In this environment when all the news seems to be bad, it is refreshing to have something exciting to cheer about.
ow that the Cathedral’s designation as a Minor Basilica has been publicly announced, it is timely to reflect on the significant effort expended over the past 2+ years to reach this point.

As members of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, we all appreciate that it is a very special place. Back in January 2018, Fr. Schreck initiated the process to see what it would take for the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist to be granted the title of minor basilica.

A minor basilica is the formal designation of a church that is more notable than regular churches.

The purpose of such a designation is to recognize the historic, artistic and spiritual importance of a church. It must “stand out as a center of active and pastoral liturgy,” as the Vatican document, *Domus Ecclesiae*, explains.

To gain this designation, the church must demonstrate its notability or magnificence to the Congregation of Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments within the Holy See.

A church may only be elevated to a minor basilica, a title bestowed by the Pope, on churches of historical and spiritual importance.

Back then there were 84 Minor Basilicas in the United States and only 17 of them were Cathedral Basilicas. In the southern region that included:

- Cathedral Basilica of Saint Louis King of France, New Orleans, LA
- Cathedral Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, Mobile, AL
- Cathedral Basilica of St. Augustine, St. Augustine, FL

Upon reflection we believed that the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist compared quite favorably to all of them.

**THE FIRST STEPS**

To begin the process we contacted the USCCB Secretariat of Divine Worship in Washington, DC to obtain a copy of the Basilica Questionnaire, *Domus Ecclesiae*.

**QUÆSTIONARIUS**

**NOTITIÆ AD TITULUM BASILICÆ MINORIS OBTINENDUM**

Dated November 9, 1989, it contained The Norms for Granting of the Title of Minor Basilica from the Congregation of Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in Rome. It contained nine sections (I-IX), consisted of 119 questions and was, of course, in Latin.

**CONGREGATIO DE CULTU DIVINO ET DISCIPLINA SACRAMENTORUM**

Thus began an exhaustive process involving almost 20 members of the parish and beyond to complete the application.

This required much detailed information about the description of the church, including its architecture and the various fixtures relating to liturgical celebrations; i.e., altars, etc., as well as the sacred images of special veneration, the exquisite decorative features, the presence of any relics, historical importance, liturgical activity and the pastoral works connected with the church.

**HISTORY: 1700s-1800s**

In our application we highlighted how those who preceded us had to overcome anti-Catholic prejudice whose worship was prohibited by the Royal Colonial Charter, to establish the Faith in Georgia.
The Charter had four written prohibitions: no lawyers, no slaves, no rum…and no religious freedom for Papists.

"...in the worship of God, to all persons inhabit or which shall inhabit or be resident within our said province, and that all such persons, Except Papists, shall have a free exercise of their religion..."

- ROYAL COLONIAL CHARTER

In the late eighteenth century, after the Bill of Rights was passed granting religious freedom to all, French émigrés fleeing revolutions in France and Haiti found refuge in Savannah.

Once here, they established Savannah’s first Catholic parish, the Congrégation de Saint Jean-Baptiste.

The original church quickly became inadequate to serve the growing population as immigrants from Ireland came to Savannah in great numbers.

The Church of St. John the Baptist was built in the late 1830s and became a cathedral on July 19, 1850 when the Diocese of Savannah was canonically erected by Pope Pius IX with the Right Reverend Francis X. Gartland as its first bishop.

Sadly on Sunday, February 6, 1898, the cathedral was almost totally destroyed by fire.
**HISTORY: 1900s**

The rebuilt cathedral (below) was dedicated on October 28, 1900 by Archbishop Sebastian Martinelli, Apostolic Delegate to the United States as the representative of His Holiness Pope Leo XIII.

On October 16, 1950, Archbishop O’Hara presided over the Diocese of Savannah’s 100th anniversary celebration. This was 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 Eugene Cardinal Tisserant, the third ranking prelate of the Catholic Church. He was one of the preeminent churchmen of the time and attended as the personal representative Pope Pius XII.

**HISTORY: 2000s**

The almost $12 million restoration completed in 2000 restored the cathedral to its esteemed glory. Today it is a place of worship and seat of the Diocese of Savannah that includes ninety counties in southern Georgia. The Catholic faith has been nurtured in the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist for over 143 years.

At the end of August 2018, Bishop Hartmayer sent our 32 page Questionnaire along with a 145 page Book of Exhibits for the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist to obtain the Title of Minor Basilica to the USCCB Secretariat for Divine Worship in Washington, DC.
ON TO ROME!

By mid-September, we received a letter from Daniel Cardinal DiNardo, President of the USCCB, stating that our application had been reviewed to ensure that all necessary materials were present, and that the application had received his nihil obstat (approval) and sent on to the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in Rome for final approval. He also assured Bishop Hartmayer of his “prayers for a successful result of your petition.”

We were somewhat disappointed in December 2018 to receive a communication from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in Rome emphasizing that “the cathedral church as the seat of the diocesan Bishop is superior to all other places of worship in the territory of the Diocese and for this reason the Congregation follows the practice of not granting the title of Basilica minor to the cathedral church even if there have been exceptions in the past. We ask you to reconsider your request.”

In early 2019 we contacted the Secretariat of Divine Worship at the USCCB in Washington, DC and ultimately spoke to the Executive Director, Fr. Andrew Menke, to gain some insight about what “reconsider your request” really meant and what might be a possible future course of action. During the conference call Fr. Schreck asked him, “Do you think it would be wise if we asked Archbishop Gregory to inquire of the Congregation if this is a new policy?”

Fr. Menke responded quite favorably to this suggestion and ultimately asked Archbishop Gregory to suggest that Cardinal DiNadro send a letter to the Congregation of Divine Worship requesting a clarification of their policy of granting Minor Basilica status to a cathedral church, which was sent by mid-March 2019.

It took a while for the Congregation to respond but on August 20, 2019 Archbishop Gregory sent out a memo to all Bishops entitled “Minor Basilica Status for Cathedrals.” In this memo, in response to the letter sent by Cardinal DiNardo earlier this year asking for a clarification on this question, the Congregation said that its current Norms for the process (Domus Ecclesiae of 1989) do not specifically exclude the possibility of cathedrals receiving this honor.

“...PARTICULAR AND COMPELLING REASONS...”

In their response, the Congregation observed that it will study any request that is forwarded, but made it clear that the Congregation will require “very particular and compelling reasons” for a cathedral to receive the title of Minor Basilica.

Since their response, which was shared with all the bishops, did not prohibit granting basilica status to a cathedral, Bishop Hartmayer sent a letter dated October 30, 2020, to the Congregation asking them to reconsider our request that the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist be designated a Minor Basilica.

The letter of reconsideration contained significant supportive justification, including many tributes from numerous diverse sources, that demonstrated there are many “very particular and compelling reasons” for the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist to receive the title of Minor Basilica.

These numerous accolades attested to the exemplary nature of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist as a cathedral of utmost historical, architectural, artistic and spiritual significance, that is widely acclaimed for its exquisite decorative scheme.

They highlight that Cathedral of St. John the Baptist is a particularly distinguished edifice
and which deserves to be granted the title of Minor Basilica as attested to by over 300,000 visitors annually.

Other notable honors for the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist include:

- Named a contributing structure in the application for the designation of the Savannah Historic District as a National Landmark District and it has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places by the U.S. Department of the Interior.
- Received Historic Savannah Foundation Trustees Preservation Award in recognition of outstanding accomplishment in preservation and protection of Savannah’s distinctive heritage.
- Honored by the Georgia Historical Society with a historical marker dedicated on November 17, 2007.
- Named the most beautiful building in the State of Georgia. It is the only cathedral in the southern USA recognized as the most beautiful building in their state.
- Recognized as one of the Top 10 Attractions in the United States along with such iconic sites as the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, the Gettysburg Battlefield and the USS Arizona Memorial in Honolulu Harbor.
- Designated Important Historic Attraction.
- Named one of America’s 20 Most Beautiful Churches, Cathedrals & Basilicas Worth Visiting.

AN EXCEPTIONAL CONCESSION...

In February 2020, we received a letter from the Congregation dated 27 January 2020, which stated that granting the title of Minor Basilica to the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist was a “most exceptional concession.”

However, “...moved by the history of your local church we felt that strengthening of her association with the Holy Father was merited.”

- CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS

Being designated a Minor Basilica now opens a new chapter in our church history and brings honor not only to our parish but to the entire diocese. A Basilica has a special connection with the Holy See and Holy Father in Rome.

We are overjoyed by the recognition that the Cathedral Basilica of St. John the Baptist is one of the major churches in the world dedicated to Christ.

On behalf of the bishops and priests who have ministered to the faithful in this church over these many decades it is wonderful and humbling to receive this honor.

We are truly blessed.
The decree in Latin reads:

MINOR BASILICA PROCLAMATION


What Makes a Church a Basilica?

The word *basilica* is derived from a Greek term meaning “royal house.” In the Catholic world, a basilica is a church building that has been accorded special privileges by the Pope. There are two kinds of basilicas. The world’s four major, or papal, basilicas are St. John Lateran, St. Peter, St. Paul Outside the Walls, and St. Mary Major, all in Rome. Minor (lesser) basilicas are significant churches in Rome and elsewhere that meet certain criteria and are given special ecclesiastical privileges. Minor basilicas are traditionally named because of their antiquity, dignity, historical value, architectural and artistic worth, and/or significance as centers of worship. A basilica must “stand out as a center of active and pastoral liturgy,” according to the 1989 Vatican document *Domus Ecclesiae*.

Three physical signs indicate that a church is a minor basilica: the umbrellino, the tintinnabulum and the Papal keys.

**THE UMBRELLINO**

The first is the presence of the umbrellino (“little umbrella”) — a silk canopy designed with stripes of yellow and red, traditional papal colors. It is a distinctive symbol of the Pope’s authority. During the Middle Ages, the umbrellino would be carried above the Holy Father during processions. Once placed, the umbrellino remains partially open in as a symbol of readiness to welcome the Holy Father.

**THE TINTINNABULUM**

The second is the tintinnabulum, or bell. Mounted on a pole, it is carried processionally, along with the umbrellino, at the head of the clergy on special occasions. The tintinnabulum, like the umbrellino, indicates that the Basilica has a special relationship with the Holy Father.

**THE PAPAL CROSSED KEYS**

Minor basilicas have the right to display the Papal Crossed Keys on banners, furnishings, and on the seal of the basilica. The keys refer to the promise of Christ to Peter, “I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in Heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in Heaven.” (Mt 16:19). The presence of the keys symbolizes the continuous relationship of the Basilica to the Holy Father in Rome.
BASILICA RIGHTS & DUTIES

In their letter dated 27 January 2020 the Congregation highlighted the rights and duties which a Basilica must follow as spelled out in Chapters 3 and 4 of *Domus Ecclesiae*, including the celebration of certain feast days.

To make clear the particular bond of communion by which the minor basilica is united with the Roman cathedra of Peter, every year there must be celebrated with particular care:

- The Feast of the Chair of Saint Peter the Apostle: Feb. 22
- The Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, Apostles: Jun. 29
- The anniversary of the Supreme Pontiff’s election: Mar. 13; or inauguration into the supreme ministry: Mar. 19

The faithful who devoutly visit the basilica and within it participate in any sacred rite or at least recite the Lord’s Prayer and the Profession of Faith may obtain a plenary indulgence under the usual conditions (sacramental confession, Eucharistic Communion, and prayer for the intention of the Supreme Pontiff):

- On the anniversary of the dedication of the same basilica: Oct. 28 (1900)
- On the day of the liturgical celebration of the title: Oct./Nov. (2020)
- On the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, Apostles: Jun. 29
- On the anniversary of the granting of the title of basilica: Jan. 27 (2020)
- Once a year on a day to be determined by the local ordinary (e.g., the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist: Jun. 24)
- Once a year on a day freely chosen by each of the faithful
Mater Dei, Mother of God

As previously reported in the Cathedral bulletin of March 29, 2020, a 1,000 pound marble statue in the style of Michelangelo’s Pieta of a crucified Christ cradled in the arms of his Mother was recently moved into the Cathedral proper. It was executed in Florence in 1856 by Italian sculptor Domenico Menconi. Previously located in the rectory, it is now in a more religious setting where it can be viewed by the faithful and tourists alike. The statue is located on the left side of the entry to the Blessed Virgin Mary Chapel. Mary seems to be gazing across the chapel to the oil painting of Our Lady of Good Counsel that is positioned next to the stained glass window of the Annunciation. These beautiful works of art create a holy tableau of the role of Mary in Jesus’ life. She was with Him when He came into this world, in His rearing/upbringing, and at the end of His life when He was crucified, died and was buried.

The month of May is a special time for Catholics to pay homage to our Blessed Mother Mary. It is the “month which the piety of the faithful has especially dedicated to Our Blessed Lady,” and it is the occasion for a “moving tribute of faith and love which Catholics in every part of the world pay to the Queen of Heaven. During this month, Christians both in church and in the privacy of the home, offer up to Mary from their hearts an especially fervent and loving homage of prayer and veneration. In this month, too, the benefits of God’s mercy come down to us from her throne in greater abundance” (Paul VI: Encyclical on the Month of May, no. 1).

May is the month we honor Mary, and hopefully we will soon be able to see this beautiful tableau.

ABOVE: PHOTO CREDIT MARY CLARK RECHTIENE

It is almost as if the words of the Angelus are vividly on display...

The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.

\textit{R} And she conceived of the Holy Spirit.

\textit{Hail Mary}...

Behold the handmaid of the Lord.

\textit{R} Be it done unto me according to thy word. \textit{Hail Mary}...

And the Word was made Flesh.

\textit{R} And dwelt among us. \textit{Hail Mary}...

Pray for us, O holy Mother of God.

\textit{R} That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.

Let us pray:

Pour forth, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy grace into our hearts, that we to whom the Incarnation of Christ Thy Son was made known by the message of an angel, may by His Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of His Resurrection. Through the same Christ Our Lord. Amen.

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