After the French and Spanish settled here, Louisiana was almost exclusively Catholic — at least in name. The Acadians added to Catholic numbers, as did black people who came here from Africa and Haiti. Since our very beginnings, Catholicism has been an integral part of who we are and who we have become.
Early Louisiana was not a hotbed of religion

First Louisiana settlers were from streets, not churches

Even though a priest, Father Zénobius Membre, was in the exploration party led by Sieur de La Salle that claimed Louisiana for France in 1682, and even though priests came here during Iberville's first attempts at colonization in 1699, it must be said that early Louisiana was not the most religious place around.

Although most of the settlers of the early colony were Catholic in name, they had been recruited from the jails and slums, not from the churches. They were irrelevant if not downright irreligious. Other who may have been of higher social status came to the new colony to get away from the rigors of the Reformation then underway in France. They came here to escape the authority of the church, not to bring it with them. Indeed, some of the first priests of the colony came to Louisiana because they were about to be, or had been, defrocked in France.

This is not to say that there were not some good churchmen in the colony. It is to say that the good churchmen of the colony ruled and pulled their hair in the reception given their efforts to bring religion to the early colony.

The first church on the Gulf Coast was established in Biloxi about 1700. The first priest to officiate there was Father Bordenave, a chaplain of one of the ships in Iberville's expedition. The church that would become St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans was established in 1718 but, apparently, it did not have a resident priest at first. According to records in the National Archives in Paris, there were two priests in Biloxi in 1722, one on Ship Island, one at the Mississippi, one at "Akansa," one in Natchitoches, two in Mobile, and one at "Albemars." Historian Carl Brasseaux wrote on "The Moral Climate of French Colonial Louisiana" in the journal of the Louisiana Historical Association in 1986.

Catholic missionaries were consistently unsuccessful in their efforts to dictate the colony's moral values," Brasseaux says. "Indeed, clerics repeatedly lamented that their European- and Catholic-born parishioners had little regard for their religious message, and even less respect for the dignity traditionally accorded their station in France."

He points out that Father Paul du Ru, writing in March 1700, complained about French Canadians in Biloxi who, when they did attend services, were "boisterous" and disrupted the Mass.

Brasseaux argues that the church's lack of influence in early Louisiana stemmed from a combination of factors. First, he says, the Catholic mission was chronically understaffed. Second, the church in Louisiana had no resident bishop. It was administered in Louisiana by men without recognized authority. According to Brasseaux, "the very modest administrative structure of the vicars general, who constituted the leading religious officials in Louisiana up to the 1790s, effectively limited the amount of influence the Church could exert on local civil functionaries."

Third, he says, "the moral fiber of the priests themselves was often suspect. .. Louisiana's vicar general acknowledged in 1725 that many priests sent to Louisiana had been 'interdicted in their (French) dioceses and had fled to Louisiana to avoid punishment for ... disorderly lives.'.. Most colonists were consequently at least apathetic, if not openly hostile, toward the clergy. In the first decades of Louisiana's existence, clerics encountered a remarkable lack of enthusiasm among the colonists for church construction. .. No church was built in New Orleans, for example, until nine years after the post's establishment. During the interim, however, numerous cabarets and billiard halls had been erected. .. (Even after St. Louis Church was built) Mother Françoise de Pargue in 1728 that 'religion is little known and practiced even less.'

Catholicism had, of course, come to the Gulf of Mexico before the French arrived in Louisiana. The first diocese in the New World was created in Hispaniola (the Caribbean island later called Santo Domingo) in 1504 by Pope Julius II, but it was never formally established. In 1511, Pope Julains created three sees, two of them in Hispaniola and one at San Juan, Puerto Rico. The first bishop to live in the New World was Bishop Manso of San Juan.

The faith also came down the Mississippi River from Canada. After the founding of Quebec in 1608, Samuel Champlain invited the Franciscans to settle there. Within a decade, the Jesuits followed the Franciscan Recollects into New France. From those beginnings, Quebec became the seat of a diocese. In 1678, Francois de Montmorency-Laval was named vicar general of New France and in 1674 he was made the first Bishop of Quebec with jurisdiction over all French-held territory in North America.
Father Barrière was ‘Apostle of Teche Country’

Father Michel Bernard Barrière flew the terrors of the French Revolution in the spring of 1795, and, like many others, made his way to Louisiana. He arrived in St. Martinville on March 8 and began 30 years of labor along the banks of the Teche and the Vermilion.

He was, in the view of Roger Baudier, chronicler of the history of the church in Louisiana, the most noteworthy of a number of priests who fled France to come to Louisiana at that time. He went about his proselytizing in the wilds of the Teche, zeal that Baudier calls Barrière “The Apostle of the Teche Country.”

“To him is due the laying of the foundation of the faith in most of the present Catholic parishes in a wide area around St. Martinville, new independent churches, but then all children of the mother parish of St. Martin of the Attakapas,” Baudier writes.

Much of the work of Father Barrière, who is called Miguel Bernardo Barriére in some of the Spanish records of the time, was recorded in an historical sketch of the church in Lafayette originally published in the St. Louis Catholic Historical Review and later republished by Father Donald Hebert in his Guide to Church Records in Louisiana.

After fleeing France, Father Barrière offered his services to Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore and was sent by him to Kentucky. Barrière worked there for several months before deciding that he could not adapt himself to the wilderness. He moved to New Orleans, which was then held by Spain. It appeared to be a bad move. He was promptly arrested by the Spanish authorities in New Orleans because he was a Frenchman, and Spain feared an ally of the French Revolutionary policy. Compare with these our own Pilgrim Fathers. Simple were they as the dove, meek as the lamb, hospitable and generous in their poverty, forgiving in their suffering, bearing ill to no one, filled with charity and good will to all.

We heard much this year of the landed Pilgrim Fathers. The tercentenary of their landing at the banks of the Mayflower was celebrated with pageant and pomp, and as occasion might permit, in any city, or at any distant point of the nation, the account of their humble and impoverished beginnings and the story of their struggles to establish the new nation. But we do not hear a word - good or bad - of the tiny band of missionaries who went to the Teche in search of converts.

Already they had wrenched out the nits of (b) fingers and toes, when the head of the tribe appeared on the scene, stopped the tortures, extended his protection over the missionary, took care of him, and saw to his safe return home on the Teche.

Father Barrière was in failing health when he assumed the pastorate in Lafayette in 1822. He stayed at St. John Parish for two years, then sailed for his native Bordeaux, France, in 1824. He died there on July 1826 at the age of 91.

HISTORY OF ACADIANA

Acadian exile remembered as area’s ‘binding golden thread’

In 1921, three years after the founding of the Diocese of Lafayette, Bishop Arthur Drossaerts of San Antonio, who had served a priest in southwest Louisiana, was principal speaker at a centennial celebration honoring the founding of St. John Parish in Lafayette by the Acadian people.

His speech was reported in the Nov. 5, 1921, issue of The Daily Advertiser. He began:

“May your attractive city.

The centenary feast of the founding of your beautiful, thriving city on the banks of the Vermilion Bayou paints before our eyes visions of a wonderful past, brings joy to our hearts for the redeemed abounding on all sides of peace and prosperity; and, above all, forces on our lips a hymn of thanksgiving to God, for all favors and blessings so bountifully received from His hands.

Are we wrong in seeing a golden thread binding together forever the romantic history of the Acadian exile and the destinies of this city and the surrounding country? Is not Longfellow’s soul-stirring epic — that entrancing narrative of the suffering and ceaseless wanderings of the Acadian exiles — is it not also the first chapter in the history of the birth of a new nation in Southern Louisiana?

No doubt, the settling here of the Acadians on Bayou Teche and the fertile lands along Bayou Teche and Lafayette Parish in particular, added to the most happy, the most prosperous, the most peaceful, the most beautiful of all Louisiana parishes, it is well not to forget those who first planted these hills, that splendid race of men that was destined to fill the countryside and the towns of Southern Louisiana.

And when today with unbounded gratitude to God we review the wonderful blessings of these past 190 years—blessings which make this heart of Louisiana an earthly paradise and Lafayette Parish in particular the heart of the Acadians — are not the Acadians the most simple, the most ancient, the most independent churches, but then all children of the mother parish of St. Martin of the Attakapas.”

Father Barrière was in failing health when he assumed the pastorate in Lafayette in 1822. He stayed at St. John Parish for two years, then sailed for his native Bordeaux, France, in 1824. He died there on July 1826 at the age of 91.
Capuchins were among first missionaries here

The territory that now comprises the dioceses of Lafayette and Lake Charles was, in colonial days, divided into three principal parts: The Opelousas district, the Attakapas district, and the Calcasieu district.

The network of bayous of southwest Louisiana was the principal means of communication during that time, even up to the late 1800s, when railroads began to stretch iron rails through the area. There were a few rutted roads, little more than trails cut through the wilderness, the most prominent being the Old Spanish Trail that stretched from east to west across south Louisiana to Tejas. Traveling north and south, the Opelousas road ran up bayou Teche from New Iberia to the Poste des Attakapas (St. Martinville), then to the Poste des Opelousas, then northward to Les Arcelles, Les Rapides, and the Poste de Natchitoches.

The establishment of the church in what is now Acadiana began in the eastern section and moved west, first at the old military posts at St. Martinville and Opelousas, then spreading out into the countryside, particularly after the arrival of the Acadians at Attakapas.

But even before the Acadian arrival, Capuchin missionaries had begun to make periodic visits among the settlers here, traveling from St. Francis Church at Pointe Coupée or from Natchitoches.

The First church established at Poste des Attakapas

St. Martin of Tours in St. Martinville, originally called the Church of the Attakapas Post, is the oldest church parish in southwest Louisiana. Church records indicate that as early as June 5, 1756, Dom Pierre Didier, a French Benedictine, who did missionary work in the Louisiana colony. In 1756, he said Mass at the plantation home of Jacques Courtableau at Opelousas.

Father Valentin, a French Capuchin who work throughout Louisiana, visited between 1756 and 1764. Another French Capuchin who ministered to the people of these two districts about the same time was Father Irenee.

In 1765, Father Jean François de Civray, also a French Capuchin, was sent to St. Martinville to minister to the Acadians who had been sent to the Attakapas. He built the first church at St. Martinville.

The First church in the Opelousas District was the Church of the Immaculate Conception, established at Church Landing, which is Washington today. It was probably begun in 1774. Spanish court records show that fees were paid that year to settlers of the community to help pay for the building. It was apparently built under the direction of Father Valentin of Pointe Coupée, who made visits to the new church until 1777. The first resident pastor at Opelousas was Father Louis Dubourg-du-Saint-Sépulcre, also a French Capuchin. He died in 1779.

In the middle 1790s, Father Pedro de Zamora asked for permission to move the church to land donated by Michael Prudhomme in what is now the city of Opelousas. The permission was given and the new church was completed in 1798. According to one history, it was first called St. Leonard's Church. But the French people of the region began calling it St. Landry almost from the beginning.

These two churches, St. Martin's church at the Attakapas Post and St. Landry at the Opelousas Post, are for many years the only churches between the Atchafalaya and Sabine rivers. They are the mother churches of southwest Louisiana. Between them, they served the whole lower third of the state west of the Atchafalaya River.

Most Protestants arrived after Louisiana Purchase

While Louisiana was under French and Spanish rule, almost all of the settlers were Catholic, at least in name. But after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, American Protestants began to come to the state in sufficient numbers to organize churches, particularly in the New Orleans area.

The Christ Church Cathedral (Protestant Episcopal) of New Orleans was founded in 1805. St. Paul's Protestant Episcopal Church in New Orleans dates to 1836. The Trinity Episcopal Church at Natchitoches was begun in 1839.

The First Methodist Church in New Orleans dates to 1825. The Felicity Methodist Church there was established in 1850. The Presbyterian Church in New Orleans was established about 1817.

Two Baptist churches were organized in Louisiana in 1812: The Calvary Baptist Church in Bayou Chico and the Hayes Creek Baptist Church in Franklin. The Beulah Baptist Church in Cheneyville was established in 1816. The Jewish people of New Orleans organized the Congregation Touro Synagogue in 1828.
Opelousas church formed under Spanish regime

The first French soldiers who garrisoned the fort that would become Opelousas were probably Catholic but they were not very religious and, apparently, no chapel was associated with the fort there for some time.

An old record, possibly written by the missionary Father Poisson, relates, “At the fort, there was no chapel, and no place where we could offer the holy sacrifice but a room open to all, even to the poultry, so that a hen once flew on the altar just as (the priest) was finishing Mass. Even this did not induce those in authority to erect a suitable chapel. (The priest’s) remonstrances actually led only to further derisions and mockery of religion.”

The beginning of church organization at the Opelousas post is generally attributed to Father Joseph de Arzena, who, in 1787, during the Spanish regime in Louisiana, gathered records of baptisms, marriages, funerals, and other services by the missionaries who had come before him. Even by then, he recorded, the records were “in wretched state of preservation, being written on loose sheets of paper, and in danger of getting lost.”

He bound together the papers that he could find and wrote an introduction to them.

This parish church was founded in the year of our Lord seventeen hundred and seventy, more or less, according to the information furnished by persons trustworthy and of well-known honesty. Don Carlos III (God preserve him) being King of Spain, Our Holy Father Pius VI ruling the Church Universal; Don Bernardo Galvez being Governor of this Province since the transfer of the same by the Most Christian King to His Catholic Majesty; and being Vicar General to His Lordship Joseph Santiago de Echevarria y Eguesua the Right Rev. Bishop of Havana, Jamaica, Louisiana and the Floridas, the Right Rev. Cyril de Barcelona, at present Auxiliary Bishop, who, in the Visitation he made of the Colony in the year one thousand seven hundred and eighty-six, ordered expressly, as is shown by the Pastoral Letter preserved among the papers of Our Offices that each Pastor should keep the necessary books, and in the best possible condition; which order respectfully and obediently, as it meets, on account of its conformity to the spirit of the Church, to reason and to the right method to be observed, we have adopted from the time we found it possible to have the necessary Registers, which are the present (illegible) in order that with greater clearness and distinction all the entries may be made, each one in the respective book, where they may be easily found in case of necessity; in like manner as we came across the few Records which were found here in wretched condition and on loose sheets of paper, exposed to the dangers of being lost, as was the case of those of Father Valentine, O.M.C.,

This historic marker stands next to St. Landry Church in Opelousas. It is the second-oldest parish in the diocese. Missionaries traveled from the parish to serve much of southwestern Louisiana. (Photo courtesy Diocese of Lafayette)