

## Notes from the Loft...

### A Report of the Kilgen Organs of St. Agnes, 1934-2007

by Geoffrey Vickery, Organist/Choir Director

*"I hear the organ's on its last leg. Is it going to get fixed before it's too late?"*

*"I heard we are going to replace the pipe organ with an electronic organ – is that true?"*

*"What's wrong with the organ? Is it really falling apart? It sounds fine to me."*

When I came to St. Agnes as organist in 1987, I heard comments and questions like these. At that time the organ had been in an unfortunate state of disrepair for 10 years and the pastoral staff indicated organ renovation was right around the corner. The staff has changed several times in the past twenty years, numerous proposals have been reviewed, but the organ remains in disrepair and in worse shape.

However, my intention is not to bring you a report of how bad things are, but a message of hope and salvation of a beautiful instrument that previous generations provided for the worship and glory of God, and what needs to be done to ensure the organ provides support and inspiration for generations of parishioners to come.

Without getting too technical, let me provide a little history of the organ, and describe some of the problems we are facing today. For those who would like more in-depth information and more pictures, check out the Organ Project link on our music website, [www.stagnesmusic.com](http://www.stagnesmusic.com). This is an ongoing web project about the organs at St. Agnes with historical information, pictures, contracts and specifications.

#### Historical Background: 1934-1959

The cornerstone of the present church was laid on April 29, 1927. Fr. Aloysius Dowling, C.P., pastor of St. Agnes Church, signed a contract on April 12, 1934 with George Kilgen and Sons, Organ Builders of St. Louis, Mo. to build two organs: the Main Organ containing 42 ranks of 2833 pipes for the Choir Gallery, and a Sanctuary Organ consisting of 12 ranks, 774 pipes. Both organs would be playable from either of two twin 3-manual consoles – one in the Choir Gallery, and the other located in the

Sanctuary. The cost was \$14,500 and a trade-in of an "old reed organ." The contract notes that the "Special Specifications" of the organ were by Prof. D'Avignon Morel. Professor Morel of Detroit was a world-renowned organ architect. The organ came with a ten year parts and labor warranty, and an additional twenty year warranty on parts.



*Picture from Seven Generations in the Building of Pipe Organs, The Kilgen Organ Company, 1951. Notice the rose window before it was stained glass, and back of church before the baptismal font was built.*

Organs built in the early part of the 20th Century were called Romantic or Orchestral, meaning they imitated the instruments of an orchestra. For example, the original "stops" or types of sounds of our Kilgen organs were labeled Flute Harmonique, Viola da Gamba, Piccolo, Trumpet, Oboe, Melodia, Viola, Flute

d'Amour, Clarinet, Chimes, Harp, Trombone, and Bass Violoncello. This was during an era when organs were used in places other than churches -- in theatres, radio stations and concert halls to provide orchestral music for dance and entertainment. Kilgen was known for both liturgical and theatrical organs. In addition to the organs they built for St. Agnes Church, they built organs for St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, St. Louis Cathedral in St. Louis, and many other Catholic and Protestant churches in America.

Unfortunately the Kilgen Organ Company went out of business before our 30 year warranty ran out. Their last installation was an organ for the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Kansas City, Mo. in 1959. Some of Kilgen's "innovations" in organ building were not picked up by other organ builders, so when they went out of business, some critical replacement parts were no longer available.

### **Organ Renovation: 1970-1979**

Shortly after Kilgen went out of business, we began to experience some problems with leather pouches used under each pipe to open and close the airway. When a key was pressed, an electrical signal was sent to a device under the pipe that was supposed to speak, allowing the air to pass through the pipe. But the leather valves began to crack and leak air.

There was another problem. Times had changed, and Romantic organs were no longer in vogue. We had entered a neo-Baroque era and the popular organs of the second half of the 20th Century were modeled after North German Baroque organs of Bach's time using smaller scale pipes with little or no orchestral sounds. Eugene Ward, organist in the 1970's, began replacing leather with direct electric action to avoid the problems of cracked leather. He also began replacing original pipes for smaller scale pipes to reshape the organ into a more American Classic Organ style, eliminating orchestral sounds. Someone decided to get the Sanctuary console out of the way, cut the cable and pushed

the console into the oratory where it sits today. The pipes are still up there behind the screen above the entrance to the oratory, but we haven't heard the sweet sound of the Vox Angelicus (Voice of Angels), one of the voices of the Sanctuary Organ in nearly 30 years.



*The pipes for the Sanctuary Organ are still behind the screen above the entrance to the oratory. The second console was disconnected and moved out of sight, just inside the Oratory.*

When Fr. Kent Piper was reassigned in 1979, funding for the organ renovation was unavailable, and the project came to an abrupt halt. Mr. Ward quit, leaving the pedal division dismantled, a third of the organ with the cracking leather problem, many of the original pipes sold or traded for smaller scale pipes, electrical connections and wiring exposed and many temporary fixes, like ranks for metal pipes with a few wooden pipes temporarily filling in for missing metal pipes.

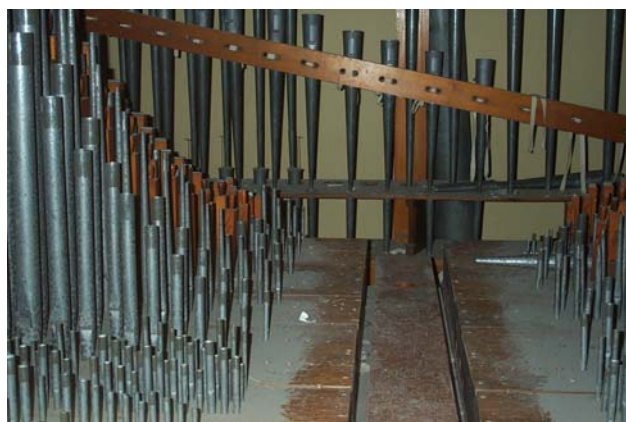
## The Past Twenty Years: 1987-2007

When I came on the scene in 1987, the organ had a bad reputation in the community. It was hard to play because it had so many missing stops, and plastic labels had been temporarily applied to describe the “new” sound that replaced original pipes. Entire sections of the organ just didn’t work anymore. It was impossible for a guest organist to walk in and play without hours and hours of experimentation to find out what worked and what didn’t. But what others saw as a glass half empty, I saw as a glass half full. I saw a great deal of potential for a fine instrument in a worship space with excellent acoustics.

Following the unfinished renovation project of the 1970’s, the organ has deteriorated further. It is normal for an organ over 50 years old to need an overhaul – a good cleaning and fix up. Years of dust, falling paint chips, not to mention bird droppings and carcasses take their toll on an organ. The connections between blowers, wind reservoirs and pipes develop leaks that need to be fixed. Electrical connections get corroded and become problematic.



*On Saturday, March 10, 2007 I heard a bird flapping around inside one of the façade pipes, and snapped this picture of it in the mouth of the pipe! By Sunday morning it was dead.*



*A view inside the Great Division. Notice missing pipes and years of dust and paint chips.*

It nearly broke my heart, but ten years ago we had to disconnect the Swell division (the second on the right that made up about one-third of the organ) because we had so many leather leaks. Thumb and toe pistons no longer work.



*The Main Organ console: the top keyboard controlling the Swell Division no longer works.*

Now we’re at a stage where the direct electric action that replaced some of the cracked leather pouches is beginning to fail. Years of tiny electrical sparks are causing the metal connections to break off. A few weeks ago several small problems appeared, and I thought I might get the dreaded news that we would no longer be able to use the organ until it was renovated. Fortunately with some minor adjustments we were able to continue to use the organ for the time being. Without major renovation though, the day will come when



minor adjustments and duct tape fixes won't keep the organ going.



*Hundreds of tiny electrical contacts are beginning to corrode and fail.*

### **Hope for the Future**

I still see the glass as half full – full of possibilities and wonderful outcomes. There are a lot of pipes stored in the church basement and many of the interesting sounds that were removed could be restored. About 10 years ago, Joe and I were taking an inventory of pipes in the church basement before the Aloysius Hall renovation. There were stacks of pipes laying on the dirt floor. Among the pipes we found a metal harp unit, an expensive component rarely found in church organs. I remember picking up and blowing into one of the Flute Harmonique pipes. The sound was beautiful in the basement, and then we continued to hear it resonate upstairs throughout the church. That awesome experience gave me hope that one day we would have the Flute Harmonique and the other pipes that had been removed back where they belong.

We have an exciting proposal to build a smaller, independent organ in the sanctuary or transept using pipes from the original Sanctuary Organ that can be used on a regular basis for smaller

liturgies and, if built as the first phase, could be used during the renovation of the larger organ in the Choir Gallery.

To renovate the Main Organ, pipes would need to be removed for a thorough cleaning, broken or dented pipes fixed, missing pipes replaced, and failing leather and electric actions replaced. We need to add several ranks of pipes to fill out the organ sounds for a well rounded instrument. Electronics inside the console would be replaced with digital technology.

It's time to take responsibility for the investment Fr. Dowling's generation gave us back in 1934. It's time to be good stewards and wisely invest in what has been entrusted to our care. We have the potential for a miracle right here at St. Agnes. Like Lazarus being raised from the dead, we could witness the second coming of a beautiful organ to be used by generations to come for the praise and glory of God.

---

Finally, I would like to hear from you if you have comments or questions about the organ. Come up to the choir loft after Mass or catch me on the way out of church. Over the years I have heard a few stories about people who worked on the organ installation, or who remember an event when the organ played a significant role. If you have any stories that I could add to my collection of music history here at St. Agnes, please let me hear from you.