St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church

1802 Tulane Avenue

St. Joseph Church is the largest church ever built in New Orleans and one of the largest in the South. Foundation problems caused construction on the massive brick structure to be halted after the cornerstone was laid in 1871 (construction had begun in 1869). Redesigned by architect Patrick C. Keeley and minus the intended twin towers and spires, the building was completed in 1877, and the first Mass was celebrated on Christmas Day 1892 in the shell of a church, with plain windows and no pews or decorative furnishings.

This building is the second for this congregation, which was founded in 1844. Originally, St. Josephs was a modest wooden Gothic-style building with a tall steeple across from Charity Hospital, but the predominantly Irish parish grew steadily, and the present land was purchased in 1866. The old church was renovated, principally through a gift from St. Katharine Drexel, and renamed St. Katherine of Sienna Church (a compromise spelling of St. Catherine of Siena to honor St. Katharine?).

Since 1858, priests from the Vincentian order (formally the Congregation of the Mission; the priests are also known as Lazarines) have ministered to both St. Katherines and St. Joseph’s churches.

When completed, the building was an empty shell with clear windows. Decorative elements and furnishings, including pews, stained glass windows, an appropriate altar and an organ, were added gradually as funds became available. The Jardine organ, dating from the 1870s, was restored by the Organ Historical Society in 1985. It is thought that the organ was always located in the balcony.

The first stained glass window, in the choir loft, dates to 1892; the newest, in the foyer, to 1963. Unfortunately, recent modifications to the building obstruct the view of some of the windows from the main worship area.

Beautiful painting, exquisite draping, and vividly clear colors are evident in the major windows, which portray well-known events in the life of Christ and Mary. St. Joseph is seen in the three-part Patronage of St. Joseph over the altar and in one portrait window at the lower level. The German studios of Franz Mayer (Munich) and H. Oidtmann (Linnich, Germany) designed and fabricated most of the glass. (The German-American studio of Emil Frei is often credited with creating the large windows, but detailed order records support the Mayer firm. Frei may well have done the small clerestory windows and has also has been active in recent window restoration and maintenance.)

Considered Romanesque, this building incorporates other architectural styles as well. The marble altar was installed in 1915 and echoes the graceful arches of the windows. In 1989, St. Johns High School in Gulfport, Mississippi, donated the marble Altar of Sacrifice, permitting the celebrant to face the congregation.

The middle of the twentieth century saw a decline in the membership of this congregation as migration to the suburbs and the growth of the medical complex changed the composition of the area. In 1979, diligent community activists ended talk of razing the building and put St. Josephs on the National Historic Registry. The parish has energetically committed itself to create new life for this magnificent old landmark and its neighborhood.

**Windows of St. Joseph Church**

Above the altar (clerestory level)

The Patronage of St. Joseph (Mayer 1898)

Bishop of Rome St. Joseph, Patron Saint Emperor Constantine

venerating of the Universal Church, with his mother,

St. Joseph with Pope Sylvester St. Helena

(signed)

Rose windows in the sanctuary area

Pelican feeding its young (Mayer 1899) Lamb of God resting on a book

with 7 seals (Mayer 1899)

Clerestory Windows (circular emblem at the top)

(Mayer: 4 2-lancet windows, rich ornament, 1898.

Others are possibly from the Emil Frei Studio.)

Sacred Heart Sacred Heart

Rose Lilies

Luke (ox) Matthew (man)

AMR (Ave Maria Regina) IHS

John (eagle) Mark (lion)

Dove All-Seeing Eye (God the Father)

Pelican Church Triumphant (lamb with banner of Resurrection)

Monstrance Monstrance

Alpha and Omega Fleury cross

Instruments of the Passion Instruments of scourging

Crown and palms Three nails

Bishops miter Keys to Heaven

Large Windows in Nave

Nativity of Our Lord (Mayer 1899) Assumption of Mary (Mayer 1902)

Presentation of Our Lord (Mayer 1902) Descent of the Holy Spirit (Mayer 1900)

Finding the child in the temple (Mayer 1915) Ascension of Our Lord (Mayer 1907)

Wedding Feast at Cana (Mayer 1915) Resurrection (Mayer 1915)

Blessing the little children (Mayer 1915) Triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Mayer 1915)

Nave, lower level (all by Oidtmann, 1929)

Immaculate Conception St. Joseph

St. Agnes St. [Blessed] Francis Regis Clet

St. Cecilia St. Vincent de Paul

Jesus the High Priest St. John Gabriel Perboyre

St. [Blessed] Louise de Marillac Archangel Gabriel

St. [Sister] Catherine Labouré Child Jesus

St. Catherine (as seminary sister) ?? Sacred Heart

St. Lucy Our Lady of Perpetual Help [Mater Amabilis]

Our Lady of Sorrows (in priests office) St. Rita

Scourging at the pillar [Ecce homo] (in priests office) St. Therese, the Little Flower

*Terms in square brackets are from the Oidtmann order book.*

Choir Loft

Rose window: Jesus as teacher in the center, surrounded by the Disciples (Mayer 1892)

Foyer

Left: Espousal of Mary and Joseph; St. Josephs Dream (Mayer 1962)

Center: Apparitions to St. Catherine Labouré (Miraculous Medal) (Mayer 1962)

Right: Flight into Egypt; Holy Family (Mayer 1962)

Above these windows (visible only from the outside)

American opalescent glass, maker unknown

Conference room (adjoining small chapel) (Mayer 1963)

Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden

St. John baptizing Jesus

*Note: All dates for windows refer to the date the window was ordered; installation probably dates to a year or so later.*

The only Mayer signature window from the old windows is about 50 feet high, above the altar, so a copy is attached. The location of the studio is given as Munihc [sic] and London, but the Mayer had only a sales office in Londonnot a workshop. Photo by Cindy Courage of Attenhofer Stained Glass, who was repairing the wooden frame around the window.



