Catholic Education in State Marks 250th Anniversary

By NEWTON E. RENFRO
(Times-Picayune Writer)

This month marks the 250th anniversary of Catholic education in Louisiana, and the Archdiocese of New Orleans will launch a year-long celebration of this historical milestone with a dinner Wednesday at Hyatt Place, at which Sar- gents Gather will be the principal speaker.

Actually, the Archdiocese cannot pinpoint a specific date for the opening of the first school in the state because, in the early colonial days, folk didn't care much for names of any events except births, deaths, marriages and business transactions.

What we do know, from St. Louis Catholic register, is that the church was built in 1699, and it was dedicated on April 14, as "machine d'ecole," schoolmaster.

That was the first record of the establishment of a school in the entire Louisiana Territory (42 states), but it was only the beginning of an uphill struggle for education in the area.

Former Beer Tavern

The Capuchin Fathers established that first school, said Roger Baudier in his "The Catholic Church in Louisiana," but their first concern was a permanent church. From their arrival in 1722, the Capuchins were housed in such unflattering accommodations as a shack, a two-room house that was a former beer tavern, and a military barracks.

To one man goes the credit for a permanent church as well as the first school. Writes Baudier, "Father Raphael de Luxembourg, at once realized the necessity of a school and Christian education for the youth of the colony if any good was to be accomplished."

Today, the education of children is taken rather for granted as an obvious benefit to the national economy, but in those days, the sole purpose of a colony was to make a profit, and education was considered an unnecessary frill.

Because of this, the Company of the Indies, which operated the Louisiana Colony and was responsible for establishing churches and maintaining priests for the benefit of the inhabitants, was slow to spend money on even a church, much less a school.

The Persistent Priest

The delays and roadblocks posed by the company were frequent and no doubt irritating, but Father Raphael was persistent, and as soon as the work on a church began, he turned his attention to a school.

Fortunately for the boys in the colony, for whom the first school was established, Father Raphael did not wait for the company to build the church before asking for a school.

Apparently, he did not ask at all, but simply moved into a building, according to Baudier, "on the grounds near the Capuchin Presbytery and faced on St. Anne, between the present Chartres and Royal Streets," and christened it a school.

Fleuriet, with the help of a lay brother, Brother St. Julian, and later a Brother Cyril, taught reading, writing, music, French, Latin and religion to beginners and liberal arts courses to advanced students.

Ursulines School

But that was for boys, and it fell to Mother Marie de St. Augustine, the foundress of the New Orleans Ursuline Community, to open a school for girls in the autumn of 1727.

The royal order sending the first three sisters to New Orleans was issued by Louis XV and included an agreement, says Baudier, stipulating that the Ursulines were to take care of the royal hospital at New Orleans and at the same time undertake the education of girls in the colony, provided the latter task did not interfere with the former.

His Majesty apparently had a logical sense of priorities, given the high mortality rates in most of the early Colonies. Keep them alive and then educate them.

First things first.

At their convent on Chartres Street, which remains today as a National Historic Monument, the Ursulines taught not only boarders, but Indian and slave girls as well. Their doors were open to all, and one French Jesuit of the day called the institution "a public school.

Years of Growth

From then on, the city, as well as its schools, began to grow steadily. The Religious of the Sacred Heart arrived in 1818, the Vincentian Fathers in 1820, the Sisters of Loreto in 1825, the Sisters of Charity in 1830, and the Sisters of Mount Carmel in 1833.

Later many other orders either arrived from Europe or were founded there. In 1882, Mother Francis Xavier Cabrini came to assist in the education of the many Italians who had migrated to New Orleans. In 1910, the College of the Immaculate Conception became Loyola University, and St. Mary's Dominican College was established.

By 1923, nearly 50 orders of priests, sisters and brothers had come to New Orleans, and Xavier University had been founded.

From 1835 to 1960, under Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel, over $100 million in building contracts were 1/12 of these for schools, convents and school-related bugs.

In Archbishop Rummel's years of administration, Catholic school enrollment more than doubled, reaching 90,000 students in 1960-61 just prior to the partitioning of part of the Archdiocese into the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

Moratorium

The present tenure of Archbishop Philip M. Hannan, who has seen a moratorium on school construction, as education institutions, both public and private, experience a financial squeeze as never before.

Following the impact of the high birth rate after