

Vacation Venture: Exploring A New Basilica in Key West

“The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page.”

—Saint Augustine of Hippo

You know what they say about all work and no play, right? So when Easter Break started two weeks ago for [John Carroll](#), my husband and I packed our bags and headed south to our place on Singer Island, Florida for some rest and relaxation. Four days later, on Tuesday of Easter Week, we were heading south on the Overseas Highway, that fabulous 127.5-mile roadway carrying U.S. Route 1 through the Florida Keys. Our final destination in this “getaway within a getaway” was the Conch Republic, Key West.

Vacation for us usually involves warm weather, new or favorite restaurants, live music, local artwork, great views, and salty air. And I get to indulge in two of my favorite pastimes: giving my camera a good workout with a 4G memory card, along with checking out the local Catholic Church. I love exploring churches and learning about their history, patron, architecture, statues, artwork, and any special features or shrines. I usually read up ahead of my visit and go during a quiet time when I can walk around and tour on my own.

Catholic Churches in the Keys:

The Florida Keys are part of the Archdiocese of Miami. According to my research there are five churches in the Keys:

- Two in the Upper Keys: St. Justin Martyr Catholic Church in Key Largo at Mile Marker (MM) 105.5, and San Pedro Catholic Church at MM 89.5 in Tavernier;
- One in the Middle Keys: San Pablo Catholic Church at MM 53.5 in Marathon;
- Two in the Lower Keys: St. Peter’s Catholic Church, MM 31.3 in Big Pine Key, and St. Mary Star of the Sea, located less than one mile from MM 0 at the intersection of Windsor Lane and Truman Avenue in Key West.

**Key West Parish:**

We made plans to spend Wednesday morning of Easter Week checking out the local Catholic parish in Key West, St. Mary Star of the Sea (1010 Windsor Lane, Key West, FL 33040). The oldest parish in South Florida, this congregation traces its roots back to the sixteenth century when Florida was a Spanish territory, and Key West, known then as Cayo Hueso (“Island of Bones”), was under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Havana, Cuba. Spanish Jesuits served the Catholics of Cuba and the Caribbean islands, and established missions in these areas.

The first Catholic church building in Key West was dedicated in 1852 and later destroyed by fire (suspected arson) in 1901. One of the few items found undamaged was a “crudely painted plaque depicting the Virgin Mary as Star of the Sea with the following inscription by [Father Sylvanius Hunineq](#):

“Since it first shed its light in Key West, it has like a star of the sea to the wandering mariner, been a star of hope and comfort in times of despair and sorrow, and a star of joy to those who have lived in its teachings.”

The current, non-wooden church was dedicated to Saint Mary Star of the Sea four years later by the Bishop of Saint Augustine (1905).

All About Basilicas:

While researching in preparation for our visit, I discovered that this oldest church in South Florida, established in 1846, had been elevated to the status of minor basilica by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI last year. This fascinated me since I thought that basilica status in this modern era was reserved for cathedrals and national shrines. This led me to much reading about [basilicas](#), churches of historical and spiritual importance that are granted this distinction by the Holy Father for unusual historical significance, or which are considered sacred due to the presence of relic(s). I discovered and read the fascinating document “[Domus Ecclesiae](#)”, Norms for the Granting of the Title of Minor Basilica from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (1989).

The word “basilica” originally referred to a type of architecture from ancient Rome, and now refers more often to the canonical status of the church. The four major basilicas are located in Rome. There are more than 1500 minor basilicas around the

world. Key West's Saint Mary Star of the Sea became the fifth basilica in the state and the 73rd in the United States at the time of its elevation by the Holy Father Emeritus. The other Floridian basilicas are located in Orlando, Pensacola, St. Augustine, and Daytona Beach.

Our Adventure Begins: The Catholic School:

We started our morning by walking over to Duval Street from the Banyon Resort for breakfast at a French bakery, and then headed over to Truman Avenue toward the basilica property. First we came upon the beautiful campus of the Basilica School of Saint Mary Star of the Sea. With only two cars in the parking lot it was quickly apparent that they too were on Easter Break. Considered the first Catholic School in South Florida, operating from 1868, the lush tropical setting made this pre-3 through grade 8 school look like a postcard in my photos. A gentleman from the grounds crew later told me that there was formerly a secondary school on the premises named Mary Immaculate High School which closed in 1986. The children in the area now attend mostly the public high schools as there are no Catholic secondary schools in Monroe County.

Adoration Chapel of Divine Mercy:

Next we came to the Chapel of Divine Mercy, in the former convent chapel, where Perpetual Adoration has been held since 1995. The chapel was stunning with its Divine Mercy image of Jesus, colorful stained glass windows which were next to tall open windows looking onto the beautiful campus, and Easter lilies before the Blessed Sacrament exposed on the altar. Two women smiled at me as I came in and genuflected. After offering my prayer intentions, I explored the displays, including three relics in the back of the chapel.

The Famous Grotto, Basilica Prayer Gardens, and the Good Sisters:

Continuing along the parish path we came through the gardens to the famous Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes. Island tour guides speak of this prayerful grotto built in 1922 and said to protect Key West from the impact of serious hurricanes. Three years earlier (1919), the most devastating hurricane in the history of the island hit Key West, taking the lives of over 400 people and damaging the entire area, including the church buildings. The grotto was dedicated on Ascension Thursday, May 25, 1922, to mark the Silver Jubilee of long-serving Sister Louis Gabriel of the

Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. She designed, raised funds, and oversaw the building of the grotto to seek protection from the Blessed Mother. The story goes that Sister remarked that “as long as the grotto stood, Key West would never experience the full brunt of a hurricane.” Tour guides and residents alike bear testimony to the fact that passing hurricanes have not devastated the island since that time. My husband and I were particularly fascinated by the stone chairs with accompanying stone kneelers that have faced the grotto’s entrance since 1922.



The basilica gardens also included a shrine to the unborn from the Knights of Columbus, the parish Renewal Center, and a special Stations of the Cross Garden where outdoor Mass and devotions are held. There is also a cemetery for eighteen of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, including a special memorial for Sister Louis Gabriel, whose community served the parish and its schools for many decades since 1868. (The sisters even offered their convent for use as a hospital during the Spanish-American War while they served the wounded and the sick.)

The basilica-parish also has vast outreach programs and serves those in need by providing clothing, furniture, financial assistance, and job referrals, while also operating a daily soup kitchen, and ministering to the spiritual needs of the military bases on the island. I was so inspired by all the incredible work they are doing for the good people of Key West.

At long last: The Basilica:

The actual basilica was the last place we visited, as we affectionately “saved the best for last.” What an amazing church!! Approaching from the gardens we could see all the tall shuttered doors open along the east and west walls to keep the air moving through the nave. I had first seen these Caribbean-style doors when we vacationed in Aruba in 2010. It almost makes you feel as though you are worshipping outside. It was refreshing too to have this sacred space fully-accessible during the day for pilgrims and tourists. For much of our visit, my husband and I were the only ones there. Some of the churches we have attempted to visit while on vacation in the past have been locked due to security concerns and vandalism.

I thoroughly enjoyed the time spent walking around the church, reading all the basilican documents on the walls, checking out the baptismal font, altars, statues,

stained glass windows, and the insignia of the basilica: the Ombrellino (basilican red and gold umbrella) and the Tintinnabulum (basilican bell). The new basilica coat of arms (which includes a conch shell, the traditional symbol of the Florida Keys, over the motto “Spe Salvi”), as well as that of the Archdiocese of Miami (which has a palm tree in the center), were on display. Everything I saw was documented as I took over 250 pictures during my visit. It was a great morning and will always be a cherished memory. It is my hope that if my readers are down in the Keys they will take a little time to visit this beautiful basilica, whether for weekend or morning Mass, or for a pilgrimage prayer stop during the week. Visiting our Catholic Churches during vacation can add an extra dimension to your travels. The benefits are heavenly!!

Enjoy my slideshow: My photos include: Interior and exterior views of the basilica, including the cornerstone from 1904 (7 photos), coats of arms of both the Basilica and of the Archdiocese of Miami (2), Adoration Chapel (outside and inside views-2), outdoor shrines (2), Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes (2), Basilica-School (1), Sisters’ cemetery and convent info (3), Stations of the Cross garden (3), and War of 1898 info (1).

Basilica Dedication Mass:

The Solemn Mass marking the official dedication of minor basilica status and the conferral of the insignia of the basilica was held on May 31, 2012, the Feast of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The principal celebrant was the fourth Archbishop of Miami Thomas Wenski, a Florida native, who joined the parish community and their pastor (now rector of the basilica) Father John C. Baker to share in the joy of this historic milestone.

Read more about this celebration and check out the great photos from The Florida Catholic: [“A basilica in God’s paradise”](#)

Read Archbishop Wenski’s Homily from the Dedication Mass [here](#).

For More Information:

Check out this 86-second video from Catholic Miami of the Archdiocese of Miami which captures some of the beauty of this incredible basilica [here](#)

For further reading: Recently-published [“Star of the Sea: The History of the Basilica](#)

[of St. Mary Star of the Sea](#)” by Key West native Bob J. Bernreuter.

“Human life is a journey. Towards what destination? How do we find the way? Life is like a voyage on the sea of history, often dark and stormy, a voyage in which we watch for the stars that indicate the route...”

Holy Mary, Mother of God, our Mother, teach us to believe, to hope, to love with you. Show us the way to his Kingdom!

Star of the Sea, shine upon us and guide us on our way!”

—Pope Benedict XVI, “Spe Salvi”

(In Hope We are Saved, 2007)