Louisiana Launches Historic Move Toward Bi-Lingualism

For the first time in the history of our country, a foreign nation and the United States have initiated a bilingual teacher exchange program.

The country being France, it is proper that Louisiana be the state in which the program is launched. The arrival in Lafayette this week of 30 teachers from le beau pays de France signals the beginning of an enterprise that has been long overdue.

For years there have been sporadic attempts in Acadiana to bring alive the beautiful language once spoken freely by the descendants of the exiled ones of Nova Scotia. The rejuvenation of the mother tongue would assure the perpetuation of a unique culture and heritage that is without parallel in the Western world. This noble venture drew many enthusiastic supporters but failed mostly because of the lack of a unifying center. The vital centralizing force was furnished when the state legislature created the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana. CODOFIL has since been in the forefront of the French renascence, and the teacher exchange program is one of the more tangible results of its many-faceted endeavors.

We find particularly encouraging for the future of the French language in Louisiana that these teachers of la belle langue Francaise are assigned to elementary schools. Foreign language requirements in high school and college serve a purpose to some extent, but there is absolutely no comparison with beginning the study of a foreign language at an early, impressionable age.

Our teacher-visitors-friends from France will stay in our state two years imparting their practical and theoretical knowledge of French to their young charges. With such a strong start, most of these youngsters will be very well prepared to pursue their studies at higher level. By graduation day they will be the masters of two languages. Such an objective — knowledge of at least two foreign languages — has long been common practice in European schools, and Louisiana may take pardonable pride if it becomes the first in a nation-wide trend.

Although it is only natural that the two-language movement should originate in strongly French Acadiana, the goal is far from being provincial. The 30 teachers will fan out throughout the state, in 16 school systems, both north and south Louisiana. Ca va sans dire that these aren't enough teachers for the entire state. However, this new development is also experimental. If it works out as it assuredly must, France stands ready to provide more teachers.

In a matter of years, as these young students graduate and become parents, their knowledge of French will be proudly and openly passed on to their own children at home. These little ones, in turn, will be well prepared when they begin the formal study of the language at school. There was a time when this was not so, when French was spoken apologetically before the Anglo-Saxons of the community and pupils were punished if they did not speak the language of les Americains in the schoolyard.

All this is no more. The French language has become a symbol of cultural pride. The teacher exchange program will provide a tremendous impetus toward maintaining this belief in one's heritage. One foresees the day when speaking French will be as common in the homes of north Louisiana as it is in Acadiana. French will be the second language of the state and, who knows, but that ultimately Louisiana will be the center of French study in the United States?

The coming of the French teachers in our midst is a most auspicious beginning toward this end. And so it is with enthusiasm, appreciation, and friendship that we extend to them a truly Gallic, “Bienvenu, nos amis, bienvenu.”