ST. FRANCISVILLE — The beauty of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Catholic Church's sanctuary lies in its simplicity, a historic preservation expert commented as parishioners gathered here last Sunday to celebrate the building's 100th anniversary.

"This is a really fine example of a country Catholic Church," said David Floyd of the state Department of Culture, Tourism and Recreation. Various sources attribute the sanctuary's design to Confederate Gen. P.T.G. Beauregard.

"One hundred years is a long time. I think it says a lot for the faith in the Holy Spirit of the people here," said the Rev. John Carville, administrator of the Diocese of Baton Rouge.

The St. Francisville church is not old in terms of the history of Christianity, "but to us, looking back, it seems old," Carville told the overflow crowd attending the 100th anniversary Mass of Celebration.

He said the significance of the event is best understood by looking back 2,000 years when Christ prepared his disciples to preach the Gospel and the spread of Christianity during the succeeding centuries.

Spanish Capuchins, following other early missionaries, established St. Francis Church on the Mississippi River's west bank in 1730.

Because the river's annual floods made burials impossible near the church, located in the civil parish of Pointe Coupee, its members established a cemetery on an east bank bluff, above the port town of Bayou Sara.

The village that grew up around the cemetery was called St. Francisville, and in 1871 the archbishop of New Orleans established a new parish for the Felicianas, which was largely populated by English settlers.

Carville said the spirit of the early monks who ministered to the Indians and early French settlers in Pointe Coupee is evident in today's congregation.

The percentage of Catholic families in the area is smaller than in most Catholic parishes, said Father Joel LaBauve, pastor from 1978 to 1980. Baton Rouge and the Mississippi River are the major cultural boundaries that define Catholic influence, he added.

"It's a small, but close-knit community," said Mary Deaton of Baton Rouge, whose mother, Hannah Wood, was married by a Methodist minister, but later converted to Catholicism. "I was ecumenical before the pope got there," she joked.

She remembers how Father Austin Carrico forged a

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Hannah Wood and Roy Allement look on.