The Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, Savannah, GA
August 2013

Welcome Home!
“A Catholic priest with strong roots at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist will return as its new rector.” This was the lead in the story by Jan Skutch, that appeared in the Savannah Morning News a few months ago.

By now we all know that Rev. J. Gerard “Gerry” Schreck, former pastor at St. Anne Parish in Columbus, has succeeded Monsignor William O’Neill, who retired in June after 17 years as Rector at the Cathedral.

Other background detailed by Skutch gives a clearer picture of Fr. Schreck’s ties to Savannah.

“Schreck, has deep roots in Savannah, having grown up on Henry Street in Gordonston. He was baptized at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church but said he attended the Cathedral “probably before I was born.” He was an altar boy from the second grade along with Pat Rossiter, Danny Brown, Michael Brown and others.

“His mother, Patricia ‘Patty’ Barragan Schreck, retired last August after 66 years as organist at the Cathedral. His brother, Monsignor Christopher Schreck, also a diocesan priest, is Rector/President of The Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio and their sister, Nancy Schreck, is a life-long member at the Cathedral having served for many years as a choir member and also as a member of the Parish Council.

“Fr. Schreck attended Cathedral Day School through eighth grade, then Benedictine Military School for his freshman year before transferring to St. John Vianney Minor Seminary in Richmond, VA. He is a graduate of the College of William and Mary and Notre Dame University and has a doctorate in canon law from the Gregorian University in Rome.

“He was ordained a priest for the Savannah Diocese in 1983. His first assignment was at Blessed Sacrament from 1983-1986, then three years of graduate studies before going to Columbus in 1989 as assistant pastor to the Rev. J. Kevin Boland at St. Anne. When Boland was named bishop in 1995, he was appointed pastor of the church.”

When asked about his feelings and hopes coming to the Cathedral, Fr. Schreck offered these observations:

“I am delighted to be back home in Savannah, and at the Cathedral. As I look out into the Church from the altar at Mass, I am still amazed that I have been given this privilege to serve as the Rector of the Cathedral. I grew up here, and spent so many hours of my youth as an altar boy in the Cathedral. I can’t help but think of my father who died in 1993, and my mother who played the organ for 66 years, each time I enter the Church. I have appreciated so much the very kind welcome that I have received from so many people. Every time someone says “Welcome home, Gerry” it makes me feel so happy.

“I think the Cathedral is a real jewel for Savannah as well as the Diocese of Savannah and I want to give my very best effort to maintain the beauty and the integrity of this great Church. Each of us who call the Cathedral our parish Church have an obligation to preserve this beautiful Church for future generations of Catholics in Savannah and..."
I hope that we can continue to build up the community of the Cathedral parish. Our parishioners come from many different parts of Savannah, and even from outside the city. I think we can all be very proud to call ourselves Cathedral parishioners. Like any parish, we can always improve our efforts to be a hospitable community, a welcoming parish.

“We find ourselves at a point in the life of the Church when we have identified a need for a ‘new evangelization.’ It is so important that our parish offer opportunities for continuing religious education for adults, to rediscover the great richness and beauty of the Catholic faith. I would love to see us develop a Cathedral Theology Series for which we could invite well-known theologians and scholars to speak, and make it open to the wider Catholic community. The religious education of our children is critically important. We must continue to support and strengthen our Sunday School and Sacramental Preparation Programs for the children of the Cathedral.

“The Cathedral itself, and the area around it, are quite beautiful. What strikes me about Europe is that often the Church, and the piazza or plaza in front of it, are the gathering points for people in the town, precisely because it is the prettiest space. People love to sit outside and take in the architecture, maybe listen to some music, and even enjoy a glass of wine. I hope that there will be some occasions when we can use our Cathedral plaza for the enjoyment of our parishioners, perhaps with concerts, receptions, and other parish events. Just something to consider.

“Everyone who comes to the Cathedral to worship, comes not only for the building, but for the music, the liturgy itself, and prayer. Our music program is wonderful. It is so important that we support it and continue to provide for its growth in the future. Our Lectors, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, Ushers and Altar Servers carry out their functions with reverence and skill and dedication. It is the ‘noble simplicity’ of the Roman Catholic Liturgy that should always shine forth in our Sunday and daily Masses. I want to encourage our parishioners to share generously the gifts and talents which God has given them with the parish.

“With each celebration of the Mass, the people are ‘sent forth’ to be the Body of Christ in the community. The Cathedral parish should be known for its generosity and willingness to be of service to our neighbors. God has given us the gifts of time and talent and treasure. Each day, and month and year, we discover what it means to be a good steward of those gifts. Let’s encourage one another to be generous with those things and to trust in God’s providence for our lives.

“Lastly, I hope that everyone who comes to the Cathedral on a Sunday, or for a daily visit, will feel welcome, will be inspired by God’s Word, and will be nourished by the Eucharist. Let’s continue to make our Cathedral a warm and joyful place, and be proud to be a Cathedral member,” he concluded.

Although Fr. Schreck began his new duties on June 12th, he’s still trying to put the names and faces of the members of our 1200 registered households together. Make sure you stop by after Mass and introduce yourself, to help him get to know everyone in the parish.

Photos of Fr. Schreck in vestibule by Mary Clark Rechtiene.
Others courtesy of the Schrect family
The most publicly visible lay ministry of the Cathedral is the Tour Guide Ministry. Judy Roddy, Ministry Coordinator, recalls its beginnings in early 2001 as the brain child of Br. Robert following the 2000 restoration of the church. “This has been and is truly a rewarding and enjoyable ministry as each day is different,” Judy said. “During high tourist season, also at St. Patrick’s Day and Christmas time, there may be as many as 2,000 visitors a day. Other days there might be only 200. I have belonged to many different ministries in several parishes, but the Tour Guide Ministry at the Cathedral is far and away my favorite. Come join us, and I’ll bet you will also find it fulfilling,” she concluded.

Many of our current docents also offered some comments and observations that show the humorous or lighter side of this work, as well as some that are more serious.

Peter Connolly states that the most satisfying thing for him is his chance to tell our visitors, many of whom have never been in a Catholic Church, about our religion. As Pete puts it, “to show them we don’t have horns and tails.” He remembers one man who stood in the entrance and asked if it was okay if he came in since he was a Mason!

Allen Janacek tells of three twenty-something girls who came to see the church. One said, “I have to get married in this church.” Later, when leaving, the same girl said, “I’m not getting married in this church because everyone would be looking at the church and not at me!”

Peter Paolucci commented on the awe expressed by the people on seeing the colors of the interior, the beautiful windows, the magnificent Stations. He tells them perhaps it is a foretaste of heaven.

“Being a Cathedral tour guide is one of the joys of my life. There is a bounce in my step as I stroll over to give tours on Friday mornings,” he said.
Twelve years ago when Betty Schwarz moved to Savannah, she and her husband visited many local churches. When they first entered the Cathedral they stood in silence, amazed at the beauty of the interior. On a recent visit to the Cathedral-Basilica in Mobile, Alabama, they were shocked that there were no docents to tell visitors about the church. Docents are needed to not only tell about the building but also to welcome our guests with a bit of Southern Hospitality.

John Pryor says that he volunteers his time as a way of giving back to the Church. He is proud of its place in the history of the City of Savannah. John relates that non-Catholics are interested in the confessional. In his light hearted way, he tells them that when he was 15 or 16 years of age he didn’t like going to confession. However, now that he is 70, it is the cheapest shrink he can visit.

We are often asked the same questions by our visitors:
- How do you change light bulbs?
- Why are there several altars?
- Are there ashes in the silver vessels in the ambry?
- Is the church still active?
- What kind of church is this?
- Can I touch the Holy Water?
- Is anyone buried here?

As a newer tour guide, Anne Hackett has been impressed by our visitors' response to the Cathedral. “When I give tours, I am inspired by our visitors’ curiosity, their respect, and faithfulness plus the quiet, “AHH”, that is often whispered when they come into the church. Overcome by the Cathedral’s beauty, its warm tones and magnificent scale, they also appreciate the quiet and prayerful respite it provides during a hectic day of touring Savannah,” she stated.

Why do I do this? It is simple. I have a great fondness for this place and all that it represents. The Church is where our life begins through Baptism and where it ends with a Mass of Christian Burial.

Sadly, it is evident from speaking with some tourists, especially the young, that they have no idea what type of building they are in. It runs to the extremes of once having a young teen ask me, “What do you have all this stuff for?” to another young student who said, “I wish I was dressed better to be in a place like this.”

People open the double doors and express awe at what they see before them. Following are some of their comments:
- This rivals the churches I saw in Europe;
- I had no idea there was such a beautiful church in the USA;
- This is prettier than St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York;
- You should see where I go to church;
- Do you still hold services here;
- This doesn’t look like any Baptist church I ever saw!

I was once asked, “Who started the Catholic Church?” I told the gentleman that it was started by Jesus Christ. He looked at his companion with dismay and said, “Did you hear what she said?” I then showed them the window of Christ giving Peter the keys. They’re probably still pondering that one.

As they leave, I have had more than one visitor say to me that although they are not Catholic, they feel something in here.

If you have warm feelings for our Cathedral, and enjoy speaking with and meeting people, from not just the USA but from all over the world, consider joining this team of dedicated docents. It is a very satisfying way to give back and it is guaranteed that you will learn more about your Church, the public and yourself. If you are interested, contact the Cathedral office @ 233-4709; morning & afternoon shifts available.
Although previously reported that the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist was ranked #6 on TripAdvisor’s inaugural Travelers’ Choice Attractions Awards for the top U.S. landmarks, this is such a significant accolade, that it bears repeating. TripAdvisor, the world's largest travel site, posts over 100 million candid reviews, opinions, and photos of hotels, restaurants, attractions, and more, all by individual travelers. They also offer free travel guides and popular forums with advice about virtually every destination. No wonder so many travelers make TripAdvisor their first stop before every trip. For the selection process, TripAdvisor culled through thousands of traveler reviews.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Savannah’s downtown historic district was ranked #6, if you consider only ratings of "Very Good" and "Excellent", the Cathedral was essentially tied with Gettysburg, being rated at 97.6% vs. 98% for the battlefield. It is also instructive to review the entire top 10 list, to realize that the Cathedral is in exalted company and this is a really big deal!

1. Bellagio Fountains, Las Vegas, Nevada
2. Gettysburg National Military Park, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania
3. USS Arizona Memorial, Honolulu, Hawaii
4. Top of the Rock Observation Deck, New York City
5. Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, California
6. Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, Savannah, Georgia
7. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C.
8. Broadway, New York City
9. Cloud Gate, Chicago, Illinois
10. Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool, Washington, D.C.

Comments from visitors to the Cathedral on the TripAdvisor site, show why it was in sixth place.

"Inspiring!"

The Cathedral of St. John the Baptist is majestic on the outside and amazing on the inside. The Stations of the Cross are large hand-carved works of art. The Baptismal Font area and the stained glass throughout are stunning. Make sure you look up at the choir loft and organ section which is equally wonderful. Taking pictures inside the cathedral is allowed and I’m sure you will take many. It is easy to get to by car and is one of the stops on the trolley tours. You don’t have to be religious (or Catholic) to appreciate the inspiring beauty.

"Beautiful interior, European feel."

Stunning interior, beautiful stained glass — it reminds me of European cathedrals. The choir and organ were practicing, making it even more special.

“Breathtaking!”

The outside had scaffolding and is being worked on but when you entered the inside of the church it took your breath away. The fine details of the stations of the cross and the side altar and the pictures on the walls and ceiling and the stained glass windows are so awe inspiring. You must go in to see. Don’t forget your camera. My children are still talking about the beauty of the church. A definite must see.

“Amazing!”

This is the most beautiful church I have ever seen! It is the home church for the Diocese of Savannah. Full of history, amazing architecture and art. You will be amazed! After your visit you’ll find yourself feeling rested and prayerful!

This recognition of the Cathedral as well as the regard visitors have for our magnificent structure, underscores our responsibility to preserve it for generations to come.
Join Bishop Gregory Hartmayer, Father Gerard Schreck, Chairman Gretchen Reese, your fellow parishioners and friends of The Cathedral of St. John the Baptist as we come together once again for the Gala fundraiser that helps preserve our magnificent Cathedral. Mark your calendar now for Saturday November 23, 2013 at 7:00 p.m. for this exciting annual event. Themed "Art and Soul", attendees will be able to stroll through Spanish Sojourns: Robert Henri and the Spirit of Spain, on view at the Jepson during the Gala. Guests from throughout the Diocese travel to Savannah to enjoy this signature event to support our diocesan Mother Church.

For more than 135 years, the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist has graced the skyline of Savannah, signaling a welcome to our citizens and tourists alike. An iconic symbol of our city, dominating an entire city block in the heart of the National Historic Landmark District, the Cathedral adds to the beauty and history of our community. The Cathedral Endowment Fund was established in 2000 to maintain the architectural soundness, integrity and beauty of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. The Heritage Ball, now the Gala, supports the Endowment Fund and is the much-anticipated social event every fall. Over $1,000,000 has been raised for the fund over the last twelve years. All of the proceeds from this year’s event will be contributed to the fund and will be used for the on-going restoration projects.

Once again, the Gala format includes heavy hors d’oeuvres, open bars, valet parking, and a Live Auction with a number of exciting prizes. In addition to the auction, we have many opportunities for sponsorships and advertising. One important new feature this year is the opportunity to purchase reserved seating. Since the Jepson Center cannot accommodate seating for all attendees, seating will be available on a “first come, first served” basis.

For more information, please call Catherine Dunn Kostilnik, Marketing Chair, at 912-429-7612 or contact us via our email address savannahcathedralgala@gmail.com.
Creating beauty and
elegance for 25 Years

It was previously reported that Brother Robert Sokolowski recently marked 25 years of service to the Cathedral.

In view of a couple of stories in this issue, it’s worth noting that the Tour Guide Ministry, which was his brain child, is still thriving today, warmly welcoming visitors from all over the country and around the world, to our beautiful Cathedral.

And the recent accolade from TripAdvisor of a 6th place ranking among top US attractions, is in no small measure due to Brother Robert’s elegant decorations, which adorn our church throughout the various liturgical seasons. It is not unusual at Christmastime, that well over 1000 visitors a day, come through the Cathedral, to view his Nativity masterpiece.

It’s hard to imagine the Cathedral without him! He has shared with us his time, treasure and talent in ways we can never measure. God Bless you Brother Robert, as you continue your service to the Marist Brothers and the Cathedral Parish.