Centennial Festivities Set for Sunday at St. Joseph's

By JOSEPH A. LUCIA
(The Times-Picayune Uptown Bureau)

CONVENT, La.—One hundred years of Catholic education in St. Michael's Church parish will be celebrated here Sunday.

The observance of the opening of St. Joseph's School here in 1867 will get underway with a reception in the school hall from 3 p.m. to 4:30 p.m. A High Mass will be concelebrated at 5 p.m.

Bishop Robert E. Tracy of Baton Rouge will preside at the Mass. The celebrants will be the pastor of St. Michael's Church, Msgr. Patrick Gillespie and Msgr. Edwin G. Gubler.

Msgr. Arthur J. Lieux, V.F., superintendent of parochial schools in the Baton Rouge diocese, will give the sermon.

Father Bolduc and the Rev. Bernard Volger, S.M., assistant pastor, said the school is "reliably said to be the oldest establishment for Catholic colored children in Louisiana, if not in the country."

They said the school opened 100 years ago following a plenary council in 1866 of United States bishops convening in Baltimore, where a decision was made "to exert every effort to provide Catholic education for Negro children."

SCHOOL STARTING

Faced with the problem of starting a new school in the economically starved post-Civil War South, Archbishop Odin of New Orleans chose Convent in St. James civil parish as the site because two Catholic institutions were already situated there.

The two institutions, neither now in existence, were Jefferson College, operated by the Marist Fathers, and the Convent of the Madams of the Sacred Heart, from which the town of Convent received its name.

Father Bolduc said Mother Shannon, head of the convent, agreed to cooperate with the archbishop in founding the school, which was named St. Joseph's. He said the school started with a class of 20 and was considered a success from its beginning.

The school outlived both Jefferson College and the Sacred Heart Convent. Jefferson College closed in 1927 because of lack of students and financial support which resulted when local residents began exercising a preference for the free public high schools over the costly boarding schools.

A history of plagues, floods, fire, population displacement and depression all contributed to the closing in 1932 of the Sacred Heart Convent, which at that time, was over a century old.

SAVE SCHOOL

To save the school, which was on the convent grounds, the Rev. Francis Georgelin, S.M., then pastor of St. Michael's, had it transferred to the property behind the church and renamed it St. Michael's.

Father Georgelin obtained the services of the Sister Servants of the Holy Ghost and Mary Immaculata from San Antonio, Tex., and operation of the school continued without interruption at its new site on Sept. 19, 1932, with an enrollment of 117 pupils.

Father Bolduc said it was St. Michael's continued to progress, the demand arose for a parochial school for whites. He said the Rev. Ernest Pfleger, S.M., then pastor, acted accordingly and erected a separate building on the church property for the white school.

Archbishop Joseph Francis Rummel of New Orleans dedicated the new school, which was also named St. Michael's on Sept. 1, 1940. The name of the Negro parochial school was changed back to St. Joseph's at that time.

Father Bolduc said both schools were under the direction of the Sisters of the Holy Ghost, a missionary group from Ireland, who had as many as nine sisters at the Convent community at one time.

Both schools, he said, survived the economic crisis which resulted from decreased enrollment in the 1950s and the problem created for small schools because of the shortage of sisters in this country.

When integration was established in diocesan schools, the two schools merged into one larger institution, St. Michael's, in 1966.

Father Bolduc said the population of Convent is presently increasing and an increase is expected in the attendance at St. Michael's.

Sister Mary Dennis, S.H.G., is principal and superior of the present school, which has a kindergarten and six grades.

Members of the staff are Sisters Mary Angel and Mary Hyacinth, S.H.G., and a lay teacher, Mrs. Nelva P. LeBlanc, who is in charge of the kindergarten.