

# **The History of the St. Mary's Nativity Church Pipe Organ**

by  
**Eric Ordoyne**

**In 1960, the newly appointed Pastor of St. Mary's Nativity Parish, Rev. Sebastien Arjonilla, undertook the task of refurbishing the old church which was built in 1876. As a part of the renovations, a 2 manual 4 rank pipe organ from the Wicks Organ Company of Highland, Illinois was purchased and installed in the rear gallery and became OPUS # 4049. In 1966, the present parish Church was built, and the church called upon August Laine, pipe organ builder, to move the organ to this new church. The organ was placed in a chamber behind the main altar, a place where it would sit for over forty-years. In May 2008, the organ played its last hymn from this position.**

**In 2006, we began questioning why the pipe organ was unimpressive and inadequate for the liturgy. Contact was made with the New Orleans Chapter of the Organ Historical Society through parishioner and choir member Ray Pitre. Several members of the society, including University of New Orleans music professor Dr. James Hammann, Dr. Carol Britt from Nicholls State University and husband Bennett and Mr. John DeMajo, president of the society at the time, visited the Church in April, 2007. It was determined that the location of the organ chamber behind the altar prevented the organ from being heard in the Church as the brick wall was dampening the sound as it tried to emerge from the chamber. Dr. Hammann recommended that the organ be removed from the chamber and placed in the main body of the Church.**

**At this time, we already had received a donation for the organ. This was not enough to complete the project, so we began to seek additional funding. After receiving a total of \$23,925 from two donors specifically for the organ, the decision was made to expand the organ. Dr. Hammann generously offered to be the consultant to the project.**

**In early 2008, the original organ was disassembled and reinstalled inside an antique wooden organ case removed from St. Matthias Catholic Church in New Orleans. The case was in deplorable condition, but was**

refinished to its original glory and expanded with the help of several parishioners. Dr. Hammann also donated the original pipes from the St. Mattias organ. Its windchest was added to our organ as a second division windchest. ("Great" windchest).

Much preparation was required before the project could begin. First, we removed the decorative steel panels and repaired the holes in the drywall before we could install the case. Then, a new choir seating area was constructed using the pews removed to make room for the organ case. Work continued at steady intervals until the aftermath of two hurricanes slowed progress. In January, 2009, work resumed at full speed until December. We worked exclusively with volunteers in their available spare time. The only cost incurred were for parts.

Another phase of work involved removing the old console and replacing it with a larger console donated by Dr. Hammann. New wiring was installed to all the valves in the organ and all valves were replaced on the great division. The original blower was replaced with a new silent blower, and the winding system was redesigned. A new Syndyne computer system was added, making the organ more responsive and allowing the organist to record performances and play them back. John DeMajo, along with Baton Rouge electrical Engineer, John Couvillion, served as excellent sources and volunteered several hours to help in these areas.

We take pride in that fact that we are one of only two Catholic Churches in the Houma-Thibodaux Diocese that is fortunate to have a pipe organ. Our Church cherishes the opportunity to host organ recitals such as this one to cultivate greater interest of music in our parish. We would like to extend our appreciation to our parishioners for their patience and support during this project.

**Special Note:** It is fitting to recognize Mrs. Wanda Hitt, who was an organist at St. Mary Nativity for no less than fifty years. She played and guided the choir, enhancing the celebration of the mass.