Mater Dolorosa Catholic Church

1230 South Carrollton Avenue

In 1725 the Capuchins, horrified by the defiant and independent lifestyle of the farmers upstream from New Orleans, established a mission church in Harahan, but this lasted only until 1752. For most of the early period, the settlers of East Jefferson had to travel to the St. Louis Cathedral or St. Charles Borromeo Church in Destrehan to hear Mass.

In 1833 the Town of Carrollton became populous enough to receive a charter. The same year, St. Patricks Church was established for English speakers in the Faubourg Ste. Marie, becoming the nearest church for Carrollton residents. Because Catholics still had to travel a considerable distance for services, Archbishop Blanc created the Parish of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the new Town of Carrollton in 1848. The church stood near the corner of Freret and Cambronne streets, and the parish comprised the vast area of Westwego, Metairie from the river to the lake, and Harahanan area that now includes thirteen Catholic parishes.

Like all New Orleans regions, the Town of Carrollton housed an amalgam of immigrant cultures. Germans constituted the largest nationality in the Parish of the Nativity, but the priest conducted Masses in French, German, and English. With the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War the Germans purchased land on Cambronne Street and built a church of their own, named Mater Dolorosa, located about a half block from Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church. The archbishop consented, and in 1871 the first Mass was observed there. Each church established its own school. By1899 the German congregation had dwindled drastically, and both churches were in decrepit condition. Archbishop Chappelle combined the two as Mater Dolorosa Parish over the objection of some Germans. All services were to be conducted in English..

With the reunion of the French and German Catholics of Carrollton in 1899, the need for a new, larger church building was apparent. Storms and age had not been kind to the old structures, and the population of Carrollton continued to grow rapidly.

Land on South Carrollton Avenue was purchased in 1904, and planning for todays handsome Romanesque-style church began soon after, under the guidance of German architect Theodore Brune (who also designed the St. Joseph Abbey in St. Benedict, Louisiana). The cornerstone was laid in 1908, and the dedication took place in March 1909. Archbishop Blenk consecrated the bells and the stained glass in April of the same year.

The former Mater Dolorosa Church was given to the Josephite Fathers for use by African Americans. Funds from St. Katharine Drexelpatroness of Xavier Universityhelped ensure its success, first as St. Dominic Church and then, after the notorious hurricane of 1915 demolished the structure, as St. Joan of Arc Church. Nuns from St. Katharines Sisters of the Holy Family taught at the St. Dominic School.

Almost all the stained glass windows relate to the life of the Blessed Mother. In keeping with her depiction here as the Sorrowful Mother, symbols of the martyrdom of Jesus can be found in many of the windowseven in the one portraying the Nativity, usually considered a joyous event.

According to the authoritative church historian Roger Baudier, the maker of these windows is the Emil Frei Studio of St. Louis, Missouri, a firm well known in New Orleans. In the early 20th century, Frei, though headquartered in the U.S., maintained studios in both St. Louis and Munich, but since the firm rarely signed its art, we dont know where the huge Mater Dolorosa windows originated. As is typical for Munich-style windows, these scenes are filled with symbols, architectural details, flowers, and other examples of the artists skills. The face painting is exceptionally beautiful.

The striking ceiling paintings (some on plaster; others on canvas), which date to a 1926 renovation, are the work of Theodore Brasch of Cincinnati, but Vera Reinike (d. 1969) provided the half-moon paintings. Both the glass and the paintings focus on the stages of Christs life with which Mary was especially involved: his birth, childhood, and death.

The stenciled designs in bright colors offset Marys sorrowful story, creating a warm yet imposing sanctuary.

**Windows of Mater Dolorosa Church**

(Parentheses identify symbols

in lower panel of the nave windows.)

Apse

Saint with sheaf of flowers Saint in armor with drawn sword

Altar

Left Transept Right Transept

St. Marys Assumption (lilies & angels) Crowning of Mary (dove)

Sorrowful Jesus Sorrowful Mary

Left Nave Right Nave

Espousal of Mary and Joseph Flight into Egypt

*(Porta clausa*closed door) (Lighthouse)

Annunciation Visit by Wise Men

(Vase of flowers) (Crown & palm)

Nativity Presentation of Jesus in the Temple

(Palm leaf & crown of thorns) (Scales (Justice))

Small Rooms at Entrance to Nave

The Good Shepherd Jesus Finds the Lost Sheep

*Visited*

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