

## “A VIEW FROM INSIDE – THE ANNUAL ST. LOUIS INSPECTION TOUR”

You see them every Sunday. Tourists and other first time visitors whose jaws drop in wonder and necks crane in awe at the beauty and grandeur of our historic St. Louis Church. But the hundreds of worshippers who attend Mass every weekend at St. Louis only see the half of it. In fact, a massive infrastructure of stone, timbers, wood, steel and brick comprise the physical building completed in 1889. It takes time, money and effort to maintain the ancient edifice, and part of the process includes the annual physical inspection of the building – held in 2013 on April 6.

Ever wonder what’s above the massive nave of the church? Or beyond the walls of the basement where we hold our socials and conduct classes for our kids? That’s exactly where about 10 adventurous parishioners ventured for this year’s tour. It has become an annual rite of spring for parish employees, Parish Council members and other interested parishioners to get up close and personal with the building. It’s really the only way for a first class examination.



We started along the dirt floors of the basement beyond the social hall. Here sit massive columns of stone that support one of the biggest churches in Western New York. Like everything that makes up the infrastructure of St. Louis, they are huge. This space – though dirty and dusty – does not remain unused. Tables with box after box of dirt hold the lily bulbs that the St. Louis Garden Society (SLGS) has ready for planting in the spring. All winter long the volunteers who keep our church grounds so beautiful are working too, including storing the bulbs in this cool dry place.

The group then emerges from below into what we know as St. Louis, but with an extra eye for leaks around the historic stained glass windows along the sides and in the sanctuary. And above the altar of the Sacred Heart, parish Business Manager John Beller

points to the only serious problem discovered during the tour – obvious water damage. The leak was eventually traced to cracks in an adjoining chimney, and soon after the parish obtained a contractor to correct the problem.

Now begins the challenging part. The group carefully ascends a winding steel staircase behind the choir loft that leads to gigantic open space extending above the entire nave of the church. You could invite the Buffalo Bills to stage a scrimmage game in this massive place. You can't help but notice the ancient and powerful timbers supporting the roof in a patchwork design orchestrated by the New York City architects who planned the church more than a century and a quarter ago. And you only express gratitude for the absence of fire that destroyed the first church – and claimed two lives – in 1885. Indeed, scorch marks on timbers toward the rear of the church attest to a 1921 lightning strike that took down a mini-steeple and almost turned into a disaster.



But you learn a lot on trip like this too. Ever wonder how they change the bulbs in the 48 huge canister lights above the congregation? They certainly don't attack from inside, but from above. Staffers enter sizeable pits above each of the lights to replace the bulbs. And, how about replacing any one of the 667 incandescent bulbs in the large cluster lights that hang from the church ceiling? These structures are lowered to the church floor level, replaced and

then pulled back up. It's quite a feat – and a little scary when you realize you are standing above the giant nave of St. Louis.

Organist Bill Kurzdorfer is no stranger to this area. "I've been crawling through here since I was 13 years old," he says. He points to the huge pipes of the 1903 organ he oversees on an almost daily basis, even recalling how it was rebuilt in 1952.



But that winding staircase leads to more hidden and mysterious places. Like a scene out of the “Hunchback of Notre Dame,” the stairs climb to a room in the steeple below the clock. It almost resembles some sort of medieval torture chamber until you stop and realize, -- no, it’s still good old St. Louis.

A set of rickety, ladder-like stairs lead up even further to another space behind the landmark clock that chimes the bell above every 15 minutes. Here, Bill Kurzdorfer recalls several stories about our late pastor – Msgr. Bill Schwinger – making the climb to the clock. And everyone is impressed by the simple but massive mechanism that moves the hands outside every minute of every day.

The tour ends here for most – but not all. A few hearty souls, including Ann McCarthy – ascend the last set of “stairs” to the chamber housing the giant bell of St. Louis. Here they peer out of the steeple slats to view an entire city below. Bill Kurzdorfer points to a covered hole in the floor where a rope dropped to the choir loft in the old days when the bell was rung by hand. Now it’s electrically timed. That leads John Beller to glance at his watch and note only nine minutes before the bell rings. “You’ll know it if you’re standing here,” he warns.

This group has displayed enough courage for the day, and begins descending the 192 steps that meander through the steeple – at 245 feet the tallest pierced spire steeple in America. Even in the clock chamber below, when the bell strikes 10 a.m. – a powerful shock wave rings through the tower.

10 a.m. -- right on schedule -- and maybe a sign from above that all seems right with St. Louis for another year.