St. Theresa of Avila Church

1401 Erato Street

The origins of this charming church date back to 1838, making it the second-oldest Catholic church above Canal Street, St. Patricks being the oldest.

It was named for St. Teresa de Avila (d. 1582), the energetic Spanish nun, writer, mystic, and founder of the Order of Discalced Carmelites. Mrs. Theresa Perie Saulet, who donated the land to Bishop Blanc for charitable purposes, specified the name of the church.

Bishop Blancs first building on the property was a new home for the Sisters of Charitys New Orleans Female Orphan Asylum (1840). A wooden chapel to serve the asylums spiritual needs was erected that same year, followed by a school the next year. This was the first Catholic school uptown. (The Sisters of Charity also founded St. Vincents Infant Asylum, St. Elizabeths Home on Napoleon Avenue, and the Louise Day Nursery.)

Because of the association between the orphanage and the origins of St. Theresa de Avila Church, it was assumed that the Sisters of Charity controlled the finances of the church. This, of course, led to frustrations at the church, as the sisters gave preference to the orphans’ needs over church maintenance. Only in 1912 did the archbishop assign financial control of the church to the pastor, since the long-lost donation document specifically gave Mrs. Saulet’s property to the bishop.

As the uptown area grew, so did the need for another Catholic parish. In 1848 work began on the present structure, directed by architect T. E. Giraud, from Charleston, South Carolina, who also worked on Holy Trinity Church in the Bywater area. A contemporaneous newspaper account described the building as Roman Byzantine style of the sixteenth century, but more recent historians describe it as Gothic revival.

In 1892 the parish ordered two stained glass windows from the Franz Mayer studio of Munich, and in 1889-1923 it placed four orders with the Royal Bavarian Art Institute for Stained Glass, established by F. X. Zettler, also in Munich (extant records specify those dates). These studios were on-and-off collaborators and competitors and merged in 1939. They are responsible for many spectacular windows in New Orleans, including those nearby at St. Alphonsus and St. Marys Assumption churches. Typical of their work is the abundance of architectural details and the handling of luxuriant fabrics. The devastating hurricane of 1915 is commemorated in the window in the back right corner.

The Mayer studio also restored seven windows in 1968, after Hurricane Betsy. Hurricane Katrina completely destroyed the large St. Teresa window, which the Conrad Schmitt firm of Wisconsin replaced (cost: $195,000). Attenhofer Stained Glass of Metairie restored the St. Margaret Mary window. (See comments below on repairing these windows by Cindy Courage, of the Attenhofer studio.)

More recent decorations include the glazed ceramic Stations of the Cross. Two artists are credited with their creation: (1) muralist Milo Piuz, a Swiss Benedictine monk whose work can also be seen on the altars at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, and (2) Father Gregory DeWit, of the Benedictine monastery in St. Benedict, Louisiana. Dom Gregory created the Stations for St. Raphael the Archangel Church around 1958, about the time that the new Stations were added to St. Theresa de Avila Church. He was a mentor of Father Milo and invited him to the U.S. to help with the murals at the Benedictine abbey (Piuz was in the U.S. in 1951-1970). Around the time that the new Stations were installed, St. John the Baptist Church was closed because of the construction of the Mississippi River Bridge, and its parishioners worshipped at St. Theresa de Avila Church, so both men may have worked together at both churches.

The past half century has wrought changes similar to those experienced in many downtown churches: a shrinking number of parishioners and the concomitant financial hardships. When the church celebrated its sesquicentennial, however, it was filled to overflowing with former members for whom the church still held strong emotional ties. St. Theresas now hosts a largely Hispanic population.

The choir loft houses what is, without doubt, New Orleans oldest extant pipe organ. It was, however, probably not the first in use here. Todays instrument is from the shop of Jardine and Son, a fine New York builder. It was likely a stock model, built between 1865 and 1870, though not originally for this parish, and contains 16 ranks of pipes in the two manual and pedal divisions. It has a tracker, or mechanical, action and was originally winded by hand pumping.

Over time the organ fell into disrepair and became unplayable. In 1988 the New Orleans Chapter of the Organ Historical Society volunteered hundreds of hours work to make the necessary repairs. This was possible through the expertise and supervision of Roy Redman of Fort Worth, Texas.

**Windows**

St. Teresa de Avila

second level second level

Jesus with Sacred Heart \* St. Cecilia

St. Michael \* St. Rose

altar

St. Ann St. [Jane] Frances de Chantal

St. Elizabeth St. Francis Assisi

St. Mary Magdalene St. Aloysius

St. Francis Xavier St. Teresa

Sacred Heart of Mary St. Joseph

St. Gertrude St. Francis Xavier

St. Margaret, Q[ueen] of S[cotland] St. Margaret Mary [of Alacoque]

St. Thomas Aquinas In Remembrance of the Storm of 1915

second level

St. Louis, King of France St. Peter

\* Franz Mayer studio of Munich, 1892

*Visited*

*September 1991*

*March 2000*

*September 2009*

See also: Bette B. Bornside and Reverend Teodoro Agudo, O.F.M.Cap. *Sesquicentennial of St. Theresa of Avila Parish, 1948-1998.* 1998.s

Comments on the St. Teresa and St. Margaret Mary windows

by Cindy Courage, Attenhofer Stained Glass, Metairie, Sept 16, 2009

The rear window of St. Theresa of Avila was one of the oldest windows in the city. It is assumed to be an American build due to the types of glass used and the failing point. The key word here is assumed. In the *St. Theresa of Avila* 150-year celebration book it clearly shows the rear window installed and all of the upper clerestory windows. The photo is dated 1871, taken by E. Cloudel, or spelled possibly Claudel, N.O., LA. The Kokomo glass factory is said to be the oldest glass producing factory in America. Kokomo built the factory in 1888, and it was started by Charles Edward Henry. [The parish history] points to the rear window fabrication by the assumed Mayer / later Zettler studios. (I dont know where the group got this information of the window fabrication, but I am not of the same mind-set.) Could it be American glass or some type of European glass? Who really built these windows? The Germans liked to use antique glass to paint and fire. This glass was clearly not antique but had ripples and double-rolled markings like the European glass, however, a good bit of this window had paint work. The Germans were much better painters and could fire the glass well. [Correspondence with the Mayer studio says that they restored 7 windows after Hurricane Betsy (1965) and created the St. Michael and portrait of Jesus with a Sacred Heart in 1892. No mention of the St. Teresa window.]

The condition of the rear [St Teresa] window prior to Hurricane Katrina was in a failing state. It was in desperate need of restoration/conservation. After Katrina struck, two thirds of the rear window was decimated. Shards of glass mixed with mangled parts of lead could be found strewn all over the property. Only one part of the altar window remained intact. One of the main support beams to the Gothic-style frame was destroyed and the upper part of the frame could be seen hanging to the left side of the altar. The frame was destroyed and only a portion of the window remained in situ. This is what the Conrad Schmitt studio had to start their project. The rear window had been boarded and now waited for the new creation. The approximate size of the window that needed to be fabricated was about 275 square feet. The cost to do the work was close to $200,000. A few of the interesting details about the new window are: It was fabricated and installed in less than six months, it was dedicated to Father Teodoro Agudo and the memory of Hurricane Katrina, and the figures in the window now represent the congregation more accurately by adding Hispanic features to Jesus and St. Teresa. Well done!

The Margaret Mary side window was in a similar condition. The frame was smashed and needed to be heavily repaired. The bulk of this window was either missing or damaged. The beautiful German-created face was amazingly still intact with only minor damage to the neck. The missing piece of glass from the neck was never found, so like much of the paint work on the window, it had to be recreated. The window took many months to put together. It was completely disassembled. The broken shards and parts of glass were carefully gathered for reconstruction. All of the pieces were marked and several rubbings (patterns) were created. Missing pieces were created and painted and fired, restored pieces were glued using a conservation-grade two-part epoxy, and original pieces of glass were puzzled back together. All of the work was re-leaded and then glazed with a conservation-grade lead-like cement (otherwise known as waterproofing). The frame was repaired, and the panels were finished, and the pieces and parts were installed at the church. A group of out-of-state volunteers were with us to lend a hand, and to witness the recovery of the city. It was a memorable time!

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