St. Martin de Tours is oldest parish in diocese

By Kathleen Toups  
ST. MARTINVILLE  
It is practically impossible to consider St. Martin of Tours Parish separate from its historical significance. It is the oldest church parish in the Diocese of Lafayette, established in 1756. From Post des Attakapas, as the little community was known in the 18th century, missionaries went throughout southwest Louisiana bringing the sacraments and the word of God to the scattered flock. The first pastor was from France, and coincidentally, the present pastor, Father Jean Marie Jammes, is also a native of France.

"I was delighted to get this pastorate," Father Jammes recalls. "Because of its history, the French and Spanish influences which make its background so rich and diverse, many consider it the capital of Acadiana."

The 4 o'clock Saturday anticipated Mass celebrated in French often attracts outside groups such as the recent visit of the French Second Armored Division which was on an American tour.

As the oldest church parish, the parish records also contain records of baptisms, weddings and funerals performed by the missionaries throughout the area. There are frequent requests for these records which were made in French and Latin up to the beginning of the 20th century. There are also some early records in Spanish, made during the period Louisiana belonged to Spain.

Although its past roots are strong, St. Martin Parish today is much involved with the present. Trinity Catholic Elementary School represents a combination of the former Mercy Elementary and Notre Dame Elementary schools, and both campuses are utilized.

Mercy High School is for girls only and some of the young men from St. Martin Parish attend Catholic High in New Iberia.

Father Jammes also expressed satisfaction with the backing the community gave the public high school football team which won the state championship Class AAA. He and Father Raymond Jones, S.V.D., pastor of Notre Dame Parish, posed for a news picture with a large roadside sign which emphasized this community spirit.

There has been an increase in attendance at the CCD classes for children attending the public school. Father Jammes says he has found home visits to the parents useful in encouraging this class attendance. Home visits to new parents have also increased the number of baptisms. Pride in the church parish is expressed by Mrs. Dalton Hebert, regent of Catholic Daughter Court St. Martin, and a member of the parish council. "I think we have a good parish," she says. "The people get along together and are willing to work very hard for the church."

"Father Jammes is bringing people back to the church who have been away," says the council, "and Father Keith Vincent is doing great things with young people," Landry advised.

Father Jammes came to Louisiana to work with the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL), liked the Lafayette diocese and decided to join it. He served in Leonville and Grand Prairie before coming to St. Martinville in 1980.

Recalling the legend of St. Martin, who as a Roman soldier shared his cloak with Christ who was disguised as a beggar, Father Jammes said he is optimistic that those who follow St. Martin are still willing to share the cloak.