



**In the Wisdom and Humility Windows of Robbins Chapel, biblical exemplars and figures from Christian history point beyond themselves to the mystery of Christ, who is the Wisdom of God.**

*Left window: WISDOM (SAPIENTIA) (2007). Hand painted leaded glass. 16.25" x 74.25". Robbins Chapel, Waco, TX. Photo: © Baylor Photography. Used by permission.*

*Right window: HUMILITY (HUMILITAS) (2007). Hand painted leaded glass. 16.25" x 74.25". Robbins Chapel, Waco, TX. Photo: © Baylor Photography. Used by permission.*

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# Humble Wisdom

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The stained glass windows of Robbins Chapel within Brooks Residential College of Baylor University in Waco, Texas present a narrative of Christian virtue and its ultimate goal, union with God in Christ through the gracious work of the Holy Spirit. The Chapel, like the sanctuaries in early Christian and medieval church buildings in Europe, maintains an eastern orientation: the apse and altar are placed in the east to be closest to the Holy Land. Six windows on the south wall (on the right as one faces the chancel) depict the intellectual virtues of humility, art, prudence, understanding, knowledge, and wisdom. Six windows on the north wall depict the cardinal moral virtues of justice, temperance, and courage, followed by the theological virtues of hope, faith, and love. Each window features a biblical exemplar in its main panel and a figure from Christian history in a smaller panel, or predella, below. The culmination of the Christian intellectual and moral life is depicted at the front of the chapel in a stained glass triptych that “recall[s] the works of the Trinity in creating and redeeming the world, taking us through the biblical story in brief capitulation from Genesis to the Revelation to St. John.”<sup>1</sup>

Robbins Chapel was completed in 2007 and named in honor of its donors, Bill and Mary Jo Robbins of Houston, Texas. With seating for eighty, it serves as a place of daily morning prayers for the University community and a worship center for undergraduate students who live in Brooks College (see p. 58). The program for the chapel windows was created by a group of Baylor University faculty, students, and staff members in consultation with the donors. Adam Smith, an artist with Willet Hauser Architectural Glass, designed the windows in a style consonant with the chapel’s neo-English Gothic architecture, inspired by the medieval colleges of Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Smith used watercolor, pencil, and ink on paper for his original designs, which then were executed in hand painted leaded glass in the company’s studio in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.<sup>2</sup>

Each window in the Robbins Chapel is rich in symbolism. Here we will focus on the iconography of the windows that depict humility and wisdom.<sup>3</sup>



*ROBBINS CHAPEL (2007). View toward the south wall and chancel. Waco, TX. Photo: © Baylor Photography. Used by permission*

The humility window introduces the worshiper to the intellectual virtues, while the wisdom window points to their culmination in a life shared with God.

In the program of the chapel's artwork, humility (*humilitas*) is the first of the six intellectual virtues. Unlike the other intellectual virtues depicted in these windows, humility was not prized in ancient Greek and Roman culture; its legacy traces entirely from Scripture. The biblical wisdom tradition frequently commends humility (e.g., Psalm 10:17, 25:9, 37:11, and 51:17; Proverbs 11:2, 15:33, and 22:4). Jesus describes himself as "humble of heart" (Matthew 11:29) and prescribes humility for his disciples (Matthew 18:4; cf. Matthew 23:12; Luke 14:7, 18:14). Quoting a hymn that praises Christ's humility, the Apostle Paul commends the same attitude to his readers (Philippians 2:1-11).

The lower portion of the humility window depicts the vision of Mary by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), the abbot who led the Cistercian movement to reform monastic life in the twelfth century (see p. 56). Bernard's vision became a popular theme of art in Florence, Italy, between 1490 and 1530.<sup>4</sup> Like the paintings of that era, here Bernard is pictured at a desk, his hands raised in praise when the vision of Mary interrupts his writing. This image, however, departs from the iconographic tradition in several important ways. Traditionally Mary (sometimes carrying the Christ Child, as in this image) is depicted in full size on the left of the composition accompanied by angels or biblical figures, while Bernard is shown on the right with a balancing number of monks or biblical figures; and the text that Bernard is writing remains unidentified. In the Robbins Chapel window, the

composition is simplified by eliminating the accompanying angelic or human figures. Bernard is emphasized as the central figure, and Mary and the Christ Child appear to float in his vision. Most importantly, Bernard's manuscript is identified as *De Gradibus Humilitatis et Superbiae* (*On the Steps of Humility and Pride*), which was his first published work. The naming of Bernard's treatise is an interpretative key for the window, for in that work he describes humility as an intellectual virtue that results from self-knowledge and ultimately leads to wisdom.

Bernard writes mostly about pride in his treatise, because he confesses in an afterword that he lacks the qualifications to teach others about humility (XXII.57).<sup>5</sup> Yet even in this confession, Bernard is an excellent model of intellectual humility because he realizes his limitations to instruct others in the virtue.

The virtue of humility, Bernard writes, enables us to know the Truth, who is Christ, and thereby to know the truth about ourselves. Only then can we recognize our own unworthiness (I.1-2). Humility is the opposite of pride, which "blots out the light of truth, so that if your mind is full of it you cannot see yourself as you really are" (IV.14). Through a moral commentary on Jesus' proclamation "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), Bernard develops his insight that humility is necessary for gaining wisdom, which is found in right relationship to God. Christ is simultaneously the Way or ultimate exemplar of humility, the Truth that we journey toward, and (when the way is too difficult for us) the Life that nourishes us on our journey toward him. Bernard concludes that Jesus' prayer in Matthew 11:25 – "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants" – makes it clear "that truth, which is hidden from the proud, is revealed to the humble" (I.1).

The biblical figure in the main panel of this window is Rachel, whose story is told in Genesis 29-35. As a traditional symbol in art for both humility and the contemplative life, Rachel can serve here as a figural *conjointure* of humility and the quest for wisdom.<sup>6</sup> Because her father Laban deceived Jacob into marrying his older daughter Leah first, Rachel and Jacob were forced to wait fourteen years before they could wed. While Leah and Jacob were blessed with many children, Rachel suffered from barrenness for many years before she was able to conceive her sons, Joseph and Benjamin. In waiting patiently to marry Jacob and enduring suffering while her sister was exalted, Rachel is a model of humility.

Rachel is depicted as a shepherdess, holding a crook in her right hand and cradling a lamb with her other arm; another sheep looks up at her. The shepherdess motif is a reference to Rachel's first appearance in Scripture, when she is introduced to Jacob as she arrives to draw water from the well for her father's sheep (Genesis 29:1-13); it is also a reference to Christ, who

is most often depicted in early Christian art as a shepherd.<sup>7</sup> Portrayed in this manner, Rachel points beyond herself to Jesus Christ, the Great Shepherd, who is the ultimate exemplar of humility and the object of wisdom.



The lower panel of the wisdom (*sapientia*) window depicts the Christian politician, poet, and philosopher Boethius (c. 480-524), seated at a writing desk (see p. 56). Prison bars in the background indicate that he is writing *The Consolation of Philosophy*, the book he composed while awaiting execution at the command of the barbarian Emperor Theodoric.

In this ‘autobiographical’ work, Boethius is visited in prison by Lady Philosophy, who serves as a physician to his soul and a guide for his exploration of the nature of truth, goodness, and beauty. As her name indicates, she is the perfect conjoining of love (*philo*) and wisdom (*sophia*). She reminds Boethius, “All men on earth from one source take their rise; / One Father of the world all things supplies.” Since all human beings have the same creator, she asks, “Why boast so loud of forbears and proud race? / Reflect on your beginnings, and God’s place / As source of all. No man’s bereft of worth, / Save if through vices he betrays his birth” (italics added).<sup>8</sup> Truly wise people, then, do not base their worth on earthly status and wealth. Boethius’s own experience confirms this: removed from his consulship, imprisoned, and awaiting execution on false charges, he must find joy in something other than worldly success. Through his writing he testifies that it is the love of wisdom, grounded in self-knowledge, which leads him to God and true happiness.

The figure in the window’s main panel, King Solomon, is legendary in Scripture as a poet and wise man. This reputation is based, in part, on the traditional attribution to him of certain songs (cf. Psalms 72 and 127; Song of Songs 1:1), collections of proverbs (Proverbs 1:1; 10:1; and 25:1), and books of wisdom, especially Ecclesiastes (Ecclesiastes 1:1) and, in the Apocrypha, the Wisdom of Solomon. Several biblical stories praise Solomon’s wisdom. According to the Chronicler, when Solomon became king of the united kingdom of Israel, God commanded him to ask for a gift. “Give me now wisdom and knowledge to go out and come in before this people,” Solomon replied, “for who can rule this great people of yours?” (2 Chronicles 1:10). Because he asked unselfishly for wisdom to rule the people, God was pleased to grant him not only wisdom but also wealth and honor (2 Chronicles 1:11-12). According to another well-known story, when the Queen of Sheba traveled to Jerusalem to build a trading partnership, Solomon’s great wisdom in responding to her difficult riddles (not to mention his immense wealth) left her “breathless” (2 Chronicles 9:3-4; cf. 1 Kings 10:4-5).

This last story, of course, is the one that Jesus had in mind when he warned some “scribes and Pharisees” who pressed him for an unambiguous miracle: “The Queen of the South shall rise up with this generation at the

judgment and shall condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and behold, something greater than Solomon is here” (Matthew 12:42/ /Luke 11:31). The “something greater than Solomon,” of course, is Christ himself and the unfolding mystery of his sacrificial death and resurrection. In this way, the renowned wisdom of Solomon, God’s amazing gift to a young king, points beyond itself to Christ, who is the Wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24).



The program of the stained glass windows of Robbins Chapel – the intellectual virtues on the right and the moral and theological virtues on the left – lead the worshiper to the Trinity windows in the chancel. At the center of these windows is the figure of Christ crucified, but with a golden halo of divine glory behind his elongated body. This image evokes the concluding words of the book of Ecclesiastes, attributed to a wiser King Solomon who senses the limits of his wisdom because he has been humbled by hard experience and debilitating age: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Through that central image of the dying Christ worshipers can glimpse the judgment of which Solomon speaks. In Christ’s death on the cross and the divine glory that it reveals, they encounter the great mystery of God that human wisdom cannot fathom: “For here below to discern a cause is easy,” Lady Philosophy sings to Boethius, “But hearts are confused by the hidden laws of heaven” (*Consolation of Philosophy*, IV.5.vii.17-18).

## NOTES

1 *Robbins Chapel within Brooks Residential College* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, n.d.), 18. The program of the Robbins Chapel windows is described in this booklet and online at the Brooks College Web site ([www.baylor.edu/cll/brookscollege](http://www.baylor.edu/cll/brookscollege)).

2 Information on the artist is from a personal conversation with Jessica Crowley, Digital Archives and Library Manager at Willet Hauser Architectural Glass. Willet Hauser was formed in 1977 when Willet Studios of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, became a division of Hauser Art Glass Company of Winona, Minnesota. Willet Studios, founded by William Willet in 1898 and now led by his grandson, Crosby Willet, has designed stained glass windows for major ecclesiastical and public buildings in America, including the Cadet’s Chapel at the United States Military Academy at West Point, the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, and Saint Mary’s Cathedral in San Francisco. For more information, see the company’s Web site, [www.willethauser.com](http://www.willethauser.com).

3 In the other windows on the south wall, knowledge (*scientia*) is represented by Luke the Evangelist and Copernicus (1473-1543), understanding (*intellectus*) by the Apostle Paul and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), prudence (*prudentia*) by Ruth and Thomas More (1478-1535), and art (*ars*) by Bezalel (Exodus 31:3-4) and Dante Alighieri (1265-1321). In the windows on the north wall, Moses and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) represent justice (*iustitia*), Elijah and Macrina (before 270-c. 340) represent temperance (*temperantia*), and Joshua and John Bunyan (1628-1688) represent courage (*fortitudo*), while in the theological virtue windows hope (*spes*) is illustrated by Hannah and Dorothy Day

(1897-1980), faith (*fides*) by Abraham and Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), and love (*caritas*) by Jesus' mother, Mary, and Augustine (354-430).

4 Stephanie Tadlock, "Fra Bartolommeo and the Vision of Saint Bernard: An Examination of Savonarolan Influence," unpublished M.A. thesis (College Park, MD: University of Maryland, 2005), 45-56, available online at [www.lib.umd.edu/drum/bitstream/1903/2570/1/umi-umd-2457.pdf](http://www.lib.umd.edu/drum/bitstream/1903/2570/1/umi-umd-2457.pdf). Tadlock compares the earliest known painting on this theme, by The Master of Rinuccini Chapel (in the 1370s), with paintings by Filippino Lippi (c. 1485-1487) and Fra Bartolommeo (c. 1504).

5 Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Steps of Humility and Pride*, in G. R. Evans, trans., *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 112. Further citations by the section of Bernard's treatise will be in the text.

6 Rachel and Leah appear as representatives of the contemplative life and active life respectively in the pilgrim's final dream in Dante's *Purgatorio* 27.94-108. This allegorical interpretation of their story in Genesis, famously employed by Thomas Aquinas to show the complementary nature of action and contemplation (*Summa Theologica* II-II, 179, 2), derives from the writings of Augustine and Gregory the Great (c. 540-604). See Kim Paffenroth, "Allegorizations of the Active and Contemplative Lives in Philo, Origen, Augustine, and Gregory," *The Ecole Initiative* (1999), available online at [ecole.evansville.edu/articles/allegory.html](http://ecole.evansville.edu/articles/allegory.html).

7 Heidi Hornik has noted that "a visual representation of Christ as the Good Shepherd bore rich meaning for the early Christians during times of persecution because it symbolized a leader who would sacrifice his life for his flock; yet, as an already popular image among non-Christians as well, it did not draw attention to the persecuted believers. Later, after the peace brought by Emperor Constantine in A.D. 306, the Good Shepherd became the most popular symbol of Jesus Christ." See Heidi J. Hornik, "The Sign of Jonah," *Prophetic Ethics*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 6 (Waco, TX: The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2003), 55-59, here quoting 56.

8 Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, III.6.9, translated by P. G. Walsh (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 50. Further citations will be in the text.

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