

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USD/I/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

Saint Joseph Abbey Church, St. Tammany Parish, LA

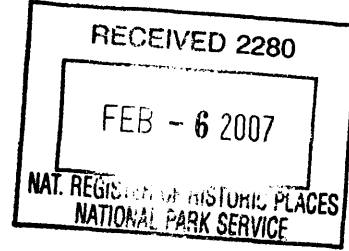
United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Saint Joseph Abbey Church

Other Name/Site Number:



2. LOCATION

Street & Number 75376 River Road

Not for publication: NA

City/Town Saint Benedict

Vicinity: NA

State: Louisiana Code: LA County: St. Tammany Code: 103 Zip Code: 70457

3. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 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.

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: Nationally: Statewide: X Locally:

Signature of Certifying Official/Title Jonathan Fricker, Deputy SHPO, LA Dept of Culture, Recreation and Tourism Date 2/5/07

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official/Title Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

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4. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- Entered in the National Register (checked)
Determined eligible for the National Register
Determined not eligible for the National Register
Removed from the National Register
Other (explain):

Signature of Keeper: [Handwritten Signature]

Date of Action: 3-21-07

5. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property
Private: X
Public-Local:
Public-State:
Public-Federal:

Category of Property
Building(s): X
District:
Site:
Structure:
Object:

Number of Resources within Property
Contributing
1

Non contributing
buildings
sites
structures
objects
0 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 0

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: NA

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### 6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: religion                      Sub: church  
Current: religion                      Sub: church

### 7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: mixed

Materials:

Foundation: concrete  
Walls: brick  
Roof: tile  
Other: concrete

#### **Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.**

Begun in 1931 and completed the next year, the basilican plan church at Saint Joseph Abbey borrows from various periods of Italian architecture. The architect was New Orleanian Theodore Brune. For the purposes of the data retrieval portion of this form, the term "mixed" will be used under style. The church is prominently located on the grounds of a Benedictine monastery in a semi-rural area north of Covington. The fairly isolated abbey campus is accessed via a one-lane bridge over the Bogue Falaya River. Buildings on the campus date from 1908 through more recent times. The abbey church and refectory are being nominated for artwork executed by Benedictine monk and artist Dom Gregory de Wit between 1945 and 1955. (The refectory is being nominated separately because it is not immediately adjacent to the church.) De Wit began painting the church in 1951 and had completed his work by early 1955. There are no notable integrity issues for the church's artwork, and the building itself has received minimal alterations.

Exterior:

The abbey church is of brick veneer construction with numerous cast concrete details. The brick is of varying shades of deep red and brown. The cream-colored cast concrete provides additional contrast. As is typical, the church's internal organization reads very clearly on the exterior. There is a tall (in fact, too tall) two-story nave and transept with a red tile roof. One story side aisles, also with red tile roofs, flank the nave. At the front corner of each side aisle is a small polygonal chapel with a parapet and flat roof. At the rear of the church is an apse with an ambulatory. The ambulatory ends on each side with a small rectangular room with a hip roof. (The rooms are of unequal size.) Along the southern side elevation, between the apse and transept, is a monumental (three-stage) tower ending in a cupola.

The nave façade culminates in a pronounced gabled parapet with a diminutive cupola at its peak and an angel at each edge. Below the tympanum is a central rose window. To each side is a composition consisting of a double arch window with a rose window above. A handsome, well-proportioned,

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composite order portico provides shelter for three entrance doors. At the center of the tympanum is a circle with a cross within. Door surrounds are of cast concrete and feature a pediment in the classical manner. Above each door is a square window. By far most of the church's numerous window openings (side aisles, nave clerestory, etc.) are round head. The tower uses both round and square head. Round head windows are coupled at the ambulatory. In the second story of the apse they are coupled with a column in-between. The two transept facades feature gabled parapets similar to that of the main façade. Here they culminate in a cross at the peak with an urn at each edge. Beneath the tympanum is a large rose window with a narrow round head window to each side.

The side aisles are only three bays long. (They do not extend all the way from the front corner chapels to the transept.) The space between the front chapel and the beginning of the side aisle takes the form of a niche with an openwork design above. At the rear of each side aisle is another niche, in this instance providing for an entrance. The two entrances feature handsome cast concrete door surrounds with pediments. Above each is an openwork wooden design. There is also a door to the tower.

The church's tower is second only to the façade in terms of visual strength. Its three stages are marked by cast concrete coping. Each side of the third stage features paired louvered openings with an oculus above. The parapet is accented by modillions and is crowned, at each corner, with a ball and finial design. Above is an openwork cupola with a pedimented motif inscribing an arch on each elevation. The composition is surmounted by a faceted melon dome.

### Interior Architecture:

The church's great glory is its interior. (This document will summarize the architecture first, then discuss the paintings.) The nave is defined by handsome composite order arcades along each side done in the Renaissance manner with arches springing directly from the column capitals. A towering great round arch marks the transition to the crossing. The nave has an openwork wooden ceiling (in the manner of Early Christian churches). Round arch windows in the clerestory illuminate the space. Except for the artwork, the walls are painted an off-white with the slightest touch of gray. (The overall effect is quite soothing and serene.)

The crossing, with a great round arch on each side, features a dome. On the south side, beneath the great round arch, is a composite order arcade (with the arches springing directly from the column capitals) which screens the crossing from a small chapel. On the north side the church's organ pipes occupy the space of the screen. Behind the pipes is a chapel. The apse features a half dome and on the first story, coupled columns punctuated by round arch portals.

As noted previously, the side aisles extend only three bays. They feature vaulting, and along the outer walls, small recesses that were once tiny chapels. (The altars have been removed.) The chapels are separated by engaged composite order pilasters. Ceramic stations of the cross (dating from the time of the artwork) are located on the pilasters. Each side aisle culminates in an altar within a niche (instead of the more typical side aisle that does not end but provides circulation to the apse).

### The Artwork:

Dom Gregory de Wit, a Dutch Benedictine monk, priest and artist, executed the brilliantly colored paintings in the abbey church between 1951 and early 1955. (See below for biographical profile.) He

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created the designs prior to leaving the abbey for a several month trip to Europe in the spring of 1950. He then began to execute them upon his return, assisted by a young artist he met abroad named Milo Piuz. De Wit's design for the abbey church left few surfaces untouched (a total of 49 murals encompassing 7,850 square feet). The overall effect, however, is surprisingly not in the least overwhelming.

It is not within the scope of this document to discuss the religious symbolism of the numerous paintings. Rather this document will focus on the murals as works of art. (For information on the religious meaning of de Wit's murals, the reader is referred to *Living in Salvation: The Murals of Gregory de Wit at Saint Joseph Abbey*, written by Adam Begnaud, OSB and published by Saint Joseph Abbey, 2005.)

It is not easy to pigeonhole the body of artwork in the abbey church. The glistening gold, for example, used in the apse's half dome is reminiscent of Byzantine mosaics. At first glance, from a distance, much of the work has an ancient look to the layperson, but closer examination reveals its contemporary (mid-twentieth century) provenance. Some scenes are strongly reminiscent of New Deal-era murals (chiseled, angular faces and strongly conveyed muscles). Others, as noted below, feature the swirling forms and stylized lines of the Art Deco.

De Wit's paintings are particularly known for their vibrant colors. The monk-artist made his own colors from powdered pigments mixed with potassium silicate. The overall effect, according to one authority on the artist, is a mural with a fresco-like appearance and durability. The paint penetrates the plaster rather than merely being a surface coating. De Wit also used a slightly textured wall surface when using potassium silicate paint.

The swirling angels in the dome and the lettering surrounding the paintings were drawn free hand. All of the other paintings were traced onto the walls (or ceilings) and then filled in. They began as miniature full-color models, then were resketched on graph paper to the proper scale. Then a serrated roulette was run over every line. The drawing was then held in place on the wall and patted with a bag of blue powdered chalk.

De Wit's signature, according to Adam Begnaud, is his handling of cloth. The murals are replete with voluminous drapes and folds in clothing, often to an exaggerated effect.

Arguably the church's most stunning (and memorable) mural is in the half dome of the apse. Upon entering the church, one's eye is drawn immediately to a brilliantly colored depiction of Christ as Ruler of All. The dominant colors are gold and a rich deep red. Deep greens, blues and browns are secondary colors. The focal point is a youthful-looking Christ with a powerful gaze. With arms outstretched, he is enveloped in a stylized swirl of cream colored cloth. The cloth reads as a garment that begins at the arm and swirls over and around the head in an almost complete circle. At the base are large red stylized wings with interlaced circles at the middle. To each side of this composition are depictions of various prophets and Adam and Eve. A strongly composed female head is at the center of each pendentive. (The women are angels, but do not look like traditional angels.) In a very stylized, Art Deco composition, the angels stretch out their hands to form a continuous design around the half dome. Their very angular heads are capped with golden halos. Their green garments are contrasted with large red stylized "wings" above and below each figure. Above the angels, encircling the half dome, is a stylized river with fish. Between the angels are arched spaces at the top of paired round head windows. De Wit used the spaces to depict the Seven Deadly Sins. Faced with nine arches, he placed the Devil in one (the one immediately below Christ) and added a deadly sin for the ninth (murmuring, or complaining). All nine are painted in a dark brown color.

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The artwork in the dome over the crossing is of a completely different character. Here, where the monks gather daily to sing prayers, angels playing instruments “fly” in a counterclockwise fashion. (These angels are far more traditional looking than those described above in the apse.) The colors are more pastel (compared to the richness of color in the apse) and the overall effect is light and airy. In the dome’s pendentives de Wit painted the four Evangelists with exaggerated folds in their clothing. (The hands and heads are “disturbingly exaggerated” writes St. Joseph Abbey and de Wit historian Adam Begnaud, OSB.)

As worshippers leave the church they gaze upon de Wit’s depiction of the Last Judgment, located above the front doors. Christ is circumscribed within overlapping stylized wings. To each side, at the top, is an angel (drawn in yet another interpretation). Standing to the left of Christ is a group of everyday people, including the afflicted. This grouping, led by a muscular African-American worker, is very similar to New Deal-era murals. To the right of Christ are various individuals, including leaders of the church, a soldier, a businessman in a bowler smoking a cigar, and a monk-artist.

On the narthex side walls are further paintings. Taken with the Last Judgment, they form a triptych of some 33 feet. On one side is a scene depicting the baptism of Christ superimposed upon a crucifixion image. As in the resurrection scene on the other side of the Last Judgment, the muscles and ribcage of Christ are depicted prominently. The resurrection scene is particularly dynamic. A very youthful Christ is shown ascending to heaven. The positioning of the body, combined with the boldly swirling cloth, has a strongly Art Deco feel to it. In broad outline, Christ’s body reads almost as a lightning bolt. The overall feel is anything but traditional.

Along the side aisle to the right (as one enters the church) are paintings of male saints; to the left, female saints. The saints are found within each of the six multi-faceted private chapels framed by double pilasters -- one on each side of a window. Because of space considerations each saint had to be depicted within a narrow and tall framework. The boldly formed saints, with their flowing raiments and angular heads, sometimes read almost as columns. As elsewhere, de Wit’s colors are dazzling -- particularly the golds and regal reds. At the head of each side aisle, as noted above, is a chapel. Above one altar is de Wit’s depiction of the Blessed Virgin Mary; above the other, the Transfiguration. Between the windows in the clerestory are additional saints. These are believed to have been executed by Milo Piuz (according to Begnaud, based on the garments).

Conservation work was undertaken on the church’s murals by specialists Christiana Cunningham-Adams and husband George Adams from mid-1995 through December 1996 (Cunningham-Adams Fine Arts Painting Conservation, Newtown, Connecticut). Clearly this work focused on cleaning rather than re-painting or “over-restoring.” In a report dated January 8, 1996, the conservators noted that the murals, when they began work, were in “excellent condition.” (The murals in the refectory were not part of this conservation project.)

### Assessment of Integrity:

The following changes have been made to the church:

- (1) The altars along the sides of the side aisles, where tiny private chapels once existed, have been removed.

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- (2) The flooring is modern, as are the pews and baptismal font.
- (3) An addition was made to the north transept which destroyed de Wit's paintings of the Archangels Michael and Raphael. (The two paintings in the corresponding south chapel survive.)
- (4) There has been some damage to artwork in the apse ceiling due to Hurricane Katrina (August 29, 2005). Most fortunately, this is confined to some of the small areas depicting the Seven Deadly Sins (plus the Devil and an eighth sin).

**Photos:**

In addition to the required black and white photos, supplemental color images are being provided.

**Information common to all photos:**

**Photographer:** Donna Fricker

**Date Taken:** September 2006

**Location of negatives:** LA SHPO

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Applicable National Register Criteria: A\_\_ B\_\_ C\_X D\_\_

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A\_X B\_\_ C\_\_ D\_\_ E\_\_ F\_\_ G\_\_

Areas of Significance: art

Period(s) of Significance: 1951-55

Significant Dates: same

Significant Person(s): NA

Cultural Affiliation: NA

Architect/Builder: Artist: Dom Gregory de Wit (assisted by Milo Piuz) Architect: Theodore Brune



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### State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

The Saint Joseph Abbey church is of statewide significance because its murals are a *tour de force* of mid-twentieth century art. While Louisiana has some notable work from this period (1930s-'50s), most examples are relatively small in size and of moderate artistic quality (some poor). With its multitude of murals, at the hand of a talented artist, the Saint Joseph Abbey church has very few peers within Louisiana. (This context is limited to artwork that is an integral part of buildings, per National Register guidelines.)

#### The Artist:

Dom Gregory de Wit was born in 1892 in Holland. He entered the monastic life in Belgium in 1913, taking the name Gregory. He completed his novitiate in 1915 and was ordained a priest in 1918. De Wit is said to have shown an interest and skill in painting since childhood. At the close of WWI he was sent to study at the Brussels Academy of Art and then to the Munich Art Academy. He also spent time in Italy. De Wit exhibited his early work at The Hague and in Munich in the 1920s. The only religious murals in Europe verified to be de Wit's work are a series of nine in the refectory of the Abbey of Metten in Bavaria.

De Wit came to the United States in 1938 at the invitation of the abbot of St. Meinrad Abbey in Indiana. The abbot had seen the artist's work in Europe and wished him to paint murals in the abbey church at St. Meinrad. (St. Meinrad is the founding house of St. Joseph.) Among the visitors admiring de Wit's work at St. Meinrad was Abbot Columban Thius of St. Joseph.

De Wit's first commission in Louisiana was at the newly completed Sacred Heart Church in Baton Rouge, where he worked in the early 1940s. He also completed work at St. Meinrad in this period, before taking up residence at Saint Joseph Abbey in February 1945. As noted previously, his first commission at Saint Joseph was the refectory (being nominated separately). Work occurred there between 1945 and 1949. Prior to leaving for a several month sojourn in Europe in 1950, de Wit planned his work for the Saint Joseph Abbey church and left the designs with the community for approval. In January of 1951 the community voted to have de Wit paint the church. Assisting him was a young artist named Milo Piuz, whom de Wit had met in Europe. By all accounts, the designs were de Wit's, but Piuz "had a hand in the execution" (Adam Begnaud, OSB, *Living in Salvation*). As noted in Part 7, Begnaud feels that Milo's hand is most evident in the clerestory murals. The abbey church murals were complete by April 1955, when de Wit expounded on them from the pulpit. Later that year the artist returned to Europe, making occasional trips to the United States. He died November 22, 1978 in Switzerland.

By all accounts de Wit's most extensive and important work in America is in Louisiana – at Sacred Heart and Saint Joseph Abbey. There is no known inventory of his output. The Sacred Heart murals were (and perhaps still are) controversial. One observer, Aelred Kavanaugh, former dean of the seminary at Saint Joseph, considers Sacred Heart to contain de Wit's "most powerful work." The nave is dominated by a huge figure of Christ in the apse's dome. The figure is roughly forty feet high. The deformed-looking right hand, raised in blessing, is six feet long. The depiction is definitely not traditional. As Kavanaugh writes, "it inspires awe, and often dread, in beholders." It is standard to refer to the face as Sicilian or Mediterranean looking. This author saw African features. The flesh is olive (or brown, depending on your interpretation); the eyes are huge; the lips are full; the nose reads almost as a piece of machinery; the neck veins are grossly overstated. The curly hair is stylized, and Christ sports a moustache. Like the work Gregory would do at Saint Joseph, the clothing is full of exaggerated drapes and folds. Originally beneath Christ was a large

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crucifix painted by de Wit on mahogany. It was so controversial as to be removed in 1948. Other work at Sacred Heart includes a handful of murals and a set of stations of the cross. (The work is not nearly as extensive at Sacred Heart as at Saint Joseph church and refectory.) De Wit's work was less than popular with Sacred Heart parishioners. Father Blasco dismissed the monk-artist as he worked on one mural (a quite enticing Woman at the Well). De Wit subsequently returned to finish it.

### The Context:

The vast majority of mid-twentieth century murals in Louisiana date from the 1930s and were commissioned by New Deal agencies. At the lower end of the spectrum are relatively small post office murals of generally mediocre to poor artistic quality. Louisiana retains about a dozen of these – typically one mural per post office. Particularly accomplished New Deal-era murals are located at Allen Hall, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge; the Louisiana State Capitol; and the State Exhibit Building in Shreveport. Well-known muralist and LSU faculty member Conrad Albrizio was the artist for the Capitol and Exhibit Building. Students under his direction executed the Allen Hall work. Conrad's largest work in Louisiana came in 1954 with four murals at the Union Passenger Terminal in New Orleans. Each measures roughly 8 feet by 60 feet. Looking beyond public buildings, the other notable examples of mid-twentieth century murals known to the Louisiana State Historic Preservation Office are the three buildings painted by Dom Gregory de Wit: Sacred Heart in Baton Rouge and the refectory and church at Saint Joseph.

Among the extant mid-twentieth century murals in Louisiana (some in the Capitol have been painted over), the de Wit murals at St. Joseph are conspicuous because of their quality (for example, the stylized drapery) and the overwhelming extent to which they lend character and emotional force to an entire architectural space (as opposed to a single limited section of wall). The abbey church alone contains 49 murals – 7,850 square feet of painting. The Louisiana State Historic Preservation Office knows of no other buildings in Louisiana as extensively articulated in mid-twentieth century mural art.

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### St. Joseph Abbey:

In 1889 a small group of Benedictine monks from St. Meinrad Abbey in Indiana established Saint Joseph Priory and Preparatory College at a site near present-day Pontchatoula, Louisiana. They moved to St. Tammany Parish in 1902, and the priory was elevated to abbey status in 1903. On November 30, 1907, a fire destroyed the wood frame campus, and the monks built anew a few acres to the west. The present large brick main building dates to 1908. That same year the Postmaster General established a post office at the monastery with the name Saint Benedict.

Saint Joseph Seminary College is an accredited four-year college for men interested in the priesthood. The monks staff the college and also serve in area parishes. One of the high-profile ministries of the abbey is Pennies for Bread, which began in 1990 when the monks decided to extend their in-house bread baking to help the poor. Through corporate and individual sponsors, the monks bake about 1,850 loaves per week for delivery to twenty-five organizations.

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Begnaud, Adam, OSB. Living in Salvation: The Murals of Gregory de Wit at Saint Joseph Abbey. Saint Joseph Abbey, 2005.

Eggart, Mary Lee. A Guide to the Art and Architecture of Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1998.

Kasteel, Annemarie and Tassin, Anthony. "A Monk's Masterpiece." Louisiana Cultural Vistas, Fall 2004.

Kasteel, Annemarie and Tassin, Anthony. "Dom Gregory de Wit: Monk and Artist." Unpublished manuscript draft on file at St. Joseph Abbey archives.

Kavanagh, Aelred. "The Glory on the Face of Christ: The Vision of Dom Gregory de Wit, O.S.B." Cross, Crozier and Crucible: A Volume Celebrating the Bicentennial of a Catholic Diocese in Louisiana. Glenn Conrad, General Editor. Archdiocese of New Orleans in cooperation with the Center for Louisiana Studies, 1993.

Saint Joseph Abbey. Century of Grace: A Pictorial History of Saint Joseph Abbey and Seminary. (No publication information)

Previous documentation on file (NPS): NA

- \_\_\_ Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
\_\_\_ Previously Listed in the National Register. (partially)
\_\_\_ Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
\_\_\_ Designated a National Historic Landmark.
\_\_\_ Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
\_\_\_ Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- [X] State Historic Preservation Office
\_\_\_ Other State Agency
\_\_\_ Federal Agency
\_\_\_ Local Government
\_\_\_ University
[X] Other (Specify Repository): Saint Joseph Abbey

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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

Acreeage of Property:           less than an acre

UTM References:	<b>Zone</b>	<b>Easting</b>	<b>Northing</b>
	15	777180	3380500

Verbal Boundary Description: See attached sketch map.

Boundary Justification: Boundaries were chosen to discretely encompass the nominated building. As indicated in Part 7, the church is part of a larger campus with several buildings. Boundaries are tight on the north side because of the proximity of the main building.

**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

Name/Title: Donna Fricker, National Register Coordinator, Division of Historic Preservation

Address: P. O. Box 44247, Baton Rouge, LA 70804

Telephone: 225-342-8160

Date: August 2006

**PROPERTY OWNERS**

St. Joseph Abbey

Saint Joseph Abbey Church  
St. Tammany Parish  
Louisiana

--- BOUNDARY

1" = 50'

