Broussard church celebrates 50th anniversary

The late Rev. Harold Perry is shown in this 1955 photo with children from St. Joseph school. Perry was the first African-American priest to be named a bishop of the Roman Catholic Church in the 20th century.

Kathleen Toops
Special to The Advertiser

"St. Joseph Catholic Church here is one of Broussard's best kept secrets," says the Rev. Michael Sucharski, pastor.

The church parish will celebrate its 50th anniversary at a 3 p.m. Mass Sunday with Bishop Edward O'Donnell. St. Joseph Parish has several things to be proud of, Sucharski says.

A Catholic school, long closed, preceded the establishment of the church parish. St. Katharine Drexel, founder of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, established the school in 1933. She paid the salaries of the teachers who were student teachers from Xavier University, New Orleans.

The parish, established in 1933, had as its first pastor the late Bishop Harold Perry, who came to the parish as a priest. Perry was the first African-American priest to be named a bishop of the Roman Catholic Church in the 20th century. At least one other African-American, James Heavy, had previously served as a Catholic bishop, from 1875 to 1900.

A native of Lake Charles, Perry was later appointed auxiliary bishop of New Orleans. He returned to Broussard in 1971 to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the parish.

Property for the church was donated by the Billoud family and Perry oversaw the construction of the church. Volunteers under the supervision of Msgr. Shay devoted labor for the church building and the rectory.

On the front of the church is an image of Christ with African-American features, designed by area artist Mary Adeleide McNealy Blake. At the time of dedication of the church in 1952, the late Rev. C.J. McNamara, a Lafayette native who was nationally recognized as a liturgical scholar, was said of the work, "Mrs. Blake's sculpture, while unmistakably mid-20th century, does join the great Catholic sculptural tradition of the past. She represents Our Lord as Lord of Creation, the Pimpler of Byzantine art, with his right hand raised in blessing and in his left hand the book of the law..."

It is the Christ of majesty as well as of humanity...

At the time of the dedication of the church, it was said to be one of the first representations in this area of Christ as a person of color.

With the integration of public schools in the 1960s, enrollment declined at St. Joseph School and it was closed in 1953. But the contribution of Mother Katharine Drexel was remembered with the naming of the public school, located across the street from the church, as Katharine Drexel Elementary.

Today Sucharski says, with the mission of St. Anthony of Padua, St. Joseph has about 50 families. The active parish council is headed by Cynthia Jiergast. The two trustees are Harold Johnson, representing St. Joseph and Alton Jean Batiste, representing St. Anthony. Lorieta Mouton is CCD director and Theresa Corrigan leads the confirmation team.

Each October, the parish sponsors the Broussard Fall Festival to raise $300,000 for a six-to-eight-bedroom educational building to provide facilities for youth and adult religious programs.

"Yes, St. Joseph is one of the best kept secrets in Broussard," Sucharski says. "Our school's foundress, Katharine Drexel, has become a saint, our founding pastor, Bishop Perry was the first African-American bishop in the 20th century and we were one of the first churches to have black imagery of Jesus."