"Je vous salue, Marie, pleine de Grace, le Seigneur est avec vous..."

The Hail Mary prayed in French over radio station KVPI in Ville Platte, Louisiana, echoes in the morning air of a Cajun Sunday.

Listening to a broadcast of the Rosary in French, even praying and conversing in French is common in this part of southern Louisiana where, after more than two centuries, much of the faith and culture of the Acadian people remains intact.

This is Acadiana... marshlands swept by gulf breezes, bayous shaded by moss-covered oaks, flatlands carpeted by rice, soybeans and sugar cane, and swamps teeming with wildlife. This is the home of America's Cajun people.

The Cajuns are descendants of those pioneers who came from France to settle the region called Acadia (now known as Nova Scotia) beginning in the early 1600s. (Acadian
later was shortened to ‘Cadian, which was then Anglicized to Cajun.)

Far from outside influences, these early settlers developed a
unique culture in southeastern Canada. Independent and self-sufficient, they
flourished for a century, growing in number from a few
dozens to more than 18,000.

In 1710, however, Great Britain gained control of Acadia and
attempted unsuccessfully to convert the Acadians to the Church of
England. Fiercely loyal to their Catholic Faith, the Acadians resis-
ted for more than 40 years. Some 6,000 secretly fled the country.

In 1753, Charles Lawrence became governor of the region.
Suspicious of all his French-speaking subjects, he tried forcing
them to sign oaths of allegiance to the British crown.

The Acadians resisted this additional attempt to involve them
in European politics, so
then Lawrence lured the men to
church and took them captive. As
mothers and children screamed in
horror, families were systematically separated, mother from child,
wife from husband, then loaded onto a fleet of leaky cargo vessels.

Lawrence’s plan was to prevent
any threat to British sovereignty by
scattering this French Catholic
minority throughout the remaining
British Crown colonies.

Settled in Louisiana

In all, more than 10,000
Acadians were dispersed across
the coasts of Pennsylvania, New
York, Massachusetts, Georgia and
the Carolinas. Most families were
never reunited. Many died at sea
when their vessels sank or when,
stricken with smallpox, they were
denied entrance to any port.

Steven Vincent is a direct
descendent of these refugees. Born
in 1939 in Gueydan in Louisiana’s

♦ “If farming doesn’t
get better, a lot of
older people here will
be forced out,” says
Ferrell McGee (at
right). Harvesting rice
and crawfish on
leased land in
Duralde is a “touch-
and-go” living, he
says.

♦ Cajun women are
hard workers, says
McGee’s wife,
Brenda, who cares for
neighbor children to
help with expenses.
She says her only
time to think or pray
is in the car while
running errands. “I
never had much
time to play.”

♦ Evenings are often
spent fishing, hunting
and trapping. At
right, 16-year-old
Shaine “Boy” McGee
dredges crawfish for
bait.

♦ In Cajun communities
like Duralde where there
are no stores and the
closest town is 10 miles
away, people’s lives
center around family,
neighbors and the
Church. Extension
helped build Annun-
ciation Church here in
1931 and helped
construct a new parish
hall last year.
he now lives in Lafayette, the “Hub City” or “Capital of Acadiana.”

Vincent has traced the genealogy of his family and the Acadian people and explains that the Spanish became instrumental in getting the Acadians to resettle in Louisiana.

Following their 1753 dispersion, most Acadians were forced into virtual slavery along the east coast as indentured servants and field hands. When British ships tried to deposit Acadians on the Virginia coast, however, the governor refused their admittance and the dispossessed Acadians were eventually returned to France, although that had now become for them a foreign land.

Spain, on the other hand, was looking for sturdy settlers to tame the wilds of its Louisiana Territory. The repatriated Acadians seized the chance, agreeing to establish themselves in southern Louisiana.

When Acadians on the east coast heard of this new Acadian colony where the people spoke French and were allowed to practice their Catholic Faith, they made the long trek to Louisiana. “Most literally walked the whole way, through the forests and the swamps,” Vincent says. “They were tough.”

Acadiana today

In their new home, they found rich soil for farming, forests and swamps teeming with fur-bearing animals and water fowl, rivers, bayous and gulf waters abounding with seafood, and freedom to wor-
ship without fear of reprisal.
While there are still many pockets of poverty across the state, Cajuns are proud that Louisiana today is the No. 1 producer of seafood in the continental U.S., the No. 2 producer of natural gas and No. 3 producer of crude oil.

Acadiana has also gained a world-wide reputation for offering the best in culinary delights. Cajun cuisine, however, like the Cajuns, has often been poorly represented and exploited.

Cajun culture is “hot” these days, says Floyd Sonnier, a Cajun from Church Point. This small town in northern Acadiana is one of the area’s last stands “where die-hard Cajuns are hanging onto the culture and language.”

The geographical isolation of the town has helped preserve local traditions, says Sonnier.

“When you go there, you touch the past. Life is still simple.”

Sonnier recalls the days of his youth when “everyone went to church in buggies and tied the horses to a hitching post while they were at Mass. In fact, buggies were used well into the ‘50s. It was a common sight.” Today, the citizens of Church Point are working to preserve their history. Thousands of visitors come every June for the town’s Buggy Festival.

“The Cajun Craze sweeping the country is good and it’s bad,” says Sonnier. “It’s good because of the publicity it brings to Acadiana. It’s good economically, too, but it’s bad because it continues the process of homogenization.”

Cajun culture was purest at the turn-of-the-century, says Sonnier. Then the new-found oil industry started an influx of outsiders who continue to dilute the culture.

A successful artist, Sonnier sells his pen-and-ink drawings across the U.S., Nova Scotia and France. Depicting scenes from his childhood, they are his own attempt to help preserve the past.

**Faith and culture**

Three major factors help make the Cajuns what they are today: their French language, their Catholic faith and their strong family life.

Language is a key unifying force. French, with a mixture of Spanish and English, has become a dialect now known as “Cajun French.”

While today’s Cajuns take pride in their culture, it was not always so. By the early 1900s, Cajun life was so looked down upon that students were all forbidden from speaking French in the public schools.

“I never spoke English until I went to school,” says Vincent. “At home, there was only French. My parents and grandparents all spoke French. But when we started school, we were forbidden to speak anything but English. The penalty for speaking French was a whipping.”

In 1968, however, U.S. Senator James Domengeaux, a Louisiana Cajun, persuaded the state legislature to turn the tables around by establishing the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL). Since then, French has been taught in Louisiana elementary schools and is offered as a high school elective.

In spite of these efforts, however, Cajun French is not faring well in Acadiana. The problem comes from outsiders, but from within the Cajun community itself. Young people are not as interested in continuing the language.

“My own children are resisting,” says Vincent. “It could be that there are still remnants of the stigma attached to French-speaking
Cajun homes often have religious art such as large Rosaries and statues prominently displayed, says Sister. The Faith is part of the fabric of a Cajun’s life. Families still carry on many traditions lost in other cultures. It is not unusual, for example, to see Cajuns wearing dark clothes for months following the death of a family member.

Closely related are customs dealing with illness. “Certain families have ‘healers’ known as traiteurs, says Sister Carmelita. “Cajuns will go to traiteurs for a wide variety of health problems; but these ‘healers’ are not paid or even thanked because the healing is seen as a service. Families pass down the prayers and gifts for healing.”

In keeping with the tradition of strong family ties, Sundays and holidays are family days observed with huge outdoor cookouts: fish fries and crawfish or crab boils.

During January, February and March, boucheries draw families and friends together to butcher, cook and eat a hog. Today, it is a festive occasion, but it once was a necessity. With no refrigeration, pork could not be kept long without spoilage. Since a hog was more meat than a family could consume, it was shared.

This event produces an array of delicacies such as cracklins (fried pork rinds) and boudin (rice and pork dressing steamed in sausage casings).

**Holy days**

More than 60 festivals a year take place in Acadia, many celebrating the bounty of the land. But though Cajuns love to celebrate life, they do not forget their bountiful God.

Local clergy, often including the bishop, take part in the festivities. They bless the fields and the crops and the shrimp boats which ply the warm Gulf of Mexico waters.

Cajuns also take special notice of Church holydays. Toussaints (All Saints Day), for example, is a major feastday and for weeks before November 1, families clean and repaint the above-ground burial vaults, necessary because of the high water table. Many parishes celebrate All Saints Day with processions and Masses in the cemeteries, sometimes in candlelight at dusk, to pray for the repose of the souls of their deceased.

Another unique celebration called Pie Day, takes place on Good Friday in Catahoula. Its origin, according to Tootie Guirard, a longtime resident of the Atchafalaya Basin, shows the loyalty to faith which is so true of the Cajuns.

Catahoula, where Extension helped St. Rita Parish build an addition to its parish hall in 1983, was settled by Acadian exiles who were mainly fishermen and fur trappers. Surrounded by water and

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**Mark Allemande** was two when his father began taking him to “fish, frog and turtle” on the Atchafalaya Swamp. “That was the basis of Cajun life. Then, during the 1960s and ’70s, people got jobs in the oil fields and began losing track of their traditions.” However, the recession is drawing Cajuns back to old-time values, says Allemande, who gives swamp tours. “I see people returning to houseboat life and to helping their fellow man. They are seeing that the simple life is the way to go.”

**People here have a lot of convictions and conscience**

— Mark Allemande
Many Cajuns live and die in the tight-knit communities in which they were born. “We understand each other,” says Wilmer Blanchard.

Faith in the family

Cajuns are strongly family-oriented and children often grow up, marry and build homes on or near family property.

“To be with your family and its history is very important within the Cajun culture,” says Sister Carmelita Latiolais (La-chus-lay), Director of Religious Education for the Diocese of Lafayette.

Sister Latiolais is also a French-speaking Cajun from the little town of Arnaudville, where Extension funding last year helped repair St. Catherine Church.
forest, these hardy people lived in isolation. Their only transportation was by pirogue, wooden boats carved from whole Cypress logs.

These early Cajuns could attend Mass only when a priest made the arduous journey through the swamp. Then the priest would baptize children, bless marriages which, in the absence of clergy, had been contracted by couples in the presence of “three good men,” hear confessions and pray for the dead.

But for the most part, these people lived and practiced their faith without the guidance of clergy. Still, they clung fiercely to their Catholic Faith and attempted, as best they could, to follow the rules and practices of the Church.

If sometimes they were unsure about Church customs, they improvised. According to legend, for instance, the people in Catahoula many years ago knew Good Friday was a day the Church had set aside as special but could not remember if it was to be a feastday or a fast day.

The people debated the issue at length, finally deciding on a compromise, fasting until noon and then feasting — on pies!

This culinary tradition endures to this day. The celebration of Good Friday begins with a outdoor Way of the Cross, with the fourteen stations stretched out over 11 miles.

Participants, who have been observing a strict penitential fast since midnight, start near the town of St. Martinville and end with the fourteenth station at St. Rita Church. They conclude the last station in the churchyard, attend Mass at the little church, then spend the afternoon feasting on homemade crawfish, custard and fruit pies.

**Joie de Vivre**

Such feasts and festivals have earned Cajuns the reputation of having *joie de vivre* (joy of life).

However, this is one of the most misunderstood qualities attributed
It is a gift from God.

The joie de vivre of the Cajuns is rooted in their faith and devotion to family and community, but also stems from their love of the land.

For years, Greg Guirard has been writing about and photographing the quiet and mysterious beauty of the Atchafalaya Basin and the Cajun people. Guirard has taught English in Belize, North Carolina, Virginia and Costa Rica.

However, in 1978, he returned to live in his childhood home next door to his 84-year-old mother. He makes his living from his books and photographs about life and nature around his home.

His most recent book, The Land of Dead Giants, is based on his relationship with his grandfather, who, like the old man in the book, sadly admits to his participation in the destruction of the ancient cypress forest which once covered the Atchafalaya Basin.

The basin, 17 by 100 miles long, is the largest of Louisiana’s swamps. For thousands of years the giant trees had stood in silent majesty in the swamp. Then, in the late 1800s, logging companies moved into the area and cleared the entire forest. Greg’s grandfather owned one of the sawmills which cut the huge timbers into lumber.

Today, only giant stumps stand in testimony to the grandeur that was. “It should have been a national park,” says Guirard sadly, “but nobody knew what was here. And to the loggers it was just a business. Nobody realized they were participating in total destruction.”

Perhaps in an attempt to make reparation for the sins of his ancestors, Greg spends his days documenting what is left of the unique Atchafalaya Basin. He also has planted more than 2,000 trees on the 100 acres of farmland he inherited from his grandfather.

Echoing the love many Cajuns feel toward this land, Guirard says, “there is no place on earth where I feel more at home than in the Great Atchafalaya Basin.

“There is an awe-inspiring, mysterious beauty in the swamps and bayous of Louisiana.”

Barbara Gutierrez is married to a French-speaking Cajun and is editor of Acadiana Catholic, the newspaper of the home mission Diocese of Lafayette, Louisiana. Box text by Marianna Bartholomew.