



The Diocese of Knoxville

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PRESS RELEASE AND MEDIA ADVISORY
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Contact Deacon Sean Smith
865-584-3307 ■ ssmith@dioknox.org

The Chancery
805 Northshore Drive
Knoxville, Tenn. 37919
www.dioknox.org

Sts. Peter and Paul Church named a basilica

KNOXVILLE—Bishop Richard F. Stika has announced that Sts. Peter and Paul Church in Chattanooga has been designated a minor basilica by Pope Benedict XVI, as of May 3.

The bishop gave the news during a noon Mass at the church on May 12, followed by a press conference. Concelebrating the Mass were several priests of the Diocese of Knoxville, including Father George Schmidt, who has served as pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul since 1986.

Fewer than 70 Catholic churches in the United States have been named minor basilicas, and Sts. Peter and Paul will be the first basilica named in the state of Tennessee.

“Just as the U.S. government has honored Sts. Peter and Paul Church by putting it on the National Register of Historic Places, now Pope Benedict XVI has honored it by making it a minor basilica,” said Bishop Stika.

“This not only recognizes the building for its historical significance but also honors the faith of the people of East Tennessee, of Chattanooga, and of the South. Sts. Peter and Paul is the mother church in that part of the diocese, and it has been a house of prayer for more than 120 years.

“I’m very grateful to Father Schmidt for his great love of this parish,” the bishop said, noting that he will appoint the pastor as rector of the basilica, “which is a special honor in the church.”

See the accompanying documents for a brief history of the parish and the church building, an explanation of what defines a basilica, a photo of Sts. Peter and Paul Church, and some notes about the church’s status as a historic building.

A brief history of Sts. Peter and Paul Parish

Sts. Peter and Paul Parish in Chattanooga was founded in January 1852, when Father Henry V. Brown—a Presbyterian convert—became the first pastor.

Catholics in Chattanooga met for Mass in a number of buildings from the early 1840s through the parish's early years until 1890, when the current building on Eighth Street was dedicated. The former buildings included a nearly completed stone church demolished in 1863 by the occupying Union Army, which used the stone for fortifications and culverts.

Irish priest Father William Walsh was appointed pastor in 1887 and immediately made plans for a new church. Ground was broken Feb. 1, 1888, and the first foundation stone was laid June 29, 1888. A five-ton cornerstone containing a time capsule was laid Feb. 1, 1889. The church was dedicated June 29, 1890, on the solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul, with Bishop Joseph Rademacher of Nashville presiding.

Then-pastor Father George Flanigen, in his history of the parish published at its centennial in 1952, described the building as an "imposing Gothic structure of brick and stone, 165 feet long by 75 feet wide, seating 1,000 persons," which "was one of the largest and stateliest churches in the entire South." The church was likely inspired by England's York Minster cathedral, Father Flanigen wrote.

Older photos of the church show its original 174-foot-high twin towers, "surmounted by 100 crocketed pinnacles and turrets," in the words of Father Flanigen. Crumbling sandstone trim, however, led to the parish's decision to remove the towers in 1939. The east tower, which houses the church bells, was shortened to its current height, and the west tower was removed.

The church's stained-glass windows, designed by renowned artist Louis Comfort Tiffany, depict significant events in the lives of the parish's patron saints. St. Peter's life is depicted in the east-side (left) windows and St. Paul's life in the opposite windows. The nave of Sts. Peter and Paul Church also has 14 polychrome Stations of the Cross, whose scenes depict Christ's suffering, death, and burial. The French artist who created the Stations "is said to have spent 17 years in designing them and three years in producing a model to satisfy him," according to an 1892 Chattanooga newspaper article.

Sts. Peter and Paul is the mother parish of many East Tennessee parishes. The first Chattanooga parish created from Sts. Peter and Paul territory was Our Lady of Perpetual Help, in 1937.

Sts. Peter and Paul operated a school for more than a century. Notre Dame School, for grade school and high school students, was located in a building near the church from its founding in 1876 until 1965, when the high school grades were moved to the current Notre Dame High School site. The renamed Sts. Peter and Paul Elementary School, later known as All Saints Academy, provided

Catholic education for younger students until its closure in 1985. The parish continues to use the All Saints Academy building.

Over the years the parish has celebrated several significant anniversaries. For its centenary in 1952, Sts. Peter and Paul received an apostolic blessing from Pope Pius XII and congratulations from Nashville Bishop William L. Adrian. Bishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Knoxville presided at the parish's 150th-anniversary celebration June 28, 2002. Also at that celebration was retired Bishop James D. Niedergeses, who was pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul when he was named bishop of Nashville in 1975.

The church underwent a \$300,000 facelift in 1997 and 1998, when the ceiling vaults were painted, the Tiffany windows cleaned, the Stations of the Cross refurbished, and damaged areas repaired.

In 2006 the church sent its then-70-year-old Kilgen organ to a firm in McDonald, Tenn., for repairs. Longtime organist Russell Goode—named a “Chattanooga Living Legend” in 2007—is one of only two principal organists at Sts. Peter and Paul over the last 96 years. Mona Manning held the position from 1915 to about 1960, when Mr. Goode succeeded her.

On Oct. 24, 2010, Bishop Richard F. Stika dedicated the Emma Strahle “Bootie” Varallo Parish Hall, a \$1.151 million project named for a lifelong parishioner. The parish hall was developed from the church's 9,100-square-foot lower level, previously used for storage.

Father George E. Schmidt Jr. is in his 25th year as pastor of the downtown parish, which is more than 600 families strong. Father Schmidt is among some 30 sons of the parish who went on to the priesthood.

What is a basilica?

The word *basilica* is derived from a Greek term meaning “royal house.” In the Catholic world, a basilica is a church building that has been accorded special privileges by the pope. There are two kinds of basilicas. The world’s four major, or papal, basilicas are St. John Lateran, St. Peter, St. Paul Outside the Walls, and St. Mary Major, all in Rome.

Minor, or lesser, basilicas are significant churches in Rome and elsewhere in the world that meet certain criteria and are given special ecclesiastical privileges. Minor basilicas are traditionally named because of their antiquity, dignity, historical value, architectural and artistic worth, and/or significance as centers of worship. A basilica must “stand out as a center of active and pastoral liturgy,” according to the 1989 Vatican document *Domus ecclesiae*.

Because designation as a basilica indicates a special bond of communion with the pope, the church must celebrate “with particular care” the feast of the Chair of Peter on Feb. 22, the solemnity of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul on June 29, and the anniversary of the pope’s election or his inauguration into his pastoral ministry. In the case of Pope Benedict XVI, those dates would be April 19 (his election) and April 24 (his inauguration).

More than 1,580 churches worldwide have been honored as basilicas. As of last year, 325 basilicas had been designated in the Americas; there are at least 68 in the United States.

Three physical signs indicate that a church is a lesser basilica. The first is the presence of the *conopaeum*—a silk canopy designed with stripes of yellow and red, traditional papal colors. The second is the *tintinnabulum*, or bell. It is mounted on a pole and carried processionally, along with the *conopaeum*, at the head of the clergy on special occasions. Third, minor basilicas have the right to display the papal symbol—crossed keys—on banners, on furnishings, and on the seal of the basilica.

In addition, the basilica’s rector may wear a black *mozetta*, or cape, with red piping, buttons, and buttonholes in the exercise of his office.

A historically significant building

Sts. Peter and Paul Church was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on Dec. 11, 1979, upon a nomination by Herbert L. Harper, executive director of and state historic-preservation officer for the Tennessee Historical Commission.

The action recognized the church and its buildings “as possessing unusual significance to the history of our state,” Mr. Harper wrote in a Dec. 27, 1979, letter to Nashville Bishop James D. Niedergeses notifying him of the listing on the register.

The National Register lists properties that are “significant in American history, architecture, archeology, and culture—a comprehensive index of the significant physical evidences of our national patrimony,” according to a certificate presented to the church by the commission.



Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church, 214 E. Eighth St., Chattanooga, Tenn. 37402

The parish was established in 1852; the current church building (photographed in 2005) was dedicated on June 29, 1890. A digital version of the photo is available at <http://bit.ly/igkDFv>.