The Most Rev. Robert E. Tracy prepares on Nov. 8, 1961, to enter St. Joseph's Cathedral in downtown Baton Rouge to attend his installation as the first bishop of the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

BY MARK H. HUNTER
Special to The Advocate

On Nov. 8, 1961, the Most Rev. Robert Emmet Tracy was installed as the first bishop of the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

Now, nearly 49 years after Tracy's installation service, the diocese is ready to launch a yearlong celebration of its 50th anniversary.

The fifth and current bishop, the Most Rev. Robert W. Muench, as well as priests and staff from the diocese's 48 church parishes will kick off the jubilee celebration with a special service at 2:30 p.m. Sunday at St. Joseph Cathedral.

The theme of the Golden Anniversary is "Born in the Spirit of Faith," and Muench is calling upon all Catholics in the 5,405-square-mile, 12-parish diocese to reflect on the church's history and celebrate the present and future.

"The members of the Diocese of Baton Rouge look forward to celebrating this defining moment of grace, our 50th anniversary," Muench said in a written statement. "It is a special opportunity to thank our ever-faithful God for the many blessings He has bestowed upon us."

Pope John XXIII establishes the Diocese of Baton Rouge with a signed proclamation, called a Papal Bull, on July 22, 1961.

The diocese has produced Jubilee banners that will be displayed in the parish's churches during the coming year, and an anniversary prayer commencing in a "Closing Mass of Heritage and Hope" to be held at the River Center on Nov. 6, 2011, Chevalier said.

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has been distributed to the parishes for use in services, Chevalier said.
A special event, with details yet to be determined, is planned for the Feast of St. Joseph, the diocese's patron saint, in March 2011.

On Wednesday, a group of 47 local Catholics will embark on an 11-day pilgrimage to Italy, including Rome, led by the Very Rev. Than Ngoc Vu, the diocese's vicar general and moderator of the Curia.

Tied as going back to our "Roots of Faith," in Vu's words, the pilgrimage includes participation in an audience with Pope Benedict XVI.

"The group will be specifically mentioned in the Pope's greeting," Vu said. "He will recognize the group from the Diocese from Baton Rouge celebrating their 50th anniversary.

"It was there in the Vatican where the document was signed that established our diocese," Vu said. "In a very real way we'll be going back to our spiritual roots, the very place where St. Peter and St. Paul were buried.

Last year Vu was diagnosed with lung cancer and has been undergoing successful treatments and adapting his diet to fight the disease. For awhile last year, he said, he wasn't feeling very well but now he feels fine enough to lead the pilgrimage.

The diocese was established on July 22, 1961, when Pope John XXIII signed a proclamation, Bishop Muench wrote in a September letter. Tracy was appointed on Aug. 10, 1961.

However, the diocese can trace its roots much further back than 1961, going all the way back to 1682, when Rene-Robert Cavelier Sieur de La Salle of France first explored the length of the Mississippi River and claimed the entire region, which he named La Louisiane, for France, Muench wrote.

The Coat of Arms of the Diocese of Baton Rouge includes a red scepter between two red stone arrowheads on a golden shield, signifying the red pole for which Baton Rouge is named. The scepter also signifies the royalty of Christ.

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THE VERY REV. THAN NGOC VU

Another French explorer, Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, identified the current site of Baton Rouge in 1699, naming it after a red pole, or stick, placed near the river bank by Native Americans.

The diocese's website details how the red stick theme is employed in the diocesan Coat of Arms which displays a red scepter between two red stone arrowheads on a golden shield, signifying the red pole that historically divided the territories of the Muskogean and Choc'taw tribes. The scepter also signifies the royalty of Christ.

The earliest Eucharist was celebrated on the grounds of what is now the State Capitol building in 1722, Muench said. The first church was St. Francis in Pointe Coupee Parish, built in 1728 and still standing, according to the diocese, followed by St. James parish in 1767, St. Gabriel in 1769, Donaldsonville in 1772, Baton Rouge in 1772, and Platteville in 1793, the same year the Diocese of New Orleans was established. That diocese, which included the Baton Rouge area, would become an archdiocese in 1850.

The Civil War, disease and Reconstruction were problems the local Catholic clergy dealt with during the 1800s, the Baton Rouge diocese's website reports, but then things improved as the 20th century progressed. Industry developed, the economy expanded and the population grew.

By 1961, when the Baton Rouge diocese was established, the population of Catholics in the area had reached 164,476—35 percent of an overall population of 464,904. As of July 2008, the latest figures available, Catholic Diocese numbered 231,295—24 percent out of a total population of 931,004.

Baton Rouge bishops

- Alfred Clifton Hughes (1932-) was installed Nov. 4, 1993, until Pope John Paul II transferred him to become archbishop of New Orleans. He retired on June 12, 2009.

Diocese data

Here's a look at the Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge based on data for 2008, the most recent year for which these figures are available:

PERSONNEL
- 70 diocesan priests.
- 72 deacons.
- 103 nuns and sisters.

FAITH COMMUNITIES:
- 68 total parishes.
- 72 total faith communities.

EDUCATION
- 24 Catholic elementary schools.
- 11,633 children enrolled in elementary schools.
- 8,575 children enrolled in other Catechetical programs.
- 8 Catholic high schools.
- 4,209 adolescents enrolled in Catholic high schools.
- 3,651 adolescents enrolled in other Catechetical programs.

OTHER STATISTICS
- 1,064 infant baptisms.
- 2,688 newly initiated (confirmed).
- 2,072 children receiving first Eucharist.
- 744 marriages recognized.
- 1,618 deaths solemnized by Catholic funeral rites.
- 231,295 Catholics in diocese.
- 931,004 total population in 2008, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

HEALTH AND WELFARE
- Three Catholic hospitals.
- 342,019 patients assisted.
- Seven Catholic homes for aged.
- 739 residents in homes.
- 13 special centers for Catholic Social Services.
- 225,499 people assisted by social services.

Catholic Diocese of Baton Rouge

One Catholic nursing, health care, liberal arts college.
2,016 students in that college.

ON THE INTERNET:
http://www.diobr.org