St. Henry Catholic Church

812 General Pershing Street

What a friendly and intimate house of worship is St. Henrys Church! With reason, its congregation feels a strong loyalty and fought for its survival in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

This parish was named for Henry II of Bavaria, head of the Holy Roman Empire from 1014 to 1024, and the only German monarch to be canonized. Queen Cunigunde, his partner in expanding the power of the Church and carrying out charitable works, is portrayed in the window across from St. Henry.

The history of the parish reflects the story of German immigration to New Orleans. Though German Catholics in this part of the city originally worshiped at the French-speaking St. Stephens, just two blocks to the north, around 1855 they successfully petitioned the Vincentian Fathers, who presided at St. Stephens, to establish a National Parish with a German priest. This became a reality the next year. Its geographic boundaries were wide, to include as many German speakers as possible. (Other German National Parishes were Holy Trinity, St. Marys Assumption, and Mater Dolorosa.)

Ironically, in 1854 German immigration to the Crescent City began to decline, and as time passed, immigrants and their offspring abandoned the German language. Perhaps to counter this trend, the church opened a school, under a German order of nuns, the Sisters of Christian Charity. By 1914 half of the 27 New Orleans churches (all denominations) founded for German speakers offered services in English only. (The use of French in the archdiocese followed a parallel decline.)

The Vincentians at St. Stephens argued vehemently for eliminating the nearbyand expensivemission church. Emotions from Europe that culminated in the Franco-Prussian War only intensified the antipathy toward St. Henrys, and in 1871 it became an *archdiocesan* mission church. Its continued existence, however, angered the Vincentians, who viewed it as competition. In 1911 Archbishop Blenk terminated St. Henrys mission status and made it an independent Territorial Church, permanently depriving St. Stephens of many parishioners. Objections to the new parish continued until 1918, when the New Code of Canon Law settled the matter.

Now open to all Catholics within its boundaries, regardless of language, St. Henrys flourished and outgrew its 1856 frame church. Diboll and Owen, the leading firm for ecclesiastic architecture in New Orleans at that time, was selected as the architect for its replacement on the same site.

The 1925 church conveys a feeling of strength, both inside and out. Its brick exterior shows decidedly Romanesque influence, and powerful exposed interior beams immediately catch the visitors eye. The intimacy and coziness of its space make St. Henrys feel like a chapel, but it is indeed a church.

The windows, by the Emil Frei Studioone of the favorites of New Orleans building committeesare beautiful! The four windows on each side illustrate the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12) through saints whose lives bore witness to the specified blessings. These probably were installed at the time of construction.

The panels behind the altar and the two small windows behind the side altars are believed to have come from the original frame church. Upstairs, in the choir loft, the music windows depict King David and St. Gregory (Pope Gregory I, died 604), reformer of church liturgy and reputed originator of Gregorian chants. Gregory is portrayed in St. Louis Cathedral but rarely elsewhere in the New Orleans area.

St. Henrys, though no longer a German church, has continued its international involvement. It has served as a Stella Maris center, ministering to seafarers. More recently, it welcomed the Hispanic community, housing a preschool and English as a Second Language classes for adults. In 2021 it is home to the Ecole Bilingue, a French immersion school.

Now more than 150 years old, St. Henrys is beloved by descendants of the original founding group as well as new parishioners. From his vantage point as a statue on the altar, St. Henry looks down upon his faithful and on all others who enjoy visiting this lovely church.

 **Windows of St. Henry Church**

Windows on the right

Altar

St. Paul (with backlighting)

St. Henry

St. Thomas Becket: Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake,

for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:10)

Identify not known: Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be

called sons of God. (Matthew 5:9)

St. Elizabeth, Virgin Mary, and Zachariah: Blessed are the pure in heart,

for they shall see God. (Matthew 5:8)

St. Vincent de Paul and Bl. Louise de Marillac: Blessed are the merciful,

for they shall obtain mercy (Matthew 5:7)

Windows on the left

Altar

(behind side altar, very small) St. Peter

St. Cunigunde

St. Brigid of Ireland and St. Patrick: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the

kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3)

St. Francis of Assisi: Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. (Matthew 5:3)

Risen Christ, St. John, and the Virgin: Blessed are those who mourn,

for they shall be comforted, (Matthew 5:4)

St. Louis Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness,

for they shall be satisfied. (Matthew 5:6)

(at the back, to the side) Baptism of Christ

Choir Loft

King David St. Gregory

 horns harp harp cymbal, lute

**St. Henrys Church in the early 21st Century**

By the early 21st century,, attendance at Catholic churches in the area had declined dramatically, and after Hurricane Katrina, the archdiocese announced in 2007 the closing of both Our Lady of Good Counsel and St. Henrys churches, combining them with St. Stephens under the umbrella of Good Shepherd Parish.

But the archdiocese underestimated parishioners loyalties to these churches, where families had worshiped for generations. After well-publicized sit-ins, one lasting 72 days, and long discussions, acceptable compromises were announced in 2012. Our Lady of Good Counsel is now home to the Catholic Charismatic Center of Jesus the Lord (since the 1970s, located at the Discalced Carmelite Monastery on Rampart Street), and early weekday Masses are held at St. Henrys for parishioners of all Good Shepherd churches.

*See also:*

Alvah J. Green III, "Fighting Spirit: A History of St. Henry's Catholic Church New Orleans 1871‑1929" (2015). University of New Orleans. Masters thesis, available at https://scholarworks.uno.edu /td/2078/.

Pearl DiLeo, Gladys Smith, Robert Morton II,compilers. *The Church of Saint Henry: Sesquicentennial Anniversary, 1856-2006.* [2007]

*Visited*:

*March 25, 1990*

*September 28, 2008*

*April 22, 2018*

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