Immaculate Conception Catholic Church

130 Baronne Street

Nestled in the heart of the Central Business District is a building of Moorish architectural style with a breathtaking interior that houses soaring lace-like horseshoe arches and abundant stained glass. Welcome to the Immaculate Conception Jesuit Church, better known as Jesuits on Baronne.

The Blessed Virgin Mary has always held a prime position in Jesuit beliefs, and the doctrine of her Immaculate Conception was formally defined as dogma in 1854, just three years after the cornerstone was laid here.

The original church, almost identical to the one we see today, was dedicated in 1857. Its architect, Father John Cambiaso, who also designed St. Joseph Cathedral in Baton Rouge and St. Maurice Church in the Holy Cross neighborhood, had lived in Spain and was fascinated by the Moorish elements in Mediterranean architecture. Father Cambiaso had no architectural training, but even the experienced architects James and Charles Dakin, from New York, could not build a stable St. Patricks Church on the New Orleans terrain.

The history of the current church and its predecessor is well documented. During construction it was determined that the foundation was too narrow, so the upper stories were redesigned to reduce their weight. Father Cambiasos church was condemned in 1928, due to structural failures, exacerbated by pile driving and dynamiting for neighboring buildings. Church records from the demolition reveal that the superstructure, well reinforced with iron bars, was in pristine shape, but at the clerestory level “The center of the Church . . . was practically broken in two.” The still-sturdy foundation “rested on a double row of large red cedar planks, over which was laid a layer of oyster shells embedded in strong mortar.” Large iron bars and a brick wall 5-7 feet wide overlay that.

After an energetic fund-raising drive, supported by Catholics and non-Catholics alike, the beloved Immaculate Conception Church was dismantled, brick by brick, and rebuilt with more modern techniques. Todays incarnation, with the original cast-iron pews and columns, was dedicated in 1930.

Around 2010 Immaculate Conception Church raised funds for the restoration of many of the windows by the Conrad Schmitt Studio of Wisconsin, as well as for other repairs. Craftsmen at the Conrad Schmitt studio in Wisconsin were amused to find that two panels had been reversed during an earlier restoration.

Despite its French history, New Orleans has little stained glass from France. Most of the principal windows from this church, however, are from the studio of Eugene Hucher at the Carmelite monastery in Carmel du Mans. Glass from this company is extremely rare in the United States, though the Basilica at the University of Notre Dame has a large collection. A signed window, the one dedicated to Mary and located high over the altar, includes the date of 1878, making these among the oldest extant windows in New Orleans. Many of the remaining French windows were ordered in 18791880. A Hucher Fils signature is easily visible in the Death of Francis Xavier window, toward the front of the church on the right. Eugene Hucher bought the studio from the Carmelite nuns in 1880, and his son Ferdinand, the Fils in the firm name on the window, did not become a partner until later on, so this window probably post-dates 1880.

Look for the outstanding attention to details, such as the clothing of the non-Westerners who interact with the Jesuits in the windows on the main floor. Art historian Jean Farnsworth considers the Hucher windows here as some of the workshops best.

Fourteen of the stained glass Stations of the Cross are thought to be the work of French Jesuit archaeologists Arthur Martin and Charles Cahier. Farnsworth notes that stylistically they resemble medieval windows in the simplicity of their lines and the absence of backgrounds.

The church also bought stained glass from the Munich studio of Franz Mayer at two different times. Three Mayer windows date to around 1900, and almost twenty to the reconstruction, when the building was extended, adding the side doors near the altar as well as the choir loft. All windows in these sections date to about 1930. This includes the four Stations of the Cross windows over the side doors, which match the earlier windows exactly. All the martyr windows in the choir loft were also from the Mayer workshop.

Many windows are from unknown studios, and the quality varies. Some depict historic events, such as the Battle of New Orleans in 1815 and the disastrous French Quarter fire in 1788. Two windows depict a burning church with an onion dome like that of Immaculate Conception Church, even though it did not exist in 1788.

Three round windows are behind the altar and thus not visible to worshipers and visitors. They show the communion gathering at Emmaus, a knight on bended knee, and a Jewish family offering a pascal lamb to God.

The balcony includes portraits of 36 saints (though some are labeled Blessed, as the canonization process had not been completed when the windows were made). These seem to have been installed at different dates and may come from several studios, as they vary stylistically and in quality. .

The Mayer records show that the Jesuits ordered more windows in 1905. These were installed first in the Memorial Chapel of the Immaculate Conception College (which was established two years before the church) and then were moved to the Holy Name Chapel at Jesuit High School.

With its Moorish architecture and its sparkling windows, Jesuits on Baronne is indeed an “Oh, wow!” church.

*Visited*

*September 24, 1995*

*March 19, 2000*

*October 14, 2012*

See also: Hilton L. Rivet, S.J., *The History of the Immaculate Conception Church in New Orleans (The Jesuits).* 1978.

**Windows**

Above the altar

*(Hucher, 1878, all)*

Assumption of the Virgin

Coronation of the Virgin

The Annunciation Crucifixion with the Holy Women at the foot of the cross

Mary Queen of Heaven Mary beholds the Death of Jesus

Altar

Sacred Heart of Jesus (Mayer, 1898) Death of St. Joseph (Mayer, 1899/1900)

Over door Over door

St. John [de] Lalande \* St. Anthony Daniel\*

St. Charles Garnier \* St. Gabriel Lallemant\*

St. Ignatius & Companions take first vows St. Francis Xavier baptizing

St. Peter Canisius Death of St. Francis Xavier (signed)

St. Andrew Bobola St. Francis Regis teaching children

St. John de Brito St. Francis Jerome

St. Aloysius Gonzaga St. Paul Miki and Companions, Martyrs of Japan

St. Stanislaus Kostka St. John Berchmans

St. Francis Borgia Adoring the Sacrament St. Alphonsus Rodriguez counseling

St. Francis Borgia Viewing Body of Empress Isabella St. Peter Claver

St. Ignatius at Manresa Bl. Ignatius de Azevedo and Companions

St. Ignatius Receives Approval from Pope Paul III Bl. Charles Spinola and Companions

Stairs to choir loft Stairs to choir loft

Sacred Heart\*\* Death of St. Joseph\*\*

Blessed Virgin surrounded by cherubim Joseph and Jesus as a youth

Above Entrance, Ground Floor

Rose window: Blessed Virgin surrounded by cherubim (American?)

Choir Loft

Decorative windows with symbols

North American Jesuit Martyrs (1931)\*:

Rene Goupil, Isaac Jogues, John de Brebeuf, Noel Chabanel

Over front door, at clerestory level

Mary at prayer, surrounded by religious symbols

\* from the Franz Mayer Studio, about 1930

from the studio of Hucher & Son,1879-1880

\*\* American glass?

**Upstairs Balcony**

altar

Bl[essed] Edmund Campion, S.J. St. John the Baptist as a child

St. Hubert St. Stephen, M[artyr]

Bl. Thomas More St. Dionysius

Bl. John Fisher St. Cecilia

St. Alphonsus Liguori St. George (Crown, Winged dragon)

St. John of the Cross St. Agnes

St. Angela Merici St. Augustine

St. Bridget of Sweden St. Henry

Angel: Blessed Are the Pure in Heart \*\* St. Dominic

St. Louis of France St. Anthony of Padua

St. Patrick St. Elizabeth of Hungary

St. Elizabeth of Portugal St. Charles Borromeo

St. Paul of the Cross St. Theresa

St. Clothilde St. Rose of Lima

St. Maurice St. Francis de Sales (Mayer 1898)

St. John the Apostle St. J[ane] F[rances] de Chantal

St. Andrew St. Vincent de Paul

St. Michael the Archangel Bl. Margaret Mary Alacoque

\*\* American glass

See also: Hilton L. Rivet, S.J. *The History of the Immaculate Conception Church in New Orleans (The Jesuits).* 1978.

**Stations of the Cross Level**

Jesus at Emmaus \*

Sacrifice of Melchizadech \* Abraham, Sarah and Lot

Altar

Crowning with thorns \* Ascension \*

Agony in the Garden \* Resurrection \*

Jesus before Pilate (Jesus is condemned to death) Jesus is laid in the tomb

Jesus accepts the cross Jesus is taken down from the cross

Jesus falls the first time Death of Jesus

Jesus meets his mother Jesus is nailed to the cross

Simon helps Jesus Jesus is stripped

Jesus meets Veronica Jesus falls the third time

Jesus falls the second time Jesus meets the woman of Jerusalem

\* Mayer, ca. 1930.

The traditional Stations of the Cross do not include the first two on each side.These were added as part of the renovation.

**Windows mentioned in the Mayer records, but not found by the Stained Glass Art in Sacred Places group:**

Blessed Virgin Mary (1898)

Blessed M [Mother?] Mary (1898)

St. Claude de la Colombière (1898)

Sacrifice of Malachi (1931) (a round window)

Communion of St. Louis (1905, for Memorial Chapel)

St. Francis Xavier preaching to the Indians (1905, for Memorial Chapel)

*The Covid-19 epidemic of 2020 precluded a final visit to confirm the placement of windows in the choir loft and along the steps leading to it.*

**Organs of the Church of Immaculate Conception**

Several organs have provided music for worshipers at this church. In 1861 Henry Erben of New York installed an instrument here. By this time he had also sold organs to the majority of New Orleans’ other churches, both Protestant and Catholic.

Although the Erben instrument was a very fine organ, its successor was more noteworthy. Built in New Orleans by the firm of Pilcher Brothers, this was the city’s largest pipe organ, with 67 ranks of pipes on three manuals and a pedal division. Visually, its most striking feature was the 32-foot wooden diapason rank that was mounted along the choir rail. The case was almost forty feet tall. This was the larger of two instruments built by the Pilchers for the 1884 Cotton Expedition, and it was relocated to the church after the fair closed.

When the church was rebuilt in the 1920s, the Möller Pipe Organ Company of Hagerstown, Maryland, received the contract to update and adapt the Pilcher instrument to its new setting (its Opus 3318). Maintenance proved difficult in the organ chambers, however, as they are located below the bell towers. By the 1970s the organ had fallen into a poor state of repair and became unusable.

The present organ is a three-manual Phoenix digital organ, installed in 2007.

When citing information from this document, please acknowledge the Preservation Resource Center of New Orleans, 2021.