They call her "the little Cajun saint," though she was never canonized and the Vatican has not been petitioned for her cause. But to the faithful who flock to her grave seeking intercessory prayers each year, Charlene Marie Richard is a saint.

The daughter of Mary Alice and Joseph Alvin Richard (pronounced Ree-shard), Charlene was born January 13, 1947, the second of 10 children. These hard-working people valued, foremost, family ties and their Catholic Faith.

French-speaking Cajuns, they lived in the small farming community of Church Point in south central Louisiana until moving five miles south to Branch when Charlene entered fourth grade.

Charlene made friends easily and got the nickname "Charlie Brown," though no one knows why. She played baseball and was captain the year her basketball team won a tournament.

Shortly after completing the sixth grade, however, Charlene was admitted to Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Lafayette. There the 12-year-old was diagnosed with acute lymphatic leukemia.

Sister Theresita Crowley, OSF, head of the pediatric ward, quickly grew close to the girl and introduced Father Joseph Brennan to Charlene’s family. Now pastor of St. Genevieve Church in Lafayette, Father Brennan was then a newly-ordained priest assigned to Our Lady of Fatima Parish and was also hospital chaplain.

Charlene’s parents had not yet told her that she was dying and asked the young priest if he would do it. "Charlene," Father Brennan told her, "some day soon a beautiful lady is going to come and take you away with her."

Father Brennan says he will never forget the twinkle in Charlene’s big brown eyes or her smile as she responded, "Father, when the Blessed Mother comes, I’ll tell her you said hello."
To reach isolated Catholics in many parts of Mission America, priests and sisters must travel hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles a week. They drive from mission to mission, often on rough country roads, to celebrate Mass and visit the sick and homebound.

But many of these dedicated priests and sisters are driving cars and vans so old and unreliable that they could break down any time!

- In the desert Diocese of Gallup, New Mexico, one priest and one sister coordinate religious education for 13 schools and 57 parishes in a 55,000-square-mile area. Their 15-year-old car has 250,000 miles on it! As you can imagine, the car frequently breaks down while they are on the road.

- Sister Margaret Maria Coon, SCN, 77, of remote Gloster, Mississippi, says her car already has 104,500 miles on it — and it is only four years old!

- St. Mary’s School in rural Lake Village, Arkansas, needs a van to transport children whose parents cannot bring them to school.

Home missionaries should not have to risk having their car die on a deserted stretch of highway, miles from a phone booth or house. Think what could happen if an elderly sister’s car broke down on a snowy mountain pass or if a van full of children were stranded as night fell.

Without adequate transportation, home mission priests and sisters cannot possibly reach scattered Catholics or carry on the vital work of keeping the Faith alive.

Won’t you become a traveling companion to a home missionary? Help provide a safe and dependable car or van by enclosing a gift of $15, $25, or $100 in your magazine envelope.

Your prayers and financial support will help keep our home missionaries safe on the road.
There was nothing extraordinary about the little girl besides her simplicity and faith, Father Brennan recalls. "I had daily conversations with her and I talked to her about offering up her suffering. She was most eager to help in any way she could, and each day she would greet me with, 'Okay, Father, who am I to suffer for today?'

Charlene died at 7:20 p.m. on August 11, 1959, about two weeks after meeting Father Brennan. The priest and Sister Theresita told others of her remarkable faith, and word began to spread.

"Charlene suffered a great deal," said Sister in 1975. "But I remember her as a cheerful patient. She never complained. "I learned a lot from Charlene, especially from her willingness to accept everything. Her life was full in a short span."

In the years following the child's death, Sister Theresita often returned to Room 411 — Charlene's room — to pray "for sick patients, sick babies, recruits for the Franciscan Sisters and especially for young people."

Why did she return to that room? "Perhaps because it was the last dwelling place of a saint," Sister Theresita said.

### Thousands seek her help

Through the years, more and more Catholics have learned of the faith of the little Cajun girl and have sought her prayers for help. Thousands of people visit her grave each year, leaving on her tomb flowers, Rosaries, candles, photographs and notes with petitions and prayers. The Diocese of Lafayette's archives hold hundreds of letters testifying to petitions allegedly granted through Charlene's intercession.

On August 11, 1989, Most Reverend Harry J. Flynn, Bishop of the home mission Diocese of Lafayette, celebrated Mass at St. Edward Church in Richard to commemorate the 30th anniversary of Charlene's death. Because the little country church holds fewer than 300 people, Mass was held outdoors. A total of 5,000 came!

Among the worshippers was Nicole Price, a 5-year-old from Morgan City, Louisiana, who came with her parents and grandparents. The Prices believe Nicole has been cured of a rare cancer through Charlene's intercession.

Nicole was diagnosed with neuroblastoma in 1987. Doctors removed part of a cancerous mass in her stomach, and Nicole returned home to continue chemotherapy. One day, Mrs. Price received a phone call from Nicole's babysitter who said the girl had been begging to talk to a "Charlene."

"None of us had ever heard of Charlene Richard," Mrs. Price said, "and there was no one in our family by that name. When Nicole continued asking for Charlene, we just thought she was talking about an imaginary friend."

But a week or so later, a woman called to say she had been praying for Nicole and had visited Charlene Richard's grave to ask for her intercession.

When Nicole's mother heard the story, her mouth dropped open. "That's who Nicole was asking for," she said.

The family asked the child, "Where is Charlene?"

"In Heaven with Baby Jesus," Nicole answered.

"Did she talk with you?"

"Uh huh."

"What did she tell you?"

"She told me to be good," the little girl answered.

Mrs. Price was referred to Father Floyd Calais, pastor of Holy Cross Church in Lafayette.
REMEMBERED FOR ETERNITY

Please join our home missionaries in praying for those listed below who have been remembered through Extension Memorial Gifts.

Rev. Anthony Laberge
Edward Bull
Melissa Kirshian & John Rainer
Edward J. Bayens
Joyce Pepper Sneed
Cecil John Dymond
Herman A. Franco, Jr.
Marie H. Carter
Mark W. Kelly
Irma M. Delsman
Albert Placky
J. William Davidson
Charles Petschelt
Ethel Urell
Genevieve Ganshirt
Stephanie Brennan
George P. Herling
Harold W. Ericson
Tony Till
In honor of Lucille Till
John Jachim
George Anderson
In honor of Luann Martin
Martha R. Jones
Tony Cimealrio
Frank Lobodzinski
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Casper & Elizabeth Schwalen
George Vuger
Margaret “Margie” Mahan
Mr. & Mrs. P. Sullivan
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Herman Stanford
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In honor of Mr. & Mrs.
Richard Mueninghoff
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Richard H. Wakulat Sr.
Joseph S. Patton
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Herman J. Monroe
Adolph Kapter
In honor of Edith Steele
Mary, William & John
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The Kadziewicz Family
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Murphy
Elizabeth Boucher
In honor of Sister Cykas, O.P.
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Charles Matthews
Lewis Malogne
In honor of Mary “Tootsie”
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If you wish you honor a loved one through an Extension Memorial Gift, please write to
The Catholic Church Extension Society, 35 E. Wacker Drive, Rm. 400M. Chicago, IL 60601-2105.

20 EXTENSION
Six-year-old Nicole Price with her grandfather Merlin Price at the Mass commemorating the 32nd anniversary of Charlene’s death.

Photo by Barbara Gutierrez

and a devotee of Charlene. Father Calais suggested they take Nicole to Charlene’s grave.

On Easter Sunday, 1988, he met the family and led them to Richard. When they arrived at the cemetery, they pointed to a picture of Charlene which is permanently displayed on the marble tomb.

“Who is that?” they asked Nicole. “That’s Charlene,” the little girl answered.

“I can’t say that Charlene appeared to Nicole, or that Nicole ever saw her,” said Charlene’s mother. “But from the first night we heard about Charlene, we began praying to her.”

Doctors said that if Nicole remained free of cancer for five years, she could be declared in full remission. But another tumor was found on her abdomen last October. She was rushed to the hospital. Family and friends waited anxiously, praying.

The doctor came out at one point to say that he had sent a piece of the tumor to the lab and was waiting for the diagnosis before proceeding, recalled Mrs. Price. He also said he felt certain that the lab tests would confirm a malignancy.

They did, and half of Nicole’s spleen was removed. Afterwards, the surgeon explained that while the full lab report would not be ready for five days, Nicole’s cancer had apparently returned.

“Everyone in the family was praying for Nicole, and literally hundreds of other people were, too,” Mrs. Price recalls. “Someone called Father Calais, who went to Charlene’s grave over the weekend and asked her to intercede for Nicole. We were literally bombarding Heaven with petitions on Nicole’s behalf.”

Finally, the lab results were ready: the tumor was benign; there was no sign of cancer!

“We believe that God answered our prayers,” says Mrs. Price. “And we have no doubt whatsoever that Charlene’s prayers played a part in all of this...for some reason we may never know, Charlene continues to be part of Nicole’s life, and we are eternally grateful for that.”

Friends of Charlene

Nicole’s story is only one among many which witness to Charlene’s intercession. In 1990, in response to appeals by devotees of Charlene, Bishop Flynn approved the formation of a private Friends of Charlene Association and appointed Monsignor A.O. Sigur, Vicar General of the diocese, as liaison for all matters pertaining to Charlene.

At this point, an official investigation into the phenomena seems unlikely. The wheels of the Church turn slowly, especially in proclaiming saints.

Despite lack of official sanction, however, the faithful continue praying to “the little Cajun saint,” whose simplicity of faith has captured their hearts.

Perhaps Father Brennan best sums it up: “Charlene was a faith-filled little girl. I see her as a witness for people of all ages to the power of resignation and acceptance of God’s will. She wasn’t different in any way except that when the crisis came in her life — and it came very early — she accepted it with faith and trust and love.”

Barbara Gutierrez has also written Charlene, a biography of Charlene Richard. The book is available for $10.95 (including postage and handling) from: CHARLENE, 111 Bocage Circle, Lafayette, LA 70503.

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Elise Picard

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Pilgrims come from around the world to visit Charlene’s grave.

Photo by P.C. Piazza

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JULY 1992