

Touring St. Mary's Church

St. Mary's Church was founded in 1879 under the official name, *Our Lady of Perpetual Help*.

The early history of the parish and many details about the building and furnishing of the present church can be found in a book written on the occasion of the parish's 50th anniversary in 1930: Historical Sketch of the Congregation of Our Lady of Perpetual Help at Altus, Arkansas. The author, Father Placidus Oechsle, OSB, was a Benedictine monk of New Subiaco Abbey in Logan County who served as pastor of St. Mary's from 1897 until his death on Feb. 6, 1935. This parish is part of the Diocese of Little Rock, but the bishop assigned it to the care of the Subiaco Benedictines in 1887 because they shared the German language of the early immigrants, and they continue to serve us today. Father Placidus' book is reprinted in 100 Years of St. Mary's Parish, Altus and its Mission, St. Matthew's, Coal Hill edited by Mary Maude Gallagher, available in the rear of the church for a \$10 donation.

Plans for the present church - a Roman Basilica with a large sanctuary and substantial tower - were drafted by Brother Hadrian, OFM, of Quincy, Illinois, and completed by Fr. Placidus assisted by the mason foreman, John Riedt of St. Louis, and the superintendent of carpentry, Rudolph Metzger of Ft. Smith. On Jan. 2, 1901 the quarry was opened on the south edge of the mountain by members of the congregation, who contributed labor totaling about 4200 days to provide quarrying of the sandstone and hauling of sand and materials. Mr. Riedt and his crew of six stone cutters and masons shaped the stones. On Feb. 18th the foundation stone of the NW corner was blessed and laid. The foundation work proceeded 117½ feet east, then 56 feet south, and turned back to the west. It was necessary to go down 10 feet to hit solid rock along the south wall, which somehow ended up being 8 inches longer than the north wall. The cornerstone was laid in the SW corner on May 24, 1901, exactly 20 years after the 1st church had been dedicated.

May 24th is the feast of *Our Lady, Help of Christians* in the Roman calendar, and perhaps that is why Fr. Placidus chose to have that title chiseled into the cornerstone instead of the official name of the church - *Our Lady of Perpetual Help*. The Latin inscription *Eccl. (Ecclesiae) B. (Beata) Virginis Mariae de Auxilio Christianorum* translates *Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Help of Christians*. This title is repeated on the stained-glass window of St. Benedict on the north wall of the sanctuary, and is a subtitle for Fr. Placidus' history book.

The golden letters **DOM et BMV** on the west facade of the church tell us (in Latin) that it is dedicated to Deo Optimo Maximo (*God, Most Good, Most Great*) et (*and*) Beatae Mariae Virginiae (*the Blessed Virgin Mary*). This dedication is illustrated in the sanctuary dome by symbols for the Holy Trinity: the hand at the top of the dome - God the Father; a streak of blue containing the Greek letters ΛΟΓΟΣ (LOGOS) - Jesus as the Word of God; and the dove with spread wings - the Holy Spirit. Just below the dove appears a representation of Mary as the Immaculate Conception.

The tri-partite arches of the portico (porch) honor the Trinity. The holes are still visible showing where the tongs lifted the sandstone blocks from quarry. The stone is soft when

it is wet and can be cut and shaped, but becomes very hard as it dries. The German scripture verse above the front doors is from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 11, verse 28. Translated it says, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest."

contributed by Amy Post Sexton

Notes on the Architecture of a Neo-Romanesque Basilica,

contributed by Michael Scott Irby

Basileios - from Greek: *place of the king*.

Basilicas are always flat-roofed and side aisles are no wider than ½ the length of the nave. This design predates Christianity and was used as a template for public building in Roman times. The local magistrate or governor would conduct business in the apse area, while the nave was often set up as a market place. The side aisles could be used for other activities.

The word 'nave' comes from the Latin word for a ship, *navis*.

The early Church used a ship as a symbol of the community of those baptized into Christ Jesus, headed by a captain at the helm, that is, the bishop of Rome. This illustrates the importance of Christians 'navigating' their life in Christ together in worship - one can swim in the ocean of life on ones own strength, but not indefinitely -- the ship, however, holds us safely as we make the journey through life. Catholics believe we are saved as a body, not just as individuals.

The nave is lined with columns whose capitals are patterned after the Corinthian capitals with acanthus leaves. Crosses were added in the Christian era.

Furnishings of the Sanctuary - tabernacle, lamp, statuary - are reminiscent of the Book of Exodus: angels above the tabernacle, cherubim above ark of the covenant; crucifix -- bronze serpent on pole; and altar built on stone going to the ground below.

Artworks in St. Mary's Church - An Artistic Collaboration

In February of 1914, German artist Fridolin Fuchs came to see the World's Fair in San Francisco, and was earning his traveling expenses by painting a Catholic church in Lindsey, Texas. Fr. Placidus, himself a fine artist, twice visited Texas that year to watch and assist Mr. Fuchs in hopes of learning the trade well enough to paint his own church in Altus. When the World War began in August of 1914, Mr. Fuchs was detained in this country and needed employment. He offered to paint the church in Altus for \$600, board and lodging provided. Later, since the War dragged on, he was paid \$150 more for the Stations of the Cross and paintings in the Sanctuary. When the work began on Jan. 2, 1915 the walls and ceiling were just white. Mr. Fuchs and Fr. Placidus consulted about designs and color schemes and by the time the work was finished in April of 1916 the artist and the pastor had given Altus a treasure of art and beauty which generations may enjoy and visitors from far off may seek and be well paid for their journey up the hill. (page 52) Many details about the planning and execution of the oil paintings by Fr.

Placidus and Fridolin Fuchs can be found in the early history book (pages 49-53), noting even the first repairs made after storm damage in 1919 (p. 61).

Some, if not all, of the murals were patterned after existing art works in various Catholic churches of Europe, according to the history. (See p. 51) Lithographs of the Stations of the Cross were obtained from St. Mary's Church in Stuttgart, Germany, where Beuron Benedictine artists had originally painted life-sized figures. Sadly, it's believed that the church and the originals were destroyed in World War II.

The Madonna pictured as *Immaculate Conception* in the sanctuary dome was drawn by the pastor in the pattern of German artist Fuhrich. The scroll work surrounding it is an imitation of the concha of Sancta Clementi in Rome. Note the presence of the Trinity; the hand of God the Father, Jesus as the Word of God (ΛΟΓΟΣ/ LOGOS) and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove overshadowing Mary. The pictures on either side of the altar (Melchisedek offering bread and wine presaging the Eucharist, and Abraham ready to sacrifice his son, Isaac as God sacrificed Jesus at the crucifixion) were certainly drawn by Fr. Placidus, but his history implies that these were also patterned after an unnamed German artist.

The pictures in the Arch of Triumph were designed after Fuerstein and Pater Rudolph Blaetler, OSB. These include the angel holding the keystone *PAX* (Peace), the Annunciation and Coronation pictures, and the *Ave Maria* frieze done in antique church lettering.

It is not clear from the history whether the murals above the side altars were patterned after Fuehstein and Blaetler or another German artist. But we do know that pictures of parishioners and historical figures of the time were incorporated into both paintings.

The paintings under the choir loft on either side of the main doors (oils painted directly on the plaster) were very well executed after originals from Pater Schuhmacher , but some portraits of people from the Congregation were substituted, as for instance, our teacher and organist, Mr. Joseph M. Duerr, Mr Sigismund Wiederkehr, Mary Oechsle, the niece of the pastor, and the painter, Mr. F. Fuchs. (p. 52)

The original drawings and designs for the church's art work were kept at the rectory and Fr. Placidus delighted in explaining to visitors the many symbols and finer details of his drawings.

Translations of the Latin Texts incorporated within the Stations of the Cross

In the "Agony in the Garden" scene, the artist has given us (in Latin) the Seven Last Words of Christ. They are painted in the blue medallion behind the cross:

1. PATER DIMIITE ILUS NON ENIM SIUNT QUID FACIUNT : "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34)
2. AMEN DICIO TIBI HODIE MECUM ERIS IN PARADISUM : "Amen, I say to you, this day you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23: 43)

3. MULIER! ECCE FILIUS TUUS : "Woman! Behold your son."

ECCE MATER TUA! : "Behold your mother!" (John 19: 26-27)

4. ELOI! ELOI! LAMMA SABACTANI (Aramaic language) :

" My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15: 34)

5. SICIO! : "I thirst!" (John 19: 28)

6. CONSUMATUM EST! : "It is finished!" (John 19: 30)

7. PATER IN MANUS TUAS COMENDO SPIRITUM MEUM : "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." (Luke 23: 46)

There are several signs being carried by figures in our Stations of the Cross. One shows the initials

S P Q R for *Senatus populus que Romanus* : "The Senate and People of Rome." This tells us which civil authority permitted the crucifixion. Another sign says *Iesvs Nazarens Rex Iudaeorum* : "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. (In Latin, 'œu' is spelled v : thus, our 'œw' is called 'double u') Then, there is the banner "Nos legem habemus" quoting John 19:7, "We have a law" (which continues) "and according to that law he ought to die because he made himself the Son of God."

Sign above 1st Station "Oblatus Est Quia Ipse Voluit" He gave Himself up of his own free will. This is an allusion to a prophecy in Isaiah 53:7 "Though he was harshly treated, he submitted and opened not his mouth." In other words, Jesus' choice to undergo the Way of the Cross was purely voluntary.

Sign atop 14th Station "Sepulcrum Eius Erit Gloriosum" His resting place shall be glorious.

Isaiah 11:10 is translated in the Latin Vulgate as "His *dwelling* shall be glorious" but St. Thomas Aquinas said that this refers to His *rest* or *resting place* (tomb) because of Our Saviour having been buried in a *new* tomb.

*Orthodox Christians view the new tomb (a cave) through which Jesus passed into eternal life as an image of the womb of the Mother of God. This is why the Orthodox represent the Nativity in a cave (versus a stable.) Jesus entered this world by passage through a cave, and He left in the same manner (through the tomb.)

*Our thanks to Michael Scott Irby for translations & commentary. APS

Other Paintings

Above St. Mary's side altar on the left is a votive picture of the Blessed Virgin presenting her Son to mankind. Note the model of the church on lower right and the American flag on the left. Those on the right depict Father Placidus kneeling, Abbot Ignatius Conrad of New Subiaco Abbey, Bishop John B. Morris of Little Rock, Pope Benedict XV and Emperor Francis Joseph representing Christian

rulers. In the front kneels a 'Venerable Sister' and on the left are penitent women, nursing mothers, a prisoner, an old man, as well as a sailor and soldier holding the flag. All appear to understand the lesson and look up confidently and assured of help and grace.

Above St. Joseph's side altar on the right is a votive picture of the young Jesus, held by St. Joseph, blessing the world's workers. Standing at attention on one side to receive his blessings are a farmer, a blacksmith, poet, pilgrim and a mother and child. On the other side a painter, architect, sculptor, goldsmith and coal miner. Note the drawing of the Virgin held by the painter and the floor plan of the church held by the architect. Between the two groups are two boys representing agriculture and horticulture.

A symbolic painting that is often overlooked is located above the main west entry doors and transom. It shows two deer drinking from an overflowing fountain in clear reference to Psalm 42: "As a deer longs for streams of water, my soul longs for you, O God." The seven streams of the fountain represent the seven sacraments.

Medallions

On the side walls of the central aisle, just above the pillars are eight medallions representing saints to whom the parishoners had special devotion. From front to back on the south side are St. Gregory the Great, St. Boniface, St. Henry, and St. Placidus. On the north side, again from front to back are St. Agatha, St. Gertrude the Great, St. Elizabeth and St. Rosa of Lima.

High Altar

The main wooden altar at the rear of the sacristy was where mass was celebrated under the Latin rite for decades. Reports from older parish members indicate it was donated to St. Mary's by St. Edward's parish in Little Rock at the time our church was being built. That parish reportedly had a new one built around that same time. Fr Placidus never mentioned it in his history. It is not clear if the large crucifix and angel statues resting atop the altar came with it. Parish elders do recall that the burn marks on the altar did come with it.

The altar originally had a wooden tabernacle, where the Blessed Sacrament is stored. The current metal tabernacle was reportedly donated to St. Mary's in the late 1950's or early 1960's, by Fr. Bede Mitchel and the parishoners of St. Anthony's in Ratcliff when that church was closed. Note also the statues of the four Evangelists from left to right, Mathew, Mark, Luke and John.

Central Altar

For many years the central altar was a simple wooden box very utilitarian in nature. However, in the 1990's Fr Hilary Filiatreau had the brilliant idea to use the

gates from the old communion rail as stanchions for the altar, with blocks of marble raising the top to a comfortable height. Now it matches very well.

The Pulpit

The pulpit to the left of the main altar as one enters was built by local cabinet maker Andrew Buergler in 1912. Made of solid walnut it has served the parish well for over 100 years. However, it is not nearly as impressive as it once was, when it was attached to the first support column on the Blessed Virgin side of the church, with fine, curved stairs leading up to its position about six feet in the air. A close look at the column shows the stubs of the anchors still there. A wooden column also offered considerable support.

Side Altars

Artist, Mr. Urban Sprug, began work in mid-November 1918, using a design which St. Louis architect Mr. F. Ludewig, a friend of Fr. Placidus, had furnished free-of-charge. "Very simple, but substantial, the Altars certainly fit the place and style of the Church."

Ten different kinds of wood were used:

- 1) yellow pine - framework
- 2) red oak - predella and carved moldings
- 3) quarter-sawed white oak - main body
- 4) & 5) cherry & black walnut - fillings
- 6) butternut - carved capitals
- 7) red cedar - columns
- 8) mahogany - square pilasters
- 9) white maple - other ornaments
- 10) cottonwood - scroll work

Mr. Sprug was paid \$350 and board. With the cost of wood and varnish, the total expense was about \$500, of which Mrs. Anna Heitmann-Meiger supplied \$400. The Altars were blessed on Sunday, May 16, 1920 (p. 62).

Communion Rail

Non-catholics and younger people may not know that Holy Communion was once administered at the communion rail, as parishoners knelt on one side and

the priest moved along distributing the Host from the altar side. It obviously is no longer used and few churches have retained theirs. But the parishioners of St. Mary's couldn't bear to have such fine woodwork destroyed.

It was built by Mr Andrew Bueglar, who also built the pulpit, mostly by hand and using a 'horse-powered' lathe to turn the spindles. Made of cherry and walnut, it was 54 feet long with two single gates on the sides and the double gate in the middle. Those now support the main altar. Mr. Bueglar is blessed in memory, due in part to the fact that he charged nothing for his labor.

The Windows

The church has numerous stained glass windows commemorating various saints and angels. The windows were designed and partly furnished by Mr. Emil Frei of St. Louis, MO and the Art Glass Company of Cincinnati, OH.

The round window above the main altar shows the Cross of Saint Andrew, Patron Saint of the Diocese of Little Rock. The large windows on either side of the sacristy depict Saint Benedict and Saint Meinrad. Those along the north side of the church represent, from back to front, Saint Mathew, Saint Anna and Blessed Virgin Mary as a child, John the Baptist, Saint Agnes and Michael the Archangel. Those in the south wall, again from back to front, depict Saint Andrew, Saint Joachim (father of BVM), Saint Joseph, Saint Barbara, and Raphael the Archangel. Note the symmetry. Those behind the stairs to the choir and over the confessional show the Immaculate Heart of Mary and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, respectively. Those in the upper story hold ornamental designs only. That's also true of the two windows framing the central window behind the organ. However, the central opening holds the bust picture of Saint Cecelia, patron Saint of music.

Small triple windows occupy the triforium spaces above the doors to the sacristy and bell tower. They are simply adorned with the seal of St. Benedict.

The Organ

The organ was built in 1897 by J G Pfeffer and originally installed in St. Francis de Sales oratory in St. Louis. St. Mary's bought it used for \$500 in 1925. It was fully restored to its former glory by Redman Pipe Organs of Dallas Texas in 1986. The restoration cost over \$100,000. The 'prow' on the choir loft had to be added to accommodate its size.

The organ is a reverse tracker instrument built so that the organist can face the front of the church. It has two manuals (keyboards) and 14 stops, along with pedals for the skilled organist. It has 15 ranks of pipes, as well as two mixtures added in the restoration. And while it now runs off of self-contained blowers, it can still be pumped by hand.

Unfortunately, its extreme value forces us to keep the choir loft locked during the week. Those interested in seeing the organ up close or playing it should contact choir director Amy Sexton (479) 667-7218. If she is available, she will be happy to accommodate your request.

The Bells

St. Mary's has four large bells hanging in its tower. The story of their acquisition, from enthusiastic donations by parishioners, to their transport, dedication and installation is a fascinating one, except it's too long to include here. They were cast by Stuckstede Brothers of St. Louis, MO and dedicated on Thanksgiving Day 1902. They were mounted in the tower soon thereafter. They are:

Name	Weight	Note
1) Holy Angels	750 pounds	A
2) Holy Apostles	1,180 pounds	G
3) Mary Magdalene	1,750 pounds	F
4) Regina Coeli	2,713 pounds	D

The stairs up the bell tower are simply too dirty and not particularly safe, so we are unable to grant requests to see them. To hear their wonderful sound should suffice us all.

We members of St. Mary's feel justifiable pride in our church, but we are also humbled by the vision, effort and sacrifices made by our ancestors in accomplishing the construction of such a wonderful structure. Those who visit are also struck by the serenity and the palpable presence of the Lord within it. So, if you visit, please be respectful of this house of God. Feel free to look around and to pray for your own intentions, as well as for those living and dead of St. Mary's parish.