Catholic threads

By JULIE KAY
SATURDAY Religion Writer

Catholicism is woven deeply into the fabric of Louisiana history and rooted largely in Spanish and French influences. From the time Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle planted a large cross at the mouth of the Mississippi River in 1682, the first French-speaking Mass celebrated in Louisiana in 1699, the foundation was strong.

Louisiana was assisted spiritually and financially by France and Spain, which sent missionaries into the area and are credited with much of the early 18th-century development of the Catholic Church in the region.


Concession of large grants of land given to those who agreed to clear and settle them. While some were abandoned as settlers realized the project difficultly they would encounter in the clearing, others plowed along.

With a population of about 50, the Baton Rouge concession took hold.

Religion was a part of each concession in that they required to have a chaplain.

"These chaplains were volunteers, and the first chaplain of Baton Rouge mentioned in the register of marriages at St. Louis Cathedral was a Franciscan Recollect named Father Prothom Boyer, who served in New Orleans in the 1720s," writes Uter.

The first Mass in Baton Rouge listed in historical records was celebrated in 1722 by historian, scientist and traveler Father Pierre Francois Xavier de Charlevoix, who had been commissioned by the French to make a study of religious conditions in the area.

After tying his canoe to a landing in "le Baton Rouge, or Red-staff Plantation," he celebrated the Eucharist on an "improved altar and a small habitation." The settlement was described in his journal as "no farther advanced than the rest."

As Catholicism slowly took hold in the years following, visiting priests traveled throughout the region, taking care of the needs of the people, Uter described in a recent interview. "Priests would go up and down the river by boat, stopping here and there as needed," he said.

The first chapel, dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows, was not built until 1789.

The Rev. Carlos Burke was sent in as its full-time pastor in 1793, but when he arrived, he found no church records of any type. The church was thought to be near the site of the old Our Lady of the Lake Hospital, across Capitol Lake from the State Capitol.

He was resident pastor for some six years and was known to visit the homes of Protestants to the consternation of some of the more prominent parishioners.

As the congregation experienced growing pains, a new church was built at the site of the current St. Joseph's Cathedral, and the parish was renamed St. Joseph. Burke reported in a parish census that there were 492 Catholics, 27 Protestants and 16 Calvinists in the area in 1798.

There were problems facing Catholicism at the time, writes Uter.

"Catholic religious fervor was very weak in Louisiana in 1795. Cited was a lack of conversion to Catholicism among Protestants and the difficulties experienced by the Irish-Spanish clergy in their ministry."

Part of the problem appeared to be that most of the Catholic population spoke Spanish or French. Protestants spoke mostly English.

Today, St. Joseph Parish is called the "Mother of Parishes" because each parish in the Baton Rouge metropolitan area was once part of it.

Its present structure was erected in 1833 and has been enlarged many times. The cathedral has weathered epidemics, the Civil War and military occupation.

Church history says that in 1862, federal gunboats shelled the area around the church during the Battle of Baton Rouge. Its pastor, the Rev. Frederic Lannuadie, was held as a spy by federal troops.

With Catholicism being the dominant religion of the region, the yellow fever epidemic took its toll on parishioners in the mid-1850s.

"The Weekly Advocate reported on Sept. 20, 1855, that "Death has dealt heavily with the ministers and brothers attached to the Presbytery of St. Joseph's Church," and goes on to report that a majority of those stricken throughout the city were parishioners.

From the mid-1830s on, parish records painted a picture accurate of finances in the parish in addition to its religious aspects.

Church wardens, or legal representatives of the church, were elected by the congregation. Their views at times conflicted with pastoral desires, including those involving money and policies.

At times, the differences between pastor and wardens reached fever pitch, not only at St. Joseph, but at other parishes.

The wardens, said Uter, didn't see their role as one of service, but rather as "doing things their way."

In 1842, the wardens of St. Joseph voted to cut the salary of its newly appointed pastor, the Rev. J.N. Brouard, and seized the rectory furniture with the intention of selling it to meet the parish's financial obligations.

Their power was reduced toward the end of the 19th century.

"The end of the Civil War had brought such destruction that during Reconstruction, much was looked at," including the wardens' power, Uter said.

The power was not reduced, however, before the wardens had involved themselves in the fracas over whether the priest should preach in French or English.

Brouard noted in a letter to the bishop in 1843 that since "he had been preaching in English, there were more communications and more converts, even a young Methodist minister, and that the local church sold more English devotional books in three months than during the past three years."

Uter notes in his book that "This turmoil within the parish at this time was a reflection of changes in the civil community. The French were rarely frequenting the church, but those who spoke English were doing so more and more."

The French-English question was not to be settled until the Rev. Delacroix preached the last French homily in 1872.

Uter said he researched material for his book, he gained a greater understanding for what the French/English question meant to the people of the time.

"It might have seemed to be a problem with language, but it was more a problem of letting go of tradition. People were trying to do the best they could, but they saw something being lost."

Uter said as he handled the old papers and journals for research, he was "impressed and grateful how human nature was active in the midst of all that and in spite of times of adversity."

By the 1890s, Baton Rouge's Anglo-American families were concentrated in the center of town.

Its French population settled near the Mississippi River.

Baton Rouge continued to grow from a city of 1,463 in 1810 to 3,905 by 1850. By 1883, there were four congregations, St. Joseph, St. James Episcopal, First Methodist and First Presbyterian.

Advocate staff photo by Mandy Lunn

St. Joseph Cathedral, 412 Main St., is the principal church of the area's Roman Catholics.

Segregated faith

By EDWARD PRATT
Editor of SATURDAY

The Catholic Church always had an open-door policy; the color of one's skin dictated how close you sat to it, according to "A Brief History of St. Francis Xavier," a document on the beginnings of the African-American Catholic Church in Baton Rouge.

Slavery, post-slavery laws and the zealfulness of their denomination played a major role in getting a large number of black people into the Roman Catholic church in this region.

According to the "Encyclopedia of Religion in the South," great numbers of black people were brought to the Catholic faith because most slave owners who supervised sugar plantations in southern Louisiana were Roman Catholics.

Another reason for the concentration of black Catholics was the "Code Noir," formulated in 1724. It required that slaves be baptized into the Catholic Church.

Records show that when St. Joseph's Church opened in 1792, slaves and white people were among the congregation.

During the mid-1800s, there was a large number of free people of color in the Baton Rouge area, many of white and black heritage. They were the children of French planters and African mothers, and they maintained the Catholic faith of their parents.

During Reconstruction, large numbers of African Americans who had been free before they migrated from Poetry Creek Parish and the Feliciana's to Baton Rouge began attending St. Joseph.

By the late 1800s and early 1900s, the black population at St. Joseph's had grown so large that the Very Rev. Arthur Drossart, rector of St. Joseph's, wrote to the bishop of New Orleans that a separate church and school for "Catholic Negroes" was needed.

About a year later, Drossart wrote another letter asking that the Josephite Fathers take over a new "mixed" parish, St. Agnes, that would include black people.

In the end, St. Agnes was not given to the Josephites. The new church had a congregation of Italian and African-American Catholics sitting on one side, while white Catholics sat on the other, according to St. Francis Xavier documents.

Combined, but segregated services, were more the rule than the exception for years.

By Boswell did not attend St. Joseph. However, the 80-year-old woman from Jennings said at her hometown church, black people had to wait until white people had taken communion before she and other black people could be served.

"That's just the way it was. We accepted it," she said, adding, "For a while I lost trust and respect that they would do it that way."

By 1916, however, a new parish for black worshippers, St. Francis Xavier, was established. For two years, black members held dinners and bazaars to raise money for the church construction.

St. Francis was officially dedicated in 1919, giving a home to black Catholics in Baton Rouge.

Boswell, an 89-year-old student at Southern University in 1938, said many Catholic students were so excited about a black Catholic church that they would miss their Sunday breakfast to catch buses to St. Francis Xavier.

"I had never seen anything like that," she said. "It was a new experience for us."