St. Michael Catholic Church

177 First Street

Biloxi, Mississippi

Welcome to the Church of the Fisherman. In the pre-casino era, the principal sources of income in this part of the world were fishing and the beaches. Not surprisingly, when the parish, which dates to 1917, decided to replace its modest-sized, traditional rectangular church, it drew on its fishing roots.

Completed in 1964, this unique round church designed by James Canizaro of Jackson, Mississippi, has a scallop-like roof. Its 36 stained glass windows were designed as a set by Francis A. Deck, a vice president of the Emil Frei Studio in St. Louis, Missouri, and a leader in the St. Louis Modernism movement. Here he focused on the theme of Christians as Fishers of Men.

Do not look for familiar saints with their identifying symbols. These are 21 generic men and women, with flat, expressionless faces. Uniting them are fishing nets, fish of various sizes and orientations, a bright setting sun, and other familiar seascape objects. The more your eyes and imagination adjust, the more becomes discernible. The fish, in addition to honoring the local livelihoods, is a powerful Christian symbol.

The two-dimensional design, flat colors, and angular and exaggerated faces and hands are among the elements that the Frei Studio considered its Mid-Century Style. In these traits and the scratchiness of shading, these portraits are reminiscent of medieval window portraits, particularly the early portraits at Augsburg. They contrast dramatically with the realistic windows at Our Lady of the Gulf, which resemble oil paintings.

A representative of the Frei Studio thinks that the similarity to medieval art grew out of the Liturgical Movement, which was widespread in the 1950s and argued for a return to the liturgy of the Middle Ages. Artistically the advocates for this movement sought minimal adornment, coupled with generous use of symbols and free space between images. Both the art and the liturgy encouraged worshipers to meditate and contemplate.

Hurricane Katrina severely damaged, but did not destroy, St. Michael Church. The negative pressure of the wind caused the lower windows on the Gulf side to blow *out,* allowing water to rush in. All the furnishingsincluding the massive stone altarfloated about. The roof and the top half of the windows, however, remained in place. The Frei Company returned and used the original drawings in its archives to replace the broken glass. In addition, they installed an ingenious device to prevent future damage to the glass: Now all the windows that reach to the floor have an interior pulley system that allows the parish guardians to raise the windows out of harms way!

Much of the other ecclesiastical art for this fascinating church was designed by well-known New Orleans artists: the Stations of the Cross, formed of lead, by Enrique Alférez; the crucifix and corona by Lin Emery; and St. Michael on the Day Chapel (outside and toward the Gulf) by Jean Seidenberg. Harry Reeks, of Ocean Springs, carved the statues of St. Mary and St. Joseph.

The congregation of St. Michael Church honors the traditions of its ancestors while embracing modern architecture and art to create a spiritual home for its present and future parishioners.

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