Good Friday tradition to continue

By Jonas Breaux

CATAHOULA - A 30-year tradition will continue here today when parishioners from St. Rita's Catholic Church make a 10-mile procession commemorating Christ's journey up Calvary to his crucifixion on Good Friday.

Each Friday during Lent, Catholics observes the Way of the Cross ceremony which depicts the sentencing of Jesus by Pontius Pilate, his crowning with thorns, his torturous walk up Calvary carrying the wooden cross upon which he was put to death.

In the early 1960s, Catahoula resident Tootie Guirard got the idea of placing 14 shrines, correlating to the 14 Stations of the Cross, on oak trees along La. 96 between St. Martinville and Catahoula.

Each Good Friday since that time, parishioners have conducted a Way of the Cross from the first station at Oak and Pine Alley, to the Madonna Hall across from St. Rita's where the last shrine is located.

"Tootie lived on the levee and would drive to work in St. Martinville each day," said Emma Bourque, 72, a long-time friend and co.
worker of Guirard at the Acadian House Museum located at Longfellow-Evangeline State Commemorative Area. “She noticed how beautiful the oak trees were and thought of placing the stations at intervals leading up to the church.”

Bourque said a cousin of Guirard’s, Mugsy Beckstrom (an artist) painted the scenes on the first shrines depicting Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection.

“The first shrines were made out of cypress and were hand-painted,” Bourque said. “This year we had to change the shrines because Hurricane Andrew damaged some of the old ones.”

Bourque said the St. Rita’s Knights of Columbus raised funds and purchased new shrines which were put up following the hurricane.

Today’s procession begins at about 9 a.m., at Oak and Pine Alley just south of St. Martinville on La. 96, and will take approximately 2 hours to complete, according to the Rev. Allen Breaux, of St. Rita’s.