

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

430

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

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Nat. Register of Historic Places
National Park Service

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church
Other names/site number: N/A
Name of related multiple property listing:
N/A
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing)

2. Location

Street & number: 1460 Pearson Avenue SW
City or town: Birmingham State: AL County: Jefferson
Not For Publication: Vicinity:

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant at the following level(s) of significance:

 national statewide X local
Applicable National Register Criteria: A B X C D

<u>Lee Anne Wofford</u>		<u>5/28/15</u>
Signature of certifying official/Title:		Date
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer		
State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government		

In my opinion, the property <u> </u> meets <u> </u> does not meet the National Register criteria.	
Signature of commenting official:	Date
Title :	State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

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4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain: _____)


Signature of the Keeper

7/21/15
Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- Private:
- Public – Local
- Public – State
- Public – Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box.)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

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Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u> </u>	buildings
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	sites
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	structures
<u> </u>	<u> </u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Religion: religious facility

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Religion: religious facility

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Romanesque Revival

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: Brick, limestone, concrete

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph

Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church is located in the West End neighborhood of Birmingham. Set on a small rise and over two stories tall with an even taller campanile, the church towers over the nearby residences and is a prominent landmark in the neighborhood. The building was constructed in a cruciform shape, a common configuration for Catholic churches, from 1928-1930. It is of steel frame construction and clad in tan Roman brick laid in a Flemish bond with limestone design elements. Executed in the Romanesque Revival style, the church features round-arched openings, an arcaded corbel table, belt courses, a square campanile and large rose windows. Brick basket weave and brick diapering along with the stylized and geometric medieval carvings found in the compound arches, the tympanums and the surrounds of the rose windows further enrich the exterior. The interior also reflects the cruciform shape with a vestibule (or narthex) opening into the nave which is visually divided from the apse by the transept. The sanctuary extends out from the apse into the crossing (the intersection of the nave and the transept). Due to financial constraints, the original windows were of plain glass and the interior was plain, lacking the "visual aids" traditionally found in other Catholic churches. The

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interior with its highly decorated surfaces and stained glass windows would not be completed until the 1950s.¹

The church sits on an irregularly shaped lot of approximately 5.61 acres that is located between Pearson Avenue SW and Cotton Avenue SW. Also located on this acreage are the rectory, a gazebo, the parking lot, a small bungalow owned by the parish and an open field. These resources do not contribute to the architectural significance of the church. The nearby Blessed Sacrament Academy, once owned by the parish, was sold in 1980 to a private property owner. The academy was individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places that same year. Therefore, the boundary in this nomination includes only the church and its immediate area. This decision is further explained and defended in the Boundary Justification section of this nomination.

Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church retains integrity in terms of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association.

Narrative Description

The pure cruciform shape of Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church, though clearly visible from the air, is offset somewhat by original, one story wings on the side and rear elevations, a campanile and a two story wing on the southwest and northeast (side) elevations respectively and apses which extend off the arms and top of the cruciform shape. The church rests on a full undercroft which is accessible from both the exterior and the interior. The top of its limestone foundation is delineated by a molded water table and a brick soldier course. Below the eaves of the cruciform and many of its appendages, the bricks are set at a diagonal on either their long or short ends to create decorative brick corbelling. All of the windows, except for the three rose windows, have round arches and limestone sills. All the windows contain stain glass which was installed in the 1950s [photos 1-2, 4-7].

The façade of Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church comprises the bottom of the stem of the cruciform. It is accessed by a broad series of steps—intercepted by a terrace—that lead from the public sidewalk to a second terrace. Another series of steps, much less wide, leads from this terrace to the main entrance. The main entrance comprises double-leaf, paneled, wooden doors flanked by molded, columnar abutments supporting a compound arch. The “capitals” of the abutments, the impost blocks, the arch and the tympanum are all intricately carved with various geometric designs. The tympanum also features two peacocks facing each other [photo 3]. A modillion belt course delineates the façade’s first and second stories and then wraps around the northeast (side) elevation of the church. Centered above this belt course is a large rose window that is flanked by narrow, paired windows. Above the rose window is a round arched niche. The gabled parapet is accentuated by an arcaded corbel table and, at its peak, a Greek cross [photo 2].

¹ Blessed Sacrament: A Descriptive Guide to the Church (No publisher cited, 2000), no pagination.

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The southwest (side) elevation is the more architecturally complex of the two side elevations. It is marked by a campanile which is set back a bit from the façade. Nestled in the corner created by the campanile and the southwest elevation is an original shallow, three-sided, one story wing that is almost flush with the façade. It displays narrow windows and round limestone pieces, each of which is carved with a Greek cross and encircled by brick voussoirs. On the interior, the space created by this wing is an extension of the vestibule [photo 1].

The three-part campanile consists of a one story tall base and a square shaft that towers over the cruciform block of the church and is crowned by an eight-sided belvedere [photos 1, 6]. The southwest side of the campanile's base features double-leaf, paneled, wooden doors with a carved limestone surround. A metal lantern is attached to the top of this surround. The surround's pilasters have Latin crosses carved into them. Above each pilaster is an impost block which features a carved dove, stylized carvings of vines with flowers and inverted fleur de lis. The compound arch is comprised of an outer arch of brick voussoirs interspersed with carved limestone panels featuring geometric designs. The two inner limestone arches display stylized carvings of leaves and vines. The brick tympanum is covered by a metal grate on which can be found a chi-rho [photo 8]. The northwest side of the base has a single, narrow window. A brick belt course and metal flashing visually separates the campanile's base from its shaft.

The corners of the campanile's shaft are delineated by plain brick piers. On at least three sides of the shaft (the fourth side abuts the church) the walls are slightly recessed between the piers and feature darker bricks laid in a diamond pattern. A single dark brick marks the center of each diamond. On each side at the top of the shaft is a tripartite arch supported by two stone columns, each with a carved capital. The columns rest on limestone piers which form part of a stone railing that is pierced by round arched openings. Above these tripartite arches, the shaft is marked by decorative brickwork and an arcaded corbel table. Crowning the campanile is an eight-sided, brick belvedere. The four main sides each have a louvred attic vent and an arcaded corbel table. The narrower sides are the beveled corners of the belvedere. Each has a brick niche. The belvedere has a full entablature, a red tile roof and, at its peak, a Latin cross.

Also on the southwest (side) elevation, in the space between the campanile and the arm of the cruciform, is a 4-bay wide, one story, L-shaped section with a shed roof. The same section is also on the northeast (side) elevation. These original, shallow wings accommodate side aisles in the nave and also provide additional access into the church. A handicap access ramp now leads up to the entry. The entry is comprised of double-leaf, paneled, wooden doors set in a deep, round arched brick reveal. The brick arch has limestone impost blocks featuring a carved dove, stylized carvings of vines with flowers and inverted fleur de lis. The arch of brick voussoirs is accented by carved limestone panels featuring geometric designs. The limestone tympanum features two peacocks facing each other and is similar in design to the tympanum above the façade entrance. The other bays of this wing are each comprised of a round arched stain glass window with a basket weave brick panel below it and an arcaded corbel table and decorative brick corbel above it. The windows are visually divided by brick piers. Above this wing, on the main wall of the elevation are four pairs of clerestory windows and decorative brick corbelling. The arm of the cruciform on this elevation has an apse with a Latin Cross delineated in a darker

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brick than the main brick and round arched, stained glass windows. Above the apse is a rose window and an arcaded corbel table outlining the gabled parapet [photo 6].

The northeast (side) elevation is very similar in design to the southwest elevation, except that there is no small wing off the vestibule and in place of the campanile is a tall, one bay wide, two story, brick wing with the same doorway treatment as the campanile. It features single, paired and tripartite windows and, below its hip roof, an arcaded corbel table. The rear door on this elevation has the same treatment as the rear door on the other side elevation, but it is accessed by stone steps rather than a handicap access ramp [photo 4].

The rear elevation features a tall, two story apse with a Latin Cross in dark brick and round arched, stained glass windows. This apse extends out from the top of the cruciform shape which is crowned by a plain gabled parapet. Shorter apses flank this portion of the cruciform. The whole rear elevation of the church is "encased" in an original, one story, rectangular wing which also displays round arched, stained glass windows and a single-leaf door with a brick soldier arch [photos 5-6].

The traditional cruciform plan of Blessed Sacrament Church includes a narthex, commonly known as the vestibule in a Catholic Church, which leads into the nave and then a transept and the sanctuary. The intersection of the nave and the transept is known as the crossing.

The church is beautifully decorated with the predominant color being blue. Stained glass, statuary, colorfully painted walls and marble, wooden and gilded fixtures express the theology of the Catholic Church through their symbolism and design. Although the church building was constructed from 1928 to 1930, the decoration of the church's interior did not occur until the 1950s. The interior remains largely intact, despite some changes mandated by the Second Vatican Council (informally known as Vatican II) and a 1989-1990 "restoration and renewal."²

The vestibule is rather plain in detail compared to the rest of the church. It does have a colorful tile floor of geometric design that continues into the main section of the church, but otherwise features neutrally painted plaster walls and a barrel vault ceiling. Deep barrel arches mark the long walls of the vestibule. The tympanums in these arches are unadorned except for the one above the main entrance into the building and another one above the main entrance into the nave. Both are painted with the same Christian symbol. Marble Holy Water fonts flank the double-leaf entrance into the nave. Similar single fonts are located at each rear side entrance into the church. The small wing off the southwest end of the vestibule originally contained the Baptismal font. Under the precepts of Vatican II, the baptismal font was moved to the front of the church. This small area then was converted into a gift shop. The northeast end of the vestibule contains a small sitting area. Single and paired stained glass windows provide muted natural light into the vestibule [photo 9].

In the rear of the nave, the round-arched tympanum above the double-leaf doors features a chi-rho set in a round arched niche with a blue background. White stylized leaves and vines flow

² Ibid., no pagination.

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from the chi-rho over the larger orange and red background of the tympanum. To either side of this doorway wooden confessionals with tripartite arches are set in shallow round-arched openings. Above is the choir loft with a wooden railing [photo 14].

The barrel-vaulted nave has a central aisle flanked by rows of pews on each side and side aisles. Arcades with end piers and steel and concrete columns which are painted red and have carved capitals stand between the pews and the side aisles. Each side aisle ends at the back of the nave in a two-tier, alcove with round-arched openings [photos 10, 14]. Each alcove has one opening leading to a staircase which accesses the undercroft and an exterior doorway and a paired opening with a central column accessing the nave. The second tier features a tripartite arch with a metal railing behind it. The northeast alcove shelters a painted metal statue of St. Theresa, the Little Flower of Jesus while the southwest's contains a statue of St. Anthony of Padua. This latter statue is a solid piece of carved wood and probably of Italian origin.³ A staircase behind the statue of St. Theresa provides access to a small storage area and the ceiling. The staircase behind St. Anthony leads to the choir loft and the bell tower.

The exterior walls of the nave display stained glass windows interspersed with the Stations of the Cross. Each wall also has a shallow, round arched niche containing a painting. One is of "Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament" and the other of "St. Pius X."

The arches of the arcade are trimmed in decorative plaster work and their soffits are painted brightly in gold and red. The spandrels contain circular pieces marked with either a crowned hand representing God the Father, a Lamb on a book symbolizing Jesus the Son or a dove and the flame signifying the Holy Spirit. On each side above the spandrels are seven square shields (for a total of fourteen), each with a symbol representing either one of the twelve Apostles or St. Paul or St. John the Baptist. These are placed between a frieze and an entablature.

The main section of the church's barrel-vaulted ceiling rests on these arcades and spandrels. It is clad in asphalt ceiling tiles which are hidden behind a painted blue background and stylized motifs painted in gold, red, black and white. White arched ribs span the ceiling and divide the clerestory windows into pairs; each pair set in a deep barrel arch. The color scheme of the nave, of course, continues throughout the rest of the church.

The transept contains Our Lady's chapel in its southwest or left arm and St. Joseph's chapel in its northeast (right) arm. Its intersection with the nave is the crossing.

In the booklet, "Blessed Sacrament: A Descriptive Guide to the Church," Our Lady's chapel is described as having an "antique altar [upon which is a statue of Mary] and a mural of the Annunciation: Gabriel appears to Mary. At the end of the transept is a large crucifix, and above it is a mural of the Father and Holy Spirit, making this a Holy Trinity shrine. Flanking the crucifix are a window depicting lilies and one with a cross and lilies, symbolic of purity and fragrance. . . . The picture of Our Lady of Perpetual Help . . . is a copy of the miraculous image now enshrined above the high altar in the Redemptorist Church of San Alfonso in Rome." Both

³ Ibid., no pagination.

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the altar to Mary and the Holy Trinity shrine are located in apses. The soffits of the apses are painted in gold and red. Located above the Holy Trinity apse is a rose window. Also in this arm of the transept are pews and a section of the remaining altar rail [photo 12].⁴

The church guide describes St. Joseph's chapel as having a "mural depicting the flight into Egypt [above an altar with a statue of St. Joseph on it]. At the end of the transept is the Sacred Heart shrine crowned by a mural of Jesus revealing His heart to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690) in Paray-le-Monial, France, in 1673. On either side of the statue is a window, one with a cross of light and Alpha and Omega (the First and the Last), the other with a pierced heart representing the Heart of Christ." Both St. Joseph's altar and the Sacred Heart shrine are located in apses with soffits painted in red and gold. Located above the Sacred Heart apse is a rose window. Also in this arm of the transept are pews and a section of the remaining altar rail [photo 13].⁵

The sanctuary apse contains an altar (now known as the altar of repose) that was designed by Sollazini and installed in the mid-1950s. Originally the main altar, it was used for the Sacrifice of the Mass. Its table and reredos are carved out of Botticini marble while its front is of Rossa di Francia marble. A disc in the center of the altar's front contains a sunburst with the letters IHS—the first three letters in the Greek version of Jesus' name. A tabernacle which dates from the same time period as the altar rests on the top of it and contains the Holy Eucharist or Blessed Sacrament. Hanging above the altar is "a wooden crucifix embellished with the symbols of the four Evangelists. The winged man symbolizes St. Matthew, . . . St. Mark is symbolized by a lion. . . . The symbol of St. Luke is the ox (or bull), . . . The eagle is the symbol of St. John" The altar sits atop three stone steps beneath a bronze baldachino. Four fluted columns support the top of the baldachino which has an eight-sided opening. This opening is crowned by an eight-sided roof resting on small, classical columns. The ceiling of the apse is decorated with a painting of Jesus Christ by a "Mr. Walsh of the Rambusch Company." Below it are six stained glass windows. The walls of the apse below these windows are painted repeatedly with four motifs: a fish with a basket of loaves which symbolizes Christ (the fish) and His Body (the loaves); a ship which refers to St. Peter's boat, a symbol for the Church; a smoking censer symbolizing worship and adoration and crossed keys which signify St. Peter's keys to heaven [photos 10-11].⁶

The area of the sanctuary outside of the apse features a mural of two peacocks flanking an elaborate cross and another mural of a pelican feeding her young with her own blood. The peacocks symbolize the divine nature of Jesus. Traditionally, the pelican was thought to give its own life to save its young and was, therefore, a fitting symbol for the Savior who shed his blood to save all people. The hanging sanctuary light in a gilded fixture reminds congregants of the "Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist" and is another symbol for Jesus who is "the Light of the World [photos 10-11]."⁷

⁴ Ibid., no pagination.

⁵ Ibid., no pagination.

⁶ Ibid., no pagination.

⁷ Ibid., no pagination.

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Circa 1970, the sanctuary was expanded out into the crossing through the construction of a semicircular, two-step tall dais. The movable wooden ambo (pulpit) and the altar of sacrifice sit upon this dais. The 54 inch square altar was designed by the parish's priest at the time, Rev. Peter MacCarthy. The altar is "a solid slab of Tennessee pink marble [on] four columns of . . . Rossa di Francia marble Inscribed in period script on the front edge of the altar slab are the words 'Fruit of the earth and work of human hands,' On its upper surface are incised five Maltese crosses representing the five wounds of Christ." It was created by the Henry Garner Stone Company of Birmingham [photos 10-11].⁸

The church undercroft serves as a fellowship hall [photos 15-16]. At the sanctuary end of the undercroft there is a stage which is flanked by a storage area to the northeast [photo 17] and a kitchen on its southwest side [photo 18].

Archaeology Component

While no archaeological survey has been undertaken on this property, the possibility of subsurface remains exists.

⁸ Ibid., no pagination and Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church: 100th Anniversary Commemorative Book, 1911-2011 (no publisher cited), p.12.

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8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A. Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B. Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C. Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D. Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B. Removed from its original location
- C. A birthplace or grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Architecture

Period of Significance

c. 1930

Significant Dates

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Carey, John
Dowling, Paul

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church is locally significant under **Criterion C: Architecture**. Art historian John M. Schnorrenberg describes it as “one of the hidden glories of Birmingham church architecture.”⁹ Catholic theology and liturgy are expressed through the architecture of and the decoration found in Blessed Sacrament. The church is an excellent Romanesque Revival example of American Roman Catholic architecture prior to the mid-twentieth century.

The period of significance is c. 1930 because the church was constructed from 1928-1930.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

Criterion C: Architecture

In his study of Birmingham’s first century (1871-1971) of religious architecture, John M. Schnorrenberg counted 606 churches and synagogues. He found that none of those built before 1886 were still standing. A significant number of houses of worship built after 1886 had also suffered demolition or had been repurposed for secular activities. Schnorrenberg especially focused on thirty-seven buildings, most of which were constructed between 1886 and 1930. Among these was Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church. He referred to Blessed Sacrament as one of Birmingham’s “hidden glories.”¹⁰

Schnorrenberg noted that a church’s form expresses the theology and liturgical style of its congregants. He wrote, “Each Birmingham church answers the question, ‘What is a church for?’ Liturgy—the practice of worship and the doing of it—shapes plan and space, and these change as liturgical practice changes.”¹¹

He identified three kinds of church design, based on theology. Those expressing a Calvinist theology are very austere in design. Other of the Protestant churches are “Word-centered churches designed for the reading of scripture, preaching and prayer They are great auditoriums: balconied and approaching squareness in plan.” Thirdly, “some are fortresses of God enshrining the altar throne of his holy mystery adored by angels and men. The focal point is a distant altar, often with sacred images set behind or around it. Stained glass is figurative and often teaches doctrine.” Blessed Sacrament, as do most historic Catholic churches, represents this church type.¹²

⁹ John M. Schnorrenberg, Aspiration: Birmingham’s Historic Houses of Worship, (Birmingham: Birmingham Historical Society, 2000), p. 82.

¹⁰ Schnorrenberg, pp. 1, 82.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 7.

¹² Ibid., pp. 7-8.

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More specifically, Blessed Sacrament Church is an excellent example of Roman Catholic church architecture. Designed in the Romanesque Revival style, it features the traditional cruciform shape, design elements and iconography associated with Catholic churches before the mid-twentieth century. The Romanesque and the Gothic revival styles, in all their variations, are the two most common styles for historic Catholic church architecture.

The Romanesque Revival style in the modern era began in Munich, Germany around 1830. It was inspired by the classical public buildings constructed in ancient Rome and from medieval interpretations of the Romanesque. The style was introduced into the United States in the mid-1840s. It was adopted for churches and such prominent public buildings as the Smithsonian Institute (1846-1855) in Washington DC. The Romanesque Revival retained its popularity throughout the nineteenth century as a style suitable for all types of public buildings, not just churches. In terms of religious architecture, the style was most commonly used by Roman Catholics, Congregationalists, Methodists and Baptists. Romanesque Revival enjoyed another burst of national popularity in the late 1920s and 1930s.¹³

Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church (1928-1930) is the best example of a Romanesque Revival style Catholic church in Birmingham from this latter time period.

The cruciform shape of Blessed Sacrament symbolizes the Crucifixion and the Church as the Body of Christ. The church's floor plan is comprised of a narthex or vestibule, a nave, a transept and its crossing and an apsidal sanctuary—all common features in Catholic churches predating the mid-20th century. In addition, the interior changes to the church stemming from Vatican II were completed in such a fashion so that Blessed Sacrament retains its historic architectural integrity and iconography while also honoring the liturgical dictates of that conference.

The Baptismal Font was traditionally contained in the narthex of a Catholic church. Prior to the liturgical changes of Vatican II, the Baptism of infants and converts was carried out in this area of the church as a symbol that they were now prepared to enter into the church community, represented by the nave. Today, the Baptismal Font is located at the front of many Catholic churches so that the congregants can experience the initiation of new members into their religious community.

In Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church, the original area for the Baptismal Font is still clearly defined on both the exterior and the interior of the narthex by a small wing on its southwest side, but the font has been moved to the front of the church near the sanctuary. The stained glass windows and Christian symbols on the walls of the narthex, however, still lend a sacred ambience to this space, reminding people entering the church that they are transitioning from the outside world into the house of God.

From the narthex, the people enter into the nave. The word is derived from the Latin word *navis* meaning ship. The nave symbolizes St. Peter's boat. The largest section of the church, this is

¹³ NY Landmarks Conservancy—www.sacredplaces.org/PSP-nfoClearingHouse/articles

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where the laity gathers for services. At the rear of Blessed Sacrament's nave is the choir loft. This was the most common location for the choir in pre-Vatican II churches.

The transept divides the nave from the sanctuary. Historically, the arms of the transept contain side altars. Traditionally, the left arm of the transept (as you face the altar) has a statue of Mary and the right arm a statue of St. Joseph. Blessed Sacrament retains the side altars and these statues in its transepts. In 1965 when Vatican II encouraged Catholic laity to participate fully and actively in the Mass, the pews in the transepts were turned to face the altar in the sanctuary instead of the side altars.

In the sanctuary of a Catholic church are found the altar of repose (also known as the high altar) and the altar of sacrifice. The tabernacle, which contains the Blessed Sacrament, rests on the altar of repose. A sanctuary light is kept burning over the tabernacle. All of these elements are still retained in Blessed Sacrament Church. The altar of repose dates from c. 1955. The altar of sacrifice dates from c. 1970.

An analysis of extant Roman Catholic churches that were built in the greater Birmingham area between 1900 and World War II, a period when the Church was coming of age in the United States, reveals that only a handful remain. All are more modest in size, design and interior decoration than Blessed Sacrament. Holy Family Catholic Church is a historic African-American parish with a church building dating from c. 1941. St. John the Baptist in the East Lake neighborhood of Birmingham was built in 1930, but closed its doors in 1977. The current St. Stanislaus church was erected in the mid-1920s, but underwent substantial alterations in 1958. Blessed Sacrament was and remains the most architecturally significant Catholic church in Birmingham dating from the early twentieth century. Its interior decoration, though dating from c. 1955, is based on historic Catholic iconography. In the local context of Birmingham, Blessed Sacrament Church is an important, high style architectural expression of Catholic theology based on historic precedents. As its parishioners contend, "It is clearly an expression of faith in stone, plaster, marble, and paint . . . Blessed Sacrament Church represents an age of faith rather than one of mere function or practicality. The fact is that this could never be anything but a church."¹⁴

After the Second World War, the architecture of Catholic churches changed dramatically in the United States because of modernist design principles promoted by prominent liturgists such as Father H. A. Reinhold and the decrees of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Duncan Stroik, AIA, summed the trend up succinctly when he wrote that ". . . up until World War II, the Roman Catholic Church was considered the finest patron of art and architecture. The Church formed Christian artists and architects who in turn influenced the architecture of the secular realm. During the last half century, however, the roles have changed, and the Church has been following the lead of the secular culture and architects who have been formed in a non-Catholic world view. Whereas previously the development of Catholic architecture was inspired by and

¹⁴ Blessed Sacrament: A Descriptive Guide to the Church (No publisher cited, 2000), no pagination.

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in continuity with works from the past, the Modernist concept of the 'avant-garde' means progress through a continuous breaking with the past."¹⁵

Especially influential in this regard was Father H. A. Reinhold, a nationally respected Catholic liturgist in the pre-Vatican II period. He "represent[ed] the mind-set of his generation" in terms of liturgy and architecture. The priest delivered a series of important lectures on liturgical architecture in 1947 at a conference on Catholic liturgy held at the University of Notre Dame. These lectures were published and distributed by the university's Liturgy Program five years later in a booklet entitled "Speaking of Liturgical Architecture."¹⁶

Influenced by the architects Le Corbusier and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Reinhold broke with the rich architectural heritage of the Catholic Church and espoused such modernist tenets as "form follows function" and "starting from zero" in the design of churches.

Reinhold's thesis was that the liturgical functions of church should underpin and inform its architecture and decoration. He seemed to dismiss the traditional architectural styles of the Church by referring to them as "children of their own day" and by stressing that his Catholic contemporaries "must find as good an expression in our language of form, as our fathers did in theirs."¹⁷

For example, Reinhold saw the spires of Gothic cathedrals as lacking any "liturgical, intrinsic function whatsoever. . . . though lovely creations, [they] create architectural emphasis around the comparatively insignificant bells—if anything." Nevertheless, he favored Gothic over Romanesque architecture because the interior skeleton was revealed externally by flying buttresses and other construction elements as opposed to having it hidden behind thick Romanesque walls. Reinhold also found "great beauty" in having a "white-washed wall behind the altar." Additionally, he espoused in 1947—a decade-and-a-half before the Second Vatican Council—that a parish church should promote full participation by the laity through a semi-circular seating arrangement before the altar, i. e., "church-in-the-round."¹⁸

When Vatican II encouraged "full and active participation" by the laity during Mass in 1965, it did not specify a certain seating configuration. American liturgists, however, influenced by Reinhold, interpreted that as "church-in-the-round." They also followed through with architecture and interior design based on modernist principles. In other words, ideas about liturgy and church architecture promulgated by church elites in the 1950s became attached to the work of the Second Vatican Council.¹⁹

¹⁵ www.sacredarchitecture.org/articles/dont_blame_vatican_ii/ and www.churcharchitectsdirectory.com/tenmythsarticle.html

¹⁶ www.sacredarchitecture.org/articles/dont_blame_vatican_ii/

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ www.sacredarchitecture.org/articles/dont_blame_vatican_ii/ and www.churcharchitectsdirectory.com/tenmythsarticle.html

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In dioceses across the United States, many traditionally designed churches were drastically renovated, even gutted, to meet Vatican II's supposed requirements. New construction was modernist in style and plain on the interior compared to historic Catholic churches.

Within this context, Blessed Sacrament Church takes on added significance as an important survivor from the pre-Vatican II period of American church architecture. As noted above, Blessed Sacrament Parish incorporated the ideas of the Second Vatican Council into its church while retaining the axial symmetry, proportions and iconography historically associated with the best of Roman Catholic church architecture.

Narrative History

The first Roman Catholics traveled through the future state of Alabama with Hernando De Soto's expedition to the New World around 1540. The priests among them made no attempts to convert the Native Americans. A little over a century-and-a-half later, during Alabama's French colonial period, four Jesuits established Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Mobile c. 1702. The mission church was upgraded to a parish in 1704. Henri Roulleaux de la Vente became the parish's first pastor. French Catholic missionaries ministered to their fellow émigrés and to the Native Americans in west and northwest Alabama until the British took over the area in 1763.²⁰ Mobile would remain the center of the Catholic presence in Alabama well into the late twentieth century.

The Roman Catholic Church was established officially in the United States in 1790, although Catholics had been here since the colonial period. The area that would become Alabama fell under the jurisdiction of the Catholic Diocese of Baltimore in 1806. Pioneers poured into the territory in the earliest decades of the nineteenth century. Small numbers of American Catholic families lived throughout the state by the 1820s and 1830s. North of Mobile, they could be found in Montgomery and the north Alabama communities of Moulton, Tuscumbia, Florence, Sheffield, Courtland and Huntsville. The Church founded the Diocese of Mobile, which encompassed the entire state, in 1829. Michael Portier became Alabama's first bishop.²¹

Around this time, the Catholic Church in the United States came to be identified as the church of immigrants. The overwhelming majority of immigrants were settling in the North because it offered them better economic opportunities. Only a few ventured south to establish themselves in the region's seaports and river towns. Therefore, the majority of Catholics in Alabama in this period were native-born Southerners.²²

²⁰ Rose Gibbons Lovett, The Catholic Church in the Deep South: The Diocese of Birmingham in Alabama 1540-1976, (Birmingham: Birmingham Publishing Co., 1981), pp. 1-4 & John Tracy Ellis, American Catholicism, 2nd ed., revised. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 16.

²¹ Ellis, p. 164 & Lovett, pp. 4, 6.

²² Ellis, p. 103 & James J. Thompson, Jr. The Church, The South and The Future, (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1988), p. 32.

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Construction of the railroads and other transportation infrastructure in the South, though, soon brought Irish Catholic laborers and their families to the region. These families easily assimilated into the Southern way of life, while still retaining their faith.²³

The establishment of Birmingham's first Catholic church illustrates this regional settlement pattern in the post-Civil War period. Birmingham was founded in 1871 at the intersection of two railroad lines. Irish workers laid the tracks and then stayed. They were joined by other Irish Catholics who provided them with needed services. By January 1872, Catholics comprised 1/8 of Birmingham's total population of eight hundred.²⁴

The Birmingham Catholics petitioned Rev. William F. McDonough, the pastor of St. John the Baptist Parish in Tuscaloosa, to help them establish a mission church. Together, they founded St. Paul's Church in 1872. Priests from Tuscaloosa and Selma served this mission church for the next eight years. St. Paul's finally got its own pastor—Rev. John J. Browne—in February 1880. He ministered not only to the Catholics around Birmingham but also to those in Oxmoor, Coketon, Helena, New Castle and Gadsden. Rev. Browne would soon need help.²⁵

Due to its location in a rich mineral region (known as the Birmingham District²⁶), the town grew rapidly. Not only native Southerners, both black and white, but also large numbers of immigrants poured into the District at the turn of the twentieth century seeking work in its industries. Many of them were Roman Catholics. St. Paul's Church founded several mission churches in the District over the next few decades. One local historian writing in the early twentieth century described St. Paul's as "the mother of all the Catholic churches and institutions in the [Birmingham] district . . ."²⁷

The industrialization of Birmingham was part of a larger national trend. The United States' expanding economy brought millions of immigrants to its shores. Most settled in the North's industrial urban centers, but others came to Birmingham, the epicenter of industry in the Deep South. People from northern Europe had comprised the majority of immigrants in the antebellum period. Late in the century, significant numbers of Germans and Irish were still arriving but they were joined by millions of other ethnicities from eastern and southern Europe such as Poles and Italians. The American Catholic population burgeoned from 1,606,000 in 1850 to just over twelve million by 1900. The number of Catholics continued to grow in the twentieth century.²⁸

²³ Thompson, p. 33.

²⁴ Lovett, pp. 25, 52.

²⁵ Lovett, pp. 52-53 & George M. Cruikshank, A History of Birmingham and Its Environs . . ., 1st vol., (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Co., 1920), p. 284.

²⁶ The Birmingham District is defined as "a geographic area defined initially by geological discoveries and subsequently by the location of industries that exploited the minerals located by the geologists." See The Birmingham District: An Industrial History and Guide by Marjorie Longenecker White.

²⁷ Cruikshank, p. 285.

²⁸ Ellis, pp. 84, 88, 103.

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The Catholic Church struggled to meet the spiritual needs of all of its members in the United States. Wherever enough Catholics settled, the Church established a parish and sent a priest. Generally, each of these parishes served a specific ethnic group. This also tended to be true in the Birmingham District, but some parishes there served various nationalities.²⁹

For example, at the turn of the century St. Paul's was predominantly Irish but ministered to significant numbers of non-Irish, including African-Americans. The Diocese founded St. Catherine of Siena in 1880 for Irish Catholics in Pratt City (in the Birmingham District) but within the decade Italians, French families and Germans from the surrounding communities were worshipping there also. On the other hand, Our Lady of Sorrows was a German Catholic parish established in 1887 in what was then the southern limit of Birmingham. St. Mark's Church and St. Joseph's Church, founded in 1905 and 1913 respectively, both served Italian Catholics. St. Michael's in Brookside (c. 1885) served that town's Slavic people. St. Stanislaus (1906) ministered to Polish and other Slavic parishioners.

The Mobile Diocese established Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Birmingham's West End in 1911. Although founded in the same time period as many of the Birmingham District's mission churches that served poor, immigrant laborers and their families, Blessed Sacrament's history is different.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church in America was evolving. No longer predominately identified with immigrants and laborers, the Church joined the American mainstream. American Catholics, because of their numbers and increasing prosperity, also gained influence in the Church worldwide. Several important factors coalesced for this to occur.

In 1908, Pope Pius X declared that America was no longer a mission territory. American Catholics were contributing both significant sums of money and personnel to the Church's missionary societies. Americans were traveling across the globe to spread the faith.³⁰

The 28th International Eucharistic Congress was held in Chicago in 1926--the first time this important conference occurred in the United States. The conference demonstrated the importance of American Catholics in the international Catholic community. Their influence was demonstrated further by the growing American presence in the Church hierarchy and at the Vatican.³¹

The number of American Catholics grew from 12,041,000 in 1900 to approximately 40,000,000 by 1956. The United States by the mid-twentieth century contained the third largest body of Roman Catholics in the world, behind Brazil and Italy. Much of this growth came from American births rather than immigration. World War I first disrupted the flow of immigrants

²⁹ Ellis, pp. 88, 104.

³⁰ Ellis, pp. 124, 130-132.

³¹ Ellis, pp. 132-133.

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from Europe. Then in the 1920s Congress passed a series of laws further restricting the number of new arrivals being allowed into this country.³²

These events allowed the American Catholic Church to catch its breath, so to speak, and to strengthen the process of acculturation into the broader society. Also, as its membership evolved from first-generation immigrants to their American-born children and grandchildren, churches became less centered on ethnicity. At the same time, these second- and third-generation Americans generally were better off financially than their ancestors. The Catholic Church was becoming better assimilated into American society.

Blessed Sacrament represents on a local level the maturation of the American Catholic Church in the first half of the twentieth century. This parish was never the mission church of an older, established parish. Blessed Sacrament had its own priest from the very beginning, so it did not have to rely on visiting priests from other parishes. Its first parishioners do not appear to have been poor immigrants. According to diocesan historian Rose Gibbons Lovett, the West End at the time of the parish's establishment was "one of the choice residential sections in Birmingham . . . [and] there were a large number of mixed marriages in the area."³³

Blessed Sacrament Parish was founded in 1911 by eleven women who wanted a Catholic church and parochial school in their West End neighborhood. At the time, their families had to travel to downtown Birmingham to attend Mass at St. Paul's Cathedral. They created the Catholic Ladies Club and met with Father James E. Coyle, the pastor of St. Paul's, to discuss the issue. He did not support their project because many of the West End Catholics had intermarried with Protestants. Undeterred, the women contacted the Right Rev. Edward P. Allen, Bishop of the Mobile Diocese. Bishop Allen met with the women in Birmingham and they convinced him of the need for a parish in that section of town.³⁴

The bishop sent Rev. Patrick J. Turner to establish the parish. In early August 1911, Father Turner celebrated his first Mass before 150 congregants in the West End. The service took place on the second floor of the Odd Fellows Hall at the corner of Tuscaloosa Avenue and Thirteenth Street. Soon, however, Turner and Bishop Allen purchased a tract known as "the old Tate place" located between Cotton Avenue SW and Pearson Avenue SW for the location of a church and a school. An antebellum house on the site served as the priest's rectory until 1959. Over time, additional acreage was added to the east and to the west of the original tract.³⁵

Church construction began immediately and a small, frame building was erected in short order. It was typical of the first churches built by Catholic parishes in the Birmingham District in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were small, unpretentious, gable-roofed, frame (and occasionally brick) structures. A few of those churches still serve their parish. In

³² Ellis, pp. 124-125, 129-130 & Wayne Flynt, Alabama in the Twentieth Century, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), pp.468-469.

³³ Lovett, p. 112.

³⁴ Lovett, p. 112.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 112-113.

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many cases, though, the parishioners moved to the suburbs after World War II and built larger, modern churches.

The first Mass was celebrated in the new church in October. Father Turner officiated, but the Very Rev. Coyle from St. Paul's Cathedral preached the sermon. He referred to the clapboard structure as a "temporary church, the precursor of a grand and stately edifice, a parish fully equipped with parochial schools, a parish hall, and a devout congregation . . .". This would all come to pass within less than a generation.³⁶

Father Turner who had previously worked with the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration asked them to come to Blessed Sacrament Parish and establish a parochial school. The sisters agreed. They purchased land adjoining the church site and began construction. The yellow brick building, which opened for classes in September 1913, contained an elementary and a high school, dormitories for boarding students and housing for the Sisters. The school grew steadily in both student population and in campus infrastructure. Just after World War II, though, the boarding school and the high school closed. The elementary school continued on for several more decades. Blessed Sacrament School finally closed its doors in 1980 and the original building was individually listed in the NRHP that same year. The other buildings associated with the school are no longer extant.³⁷

Rev. Patrick J. Turner became a chaplain with the American military in 1918 and left Blessed Sacrament. His replacement, Rev. Lawrence J. Carroll served the parish for almost a decade. He was followed by Rev. Walter J. Tobin.³⁸

Arriving in 1927, Father Tobin realized immediately that the parish needed a new church. The old, small church could not meet the needs of the growing, vibrant community that Blessed Sacrament Parish had become. The congregation had ballooned from 150 in 1911 to approximately one thousand members by the end of the 1920s. The new church, designed by Mobile architects John J. Carey and Paul F. Dowling, would seat six hundred. It was constructed from 1928 to 1930. The new Blessed Sacrament Church was dedicated by Bishop Thomas J. Toolen in February 1930.³⁹

The founding and early development of Blessed Sacrament Parish roughly paralleled what was arguably the most virulent period of anti-Catholicism in the United States. The decade of the 1920s saw a spike in anti-Catholic rhetoric, which in Birmingham boiled over into blatant discrimination and even violence. Anti-Catholicism had not been an issue in the South in the nineteenth century, but it was precipitated in the new century by a clash of cultures: rural vs. urban, evangelical Christian vs. liturgical Christian and native-born American vs. immigrant.

In the interwar period, agricultural prices dropped and farmers struggled to make ends meet. The situation was particularly acute in the Deep South. Cities such as Birmingham, though, were

³⁶ Ibid., p. 113.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 114.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 114-115.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 115.

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growing and seemed to offer prosperity to anyone willing to work. Ambitious, young people abandoned rural areas to seek new opportunities in industrialized, urban centers. Cities with their diverse populations, freer lifestyles and urbane ideas threatened the "real" American way of life in the eyes of many rural and small town Americans. They also felt that sophisticated city dwellers looked down on them as rubes and hayseeds.

Religion only served to widen the chasm. Alabama's evangelical Christians aggressively supported prohibition in the period from 1880 to 1930. Liturgical Christians such as Episcopalians, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics, on the other hand, opposed it. These religions even used wine in their services. Catholics were additionally suspect in the eyes of southern evangelicals because of their growing numbers (many of whom were immigrants), their support for labor unions, their celibate priesthood and their ties to Rome. Evangelical Christians questioned the loyalty of Catholics to the United States and to the democratic process.⁴⁰

A statewide census on religion conducted in 1906 revealed that 84% of church-going Alabamians were either Baptists or Methodists (53% Baptists and 31% Methodists). Roman Catholics at 6% comprised the third largest denomination. The overwhelming majority of Catholics, however, were concentrated in and around the cities of Birmingham, Montgomery and Mobile. In fact, 38 of Alabama's 67 counties contained no Catholic church.⁴¹

That same year in Birmingham, however, the Catholic Church with approximately 8,000 members was the city's largest denomination. It comprised 29% of the city's total number of church-goers. Black Baptists with 4,000 congregants totaled 15%. They were followed by white Methodists (3,900 at 14%) and white Baptists (2,100 at 8%).⁴²

Ten years later in 1916 Birmingham's religious composition was in flux. World War I was blocking European immigration at the same time the city was experiencing an influx of rural Alabamians. Within a few years, the flow of immigration would be further decreased by restrictive federal legislation. Black Baptists were now the biggest denomination followed by white Methodists, Roman Catholics and white Baptists. Catholics comprised only 16% of Birmingham church-goers. But their institutions dotted the landscape of the Birmingham District. By 1920, there were 12 Catholic churches, St. Vincent's Hospital, the Orphans Home at East Lake and the parochial school at Blessed Sacrament. Fifteen priests served in the District.⁴³

The dwindling numbers of Catholics combined with their strong visual presence on the landscape was about to make life much more difficult for Roman Catholics in the Birmingham District.

Southerners also distrusted the Catholic Church because of its association with labor unions. As the church of working class immigrants, it was natural for the Catholic Church to support

⁴⁰ Flynt, pp. 467-468.

⁴¹ William Warren Rogers et al., Alabama: The History of a Deep South State, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994), pp. 275-276.

⁴² Flynt, p. 468.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 468-469; Ellis, p. 129; Cruikshank, p. 285.

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organizations devoted to improving the lives of its congregants. In the North, large numbers of Roman Catholic immigrants swelled the ranks of labor unions enabling them to win concessions from big business. In the eyes of some Southerners, this linked unions to the Vatican. Union members and Catholics were one and the same. They believed that powerful unions would turn the country into a vassal of Rome. The advancement of labor unions into the South had to be stopped.⁴⁴

Other white Southerners suspected that powerful labor unions in conjunction with Catholics would upset the balance of power in their region. They believed they could maintain control by limiting the development of cities, decreasing the number of Catholics in the South and controlling blacks. Such Southerners also feared that labor unions would stir up class consciousness among poor whites and that priests were targeting blacks for conversion. Would class replace race as the crucial dividing line in Southern society? And could blacks be controlled after they'd entered into an alliance with Rome?⁴⁵

In actuality, of course, labor unions never gained much of a foothold in the South and priests were not focused specifically on proselytizing Southern blacks. Some black Southerners were Catholics, but the overwhelming majority of African-Americans were evangelical Christians just like their Southern white counterparts.

Even outside the South, however, storm clouds were gathering over American Catholics. A virulent anti-Catholicism thundered across the country from World War I through 1930. It was a fearful, knee jerk reaction from white, native-born Americans to a United States that was becoming more urban, more ethnically and religiously diverse and more of a leader on the world stage. Unscrupulous politicians, journalists and ministers incited people's bigotry to win office and gain influence.

The demagogue Senator J. Thomas Heflin of Alabama, railed against blacks, immigrants and Catholics. His claim that Catholics were out to assassinate him brought ridicule from his fellow Senators and made Alabama a national laughing stock. Yet Alabamians continued to reelect him. In 1923, a *Birmingham News* editorial contended that "The man who might have been the nation's one really genuine Picturesque Statesman in the drab and drear Coolidgean epoch is burning with an inner and . . . unhealthy fire."⁴⁶

An even unhealthier fire raged in Rev. J. Frank Norris, an Alabama native who was the pastor of First Baptist Church in Ft. Worth, Texas. He spread his anti-Catholic message across the country through the publication of his weekly newspaper *The Fundamentalist* and through books he advertised in the paper. Norris believed that Catholics were plotting to take over all levels of government in the United States so as to hand the country over to the Vatican. He argued that when they took over Ft. Worth Catholics "would behead every Protestant preacher and

⁴⁴ Thompson, p. 60.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 59-60.

⁴⁶ Flynt, pp. 50-51.

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disembowel every Protestant mother" in town. Norris's dark craziness struck a chord with many Southerners.⁴⁷

The Birmingham District was not immune to this scourge. White evangelical Christians, particularly recent rural arrivals, felt threatened by the growing numbers of blacks, Catholics and Jews in their midst. Their fear was translated into action. In 1916, a Catholic church and school near Pratt City were torched in the middle of the night. Baptists ran a Catholic doctor associated with the U. S. Public Health Service out of town. Some Protestant whites eagerly attended the speeches of Rev. Sidney J. Catts who often came to Birmingham to rail against Catholics. Catts had won the governorship of Florida on an anti-Catholic platform and felt compelled to carry his message beyond the borders of the Sunshine State.⁴⁸

Even socially progressive Protestant leaders in Birmingham opposed Catholics and the politicians who supported them. The theologically liberal pastor of First Baptist Church in Birmingham, Rev. A. J. Dickinson, for example, founded the anti-Catholic True American Society. Dickinson and his followers successfully defeated the reelection bid of a local city leader who would not fire the Catholic police chief.⁴⁹

The Ku Klux Klan was reestablished in Georgia in 1915. As self-defined defenders of "100 Percent Americanism", Klansmen were opposed to blacks, Catholics and Jews, immigrants, city dwellers and those they viewed as deviants. Significant numbers of white, Protestant Alabamians, including many in the Birmingham District, embraced this message and joined the Klan. By 1920, the Klan held considerable influence in Birmingham and by the middle of the decade controlled city government.⁵⁰

Historian James J. Thompson, Jr. maintains that in the anti-Catholic milieu of the early twentieth century American South, "Catholics laid low and kept quiet."⁵¹ If so, then Father James E. Coyle, the pastor of St. Paul's Cathedral in Birmingham, was the exception.

Father Coyle, a native of Ireland, was ordained in Rome in 1896 at the age of twenty-three. Soon after, he came to Alabama to serve as a priest in the Diocese of Mobile. In 1904, the Bishop sent the young priest to serve as pastor of St. Paul's.

As anti-Catholicism grew in postwar Birmingham, Father Coyle publicly defended Roman Catholic theology. In 1920, for example, he wrote a rebuttal to a Baptist preacher's anti-Catholic essay. His defense of his faith made him a lightning rod for violent threats. Armed guards patrolled the cathedral's property at night for his protection.

On August 11, 1921, Father Coyle was shot in cold blood while sitting on his rectory's front porch by Rev. E. R. Stephenson. The motives of the Methodist minister and Klansman were

⁴⁷ Thompson, pp. 60-61.

⁴⁸ Flynt, pp. 468-469.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 469.

⁵⁰ Rogers, p. 448.

⁵¹ Thompson, p.57.

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personal as well as theological. Earlier in the day, Coyle had officiated at the marriage of Stephenson's daughter Ruth and Pedro Gussman, a Catholic immigrant from Puerto Rico.

The trial of Rev. Stephenson was a farce. The presiding judge and jury foreman were Klansmen. The Ku Klux Klan hired Stephenson's defense attorney, Hugo Black. Within two years, Black would join the KKK to advance his own political career.⁵² Black stressed that Father Coyle had lured Ruth into Catholicism and then married her off to a mulatto. Thus he had broken two Southern taboos based on religion and race. Gussman was a dark-skinned man of Spanish descent, but to the bigoted jury he looked black. Stephenson was acquitted.

Sympathy for Father Coyle and Catholics in general did exist, however. It is said that Coyle's funeral was one of the largest ever to be held in Birmingham. And the national press was outraged at the priest's murder. The August 31, 1921 issue of the *Nation* excoriated Birmingham as the "American hotbed of anti-Catholic fanaticism."⁵³

Just a few short years later, Blessed Sacrament parish began construction on its new church. On the eve of the Great Depression and during a decade of violent anti-Catholicism, it took courage and faith on the part of Blessed Sacrament's parishioners and Rev. Tobin to complete the large, new edifice. Perhaps the number of intermarriages in the parish helped prevent any violent, discriminatory acts during church construction. Non-Catholics who had family members attending Blessed Sacrament even assisted in the work. M. D. Mewbourne, for example, excavated the new church site for free.

Towering over the neighborhood of modest, wood-frame houses, Blessed Sacrament Church symbolized a proud Catholic presence in the West End of Birmingham. It was the largest and most architecturally significant Catholic church built in the Birmingham District in the first half of the twentieth century. Within the larger Catholic community of the Birmingham District, the parish was second in importance only to St. Paul's Cathedral (constructed from 1890 to 1893). The Catholics of Blessed Sacrament had assimilated into American society. The ethnically diverse parishioners were secure enough in their identities as Americans to proclaim their Catholic faith through the architecture of their new church.

Father Joseph Lody, the editor of the *History of the Diocese of Birmingham*, writing in 2009, explained that "Blessed Sacrament Parish has had a profound impact not only on the community of West End, but also in the lives of many people who have been a part of its rich tradition. . . . currently a parish of 116 households [that are committed to maintaining church and community] . . . home for the celebration of the Traditional Latin Mass and the Mass in the Syro-Malabar Rite."

⁵² He became a U. S. Senator and later was appointed to the U. S. Supreme Court.

⁵³ Flynt, pp. 469, 543.

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____
- recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other
- Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of Property less than one acre

Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church
Name of Property

Jefferson, Alabama
County and State

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates

Datum if other than WGS84: _____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

- | | |
|------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Latitude: 33.488345 | Longitude: -86.855551 |
| 2. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 3. Latitude: | Longitude: |
| 4. Latitude: | Longitude: |

Or

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

NAD 1927 or NAD 1983

- | | | |
|----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 2. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 3. Zone: | Easting: | Northing: |
| 4. Zone: | Easting : | Northing: |

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundary begins at a point where the northern curb of the driveway into Blessed Sacrament's parking lot meets the public sidewalk and continues along that curbing until it reaches the rear corner of the parking lot. The boundary then turns northeast and, running parallel with the rear elevation of the church, extends approximately 105 feet. At this point, it turns and heads in a southeasterly direction, lining up with and following the outer edge of the sidewalk on the northeast side of the church until it reaches the public sidewalk. Here the boundary turns and follows the northern edge of the public sidewalk until it reaches the point of beginning. There are no fences or outbuildings touching the church. The boundary is indicated with a dotted line on the accompanying aerial photo.

Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church
Name of Property

Jefferson, Alabama
County and State

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church sits on an irregularly shaped lot of approximately 5.61 acres that is located between Pearson Avenue SW and Cotton Avenue SW. The boundary, however, includes only the church and its immediate area. It was drawn to include only those features directly related to the church such as the wide sweep of steps leading up to the front entry, the concrete handicap access ramps and the sidewalks along the side elevations of the church. Excluded from the boundary and thus not part of this nomination are the rectory, a gazebo, the parking lot, a small bungalow owned by the parish and an open field. These resources do not contribute to the architectural significance of the church. Blessed Sacrament Academy (NRHP 1980), once owned by the parish, was sold in 1980 to a private property owner.⁵⁴

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Susan Enzweiler / National Register Coordinator
organization: Alabama Historical Commission
street & number: 468 S. Perry Street
city or town: Montgomery state: AL zip code: 36104
e-mail LeeAnne.Wofford@preserveala.org
telephone: 334.230.2659
date: December 2014

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

⁵⁴ Fr. Joseph Lody, ed. History of the Diocese of Birmingham, (Strasbourg, France: Editions du Signe, 2009), p. 69.

Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church
Name of Property

Jefferson, Alabama
County and State

Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map. Each photograph must be numbered and that number must correspond to the photograph number on the photo log. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log

Name of Property: Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church

City or Vicinity: Birmingham

County: Jefferson

State: Alabama

Photographer: Susan Enzweiler

Date Photographed: 10 July 2014

Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:

Photo 1 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0001)
Façade and southwest (side) elevation, camera facing north

Photo 2 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0002)
Façade, camera facing northwest

Photo 3 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0003)
Main Entrance of Façade, camera facing northwest

Photo 4 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0004)
Northeast (side) elevation, camera facing southwest

Photo 5 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0005)
Northeast (side) and northwest (rear) elevations, camera facing south

Photo 6 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0006)
Northwest (rear) and southwest (side) elevations, camera facing east

Photo 7 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0007)
Southwest (side) elevation: detail of brickwork, camera facing northeast

Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church
Name of Property

Jefferson, Alabama
County and State

Photo 8 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0008)
Entrance on southwest (side) elevation of campanile, camera facing northeast

Photo 9 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0009)
Vestibule or Narthex (Exterior doors on the left of photo and doorway into nave on right of photo), camera facing southwest

Photo 10 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0010)
Nave and Sanctuary, camera facing northwest

Photo 11 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0011)
Close-up of Sanctuary, camera facing north

Photo 12 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0012)
Left or the Virgin Mary's Transept, camera facing west

Photo 13 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0013)
Right or St. Joseph's Transept, camera facing north

Photo 14 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0014)
Rear of Nave and Choir Loft, camera facing southeast

Photo 15 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0015)
Undercroft, camera facing southeast

Photo 16 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0016)
Undercroft, camera facing northwest

Photo 17 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0017)
Undercroft Storage Area under St. Joseph's Transept, camera facing northeast

Photo 18 (AL_JeffersonCounty_BlessedSacramentCatholicChurch_0018)
Undercroft Kitchen under the Virgin Mary's Transept, camera facing northeast

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 460 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.





















DOWN HIS HEAD THAT WE MIGHT BE PROVED



THE HEAD THAT WAS SEVERED FROM THE BEAVEN

THE HEAD THAT WAS SEVERED FROM THE BEAVEN

MEMORIAL OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD IN THE RIVER OF EGYPT

MEMORIAL OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD IN THE RIVER OF EGYPT



FOR OUR INQUIRIES HE WAS BRUISED FOR US

NAIL FULL OF GR



AND TOOK THE CHILD AND HIS MOTHER AND RETIRED



BEHOLD THIS HEART WHICH HAS LU













UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

REQUESTED ACTION: NOMINATION

PROPERTY NAME: Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church

MULTIPLE NAME:

STATE & COUNTY: ALABAMA, Jefferson

DATE RECEIVED: 6/05/15 DATE OF PENDING LIST: 7/07/15
DATE OF 16TH DAY: 7/22/15 DATE OF 45TH DAY: 7/21/15
DATE OF WEEKLY LIST:

REFERENCE NUMBER: 15000430

REASONS FOR REVIEW:

APPEAL: N DATA PROBLEM: N LANDSCAPE: N LESS THAN 50 YEARS: N
OTHER: N PDIL: N PERIOD: N PROGRAM UNAPPROVED: N
REQUEST: N SAMPLE: N SLR DRAFT: N NATIONAL: N

COMMENT WAIVER: N

ACCEPT RETURN REJECT 7/21/15 DATE

ABSTRACT/SUMMARY COMMENTS:

*Architecture AOS
local level of significance
c.1930.*

RECOM./CRITERIA C
REVIEWER W. D. ... DISCIPLINE Historic
TELEPHONE _____ DATE 7/21/15

DOCUMENTATION see attached comments Y/N see attached SLR Y/N

If a nomination is returned to the nominating authority, the nomination is no longer under consideration by the NPS.



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
CITY OF BIRMINGHAM

WILLIAM A. BELL, SR.
MAYOR

March 13, 2015

Ms. Lee Anne Wofford
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer
Alabama Historical Commission
468 South Perry Street
Montgomery, Alabama 36130-0900

Re: National Register Nomination for the Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church
1460 Pearson Avenue SW, Birmingham, Jefferson County, Alabama

Dear Ms. Wofford:

As Mayor of the City of Birmingham, it gives me great pleasure to support the nomination of the Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church to the National Register of Historic Places. In my opinion, the nomination meets the criteria for listing in the National Register. This church building is a significant part of our local history, and I enthusiastically recommend that it be listed. Thank you very much for your careful consideration of this nomination.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "William A. Bell, Sr." in a cursive style.

William A. Bell, Sr.
Mayor



CITY OF BIRMINGHAM

DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING, ENGINEERING & PERMITS
710 NORTH 20TH STREET
ROOM 500, CITY HALL
BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA 35203

WILLIAM A. BELL, SR.
MAYOR

ANDRÉ V. BITTAS
DIRECTOR

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL COMMISSION

March 19, 2015

Ms. Lee Anne Wofford
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer
Alabama Historical Commission
468 South Perry Street
Montgomery, Alabama 35130-0900

Re: National Register Nomination for the Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church
Birmingham (Jefferson County), Alabama

Dear Ms. Wofford:

I am writing to you on behalf of the Birmingham Historical Commission, as its Chairman. The Commission has considered the National Register of Historic Places Nomination for the Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Birmingham, we support the nomination of the this property to the National Register. In our opinion, the building meets the criteria for listing in the National Register, and we are enthusiastic about our recommendation for the inclusion of this listing.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Samuel H. Frazier".

Samuel H. Frazier
Chairman, Birmingham Historical Commission



STATE OF ALABAMA
ALABAMA HISTORICAL COMMISSION
468 SOUTH PERRY STREET
MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA 36130-0900

RECEIVED 2280

JUN - 5 2015

Nat. Register of Historic Places
National Park Service

May 29, 2015

FRANK W. WHITE
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

TEL: 334-242-3184
FAX: 334-240-3477

Ms. Carol Shull
Keeper of the National Register
U. S. Department of the Interior, NPS
Cultural Resources
National Register, History & Education Programs
1201 "I" Street NW (2280)
Washington, D. C. 20005

Dear Ms. Shull:

Enclosed please find the nomination and supporting documentation to be considered for listing the following Alabama resource in the National Register of Historic Places:

Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church
Birmingham, Jefferson County, Alabama

Your consideration of the enclosed National Register of Historic Places nomination is appreciated.

Sincerely,

Lee Anne Wofford
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

LAW/sme/nw

Enclosures