St. George Catholic Church

7808 St. George Drive**,** Baton Rouge

A soaring neo-Gothic church welcomes worshipers today, but for the first century and a quarter the St. George parishioners worshiped in much humbler surroundings. Throughout this long history, a dedication to education has been a hallmark of the parish.

The story began in 1885, when Mrs. Augustine Kleinpeter, whose family had immigrated to Baton Rouge ten years earlier, donated ten acres with numerous live oaks for a mission chapel and a public school. (Yes, the same Kleinpeter family that founded the legendary dairy.) The land was on the Daphne Grove Plantation on the outskirts of the city, and from the start the parish was named St. George, perhaps in honor of the original settler, George Kleinpeter. The first building, which served as both chapel and school, was completed in 1888, and a priest visited monthly.

In 1906 the congregations petition for full parish status was granted, and it absorbed nearby small missions. Parish funds were insufficient, and priests complained about the living conditions, leaving as soon as possible.

In 1943, St. Georges became the first parish to integrate voluntarily, and as Baton Rouge grew outward, it was no longer a small country church. In 1957, the parish added fifteen acres to the original ten and erected a gym-church, followed by an elementary school. By 1988 the school expanded into new buildings, and the gym-church was renovated as a dedicated church. This served the growing parish until the momentous day in 2017 when a candlelight procession to the new church followed the final evening prayer service in the old church. The former gym-church now houses pre-K to fourth grade, and Mrs. Kleinpeters vision of combining religion and education continues at the same site, which is still sheltered by live oaks.

Todays church seats 1200. After more than a year of collaborative planning and fund-raising, ground was broken in 2015. The architect and contractor were GraceHebert and Milton J. Womack, both of Baton Rouge. The overall design is a traditional cruciform. A semi-clear glass wall between the chapel and the sanctuary, symbolizing the torn temple veil that shielded the Holy of Holies and the Ark of the Covenant, integrates the two spaces even as it separates them.

Stephen Wilson, a talented Baton Rouge artist who has also created windows for churches in New Orleans, Hammond, Texas, and West Virginia, designed and fabricated the powerful stained glass windows. In the transept windows (Eucharist and Baptism) and in the chapel depiction of the Holy Spirit, the vivid colors swirl and explode. The Sacrifice of the Lamb window over the entrance plays with shapes, especially circles, and with color. In contrast, in the window-wall behind the altar Wilson limits the colors to gold and clear glass in numerous textures, creating a warm, peaceful background.

Wilson also designed the six floor mosaics in the muted colors of natural stone. The basswood crucifix was carved for this church in Ortisei, Italy, by the Ferdinand Stuflesser 1875 Studio, and the three bells were cast in 1926 for the Holy Family Parish of Oak Hills, Missouri. The Missouri church closed because of a declining populationa fate that the vibrant St. George Parish need not worry about.

**Windows of St. George Catholic Church**

Holy Spirit

Chapel

Sanctuary Window

Sanctuary

Baptism Eucharist

Narthex

Sacrifice of the Lamb

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