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**HISTORY OF SACRED HEART OF JESUS PARISH**

**HOLY CROSS HISTORY CONFERENCE**

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A HISTORY OF SACRED HEART OF JESUS PARISH  
1879-1999

Written for the Holy Cross History Conference, June 1999  
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In 1878 we see the first beginnings of Sacred Heart parish in the negotiations initiated by Archbishop Perche with the Congregation of Holy Cross to take charge of a new parish he wished to form in the rear section of Canal St. On March 19, 1879, Holy Cross gave up its work at St. Vincent's Home for Destitute Boys on Bienville (where they'd been since 1873) and accepted responsibility for this parish extending from Broad St. to Lake Pontchartrain, and from Howard St. to St. Louis. One week later Mr. Patrick Burk O'Brien, cotton broker and generous benefactor of the parish, donated a square of land bordered by Canal, Gasquet (later Cleveland), Lopez and Rendon Streets to Holy Cross for the use of the parish. A 3 room combination church and rectory was built on the corner of Canal and Lopez and the church was dedicated on Aug. 24, 1879.

What must have been a rather bleak sight greeted the first pastor, Rev. Auguste Marine, CSC. Only 30 or 40 families inhabited his whole parish which consisted mainly of brush, palmettos, swamp, truck farms and cow pasture. Someone is reported to have remarked, "Frogs are the only worshippers here!" Canal Street was a shell surfaced road which was impassible during heavy rains or floods. Poor drainage necessitated the construction of board walks consisting of 2 x 12's raised about 30" off the ground. In times of floods even these disappeared and those attending service had to come by raft or row boat, as did the school pupils. A popular activity for the boys after Sunday mass was to scoop crawfish from around the drain running along Lopez St. to Tulane Ave.

Collections were slim in Fr. Marine's day and he often went without enough to eat - until his parishioners found out about it. The early parishioners were mostly poor Irish, poor but generous with what they had. Several families supplied milk to the rectory from their dairies and another family, surnamed Lacoste, supplied food from their grocery store. Fr. Marine was apparently not afraid to remind parishioners of their religious obligations. He spent 4 months in the hospital as a result of being hit over the head by some dairymen after delivering a "scorching sermon" on their lack of attendance at Mass! (Apparently some *were* attending that day.)

Despite initial difficulties the little congregation must have grown quickly as within a few years a new white wooden church seating 300 to 400 was built facing Canal St. in the middle of the block and a 4th room was added to the original building. In the little memoirs written by some early parishioners many mentioned a "beautiful picture of the Annunciation", donated by the William Willett family, which hung over the altar in the new church.

Fr. Marine also organized a Sanctuary Society and saw the building of a 2 room schoolhouse in the last year of his pastorate. The school was built by Thomas Carey on the corner of Canal and Rendon, facing Rendon. Br. Oswald, CSC, and a Miss Slaughter from St. Joseph's parish taught the handful of students first attending. Apparently neither of them taught there for long; they were followed by Misses Margaret Carey and Agnes Thompson.

Fr. Marine was replaced as pastor in 1882 by Rev. Peter Cooney from Ireland. He served as pastor only 1 year. Rev. Guillaume Demers from Quebec became pastor in 1883 until 1886. A petition was sent in 1885 asking for his removal saying, "He speaks too much about the colored gentlemen, such questions shouldn't be discussed from the altar." (It doesn't say whether he spoke favorably or negatively about the "colored gentlemen", but whatever he said the parishioners didn't like it!) Rev. John Adelsperger from Ohio became pastor in 1886 until 1889. The parishioners were again in a petitioning mood and a lengthy one was sent to the provincial, this time asking to keep their pastor. In 1889 Rev. John Scherer from Germany took over the parish, serving for only 1 year. A secular (priest?) once remarked about Fr. Scherer, "I wonder whether the community has two superior generals or two provincials. He scandalizes all by his blind disobedience."

A Frenchman, Auguste Saulnier, became the next pastor and stayed until 1895. Fr. Saulnier was described as a "nice old man" and under his leadership the St. Vincent DePaul Society was organized as well as the League of the Sacred Heart. He reported in 1894 to Fr. Corby, then provincial, that the Rosetta Gravel cars were soon to pass by the church fixing cement banquettes on both sides of Canal St., and that more than 20 families were building around the church.

In 1893 the School Sisters of Notre Dame began their long tenure at Sacred Heart. 2 Sisters commuted each day from Josephine St. in St. Alphonsus parish on electric and mule cars. The school boys had to lay wooden planks from the tracks to the door of the school so the sisters could get in during wet seasons. Testifying to further growth in the parish a 2 storey, 8 classroom school building was constructed in 1894 and the former school was converted into a convent.

Apparently Fr. Saulnier was not the brightest of persons. Fr. Daniel Spillard (who must have been the Superior for New Orleans) wrote to Fr. Corby in 1895 that Fr. Saulnier had been sandbagged by two con men who came in on pretext of consulting him. The same letter reports that the Lazarists think "that within 15 years Sacred Heart would be one of the best in the city. They (the Lazarists) hint that Fr. Saulnier is a little too slow for everyone except the creoles." Spillard suggests Fr. Toohey be made pastor and that there was now enough work for 2 men in the parish. Saulnier's health was also in decline and he was replaced in March of 1895 by Fr. Spillard, an Irishman. (Proving you should never suggest work for others lest you yourself end up doing it!)

Fr. Spillard was faced with a number of problems which needed immediate attention. The Sisters had been using the second floor of the school as additional living space and the school building was now inadequate for the 320 children in attendance. The rectory was in need of repair, Fr. Spillard had written that it was "the worst in the city", and a new church was being built.

The new brick church was donated entirely by Patrick O'Brien and designed by well known New Orleans architect James Freret. It was dedicated on February 23, 1896, by Archbishop Janssen. It seated 800 worshippers and stood immediately next to the present church facing Canal St. The old church became a recreation center until it was torn down in 1911. 1896 also saw the

passing of a city ordinance forcing the parish to pay \$900 for the sidewalks, and the death of the parish's benefactor, Patrick O'Brien, Mr. O'Brien left \$5,000 to the parish in his will for the building of a new school (though he had promised \$10,000 to Fr. Spillard.)

Rev. Patrick Condon from Ontario served as pastor from 1897 - 98 and Rev. Peter Lauth of Germany from 1898 - 99. Another German, Rev. Nicholas Warken, saw the parish into the new century serving as pastor from 1899 to 1906, the longest stay of any pastor up to this point. Under Fr. Warken a new rectory was built on the site of the original building, the corner of Lopez and Canal. It seems repairs were already necessary on the church at this time, too. The only other note I find on Fr. Warken is that he raised chickens.

Sacred Heart benefitted from the digging of a canal along Claiborne Ave. The school yard resembled a lake most of the time so it was arranged to have mud brought down Canal St. on little flat topped electric cars where it was dumped into the yard. As one early parishioner wrote, "It went from being a lake to being filled with mud hills for about a year."

Rev. Peter Franciscus served a one year term as pastor following Fr. Warken. Rev. John O'Rourke was appointed pastor in 1907 and remained at Sacred Heart until 1921. In 1909 Fr. O'Rourke reported to the Provincial that the church was being painted and decorated. A new school building was also an immediate need so the old school and convent buildings were moved to the back of the lot and a new brick school costing \$30,500 was dedicated by Archbishop Blenk in 1911. (This is the current brick building facing Canal at the corner of Canal and Rendon.)

The population of Sacred Heart Parish continued to swell and in 1913 the first division of the parish was made, everything from North Carrollton to the Lake became a new parish. O'Rourke wrote to Fr. Morrissey asking whether Holy Cross would accept the new parishes. We know that he answered in the negative and the Dominicans were given charge of the new parish. Sometime in the early 20's the current parish boundaries, Broad to Carrollton and Orleans to what is now the expressway, were established.

Disaster struck on October 1, 1915 when a storm (in the accounts I have some called it a tornado and others a hurricane) swept through the city and blew the tall steeple of the church over on its roof. In a letter written that same day Fr. O'Rourke reported severe damage, "A great storm blew in at 120 mph, half of the church roof is gone, the organ is in pieces, the roof of the school is damaged, windows smashed, roof of rectory injured and much of the city is under water." The buildings were repaired, but the steeple was never replaced, instead a cornerage or squaring was put in its place.

The rest of Fr. O'Rourke's pastorate seems to have been less eventful and in 1921 Rev. William Minnick was named his successor, despite his vehement protests. One parishioner noted that Fr. Minnick felt he was incapable of handling problems since he was a young man. In 1922 Rev. John DeGroote was appointed pastor. It is because of Fr. DeGroote's vision that the block where Sacred Heart is located looks the way it does today. He wished "to plant a



square of buildings to the glory of God and an ornament to the city of New Orleans," and had decided it would be better to incur a little debt and build a church which would last many years rather than repair the old one which would deteriorate again shortly. Within his first year he launched an extensive building campaign. Fr. O'Rourke had left \$35,000 to build a new church which DeGroote used instead to renovate the interior of the school and then started from scratch to raise money for the church building; he was the first to put in the envelope system. The rectory was repaired and moved to the corner of Lopez and Cleveland to make room for the new church building. Fr. DeGroote supervised the entire building of the church, beginning with plenty of 100 ft. piling to be sure his church would "last forever." He also wanted to save the bricks from the old church to double the size of the school and construct a new convent. Things moved quickly (work began on Jan. 30, 1923) and the new church seating 1200 was dedicated on March 2, 1924, by Archbishop Shaw. The main altar had been dedicated almost a year before, on March 24, 1923. It had been paid for by a \$20,000 donation from Nicholas Long, Sr. Most of the statues and altars were donated by individual parishioners or by parish organizations. The painting above the main altar (which originally was Christ seated on the judgement throne flanked by Moses and John the Baptist) was unveiled on the Feast of Christ the King, 1924.

A few notes of interest on the expenses of building the church:

- The building itself was reported to cost "about \$125,000"
- Each of the four marble statues in front cost \$325
- The two side altars cost \$2,195 each
- The niches for St. Joseph and St. John cost \$1875
- The communion railing cost \$3,265

The little parish which had such humble beginnings was coming of age. Fr. DeGroote began having 7 masses on Sundays and the parishioners were active in many organizations: St. Vincent De Paul Society, Holy Name Society, Sanctuary Society, St. Margaret's Daughters, Young Ladies Sodality, and the Usher's Society. A Boy Scout Troop was established in 1924 and became the first to have a band, first to have a bugle and marching corps, first to distribute palms on Palm Sunday for offerings which were given to the poor and the 1st to form an all night vigil on Holy Thursday.

In 1928 Rev. Michael Quinlan was named pastor and continued working to make the vision of Fr. DeGroote's "square of buildings" a reality. In 1929 he requested permission to begin work on a new convent and 10 room school building. The completion of the new school building allowed for the reopening of the high school which had been closed 7 years previously to make room for the grammar school students. In 1931, in the midst of the Depression, he initiated the completion of the building program, the new rectory, new gym/stage area added to the top of the grade school (the famous O'Brien Hall), and an annex to the side of the grade school building (the section nearest the

church.) As one might deduce, money was quite scarce and there are repeated letters mentioning the inability to pay the back salaries owed to the priests and sisters, not to mention the loans made to pay for the new buildings. The building program had saddled the parish with a large debt and the parishioners were up in arms. Fr. Quinlan mentions that the Easter collection in 1931 was \$1397.63 with almost half of that going to the bishop and in 1932 it was only \$908.79 with \$514 of that going to the bishop. In other words, there was no way he could begin to pay back the loan!

Despite the financial burdens the numbers in the parish continued to grow. In a 1930 letter to Fr. Burns (the provincial) Fr. Quinlan is adamant about the possibilities for Sacred Heart. The Provincial Council had been skeptical about the need for so large a rectory with so many meeting rooms. etc. Quinlan notes that the parish had been asked to send a priest to serve as chaplain in the prison built within its boundaries. That ministry with the work of the parish now required 7 priests. He mentioned that Fr. DeGroote had envisioned 4 confessionals, but they now needed 6, and said that people were beginning to look up to Sacred Heart. He concluded with, "Dear Father, this parish can be as small as you want to make it, and one way to make it small is to keep thinking it is not supposed to grow." Also under Fr. Quinlan the mosaic Stations of the Cross were canonically erected (2/03/29) and the Perpetual Novena to the Sacred Heart, which "really packed them in", was begun (also in 1929).

Rev. Louis Kelly became pastor in 1934 and faced well the unpleasant task of reducing the sizeable debt incurred by his predecessor - \$45,000. He wrote in '35 to Fr. Burns, "Last Friday over 2,000 people were at the novena (2 services) but the collection was less than 2 cents per person." Despite such obstacles he managed to pay off a sizeable portion of what the parish owed during his years here.

In 1938, while Fr. Kelly was still pastor, Sacred Heart was chosen as the sight for the beginning of the closing ceremonies and procession for the 8th National Eucharistic Congress. The ceremony was a big success largely due to Fr. MacNamara who went to bed exhausted immediately after it was over. Fr. Kelly marveled that Fr. "Mac" was back at work the next day and in his office until 2 am. One parishioner wrote that Fr. Mac never could do enough for the parish. His zeal for the parish came to a sudden end, though, early in 1939 when he died of a heart attack on a street car. The large attendance at his funeral attests to how well he was loved and the niche in the back of the church with the statue of the *pieta* was dedicated to his memory.

Toward the end of his tenure, in 1939, Fr. Kelly realized the necessity of organizing a Catechetical Society to address the needs of the some 1,000 parish children who were enrolled in public schools and were receiving no religious education at all. The highly successful Sacred Heart Federal Credit Union, still in existence today, was organized in 1939 as well.

In 1940 Rev. Joseph Burke was named pastor, but he lived only 5 months, dying of heart trouble. Rev. Leo Flood assumed the reigns after Fr. Burke's

death and remained as pastor until 1949. One of the parishioners noted that he was a "good orator". In 1946 the parish purchased a 73 acre camp near Hammond for the use of parishioners, parish organizations and youth groups. The priests and sisters also made use of it as a "getaway". Fr. Flood also built the "Grey House" for CYO activities and enlarged the school cafeteria. In 1948 the high school began to take male students for the first time.

In 1949 the much loved Rev. Thomas Peyton assumed the first of his two pastorates at Sacred Heart. This time might well be called the "glory days" of the parish. By March of 1951 the interior of the church had been newly painted and decorated, the pews and floors renovated, new steps built on both sides of the church and brass railings installed. The 12 large stained glass windows depicting 12 mysteries of the Rosary, obtained through Zettler Bros. in New York, were installed by then as well. (I found a letter stating the cost of the window of the Annunciation to be \$1500 and I assume the others cost pretty much the same. I could find no reference whatsoever to the rose window.) An Angelus bell, a funeral toll, and a set of chimes which could be played from a console in the organ loft were installed in the bell tower and dedicated in November of '51, one of the bells being inscribed to Archbishop Rummel for all he had done for the Holy Cross priests and brothers. The church was air conditioned in 1952. Mercy Hospital first opened in 1953 and Sacred Heart was charged with supplying a chaplain for 4 months out of the year (the Jesuits took the remaining 8 months.) Permission was obtained for a Sunday evening mass which was reportedly popular with staff members at Mercy and Montelepre Hospitals as well as workers at the Southern Railroad Shops. Novenas (for which outside priests would be brought to "give") and "triduums" held at the parish had high attendance; many current parishioners remember having to put chairs up and down the aisles to hold all the people. The list of parish organizations had grown to 17 and the school enrollment was at an all time high. (Around 1500) Fr. Peyton reported that each year they had to turn away 300 high school students and 50 grade school children. To accomodate more students 3 lots near the parish were purchased in 1953 as the site of a new gym/classroom building/community center and fund raising efforts initiated to pay for the building. In 1954 the parish celebrated its 75th anniversary.

Early on in this same decade, however, signs of a coming shift in the neighborhood were evident. Fr. Peyton mentioned already in 1952 that a large portion of Tulane Avenue was being converted to commercial property and that many families who had been living within the parish boundaries in two and three room apartments were moving out to the developing suburbs.

In 1954 it was decided to put the camp in Hammond up for sale. It seems the camp never really achieved its purpose and the funds were needed to help build the gym. Unfortunately it would take another 4 years to find a buyer. Another chief fund raising event, the annual bazaar with car raffle (netting \$12,000 to \$15,000 each year) was effectively squashed by legislation supported "by some dope and the Protestants."



Rev. Walter Higgins followed as pastor in 1955. The new gym building was dedicated in September of 1957. Many parish meetings as well as social, athletic, dramatic and academic functions were held there, replacing the old O'Brien Hall on the third floor of the grade school building. Through the late 50's and well into the 60's the gym was *the* place for young people to congregate for Saturday night dances. Bands reportedly vied with one another for the distinction of performing there. 1957 also saw a tragic fire which caused extensive damage to the interior of the school building.

Repairs to the school as well as the debt on the gym put the parish under a strain financially. Fr. Higgins wrote that they were in desperate need of financial help, especially in raising collections. In 1957, of the 2,289 envelopes given out 803 did not give at all during the entire year. Of those who did contribute, the vast majority gave less than a dollar per week. This was a troubled time in the history of our country concerning racial integration and this was not without its effects even on the parish level. Fr. Higgins noted that, "since segregation and integration made headlines 2 years ago the records indicate a drastic drop in contributions and many have written that they will no longer subscribe to the fund drive." (In other words they stopped paying their pledges for the new gym building.) Fortunately the camp was finally sold in the following year giving a much needed boost to parish income. Thought was also given in 1958 to closing the boys high school (besides being expensive to staff and operate, it had the unfortunate reputation of being for "second class" students - those that couldn't get in to Jesuit or other Catholic boys schools.) In the end the boys' program was kept, but the "expensive competitive sports program" was ended. Difficulties continued to plague the boys' high school and it closed in the early 60's.

In 1960 Fr. Higgins contracted 10 Dominican Sisters to take a house to house census of the parish. The continuing trend of the Catholic population diminishing and being replaced by businesses and non-Catholic families is evident. In the early 1940's some 12,000 Catholics had lived in the parish with a little over half of those attending mass regularly - 6,500. By 1960, 8,044 Catholics remained with 4,500 attending mass regularly. Fr. Higgins notes that the parish is "growing old", only 1,055 members were in the 18 - 30 year age bracket. (Would that we had that "problem" today!)

Despite the cash problems which had been present throughout his term, Fr. Higgins contracted in 1960 to have bronze doors built for the front of the church replacing the existing wooden doors. These were installed the following year under his successor at a cost of \$17,610. (And against the better judgment of many parishioners!)

In 1961, Rev. Thomas Peyton returned as pastor until 1967. In '67 Rev. J. Rick became pastor, but was replaced the following year by Rev. Eugene Dore. Fr. Dore remained only two years and a native son of the parish, Rev. Larry LeVasseur, was named as pastor in 1970. Under Fr. Dore and following the reforms of Vatican II the first Parish Council with its various committees was

formed. Fr. Larry expanded the council and introduced the idea of team ministry. The "team", which had formerly consisted of the clergy living and working at Sacred Heart under the leadership of the pastor now became a broader team consisting of laity, women religious (two Sisters of Providence served on the team in the 70's), and deacons working with the clergy.

By this time the population of the parish had drastically changed. Most of the middle and upper income bracket families had moved to suburban areas leaving mostly elderly and/or lower income bracket families in the area. Large numbers of ethnic groups were living within parish boundaries, too. The African-American population had grown considerably and many Latin American immigrants settled in Mid-city. In 1973 Sacred Heart began celebrating a mass in Spanish on the weekends. Conscious efforts were made to incorporate these varying groups into all aspects of parish life.

In June of 1971, due to lack of enrollment and increased cost of operation, Sacred Heart Grade School closed its doors. Four years later the high school was merged with St. Joseph's to form Seton Academy which used the Sacred Heart School buildings and was administered by the Archdiocese.

The parish celebrated 100 years of service to the people of New Orleans in 1979 and soon after that celebration Rev. Harold Essling came as pastor. The present condition and look of the church owe much to his hard work and ingenuity. By June of 1986 new heating and air conditioning had been installed and the building reroofed. The interior decorating firm that had originally painted the church in 1924 was contracted to do the design and painting once again and new pews were installed. The church was rededicated in a celebration with Archbishop Hannon on June 7, 1986. A lot of effort went into fundraising for this project, including the much talked about bi-yearly yard sales. A providential outcome to the redecoration of the church has been its desirability for weddings. Each year many couples from all over the New Orleans area rent the church to be married in. Income from these weddings has been a welcome and, at times, necessary addition to parish funds. During this time the convent came to be used as the parish center and as classrooms for religious education. Later, Fr. Harold worked to remodel the 6 classrooms below the gym for meeting and religious education use.

In 1994 the last class to graduate from the Sacred Heart school buildings walked through its doors. Seton Academy was merged with Holy Redeemer High School to become Redeemer-Seton and the campus moved to Gentilly. The long and dedicated service of the School Sisters of Notre Dame to the education of the children of Sacred Heart also ended with the closing of the school. The buildings now stood empty and rather than have them deteriorate and become a liability Fr. Harold had plans to convert them into apartment buildings for parishioners.

While Fr. Harold's vision of apartment buildings never quite materialized, his successor, Rev. Dick Nowery, who became pastor in 1995, took up the idea and through the Will Woods Community, HUD, and other organizations, the highly successful Malta Square at Sacred Heart was born.

Work began in March of 1997 to convert the old convent and school buildings into 108 apartments for the elderly: 56 independent living units and 52 units for assisted living. By March of the following year the first residents began moving in and on June 6, 1998 the building was officially dedicated by Archbishop Schulte.

Fr. Dick, in a collaborative effort between the two men's societies of Holy Cross, invited two Holy Cross Brothers to form part of the parish team with him, the first time Brothers had directly served here in parish ministry. (The only other mention of Brothers were those of Br. Oswald who taught in the very first school and of two Brothers living here sometime in the '30's or '40's "canvassing for the Bengalese.") The new team began a concerted effort to improve the liturgy and children's religious education program. Several religious education programs were started for adults and parish days of retreat and reflection were added to the yearly calendar. Outreach to the poor and to the people of our neighborhood have also been important goals. Youth groups for Junior High and High School aged youth in the neighborhood were started and the newly repainted gym began to be used again. CYO basketball teams were organized and several new trophies have been added those earned in years past. A youth group aimed more specifically at our Catholic youth is currently getting off the ground. The St. Vincent De Paul Society was reorganized and Sacred Heart once again has a functioning chapter. The Br. Andre food pantry was opened to provide food to needy families within the parish boundaries and a Social Concerns Committee has been organized within the past year.

Sacred Heart of Jesus continues to be composed of a wonderful mix of God's people: white, African-American, Hispanic, and even a few Vietnamese. The Congregation of Holy Cross can be proud of its enduring service toward the building of the Kingdom here in New Orleans. The Mid-city area is seeing hopeful signs of revival today and the people of Sacred Heart, with their little square of buildings dedicated to the glory of God, stand ready, as always, to weather whatever difficulties may come and to be hopeful signs of Christ's presence in the midst of an ever-changing world.

#### SOURCES

Remembrances written by early parishioners for Sacred Heart's 25th and 50th anniversaries.

Histories of Sacred Heart written for the 50th and 75th anniversaries of the parish.

Notes gathered and sent from General and Provincial Archives at various times.

Letters to and from various pastors at Sacred Heart.