St. Martinville Parish To Mark Anniversary

St. Martinville — (St. Martin Parish) — The 200th anniversary of the founding of St. Martinville church parish, oldest in the Diocese of Lafayette, will be noted with a two-day celebration here May 8-9.

The procession will begin at 6 p.m. Saturday from the church and proceed to Longfellow-Evangeline state park where high points of pageants presented in the past will be reviewed. This year’s tableau will feature the history of the Immaculate Conception with Adele Builard as the Blessed Virgin Mary. The annual May Day procession, a tradition in St. Martinville for many years, will be held Saturday, May 8 as part of the bicentennial observance. The procession is usually held on the first day of May.

The procession will be Monsignor Clay Bienvenu, Church Point, cathedral pastor, and Father Kenneth Bienvenu, Ville Deacons of honor at the Bishop’s throne. Deacon will be Father Emmett Bienvenu, and A. J. Vincent, vice chancellor, and Father Whitney LeBlanc, assistant pastor in St. Martinville. Seminarians of the parish will be minor ministers.

A family picnic in the park will be held after the Mass. All parishioners are invited to this climaxing the observance. Everyone is welcome to step out of the church and to view the procession. An informal program will be held after dinner with Secretary of State Wade O. Martin, a native of St. Martinville, as the keynote speaker.

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Church History

According to the history of the church in Louisiana, by Roger Baudier, the territory, which at present comprises the Diocese of Lafayette in Southwest Louisiana, was in old colonial days, like ancient Gaul, divided into four main areas — the Opelousas district, the Attakapas and the Calcasieu sections.

THE VAST NETWORK of bayous in that section provided excellent means of communication — in fact, the principal means for many decades, even up to the latter half of the past century, when the railroads moved their iron rails in many directions. But there were early roads, the Old Spanish Trail stretching across South Louisiana to the Spanish province of Tejas (or Texas of today); the Opelousas road that ran from La Nueva Erres up along the Teche, through the post of the Attakapas and to the Post of the Opelousas, then northward into Les Aveyettes, to Les Raquesis, and northwest to the Post of Natchitoches on the Red River.

The establishment of the Catholic church in that territory began in the eastern section and moved westward. Wherever the colonist settled, the cross and the priest accompanied them. French colonists were the first to settle in the Attakapas and Opelousas sections.

"Trading centers and military posts as protection against the marauding Indians were established at Opelousas and at the Attakapas on the banks of Bayou Teche. Then in 1695 the Acadian exiles began to enter these two districts and establish farms and homes.

"THESE TRAGIC victims of British barbarity brought with them not only their love of home and farming but also their staunch Catholic faith. The French settlers were Catholics all.

"Even before the coming of the Acadians, i.e., prior to 1765, the Capuchins had begun to make periodic visits among the settlers. In fact, as early as 1756 they had worked their way westward from St. Francis church at Pointe Coupee post on the Mississippi, or southward from 'Les Rapids,' of the Red River, coming from Natchitoches.

"Probably the first priest to minister to the settlers of both St. Martinville or Attakapas area, and the Opelousas district was Dom Pierre Didier, a French Benedictine, who was doing missionary work in the Louisiana colony. This was in 1765.

"Father Valentin, the French Capuchin who did notable missionary work all through Louisiana, but principally in the Natchitoches and Red River sections, and visited the area between 1766 and 1764. Another French Capuchin who ministered to the people of these two districts about this time was Father Irene.

"THE FIRST CHURCH in southwest Louisiana of which we have a record is St. Martin's at the Post of the Attakapas, St. Martinville of today. This was built in 1765 by Father Jean Francois de Civray, the French Capuchin, who was sent there for that purpose and to minister to the Acadian exiles.

"Regardless of what was then considered St. Martinville's great distance and the difficulty to reach it from the colonial capital, the bishops of the colony visited it regularly — Bishop Ignacio Penavier, the first Bishop of New Orleans; Bishop William Dabourg, his successor, and Bishop Joseph Rosati, auxiliary and administrator.

"Bishop Antoine Blanc, later first Archbishop of New Orleans, always visited the Attakapas regularly, conferred with the clergy of the area, preached to the people and gave Confirmation to large classes.

"THESE TWO CHURCHES, St. Martinville of the Attakapas post on the Bayou Teche, and St. Leander's (now St. Landry) at Opelousas post, established 1777, were the only churches between the Atchafalaya and Sabine rivers. They are the mother churches of Southwest Louisiana.

"Gradually other parishes were carved from these huge parochial territories and they in turn became mother parishes. First dismemberment from Opelousas was for Grand Coleau in 1819, and St. John Lafaye-ette, in 1821. First divisions of St. Martinville were St. Peter's at Nueva Erres in 1838, and Charenton, 1843.

"From these small beginnings has grown the Church in the Diocese of Lafayette, numbering 144 parishes in 1965.

St. Martin Church

Historic St. Martin church at St. Martinville is the oldest church parish in the diocese, established in 1765. Portions of the original edifice are incorporated in the present structure.