



REJOICE & RESTORE

The Newly Renovated Cathedral Basilica of Saint Augustine is America's First Catholic Parish

By Christi Elflein | Photography by Woody Huband

On September 8, 1565, Pedro Menendez landed on the shores of Matanzas Bay, kissed Father Lopez's wooden cross and celebrated mass; marking the beginning not only of St. Augustine, but also America's First Catholic Parish.

The Spanish settlers built a town plaza with a parish church, Nuestra Senora de los Remedios (Our Lady of Healing), around 1573. Our Lady of Healing, made of wood planks and a thatch roof, was burned down during the legendary Sir Francis Drake's pillaging of the city in 1586. Several other parish churches would be built and subsequently destroyed by invaders or hurricanes throughout the next two centuries. The Cathedral Basilica of St. Augustine that we see today sits on the same plaza where Our Lady of Healing sat over four centuries ago, Plaza de la Constitucion.



A hand carved statue of Our Lady of La Leche, Mary nursing the infant, graces the font of the new choir loft.

TOUR THE CATHEDRAL

The Cathedral, located at 38 Cathedral Place in downtown St. Augustine, is open to the public. Take a peek inside to see these new improvements, and find yourself in awe of the City's historic Cathedral.

Baptismal Font – Relocated to the Cathedral's entrance is a 1,500 lb. solid limestone baptismal font. It is a replica of the font used to baptize Ponce de León in 1474. The font was made by hand, and given to the City of St. Augustine by the Village of Santervás de Campos in 2013. Santervás de Campos is a small village of about 100 people and the birthplace of Ponce de León. When Florida was celebrating the anniversary of Ponce de León claiming "La Florida" for Spain, the village wanted to commemorate the occasion so they made two replicas of the original baptismal font, which is now located in the Cathedral of San Juan, Puerto Rico, where Ponce de León was Governor. The other replica font is located in the village's church. Father Willis says, "What a great gift, because it continues to tie the history of Spain and Florida, which dates back those 500 years."

Choir Loft – The choir previously sang on the altar. The new choir loft, located above the entrance of the church, is one of the major new additions. Notice the statue of Our Lady of La Leche; it was hand-carved in Ortesei, Italy.

Tile Floor – The concrete tile floor in the Cathedral was added during the 1965 renovations. They were fashioned by Cubans who were ousted by Castro, using a special technique where colors were mixed into the concrete to create the design. Many of the tiles have been damaged over time, and needed to be replaced; however, the technique is no longer used. A long search led today's designers to Mexico, where they found a company to duplicate the tiles.

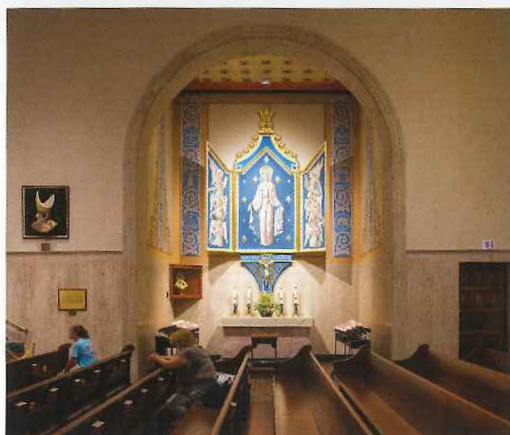
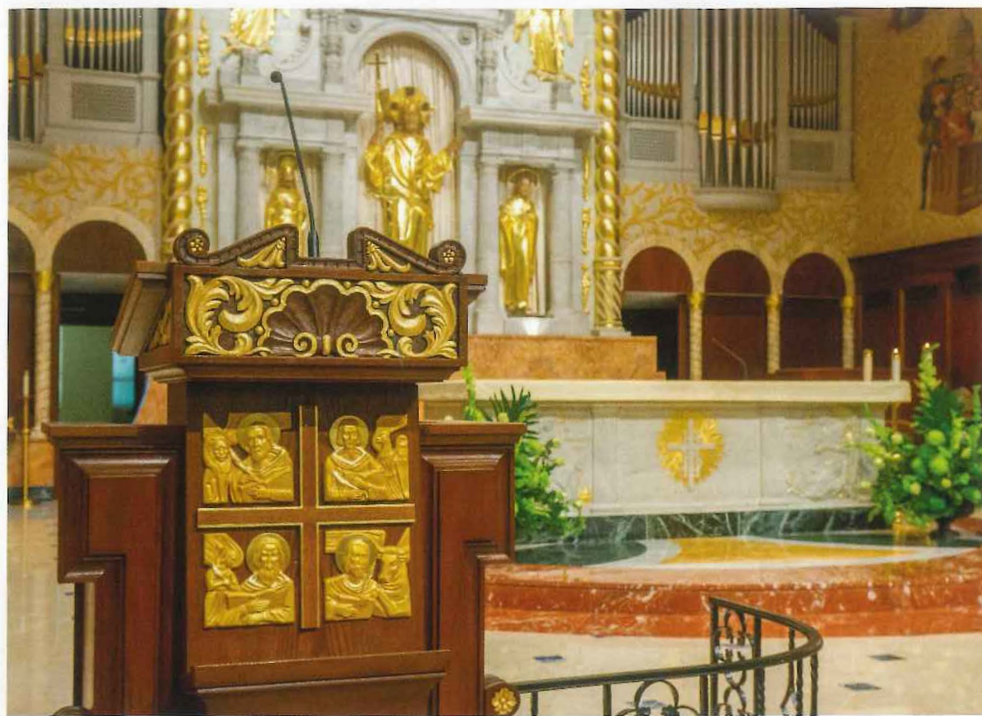
The Pews – The wooden pews are new, adding more seating and accessibility. What is interesting, though, is what happened to the old wooden pews. Some have been made into commemorative wooden crosses by the Cathedral's Men's Group. Some were donated to UNF for their chapel renovations. Most were shipped through Food for the Poor to be used in the rebuilding of churches in Haiti that were damaged by the earthquake.

Italian Marble Sanctuary Floor – The quarter-inch tile put in the Sanctuary in 1965 was cracking, and needed to be replaced. Father Willis personally picked out the new Italian marble which graces the floor, and should stand the test of time. Local artisans from Ancient City Tile laid it.

Gold Leaf – Everywhere you now see real gold used to be gold paint. Now it's 23 carat gold leaf. The gold is particularly stunning on the reredos, which is the backdrop behind the altar.

Stained-Glass Windows – Lights have been added to the stained-glass windows. After the sun sets, enjoy the view of the Cathedral from the street. The stained-glass windows are glorious. They tell the story of the patron saint of St. Augustine, Saint Augustine de Hippo.

The Cathedral renovations were led by Baker Liturgical Art.



Clockwise from top: 23 carat gold leaf adorns the church; a triptych of Mother Mary in a small chapel in the sanctuary; Father Tom Willis, Rector of the Cathedral Basilica of St. Augustine.

Father Tom Willis, Rector of the Cathedral Basilica of St. Augustine, interviewed while standing in the Cathedral, says, "When the Spanish got St. Augustine back (in the 1783 Treaty of Paris), the parishioners really began a push to get the Spanish monarchy to fund a permanent church. And so that's how the parish church in St. Augustine that was built from 1792 to 1797 started, on this spot."

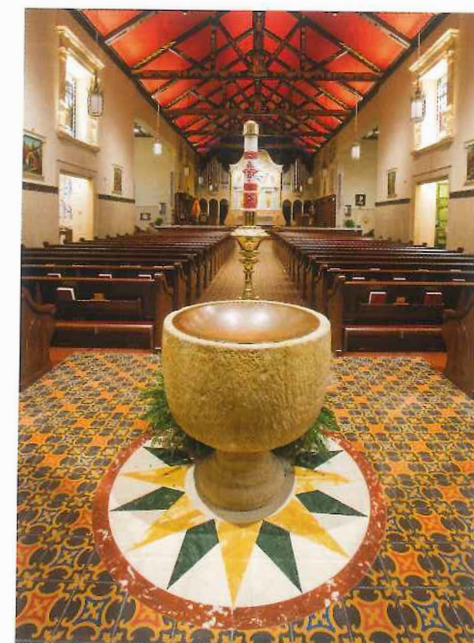
In 1870, that small church was elevated in status by the Vatican, and became the Cathedral of St. Augustine. Today, "The two nave walls and the façade wall are all original to that 1790s construction. That's 24-inch-thick coquina," says Father Willis. "Where these two walls end," he points to

the front half of the church, "that was the size of the original church."

According to Father Willis, "The expansion of the two wings, or transepts, happened after the fire of 1887. They also lengthened the church at that time in order to give the church its classic cruciform shape," he says.

Oil magnate Henry Flagler, "Helped Bishop Moore in raising the funds for the reconstruction of the Cathedral," says Father Willis. "Then Mr. Flagler gave an additional \$67,000 to build the bell tower because he wanted, basically, a town clock."

The next big renovation of the Cathedral took place in preparation for the City of



The baptismal font is made of solid limestone and weighs 1,500 lbs. It is a replica of the font used to baptize Ponce de León in 1474.

St. Augustine's 400th Anniversary in 1965. Father Willis says, "Archbishop Hurley's vision for the renovation of the Cathedral was that he wanted it to not only show the magnificence of the cathedrals of Europe, but he also wanted to bring back the Spanish flavor of a cathedral in a Spanish town." The yearlong renovation proved grand.

Now, 50 years later, as St. Augustine has prepared for its 450th Anniversary, the Cathedral has undergone another transformation. Through fundraising and matching church funds, \$5.5 million has been spent on much needed repairs to the Cathedral's exterior, as well as updates to the interior lighting and sound systems. Dramatic changes include new Italian marble on the altar, and the choir loft constructed above the entrance of the Cathedral. The reredos behind the altar also received an update. Where gold paint used to cover the statues, now 23 carat gold leaf glimmers.

Father Willis says, "Having grown up here, I would say that as a town, the townspeople, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, have always been proud to have the cathedral in their city. For a small town like this, it's a nice feather in the cap. But it also, I think, reminds people, because we are home to America's First Parish, that religious roots were established here 450 years ago. I like to say those roots run long and deep." 🐾