The Cathedral of St. John the Baptist is an iconic symbol of Savannah, Georgia, Gracing the skyline with its towering steeples, it represents historically noteworthy architecture which stands as a monument in stone to the faith of the Catholic community in Savannah.

The Cathedral Heritage Endowment Fund was established in 2001 as a sustainable method of funding the ongoing capital needs for the preservation and maintenance of our beautiful Cathedral. Since its inception, many generous donors have contributed to that fund which is now valued at almost $3,500,000. Each year the Cathedral is able to use a portion of the interest on that money for significant, structural work. Since 2012 the Fund has distributed approximately $1,000,000 which has been used to pay the debt on the repair of the steeples completed in 2013. That debt, which was a little over $1,700,000, has now been repaid in full!

Only a portion of the interest generated by the fund is disbursed each year and those funds are not sufficient for the ongoing structural repairs and maintenance on the Cathedral. Our ultimate goal is to build the Endowment to at least $5,000,000, so that we will have sufficient revenue generated each year to meet the ongoing maintenance needs of the Cathedral.

The Cathedral Preservation Society was established to support the Cathedral Heritage Endowment Fund and is very important to insure the future of our beautiful Cathedral. This year’s appeal for the Preservation Society was
quite successful. At the celebration dinner on November 16, 2019 at the Savannah Golf Club, those who had donated $500 or more came together for a joyful evening.

Bishop Hartmayer thanked all of the generous donors and benefactors, who were able to make a donation to this annual appeal. “I appreciate the sacrifices that you continue to make for the good of our Cathedral. It really is a treasure, and something of which we should be rightly proud. Visitors to our Cathedral marvel at its beauty and covet how fortunate we are to have it.”

Fr. Schreck echoed Bishop Hartmayer’s appreciation.

“I am most appreciative of those who were able to contribute this year. This year’s appeal was quite successful. We raised almost $145,000 which will be placed in the Endowment Fund. Many faithful Catholics of Savannah made the sacrifices to build and rebuild this magnificent Church. They did it by faith and by a passion to make a statement about the Catholic faith in Savannah. Our Cathedral is in itself a great tool of evangelization. It is amazing to see the awe and wonder in the eyes of visitors who enter the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. We have been fortunate to be able to worship in such a grand church. Together we can preserve and secure the future of the Cathedral for the next generations of Catholics and all Savannahians.”
At the heart of every cathedral, in every diocese, sits the Bishop’s chair, symbol of his teaching authority and his direct link to the Apostles.

The Chair celebrates the best of Catholicism today, springing from the physical beauty of our cathedrals to the holy beauty of the Bishop and his faith. By focusing on the Bishop, we gain the insights of Christ’s apostle in our midst, learning about his vocation, his diocese, and how he is shaping the future in this time of change.

The Chair is a series of 22-minute videos, produced by DeSales Media Group, the communications and technology arm of the Diocese of Brooklyn, that tells the joyful story of the Catholic Church in America today—a television show with true vision.

Each episode highlights a Bishop as he shares his own faith journey, the story of his cathedral and his community, and his hopes for a bright future. With exceptional visuals and production values, the fresh approach of The Chair blends the diverse history, architecture, and art of the Church with the Bishop’s living example of Christ’s presence in our world.

Barbara King, Director of Communications for the Diocese of Savannah was contacted by DeSales Media about including our Cathedral in the series. Bishop Hartmayer was interviewed on November 4th on the altar of the Cathedral by Monsignor Kiernan Harrington, Vicar For Communications for the Diocese of Brooklyn as well as President and Chairman of DeSales Media Group.

In his remarks at the Preservation Society Dinner, Bishop Hartmayer mentioned the interview and expressed how he feels about our beautiful Cathedral. He highlighted the elegant windows and the exquisite murals and thanked the attendees for their generous support of our magnificent church.

DeSales Media will begin running the series in September 2020. Look for it.
At Christmas we honor the birth of Jesus Christ, but sometimes our Savior is forgotten in the commercialization of the season and the rush to get ready for the holiday festivities. Each year the Knights of Columbus take a leading role in reminding society that Christmas is first and foremost a holy day. The Order’s “Keep Christ in Christmas” campaign promotes the birth of Christ as the focus of the Christmas season. During the first week of December, K of C units everywhere turn on a switch illuminating a nativity scene to “Light Up For Christ.”

Advent is a season of hope. Every year this spiritual attitude is reawakened in the hearts of Christians while they prepare to celebrate the great Feast of Christ the Savior’s Birth. On Wednesday, December 4, 2019, the traditional “Light Up For Christ” ceremony was held to unveil and illuminate the beautiful Nativity scene in the front window of the Parish Center thus increasing awareness of the true meaning of Christmas. The Knights used to hold this ceremony at the K of C Hall on Liberty Street until former Cathedral parishioner and Knight Frank Baker, suggested that it be moved to the front window of the Parish Center at the Cathedral where it would be seen by more people and Brother Robert was instrumental in making it happen.

We had a lovely evening for the ceremony. In previous years the weather has been very cold, but this year it was most pleasant and there was a nice group of about 60 faithful parishioners who came out to witness their faith. Father Schreck led the attendees in prayer and read the Gospel according to St. Luke (2:1-7), describing the birth of Jesus and then blessed the Crèche with the following prayer as the lights were turned on. “God of every nation and people, from the beginning of creation you have made manifest your love. When our need for a Savior was great, you sent your Son to be born of the Virgin Mary. To our lives He brings joy and peace, justice, mercy and love. Lord bless all who look upon this manger. May it remind us of the humble birth of Jesus and raise up our thoughts to Him, who is God with us and savior of all, who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen”
The 13th colony Sound Quartet led guests in Christmas Carols including “Hark the Herald Angels Sing”, “Angels We Have Heard on High” and ended with “Silent Night”.

Following the ceremony, the assembled throng converged on the Parish Center to attend a bountiful and delicious supper. Close to 100 parishioners attended the dinner in the hall which was festively decorated for the Christmas season. It was the first time for many of the Cathedral parishioners to see the parish hall after the remodeling that took place over the summer thanks to the Knights of Columbus and many parish volunteers.

Again, thanks to the Knights of Columbus who provided the turkey and dressing and to Dwight Sheley for cooking and transporting the food to the hall. This event could not take place if it wasn’t for the dedication of the Parish Life Committee and the ladies of the Cathedral Council of Catholic Women who always make themselves available to lend a hand when needed.
During Advent, the Cathedral holiday tradition continued again this year as members of the Christian Services Committee and the Council of Catholic Women (CCW) set up Advent Angel Giving Trees.

The Christian Services Committee collected donations of food to provide a healthy Christmas dinner for the clients of the Social Apostolate. The food helped provide meals and stock the pantry for clients of our Social Apostolate. Many parishioners selected a food item card from the tree and joined in the spirit of giving this Christmas by returning multiple bags of canned goods. Every Sunday the tree was surrounded by many gift bags filled with food donated by our generous parishioners. The abundance of gifts had to be removed from the Cathedral several times a week and delivered to the Social Apostolate. Sophia Grace Wade, Deborah and Bill’s 8-year-old granddaughter, a 3rd grader at St. James, helped load the bags and deliver them to the Social Apostolate.

The CCW set up two Advent Angel Giving Trees this year. On first tree (and in partnership with Christian Services) the CCW asked for donations of grocery store gift cards. The gift cards are given to the Social Apostolate to assist their clients with groceries, pharmacy items and gas. The Cathedral Parish responded with great generosity donating gift cards worth almost $3,000. Most of the gift cards were delivered by mid-December so the staff at the Social Apostolate could distributed to their clients receiving food from the pantry.

On the second tree, the CCW did a new project, a Book Drive to benefit Hodge Memorial Day Care in Savannah, which had very few resources and books for the children. Our Cathedral Parish responded with overwhelming generosity. Every weekend the gift box was overflowing with bags of new and gently used books as about 500 bibles, bible stories, picture books, educational books, and story books were donated.

The week of December 16, Carol Letcher and Moira Novak sorted over 150 pre-school age books and they were delivered to Hodge Memorial Day Care. This was just the start. Another 100 books were also delivered to other inner city day care centers and schools. So many books were donated that the CCW is still sorting the books and will deliver them after the New Year to a few other worthy organizations.

The Advent Giving projects were great ways to give, thus benefitting families and children in our community. On behalf of the Christian Services Committee and the Council of Catholic Women, we are very grateful for the generous hearts of our Cathedral Parishioners and how you responded to the Advent Giving programs. Many thanks to all the volunteers for your passion and commitment to those in need in our community.
The ladies of the Cathedral Council of Catholic Women gathered again this year in the Parish Hall early on the morning of Saturday, December 14 to begin a daylong event of baking in preparation for their annual bake sale which was held before and after the masses on Sunday, December 15.

The baking process has been perfected over the years by using an assembly line approach. It starts with the ladies that measure the ingredients, then on to the mixers and bakers, ending with the packaging and the festive decorating of each item to be sold. This year, a wide variety of baked goods were available for purchase including cakes, fudge, cookies, brownies, candy, and cupcakes.

This event is just one of the fund raisers that the CCW holds throughout the year to raise money to support organizations and charities throughout the diocese and beyond. The CCW supports the Cathedral annually with donations to the Cathedral Preservation Heritage Society, the Bishop’s Annual Appeal, and gift certificates to the clergy in appreciation for all that they do for our parish. They donate supplies and make sandwiches monthly for the Social Apostolate and contribute annually to the Social Apostolate Golf Tournament. The ongoing financial and in-kind support of the Carmelite Monastery is also important to the ladies of the CCW. Some of the other major charities that they support include the Monsignor Daniel J. Bourke Scholarship Fund, Bishop Boland’s Helping Hands Project, Middle Georgia Alliance to End Regional Sex Trafficking, and Family Promise of Greater Savannah. Boxes of Joy filled with Christmas gifts for impoverished children in 29 countries were also donated this year as part of the Cross Catholic Outreach Program.

So when you purchase items at their annual bake sale, you are not only receiving delectable and homemade baked goods, you’re also helping to support others in need in our community and around the globe.
On December 1, Pope Francis visited the Italian town of Greccio, where, in 1223, St. Francis of Assisi created the first nativity scene with live animals in a cave. While in Greccio, the pope also signed the apostolic letter *Admirabile signum*, which means “A wonderful sign,” to encourage the tradition of the nativity scene to be more widely displayed in family homes and public places throughout the world.

“Setting up the Christmas crèche in our homes helps us to relive the history of what took place in Bethlehem. When, at Christmas, we place the statue of the Infant Jesus in the manger, the nativity scene suddenly comes alive. God appears as a child, for us to take into our arms. The enchanting image of the Christmas crèche, so dear to the Christian people, never ceases to arouse amazement and wonder. The depiction of Jesus’ birth is itself a simple and joyful proclamation of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God,” Pope Francis wrote in the letter.

Here at the Cathedral, our elaborate Crèche scene, originally set up by Brother Robert back in the mid 80’s, is viewed by as many as 30,000 visitors and parishioners during the Christmas season. But few people realize the magnitude of the task to set it up.

It starts out with an announcement John Pryor puts in late November Bulletin that asks:

“Want to be part of installing our World Famous Crèche scene?”

We are preparing for the Crèche scene installation and we need HELP! The installation will take the entire week. Initially we will need about 8 to 10 able bodied helpers who can lift 50 pounds to start bringing up the heavy staging materials and figures from basement storage to erect the foundation of the Crèche up in the Cathedral. Subsequently we will also need 5 to 10 people to assist with the movement and placement of the objects in the Crèche. Any time you can contribute will be welcome.

According to John, Bart Traywick has been the backbone of the Crèche installation for years — he is the guy...
who really knows how it goes together and ties all the volunteers to its implementation. There are also a few others who really do the work—John Atwell, Tony Hjeka and Joe Herb plus Joe Moriarity, Tom Stack, Jimmie Sheehan, Jim Hester, Joe Mullin, Joe Rozman, and Wim Salien just to name a few. As always, Ronnie Hall was there Saturday with his grandchildren who were a great help moving the figures to the sacristy.

The work began on Friday morning. This year was unusual in that Orlando would not arrive until Tuesday afternoon. Also the outside help we usually have with the heavy platforms was unavailable. So everyone rolled up their sleeves and began the heavy lifting. We had a retired Air Force pilot in his eighties lifting beside young teenagers. There was laughter, groaning and more than a few sore muscles, but the Crèche slowly began to take shape. Mountains were hung, waterfalls were created and an entire city was built. But just as important was the sense of ownership of this beautiful work by all those who participated.

Once again, Orlando Cuadra came up from Florida to oversee the placement of the figures and insure the religious accuracy of the display. He was assisted by Carol Herb, Sandra Traywick, Patti Mizelle, and many others.

Flower Guild members Jan Curran, Kate Haase, Jane Pruitt and Pat Cook were on hand to guide the decoration of the Cathedral with the over 500 poinsettia plants that add such a beautiful, vibrant color to the church. Debi Dickson, Lisa Atwell, Mia Guerin, Maureen Koncul, Denise LeMay, Carol Herb, Charlotte Welsh and Catherine Bowman also pitched in to help.

Everywhere you looked, it was a feast for the eyes proclaiming the joy of the Birth of Christ.
The Cathedral Choir performed the annual Christmas at the Cathedral Concert on Sunday, December 15 before an overflow crowd. This is one of the most popular events sponsored by the Friends of Cathedral Music. This year’s concert marked the fifth anniversary of our society of music-lovers and supporters.

The concert repertoire was drawn from the entire breadth of Catholic sacred music, from the ninth-century O Come, O Come, Emmanuel, to pieces written in the last ten years. The Cathedral Choir often sings in English, Latin, French and German; this concert included Sergei Rachmaninoff’s setting of Ave Maria performed in the original Russian.

In addition to a number of traditional a cappella Christmas selections performed in the front of the Cathedral, the choir was joined again this year by the Cathedral Brass and organist Craig Cramer, professor of organ at the University of Notre Dame, to sing accompanied works by Mathias, Ledger, and Dirksen from the choir loft. The sound of the combined forces of organ, brass, choir, and 1,000 people singing the great carols was thrilling and memorable.

Fr. Schreck’s prayer at the beginning of the evening encapsulates the meaning and intent of Christmas at the Cathedral:

My friends, in company with people in great cathedrals down through the ages, we keep vigil this Advent season and eagerly await the coming of Christ, the dawning of our salvation.

Let us join our voices to theirs in prayer and joyful song.

Photos by Paul H. Camp
By Dwight Sheley

On December 22, the last Sunday before Christmas, families of the parish were invited to enjoy Breakfast with Santa after the 10 AM Mass in the Parish Hall. Families were served sausage and pancakes, along with milk and orange juice.

Sponsored by Knights of Columbus Council 631, the children had the opportunity to have their photo taken with Santa. After taking their picture with Santa, children could engage in fun activities.

Santa helpers staffed a few activity tables where the children could decorate their own ornament to take home with them and put it on their tree, color a masterpiece from multiple pictures to hang in their room or write a letter to Santa to take back to the North Pole.
A reORGANization is underway
By Dr. Paul Thornock

The Noack organ in the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, dedicated in 1987, is heard at all weekend Masses, on Holy Days and at innumerable other events. Its sound is central to our liturgical life. This instrument, like any instrument or machine its age, requires some maintenance.

Our Noack organ was built on a very, very tight budget. The organ consultant and the members of the committee also had very strong opinions and particular tastes. These factors, plus the organ’s height restrictions due to the rose window, combined to create an organ with mechanical reliability issues and a sound that can sometimes be thin or piercing. The budget was so tight, in fact, that some pipes were recycled from the former organ at Wesley Monumental United Methodist Church and others were actually built by members of the committee, including Dr. Harry Persse. When compared to other organs in similar-sized buildings, our is about one-half the typical size.

In addition to its tonal inadequacies, many of the organ’s mechanical parts are wearing out and many pipes don’t speak because of sagging languids and broken solders, sometimes the result of metal fatigue or other metallurgical issues. Organ pipe shops (yes, there are such things!) around the world are filled with pipes from organs of the same vintage as ours in need of repairs.

The plaster repair and painting work around the rose window and all over the west end of the Cathedral provides the perfect opportunity to take care of some of the organ’s deficiencies. Before the work can begin, many of the pipes would have to be removed to protect them during the construction, the organ would be bundled up and inoperable to protect the mechanism during the work, and the organ would automatically have to undergo a thorough cleaning at the conclusion of the project. With all of this happening, why not just complete the much-needed work on the organ?

In Germany, when organs of this vintage have their 100,000 mile check-up, it is not called a renovation or a restoration, it is called a reorganization. In the first weeks of January, all of the
pipes in the organ will be removed from the case, crated and inspected. Those with damage will be sent off for repair. The rest will be cleaned and re-voiced to fit with the new tonal scheme. With some minor adjustments to the existing pipes and the replacement of pipes that have never worked well, we will reorganize our Noack organ into an instrument with far more flexibility and dynamic range. The edgy sound of the organ will give way to a much more gracious, warm, enveloping sound that better fits our liturgical celebrations and will work better in accompanying the Cathedral Choir.

In 2017, some work was done on the electrical controls of the organ. None of this work will be changed; it fits perfectly with the work now being undertaken. However, we will finish the mechanical work on the organ, improve its reliability and tuning stability, and make it ready for another 30-plus years of service. The work is being carried out by a collaboration of two well-respected organ firms.

The goal is to have all of the work on the organ finished by Holy Week. When the organ returns, you will definitely notice the difference! The façade pipes will be re-polished and the sound will have a depth and freshness currently lacking.

The Cathedral did a marvelous and visionary thing by commissioning a great organ in 1987. With some much-needed maintenance and a few judicious improvements, the Cathedral will once again have an instrument worthy of its beautiful liturgical celebrations and its position as the mother church of the Diocese of Savannah.
As we come to the end of the Christmas season, on January 13 the church celebrated The Baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan by St. John the Baptist. This event is beautifully displayed in the center stained glass window in the sanctuary of the Cathedral. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he came up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and the Spirit of God descended like a dove alighting on him. And the voice of God the Father from heaven was heard to say, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17), thus affirming that Jesus is the Son of God.