



# St. Louis Cathedral trustees tried to rule church

By Dr. Charles Nolan  
Contributing writer

The trustee controversy that broke out at St. Louis Cathedral in 1842 was not uncommon in the U.S. Such conflicts between a bishop and parish lay trustees concerning church ownership and administration took place as early as the 1790s.

The trustee system, often amiable, sometimes hostile, was familiar in the rapidly expanding Catholic parishes and reflected, in part, the growing influence of the young country's democratic way of life.

Where conflict existed, the central point often was the trustees' authority to hire and fire a pastor. The 1829 Provincial Council of Baltimore, which Father Antoine Blanc attended, decreed that lay trustees did not have the right to nominate, accept or reject a pastor.

The New Orleans controversy, however, had a unique Louisiana flavor, since the St. Louis trustees – marguilliers, as they were called – claimed to have inherited the Spanish king's right to appoint a rector.

## Tensions were common

Tension between the New Orleans bishops or their appointees and the cathedral wardens, usually dealing with finances, arose periodically after the Louisiana Purchase. Catholic historian Roger Baudier wrote the trustees were "a source of untold trouble and scandal in the cathedral for some 40 years."

Soon after French-born Antoine Blanc became the bishop of New Orleans in 1835, he asked Archbishop Samuel Eccleston of Baltimore to solicit U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger Taney's opinion on the bishop's rights regarding the cathedral's temporal administration. Taney responded that this right was governed by state law.

In 1837, the trustees, on their own, mortgaged the cathedral for \$200,000. Bishop



File photo | CLARION HERALD

**Then-Bishop Antoine Blanc eventually won – through civil court – the church's internal battle with the trustees of St. Louis Cathedral.**

Blanc, in turn, wrote to Rome, requesting permission to transfer the cathedral to another New Orleans church. Rome agreed, if this was financially feasible, which it was not. At the same time, the trustees were withholding the usual annual financial subsidy to the bishop.

The public confrontation began with the death of Father Louis Moni on Aug. 3, 1842. Moni had been the cathedral rector since 1829 and was favored by the trustees. On Aug. 8, Bishop Blanc appointed Father Étienne Rousselon, his vicar general, as the cathedral rector.

## Trustees vote to overrule

On Aug. 20, the trustees voted to declare the appointment null and void. On the 23rd, Bishop Blanc and the clergy issued a letter condemning the trustees' action as schismatic. The situation was further complicated because Father Mathieu-Bernard Anduze was quietly politicking with the trustees to name him rector.

On Aug. 30, the trustees passed a set of resolutions

that were published in local newspapers. They argued that, with the Louisiana Purchase, the Spanish king's right of presentation (including the appointment to clerical benefices such as the cathedral) passed to the sovereign people of the U.S. and thus to them as the cathedral's elected representatives.

In church law, no such right existed in the U.S. The trustees then appealed, unsuccessfully, to the pope via the U.S. Secretary of State. On Sept. 4, four trustees (one third of the total) were elected; all were hostile to the bishop. Amid the escalating controversy, the trustees approved a report stating that Bishop Blanc was not the legitimate bishop.

Father Rousselon resigned on Sept. 15, and the following day, Father Constantine Maenhaut was appointed. Although the trustees initially accepted him, the situation soon deteriorated as the trustees verbally abused Father Maenhaut and imposed petty regulations concerning his use of the rectory and grounds.

The trustees not only refused to respond to Bishop Blanc's and Father Maenhaut's conditions for the continued presence of a priest at the cathedral but also successfully approached the First Municipality Council to enact, on Oct. 31, the "Dead Corpse Ordinance," requiring all Catholics to be buried in the mortuary chapel on Rampart Street, rather than the cathedral or other city parishes; the ordinance applied only to Catholics.

On Nov. 18, the remaining clergy withdrew from the cathedral. One priest remained at the mortuary chapel to perform funerals. On Dec. 2, the ordinance was declared null; on Dec. 10, it was declared unconstitutional.

The withdrawal of the clergy continued as a war of words raged in the local as well as the newly established diocesan paper, *Le Propagateur Catholique*, edited by Father Napoléon Joseph Perché. Father Perché's masterful

See **TRUSTEES** page 61 ▶

## Engaging the Past | Animating the Future The Jesuits in New Orleans

- 1726** The first Jesuit foundation in New Orleans was established in 1726. Jesuit missionaries worked among the native people, and several died as martyrs. To support the missionaries' work, they operated a plantation in what is now New Orleans' Central Business District.
- 1763** When the Jesuit order was banned from the French colonies in 1763, the Jesuits were expelled from Louisiana and their property was confiscated and sold at auction.
- 1814** The Society of Jesus was restored in 1814. In 1831, four Jesuits were passing through New Orleans when Bishop Leo de Neckere detained one of them, Fr. Pierre Ladavière, to serve in New Orleans. Seven more Jesuits came to southern Louisiana in 1837 and founded St. Charles College in Grand Coteau in 1838.
- 1849** In 1849, the College of the Immaculate Conception opened its doors at the corner of Baronne and Common streets. In 1911, the college and high school departments separated. In 1926, Jesuit High School moved to its current location on Carrollton Avenue.
- 1851** The Church of the Immaculate Conception was established in 1851, and the first Mass was offered on August 15, 1857. That building was demolished in 1928, and replaced with the current church. The first Mass in the new Immaculate Conception Church was celebrated on March 2, 1930.
- 1890** In May 1890, the parish of Most Holy Name of Jesus was established, with its first Mass celebrated in May 1892.
- 1904** In 1904, Loyola College opened its doors on St. Charles Avenue, with Fr. Albert Biever, SJ, as president. In 1912, it received its charter to operate as Loyola University.
- 1907** The New Orleans Mission became the New Orleans Province in 1907. The Jesuits in New Orleans are now part of the USA Central and Southern Province, created in 2014.
- 1909** WWL Radio went on the air.
- 1960** The New Orleans Province was comprised of more than 600 Jesuits.

**Happy 300th Birthday, New Orleans!**

We're pleased to be part of your history  
and ready to be part of your future.



JESUITS  
USA Central and  
Southern Province

[JesuitsCentralSouthern.org](http://JesuitsCentralSouthern.org)