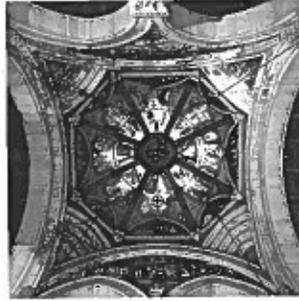


BY JOHN CONTI
PHOTOS BY ROBERT RUSCHAK



THE RICHLY DECORATED INTERIOR
DOME AT ST. BERNARD CHURCH.

God's own Mansions

TWO CATHEDRAL-LIKE CHURCHES ARE WASHINGTON ROAD LANDMARKS

As you leave Downtown Pittsburgh and travel to Mt. Lebanon—through the Liberty Tubes, past the hill-sides of Beechview and Brookline and through the center of Dormont—you climb 500 feet in elevation by the time you reach Mt. Lebanon. At the very apex of this climb—as the street changes name from West Liberty Avenue to Washington Road and just as it begins to level off—are Mt. Lebanon's two “cathedrals”—Mt. Lebanon United Presbyterian Church and St. Bernard Roman Catholic Church.

Though neither church is truly a cathedral (in the technical sense that a cathedral is the church of a bishop) each church is nevertheless among the largest in Western Pennsylvania—both in physical size and in the size of the congregation. Each is recognized instantly by all who travel the Washington Road corridor; each is officially designated as an historic and architectural landmark, and each was designed to recall for its congregation and for the public the spirit and meaning of specific European churches from hundreds of years past.

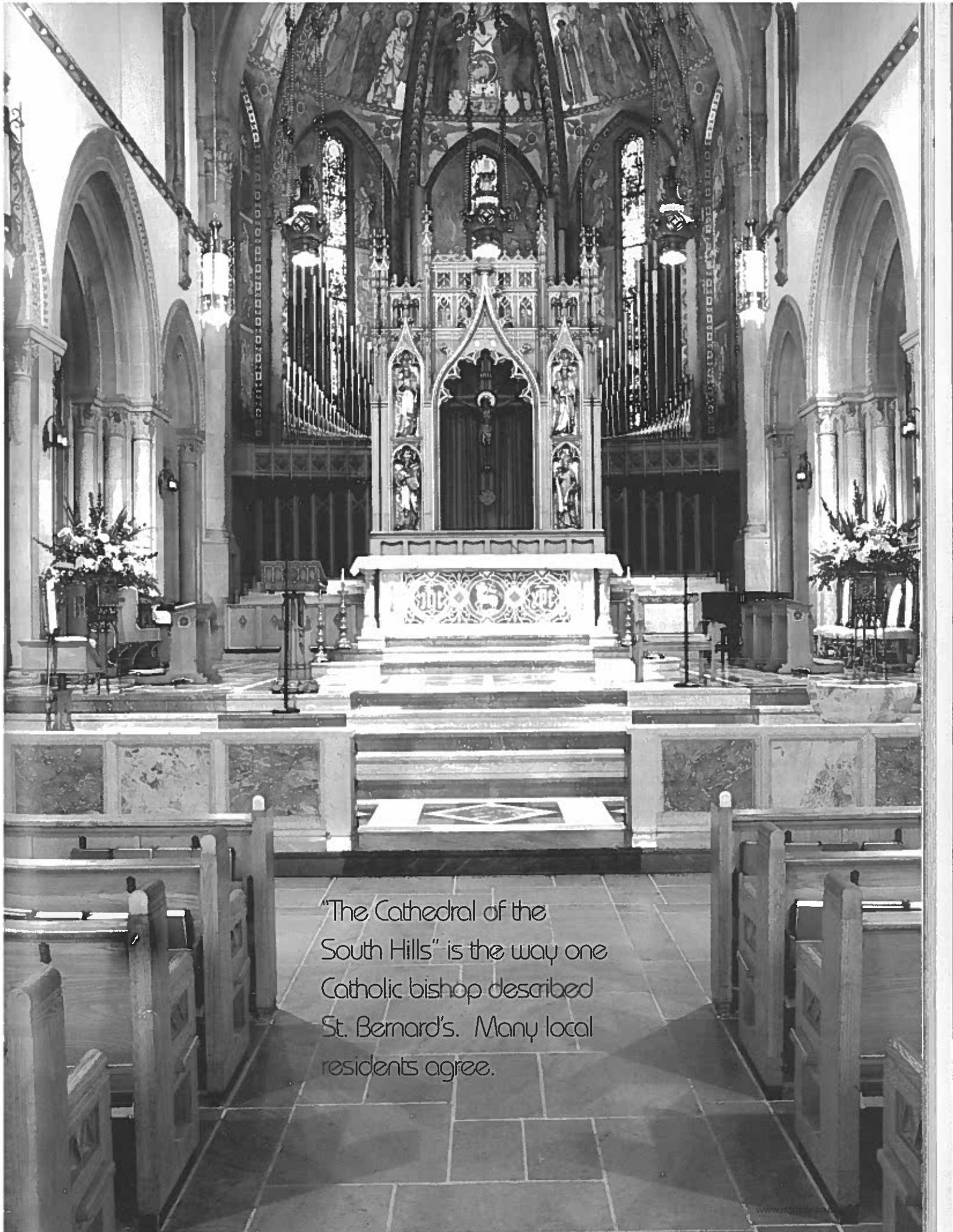
These churches—along with the neighboring Mt. Lebanon United Methodist Church—serve as the northern gateway to Mt. Lebanon, a town with 15 churches and a synagogue, a place where residents have long made religion an important part of community life.

ST. BERNARD CHURCH, ROMAN CATHOLIC

“It was overwhelming for me. I thought I was back at St. Bernard's in Mt. Lebanon. The architecture, the naves of the churches, the roofs, the stones—everything made me think of home.”

That's the way the Rev. George Wilt, pastor of St. Bernard's, recalls a pilgrimage into the hills of eastern France about 16 months ago, when he first saw what remains today of the abbeys of Fontenay and Clairvaux. These are abbeys founded in the early 1100's by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the pious monk, monastic reformer, spiritual leader of the 2nd Crusade, and defender of the faith for whom Father Wilt's parish is named.

The architectural style of St. Bernard Church is essentially Romanesque—the dominant style of major European churches in



"The Cathedral of the South Hills" is the way one Catholic bishop described St. Bernard's. Many local residents agree.

(RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM) ST. BERNARD'S IS BUILT OF MULTI-HUED MASSACHUSETTS GRANITE, WITH WHITE INDIANA LIMESTONE USED FOR TRIM. CONSTRUCTION TOOK ALMOST 40 YEARS, FROM PLACEMENT OF THE FOUNDATION TO INSTALLATION OF THE LAST STAINED GLASS WINDOW.

(CENTER) THE INTERIOR DOME OF THE CHURCH — WHICH IS UNDERNEATH THE BELL TOWER — IS 70 FEET ABOVE THE CHURCH FLOOR.

(BOTTOM) SLIGHTLY POINTED ARCHES FRAME THE SIDE AISLES. THE HEAVY, ROUNDED COLUMNS ARE TYPICAL OF ROMANESQUE DESIGN.

➤ the 11th and 12th centuries. It preceded Gothic. But this is Romanesque as it appeared when the transition to Gothic was just beginning to occur. Thus the church has the heavy, muscular, almost stolid profile of the Romanesque but also the graceful pointed arches in the windows and in the interior that eventually came to characterize Gothic. Architect William Perry (a resident of Dormont who was prominent nationally in the design of Catholic churches) traveled to France and to northern Spain to see churches founded by and from the era of St. Bernard, and he patterned St. Bernard's after them.

The looks of St. Bernard's have huge popular appeal. Many residents, whether Catholic or not, tend to think of it as our very own "Cathedral of the South Hills." But what passersby notice and like about this building may come as much from its amazing variety of colors and the sumptuousness of its materials as from its size. The exterior colors have all the appeal of the Pennsylvania countryside on a bright fall day. There is a mix of golden brown, tan and light-gray square-cut granite. The tiles on the vast roof are a mix of reddish copper, deep green, bright blue, gray-black or brown. For further effect, there is the green patina of the copper downspouts and flashing. White limestone—almost the color of an overcast sky—is used for sills, capstones and other exterior trim. It could be said that this is God's own palette!

On the inside, this architectural celebration continues, enlivened further by green slate flooring in the church's long nave, marble flooring in the chancel and a generous use of deep red and gilt details as accents throughout the interior—in large murals behind the altars, in an elaborate screen behind the main altar, in the figural paintings in the dome that sits above the crossing of the nave and transepts, and in abstract painted designs all over the church's ceiling. (When you go into this church, be sure to look up.)

The many murals in the church were painted by Jan Henryk De Rosen, an internationally famous artist from Poland who first came to the United States in 1933. His murals can also be found at the Washington National Cathedral and the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, both in Washington, D.C., and in other churches throughout the United States. His murals here at St. Bernard's are as important as the architecture in creating the interior feel of the church and are as notable in quality.

St. Bernard's parish was founded in 1919, and the first Mass was celebrated in a former carriage house on the Haller's property nearby, where Rollier's now stands. Later that year, the current site was purchased, and the parish used the temporary buildings for worship until 1926, when the first part of the school was built. Worship began in the "lower church"—what is now the lower level of the main church building—in 1934, and construction of the huge superstructure itself began in earnest in 1942. Some work was still under way even into the 1970s, when the last stained glass window was installed.



(RIGHT AND BELOW) PITTSBURGH ARCHITECT J. LEWIS BEATTY GAVE THE CONGREGATION OF MT. LEBANON UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH AN EXTERIOR INSPIRED IN PART BY THE CATHEDRAL OF YORK IN ENGLAND. BUILT IN THE LATE 13TH AND EARLY 14TH CENTURIES, YORK WAS ONE OF THE FIRST IN ENGLAND TO USE THE ELABORATE CARVED DESIGNS IN THE STONEMWORK OF THE WINDOWS AND TOWERS THAT CAME TO BE CALLED "DECORATED GOTHIC."



MT. LEBANON UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Mt. Lebanon United Presbyterian Church was formed—as the Associate Reformed Congregation of Saw Mill Run—in 1804, 108 years before there was a municipality called Mt. Lebanon. And for most of that century plus, it was the only church in the immediate area. From Mt. Lebanon's perspective, this is the church of our founding fathers. It has long enjoyed a reputation as the most prominent church in town.

And for good reason. It sits on as high a hill as there is in a town of hills. Its stone "twin towers" are spotlighted at night and visible for miles. The design of the current church building (the third house of worship the congregation has had on the site) is based on the cathedral of York in England. It was erected to replace an older, smaller church in 1928-29, when Mt. Lebanon was a fast-growing affluent suburb—the fastest-growing community in the state at the time. Its Gothic designs (this particular style is called "Decorated Gothic" and is most apparent in the elaborate carved stonework of the church's huge windows and towers) project the sense of prosperity, achievement and stability that was central to Mt. Lebanon's conception of itself in those years leading up to the Great Depression.

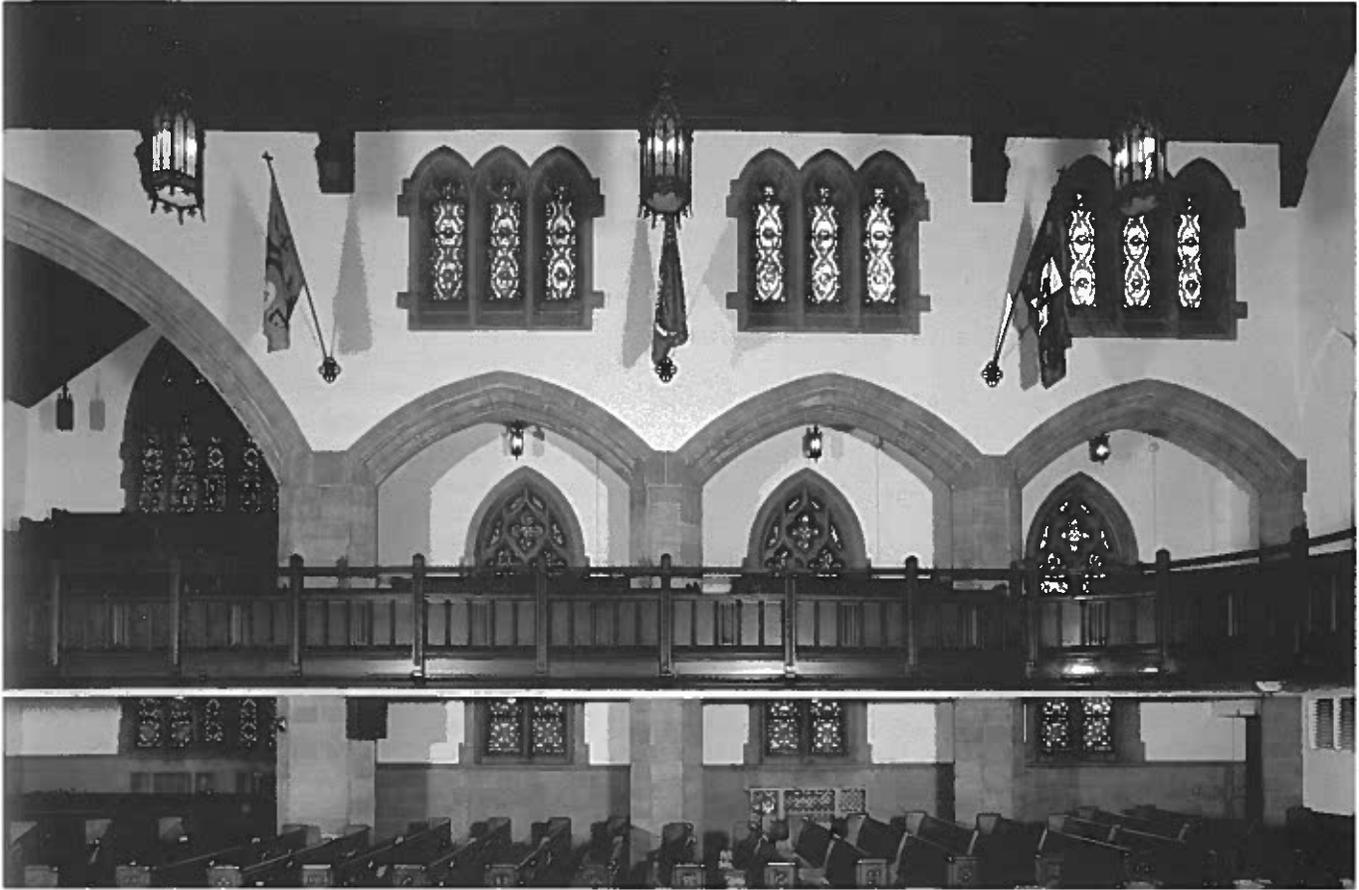
But, in fact, there is an extraordinary—and delightful—architectural contradiction in this church. Because if this church is styled to look like a great and imposing English cathedral to the outside world, once you are inside, the worship space is more like a large Presbyterian meetinghouse. It's still Gothic in style inside, not plain like a true meeting house would be. But the space is remarkably intimate—quite the opposite of a cathedral.

The best way to understand this remarkable architectural transposition is to compare this interior with that of St. Bernard's, which has a traditional cathedral-style interior. At St. Bernard's you have what is called a longitudinal nave—a long rectangular space with the entrance at one end and a center aisle leading to the elevated main altar at the far end. From the back, the main altar can sometimes seem very far away indeed. At the Presbyterian Church, there is no altar (just a communion table) and no center aisle at all—but rather two aisles that divide the dark wood pews into three sections. Rather than the main space being long and rectangular, the seating area on the slightly sloping main floor is almost square. Front to back, this space is only 18 pews deep. At St. Bernard's, by contrast, there are no fewer than 32 rows of pews.

At the Presbyterian Church, there are large galleries (or balconies) on three sides of the sanctuary, set at one point only 10 feet above the floor. These low galleries, which are a common feature of old







Protestant meetinghouses, fill the church's transepts and the back of the nave as well as line the sides. They account for a large portion of the entire seating capacity of the church.

The effect of all this is that, almost regardless of where you sit in this church, you have the feeling of being very close to your fellow congregants and to the clergy and choir as well. This effect was enhanced by renovations about 10 years ago that created an easily accessible, low, stepped platform at the front of the chancel that extends toward the pews. It replaced a 42-inch high platform that was accessed only by stairs at the sides.

Today, Senior Pastor John Powell preaches most often from a center pulpit. "This is a Word-centered church, where the preaching of the Gospel is paramount, and the design of the sanctuary supports that," he says. "When I preach, I have this sense that we're all gathered around together. It makes the Gospel profoundly personal."

Mt. Lebanon United Presbyterian was designed by Pittsburgh architect J. Lewis Beatty, who, in addition to having a thriving practice planning private homes, designed a number of other Presbyterian churches in the region as well.

A PAST INTERTWINED

Other than their adjacency and their size there wouldn't seem to be too much to connect Mt. Lebanon United Presbyterian and St. Bernard's. But history has a way of throwing some coincidences at us that are sometimes too good not to mention.

In the 1850s, the Rev. Joseph Clokey, the fourth pastor of the Presbyterian congregation, brought two Cedar of Lebanon trees back to the United States from a trip to the Holy Land. He planted the two trees in front of his home, which was near Bower Hill Road and present-day Kenmont Avenue. These trees—native to a moun-

(FACING PAGE) SEVERAL MT. LEBANON CHURCHES HAVE BEEN REMODELED IN RECENT YEARS TO BRING THE CLERGY AND CHOIR BOTH VISUALLY AND PHYSICALLY CLOSER TO THE CONGREGANTS, AND MT. LEBANON UNITED PRESBYTERIAN IS ONE OF THE BEST EXAMPLES OF THAT. THE LOW, THREE-STEPPED PLATFORM LEADING TO THE COMMUNION TABLE WAS INSTALLED ABOUT 10 YEARS AGO. TODAY, PASTOR JOHN POWELL OFTEN PREACHES FROM THE CENTRAL PULPIT DIRECTLY BEHIND THE COMMUNION TABLE.

(TOP) THE LOW GALLERIES AT MT. LEBANON UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH HELP GIVE IT THE INTIMATE FEEL OF AN OLD-FASHIONED PROTESTANT MEETINGHOUSE, DESPITE THE CHURCH'S ELABORATE GOTHIC WINDOWS AND DETAILS.

tain called Mt. Lebanon in present-day Lebanon—suggested the name "Mt. Lebanon" for the hilltop neighborhood where the two churches now stand, and that ultimately led to the name for the community as well, when it was founded in 1912.

In 1919, when Father Thomas Bryson, the first pastor of St. Bernard's, and Bishop Regis Canevin sat down to name the new parish they were forming in the South Hills, one of the things they are said to have liked best about their decision to name it after Bernard of Clairvaux was that the offertory verse of the Mass on the feast day of St. Bernard contains this line from the Psalms: "The righteous will flourish like palm trees; they will grow like the Cedars of Lebanon."

The city of York—whose cathedral inspired the design of Mt. Lebanon United Presbyterian Church—has long been considered England's "second city," after London. And the diocese of York has long been the second most important Bishop's seat, after Canterbury. But the prominence of York in the English church may not have been guaranteed had it not been for the adroit intervention of a papal emissary when a dispute over succession threatened to disrupt the diocese in the year 1142 (when English churches were still Roman Catholic). The peace-making emissary sent to England by the pope: none other than Bernard of Clairvaux. ☪