

Brief History of the Catholic Church and St. Mary Help of Christians, Aiken, SC
December 5, 2025

For 2,000 years, the Catholic Church has proclaimed the Paschal Mystery – the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. This same proclamation, in word and action, is the heart of our mission here at St. Mary Help of Christians Parish.

"Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Matthew 28:19-20

The basis of the teaching and practice of the Catholic Church is threefold: The Holy Scripture, sacred Tradition, and the authority of the Bishops, who are the successors of Jesus's Apostles, in communion with the Bishop of Rome, called the Pope, who is the successor of Simon Peter, named by Jesus "The Rock."

On the night before He died, Jesus prayed for the unity of His followers:

"I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they may also be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me." – John 17:20, New American Bible

Regrettably, due to human sin on all sides, various groups have split from the Catholic Church over the past 20 centuries. We pray and work for the unity of all Christians.

Catholic Church buildings are designed to support public worship, focused on the Sacraments, as well as private prayer.

The seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church are outward signs, instituted by Jesus Christ, to give grace. They are

- Baptism: The person is washed of sin and incorporated into Christ.
- Confirmation: The person is anointed with the Holy Spirit, giving the courage and inspiration to proclaim the gospel
- Holy Eucharist: The Priest, acting in the Person of Christ, changes the substance of bread and wine into the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of our Lord and Savior, while retaining the appearance of bread and wine, which the faithful then consume.
- Penance (also called Reconciliation or Confession): The sinner confesses his or her sins privately to the priest, who, acting in the Person of Christ, grants absolution, the forgiveness of sins.
- Holy Orders: The Bishop, acting in the person of Christ, ordains priests and deacons.
- Matrimony: a man and a woman come before the Church and declare themselves husband and wife.

-Anointing of the Sick: The Priest anoints a person who is seriously ill or undergoing a serious medical procedure to give the person strength for their journey and the forgiveness of their sins.

These sacraments, except the anointing of the sick, are generally administered in a Catholic church building. The sacrament of Penance is generally private; private confessional booths provide for this sacrament. The other sacraments are public. This sets the basis for the design of a Catholic church building.

The focus of the building is the altar, on which bread and wine are changed into the body, blood, soul and divinity of Jesus by the priest while still retaining the appearance of bread and wine, and near the altar, and the ambo (lectern or pulpit) from which the word of God, the Sacred Scriptures, are proclaimed.

Iconography and stained glass windows are generally found in Catholic church buildings. These provide visual reminders of Jesus, his mother Mary, the and the saints.

Particularly significant among the iconography are the 14 Stations of the Cross around the walls of the Nave, which trace the Passion of Jesus, from his condemnation before the Pontius Pilate, Roman Procurator of Jerusalem, to Jesus's crucifixion, death and burial.

Some key dates in Catholic history:

33 AD:

- The crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus, His ascension into heaven, and the coming of the Holy Spirit on His Apostles and other followers in Jerusalem.
- Simon Peter (St. Peter) makes first public proclamation of the gospel of Jesus's death, burial, resurrection and ascension into heaven.
- The Apostles choose Matthias to become an Apostle in place of Judas Iscariot who betrayed Jesus and then killed himself.

Around 35 AD:

- St Peter proclaims the gospel to the household of the gentile (non-Jew) centurion Cornelius, in Cornelius's house.
- Jewish leaders stone to death St. Stephen, first martyr, in Jerusalem
- Saul of Tarsus, on the way to Damascus to arrest followers of Jesus and bring them in chains to Jerusalem, is struck down by a vision of Jesus, and thereafter becomes a zealous Apostle of Jesus, known as St. Paul.

Around 40 AD, the apostles and other leaders of the church gather in Jerusalem to decide if gentiles need to follow the Jewish law, including circumcision. Their decision is they do not.

About 64 AD: Martyrdom of Jesus's leading apostles, Sts. Peter and Paul, in Rome.

313 AD: Edict of Milan by the Emperor Constantine, declaring toleration of Christianity in the Roman Empire.

324 AD: Emperor Constantine built the first public Christian church, the Lateran Basilica, in Rome. This is the Cathedral Church of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope.

325 AD: Emperor Constantine convened the First Council of Nicaea to address the Arian controversy about the nature of God and Jesus, a controversy that was dividing the Church. The Council declared that God is one God in 3 persons, all three of the same divine substance, distinct only in their relationship to each other. They are called Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Son became Man in Jesus Christ, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. Jesus is fully God and fully Man in one Person.

The Church has convened many Councils over the centuries, to address controversies and bring about reforms. The most recent is the Second Vatican Council, which met from 1962 to 1965.

Catholics in America:

Catholics first came to the Americas with the voyages of Christopher Columbus, followed by Spanish, Portuguese and French missionaries. The first known Catholic Mass in what is now South Carolina was celebrated in 1540 AD at Silver Bluff along the Savannah River, by the Spanish expedition led by Hernando de Soto.

The first organized Catholic presence in the English colonies of North America was the Proprietary Colony of Maryland, established in 1634. In 1789, after the American Revolution, Pope Pius VI established the Diocese of Baltimore, encompassing the United States. The Right Reverend John Carroll was the first Bishop of Baltimore.

On July 11, 1820, Pope Pius VII established the Catholic Diocese of Charleston, the seventh Catholic Diocese in the United States. The states South Carolina, North Carolina and Georgia were included in this new diocese. Bishop John England was the first Bishop of Charleston. Today, the Diocese of Charleston covers the State of South Carolina. Our current Bishop is the Right Reverend Jacques Fabre Jeune, the 14th Bishop of the Diocese of Charleston.

In 1853, Bishop of Charleston Ignatius Reynolds purchased property in Aiken.

In 1867, at the invitation of Bishop John Lynch of Charleston, Bishop Ignacio Persico, a Capuchin missionary who had been made Bishop while serving in India, came to Aiken to establish a church here. He built the first Catholic church building in Aiken, on the site now occupied by the Old St. Mary Help of Christians Catholic Church. In 1870, Bishop

Persico was made Bishop of Savannah, Georgia. Some years later he moved to Italy and was made a Cardinal.

In 1875, the church building in Aiken was destroyed in a hurricane. Soon afterward, a wealthy Catholic resident of the Aiken Winter Colony contributed to the building of a new church, a brick building, named St. Claire Catholic Church. This served as the parish church into the early 20th Century. This lovely building is still in use. For the past 25 years, it has been used for Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. People pray before the Blessed Sacrament (the consecrated bread that is the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, under the appearance of bread) on an established schedule, 24 hours per day, every day of the year except for the Easter Triduum which runs 3 days, from the Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday to the Great Easter Vigil.

In 1892, a Catholic church was established in Orangeburg, initially as a mission of St. Claire Catholic Church of Aiken.

In 1901, St. Angela Academy opened in Aiken, administered and taught by Ursuline nuns. This was supplanted by St. Mary Help of Christians Catholic School which was established in 1955. This school now provides excellent Catholic education to children from 3PK kindergarten through eighth grade. Added a large state-of-the-art STEM Center to the school, which Bishop Jacques dedicated in 2025.

The growth of the Catholic population in Aiken made it necessary to build a new, larger church. In 1905, St. Mary Help of Christians Catholic Church was dedicated. This was the main parish church until the new, much larger St. Mary Help of Christians Church on Fairfield Street was dedicated in 2015. Now called Old St. Mary Help of Christians Church, this handsome brick building is used for daily Masses, confessions, weddings and funerals. As in any Catholic Church, the altar for the offering of the Body and Blood of the Lord, and ambo for proclamation of the Word of the Lord are the focus. Stations of the Cross, generally found in all Catholic church buildings, line the nave. They represent events on Jesus Way of the Cross, from His judgment before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate to His crucifixion, death and burial in the tomb. Stained glass windows represent events in the life of Mary the Mother of God. The symbols on the vault of the apse represent the Apostles of Jesus. Confessional booths near the back of the church provide space for private confession of sins. The baptismal font provides for baptisms. A choir loft with organ above the rear of the church provides for music. Holy water near the entrances reminds us of our baptism. This building can seat about 300 people.

In 1915, the Pastor of St. Mary's, Fr. P. J Lanigan, established the Mission Church of St. Joseph, now St. Williams Parish, in Ward, SC.

Monsignor George Lewis Smith was Pastor of St. Mary Help of Christians from the late 1930s to the early 1950s. In 1940, he established a mission in Gloverville in Horse Creek

Valley, the Horse Creek Valley Handicrafts and Recreation Center, now called Our Lady of the Valley Catholic Center. He did this to minister to the very poor people of Horse Creek Valley, said to be the second poorest place in the United States during the Great Depression. The Center was operated at first by the Sisters of Christian Doctrine from New York, later by the Daughters of Charity from Emmitsburg, Maryland, and now by Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Charleston. A few years after establishing the Center, Monsignor Smith established the mission church of Our Lady of the Valley, now a parish. He also established a mission church for Black people during the time of racial segregation, St. Gerard's Catholic Church on Edrie Street in Aiken. St. Gerard's is now a parish, serving everyone regardless of color or national origin. Msgr. Smith also established a mission in North Augusta, now the large parish of Our Lady of Peace.

The Catholic population of Aiken continued to grow, first with the building and operation of the Savannah River Site starting in the 1950s, as well as other industries, and later with the influx of many retirees to this very pleasant area. By the year 2000, It was becoming clear that St. Mary Help of Christians Catholic Church on Park Avenue was too small.

Pastor Fr. James Leblanc undertook a study for building a new, much larger church. The first concept, for a church that would seat about 1,200 people, was to demolish the rectory located behind the church along York Street and extend the church to the railroad embankment. This encountered controversy about historic preservation. It was approved by the City of Aiken and the Diocese. However, circumstances and continued concern led to some hesitation about proceeding with this plan. Fr. Gregory Wilson was appointed Pastor in 2011 and called for a new look at the project. It was decided to build a new church building on Fairfield Street, on property the parish already owned, that would seat about 900 people. This project went forward.

Bishop Gugliemone of Charleston dedicated the new St. Mary Help of Christians Catholic Church on February 2, 2015. This is now the main Parish Church, used for Masses on Sundays and major holy days. It is a handsome design, somewhat like a Roman Basilica, with a large baldacchino (structural canopy) over the main altar, various statuary and stained glass windows. The choir loft with organ is large, high up in the rear of the church above the narthex at the entrance, facing the altar. Like most Catholic churches it is open during the day for private visitation and prayer.

The current Pastor is The Very Reverend Richard Wilson.

Other facilities:

-St. Mary Help of Christians School, comprising several buildings and a playground, occupying most of the block bounded by York Street, Richland Avenue, Fairfield Street and Park Avenue. St. Angela Hall, normally configured as a full-size basketball court, serves also as a large room for meetings, festivals and other purposes. St. Angela Hall was used for Masses on Sundays and major Holy Days for several years before the new large church on Fairfield Street was built and dedicated.

- The Rectory, which houses the Pastor, other assigned priests and visiting priests, along York Street between Old St. Mary's and the railroad embankment.
- The Parish Office, on Park Avenue across York Street from Old St. Mary Help of Christians Church. This has several office spaces for parish clergy and staff.
- Smith Hall, a 2-story building with kitchen, meeting rooms and offices, next to Old St. Mary's on the Aiken County Courthouse side.
- St. Michael Hall in the south wing building next to the new Church on Fairfield Street. This building houses a kitchen and meeting room as well as a religious articles shop.
- North wing building of the new Church, housing the Saint Vincent DePaul Society and convenience facilities. The St. Vincent DePaul Society provides food and other assistance to needy people in the area.
- Saint Theresa Hall, north of the new church along Union Street, across from the railroad station. This has a kitchen and meeting rooms for various purposes.
- Sacred Heart Hall on the corner of Richland Avenue and Union Street, which has offices and meeting rooms.
- St. John Bosco Youth Center on the corner of Richland Avenue and York Street, which houses offices and meeting rooms, for religious education and youth activities.
- The Columbarium, located in the garden area north of the new church, which provides space for cremated remains.
- Calvary Cemetery, located at 1255 University Ln, Aiken, in the vicinity of USC Aiken. This provides casket and ash burial spaces.

A map of St. Mary Help of Christians campus can be found on the parish web site at <https://www.stmarys-aiken.org/campus-map>

Sources for this brief history:

- The Bible
- Various books and web sites covering commonly known history of the early church to the First Council of Nicaea and the Second Vatican Council.
- Web site of St. Mary Help of Christians Catholic Church, <https://www.stmarys-aiken.org>
- Web site of the Catholic Diocese of Charleston, <https://charlestdiocese.org>
- Web site of the Catholic Diocese of Baltimore, <https://www.archbalt.org>
- Testimony of current Pastor and staff
- Personal recollections of parishioner W. G. Collins.