St. Mary Magdalen Catholic Church restored

Bruce Brown
bbrown@theadvertiser.com

ABBEVILLE — All the waiting, all the work, all the contributions were worth it.

St. Mary Magdalen Catholic Church, the landmark parish in the heart of Abbeville, has been restored to its former glory after an eight-month renovation.

Bishop Michael Jarrell will preside over the Rite of Dedication of the Church and the Altar at 11 a.m. on Sunday, capping a weekend celebration.

"Our parishioners have expressed a tremendous amount of gratitude for the work done for their parish church," said the Rev. William Blanda. "Many have said it is beyond what they expected in the beauty of the art and architecture."

"The financial sacrifices and being out of the church were well worth it. We have returned the church to the style which it was originally built to have."

The $2.9 million project began last spring, an eight-month endeavor that stretched from just after Easter to just — barely — before Christmas. Fundraising was the first big hurdle, but was cleared nonetheless.

"Despite the economic situation of these times," Blanda said, "people have been extremely generous. It reminds me how, when the church was first built in the early 1900s, crops were failing and farmers faced terrible struggles. But even then people decided to make the house of God a priority. They could have chosen a lesser structure, but they didn’t."

Blanda said contractors were especially attentive to communicating with the parish, and with each other, and that their openness facilitated a smooth operation.

"There were very few setbacks, precious little delays," he said.

Still, it was a push to be back inside before Christmas.

"Our first Mass (back in the church) was Christmas Vigil mass on Christmas eve," Blanda said. "We were working a minute to midnight. The Saturday before, parishioners were cleaning the church. The floor contractor was working through Dec. 23.

Parishioners and contractors alike were determined to give us the opportunity to be in the church before Christmas."

Ceiling murals, stations of the cross, stained glass windows, new marble side altars and many other details turned the facility into a scaffold-filled workplace for months.

"It’s hard to pinpoint a specific facet I like best," Blanda said. "Each one complements the others. I will say that the decision we made to obtain marble side altars and communion rails from St. Rose of Lima in New Orleans, which had been closed, was a timely decision. It’s a powerful representation of our commitment to support the church as more than a building. It’s made up of living stones."

"The pieces obtained naturally fit into the architecture and design of the church. It looks like they would have always been here. I’m also pleased with the restoration of the original stained glass in the apse."

Now the parish can return to its mission of service, which includes attention to both local needs as well as urgent needs for help for Haiti earthquake victims.

"Our second collection this weekend will go to those victims," Blanda said. "It’s a powerful representation of our commitment to support the church as more than a building. It’s made up of living stones."

"We feel a close connection with Haiti since Father Glenn Meaux, a native son, has his mission there. But we’re also committed to do more than the collection asked for by the bishops of the United States," he said. "Beyond that, we’re going to help as much as we can, along with helping our local needs service center. We’re concerned with the poor and needy, both here and abroad."

"We want the church to be a place of dignity to lift their soul to God."