Bishop Guillory returns home
Says Church will increase roles of minority members

By RUTH FOOTE
Special to SATURDAY

OPELOUSAS—"Comment ca va?" Auxiliary Bishop Curtis Guillory asks in his first tongue, greeting hundreds of his relatives gathered for the 6th Guillory USA Family Reunion.

The kinfolk respond in kind to the St. Landry Parish native, who has returned from Texas where he serves as auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Galveston-Houston.

His entry into the Yambilee Building, where festivities are taking place, is greeted with applause. As he mingles through the crowd, there are hugs, kisses, handshakes and pats on the back.

Signs of affection are accented with pride. It's almost as if the reunion crowd is boasting unconsciously, "There's a bishop in the house, and he's a Guillory—one of us."

At age 49, Guillory is also one of only 13 active African-American Catholic bishops nationwide.

Yet despite the lack of black clergy in leadership roles and a call by some for black self-determination, Guillory is optimistic about the future relationship of the Catholic Church and its national membership of 3 million blacks.

How is the Catholic Church doing today in the black community? Making in-roads, according to Guillory, who says that the church is becoming more culturally sensitive to African-Americans.

He notes that the church is addressing such issues as racism, health care and other concerns.

"As the church takes a stand on these issues, people see more and more that the church is interested," Guillory says.

Guillory also cites efforts underway to recruit more young black men into the vocation.

"It's better than it's been. The more that black men see black priests and bishops, the more interested they'll become," he says, noting that some black priests were recently ordained by the Diocese of Lafayette.

Although there's a need for more recruitment among all races, Guillory doesn't believe allowing priests to marry will increase the fold.

"A marriage clergy would not bring about more vocations," he says.

Instead, Guillory says that the key is to communicate to young people the need to make sacrifices. The problem today, according to Guillory, is that too many families are breaking up.

"The more witnessing we can do, the more the family can be promoted to make a difference," he adds.

Guillory also disagrees that blacks are leaving the Catholic faith. Instead, he says that the Catholic Church is growing in the black community throughout the country. He cites the triple-million membership figure.

Guillory says another reason that more and more black Catholics are interested in maintaining their religion is because the Catholic Church has universal appeal and strength. For instance, he says that the church membership is growing by leaps in Africa.

The Rev. Bishop Curtis Guillory, auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Galveston-Houston, greets relatives and friends recently when he returned to a Guillory family reunion in Opelousas.

See GUILLORY, Page 2C

Photo by Norm Hall
While some have called for an African-American Rite, which would provide blacks with self-determination and control within the Catholic Church, Guillory disagrees that such a rite is necessary. "I think there is enough leeway room within the Catholic Rite to accommodate the African-American community," he says.

Currently, the plausibility of an African-American Rite is being researched.

On the other hand, the Rev. George Stallings, a former Catholic priest, believes the only way that Catholic blacks can have self-determination is to break away from the Church. That was his conviction in setting up his Imani Temple.

But Guillory says that Stallings has not made the impact as expected. "African-Americans did not leave the Church in droves," he notes.

What African-Americans are saying, according to Guillory, is "We are Catholic and we want to be Catholic." But these black Catholics, he adds, want the Catholic Church to be sensitive to their culture and open in terms of leadership and participation. And the church is responding to the cry of blacks, according to Guillory.

A few miles down the road from the Yambilee Building is where Guillory grew up in the small, rural community of Mallet. The farming community holds fond memories for Guillory, the eldest of 16 children. His was a childhood where Creole French was the first language, where English wasn't learned until school. After all, it was he and his siblings who taught their parents how to speak English.

His was a childhood bathed in Catholicism. His education was at St. Ann's Catholic Church. Guillory remembers attending church regularly.

He also recalls that the rosary was recited regularly in his home. At age 16, he knew he wanted to devote his life to Catholicism; he knew he wanted to become a priest.

With such a strong Catholic upbringing, it should come as no surprise that one of his brothers also pursued the same goals and is a Franciscan priest today.

His was a childhood based on strong family ties. Those ties have lasted through generations. And such is evident during the family reunion, which draws some 700 family members from across the country to celebrate their strong family ties together.

And it is one of their own — a Guillory, a bishop — who will say the mass.