St. Marys Assumption Catholic Church

923 Josephine Street (at Constance Street)

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the immigration of European Catholics to New Orleans was so massive that sometimes multiple churches sprang up in the same neighborhood. Such is the case with St. Marys Assumption Catholic Church, which served the German-speaking community while across the street St. Alphonsus Church catered to the Irish; Notre Dame de Bon Secours, at the corner of Jackson Avenue and Constance Street (destroyed by fire in 1928), ministered to French speakers. This area was, appropriately, dubbed Ecclesiastical Square.

St. Marys is noted for housing the remains of Father Francis Xavier Seelos, a Redemptorist priest who died of yellow fever in 1867 while serving the Irish Channel immigrant population. He was beatified at the Vatican in 2000, and the Redemptorist fathers are hopeful that the Vatican will soon canonize him.

Not until 1843 did a German Redemptorist arrive in this corner of the town of Lafayette. Services took place for a while in a popular dance hall, the Kaiserhalle. The next year, a small, modest clapboard church, the first church for German Catholics in Louisiana, preceded this splendid building. (That unadorned church still functions as a chapel within St. Alphonsus Parish, at 1516 Jackson Avenue. For more details see the description of St. Marys Chapel.**)**

**Building.** The cornerstone for the present German Baroque brick structure was laid in 1858, the same day that St. Alphonsus Church was dedicated. Architectural historian Samuel Wilson, Jr., believed that German architect Albert Diettel designed the structure due to similarities to his work on SS. Peter and Paul and St. John the Baptist churches. The parishioners contributed extensively to the building of St. Marys. Legend has it that when rain prevented horse-drawn wagons from negotiating the dirt streets, women carried small loads of bricks in their aprons from barges at the Jackson Avenue landing on the Mississippi River to the construction site. The building was dedicated in 1860, with total construction costs of $68,551.57.

St. Marys was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971 as one of the finest examples of German Baroque brick architecture in New Orleans. Today, like St. Alphonsus Church across the street, it is a National Historic Landmark. The elegant bell tower calls worshipers to an architectural marvel with ornate ceilings and wooden statues believed to have been carved by parishioners. The wooden high altar, hand carved in Munich, was dedicated in 1874 and symbolizes the churchs namesake, depicting Marys rise to heaven as Queen of Angels and Saints. Notre Dame de Bon Secours Church was the original home for the altar table.

The magnificent organ in the choir loft is the handiwork of B. D. Simmons and was installed in the 1860s. It was rebuilt in 1905 by William Schuelke of Milwaukee, and in 1988 the New Orleans Chapter of the Organ Historical Society supervised a major restoration effort. The buildings excellent acoustics complement the work of that group.

St. Marys Assumption Church has suffered from two major hurricanes, Betsy in 1965 and Katrina in 2005. A 1971 visit by then First Lady Patricia Nixon galvanized community support to restore the structure, which was completed in 1975 at a cost of $800,000. The church formally reopened to the public August 15, the Feast of the Assumption, ten years after its closure. The ravages of Katrina yielded major roof, plaster, and paint damage, resulting in nearly $1.2 million repairs. More recently, the church replaced laminate flooring with wood.

**Stained Glass**. In 1892, the church spent nearly $12,000 on its wall paintings and stained glass windows. St. Marys windows were designed and fabricated by the Royal Bavarian Art Institute headed by Franz Xavier Zettler, also the manufacturer of the stained glass in St. Alphonsus Church. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this firm, along with that of Franz Mayer, became the prominent German exporters of what became known as the Munich-style stained glass. Munich windows are characterized by heavy use of paint and stains in emulation of oil painting. This contrasts with the American style, which placed more emphasis on the glass itself.

F. X. Zettler began his career in stained glass in the Franz Mayer studio in 1863 as art director and eventually became the son-in-law of the firms founder. In 1870, Zettler established his own studio, which eventually was honored by Pope Pius IX and King Ludwig II and became known as the *Royal Bavarian Art Institute for Pictorial Painting on Glass*. Eventually both Mayer and Zettler created distinctly American versions of the Munich style, emphasizing movement, motifs from art history, and natural groupings of sacred individuals. The two firms merged in 1939 under the Mayer name, but a revived Zettler organization now functions within the Mayer studio..

The choir loft and church organ block the view of stained glass windows made by the Cincinnati Art Glass Company, probably around 1900. Sadly, these windows bear witness to the toll that poor paint firing, neglected repair and restoration, humidity, and western exposure to the intense Louisiana sun can take on stained glass. Among the topics depicted are King David, St. Cecilia, The Nativity, and Guardian Angels.

St. Marys stained glass windows sustained extensive wind damage during Hurricane Betsy. Some of the glass was cracked, and portions were literally blown away. Restoration was originally estimated at $29,320. Gabriel Mayer of the Mayer Studio was consulted, as was Robert Frei of the Emil Frei Art Glass studio of St. Louis. Ultimately, the work was undertaken by a Covington firm, Pounds Stained Glass, beginning in 1974 and was completed for a total cost of $40,887.

**Artwork behind the altar**. The circular stained glass window above the high altar is perhaps the oldest in the building and, possibly, the city. It exemplifies the original Munich style: darker and more symbolic in a design compatible with German artistic standards. The window presents the three virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity. Above the window is the Lamb of God, seated on a Bible, and above that is the great seal of the Redemptorist Fathers (Christs Passion represented by a cross, lance and reed). On either side are the abbreviated words Jesus and Mary. The all-seeing Eye of God framed in a triangle surmounts these images.

 *by Kelly E Rylance, PhD*

**Windows of St. Marys Assumption Church**

Above the Altar

Faith, Hope, and Charity

Congregations Right Side

Front (upper): ***St. Nicholas***, Archbishop of Myra, patron saint of children and precursor of modern Santa Claus. (lower): ***Presentation of the Blessed Virgin in the Temple***.

***The Great Window***. This magnificent window is the third largest stained glass window in the city of New Orleans. (Two in St. Pauls Episcopal Church are larger, but two windows at St. Catherine of Siena in Metairie are even larger.) It represents the sending of the angels to Purgatory to bring souls to heaven as a result of the prayers of the Virgin Mary. Mary wears a circle of stars above her head and is seated on the moon, surrounded by angels and saints. On her right are the prophets John the Baptist and King David. On her left are other saints, including a kneeling bishop who may be St. Alphonsus. Above Mary is the Trinity surrounded by saints and angels. To the viewers left of the Trinity is St. Paul; to the right, St. Peter.

Inscription: Royal Bavarian Institute.

Back (upper) ***St. Aloysius, S.J., Jesuit Seminarian***

Back (lower) ***The Transfiguration of Christ before His Apostles***.

Above the doors in the Back of the Church

Left (facing the doors from the inside): ***St. Vincent De Paul***

Right: ***St. Joseph*** (inscribed by the F. X. Zettler studio)

Congregations Left Side

Front (upper) ***St. Bartholomew the Apostle***, martyred by the flaying knife shown held in his hand

Front (lower) ***St. Dominic***, receiving the Rosary from the hands of the Mary

Middle (upper right) ***St. Henry***, Emperor of Germany, one of historys most devout Christian rulers

Middle (upper left): ***St. Kunegunda***, virgin wife of King Henry. Their marriage was that of brother and sister, and both dedicated themselves solely to the service of God. They were favorites among German Catholics.

Middle (lower right): ***Mary Magdalene***, washing the feet of Jesus.

Middle (lower left): ***The Resurrection of Christ***.

Back (upper) ***St. Rose of Lima***

Back (lower) ***Jesus, Mary and Joseph: Flight into Egypt***.

*Visited September 17, 1989*

*April 5, 1997*

*April 22, 2007*

*September 20, 2009*

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