Pope Francis proclaimed a Year of Consecrated Life, starting on the First Sunday of Advent, the weekend of November 29, 2014, and ending on February 2, 2016, the World Day of Consecrated life. In a letter addressed to all religious on November 30, 2014, Bishop Hartmayer said:

“Today begins a period of Grace for all women and men who live a consecrated life. In our 164 years of growth as a diocese, Religious women and men have been an invaluable part of our proud history from the very beginning. The Diocese of Savannah has been blessed with the presence of members of a variety of Religious Communities providing pastoral ministry in our schools, hospitals, parishes, social outreach and contemplative life. As the bishop of the diocese, I am most grateful to you for your presence, your witness and the good work that you do. We are a holier diocese because of your presence among us.”

Here in the Cathedral Parish we are blessed to have the Convent of St. Vincent de Paul, a living Savannah landmark, located right next door at the corner of Liberty and Abercorn Streets since 1845. Throughout these past 170 years, this dignified and historic building has served as the residence for hundreds of Sisters of Mercy.

They were among the first teachers in Savannah, establishing St. Vincent’s Academy, the oldest Mercy secondary institution in continuous existence in America. They built and opened St Joseph’s Hospital and they took care of orphans in their convent for 30 years until they staffed St. Mary’s Home. Since 1845, these women, have served Savannah’s sick, her poor, and her children. They have been, and remain today, a formidable part of Savannah’s ongoing history.

It all started in 1845 when six of these dedicated women arrived in Savannah from Charleston. After the construction of the convent was complete, more sisters arrived to help with the tasks. Many orphans they would then gather up and take with them into the Convent. In 1876, more than a thousand people died of this disease within a two week period. Thousands fled the city, leaving businesses closed and inextricable confusion.

More than 60 percent of the victims died over a period of six or seven days. But the brave sisters stayed and worked night and day to serve Savannah. We have no way to estimate how many times these sisters saved and shaped or how many of our neighbors would not be here if their ancestors had not been saved by the kindness of these sisters.

There is one notable but little known contribution made by the sisters to the Diocese of Savannah. In 1870, shortly after his arrival in Savannah, Bishop Ignatius Persico made plans to erect a new cathedral. At that time, the Sisters of Mercy owned the large lot on Lafayette Square adjacent to St. Vincent’s Academy. Bishop Persico made an arrangement with the sisters to trade them a plot owned by the diocese on Whitfield Square while the diocese gained the property facing Abercorn running back along Harris towards Lincoln for its cathedral. The first St. Joseph’s Hospital was ultimately built on the Taylor Street property.

Today this Convent is still home to the Sisters of Mercy. Over the years it has been an orphanage, a hospital and a school — whatever it needed to be to serve. So many generations have been affected by their service and generosity. We are blessed to have had the good sisters as our neighbors all these years.
To some it’s absurd, and to others it’s an idol, but to Catholics, the Eucharist is a profound mystery that expresses the inconceivable love and humility of Christ. The Real Presence of Jesus in the Sacred Host is hard for the world to swallow. The Jews couldn’t accept the notion of eating human flesh and blood. The rest of the world rejected the idea of a transcendent deity manifesting himself in a crude, perishable substance. Such things are undignified and unsophisticated and, especially to the modern mind, superstitious.

We celebrate this mystery as a Feast Day — the Feast of Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ. The term itself can come across a bit unsettling to the unaccustomed ear. To feast on Jesus’ body? And we don’t allow dismissal as a metaphor or symbol; this is literally what we do.

Even further, the Eucharist isn’t just some element of our Faith — it is the central concept. It forms the basis of our Liturgy, it is the most blessed of all the Sacraments, and it is the rallying point of the Church. Everything orbits around it. It seems bizarre: God comes down as bread. We drink his blood. But this concept has a divine origin, not a human one. One must wonder if such a peculiar method wasn’t meant to capture man’s attention and enlighten him.

The book of Leviticus provides some insight into the function of the Eucharist. In Chapter 17 we read the Israelites are strictly prohibited from consuming the blood of animals. The reason is emphasized multiple times: “the life of every creature is its blood.” From this reading our physical participation with the Blessed Sacrament reveals an unmistakable reality. We are being inoculated with the very life-energy of Christ. Might this only be done in a spiritual way? Probably. But man is not just a spirit: he is a spirit-animal hybrid, and God knows that man’s religion must cater to both his needs. In this way the Eucharist offers a profound insight into the character of God: it is a sign of His remarkable humility in continuously making himself physical to meet the physical needs of fallen creatures.

If we understand the infinite majesty of God, the manifestation of his humility is astounding. We see God’s humility expressed drastically in the taking on of human form, and then enduring gross mistreatment, torture and death. We see even further God’s humility in his unrelenting pursuit of “the least these.”

We see this humility in how Jesus responds to the marginalized of society at great personal cost. He touched lepers, he ate with tax collectors, he defended prostitutes. St. Paul recalled this kind of humility in Philippians Chapter 2: “[Jesus] who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.”

But the Feast of Corpus Christi acknowledges an even deeper “stooping down” to secure our rescue. In his own meditations St. Josemaria Escriva wrote, “The humility of Jesus: in Bethlehem, in Nazareth, on Calvary. But more humiliation and more self-abasement still in the Sacred Host: more than in the stable, more than in Nazareth, more than on the Cross.”

St. John records this in Jesus’ own words: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”

In case one is ever tempted to think God could go no further than becoming one of us to save us, our attention is roused by Corpus Christi in the Eucharist — he lowered himself even further. He came not only to save us from death, but to give us life. He became bread. And he beckons us to come and eat.
Although Faith Formation is ongoing, the Cathedral’s Children’s Religious Education (CRE) program concluded a school year in which four sacraments were conveyed and a celebration of the Bible was conducted for the parents. We accomplished our mission of putting children on the path to become lifelong disciples of Jesus through our weekly Sunday School sessions and while preparing 41 children to receive the sacraments of initiation; Baptism, Eucharist and Confirmation and 25 children received the sacrament of forgiveness; Reconciliation. Our enrollment number swelled to 73 children. It was a wonderful year of Faith Formation.

Father Schreck and Deacon Smith conducted Baptism for seven of our CRE children. We chose January 11th since that was the Sunday in the Church calendar that we commemorate the Baptism of Jesus. All the children from the CRE program gathered around the Cathedral Baptismal font to witness the Baptism of their peers. It was a memorable learning experience for all in attendance.

We were honored by Bishop Hartmayer who conveyed the sacrament of Confirmation on nine Cathedral candidates during the May 7th evening. Each candidate was prepared for Confirmation by William Gill and Will Cook. We shared the evening with four Confirmation candidates from St. Michael’s Church on Tybee Island. It was wonderful to see the 13 young Catholics who prepared diligently for the event. The Bishop spoke to each candidate before and during Confirmation using a mix of serious and not so serious probing questions to make sure they were adequately prepared to receive the sacrament. Luckily they all passed the examination and went on to receive the sacrament followed by the delicious dinner reception put on by the Cathedral CCW and Knights of Columbus.
First Eucharist and Reconciliation took place during Mother’s Day weekend as is tradition. We had 25 CRE students receive the sacraments who were prepared by either Shannon Lancaster or Sherri Rachael. It was inspiring to see so many young people receive the sacraments for the first time and watch the proud parents and other family members as they witnessed this important event in our Catholic life. Father Schreck and the catechists did a nice job of putting the children at ease and as a result the children’s piety and decorum were impeccable.

During a recent meeting with the catechists, I asked them to decide what our focus should be during the end of the year celebration. It was unanimously decided that we would focus on the Bible, the foundation of our faith. As a result, during the last day of class we invited the parents to see and hear the chosen Bible stories. Julie Estvander’s Kindergarten and 1st grade class told the story of Creation, Amy Schuler’s 5th and 6th graders told the story of the 10 plagues of Egypt, Betsy Blalock’s 3rd and 4th graders sang about the fall of the city of Jericho, Sherri Rachael’s 2nd and 3rd graders told the story of the fiery furnace using a felt board and William Gill’s 7th and 8th graders acted out the feast of Pentecost. The Parish Center was filled to capacity as the children told the stories as only children can.

The staff of the Cathedral’s Children’s Religious Education program sincerely thanks the parents for their support of our program. Every year we keep getting bigger and better in our delivery of our Catholic faith. I also want to thank each member of the parish who in some way encourages or supports the catechists, children or parents to ensure a viable program for many years to come.
The tour guides were recently treated to a personal behind the scenes tour of the Cathedral by Monsignor O’Neill. As you would expect, it was filled with many previously unknown details about the restoration and numerous humor filled vignettes.

“Bishop Boland and I worked very closely to make the many decisions regarding the various elements of the Cathedral restoration,” he began.

Monsignor O’Neill pointed out the decorative paint on the side aisle wall, underneath the Stations, which was not there before the restoration. “It was there years ago but back in the 1960’s, it was painted over during that restoration. The restorers stripped down the paint and discovered that pattern. I kind of liked it so we decided to keep it,” he said. Some of the records show that Christopher Murphy, after securing the services of Paul Gutsche in Greenwich Village New York City, to paint the murals, came back to Savannah and began decorating the Cathedral to compliment the murals. So he was likely the artist who painted those designs.

There was also a big decision of what color to paint the ceiling of the Cathedral. “The restorers gave us several renderings of the ceilings to help us decide what to do. There was one with center plain and the side aisle ceilings painted blue. Then we had a blue insert for the center and finally considered the center blue and the side aisle ceilings with the lighter color. In the end, we decided that blue on the side and the center plain was the way to go to give height to the center aisle ceiling.”

He told us that he ascended the scaffolding many times to inspect various aspects of the restoration. One morning he was climbing up to look at a problem with the steeples. But he was in such a hurry that he didn’t put on the harness. As he climbed higher, his pants began to slip below his waist, then his knees and finally they were at his ankles. He was afraid that the TV coverage would catch him mooning over Savannah.

Monsignor told the tour guides about the mistake in the new altar panels which makes it unique. After considering various designs, he convinced everyone that we should go with a design that matched the old altar. “You can see that the thin panels on the end of the old altar are on the side of the new altar. And the columns are sturdier because it is a self standing altar. For the center, we took castings from the panels on the old high altar and sent them to Italy to carve them to match and constructed the new altar. But in making the impressions for the molds, the workers failed to notice that the panels on either side of the center panel of the old high
Altar are different. They only made a mold for one side not realizing they were different and now in our new altar panels the acorns in both side panels face the same way."

“We were going to remove the three tabernacles on the Blessed Virgin, St. Anthony and St. Joseph altars from the Cathedral. But I hate to throw anything out, so one morning while shaving, I got the idea to use them to make the Ambry. I called the architect and told him I got a new idea while I was shaving. ‘Why don’t you grow a beard,’ he replied. Finally he agreed, it was a good idea.”

On the new pulpit, there are carvings of the evangelists Matthew and Mark on each side while John and Luke are on the center panel. Monsignor told us that the only way you could fit 2 evangelists on one panel was to put John’s symbol, the eagle up into the arched top of the panel, above Luke’s.

He also mentioned that one of the surface panels of the Baptismal Font is a lighter color, because the original got damaged on the way from Italy and we had to order a replacement. Even though they took it from the same quarry in Carrara, it is a slightly different shade. The damaged original is in the basement.

All the stained glass windows were sent to New Berlin, Wisconsin to be restored at the Conrad Schmidt Studios. Remarkably none of them were damaged during the trip up and back. “After they were reinstalled, a roofer dropped his hammer and knocked out St. Mary Margaret Alacoque’s eyeball in the window in the Sacred Heart Chapel, but you can’t tell it today,” he revealed.

John Pryor asked, “Many tourists ask me about the difference between a cathedral and a basilica?”

“A cathedral is the principal church in a diocese and the home church for the bishop. It is where the bishop’s throne, called a cathedra, the symbol of the teaching authority of the bishop, is located. The Latin word for throne, cathedra, is the source of our English word, cathedral. A basilica is an honorary title for an important church building, designated by the pope because it carries special spiritual, historical, and/or architectural significance,” replied Msgr. O.

Monsignor kept track of many restoration project details. On night after returning from a trip, he went up into the attic to check on work that was supposed to have been done during his absence. The entry door blew closed and locked from the outside, so he had to spend the whole night in the attic. The next morning when the workmen arrived, he called down to them from above “Hello down there.” They were frightened and all ran out of the church but finally came back and let him out.

The tour ended in the basement of the Cathedral as Monsignor O’Neill showed us all the boiler room, where the fire of February 6, 1898 most probably started. Space limitations prevent recounting all the stories he told us, but it was a most informative and amusing experience.
Sometime ago, John Pryor was asked by a tourist, “How come there are 2 names indented under Bishop O’Hara’s on the past bishops plaque in the Cathedral lobby?” Since John didn’t know the answer, he asked Fr. Schreck about it before Mass one Sunday morning. “Bishop O’Hara had two auxiliary bishops, Francis X. Hyland and Thomas J. McDonough,” replied Fr. Schreck. But that was just the beginning of the story. According to Fr. Schreck, “Bishop O’Hara had a most extraordinary and interesting career during his years as Bishop of Savannah.”

Gerald P. O’Hara was born in Green Ridge, Pennsylvania, near Scranton on May 4, 1895. A short time later, his parents moved to Philadelphia, and O’Hara graduated from Our Mother of Sorrows School and Saint Joseph’s Preparatory School in Philadelphia. He attended Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary, from 1911 until 1918.

Upon completion of his studies, he was sent to Rome to study at the Pontifical Roman Seminary. He was ordained in Rome on April 3, 1920 and ultimately earned a Doctor of Divinity and the rare J.U.D. degree (Doctor of both Civil and Canon Law in 1924.

Upon completion of his studies, Father O’Hara returned to Philadelphia, where in 1929, he was named auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia and titular bishop of Heliopolis, Phoenicia. At the time of his ordination as Auxiliary Bishop of Philadelphia on May 20, 1929 at age 34, the Most Reverend Gerald P. O’Hara was the youngest bishop in the world at that time.

Bishop O’Hara was appointed as the ninth Bishop of Savannah by Pope Pius XI on November 16, 1935 and served as its ordinary until 1959. In 1936, because of the large number of Catholics living in the Atlanta area, he petitioned Pope Pius XI to designate the diocese as “Savannah-Atlanta” in recognition of the growing importance of Atlanta. The decree was authorized on January 5, 1937 and the diocese got a new name, the Diocese of Savannah-Atlanta. There were cathedrals in both cities.

After World War II, in May 1946, Bishop O’Hara was called to Rome. He was received by Pope Pius XII who informed him of his assignment as Regent of the Apostolic Nunciature in Albania while remaining the Bishop of Savannah. Unable to secure a visa due to communist influences in the Albanian government, he was instead sent to Romania as Regent in the Apostolic Nunciature in Bucharest.

Because of his extensive work in the Vatican Diplomatic Service, Bishop O’Hara was often outside of the diocese. Francis X.
Hyland was appointed auxiliary bishop in 1949, to carry out much of the administrative work in the diocese.

Bishop O’Hara served as Regent of the Apostolic Nunciature in Romania from 1947–1950. During his stay in Romania he confronted many challenges from the government to the independence of the Catholic Church.

He was ultimately ordered to leave the country and upon his return to Rome, on July 12, 1950, he received the personal title of Archbishop as an indication of Pope Pius XII’s gratitude for all his courageous work in Romania.

Upon his return to the United States he was greeted enthusiastically in both Savannah and Atlanta and praised for his fearlessness behind the Iron Curtain.

Archbishop O’Hara presided over the Diocese of Savannah’s 100th anniversary celebration. On October 16, 1950, the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist was the site of one of the most significant liturgical events in the history of the diocese. The highlight of the Centennial was a Solemn Pontifical High Mass celebrated by His Eminence Eugène Cardinal Tisserant representing Pope Pius XII.

Cardinal Eugène Tisserant, the third ranking prelate of the Catholic Church, was one of the preeminent churchmen of the time and a trusted advisor of Pope Pius XII. Between 1900 and 1961, Eugène Tisserant was the only non-Italian Cardinal Bishop in the Church. Tisserant held a number of offices in the Roman Curia. He served as Secretary of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches (1936–1959), as President of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (1938–1946) and as Prefect of the Congregation of Ceremonies (1951–1967). After serving as vice-dean of the College of Cardinals from 1947 to 1951, he became Dean and presided over the College of Cardinals from 1951 to his death in 1972. As Dean of the Sacred College, he was the first person after Pope Paul VI to sign each of the acts of the Second Vatican Council.

Archbishop O’Hara was appointed Apostolic Nuncio to Ireland in 1951 and on June 8, 1954, O’Hara was named Apostolic Delegate to Great Britain. As Apostolic Delegate, his jurisdiction also included Malta, Gibraltar, and Bermuda.

In 1956, Georgia was divided into two dioceses with Bishop Hyland becoming the first Bishop of Atlanta. The name “Diocese of Savannah” was restored to the 88 counties in South Georgia with Archbishop O’Hara remaining as Bishop of Savannah. On January 2, 1957, Auxiliary Bishop Thomas J. McDonough of St. Augustine was transferred to Savannah as auxiliary to Archbishop O’Hara.

Drained by his dual duties as papal diplomat and diocesan bishop, he resigned as Bishop of Savannah on November 11, 1959; he was named Titular Archbishop of Pessinus by Pope John XXIII on the same date. In 1960, he became the first papal representative to visit the Houses of Parliament in more than 400 years. Auxiliary Bishop Thomas J. McDonough was appointed the 10th Bishop of Savannah on March 2, 1960.

On July 16, 1963, O’Hara died from a heart attack at his residence in the Wimbledon section of London, aged 68. His Requiem Mass was celebrated by Archbishop John Carmel Heenan at Westminster Cathedral. His body was then flown back to Philadelphia, where he is buried in the crypt of the Cathedral of Ss. Peter and Paul.

Sources:
One Faith One Family
Diocese of Savannah 1850–2000
Southern Cross
November 23, 2000
Centennial – Rita DeLorme
Photos this page:
Andrew Bunn Photography
Used with permission © Archives, Diocese of Savannah
Bishop's Cup

The Club at Savannah Harbor on March 27, 2015, was the scene of the Annual Bishop’s Trophy Golf Tournament. Four teams, auctioned off at the 2014 Cathedral Heritage Gala, participated in the scramble format tournament including: Team Hartmayer: Bishop Hartmayer, Paul Hinchey, Otto Aliffi, Lenny Panzitta; Team Boland: Bishop Boland, Msgr. Costigan Sean Shepard, Heath Moyer; Team Schreck: Fr. Schreck, Bill Wade, Ted Kostilnik, Jack Reese; Team Firmin: Fr. Firmin, Paul Nott, Dick Rechtiene, Tom Odom.

During the lunch that followed the tournament, the trophy was presented to Team Boland that had edged out Team Schreck by matching cards. It had to go the third handicapped hole before the tie was broken. The weather cooperated to provided a good time of camaraderie and friendly competition for all.
CATHEDRAL EASTER EGG HUNT
By Melanie Brooks

It was a beautiful Saturday morning as the Easter Bunny hopped across the Cathedral steps. More than 100 children, participants in the first annual Cathedral Easter Egg Hunt and parents, greeted him with smiles, giggles and a little bit of noise. Father Schreck welcomed the children and asked if they knew what happened on Easter morning (besides the bunny). How pleased we were to hear them respond, “Jesus rose from the dead!”

Over 1000 plastic eggs had been hidden in Lafayette Square in areas designated by age group (2 and under, 3-5 years old, 5-8 years old, 9 and over). Eggs and candy were donated by generous Cathedral parishioners and the eggs were filled with the candy by the girls at St Vincent’s Academy. The SVA girls also made the precious signs to designate the age groups areas. We are so grateful to Sister Lisa and her cadre of helping hands, especially the young ladies who showed up early on Saturday morning to hide the eggs.

With volunteers serving as crossing guards and traffic monitors, the children eagerly crossed to the square. Within seconds the eggs were found by the children and baskets were overflowing. The golden eggs, with dollar bills, were found by three lucky children.

Colorful bunny cookies and more candy were offered to the children along with apple juice, chocolate milk, and water. Eggs were counted and comparisons made. Some of the overheard comments: “I think I got more than you.” “I got the most pink eggs.” “I love chocolate!!” “I got a ring in mine.” “Well, I got tattoos” “She’s crying because she’s afraid of the Easter Bunny.” “I’m eating all of this candy today.”

It was a grand day. The City allowed us to use the park at no charge, volunteers provided all of the labor and clean-up was easy. The Easter Bunny was a big hit, even posing for pictures with Father Schreck. Many thanks to thoughtful and caring parishioners and volunteers who gave up their Saturday morning and the Easter Bunny, and Father Schreck for supporting our 1st Hunt. We are excited to think about the 2nd.

If you would like to see and help plan more children activities at the Cathedral, please contact Melanie Brooks at email, brooks508@aol.com, or cell 678.644.0912.
As the music program at the Cathedral has grown, it has become obvious that there is an increasing need for a support group to assist with all of the necessary details of a busy vocal and instrumental music program.

This group of boosters will be named for the patron saint of music, St. Cecilia, and will also help with fund raising for special music programs requested and desired by our Cathedral parish. The first of these activities is the Sacred Pilgrimage 2016, choir tour and trip to Italy, scheduled for next April. The society also assisted with the special concert to honor Brother Robert on May 24th.

There is no fee to join the St. Cecilia Society. Just complete the form in the weekly bulletin and drop in the offering plate, send an email to StCeciliaSociety@gmail.com or call Melanie Brooks at 678-644-0912.

Donations will also be accepted to benefit the music program at the Cathedral. If you would like to join this group of special St. Cecilia patrons, details on the tier levels and special benefits will be announced over the next few months.