

**United States Department of the Interior  
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**



80

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

**1. Name**

historic St. John's Church and Rectory

and/or common St. John's Church and Rectory

**2. Location**

street & number 121 S. Capitol Avenue; <sup>and</sup> 124, 126 West Georgia St.  not for publication

city, town Indianapolis  vicinity of congressional district 6th

state Indiana code 018 county Marion code 097

**3. Classification**

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> other:

**4. Owner of Property**

name Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Indianapolis

street & number 1350 N. Pennsylvania Street

city, town Indianapolis  vicinity of state Indiana

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. City-County Building

street & number 200 East Washington Street

city, town Indianapolis  vicinity of state Indiana 46204

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

title 1977 Survey of Marion County has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date  federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records Indianapolis Historical Preservation Commission

city, town Indianapolis  vicinity of state Indiana

## 7. Description

<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

### Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

Located in downtown Indianapolis, St. John's Church faces west on Capitol Avenue, and is directly across from the Indiana Convention Center, two blocks south of the Capitol. The Rectory is located south of the church, and faces south on Georgia Street.

#### CHURCH

Designed using a cruciform plan, the French Gothic church has a relatively simple brick and limestone exterior. The foundation is of rock-faced limestone. Above this, the red brick walls are laid in a Flemish variation of common bond. The contrasting white limestone corner buttresses form visually strong vertical elements which divide the facade into three parts. The gabled center section is three stories high and contains the main entrance (see Photo #2). A pair of plain wooden doors are ornamented by floriated iron work. Flanking the doors are limestone Corinthian columns, which support a compound Gothic arch. The tympanum features a life-sized stone carving, representing St. John writing the Gospel. The arch is surmounted by a gabled parapet, with a blind trefoil beneath the coping, and a cross at its apex. Above the entrance at the second-story level is a large rose window, depicting the baptism of Christ by St. John. The rose window is within a broad inset panel of brick, framed by a Gothic arch, supported by slender Corinthian columns. Above this is a pair of trefoil-arched openings within a blind Gothic arch, and finally, the gable with a cross above the stone coping.

This center section is flanked by identical towers, with copper spires. Each tower features a minor entrance, with additional openings at each of the four upper levels that are separated by stone belt courses.

The Gothic mode is continued in the interior. Corinthian columns and ribbed vaulting are executed in plaster, and are not structural, as is evidenced by the fact that the columns rest on corbelled, floriated bases, halfway up the flat surface of the walls (see Photo #3).

The apse contains traceried stained glass windows, behind a Gothic-styled altar. Wood paneling and ornate plasterwork cover the walls, and the ceiling is decorated with painted angel figures in a starry sky (see Photo #4). Flanking the sanctuary are side altars with figures of Mary and Joseph beneath ornate, architectonic Gothic structures. An elaborate pulpit of quartered white oak stands at the southwest intersection of the short transept (see Photo #5). Side aisles are twelve feet wide and contain small chapels.

At the rear of the nave, above the narthex, is a pipe organ and choir gallery finished in quartered white oak (see Photo #6).

#### RECTORY

The Rectory (see Photo #7) is actually made up of two parts: The 1863 rectory to the east, and the 1879 former chancery, attached to the west side of the rectory. Together they form the present-day Rectory.

The two-story, 1863 building, like the church, is constructed of red brick laid in a Flemish variation of common bond, and is trimmed in stone. The three-bay facade features a limestone foundation and water table. Steps lead up to the entrance, which is located in the righthand bay. The rectangular opening contains a Tudor arch, which encloses multi-paned sidelights and transom. The actual front door is recessed behind this opening. All first floor openings have label hood molding, as does the center opening of the second floor.

## 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

Specific dates	Church	Rectory	Builder/Architect
	1867-93	1863-79	D. A. Bohlen (Church)

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

St. John's Church, the Rectory, and the site on which they are located are historically significant because they have played a central role in the growth and development of Catholicism in Indianapolis, and because of their association with three important religious leaders: Jacques Maurice Landes de Saint-Palais, Francis Silas Marean Chatard, and John Francis August Bessonies. The church is architecturally significant as a major building designed by the prominent local architectural firm of D.A. Bohlen and Son.

St. John's, as it now exists, replaced a modest church which served from 1850 to 1867 on the same site. This earlier building served as an army recruiting station during the Civil War. The current structure, designed by Deitrich A. Bohlen, was begun in 1867. By this date Bohlen, a German immigrant, had been in private practice for fourteen years, and had already designed the Morris Butler House (National Register, 1973), and the convent and chapel at St. Mary-of-the-Woods in Terre Haute. His firm, one of the most prominent in Indianapolis, later designed numerous other major buildings, including Roberts Park Church (1873), Crown Hill Cemetery Chapel (1875), the City Market (1886), and the Majestic Building (1895), all of which have been nominated for, or are listed in, the National Register. Bohlen's son, Oscar, planned the renovation and added the spires to St. John's in 1893.

The enormous size of the church stems from the intention of Bishop Maurice de Saint Palais that St. John's Church would eventually become the Cathedral Church upon the creation of the Catholic Diocese of Indianapolis. This state of affairs, however, never materialized. Born in France in 1811, Saint Palais became bishop of the Indiana diocese in Vincennes in 1848, and used St. John's as his residence during frequent visits to Indianapolis. He is most noted for persuading the Benedictines of Einsiedeln, Switzerland, to send a group of sisters to St. Meinrad's in southern Indiana in 1857, thus beginning the Benedictine community located there.

Francis Silas Marean Chatard, born in Baltimore in 1834, succeeded St. Palais as bishop of Vincennes in 1878. He established his personal residence at St. John's, making an addition to the existing rectory, and thus increased the visibility and importance of the church. He enjoyed a reputation as an academic theologian based on his essay, Christian Truths, published in 1881.

Reverend John Francis August Bessonies was pastor of St. John's from 1857 to 1890. Born in France in 1815, he came to the United States in 1839. He served in Perry County, Indiana, for thirteen years, where he founded the town of Leopold and established five churches. Bessonies built St. John's Adademy, a school, after his arrival in Indianapolis. He built the parsonage, arranged for the purchase of the Catholic cemetery, and established the first Catholic hospital in the city. Bessonies was prominent in the temperance movement in Indianapolis, was agent for the Orphans' Asylum, and later was appointed administrator of the Diocese of Vincennes.

The first ordination of priests in the City of Indianapolis took place at St. John's in 1874, and in 1900 the first Catholic bishop was consecrated in the diocese at St. John's.

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

Alerding, Herman: A History of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Vincennes.  
 Carlon and Hollenbeck, Indianapolis, 1883

Godecker, Sister Mary Salesia, O.S.B.: Simon Brute de Remur. St. Meinrad Historical  
 Essays. Abbey Press, St. Meinrad, Indiana, 1931. (Continued)

# 10. Geographical Data

**UTM NOT VERIFIED**

Acreeage of nominated property Less than one acre  
 Quadrangle name Indianapolis West, Indiana

**ACREAGE NOT VERIFIED** Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UMT References

A 

1	6	5	7	1	8	4	0	4	4	0	1	7	5	0
Zone	Easting				Northing									

B 

Zone	Easting				Northing									

C 

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D 

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**Verbal boundary description and justification** Beginning at a point at the northeast corner of Georgia Street and Capitol Avenue, thence north along the curblin 200 feet to an alley (also called Chesapeake Street); thence 200 feet along the centerline of the alleyway to another alley; thence south 200 feet along the centerline of the alleyway; thence west

**List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries**

state code county code

state code county code

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Rev. Thomas C. Widner and Sister Marie Wolf

organization St. John Catholic Church date

street & number 126 West Georgia Street telephone 635-2021

city or town Indianapolis state Indiana 46204

# 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature Joseph P. Land

title State Historic Preservation Officer date July 11, 1980

**For HCRS use only**

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

Joseph P. Land date 9/17/80  
 Keeper of the National Register

Attest: W. Ray Luce date 9/8/80

Chief of Registration

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The most outstanding feature of the 1863 building is the Flemish gable with its Gothic-arched niche and flanking windows. Brick detailing and stone coping emphasize the unusual shape of the gable.

The east wall of this building features a gabled wall dormer with two lancet windows, and two smaller dormers.

The 1879 building, though simple in its design, is more Victorian in flavor. All openings are segmentally arched. The entrance is at the east side of the Georgia Street facade, next to the 1863 building. Also on this side is a projecting two-story bay. The slate roof is hipped and features gabled dormers and a conical roof above the projecting bay. A Flemish-bond wall separates this portion of the Rectory from the street.

The Rectory is attached to the church by a one-story addition to its north wall.

Also on this property, but not included in this nomination, is a 1966 education building. This two-story brick building stands on the northeast corner of the intersection of Capitol and Georgia.

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Horan, Sister Rose Angela, S.P.: The Story of Old St. John's (A parish Rooted in Pioneer Indianapolis). Litho Press, Inc., Indianapolis, Indiana, 1971.

Mug, Sister Mary Theodosia, S.P.: Lest We Forget. Providence Press, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana, 1931.

Schroeder, Sister Mary Carol, O.S.F.: The Catholic Church in the Diocese of Vincennes, 1847-1877. The Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 1946.

OFFICIAL RECORDS

Archives, St. John Church, Indianapolis, Indiana

Bohlen and Son, Architects. Official files: Original Drawings and Account Books of the 1860s and 1870s.

OFFICIAL DIRECTORIES

Indiana Almanac and Fact Book. 1967 edition. Ed. Leary & Associates, Indianapolis, Indiana

The Official Catholic Directory, known in earlier years as The Catholic Almanac or Catholic Almanac for the Laity. Years 1833-1968. Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College Library and Notre Dame University Library.

Year Books of the Diocese and Archdiocese of Indianapolis. 1918 and successive years. Chancery Office, Indianapolis.

NEWSPAPERS

The Democrat (The Indiana Democrat), 1834-1846.

The Journal, 1833-1889. Also known as The Indianapolis Journal.

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along the north curbline of Georgia Street 200 feet to the place of beginning.