

Carved Doors Invite Us: Enter Into the Life of Our Patron Saint

I hope you are like me, and love the back story behind the art.

It started with a simple question from Kim Stanchfield during early church renovation plans in 2008: “What do you think about a carved door?” Followed that came gentle nudgings from the Holy Spirit. Funded fully by individual donations, the parish community has a spectacular piece of evangelical art expounding the life of St Philip Benizi gracing the 2009 remodeled entrance to our church.

The 8 x 7” double doors, each side weighing approx 250 pounds, are made from 6 inch thick Oregon alder, and required 2 1/2 months of 40+ hour work weeks by artist J. Chester Armstrong of Sisters, Oregon to complete. The carvings were initiated with chain saw, and finished with 25 various kinds of woodworking tools. There are no absolutely straight lines on the doors, to give the impression that the contained story line is anything but static.

At the upper left, we see Philip’s beatific vision: on a deserted road in early 13th century Florence, he saw a golden four-wheeled chariot upon which sat the Blessed Virgin, surrounded by angels and saints. A lamb and a lion drew the golden chariot and ‘round it circled a white dove. The deserted road is the empty love of this world. The golden chariot stood for the Servite Order of the holy Virgin Mary (which Philip would join). Its wheels represent the Order’s adherence to the four Gospels. Two things are required of the servant of God: gentleness (the lamb), and strength (the lion). The dove symbolizes simplicity.

The central action of the carving is the miracle with the leper. Philip is bigger, more dominant; he is where the action is. The halo reminds you he is the saint. The leper is rough, unclean, unshaven; one you wouldn’t lend a cloak to. St Philip’s kindness is important here – he wasn’t anticipating the miracle *either*, he was just being kind. The offered tunic ties them together.

How does one convey the moment of a miracle? The leper is witness to his own cure, the animation coming from the immediacy of the unexpected act. He is leaping up for joy, seeing his hands at the instant of the change. His bandages fly off – all the leprosy gone-, his beggar’s bowl upset in the drama. There is no interest in money; it pales in the excitement of a miracle.

The friar at the bottom right is witness, and brings energy into the scene as his feet contact the lower corner of the door. There is a line of movement from the monk’s eyes to the leper’s hands to Philip’s face. Philip’s hand is gesturing toward the leper, bidding us, “Look to the miracle, the wonder of God, not me,” reinforcing Philip’s constant humility.

The arc above separates the heavenly and earthy realms, but heaven “breaks” into the earth with Our Lady of Sorrow’s outstretched hand. She is leaning in, not a part of the miracle, but participating emotionally by witnessing and drawing attention to it.

A short list of Philip’s miracles begins at the bottom left: manifested baskets of bread to feed his starving community, prophecy of the blasphemers’ destruction with lightning, a widow’s son brought back from the dead, a woman’s withered hand restored, now able to lift a jug overhead; the sun compelling flood waters to recede, and a raging fire halted having paraded St Philip’s sandals around the town.

The Papal tiara is *behind* Philip, who hid in humility rather than chance being elected Pope. He is also shown reverencing his ever-present crucifix.

On the right door Philip begs two prostitutes in Florence to turn away from sin by offering several night’s wages, and his kindness towards them results in their conversion to lives of holiness. The kneeling woman’s knees pointing one direction, her body and heart turning back towards Philip and God.

At the top is the crown of glory Christ has won for each of us. This one is Philip's, with his feast day, Aug 23rd, inscribed.

Philip's figure breaks out of the frame of the door at the bottom. He is walking *out* of the picture into our earthly space. He is not contained by a frame, but taking on "real life dimension", entering into *our life*. He is relegated to be more than just "art".

The right side of the door is more representative of our fallen self, our shadow side. We are the ones looking for a miracle. Conversely, the left door represents our devout, holy self, where our faith and trust are mirrored.

The doors were created to be functional art (the metal handle only added afterward for security purposes). Mr Armstrong wants us to physically touch the doors so that we can engage in the reality of our Saint's dramatic life. If we are feeling lowly, aware we don't have the miracle, we can enter through the right side of the door (the leper's elbow becomes our handle).

If we are feeling more spiritually connected, aware of the miracles -great or small- in our life, we might enter the left side of the door (Philip's wrists are the door pulls). We enter into the wonder of Philip's life through either door.

And if aware of our full humanity, be like Mike Lisac and simultaneously pass through both doors! Regardless, this invokes powerful symbolism for our heart and soul.

Philip died in 1285 and was canonized in 1671. His body lies incorrupt in Todi.

Philip was born in Florence, Italy, in the early thirteenth century, well educated, skilled in medicine and a God-fearing man. He entered the Servants of St Mary (Servite Order) and was ordained a priest. In 1267 he was elected prior general and remained in office almost until his death. Recognized for his holiness, he attracted many to enter religious life and follow his example of Gospel values and the service of Mary.

Heather Hannam with J. Chester Armstrong 11/5/09 Updated 8/22/26