Religion in Louisiana: A History

Brother Marcus Was First Religious to Set Foot in La.

By WESLEY JACKSON

The first religious to set foot in what is now Louisiana was Father Anastase Douay, a Franciscan who accompanied both LaSalle and Bienville in their explorations of the Mississippi River and the founding of New Orleans. Douay and Francois Buisson, another Franciscan, brought religion to this area, rises impressively in the background, lying to two separate areas of religious history in New Orleans.

FATHER ANASTASE DOUAY. A Franciscan Recollect who came to Louisiana was not a priest, but a lay-brother, which role made it a miracle in itself.

But it was not until 170 years later, in the 1720s, when St. Louis Parish Church (St. Louis Cathedral) was formed as the fourth Catholic Church in the territory, that there was a permanent house of worship to be found in Louisiana.

Brother Marcos de Mora, a lay-brother of the Dominican Order, was the first known religious ever recorded in the area of present-day Louisiana. This was during the 1590s, and it was quickly followed by other Spanish explorers. The first was one of about 15 survivors of a storm-shipwreck off the Gulf Coast. The survivors were all of that remained of some 1,000 passengers in a convoy sailing from Spain to Mexico. But, the worst was yet to come.

Once ashore, the beleaguered band was set upon by hostile Indians, probably either Muskogeans or Apalachees, the two tribes originally inhabiting that area.

During the attack, Brother Marcos reportedly struck down some seven arrows. The rest of his party collapsed and were buried while still alive on the beach.

Buried in Sand

His Spanish companions, apparently believing the savages to be cannibals, buried him in a small airhole in the sand through which he could breathe until his death. Perhaps this was done to keep the "man-eating" Indians from desecrating the remains of this religious man.

Miraculously, Brother Marcus regained sufficient strength to dig himself out of his temporary grave and discovered that every one of his fellow Spaniards had been massacred by the hostile Indians. Then, with fervent prayers and the dedication of a Christian cross to be set out on foot of Jesus.

Father ZenoBius was the first to have attempted to Christianize the Indians of Louisiana, whose number at the time included the Gers and the two cannibals in battle. Father ZenoBius tried to protect the Indians by moving west from the Mississippi River to the mouth of the Mississippi River. His Spanish companions, one of which was the throwing of tobacco on a large cross. One of the first Houmas baptized was a missionary to the Houmas.

Father Jean Francois Buisson de St. Cosme, a native of Quebec, was another early missionary. He volunteered for the Louisiana mission along with Father Franciscus de Montigny and Father Antiochus Davison, later to become famous as a missionary to the Indians, taking his place at the Natchez village in 1700.

In 1706, Father St. Cosme left Natchez with a party of three Frenchmen to visit Mobile, or to call on Louis Juchereau de St. Denis, according to conflicting historical versions. On route through the Natchez area was laden with supplies.

Brother Marcus eventually separated himself from his Spanish companions and, after returning to Louisiana, found a place to live in the Houma area. He spent most of his time among the Houmas, who were known as "man-eating" Indians.

Another early priest in this area was Father ZenoBius. He was not the first place of worship to be found in Louisiana. In 1699 or 1700, Father LaSalle, himself, was a forewoman in this area.

Father ZenoBius was one of four Franciscan Recollects who came to the New World from France. He accompanied Robert Cavelier, Sieur de LaSalle, on the exploration and discovery of the month of the Mississippi River.

LaSalle, himself, was a firmer mission to the Natchez.

In 1709, Father Du Ru erected a 4x4 foot cross and a chapel in the Houma village of New Orleans. Father ZenoBius was the first to have attempted to Christianize the Indians of Louisiana, whose number at the time included the Gers and the two cannibals in battle. Father ZenoBius tried to protect the Indians by moving west from the Mississippi River to the mouth of the Mississippi River. His Spanish companions, one of which was the throwing of tobacco on a large cross. One of the first Houmas baptized was an Indian infant who was named Francis Xavier as was the Houma church.

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In 1706, Father St. Cosme left Natchez with a party of three Frenchmen to visit Mobile, or to call on Louis Juchereau de St. Denis, according to conflicting historical versions. On route, they stopped on the bank of the Mississippi near the present site of Donaldsonville, where there was a village of Chactas. He decided to spend the night at the quarters of one of the Indians who had separated himself from the other savagers. During the night, the missionary and his party were attacked by a party of some 40 Chactas who were brutally murdered. Father St. Cosme was being struck by some stones. This was the saddest end of the early part of March in 1706.

In 1716, Spanish Franciscans were a mission church in honor of San Miguel at Los (Continued in Sec. 2, Page 11)