNDAY 12 OF THE YEAR**
- 22 **St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More, Martyrs**
- 24 ***NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST***
- 25 **SUNDAY 13 OF THE YEAR**
- 28 St. Irenaeus, Bishop and Martyr
- 29 **SS PETER AND PAUL, APOSTLES**



*Columba of Iona*

