“Someone here must be living right,” exclaims Monsignor Frederick Brunet, gazing over the clay-colored waters of Boudreaux Canal. It is, for southern Louisiana, a miraculously mild and humid-free April day.

Vestments billowing like a sail, this ruddy Cajun priest takes his place in the bow of the 80-foot shrimp boat Randy John. Plastic streamers along the rigging above him flicker in the sunlight and snap in the fresh Gulf breeze. Nearby stands Father Rene Bernadas, a native of the Philippines, who serves with Monsignor Brunet at St. Joseph’s Church in this Cajun town of Chauvin (population 3,000).

As the Randy John embarks, the priests flick Holy Water in shimmering arcs toward dozens of boats docked along the canal. People lining the decks of boats large and small make the Sign of the Cross or genuflect as they are blessed.
Then, all cheer and wave as the lead boat glides by, and steer their own boats into the procession.

This annual shrimp fleet blessing has taken place in Chauvin and throughout home mission Louisiana longer than anyone can remember. While it has a carnival air, the blessing retains its spiritual emphasis. The celebration begins the evening before the blessing with a Mass for the commercial fishermen, many of whom will be working offshore the next day.

As the Randy John glides to a halt on the lake, the more than 20 people on board gather around tubs of fresh, boiled crawfish and crab. His duties completed, Monsignor Brunet sheds his vestments, slaps on his weathered captain's hat, then jokes, "I'm going to be a redhead by tonight!" The sun is already turning the white-haired priest's complexion the fiery hue of the crawfish he balances on a tray on his lap.

Shelling this delicacy with gusto, then popping the nuggets of seafood into his mouth, the monsignor tells how times have changed in Chauvin.

Changing times

In the 1950's, just a clam shell road ran along the bayou, he says. Most transportation was on the waterways. Then, the oil companies came.

By the time Monsignor Brunet arrived in the 1970's, the oil industry had created new jobs, cut roads and canals through the land, and brought in outsiders, many of whom intermarried with locals.

However, times were rough for the parish, recalls Monsignor Brunet. "The Catholic school had closed because of financial reasons, then we lost the rectory to fire." As in many Cajun missions, daily ministry was a challenge in a parish stretching 36 miles along the bayou. "At first, I had no Eucharistic minister to help," says Monsignor Brunet, "so just bringing Communion to the homebound could mean a 70-mile round trip."

Today, the parish is thriving, but the oil industry has gone bust. People in Chauvin and surrounding areas are struggling to survive
on shrimping — an industry which, as one local resident says sadly, has “too many shrimpers and not enough shrimp.”

Earlier in the day, as he readied his motorboat for the procession, 27-year-old Bobby Lirette explained that “it’s tough to make a living these days with all the government regulations.”

For one thing, every shrimp net must now have turtle excluder devices, said the tanned, wiry Lirette, who works on a shrimp boat like the Randy John. These devices not only let turtles escape, but also shrimp, meaning more hours of labor for a smaller catch.

Another challenge to shrimpers can be the weather, as attested by Lirette’s mobile home, raised six feet off the ground on wood pilings he made himself. Some homes crack in half when they are hoisted like this, said Lirette, but this is a necessary precaution against flooding.

During Hurricane Wanda seven years ago, people who had ground-level homes lost everything to flood waters. “Now they won’t even hook up a new home with electricity until it is raised onto pilings,” said Lirette.

On the Randy John, JoAnne Carlos perches on a cooler and recalls how she had 16 inches of water in the house after Hurricane Wanda. “We lost everything,” says this gray-haired mother of three. When a hurricane comes, everyone
ties their boats together on the canal and rides it out. "It's scary. You never know if you'll have a house when you come back."

Such uncertainties can either engender despair or teach people trust in God's providence. Most of these traditionally Catholic Cajuns choose the latter. Ship-builder Eudras Prosperie, for example, believes it is a miracle and the answer to prayer that he is alive today.

**Daily dangers**

On March 28, a shipyard chain which had just hefted a seven-ton rudder the night before, suddenly snapped and struck Prosperie in the head. It hurled his hard hat 35 feet away. "It didn't break one bone and I never lost consciousness," marvels the shipbuilder. "I don't even have a scar."

Prosperie tells how he listened to Bible tapes in the hospital and how the community joined in prayer for his recovery. "The Lord's been good to me," he says fervently, "we just have to learn to give more back to Him."

"If the Lord is trying to give you a message and you don't listen, He'll find a way to get your attention," says Prosperie's wife, JoAnne. She softly tells how her first husband was killed in a boat explosion when she was just 19 years old, leaving her with a nine-month-old child and one on the way. "You can just imagine what I went through when I heard Eudras was hurt," she says soberly.

For every shipbuilder or fisherman praying for a good season, there is a wife or loved one praying for his safety.

"Boats today are stronger, better built, and they have loran (a modern navigational system)," says Monsignor Brunet, so the dangers shrimpers face have decreased through the years. Even so, he admits that "every now and then a boat will explode, there will be a fire on board, the motor will give out or a squall will come up."

In fact, when 40-year-old Brent Theriot, captain of the Randy John, is asked if he ever pulled anything strange up in his nets, he admits, "a wallet... and a dead man." Whenever there is a drowning, an alarm is raised, explains Theriot, and then all the boats come out to troll for the victim.

Captain of his first shrimp boat at the age of 26, Theriot quit school in ninth grade to work full-time. "I used to get sea-sick," he recalls. Now, like other shrimpers, he stays out in the Gulf of Mexico five to nine days at a stretch and starts his work before daylight. "Although it's hard to predict shrimp," he says, "you usually get the best ones when it's rough. They get stirred up off the bottom."

Although Theriot often misses his wife, Brenda, and his family, he keeps in touch by radio and says he loves his life on the water. "There's just something about being out here in the quiet, being your own boss," he says.

Enthusiasm for this life also illumines the face of Theriot's 11-year-old son Brent, known as "BJ."

Asked how close he has ever been to alligators while swimming, BJ grins and spaces his hands about three feet apart in front of him. What did he do? "I swim away... quickly," he says in his tranquil, confident way.

Asked what he wants to be some day, BJ says without hesitation, "a controller. I love seafood." Then, looking out over the water and echoing his father, he explains, "and I love the quiet out here."

**Health concerns**

Sadly, the shrimp, crawfish and crabs that Cajuns depend on for their livelihood and their own dinners comes from increasingly polluted waters. Their seafood diet is most likely causing the people's high rates of cancer and heart disease, says Sister Diane Poynot.

She and Sister Renee Loubere, both New Orleans natives and registered nurses, live in Chauvin and provide the people with
much-needed home health care.

“For a long time, people had to survive for themselves,” says Sister Poynot. “There wasn’t even a hospital nearby until the 1950s.” The people still visit folk healers known as “traitors.” Even Sister Poynot had a traitor successfully treat a wart on her finger.

Father Bernados speaks warmly of the “friendly, down-to-earth Cajuns,” who have helped this Filipino native feel at home. His minority status, he says, is something the Cajuns keenly understand. “They aren’t like other Americans. Their culture is really half-French, half-American.”

This difference has led Cajuns to feel shy around outsiders, adds Monsignor Brunet. But now the fleet blessing and the Nanette (“a little something extra”) Festival in October, has helped break through cultural barriers.

“People come from across the country to enjoy Cajun food, music and dance,” says the monsignor. “This has led to a lot of pride.”

And this Cajun priest, who remembers shining servicemen’s shoes for a dime on New Orleans’ Canal Street as a boy, has done much to help his people maintain their faith and traditions. He has even formed a Cajun folk group, which sings at parish festivals and on the radio.

As the sun slips to the west and boats swing back to the docks, Monsignor Brunet heads off to visit the Randy John’s owners, who were kept from the festivities by illness in the family. Then he returns home to his comfortable couch and to a relaxing half-hour with his guitar.

First in French, then in English, he strums and croons one of his favorites, a tender Cajun love song:

“I met her in the marshland and I brought her to the bayou, we were married in the chapel down here. We promised lasting love, forever, ever more. That is why she’ll always be mon cherie cherie.”
Faith grows in Mission America

Catholics in Quinton, Virginia, met in school buildings, a Baptist chapel and a barbershop before their chapel was dedicated in November...

...Extension helped build a chapel/parish center for St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Mission, and the community has grown “from 10 to 100 families in five years,” said parishioner Gail Sorensen.

EXTENSION Magazine won three awards at this year’s Catholic Press Association convention...

...Managing editor Marianna Bartholomew won first place for her article “On the Highest Hilltop” about an Appalachian mission (January, 1991)... The Catholic Press Association JOURNALISM AWARD Extension General Excellence Mission Magazine

...Artist Ed Griffin, designer Ellen Nielsen, and photographer John Holmstrom won third place for the June, 1991, cover story illustration. The magazine also received an honorable mention for general excellence.

- The Diocese of Lake Charles trains CCD teachers with help from Extension. “We take people out of the pews to run religious education programs,” explained Sandy Gay, diocesan religious education director, so funds are needed for consulting and training...

...Extension aid also allows National Evangelization Teams (NET), young adults who give teen retreats nationwide, to come into the diocese. Teen interest in retreats has exploded, Gay said. “We will have eight retreat teams of our own by fall as a direct result of NET coming here. We could not do this without Extension.”

The only Catholic church in Robinson County, North Carolina, is distributing EXTENSION Magazine articles on Native American concerns at a powwow in July...

...This pre-evangelization dispels myths about the Church, says Father Joseph di Mauro, SA, pastor of St. Francis de Sales in Lumberton. And he sees results. “We received two Native Americans into the Church through the RCIA program, and three families have come back.”

Fourth annual Day of Prayer for children’s faith

Families all over the United States prayed for the nation’s children Sunday, May 3, as part of Extension’s fourth annual Day of Prayer for the Faith of Our Children.

Extension President Father Edward Slattery created this special observance in 1989 after hearing from parents and grandparents concerned about children no longer practicing their faith.

Extension invited Catholics of every diocese to participate by praying the Rosary and remembering this intention in the Prayers of the Faithful during Mass.

“This...strikes at the core of family life for us Catholics,” wrote Most Reverend William Houck, bishop of the Diocese of Jackson.

“We certainly believe in handing on our values and the gift of our faith to our children.”

In Chicago, over 200 friends of Extension gathered to pray for the faith of children at a nationally-televised Mass celebrated by Father Slattery Jane Hajduk, 15, and Nicole Monroe, 15, read at this special Mass. “It’s important to pray for kids because children of today are the Church of the future,” said Monroe.

Father Slattery warned that commercialism and violence teach children that non-Christian values are acceptable.

We need to call forth the best in others, he said. “Our faith is meant to be shared.”