

*A History of St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church
Auburn, Alabama
1912-2012*

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For the Centennial Anniversary of the Roman Catholic Church in Auburn, Alabama

Part I: Origins

The state of Alabama officially joined the United States on December 14, 1819, becoming the 22nd state in the Union. Just over nineteen years later, the city of Auburn was officially incorporated, on February 2, 1839; and in 1856, the state legislature chartered East Alabama Male College, a Methodist college, in Auburn. In 1872, with federal funds provided by the Land Grant College Act, or Morrill Act, the state took over the college, renaming it Alabama Agricultural and Mechanical College. In 1892, the college became the first four-year college in the state to allow women students. In 1899, the school's name was once more changed to Alabama Polytechnic Institute (it would finally become Auburn University in 1960). In 1910, the college football team won its first SIAA Conference championship. That same year, the Roman Catholic Church established a presence in neighboring Opelika, eventually opening a Church in Auburn in 1912.

Catholicism first came to Alabama by way of the Spanish in 1540. The first Catholic parish in Alabama had been established in 1703 by the Bishop of Quebec (then French). The state was officially organized into the Diocese of Mobile in 1829 by Bishop Michael Portier (the Diocese would be split into Mobile and Birmingham in 1969, and Mobile would become an

Archdiocese in 1980). In 1830, the Church built Spring Hill College, making it Alabama's first institute of higher learning. By 1850, the Diocese had 18 parishes, 20 priests, and approximately 11,000 Catholics. In 1910, Bishop Edward Allen requested assistance from the Congregation of the Mission (aka the Vincentian Fathers) in Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in building a Catholic ministry in the area of Auburn / Opelika. By 2010, there were 66,000 Catholics in the southern half of Alabama (representing about 4% of the state's population and not counting the increasing number of illegal immigrants, most of whom were Hispanic and Catholic); and the Archdiocese of Mobile was one of the smallest in the United States.



[Image Source: <http://www.bestplaces.net/city/alabama/auburn>]

Part II: Legends

The legend that has persisted over the decades is that since the male students of API, still run with the same religious rigidity as its Methodist origins, were required to attend church services every Sunday morning. The students were rounded up, separated by faith, and marched to services. Since there were no Jewish or Catholic churches in the area, those students were

exempted from this policy. As such, more and more non-Jewish students were claiming to be Catholic, giving the appearance of a growing Catholic presence in the region. This legend seems unlikely, however, since of the 800 students at API in 1910, only thirty were on record as being Catholic.

What is known is that once a Catholic church was established in Auburn, the number of students attending Masses steadily increased. Some have suggested that this was due to the fact that Catholic Masses were shorter than any Protestant services, making it more appealing to the college students. However, the fact that the number of Catholic students continued to increase consistently long after the requirement for church attendance was lifted at the college lends considerable credibility to the sincerity of the numbers of Catholic students that had come before.

Part III: The Vincentians

The Congregation of the Mission of St. Vincent DePaul was established in France in 1625. Their mission was to preach the Gospel to the poor and train priests. They first arrived in the United States in Baltimore, Maryland in 1816. As Maryland had been first established as a colony that was a safe-haven for English Catholics, the state was still the most Catholic-friendly region in the young nation. They soon moved to Philadelphia to better serve the increasing number of poor Catholic immigrants coming into the United States. When contacted by the Diocese of Mobile in 1910, the Vincentians chose Opelika as the center of their new ministry due mainly to the central location of the railroads, making contact with the outside world easier.



[Image: St. Vincent DePaul; Source: <http://communio.stblogs.org/2010/09/saint-vincent-de-paul-1.html>]

In a letter to Bishop Allen dated July 1st, 1910, the Vincentian Fathers in Germantown first suggest Opelika and advise that they are sending a Father Thomas MacDonald, C.M. to the area. In a follow-up letter dated July 30th that same year, the Vincentians inform the Bishop that they are purchasing a house in Opelika for \$8000 – a considerable sum in 1910 – and that Father MacDonald has been prepared for the challenges that he will face in the region. St. Mary’s Mission was dedicated by Bishop Allen on October 9, 1910. The primary mission of St. Mary’s was to minister to the Catholics in the poor region of Lee County and the surrounding countryside. The first child to be baptized in the Opelika mission was Maria Finley Kincaide on January 17, 1911.



St. Mary's Mission House in Opelika

[Image Source: *The Catholic Week*, October 25, 1952]

At this point, both nationally and within Alabama, there was a rabid nativist movement that had been ongoing for several decades. Prior to the Civil War, most immigrants to the United States were white Protestants from northern Europe. After the Civil War, there were an increasing number of Catholic immigrants from Ireland, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, Central and South America, and the South Pacific and Southeast Asia. Organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan targeted Catholics as a threat to traditional Protestant America. In 1917, the people of Phenix City went so far as to send a letter to the priests warning them to not to try and “lead away or to persuade our protestant children in any way to attend your school or to enter your church.” It was “signed here by the Christian citizens of this our town home not to be duped by Roman Catholic priests.” This phenomenon would pose a serious and constant physical threat to the Catholic ministries in the Auburn/Opelika/Phenix City area for decades. The Vincentians, however, would build five churches in the surrounding area in five years: Opelika, Auburn, Phenix City, Salem, and Lanett.

In the first report from Father MacDonald in February, 1911, there were 152 Catholics in the 5300-square-mile area (comprising a number only one-third of that in China at the time); and

the Catholic population was widely dispersed, except in Auburn and Phenix City where it was more concentrated. The comparison to China exemplifies the massive cost to the Church in money and manpower to proselytizing the East Alabama region. Of those 152, only fifteen were reported to be in Auburn. Priests from Opelika would celebrate Mass in Auburn only three times a month. This number does not appear to include the original thirty Catholic students reported at the college. Throughout most of the decades that followed, the number of Catholic students at the college / university was segregated from the number of “Catholics” reported. Regardless, the Vincentians saw sufficient reason to establish a physical Catholic church within Auburn itself, and Sacred Heart Catholic Church was built and dedicated on November 10, 1912.

Part IV: Sacred Heart

With the establishment of Sacred Heart, Father MacDonald continued to act as pastor from his Opelika location. The first baptism at Auburn was Michael Joseph Donahue on October 1, 1915, conducted by Reverend Father Thomas Judge, C.M. In several letters to Bishop Allen throughout 1917, Father MacDonald warned of continuing violent reactions from non-Catholics in the region, and of the brave service of the Catholic women in the area. According to the End-of-Year Report for 1918, there were fifteen Catholics attending two weekly Masses at Sacred Heart (though it is uncertain whether this number, again, included the college students).

By 1921, the number of Masses celebrated at Sacred Heart had been reduced to twice a month, with some fifty attending. On December 26, 1923, the Missionary Servants of the Most Blessed Trinity was incorporated and headed by Father Judge, and dedicated to establishing educational facilities in the area. The attempt to run a Catholic school had been ongoing for several years at this point, and in 1921, Father MacDonald reported that local non-Catholics had

brought in an alleged priest named “Johnson” to stir-up problems for the fledgling school. The local chapter of the KKK went so far as to send threatening letters to the families of children attending the school. According to David Housel, it was this strong anti-Catholic sentiment during the 1920s that led famed API Football Coach “Iron Mike” Donahue to relocate to Louisiana. Also according to Housel, one of Auburn’s early API Catholic students was James Ralph “Shug” Jordan. Graduating from API in 1932, Jordan first coached basketball for API before serving as Head Coach for the university for twenty five years, becoming the winningest coach in Auburn football history. Today, Jordan-Hare Stadium is half-named for Coach “Shug” Jordan.

By 1932, however, anti-Catholic prejudice appears to have subsided considerably. In an article in *The Catholic Week* dated November 10, 1935, it is stated that the ministry of the Vincentians had successfully educated the surrounding region of the beliefs and mission of the Catholic Church to enough of a degree to cause a radical decrease in opposition. This is impressive considering the times. By 1935, the country was in the throes of the Great Depression, and southern states like Alabama were among the hardest hit. At times such as these, prejudices and violence tend to increase. The fact that the reverse happened is a testament not only to the ministry of the Vincentians, but also to the people of the Auburn/Opelika region.

Current parishioner Johnny Meagher had this to say about the Catholic community in the 1930’s and 1940’s:

“My parents and I moved to Auburn from Houston in February 1934 when I was six years old, along with my sister and four brothers. My father took a job at API as athletic director and football coach. Only one other family in Auburn at the time was actively Catholic – the Allesandros. Dr. Allesandro taught mechanical engineering at API and had three children, two boys and one girl.

“The priest came to Auburn from Opelika, from St. Mary’s – there was only one Mass on Sundays and holy days. For the first few years we would go to Opelika, to St. Mary’s for CCD, which they would have for two weeks in the summertime. Most of the children were from Opelika. I believe the nuns that taught us were Sisters of Charity from St. Margaret’s Hospital in Montgomery.

“Nothing was ever said to me about being Catholic. There were a number of little boys who lived on Thach Street like us, and we all played together.”

The first nuptial Mass – that has been discovered – at Sacred Heart took place on May 16, 1942 between William B. Viglione and Rosary Mary Borrus, both from Detroit, Michigan. Also in 1942, Catholic API students organized the Newman Club, a student organization named after Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman dedicated to attending to the spiritual needs of Catholic students attending secular colleges and universities. In 1944, Father Patrick Doran, C.M., became the first resident pastor for Sacred Heart, taking up residence at 132 E. Thach Street. Rather than simply proselytizing, Father Doran became very engaged in the Auburn community, often seen eating at the Auburn Grill.



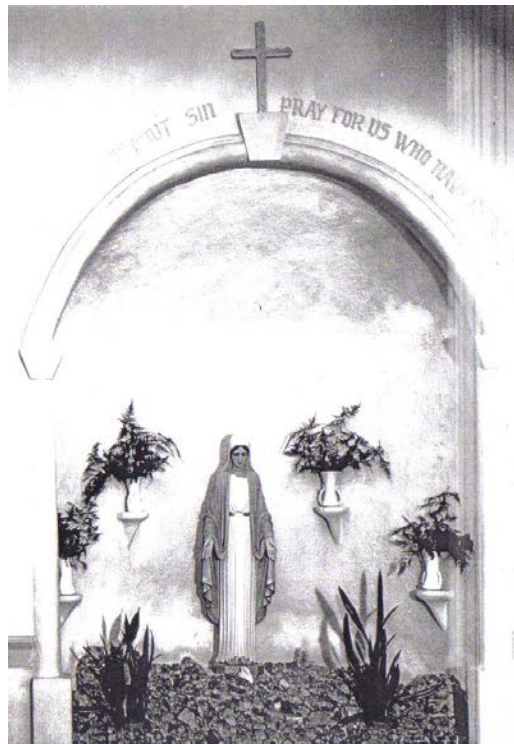
Fr. Patrick Doran, CM with an attentive group of Sunday school students.

[Image Source: *Alabama Mission*, 2010]

By this time, America was embroiled in World War II. During the war, the U.S. Army and Navy established training facilities at API. All engineering schools were asked by the federal government to institute programs that would provide “crash course” engineers for the war effort. At API this program was called Engineering, Science, and Management War Training.

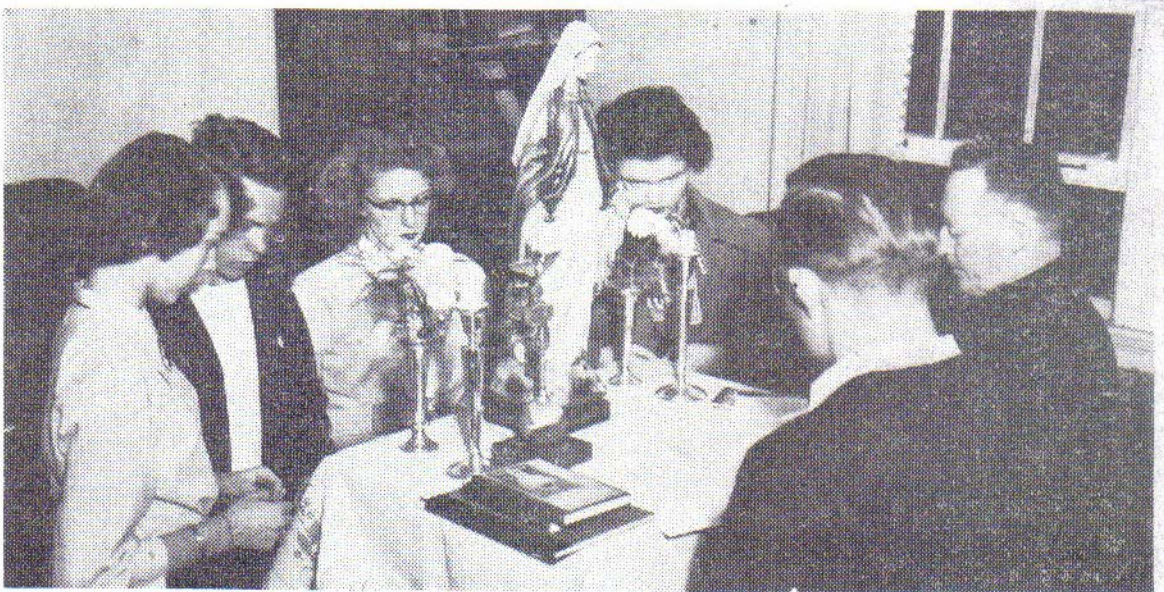
Throughout the war years, API and the city of Auburn produced 32,000 soldiers. This brought many more Catholics to Auburn from around the country.

There were, in fact, so many people attending the 1943 Christmas Mass, that there was not enough space at Sacred Heart to accommodate the crowd, even with multiple Masses. Instead, Christmas Mass was held at the Alumni Gym on campus, known now as Foy Hall. During the war, four German prisoners-of-war from the POW Camp in Opelika were used for renovations of Sacred Heart Church on the corner of Gay Street and Magnolia. Overseen by a priest and a Major Lee, these POWs also built a shrine to the Immaculate Conception. Though pictures of the statue of the Blessed Virgin exist, the statue itself has been missing since sometime prior to the dedication of St. Michael's in 1966. Its current whereabouts remain unknown.



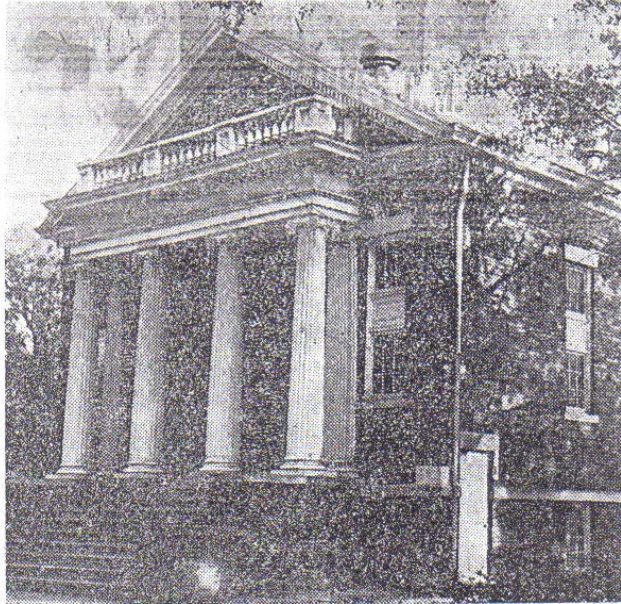
[Image Source: Vincentian Archives, Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania]

After World War II, Auburn was flooded with veterans seeking education through their new G.I. Bill benefits. Catholic veterans set up a trailer park on the church grounds around Gay Street. By 1947, Sacred Heart on East Magnolia was conducting two Masses every Sunday. There also existed two units of the Legion of Mary, a lay Catholic organization which started in Ireland in 1921, a chapter of the Holy Name Society, an organization dedicated to the evangelization of the Catholic Church and devotion to the names of God and Jesus Christ, a chapter of the Rosary Confraternity, and the aforementioned Newman Club. It was also in 1947 that the deed for the Gay / Magnolia Streets property, originally owned by an E.W.J. Flanagan in the 1880s, passing down to various owners through the decades, was officially transferred to Sacred Heart.



MEMBERS of the Junior Legion of Mary, "Our Lady of Fatima" of Auburn reciting their opening prayers and Rosary. Left to right, Jo Ann Dickerson, Lonnie Dickerson, Alice Strong, Dianne Deckwa, Father P. J. Doran, C.M., spiritual director, and in the foreground James Zinner, president.

[Image: Legion of Mary, Auburn, Alabama; Source: *The Catholic Week*, March 24, 1951]

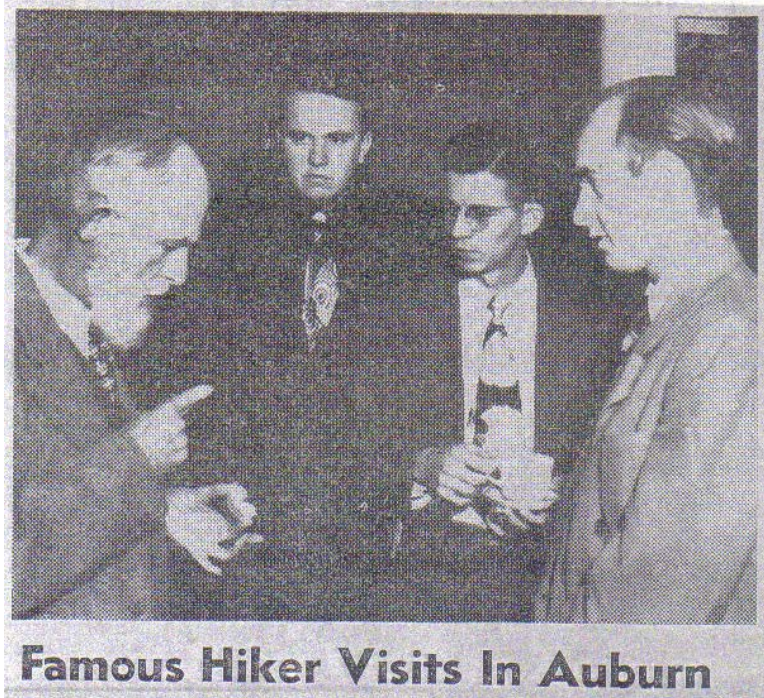


Sacred Heart Church in Auburn

[Image Source: *The Catholic Week*, November 25, 1952]

In a “Motor Mission Report” dated June, 1950, Father O.J. Miller, C.M. reports of the success in the Auburn ministry. He points out that Mayor Wright and Chief of Police Ellis were very cooperative, symbolic of Father Doran’s success in breaking down the barriers of local prejudice and establishing “good will” in and around the Auburn community. Another Auburn citizen of note in the report was Shelton Toomer, providing his store-front for use in street ministry.

The year 1951 saw several historic events. The Legion of Mary in Auburn established a Junior Praesidium with four members. Father Doran spoke to 485 graduates at the API summer graduation ceremonies. Lastly, a quasi-celebrity Catholic at the time visited Auburn. John Stahl, who became famous in 1940 for walking from Fatima, Portugal, to Lourdes, France, and on to Rome (a trip of about 1,660 miles) visited the API campus.



[Image Source: *The Catholic Week*, January 27, 1951]

Aside from the Legion of Mary and visitations by the Ladies of Charity, 1951 also saw the beginning of two weekly radio Catholic broadcasts (at 3:45pm on the Opelika radio station, and 9pm on the Auburn station). The same report also mentions the street preaching project. A request was made for additional personnel for ministering to the local black community.

From the beginning, the Vincentian Fathers had given special focus to proselytizing to the African-American community in eastern Alabama. In 1953, Father Joseph Kennedy established Immaculate Heart of Mary Mission on a plot of donated land on Mission Drive in Auburn to serve the African-American community (it would be renamed St. Martin de Porres Mission under Father John Rutledge in 1964, named for the Peruvian saint of African descent) as well as a day care center and thrift shop. At this point, the South, including Auburn, was still living in the throes of Jim Crow society, with all aspects of community life racially segregated by law. The landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, often seen as the

springboard for the modern Civil Rights Movement, would come within a year of Father Kennedy beginning Immaculate Heart. Auburn now had two Catholic communities.

In a letter dated March 2, 1953, Bishop Thomas Toolen wrote to Sacred Heart concerning rumors that he had heard regarding the sale of alcohol at Church functions in Auburn. Without providing details of the source of the rumors, Bishop Toolen mentioned again and again the “great scandal” that arose from this story. He made a point to mention the local chapter of the Knights of Columbus who were, supposedly, also engaging in this activity.

Part V: Saint Michael the Archangel

Beginning in 1954, Sacred Heart began the process of purchasing the adjacent Magnolia Street property known as Henderson Place. By 1955, Carr Hall, an old student residence facing Gay Street, was used for the rectory and for classroom space. It was sold in 1957 to help pay for the new Magnolia Street property. Father Doran was succeeded in September, 1960, by Father Joseph Konen, C.M., just weeks before John F. Kennedy was elected the first Catholic President of the United States. According to a letter by Father Konen in 1964, the Auburn Catholic community numbered: 525 single students, 100 married students, and 70 non-student families. More space was desperately needed as Sacred Heart only held about one hundred. In 1964, the Vincentian Fathers signed an agreement with Archbishop Thomas J. Toolen to build a new church on the newly acquired Magnolia Street property.

Before leaving Auburn, in the early spring of 1960, Father Doran had a frightening brush with death. On a trip to speak to seminarians at St. Joseph’s Seminary, accompanied by Captain Joe Morrissey of the Air Force, Father Doran’s recounted his story in a letter to a Father Taggart, dated April 3:

“Approaching the [unnamed] river from the north side, we noticed a group of persons on the South end of the bridge standing on the road... On our north side two cars were parked. These apparently from the direction in which the parked cars were pointed, had come across the bridge. We drove, and stopped on the bridge. We wanted to see what the people were waving to us for. Did somebody fall in? or were they going to sell us something? The people who were real country apparently were a couple of families, one was a red head girl about ten; others were, it seemed brothers and sister. One old lady about sixty-five, one man about her age, and two other men. They beckoned us to get out of the car. We did. Looking over the side, the old lady said, ‘Looks like the road is washing away.’ Below, the yellow muddy river was rushing madly along. I’d say and Joe said, about forty feet below. Joe said, ‘Father, do you think we ought to drive across – let’s go in the left corner’ (that was the East side). The family stood on the west side of the road. I said, ‘Joe, we ought to look first.’ I walked from the middle to the East side to take a look under the pavement to see if this was a shell of asphalt. Remembering that Joe was an air force man experienced perhaps in some slants on Engineering I turned to say, ‘Joe, you know more about this than I do.’ In quicker than you could snap a finger, the ground opened under me and I fell thru. I had gone too near the edge, although I was a few feet from it. Because I had turned to Joe to say, ‘You know...’ my face was toward the road. I threw my arms forward. There I was dangling, holding on to pebbles on the asphalt road. Fortunately, my elbows gave me some purchase but very little. I did not know how long I could hold on. Joe was on the cement he reached for me with his two arms, said something which at the time I thought ‘very consoling.’ He said as he tried to pull me, ‘Father, I don’t think I can lift you.’ After a moment, in which I think the others were frozen by the spectacle, the two older than me came rushing and standing on the same weak asphalt, the three lifted me over, and thank God, my life was saved. I say my life was saved because humanly speaking, I could not have pitted my strength against the rushing river below. The thing that brought the two men running across the road from the children to my side was the voice of the old woman who shouted, ‘Save the Reverend!’... After this, like the story of St. Luis Rey, the whole group ran across the bridge to the North side. I turned to thank these good people and asked their names that I mean to send a note of thanks. They were ‘McCranes’ of Girard Station, Phenix City. Just think, if we had impetuously not heeded these poor peasant people and rushed across the bridge in the car, we might have pulled the whole family to death. You’ve heard the story of the tough boys of Phenix City who were going to throw Father [name illegible] over a bridge. Let us [remember] the good people who saved the life of a priest (at the chance of losing their own) from death in a river. Te Deum Laudamus. PS – O yea, I gave the talk!”

By this time the African-American Civil Rights Movement, under the leadership of the Baptist minister Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had achieved long-sought successes in ending the Jim Crow South. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 had opened the door for a new era in race relations in the south. It was decided that the new Catholic Church in Auburn should unite the two local Catholic communities into one. As such, St. Martin de Porres Mission and Sacred Heart Church would be united to create St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church, hoping, in part, that the militant St. Michael would encourage campus ministry among the students.



A GROUND-BREAKING CEREMONY for the new Sacred Heart Catholic Church was held recently at the site on E. Magnolia Ave. Taking part are (from left) the Rev. Louis J. Furton, C. M., superior of St. Mary's Mission, Opelika; the Rev. John D. Rutledge, C. M., assistant at Sacred Heart Church; (breaking ground) Roberts Blount, Tallassee; E. W. Burkhardt, architect; B. J. Kirkley of the contractors, Burns, Kirkley and Williams of Auburn, and the Rev. Joseph F. Konen, C. M., pastor of Sacred Heart Church.

[Image Source: Ducournau Archives]

The new building was designed by Dr. E. Walter Burkhardt, FAIA Architect and Professor Emeritus of Architecture at Auburn University, and cost \$215,000 (with another \$35,000 in furnishings), all of which was raised through the residents and students of Auburn, the Catholic Charities Expansion Program, and the Diocesan Holy Name Chapel Fund. With a circular sanctuary, exemplifying the revival of the liturgy and symbolizing the unification of the Catholic communities of Auburn, Father Konen oversaw every aspect of the construction of the state-of-the-art facility, frequently at odds with the contractors. The new church was dedicated by Archbishop Toolen on September 29, 1966, with Father Sylvester A. Taggart, C.M., presiding over the Mass, Father Joseph G. Vath, D.D., giving the sermon, and coinciding with two feast

days commemorating St. Michael: the seventh century Gelasian Sacramentary's "*S. Michaelis Archangel;*" and the Gregorian Sacramentary's "*Dedicatio Basilionis S. Angeli Michaelis.*"

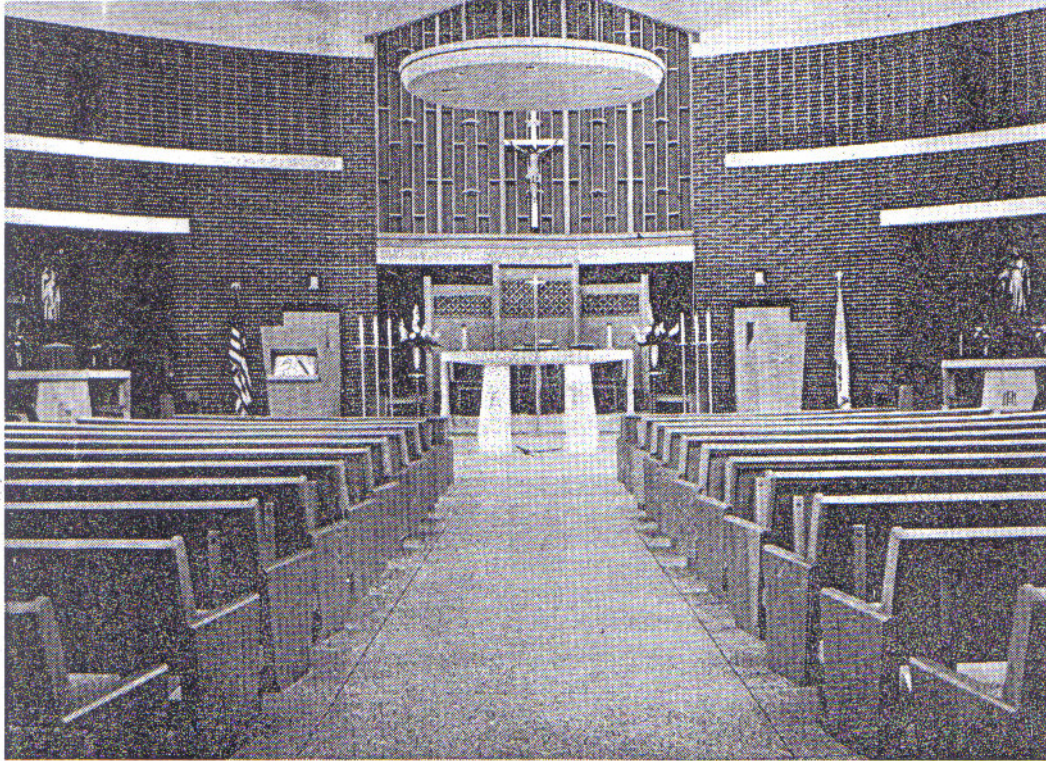


[Image: St. Michael the Archangel;

Source: <http://www.mycatholictradition.com/prayer-to-saint-michael-archangel.html>]



[Image: St. Michael's, 1966; Source: Post Card]



[Image: Interior St. Michael's, 1966; Source: *Lee County Bulletin*, September 29, 1966]

Beth Jones Morgan wrote this about the 1966 church:

“I was five years old when St. Michael’s was constructed. I remember attending Mass with the family at Sacred Heart next door and looking out the church window as the new church went up.

“My impression of the new church was that it was very large, very round, and had two enormous, round, white ‘spaceships’ suspended from the ceiling. When bored with the homily, I used to count the lights in each ‘spaceship’ and wonder what would happen if one of the ‘spaceships’ ever fell onto the congregation. (The worries of a young child!)

“For years, one could arrive at Mass just five minutes ahead of time and sit in the ‘usual’ pew. My First Communion class was me and another little boy. My high school class contained less than a dozen Catholic boys and girls.”

In 1968, local Auburn parishioner James R. Quillin was honored by the Vincentian Fathers. He was presented with a Document of Affiliation in the Congregation of the Mission in the name of the Very Reverend William M. Slattery, C.M., Superior General. Quillin had been in charge of the Chemistry Store at Auburn University since 1948, and was well known for twenty-five years of service for the Catholic Church and the Vincentian Fathers. Of his many works, Quillin rewired the old Sacred Heart Church during its 1943 remodeling, providing the

materials for the rewiring himself. He was elected President of the Newman Club in 1944, spent the summers of 1951 and 1952 lay preaching in the streets of Auburn, and served Sacred Heart / St. Michael's as the church's accountant for twenty years.



[Image: James R. Quillin; Source: Unknown Newspaper / Periodical, January 19, 1968]

Also in 1968, Father Konen wrote to the Diocese regarding a joint project with the local Presbyterian church to “erect non-profit low-cost housing for low-income people.” This was to be accomplished with the assistance of a group called Urban America, through newly established federal funds through the Department of Housing and Urban Development as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society” programs. This housing project, called “Morton Apartments,” mainly targeted local African-American families who were, at the time, living in severely dilapidated housing. Eventually, due mainly to the slowness of access to the government funding, Father Konen decided upon building a new Catholic Center for the betterment of all poor people (rather than the few dozen that would have been helped with the

housing project). He hoped that educating the poor would do more for them than simply alleviating their housing situation.

In 1970, Sisters from the Missionary Servants of the Blessed Trinity began ministering Auburn, establishing Confraternity of Christian Doctrine classes that had been requested by Father Konen and approved by Bishop May. Initially, the Sisters focused primarily on the African-American community on the outskirts of the city. The Trinitarian Sisters were replaced by the Daughters of Charity in 1983. Sisters would continue to minister at St. Michael's until 1998; over time the focus of their work became primarily education, campus ministry and youth ministry.

By 1970, there were 1,200 Catholic students at Auburn University (out of 15,000 total). Around that time, the women's movement was going strong in America, and the traditional roles played by women were giving way to women doctors, lawyers, politicians, professors, engineers, etc. From the earliest years of Christianity, women have played an important role in serving the Church and spreading the message of Christ. As such, the role of women within the ceremony of the Catholic Mass in the present day came into question. Father Konen contacted Bishop May regarding this in November, 1970. The feeling of the Bishop was that, until clarification could be received from Rome, women could serve as lectors during Mass, but they could not read from the same pulpit as the priest. Both men and women began to serve as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion in the 1970s, but not without some initial controversy.

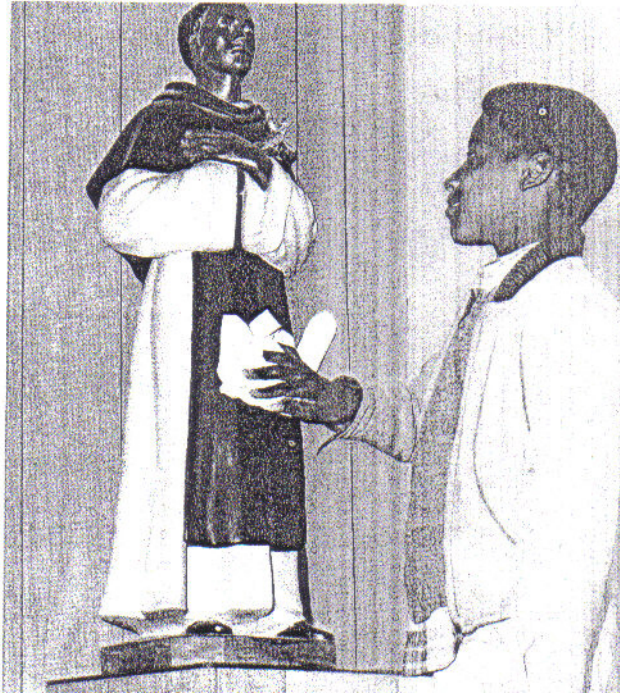
In the spring of 1971, St. Michael's held a lecture series called "Faith and Understanding," an attempt to connect with an increasingly resistant youth culture. Father Paul Loeffler provided lectures on "The Challenge of Scripture," centering on a close study of the Gospels, focusing on their controversial provenance and their validity in the modern world.

Sister Clare of Blessed Trinity held lectures on “Teacher Training,” focusing on how to pass along ideas of faith, prayer, obedience, pain, suffering, death, and failure on to children. Father Konen held lectures on “Directions in Morality,” focusing on the sacraments of Christian initiation, marriage, human sexuality, and the sacramental care of the sick and elderly. At that time, there were 1,675 Catholics at St. Michael’s (including 800 unmarried students), with 184 children attending CCD. For the first time in the Catholic Church’s history at Auburn, St. Michael’s was becoming self-sufficient, relying less and less on donations from the Vincentian community.

In 1971, St. Michael’s spearheaded a cross-denominational anti-abortion campaign that ultimately met with the most resistance from local Protestant sects whose positions on abortion were not clear. They formed the Alabama Clergy Consultation Service on Problem Pregnancies, an affiliate of the national Clergy Consultation Service. A hotline was established in Auburn to make appointments for confidential counseling for women facing unplanned or unwanted pregnancies. St. Michael’s official statement on the issue came in April, 1971: “We the members of the Parish Council of St. Michael’s Catholic Church, Auburn, Alabama, feel compelled, not only to regret and to protest this nation’s and the world’s growing acceptance of abortion, but to urge all who will listen to do all in their power to awaken themselves and others to a clearer vision of right and wrong.” The Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 would bring this issue even more to the fore and even more difficult to combat. St. Michael’s and the Catholic Church would continue to pursue an anti-abortion message for decades to come.

Beginning in 1972, St. Michael’s began to intensify its ministry to the campus of Auburn University and to the surrounding African-American communities. Originally opened by Father Kennedy in 1955, but closed due both to a lack of funding and the desegregating of the Auburn

Catholic community with the building of St. Michael's, Joyland Nursery was reopened in 1974, in the area of the old St. Martin de Porres Mission with assistance from the federal program eventually known as Head Start. The decision was based primarily on the fact that the young children in the area of the old St. Martin's would not have access to practicing their new faith unless the old mission was reopened.



[Image: St. Martin's (Date Unknown); Source: Unknown]

The fear – primarily from the African-American Catholics at St. Michael's – was that reopening the old facilities might again create a segregated Catholic community in Auburn. Eventually renamed St. Michael's Child Development Center, a request was made in 1985 to return the name to Joyland. By 1991, decreased state funding, increasing insurance costs, and increased costs due to federal regulations, Joyland's days seemed numbered, but it still exists today as an after school care program.

A charismatic prayer group began meeting in the nursery around 1972, with Father Bud Englert, Katherine Brusio and Tom Patton as the original members. The group grew to more than

50 members, and relocated to the Upper Center, the first floor of the old Sacred Heart Church.

At its peak, nearly 100 people attended some weeks. Eventually the group “prayed itself out of business” as many of its members became involved in various other ministries at the church.

St. Michael parishioners were instrumental in establishing the Cursillo lay movement in the Archdiocese of Mobile in 1981. The Cursillo movement began in Spain in 1949 and came to the United States in 1957. It is described by the Catholic Almanac as an “instrument of Christian renewal designed to form and stimulate persons to engage in evangelizing their everyday environments.” It consists of a three-day formation weekend, a Cursillo or “little course,” and weekly small group and monthly large group meetings. The first rector for the Men’s Cursillo was Jimmy Jones, and the first Women’s Cursillo rector was Rosemary von Eschenbach, both St. Michael parishioners. Most of the original Mobile Cursillo team members also came from St. Michael’s, including Keith and Mary Ann Campagna, Lou Mackin, John Painter, Read Haughery, Gerry Hankes, Mary Nash Jones and Dolores Meyers. The first archdiocesan lay director was Harold Grant, and the first spiritual director was Father Marty McGeough.

A college student retreat called Pan y Vino (Bread and Wine) began in the 1970s. Now held twice a year, 69 of these student led retreats have been held over the years.

Father Marty McGeough, associate pastor of St. Michael’s at the time (and pastor from 1981 to 1984), gave this account of a tragic parish event in November, 1979:

“Harold Grant, [Sister] Mary Theresa Feinen, [Sister] Mary Frances Wilkerson, and I had been to a regional Cursillo meeting in St. Petersburg. After the meeting, we stopped in Florida to have dinner with my parents and brother. I drove the first couple hours to Tallahassee, then Harold took over. Harold was going to call his son to pick him up in Auburn at the church, but the others said, ‘No, we’ll take you home.’ So, we took Harold to his house in Waverly. We all got out of the car to say goodbye. Well, the keys to the car were on Mary Fran’s key ring, and Theresa and Mary Fran argued over who would drive home. Mary Fran said, ‘They’re my keys,’ and she took the keys and got into the front. Mary Theresa was a little annoyed, so she got into the back seat instead of the front passenger seat. I also sat in the back seat. We started back in [to Auburn], and as we were right above the bypass [Shug Jordan / East University intersection at North College] when we were hit at the top of the hill.

“The police said that Mary Fran had less than a second to make a decision to avoid a head-on collision, and couldn’t. The other car hit us head-on. She was killed instantly.

“I remember coming to, and kind of looking around in a daze, and seeing Mary Theresa on the floor of the car, I picked her up – I don’t know how I did it with a broken arm. There were people outside of the car. I told them to please call Father Gene Sheridan, tell him we had been in an accident, and to come to the hospital.

“I was the first one out of the car because I was the easiest to move. They didn’t do anything with Mary Fran, because they knew she was dead. And Mary Theresa had to be maneuvered because of a broken leg.

“They put me in an ambulance, and took me to the hospital. When [Father] Gene came in, he said to me: ‘My name is Father Sheridan. I’m from St. Michael’s Church and I’ve come to anoint you.’ He didn’t recognize me! I never really saw myself to know how bad I looked, but it must have been bad, because he had no idea who I was. So I looked at him, and said, ‘Gene, it’s Marty. We’ve been in an accident.’

“The next morning, people came to keep a vigil with us at the hospital. The parishioners would sit with us night and day until we were released from the hospital. The parishioners initiated this themselves, and told Fathers Gene and Bob Stone, who had their hands full taking on extra duties, what they were going to do and how. The people took on the role of taking care for the people who had been sent to take care of them. Mary Theresa was in the hospital in traction for 6 weeks, and I had surgery to repair my arm and was in a cast through Christmas.”

The Auburn University Council of the Knights of Columbus (Council #8696) was established on December 6, 1983. This fraternal and charitable society of Catholic men was established in the United States in 1882. The Knights in Auburn are still active today, with over 100 current members.

One of the beautiful additions to the 1966 church was the statue of St. Michael the Archangel. An interesting history revolves around it and one particular parishioner, Bob Fucci. Bob had a certain reticence about entering the sanctuary of the church, during Mass he would stand in the church vestibule next to the statue of St. Michael. This went on for years. When Bob and Linda were married in 1981, Bob had to not only come into the church, but to sit in the front row. The day of the wedding when pictures were being made, Father Frank Sacks and Father Marty McGeough took the statue of St. Michael off the wall and put it in front of the church. In Bob and Linda’s wedding album, you will find Bob Fucci standing with the statue of St. Michael in front of the altar.

The statue of St. Michael mysteriously disappeared from St. Michael’s in the late 1980s. In a truly ironic fashion, it was Bob Fucci who found it in 1993. A realtor was showing Bob an

apartment complex in Auburn that he was interested in buying. As he was inspecting one of the apartments, he saw the statue of St. Michael hanging upside down in the hallway. When the realtor left, Bob went back, knocked on the door, and said, "Excuse me, but I know where that statue belongs." A young lady said that she knew nothing about it; and that it was something one of her roommates hung there. Bob said, "Well, that statue belongs to St. Michael's Catholic Church, and you have one of two choices. You can either let me take it now or I will return with the police and get it." She allowed him to take it. In the process of reclaiming the statue, Bob also noticed a picture of Pope John Paul II which had also been stolen from the church. He took that as well.

Bob was driving his Corvette that day and, because St. Michael was too tall to fit in an upright position, Bob put the top down and drove St. Michael in convertible style to Auburn Bank, where his wife Linda worked. He parked outside her window, went into her office and said, "Look out the window and see what I found." Bob then drove to the church and returned St. Michael to his home. The man who stood by St. Michael's statue for all those years was the one who saved him after being kidnapped. By the way, Bob bought that apartment complex.



[Image: St. Michael Statue; Source: St. Michael's Archives]

In 1983, St. Michael's decided to build a multi-purpose facility for classrooms, a college student center, an auditorium, kitchen, convent, rectory, and office space. This project was completed in 1988, by which time St. Michael's was the only church in downtown Auburn that met local zoning requirements for their own on-site parking. That same year, the Center for Catholic Students was organized, consisting of an Apostolic Action Committee for community service, an Education Committee for student programs, a Public Relations Committee for student activities, a Social Committee to plan trips, parties, and sporting events, and a Spiritual Growth Committee for Bible studies and retreats. Its successor is today's Catholic Student Organization, which is an officially recognized student organization at Auburn University. At that time, St. Michael's parish numbered 320 families and 2,000 Catholic students at Auburn University.

Generosity has always been a hallmark of St. Michael's parishioners, as illustrated by this story told by Tom Nadar, the current director of music at St. Michael's:

“When I came to St. Michael's in September 1987, the music for the 9:30am family Mass was provided by a small folk group, with only a few vocalists and just two fairly decent guitarists. I discovered an old spinet piano tucked away behind the sanctuary, so I felt fairly confident when I offered my musical services to the group that we would be able to combine the piano with the guitars. Unfortunately, the piano had seen a lot of heavy use and was not in particularly good shape, but I guess it was better than nothing at all. You can imagine my great joy that December when Tom and Betty Bonniol donated a brand-new spinet to St. Michael's for me to use. I felt that those three months of my music making hadn't gone unnoticed, and the Bonniols wanted to be sure that we had a decent instrument for the parish liturgies. That piano is still used today in the choir practice room behind the sanctuary.”

In three quarters of a century, the Catholic Church in and around Auburn had come a long way. The early dangers of violence and bigotry had been overcome; and St. Michael's was a vibrant force in the local community. In February, 1986, in a homily celebrating the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Vincentian Apostolate in Eastern Alabama, Father Frank Sacks, C.M., summed up how far the Catholic Community had come since 1910. He said, “Catholics in the South might today find it difficult to empathize with those who endured blatant bigotry in former times. Perhaps our children's memories of such struggles, by God's Providence, have been dimmed by our experience of renewal in Christian Churches of the South. Yet none of us today, recalling our past, can fail to appreciate those qualities of greatness which motivated our predecessors. Their courage in the face of adversity, loyalty to the Church, devotion to Christ, and love of Mary continue to inspire us.”

In 1994, the bells outside St. Michael's were finally repaired after thirteen years of silence. Donated by Mildred Blount of Tallassee in 1965, the three bells, cast by the McShane Foundry in Baltimore, Maryland, are, respectively, 500, 300, and 200 pounds. The bells were silenced in 1981 because the vibrations caused the brick face of the tower to crack. A computerized timing system was installed and on May 16, 1994, the refurbished bells were put back into service once more thanks to a \$15,000 donation by the Mildred Weedon Blount

Educational and Charitable Foundation and \$5,000 from the parish itself. In 2009, the same bells were placed in a new tower next to the new church located on North College Street.

A number of different Vincentians served at St. Michael's during the 1970s and 1980s. Often there were three priests at St. Michael's – a pastor, an associate pastor and another priest whose primary focus was campus ministry. On May 22, 1996, St. Michael's celebrated a Farewell Liturgy signifying the end of the parish's connection with the Vincentian Fathers after 84 years in Auburn. Father Stephen M. Staff became the first archdiocesan pastor in June 1996.

Property just north of St. Michael's, 0.75 acres at the northwest corner of Magnolia Avenue and Burton Street, was purchased in 1997 and used for additional parking and rental income. That same property would be sold for more than four times its original cost just nine years later.

Faced with increasing numbers of Catholics in Auburn, a long-range planning committee was formed in 2004 and given the task of determining the future direction of St. Michael's and its ministries. In 2006 it was determined that St. Michael's could not meet its long-term needs if it remained at the East Magnolia location. Finding a new location became the top priority. The Archdiocese of Mobile purchased a house at 115 Mitcham Avenue to be used for campus ministry, in order to maintain a Catholic presence downtown. St. Michael's rental property north of Magnolia Avenue was sold to Auburn Bank in August 2006, while the remainder of the property between Magnolia and Thach Avenues was sold to Auburn United Methodist Church in October 2007, with the provision that St. Michael's could use its facilities until June 2010.

After many months and evaluations of several sites, St. Michael's purchased 17.5 acres of land on North College Street for \$1.35 million in November 2007. The new location was 1.5 miles north of Toomer's Corner, much closer than all the other potential sites which had been

considered. A house at 1121 North College Street was purchased in January 2008 for use as a priests' residence.

A building committee was formed in 2007 and immediately began working with CTSM Architects of Birmingham on the design for the new facilities. Forward in Faith, the capital campaign for the project, also began in the summer of 2007. It would ultimately raise over \$3.6 million in pledges.

Construction began in September 2008 – the contractor was Gary C. Wyatt, General Contractor of Birmingham. The new facility included a 600-seat sanctuary (internally expandable to 1000 seats), a parish hall and kitchen, 14 classrooms / meeting rooms, youth ministry space, offices and storage rooms. It was dedicated on December 6, 2009 by Archbishop Thomas J. Rodi. Retired Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb was also in attendance, marking the first time two Catholic archbishops were in Auburn simultaneously.

Attendance at Mass increased significantly when the new church opened, along with an increase in Sunday school attendance and other parish activities. By the end of 2011, St. Michael's had 900 registered families, along with approximately 2,500 Catholics attending Auburn University, 350 children from age 3 through 8th grade registered for Sunday school in the fall of 2011.



[Image: St. Michaels, 2011; Source: <http://www.millermizeprecast.com/galleryLarge.cfm?ID=32>]

Part VI: Auburn's Servants of God

- Rev. Thomas MacDonald, C.M. 1912-1943
- Rev. Patrick Doran, C.M. 1944-1960
- Rev. Joseph Konen, C.M. 1961-1972
- Rev. John E. Hurley, C.M. 1973-1974
- Rev. August H. Englert, C.M. 1975-1977
- Rev. Eugene F. Sheridan, C.M. 1978-1980
- Rev. Martin J. McGeough, C.M. 1981-1984
- Rev. Michael J. Kennedy, C.M. 1984-1991
- Rev. Henry M. Bradbury, C.M. 1991-1996
- Rev. Stephen M. Staff 1996-2000
- Rev. Msgr. James S. Kee 2000-2001
- Rev. J. Francis Sofie 2001-2005
- Rev. Msgr. William J. Skoneki 2005-Present