LAFAYETTE GETS A BISHOP OF ITS VERY OWN

Diocese celebrating 75th anniversary year

By Jim Bradshaw
Staff Writer

Father Jules B. Jeanmard did not know it when he came to Lafayette in May 1918 to preside over the ceremonies creating the Diocese of Lafayette, but he would soon be named its first bishop. He came to Lafayette for the ceremony because he was then serving as administrator of the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

The Morning Star, then the newspaper of the Archdiocese, reported in detail on the ceremony that created the new Lafayette diocese.

Some excerpts:

With the ringing of bells, the reading of the Papal Decree, the solemn chanting of the Te Deum, and the joyous acclamation of thousands of loyal Catholics, the new See of Lafayette was canonically erected by the Very Rev. Jules B. Jeanmard on Thursday last. The day marked the most eventful period in the history of the Church in the Attakapas. From the thirteen different civil parishes lying west of the Atchafalaya River and south of the thirty-first line of latitude as far as the Orange River, Texas, which section will constitute the new Diocese of Lafayette, clergy and people poured into the beautiful queen city of the Vermilion on Wednesday evening in order to be in time for the grand and imposing ceremonies of the day. The whole city wore a gala holiday aspect. Flags were flying in the breeze, friends of other days from one end of the new Diocese to the other met and clasped hands again, once more the story of early days and struggles was reviewed, the names and deeds of priests and pastors who had labored long and faithfully and who had borne the brunt and burden of the day in laying broad and deep the foundations of religious and educational work which had culminated in such a notable and glorious climax were recalled lovingly, reverently, and the whole Catholic population united in joyous acclamation of His Holiness, Pope Benedict XV, who, in his Christmas message, had declared to the best interest of his flock, had decreed to give this large and constantly growing section of Louisiana a Bishop of its own, to guide, to direct, to console, to bless, to lead them and their children nearer and nearer to the Divine Ideal.

With the announcement of the appointment of the Most Rev. John W. Shaw to the Metropolitan See of New Orleans came also the announcement of the division of the Archdiocese and the creation of the new See of Lafayette. The beautiful Church of St. John the Evangelist, which has been raised to the dignity of the Cathedral of Lafayette, was decked in keeping with the great event henceforth to be commemorated in its history. The spacious sanctuary was aglow with light and color. The altars were resplendent in myriads of lights, and every niche and corner of the magnificent edifice seemed to throng with the new life that had come to the sections. The church was thronged. Every available seat was occupied, the aisles were filled, and without a sound an entire mass unable to gain admission, yet anxious to catch every echo of the imposing ceremony as it floated beyond the portals.

The procession formed in the Cathedral presbytery and as the bells of the Cathedral pealed joyously forth the stately cortage passed down the aisles.

Nearly all of the rectors and assistant priests in the civil parishes of Acadia, Allen, Beauregard, Calcasieu, Cameron, Evangeline, St. Landry, Iberia, Jefferson Davis, Lafayette, St. Martin, St. Mary and Vermilion were present. Finally there entered the Very Rev. W.J. Tourlings, rector and builder of St. John's Church, Lafayette, and the sub-delegate, Very Rev. Jules B. Jeanmard, Administrator of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, who had been appointed by the Apostolic Delegate to represent him in erecting the Diocese. As the strains of the organ died away, Very Rev. Father Jeanmard, in his capacity as sub-delegate, addressed the clergy and congregation as follows:

T
his is indeed a proud and blessed day for you who are gathered here this afternoon. It is the day the people of Lafayette and I, as the clergy of the Attakapas, have looked forward to for some years past...the day when it might please the Holy Father to raise this city to the dignity of an Episcopal See and appoint a Bishop to guide the spiritual destinies of the ever-growing Catholic population of southwest Louisiana. That long looked-for day has dawned at last, though His Hert is weighted with the sorrows and sufferings that have come upon the world in our day, yet the Holy Father does not forget the spiritual needs of His children in the remotest parts of the globe. As from His watchtower His tear-dimmed eyes wander over the world for some sign of hope for the war-torn nations, they rest for a moment upon you, and whilst blessing you, He graciously grants the favor you have so long wished for.

I am here now, as His unworthy representative, duly commissioned by His Excellency, the Most Rev. John Bonzano, Apostolic Delegate to the United States, to announce to you officially the glad tidings, and to bid you rejoice at the realization of your fond hopes and expectations, and hail with gladness the new era of progress that it marks for religion and...
On July 18, 1918, Father Jean-mard, then 38 years old, received his letter of appointment as the First Bishop of Lafayette. He was formally installed on Dec. 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, to become the first native of Louisiana to be made a bishop.

What he found when he got to southwest Louisiana were 72 priests to take care of the 11,000 square miles and 152,792 Catholics of the diocese. There were then 48 church parishes, 44 of which had a resident priest.

A note to himself gives some idea of the diocese that the bishop looked out upon from his seat in Lafayette. It was a reminder of how many copies he needed of a letter to the faithful. He needed 68 of them: 48 in French, 20 in English.