



IMMACULATE CONCEPTION SESQUICENTENNIAL ANNIVERSARY

Church began under patronage of St. Francis de Sales

By Pamela Seal
Diocese of Lake Charles

The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in downtown Lake Charles has been a symbol of resilience and faith over the past 150 years, rising above the destruction of hurricanes and ashes early on.

From its humble beginnings as the Parish of St. Francis de Sales in 1869 to a majestic Cathedral now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Immaculate Conception has always been the center of liturgical life. It serves as a reminder of the pioneering spirit and determination of the early missionaries who helped establish the first Catholic church in Lake Charles.

Reflecting on the sesquicentennial anniversary of Immaculate Conception Church Parish, which is Dec. 8, the Rev. Rommel Tolentino, pastor of the Cathedral, expressed gratitude to those early church fathers for their sacrifice and dedication to provide spiritual nourishment to the people in this area.

"The missionaries and priests deserve a great deal of thanks for being faithful to their vocation," Father Tolentino said. "Christ commanded the apostles and their successors — which are the bishops and their collaborators, the priests — to spread the Gospel and to preach to all corners of the world. They took that mandate seriously even through difficult situations, crossing bayous and marshes, using boats and horseback to bring the Gospel and Sacraments here to the people of Lake Charles."

The sesquicentennial year-long celebration initially kicked off on Dec. 8, 2018, with the theme, "Celebrating Our Past With Joy Today and With Hope For the Future."



Coinciding with the anniversary year was the extensive restoration of the Cathedral. The glorious interior was revealed on June 29 during the historic ordination of one priest and four transitional deacons.

"It is such a blessing that our own generation has been able to contribute to our history through the capital campaign for the restoration of the Cathedral," said Tolentino. "Not every generation had that opportunity. The examples of our ancestors are truly inspiring for us to do our own part in contributing to the growth and development of this parish. Hopefully our efforts will inspire the generations that are coming after us."

The Cathedral has played a significant part in the lives of thousands over the years, whether for baptisms, weddings, ordinations, funerals, or daily and weekend Masses. Being the "mother church" of Southwest Louisiana, from which all other Catholic churches were born, adds a great weight to the Cathedral, Tolentino noted.

"When you think about all the prayers that have been said in this church, all the Sacraments that have been celebrated, the holiness of this place

draws people to this parish."

Father Tolentino compared the Cathedral's traditional architecture to the stability of Christ.

"This church was built to last for many years. The sacred art inside these walls connects us to the Scriptures and the truth of the Catholic faith. It is very tangible, something you can see with your own eyes."

Today, the Cathedral remains home to 845 registered families (2,117 individuals) and is considered to be one of the most outstanding examples of Lombardy Romanesque architecture in the United States.

History of the parish

While Immaculate Conception was established as the first Catholic church parish in Lake Charles on Dec. 8, 1869, recorded missionary activity began in the Imperial Calcasieu area as early as the 1850's as priests from Texas and later Opelousas and Abbeville came to minister to the people.

Instrumental in this role were two missionaries from France, the Rev. P. F. Parisot and the Rev. Andre Borias, who traveled the ocean for 52 days to answer the plea of the Most Rev. Jean-Marie Odin, Bishop of the Diocese of Galveston. Their missionary work in eastern Texas included the western part of Louisiana in which Calcasieu Parish and Lake Charles were also served.

The registers of the Galveston Diocese show 129 baptisms were recorded in Calcasieu Parish during those early years. The growth of the Catholic Church soon led to regular visits by clergy from Opelousas.

When priests made visits to Lake Charles, Mass was celebrated in the courthouse. But as the number of Catholics continued to grow, it became obvious that a church building was needed.

In 1857, through the efforts of Father Francois Raymond from Opelousas, a lot on the corner of Ryan and Kirby streets, measuring 200 feet by 200 feet was purchased for \$375, and a chapel was built. The church, constructed for \$900, was dedicated to St. Francis de Sales on Sept. 26, 1858, thus making Lake Charles a mission of St. Landry Parish in Opelousas.

In 1866, after the Civil War, the parishes of the western part of the state were realigned and Lake Charles became a mission of St. Mary Magdalen Parish in Abbeville. The Rev. Theodore Lamy, pastor in Abbeville, visited Lake Charles at least three times in 1867 and 1868.

In 1869, however, missionary status came to an end when The Most Reverend Jean-Marie Odin, who had since become Archbishop of New Orleans, established the Parish of St. Francis de Sales with the appointment of a pastor, the Rev. Francois Magniny, and his assistant, the Rev. Etienne Badoil. The region — recognized today as the Diocese of Lake Charles — encompassed the present civil parishes of Allen, Beauregard, Jefferson Davis, Cameron and Calcasieu.

A few months after the Rev. Michael Kelly arrived in Lake Charles in May of 1879, a hurricane spread destruction throughout the area on Aug. 22, badly damaging both the church and the rectory. While the rectory was refurbished, a new church was built and dedicated under the name Immaculate Conception

by the Most Rev. Francis X. Leray, Auxiliary Bishop of New Orleans, on Oct. 2, 1881. It faced the courthouse on Ryan Street, as did the old church and rectory.

Father Kelly used lumber from the old church to build a boys' school, and added a girls' school and a convent.

Destruction would strike again when The Great Fire of 1910 leveled more than seven city blocks of Lake Charles claiming not only the church, rectory, convent and both the boys' and girls' schools, but most of the parish church records as well. Only a few baptismal records survived. Because of its devastating effects, the Great Fire proved to be a turning



The church of the Immaculate Conception was dedicated on Dec. 18, 1913, replacing the previous one destroyed by the Great Fire of 1910. The church, pictured here in 1930, would later become the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception when the Diocese of Lake Charles was created on April 25, 1980. This is the third church structure in the 150 year-history of Immaculate Conception Parish.



The church of the Immaculate Conception, left, as it was in 1895, was dedicated in 1881 after the original church, named for St. Francis de Sales, was destroyed by a hurricane in 1879. Lumber from the original church was used to construct a boys' school, right. The Convent of the Sisters Marianites of Holy Cross can be seen in the background.

point in the history of Immaculate Conception parish.

Plans for a new church, seating between 800 and 900, were approved in 1912. Building got underway immediately on the corner of Kirby and Bilbo streets, and the church was dedicated on Dec. 18, 1913, by Archbishop James Blenk of New Orleans. On Dec. 8, 1927, Feast of the Immaculate Conception, the church was solemnly consecrated. This is the church that stands today.

It was under the leadership of the Rev. Hubert Cramers, a 27-year-old Dutch priest, assigned to the parish in 1902, that Immaculate Conception would flourish. Under his pastoral care at that time were about 4,000 Catholics and two schools enrolling 110 girls and 78 boys. In 1929 Pope Benedict XV made Father Cramers a Domestic Prelate with the title of "Monsignor." He would spend the remainder of his life as pastor before his health declined. He died on Aug. 10, 1935, and his body is interred in a special vault just outside the sanctuary in the main aisle of the Cathedral.

In September 1935, Monsignor J.A. Vigliero was appointed as successor to Monsignor Cramers. During his five-year term as pastor, stained glass windows were installed in the church as well as a bell in the high tower.

Succeeding Vigliero was another beloved pastor, Monsignor Louis H. Boudreaux, who served from 1940-1974. He was the first native-born pastor to serve the parish as pastor. It was during his administration that Immaculate Conception became the first Catholic church in Louisiana to be air conditioned. Monsignor Boudreaux died on Dec. 3, 1974, just hours after his retirement had taken place.

Many more pastors would follow as well as the establishment of more church parishes through-

out Southwest Louisiana. Eventually, the Diocese of Lake Charles was formed on Jan. 29, 1980, and The Church of the Immaculate Conception became the Cathedral of the Diocese.

Generations of parishioners in addition to priests have served as a symbol of fortitude and willingness to endure hardships for the sake of Christ.

"While the priests played an important part in the growth and development of the parish, the lay people did as well," Tolentino emphasized. "Without them, there would not be a church. They had that pioneering spirit in rebuilding after the Great Fire of 1910, and even the hurricane in 1881. Through the fundraising efforts they had to do for the bell, the altar, to pay for the first church and the new church, ... they sacrificed a lot."

The establishment of the first Catholic church in Lake Charles would also bear fruit to serve the community's medical and educational needs.

It was through the efforts of Monsignor Cramers and Dr. John Greene Martin that the first hospital in Lake Charles, now known as Christus Och-sner St. Patrick Hospital, was dedicated in 1908 as St. Patrick Sanitarium.

Under the leadership of Monsignor Boudreaux, Immaculate Conception Catholic School was the first parochial grade school in the area for both girls and boys, opening its doors on Feb. 19, 1950.

Sesquicentennial celebrations

To culminate a year of sesquicentennial celebrations, the Cathedral has planned several special Masses to mark this milestone in its history:

- 5 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 8: Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Extraordinary Form Mass, followed by a Marian Procession.

- 8:30 a.m., Monday, Dec. 9: Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Immaculate Conception Cathedral School Mass at the Cathedral, followed by Marian Procession to ICCS.

- 6 p.m., Thursday, Dec. 12: Sesquicentennial Anniversary Mass, followed by a reception in Ave Maria Hall.

- 11:15 a.m., Sunday, Dec. 29: Sesquicentennial Anniversary Closing, Solemn Pontifical Mass, followed by a reception in Ave Maria Hall.

The Most Rev. Glen John Provost, Bishop of Lake Charles, will be the main celebrant for both the anniversary Mass and closing Mass. Invited guests for the anniversary Mass include former pastors and parochial vicars of Immaculate Conception, as well as priests and deacons of the Diocese of Lake Charles.

- A proclamation from Mayor Nic Hunter will be read at all the Masses during the week of Dec. 7-8.

Celebrations have also included:

- Presentations on St. Francis de Sales by Cathedral historian Roland Bodin.

- Immaculate Conception Cathedral School Family Mass and reception.

- An anniversary concert entitled "Our Musical Heritage" under direction of Bob Marcantel, director of music.

- Parish Family Picnic

held at Drew Park. Special honor was given to parishioners 90 years and older: Lois Baham, Gerard Bodin, Roland Bodin, Robert Boudreaux, Ruthie Broussard, John Gaspard, David Hebert, Marie Hebert, Betty Henry, Theresa Hood, William Langley, Sybil McCrosky, Hazel McMurray, Teresa Mistretta, Louis Robert, Ruth Ottenweller, Lena Roush, Olivia Scalisi, Sherman Solari, Joe Stoma, Lorena Stutes, Ione Vincent and Romona Wall.

- Sesquicentennial Gala at the Historic Calcasieu Marine National Bank.

Sesquicentennial committee members are Barbara Wyman, Roland Bodin, Sue Burke, Bob Marcantel, Andrea Prejean, Monica Broussard, Richard Moreno, Amanda Martin, Charles Marcantel, Janet Stoma, Barbara Dubose, Kay Morgan, Marty Derouen, Andrew Steiner and Pamela Seal.

Father Tolentino conveyed his appreciation to the group, "We have been meeting monthly for over a year. Without their help, we could not have planned all the events with success."

Editor's note: Sources for history of Immaculate Conception Parish include "The Vine and the Branches: A History of the Catholic Church in Lake Charles" by Lloyd G. Barras; "The Visible Church" by the Diocese of Lake Charles; and the 2015 church directory for the Cathedral.

The next publication of the Catholic Calendar will be Friday, Dec. 20.

Regular office hours for the Diocese, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., are in effect through Friday, December 20. Offices are closed for Christmas from Monday, December 23, through Wednesday, January 1, reopening on Thursday, January 2, at 8:30 a.m.



