St. Agnes Catholic Church

3310 Jefferson Highway

The early settlers of East Jeffersonwho named the area Les Chapitoulas after the Indian group living along the riverhad no nearby place for formal worship. A Capuchin mission church was established in Harahan in 1725, in response to reports of the settlers laxity,” but after its closing in Catholics had to journey to Destrehan or New Orleans. Almost a century later, in 1844, Assumption Church became the first parish in East Jefferson, but its congregation was German. Four years afterward, Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church opened its doors in Carrollton. Many of the parishioners there spoke French.

The early 20th century saw rapid suburban growth upstream from Orleans Parish, with a streetcar running all the way from Kenner to downtown New Orleans and its numerous Catholic churches. To provide a nearby church for the new suburbanites Archbishop John W. Shaw created St. Agnes Parish in 1931. For the first year, services took place at the Whitehall Plantation home, which had served as a Jesuit retreat and now is the Magnolia School.

The second worship place for the parish was the former Tranchinas Nightclub, furnished with reused items from other churches. On the roof, to identify the building as a church, the parish added a steeple, a bell, and a simple cross. A school opened its doors in 1950.

As the suburbs expanded, plans for a proper church were laid. Architects Albert Bendernagel, Jr., and John M Lachlin, Jr., designed the Italian Romanesque cruciform-shaped building, which was dedicated in 1957. (The Bendernagel name is familiar in church architecture in the New Orleans area.)

The sumptuous interior of St. Agnes Church, painted in an unobtrusive off-white, is subtle. It is full of light and harmony, and the design shows a mastery of detail, from the marble altars to the statues and the windows. The bells, each named for a saint, are a source of pride for the congregation. The Venetian mosaic Stations of the Cross and the marble statues come from Italy. While the subjects of the statues are not unusual, the Portuguese onyx used for hands and faces imparts a warm and translucent quality to the art.

The stained glass windows, dating to the late 1950s or the early 1960s, portray several liturgical themes. Made of mouth-blown glass from Germany and Czechoslovakia, the windows were assembled in Florence, Italy, by the Studio Arte Tolleri. Their themes are possibly unique in the New Orleans area: the life of St. Agnes, phrases from the Te Deum, the Seven Virtues, and The Coming Judgment. A small vestibule near the Carrollton Court entrance houses windows representing the French Quarter fire of either 1788 or 1794 and the 1815 Battle of New Orleans in Chalmette; for both events, the prayers of the Ursuline sisters to Our Lady of Prompt Succor helped save the city.

Stylistically, the windows reflect the rejection of elaborate Munich-style windows. The return to the simplicity of medieval glass was widespread in the middle of the twentieth century. Facial painting is simple, and the vivid colorsstressing red, blue, and white--come from the glass itself, not from enamel. Overall the windows convey a message of strength and joy.

**Windows**

*Rose window:* Seven Virtues + Wisdom, each represented by a person and a symbol

*Transept:* Life of St. Agnes; St. Peter receiving the keys to the church; two children receiving communion while a pope looks on

*Nave:* Te Deum (6 windows)

*Vestibule on Jefferson Highway side:* St. Cecilia, John baptizing Jesus

*Vestibule on Claiborne Court side****:*** St. Mary holding the Christ Child; French Quarter Fire and Battle of New Orleans

*Visited April 21, 2013*

See also: *The Parish of St. Agnes: Golden Years, 1931-1981.* Published in 1981 by the churchb.

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