

History of Mary, Mother of Jesus Church Woodworth, Louisiana

Catholic missionary efforts date to 1682 in north Louisiana by a Franciscan who was chaplain to the LaSalle expedition down the Mississippi. He ministered to the aboriginal peoples in the Tensas area. Another effort was made from Natchez, Mississippi (Roger Baudier, Sr., *The Catholic Church in North Louisiana*, compiled for publication in commemoration of the Centennial of the Diocese of Alexandria, May 20-21, 1953; hereinafter: *100th Anniversary*, p. 16).

Natchitoches was founded as a French settlement in 1714. In response, by 1716, the Spanish claimed that their province of Tejas' eastern border was the Mississippi and established its capital at Los Adayes, just west of Natchitoches. The first recorded Mass was said in the woods around Natchitoches in 1716 by Fray Antonio Margil de Jesus, o.f.m; he later was declared "venerable" but has not progressed further toward sainthood. Although Spanish, he ministered to the French and aboriginal people as well. The French lacked priests to serve them until 1728 when a Capuchin arrived in Natchitoches and established St. Francis of Assisi Church there. Subsequently around 1760, the French built a chapel, St. Louis des Appalages, near Poste du Rapides (Pineville), but the Spanish friars also visited the Rapides area.

Even after Spain took over the Louisiana territory in 1769, the French Capuchins remained at least sporadically serving in Natchitoches. The Spanish Franciscans served when the French were absent. The French Revolution caused the removal of one French pastor from Natchitoches in 1795. In that same year, there is evidence of a Spanish missionary working among the aboriginal people in the Rapides areas from the Post of Dionisio.

In 1800, France secretly obtained the Louisiana territory from Spain. In May of 1802, William Miller, in partnership with Alexander Fulton, purchased "46,800 arpents" or 39,604 acres from the Pascagoula, Choctaw and Biloxi aboriginal peoples "...all of the land on both sides of Bayou Boeuf from the mouth of Bayou Clair to a point some distance below the present town of Lecompte" (George M. G. Stafford, "Early Rapides History," an undated, typewritten manuscript, p. 1). This area would generally encompass that portion of south Rapides Parish that is served today by St. Martin Church, Lecompte and Mary, Mother of Jesus Church, Woodworth. This period was known as a real estate boom-time around Rapides Parish when Alexander

Fulton made many land deals. It was at this time, too, that Louisiana was purchased by the U.S. from France on April 30, 1803, arguably the best land acquisition of all time.

Not until 1817 was a church built in Alexandria, but this was a rocky time for the faith in the entire area. It was built by Father Francisco Maynes who visited the area from 1813-1822; he came from Natchitoches. But, by 1822, there was only one priest in north Louisiana. A priest from Opelousas also visited occasionally. In general, during the first quarter of the nineteenth century as Bishop Dubourg wrote in a baptismal register during a visit to the area, "I saw with sorrow the decadence of everything pertaining to religion..." Following his visit, more priests were sent and his successor, Bishop Rosati, did likewise in 1828 (*100th Anniversary*, pp. 15-16, 21). Then, three priests occasionally made the journey from Natchitoches to minister at the Alexandria chapel from 1828 to 1853. They were Father Jean Baptiste Blanc, 1828-1834; Father Edmond d'Hauwe, a Belgian, 1834-1837; and probably Father Victor Jamey from 1838-1839 (*100th Anniversary*, p. 21).

In just 28 years, from 1825 to 1853, albeit with only five priests, the Diocese of Natchitoches was erected. The area progressed from a mission territory to a missionary diocese and remains one today.

During Louisiana's French period, the present diocese was part of the Diocese of Quebec. Under the Spanish it was part of the Diocese of Santiago de Cuba, then of the Diocese of San Cristobal de la Habana, Cuba. On April 25, 1793, it became part of the Diocese of Louisiana and the Floridas that, in 1850, became the Archdiocese of New Orleans. The Diocese of Natchitoches was founded July 29, 1853, and transferred to Alexandria on August 6, 1910 (*100th Anniversary*, p. 13).

Eventually Alexandria had its first resident pastor, "...Rev. Robert Duggan — April, 1840 to October, 1843, and it was he who began construction of a new parish church. But the work was cut short by his untimely death on October 2, 1843". Once again there was no resident pastor. "Then for six years Father Hector Figari, the Lazarist [order priest], came from Natchitoches to serve the Catholics of Alexandria on periodic visits. In 1849, Father Ivers served Alexandria for a short time. Then came Rev. Joseph P. Bellier, former officer in the French army, an energetic,

aggressive man. His pastorate extended from 1849 to 1853, but he left, then returned.

"In 1834, a colony of Belgians settled on Spring Creek [near present-day Forest Hill] and despite lack of church and priest maintained the Faith by prayer. Father Duggan, while pastor of Alexandria [1840-1843], visited the Indian villages and the farm colonies that were springing up. In those early visits at Spring Creek, Mass was offered in the homes of Severan Rougeau and Michael Paul, two French settlers, when Father Duggan came on horseback at intervals.

"While Father Figari served Alexandria, 1844 to 1848, a chapel was built on Spring Creek. The carpenter was W. Verheyden, a nearby farmer. All lumber used for the church altar and pews was sawed at a nearby water-powered sawmill and planed by hand. The statues installed were those that the Belgian colonists had brought from Europe, including the life-size statue of Our Lady. All of these and the first altar-stone are now at St. Peter's Church at Elmer, La., successor of the pioneer chapel of Spring Creek. Until the 1890's, this church was served from Alexandria by priests who came at first on horseback, by horse and buggy or wagon, and stayed at the home of Dan Andries. From the latter's family came Very Rev. Andrew Andries, second Vicar-General of the Diocese of Natchitoches, and rector of the Natchitoches Cathedral. Among other settlers of the vicinity were the Vandegaers, who gave the Church. Rt. Rev. Msgr. John Vandegaer" (*100th Anniversary*, pp. 21-22).

The foregoing passage is important not only for the facts that it contains but the general pattern that can be extrapolated from it. In each area where a church was eventually built, visits by a priest would have been on a somewhat regular basis. He would have administered the sacraments and celebrated Mass in the homes of the area. As the community grew and the means became available, a church would have been constructed. The journey from one place to the next would have been by the means available. Initially that would have been by horseback on the trails and by boat on the navigable waterways. Along the way, everyone would have been visited as meals and lodging were sought.

For instance, when Father Duggan traveled to Spring Creek, he would have done so most likely by horseback and would have followed a path that led along Bayou Boeuf through an aboriginal village such as the one located east of present-day Woodworth. This same path would have taken him along the plantations, one of which eventually was the first location for St. Martin Church now located in Lecompte. He would have been

able to turn west after having avoided the low wetlands in the southwest of Alexandria.

The Civil War, as well as the period of debate preceding it and the Reconstruction which followed it, presented many difficulties for the Church. The moral dilemmas were overwhelming. Hunger on the personal level and institutional survival were also great challenges through the 1870's.

On February 28, 1878, Mrs. Sophie Lamoth Martin donated an acre of land to build the first church; and on July 27, 1879, Bishop Francis Xavier Leray dedicated it. The church was actually completed in 1881. This location was part of Kanomie Plantation and situated along Bayou Boeuf, a navigable waterway at the time, and Chickamaw Road that follows it. The plantation is also called Martin's Sugar Bend Plantation at Chickamaw (N.B. Carl Laurent, *From this Valley: A History of Alexandria, Pineville, and Rapides, Louisiana*, Alexandria: X-Press, 2004, p. 263). It was situated next to one owned by Wm. C.C.C. Martin.

Roger Baudier in his famous book, *The Catholic Church in Louisiana* (New Orleans: LA Library Assn. Reprint, 1972) wrote: "One of the oldest missions of the Diocese of Alexandria [Natchitoches] was St. Martin's at Lecompte. On several occasions it was privileged to have a resident pastor, but it reverted to the status of a mission station. The church was built by Fr. Menard when he was an assistant at St. Francis Xavier in Alexandria. The first church was on the banks of Bayou Boeuf, halfway between Lecompte and Woodworth. In 1899, because of the growing importance of Lecompte, the church was moved to that town" (Baudier, p. 553).

Once St. Martin Church was moved to Lecompte in 1889, the question arises concerning ministry to the people of the Woodworth area. Nothing is known.

The 1890's through the 1920's were known as the "golden age of lumbering" in the Woodworth and surrounding areas. The Long-Bell Lumber Company operated the Rapides Lumber Company at Woodworth (Sue Eakin, *Rapides Parish History*, Historical Assn. of Central LA, 1976, p. 56-57).

Shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, a church was built in Woodworth itself. "In July, 1908 ... Bishop Van de Ven ... blessed a chapel at Woodworth" (Baudier, p. 503). It would seem that this is St. Joseph Church located where Mary, Mother of Jesus Church stands today. The chapel would have been located on the "R.O. Butler Place on Bayou Clear," owned at the time by Edward and Richard Butler. The two acres on

which it was located were then inherited by Henry Butler on November 19, 1908. Subsequently, on June 15, 1911, it was sold to Bishop Van de Ven at the going rate for property in the area of \$5.00 per acre. Eventually, it was discovered that the title was not clear, and on March 7, 1981, there was an Act of Donation by Carl and Ruth S. Butler and Nettie Butler Dore and Chester M. Dore to settle the matter.

For the first time in 1913 *Catholic Directory*, "Woodworth, Rapides Co., St. Joseph's" is listed as a mission of "Alexandria, Parish of Rapides, St. Francis Xavier's Cathedral." Father Becker (assistant from 1919-1921) used to ride out on his motorcycle to St. Joseph. The last listing appears in the 1927 book. Of their nature, these annual publications would have lagged behind reality.

Some Catholics came to the area because of the sawmill. The Alvah Joseph Moore family was one of them. Sadly, the Ku Klux Klan was also active and would have clashed with the Catholics had it not been for the interventions of the sawmill management (from the recollections of Elmer V. "Tiny" Moore, the son of Mr. and Mrs. A.J. Moore).

Until 1926, Woodworth was a thriving sawmill town. That ended when the timber had all been clear-cut and nothing was left to harvest. "The woods were stripped of trees and there was no more work to be had ... The mill relocated to Bessmae, TX" (Laurent, p. 11). The "cut-over was not restored until the CCC program of the Depression years" (Eakin, p. 57). With the close of the sawmill, apparently the church building was relocated to Reddell, LA; some Catholic families moved away as well.

St. Frances Cabrini Church was established in southwest Alexandria in 1947. Its territory was taken from the Cathedral. Sadly, it is learned in a letter dated February 25, 1953, from Father Gerard J. Ducote, the second pastor of Cabrini, to Bishop Charles P. Greco: "I understand from Mr. and Mrs. A.J. Moore that there have been no Catholic services in Woodworth since about 1927, the year in which they left the community to reside in Alexandria, and that the reason why so many of these people [approximately 30 referenced in the letter by name or attribution] have not continued active affiliation with the Church was because of resentment that their Church had been dismantled and moved away — a measure of protest over the action."

On a positive note, however, of the 51 total referenced in the letter, 21 were said "to attend Mass regularly either at St. Martin's Church, Lecompte, or at St.

Frances Cabrini Church, Alexandria". Mr. and Mrs. Percy Dufour had personally contacted "the Catholics and those who were merely baptized. They testify that all were interested and even those who were baptized and poorly instructed and who subsequently defected promised co-operation and attendance in the Catholic Church." Of the 51, it was felt "that at least three-fourths would be in attendance for regular services" — an increase from 21 to 38 souls present in church. Certainly, the prospect of nearly doubling participation energized both Msgr. Ducote and Bishop Greco.

On property located one lot from the junction of US 165 with Robinson Bridge Road, a used military building from nearby Camp Claiborne was moved in place later in 1953. St. Catherine Church as a mission of Cabrini was established. The land was actually purchased later from John Thiels on April 28, 1955, for \$300. (It would be sold in 1969 for \$3,500 to the Village of Woodworth after Mary, Mother of Jesus Church was built on the original property.)

In 1962, with the strong backing of Msgr. Ducote and under the able leadership of Father Joseph LeSage Tisch, plans were made to build a new church at the location of St. Joseph Church, the first church in Woodworth. Fr. Tisch estimated cost of the new church as \$25,000. "Our present Church which accommodates sixty persons is completely inadequate for the needs not only of resident Catholics but of many people who have summer homes in the surrounding area." The Catholic Church Extension Society of America made two gifts. Additional funds came from the people in Woodworth, and an appeal to all Catholics who had summer homes in Castor Plunge and surrounding areas was made. At the time, Castor Plunge was a swimming and recreation area with many camps. Indian Creek had not yet developed as it is today.

Everyone supported the effort to build the new church in any way they could. Mrs. Nettie Wise tells how it was mistakenly recorded that she and her husband had pledged \$500, an amount they could ill afford. When they determined to pay this pledge, "it was the easiest money we ever made. From then on we knew how to give money to the Church...". A parishioner and talented cabinetmaker, Mr. Felix Johnson, built much of the furnishings. There are many such instances of exceptional generosity. Notably, so much support for the new construction was given by the members of First Baptist Church in Forest Hill that a fish-fry was held to recognize their great contribution. In 1963, the new church was completed. The name was changed to Mary, Mother of Jesus Church.

On Monday, November 10, 1969, Mary, Mother of Jesus Church became a mission of St. Martin Church in Lecompte with Father Peter Norek as Pastor. After the tragic death of Laurie Ogaard in 1975, her mother, Valorie Clayton, donated the church bell; Mr. and Mrs. Derwood Delaney gave a special French-made electric motor, and the bell tower was funded by other donations.

Through the generosity of Ed and Valorie Clayton, additional property was obtained on July 14, 1976, on which a hall was later constructed. It was begun under the administration of Father Cumella and completed under Father Hasieber in 1987. The new structure was dedicated as "Cumella Hall" in honor of Father Anthony Cumella.

Woodworth and its Catholic community have continued to grow over the years of the 20th century and into the 21st century. On May 13, 2008, the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima, just two months short of the 100th anniversary of the establishment by Bishop Van de Ven of the first chapel in Woodworth, and after 38+ years as a mission congregation under St. Martin's Church in Lecompte, Mary, Mother of Jesus was established as a diocesan parish by Bishop Ronald P. Herzog. The church thus became the 49th parish of the diocese. In his action, the Bishop appointed the Rev. Father John D. Pardue as first pastor of the parish. In celebration of this achievement, the first Mass of the parish was held on the evening of May 13, followed by a reception and supper in Cumella Hall. Mary, Mother of Jesus is the first parish established in the diocese since 1988.

There have been many efforts to enhance the church and hall with additions and improvements over the years. Unfortunately, a history such as this can only capture the circumstances of place and buildings for the most part. The Church, however, is really built of living members whose lives have been touched and whose destinies have been formed by the Catholic community of friends and relatives, the Word preached, taught and proclaimed, and the sacraments of Christ administered. That history remains silent except that it is relived by each and all who are now part of the communion of saints, the body of Christ.

Since 1969, the following priests have been privileged to serve the people of Mary, Mother of Jesus Church:

1969-1982	Rev. Peter T. Norek
1982-1983	Rev. Michael Bodnar, S.V.D.
1983-1987	Rev. Anthony N. Cumella
1987-1992	Rev. Joseph S. Hasieber
1992-1993	Rev. Msgr. Patrick Murphy
1993-1997	Rev. Terry Allen
1997-2002	Rev. David Braquet
2002-2007	Rev. Bruce Miller, J.C.L.
2007-	Rev. John Pardue

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