St. Landry Parish: Deep faith in God and church

By Kathleen Toups

OPELOUSAS

"Parishioners of St. Landry in Opelousas have a strong love for their church and obvious devotion to it," says Father Gary Schexnayder, pastor.

The church parish is the second oldest in the Diocese of Lafayette, being established in 1776 when it was known as Post des Opelousas. The church was first located at present Washington but as the Opelousas area increased in size, land where the present church stands was donated by Michael Prudhomme.

The name St. Landry is derived from St. Leander and, following a tradition from the early days of colonization and development, the civil parish takes its name from what was the principal church community of those days.

Deserved honor

"Parishioners are justifiably proud of the church which recently been placed on the National Register of Historic Places," Father Schexnayder pointed out. "This honor is indeed a deserved one for the church, one of, if not the most beautiful in the entire area. It is also recognition of the historical past of our parish."

"I feel very positive about the depth of faith in the church and in God that I have found in my parishioners," Father Schexnayder continued. "as in all church parishes, the 15 years since the Second Vatican Council have brought challenges and problems, but St. Landry Church has come through these years well. I feel that much good has been done to incorporate Vatican II into the local church and much remains to be done."

"Most important Father Schexnayder says he sees the parish council as the most important group of parishioners. "The task of the council is to work and plan with the pastor and staff of the church for needs of the church parish and the develop programs for its members."

"These include," he pointed out, "the spiritual growth of the church, the educational needs of all parishioners from the very young to the elderly, the administration and maintenance of the church's properties and business, as well as helping to meet the needs of the larger community."

Father Schexnayder says he is trying to have an active, informed and committed parish council to "steward" with what God has given us here at St. Landry.

"The ideas of shared responsibility, of initiative, of accountability and of leadership are some of the central ideas I feel need to be further developed in the church and in the parish if the church can blossom and move forward as the Council calls for."

Permanent deacons

Three permanent deacons assist at St. Landry in ministry of the church in various ways. They are Deacon Arthur Lognion, John Miller and Carlo Cannatella. Developing the concept of service and of ministry in the total parish is one of his most important duties, Father Schexnayder says, and he also feels there are "many gifted persons here at St. Landry who are in the work of the church, but there are many others who are gifted and for some reason or another they have not been called to service."

Calling people forward to be more involved in the work of the church will hopefully occupy more and more of my time, he said.

"The Catholic schools are a vital part of the history of our church parish," Father Schexnayder noted, "One of our real blessings is Opelousas Catholic School."

Opelousas Catholic evolved in the early 1970's from a pairing of the Academy of the Immaculate Conception and Holy Ghost schools. Sister Maria Buonato, R.S.C.J., principal, heads a faculty and staff of religious and lay people.

Personally involved

Father Schexnayder says he looks forward to becoming "more personally involved in ways to assist the school staff and faculty in preparing our young people spiritually, personally and educationally to be the future leaders and citizens of the church and the community."

One of the popular educational programs in the parish is an on-going Bible class conducted by Deacon Cannatella. Father Schexnayder emphasizes he feels strongly it is important to provide more opportunities for the people to learn about the scriptures, the strength and power that comes in knowing and in living the basic truths of the Bible.

"Among some Catholics there is some hesitration about reading the Bible," he conceded, "but as people learn about the Bible and come to be more comfortable in reading the Word, they come to be more at ease in reading the Bible as part of their daily lives."

Another recent successful program was a stress relief workshop conducted by Father Aurele Godbout, C.J.M., and Sister Mary Jane Belfie, O.P. They will return in the fall for another workshop. Father Schexnayder also plans to sponsor a series of classes on self-appreciation and self-understanding, as well as a series on the family.

"These programs are a great help," he pointed out, "in assisting people to come into a more mature and more adult understanding of how God is working in their lives and how faith can be the key to living and coping with the events of life."

One of the programs which has become a highly successful summer event is the "Hi-God" program for children of the parish. Barbara Perrault, who has directed it for four years, says children, parents and parishioners in general have benefitted from it. "Some people think of us as the old parish," but this program has counteracted that feeling.

A parish trustee, lector and council member, she feels the church is important to the community, as a place of worship, and as a historical building.

More people

Albert Soileau, parish council president, says, "It's a great parish, but we need more people going."

For the next year the parish council is going to redefine its responsibilities and commissions with a goal of wider participation.

Some initial projects with the upkeep of the church and the cemetery have brought a good response. "Some people are just waiting to be asked, and when they get personally involved, it's a good feeling," Soileau pointed out.

Spotlight

Stress relief

BIBLE CLASS—Permanent Deacon Carlo Cannatella, St. Landry Parish, Opelousas, teaches a weekly adult education scripture course. (Photo by Henry Pavy)