CHURCH HISTORY

A PROPOSAL TO RENOVATE THE HISTORIC ST. MARTIN DE TOURS CATHOLIC CHURCH IN ST. MARTINVILLE LEADS TO RESIGNATION OF ITS PRIEST.

THE ST. MARTIN DE TOURS Catholic Church stands as a monument both to history and to the ravages of time. Dominating the center of St. Martinville, it gracefully wears the discreet marker identifying it as a member of the National Register of Historic Places.

Inside, however, intricate statues and stained glass windows, all with their own stories behind them, the circa 1870s painting of St. Martin de Tours and the replica from the same period of the Grotto of Lourdes, clash with peeling paint and a cement floor layered with glue splotches leftover from the vinyl clash with peeling paint and a cement floor that used to be there, as if to find enough teachers to meet the targeted reductions. He denied that it got a slap on the wrist. State Superintendent of Schools Wilmer Cody said that the system was unable to find enough teachers to meet the targeted reductions. He denied that Lafayette was among seven school systems which have ignored the Louisiana Department of Education's demand to meet the targeted reductions.

St. Martin de Tours shows its beauty and its flaws simultaneously. Outside, work on beautifying the exterior and the grounds has been well-received in town. Inside, paint peels and old glue mars the floor.

JAMES B. AKERS HAS THE DUBIOUS distinction of having been the catalyst. He's not even a member of the St. Martin de Tours parish, as has been frequently pointed out to him since the whole affair began, but he once worked for the church and was involved in its major restoration project in 1973 and 1974. Akers, now living in Baton Rouge, heard of proposed changes to the church which concerned him enough to fire off a letter to The Teche News.

"This building is not only the seat of your religion and your worship of God; it is the visible link with your past," the letter read in part. "The church is a living symbol of our heritage, the last symbol of your French, Spanish and Acadian culture, which God has given to our care, to preserve for future generations."

The internal changes proposed were definitely more involved than some paint and some flower beds, however. Included was to be the moving of the altar forward, necessitating the removal of the first three or four rows of pews and the relocation of the choir. The old cypress pews were to be ripped out and replaced with new pews made of oak, and a brick parquet floor was to go down over the cement. Gordon Delambre, the president of the parish council, declined to comment on the controversy except to say that the plans were just that—plans which had not been finalized nor approved by the diocese. "Everyone jumped the gun," he said.

Akers' objections are extremely detailed, but his main concerns have to do with intent and implications. The renovation of 1973 and 1974, he says, was meant to bring St. Martin de Tours Catholic Church "closer to the people, to do away with the old French idea of a place of worship." It has been frequently pointed out to him that the church was originally built for the Capuchin who settled with the first French in southwest Louisiana. The Capuchins, he says, "believed in the spiritual needs of the people, not just in the physical structure of the church."

The following Sunday, Jan. 14, Father Stephen Laliberté read the letter sentence by sentence during services, refuting each of Akers' criticisms. Then, without warning, he announced his resignation. Almost as quickly, the Diocese of Lafayette appointed a replacement, not from within Laliberté's own Capuchin order, but from the ranks of the diocese itself. Laliberté did not respond to a call from The Times, and other figures in the controversy, with the exception of Akers, declined to comment. Debate has continued to rage within the letters columns of The Teche News and elsewhere in the town. Until the controversy, he declared, "we were able to be happy with what we had."

For his part, Akers says he was only voicing his opinion in a public forum. "Nobody wanted to kick the priest out," he says. "That was never the intention. We just wanted to have some say so..."

ST. MARTIN DE TOURS IS THE OLDEST church parish in southwest Louisiana. Its first pastor was a Capuchin who settled with the first group of Acadian exiles in 1765; parts of the church building date back to the late 1830s. The old cypress pews with doors on one end, according to a history of the church, were once a key source of revenue, as families rented them by the year. The large rectory was supposedly built during the 1850s in hopes that St. Martinville would be designated as the seat of a new diocese, although that honor eventually went to Lafayette.

Laliberté, a New Englander, came to St. Martinville about three years ago. Known around town as "Father Steve," he has won praise for his efforts to beautify the church exterior and the church square, as well as his improvements to the rectory which is now considered a showpiece. Citizens tell of his contribution of personal funds and his willingness to climb ladders with workmen.

"You have only to look across the street to see the work that Fr. Steve and a few volunteers have done to improve the looks of our Main Street," wrote Inez Gauthier, a trustee and a member of the church's parish council. "There is so much more to be done to keep the historical Main Street as it should be..."

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Tours into compliance with the guidelines of Vatican II while not harming the historical character of the church itself. Vatican II emphasized involvement and interaction between the priest and the congregation, primarily by having the priest face the congregation during services, rather than saying Mass with his back turned as had been done in the past. At that time, the renovation plans were approved by the diocese, and the church was consecrated. “When all this was done, it was a way of preserving the church for future generations,” says Akers.

But the latest proposal, particularly bringing the altar far forward, carries the implication that the church does not comply with the guidelines of Vatican II, he says. And he is concerned about the effects of the changes on the consecration.

“It’s the way it’s presented to the people. They’re made to believe they are not in compliance with the rules of the Second Vatican Council,” he says. And if, as has been charged, he was out of order as a non-parishioner, he wonders why he was attacked from the pulpit rather than simply ignored.

Akers apparently is not alone in his concerns. Within the last few weeks, the state Office of Historic Preservation has been contacted by parishioners about the proposed renovation. “Right now, all we have is hearsay,” says Jonathan Fricker, deputy preservation officer. He says he was surprised by the contact because he had met Laliberte and been impressed by the priest’s sensitivity to the history of the church.

Still, the office, which is obligated to provide free design and architectural advice about properties on the National Register, has contacted both the parish council and the diocese offering its services. Fricker says the parish council has responded and asked the office to take a look at the plans.

Other letters to the editor have alluded to a larger issue: the difficulty of ministering to St. Martin de Tours parish because of its tradition and history. “We can have the most magnificently-appointed cathedral in the world, but without love and understanding we have nothing,” wrote Carole G. Lancon.

From Marcel Guidry came: “We cannot keep on replacing one priest after another like we do a shirt. Let’s try to keep the next one long enough to wear him out before we try to exchange him.”

And there is a strong sense of loss. A woman answering the phone last week at the church called Laliberte one of the best things to ever happen to St. Martinville. “The whole town is grieving,” she said.

-JANE NICHOLES