



# St. John the Baptist, Edgard, among oldest parishes

By Christine Bordelon  
Clarion Herald

Fire, floods, yellow fever and a triple murder are all part of the history of St. John the Baptist Church in Edgard, just west of New Orleans on the Mississippi River's west bank.

A chapel named St. John the Baptist first appeared as early as 1723-24 in a farming area on the second Cote des Allemands (German Coast, named for those of German descent who settled here on high ground), according to a 1970s history written by parishioner Warren F. Caire, Ed.D., and also in "The Catholic Church in Louisiana," written by Roger Baudier.

St. John the Baptist (1772) is the third-oldest Catholic church parish in the archdiocese; St. Louis Cathedral (1718) is the first, and St. Charles Borromeo, Destrehan (1723), is the second.

St. John's first permanent church, made of cypress,

opened in 1772 on four arpents (about four acres) of property expropriated from bachelor Jacques DuBroc by the Spanish authorities when Louisiana was a Spanish colony. Spanish Capuchin Father Bernardo de Limpach was its first pastor. The first church records indicate a marriage between Antoine Manz and Sibylla Bischof in 1772.

Capuchin Father Cirilo de Barcelona was appointed auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Santiago (Cuba) and became the first resident Louisiana bishop. Caire wrote he left Havana and visited here in December 1785.

### Bishop sees restored church

The Diocese of Louisiana and the Floridas was established in 1793. In 1795, extensive repairs costing \$900 were made to St. John the Baptist Church, and the following year, Bishop Luis Peñalver y Cárdenas made a pastoral visit.

In 1819, a flood swept

the area near Taft and destroyed the early church. A new church constructed of homemade brick was built on the same spot for \$146,000, with the cornerstone blessed by Father Louis Sibourd, vicar general, in 1820. The church was consecrated in March 1822 by Bishop Louis DuBourg, assisted by St. John the Baptist pastor, Oratorian Father Vito Modestus Mina, a native of Turin, Italy, who spoke fluent French.

### Yellow fever peril

A yellow fever epidemic in 1853 decimated the area, killing one in 13 people, Caire said, including St. John's associate pastor, Father Edward Legendre. That left Father Mina to help surviving parishioners. Father Mina was pastor for 47 years, beginning in 1817, and was buried near the church altar in 1864.

Another interesting piece of parish history – similar to the dispute between the wardens of St. Louis Cath-



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**This Roman Renaissance-style church was consecrated in 1920, replacing a church that burned in a 1918 fire. It seats 500 and is 85 feet tall on its two towers.**

edral with Bishop Antoine Blanc in 1844 – was the clash of church lay trustees (marguilliers) with its pastor, Father Alexander Juille. The trustees took control of the church and had Father Juille arrested sometime between 1899-1904. The Archdiocese of New Orleans closed the church for a time, with no services, sacraments or even funerals allowed. St. John the Baptist reopened in 1904, according to Caire's second written history. Differing accounts further a legend that Father Juille put a 100-year curse on the church, while others show he forgave the trustees.

### New church built

On March 19, 1918, fire destroyed the church, and a new Roman Renaissance-style, 500-seat church was built, incorporating the surviving church bells. Rich

farmers and nearby plantation owners helped build it "debt-free," Caire said.

Archbishop John Shaw consecrated the church on Oct. 28, 1920. It is 143 feet long, 60 feet wide, 55 feet tall and has twin towers, 85 feet high.

Caire pointed out special church features including an altar and Communion rails made of Italian Carrara marble. German-made stained glass represent the mysteries of the rosary, St. Francis of Assisi, active parish groups such as St. Vincent de Paul and St. Margaret Mary (Sacred Heart devotion) and the parish's French influence with St. Joan of Arc.

### Segregation, desegregation

Father Theophile Stenmans, pastor from 1917-33, established the Knights of Peter Claver and its women's auxiliary for African

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