The Shrine of Saint John Berchmans at Grand Coteau is the only recognized place in the United States where a saint has appeared. Father Sam Hill Boy, who started Our Lady of the Oaks Retreat House at Grand Coteau, feels the little-known shrine can become nationally and internationally recognized. See story inside today's Journal. (Photo courtesy of The Morning Star)
The main building at the Academy of the Sacred Heart at Grand Coteau houses the Chapel and Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Arrow indicates approximate locations of the chapel, which was formerly the infirmary where Mary Wilson was cured of cancer after Saint John Berchmans appeared to her. (Photo courtesy of the Morning Star)

Miracle of Grand Coteau Revisited

by Pat Girelle

Did you know that the only recognized place in the United States where a saint has appeared is in the Acadian area? In other countries of the world pilgrimages and shrines are widely known. Thousands of people visit these shrines and pray there. Perhaps you have heard of some of them: Lourdes in France, Walsingham in England and Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico, to name but a few.

Father Dan Hill, S.J., believes that the shrine of St. John Berchmans at Grand Coteau, La., should be made into a national shrine and should be widely publicized so as to attract the visitors it is capable of attracting.

Father Ray, who started Our Lady of the Oaks Retreat House at Grand Coteau, gave the following account of the Miracle of Grand Coteau:

At about 17 years of age, a young woman by the name of Mary Wilson was sent to convent, La., to begin her training as a religious of the Sacred Heart but her health began to decline and she was sent to Grand Coteau, La., where the climate was considered better for her health. She still declined until it was discovered by Dr. Campbell of nearby Opelousas, that she had a malignant cancer. The illness extended from her mouth to her stomach. The doctor finally gave her up as incurable and admitted there was nothing he could do for her. At this sad time, the nun began to pray in honor of Blessed John Berchmans, begging her cure. On the eighth day of the novitiate, the nun, who was near death, the priest anointed her and all the nuns and students came in to see her and for what they feared was the last time. During the night a sister was stationed with her in her last moments. The next morning, the sister who had watched through the night, stepped out of her room for a few moments to see a nun in a neighboring room while the other nuns were at Mass. When the nun returned, Mary spoke to her and told her she was cured, hungry and wanted to get up and get dressed. Naturally, they were astonished, going from near death to complete health in a few moments. When the doctor arrived that day, Mary met him at the foot of the stairs. The doctor exclaimed, "Nothing I have done has cured you." Incidentally, the doctor was a non-Catholic. She was completely healed and Mary told how John Berchmans had appeared to her and cured her. He appeared to her later and promised to see her again in eight months. This happened on December 18, 1856 and in eight months he appeared as promised and she died, but not of illness, since she was in good health. Her account signed by herself, the nun, and the doctor, was accepted in Rome as one of the two first-class miracles for the canonization of St. John Berchmans.

Mother Antonia Plante, R.S.C.J., superior of the Academy of the Sacred Heart in 1960, visited the graves of Mary Wilson in St. John Berchmans' cemetery with founder John Olivier of Sunset. Mayor Olivier is a grandson of one of the two doctors attending Miss Wilson who certified her miraculous recovery in 1856 from what had been diagnosed as a fatal illness. Mayor Olivier's grandfather, Dr. Touissant Laurin, an Episcopalian, became a convert to Catholicism because of Miss Wilson's miraculous cure. The cure is credited to an appearance by Saint John Berchmans to Miss Wilson, who was a novice in the religious of the Sacred Heart. (Photo courtesy of the Morning Star)

From the beginning we see man advancing in material realms, from discovery of fire to the flights to the moon. But if man is such a highly intellectual being, why hasn't he improved himself within, instead of without? We still have wars, tullings, social unrest and political corruption. Are we that ignorant to build a highly sophisticated material world, but as brothers it? It's like building a great house for a family with the members of that family hating each other rather than living together. So why not try to improve within, since it doesn't hurt to try, and trying just a little is better than nothing. Take a ride to Grand Coteau and make Father Ray's dream a reality. You will find much beauty in Grand Coteau—the grand oaks and landscapes are something to see.