

Shrine Of Our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church



**600 Jefferson Davis Avenue
Rayne, Louisiana 70578**

A Story Worth Celebrating, A Legacy Worth Preserving

The Significance of our Church

The Shrine of Our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church retains its historic integrity and is documented as an important gathering place within the City of Rayne, Louisiana. While the buildings were used for religious activities, they also played a key role in social and philanthropic events in the Rayne community. Community events like revivals and the annual fall bazaar sustained the black community throughout the church's history. The community as a whole, not just the parishioners, attended the bazaars. Community members bought plate lunches and sweets, participated in raffles, and enjoyed musical entertainment. Bazaars and revivals were a gathering place for all members of the community and were an integral part of the African American experience.

The granite adorning the inside of the church was a gift from a French-Canadian Province. The four hundred tons of granite seen throughout the church are from the Pre-Cambrian Era, which predates early civilization. The crucifix suspended above the altar was handmade in Italy and was funded through parishioner donations. The Shrine of Our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church is the only such designated church throughout the Diocese of Lafayette, under the Josephites Order, and within the Region.



The Significance of our Shrine



In 1969, a Shrine dedicated to Our Blessed Mother was erected in front of Our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church in homage of the Grotto at Lourdes. When completed, the Shrine featured a concrete path leading to an octagonal fountain with a statue of the Blessed Mother on a square base in the center. The purpose of the Shrine was to honor the miracle at Our Lady of Lourdes Shrine in France. In the late 1960s, every Monday at 7:00

p.m., our parish priest would lead parishioners in a procession to the fountain, carrying the miraculous healing water received from the *Lourdes* spring in France. A procession would proceed to the Shrine, where a Novena was then recited. Large crowds attended these weekly services, which were open to everyone seeking a blessing or healing.

The weekly pilgrimages and unwavering devotion to Our Blessed Mother were instrumental in why our church's name was changed from Our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church to the *Shrine of Our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church*.



This special designation placed our church in a category different from most churches in the area, as we were designated a Shrine. Per Canon Law 1230, “The term shrine signifies a church or other sacred place to which the faithful make pilgrimages for a particular pious reason with the approval of the local ordinary.” The local ordinary at the time was Bishop Maurice Schexnayder, the second Bishop of Lafayette, who on May 19, 1969, dedicated the Shrine of Our Mother of Mercy in an official ceremony. The Shrine was recently refurbished and rededicated by Bishop J. Douglas Deshotel on Mother’s Day, May 12, 2024, at the May Crowning.



Original Fountain

The Significance of our Convent

The Our Mother of Mercy Convent is another special building located on the grounds of this church. The convent housed the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament nuns, an order founded by Mother Katharine Drexel. Mother Katharine Drexel established several schools in the South for African American children. When she was alive, Mother Katharine Drexel would visit her schools every three to four years, which included our parish. On October 1, 2000, Pope John Paul II canonized Mother Katharine Drexel as Saint Katharine Drexel. She is only the second US-born person canonized into Sainthood. It is rare to have had a saint walk the grounds of a church, school, or convent in the United States. The grounds of the Shrine of Our Mother of Mercy hold that distinct honor.



The convent not only housed the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, but it also served as a community meeting place. In the early spring of 1953, a public meeting was held at the convent spearheaded by the Our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church, to complete plans for a “public library for the African American children of Rayne Negroes”. Funds were collected, and a small library was built and opened on May 24, 1953, for the African American children of Rayne. The library was named the Bunche Library in honor of Dr. Ralph Bunche, a renowned diplomat, civil rights activist, and leader.

The Significance of our Parish Hall

Mercy Hall



The Bunche Library, originally located on Reynolds Street, was restored and rededicated on June 19, 2024, Juneteenth Day. The Bunche Library helped many children throughout the community learn how to read, hope, dream, and advance in society. The Bunche Library of Rayne, now located on Section Street, is the oldest known Ralph Bunche Library in the United States. It stands as a prominent symbol of unity and progress.

The Shrine of Our Mother of Mercy Parish Hall was first a schoolhouse made possible due to the generosity and enterprise of Mother Katharine Drexel, Foundress of the Blessed Sacrament Sisters. When she was able, Mother Katharine Drexel would visit her schools, which included our beloved parish hall. The school welcomed all denominations. Catholics and non-Catholics seeking an education attended Our Mother of Mercy schoolhouse.



In 1971, due to the desegregation, Our Mother of Mercy School, and all Catholic schools in the Diocese of Lafayette were consolidated. The school became the satellite location for Rayne Catholic Elementary's 4th and 5th graders. Both fourth and fifth grades had two classrooms at Mercy Hall. Classes were taught by one Sister of The Blessed Sacrament, one Sister of Mt. Carmel, and two lay teachers. Fortunately, for the many African American children who could not afford the private school tuition at Rayne Catholic Elementary School, the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament developed an extensive Religious Education Program for them. The Shrine of Our Mother of Mercy Religious Education program was a robust program in the diocese, with over 500 children enrolled each year in grades 1 through 12. By the 1990s, the schools were no longer consolidated. The parish hall continued to thrive, thanks to its CCD program and youth group. Mercy Hall continues to educate the community and has served as the Acadia Parish Head Start Program for over two decades.

