

1999-1

THE MARIANITES IN LOUISIANA
ONE HUNDRED FIFTY YEARS IN TWENTY FIVE MINUTES

HOLY CROSS HISTORY CONFERENCE

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

JUNE, 1999

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ONE HUNDRED FIFTY YEARS IN TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES
or
THE MARIANITES IN LOUISIANA

It is not an easy task to gather information that covers a span of 150 plus years, much less to write the story of that epoch. Such a story must hold the attention of the audience, and at the same time impart interesting facts and data to add to the knowledge of a group that for the last fifteen years has been inundated with similar facts. As members of the Holy Cross History Conference we have had such experiences and I trust that this paper will refresh memories and possibly present something interesting and which you've not heard before.

Holy Cross in no matter what part of the United States springs from the same roots, has the same founders, the same goals and objectives, and has had the same struggles in its century and a half of existence. When preparing the 1999 Conference Brother Walter and I decided that to worthily celebrate the anniversary of our coming to New Orleans, we should solicit papers that reflect the achievements of those years, papers that treat as effectively as possible the attainment of goals and objectives, while recognizing the efforts of the "Laborers in the Field". During those fifteen decades our co-workers have tried to follow the "signs of the times" as indicated by the Church, the Congregation and the World, always, with Father Moreau's striking characteristic of trust in Divine Providence.

Five Brothers of Holy Cross and three Marianites arrived in the Crescent City and took charge of Saint Mary's Boys Asylum on May 1, 1849. Undoubtedly Father Sorin selected the most promising of his meager personnel of Brothers to answer the call of Bishop Antoine Blanc to care for the boys in St. Mary's Orphan Asylum. The Marianites joined them from Louisville, Kentucky where, two years before, they had come to St. Mary's College to render domestic service. Father Sorin had accepted the college from the Jesuits in 1847 and sent Holy Cross Brothers and Father Saunier along with the sisters. This arrangement lasted only one year when the priest and brothers returned to Notre Dame and Father Sorin promised to recall the sisters at the end of the second year. This recall was a continuation of their southward journey which brought them to New Orleans.

St. Mary's Orphanage founded by Father Adam Kindelon, who died in 1835, was subsequently administered by a lay board for 14 years. Either because of a lack of business acumen or of necessary vigilance on the part of the administration, on arrival the Holy Cross pioneers found a miserable institution. Miserable in more than one way -- business matters were chaotic, the institution was

scarcely able to be called a home, material comforts were wanting, food was more than scarce, in general, creature comforts, even the most essential, were not to be had. The religious sisters and brothers were unmindful of what would have made their own lives more comfortable when they realized that the living conditions of the boys were anything but home-like, much less desirable .

Despite the fact that for various reasons amicable conditions did not exist among the religious themselves, their spirit of self-sacrifice sustained them in their struggles to make a home for the orphans who were victims of the yellow fever and cholera epidemics. The parents of these unfortunate children had been carried off by these diseases which ravaged the city annually.

The Brothers of Holy Cross under the fatherly guidance of their intrepid Brother Vincent, were prepared to care for the intellectual formation of the boys, elementary though that education was. The sisters took over the laundry, the house cleaning and the barn yard duties. There was a brother cook who with the assistance of Brother Vincent went out every morning to beg left overs from the hotels and with an admirable ingenuity made an almost palatable meal from his gleanings. The Brothers were responsible for the supervision of the dormitories and the assistant-cook, actually the scullery maid, was a sister.

One of the difficulties which arose among the religious was the absence of a Holy Cross Priest in this Holy Cross Community, with the result that the Community had to attend services at St. Louis Cathedral. Given the distance from the Orphanage to the Cathedral, from Mazant Street to Jackson Square, one wonders how they made the trip, or how often they were able to assist at religious services. The necessity of long walks to church proved to be a blessing in disguise. One day while going to confession at the Cathedral, Sister Mary of Calvary was stopped by a young mother and given a substantial sum, some say \$30 some say 50, for her orphans. This act of charity added greatly to the morale of the community and proved to be one of many such donations made by inhabitants of the city once the wise administration of the Brothers and the motherly care of the Marianites became known. Sister Mary of the Five Wounds wrote to Father Sorin asking for additional help. Thus it became evident that Holy Cross had not only been planted in the south, but that it was beginning to enjoy a period of growth.

Seeing the need for ministering to young girls in the Third District of New Orleans Sister Mary of Calvary solicited and received from the Archbishop and from her religious superiors permission to open an industrial school for young women who would be trained in sewing, their principal work being that of making coarse clothing for negro slaves. At the end of the six months trial the books showed a meager profit of two dollars, enough, to prove that the project could support itself and thus survive. The Industrial School's goal was to make the young women self

supporting once they left the institution. Their moral and intellectual formation went along with their professional training.

Agriculture being one of the chief occupations of the locality the Brothers added farming to classroom teaching. Thus classroom education by Holy Cross in New Orleans found its practical application at St. Isadore farm for the boys and at Immaculate Conception Industrial school for the girls.

The Act of Incorporation signed in 1857 was amended in 1860 under Act 132 of the State of Louisiana designating the Congregation as a literary, scientific and charitable organization. The Academy of the Holy Angels, founded in response to a request from families in the Third District, was the first institution to profit of this act. The Academy, the first permanent foundation of the Marianites in Louisiana will be treated at length in a subsequent presentation. Here we move on to the expansion of the ministry of education by the Marianites in other parts of south Louisiana.

Father Gilbert Raymond, former director of St. Mary's College in Baltimore and later Vicar General of the New Orleans Diocese, had befriended and served the Holy Cross community in the absence of a Holy Cross priest. His appreciation of the Marianites, as well as their reputation (gained from the successful operation of the new Academy of the Holy Angels in New Orleans) moved him to ask for their services when he proposed to build a school in Opelousas, a settlement located on Bayou Bellevue in St. Landry parish. The existing building which was to be used as a boarding school was too small and Father Raymond promised to make the necessary alterations as far as resources permitted. Apparently he quickly made some necessary changes because in September of 1856 five sisters were assigned to the mission and a sixth joined them a month later. The reputation of the sisters as educators soon spread, but the chronicles relate and with no further explanation that "Crosses and discouragements incidental to all movements undertaken for God's honor and glory were not wanting to the sisters who formed the first faculty of the Immaculate Conception Academy". **The sisters were forced to leave their mission during the Civil War and returned only in 1879 after an unsuccessful attempt of the Ursulines of Ohio to conduct the Academy.** According to a prospectus of the reconstruction period "the Academy, a boarding and day school, offered a course of instruction extensive, solid, varied, useful and practical, embracing English and French in all branches. Parents were assured that through religious instruction the moral character of the pupils was formed at the same time that their health and well being received the maternal attention of the Marianites.

Concurrent with the opening of the school in Opelousas the Marianites answered the call of Reverend Father Charles Chambost to undertake educational work in Plaquemine. The sisters lived in a small rented house which also served as the school. The zealous

pastor had already erected a three story college for boys, which unfortunately was destroyed by fire soon after the arrival of the sisters. This disaster was too great for the advanced years and waning strength of the pastor, who resigned and returned to his native France. The sisters and the parishioners were left without a spiritual leader but, encouraged by their major superiors, the Marianites did not abandon the mission. The Civil War threatened the ministry of the sisters and they were recalled to the provincial house in New Orleans from whence they returned to Plaquemine in 1865. **Many of the ideals promoted by educators today as "new " were embodied in plans outlined, taught and emphasized in the prospectus of 1866 which was but the beginning of St. Basil Academy's educational system.**

South and southwest Louisiana welcomed the Marianites along the Mississippi, into the land of Acadia, the Prairie Lands, by the banks of Evangeline's Bayou Teche, and along the Old Spanish Trail. Houma in the civil parish of Terrebonne is today an hour's trip by auto, but when the Marianites answered the call to this mission in 1870 they traveled from eight o'clock in the morning until three o'clock in the afternoon to reach their destination. Part of the trip was made by train and part by hackney coach which uncomfortably accommodated the four sisters and the Provincial who accompanied them for the opening of their new home and school. The Houma College, formerly a protestant college of two stories presented an imposing picture; however the perfectly executed masonry concealed all evidence of the wreckage within. Its main and only recommendation was that during its existence it had withstood hurricanes and tornados. It took brave and heroic souls to face the task that lay ahead. But these were brave and heroic Marianites and they faced the challenge. **They had the blessed Sacrament in their home, the support of the Archbishop, and of the Pastor who displayed the highest interest and generosity toward them. They also had the hearty cooperation of the people of the town. The success of the classes of these first years was based on the generous efforts of the sisters to inculcate the elements of religious and secular education.** The first graduate in 1879 was examined by the Mother Provincial and three other sisters who all attested to the depth and extent of the scholastic formation the young lady had received.

The building of the parochial school system in the United States was a gigantic task. This was specifically true in the city of New Orleans where the public school system was making great progress, thanks to the John McDonogh legacy which supported a number of elementary educational institutions throughout the city. Innumerable sacrifices were required of the religious called to staff parish schools; like other religious congregations the Marianites, relying on their own resources, established and maintained several parochial schools at their own expense.

In 1869 the Marianites responded to a request to open an Academy in

St. Vincent de Paul Parish, the third oldest parish in New Orleans. It was within a quarter of a mile from the Academy of Holy Angels. This school flourished as the chronicles attest and the Marianites did much to advance the practice of their faith among the adults as well as among the pupils. However, the Marianites incurred the disfavor of the pastor who wished that the entire student body participate in the exhibition of the school year. This was in opposition to the regulations approved by the General Council that only the superior students participate in the closing exercises. The Result was the withdrawal of the sisters from the school in 1880.

In 1870, when Sts. Peter and Paul Parochial School was established in New Orleans, Louisiana's credit was practically wiped out in European money markets. The whole nation was on the brink of the **Depression of the Seventies**, and public schools which had sprung up were peopled principally by paupers. Carpetbag schools were for mixed races, hence were unpopular. Families who could afford to do so sent their offspring to private or church schools. It was at this time that the newly appointed pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul School "solicited the services of the Sisters Marianites of Holy Cross. The superiors after due deliberation thought it proper to accept. The pastor fully acceded to the terms proposed, namely that the sisters should have the entire revenue of the school and that a dwelling should be furnished them free of rent". The increase within the first three months of operation from one hundred seventy pupils to two hundred and fifty required that two sisters be added to the original number of three before the end of the scholastic year. This period of prosperity for the school did not last very long and the sisters found themselves burdened with the upkeep of both school and convent with very insufficient income. Here, as in several other educational institutions, the Marianites were forced to rely on their own resources in maintaining the school. Annually the examinations of the pupils took place with favorable results, and at the end of the sisters' first five years at Sts. Peter and Paul school the chronicles relate that the Pastor who examined the pupils expressed great satisfaction at the progress they had made.

It will be recalled that the Marianites had received a number of Irish vocations since coming to America. This fact attracted the attention of the pastor of St. Patrick's Church in uptown New Orleans. The Parish of St. Patrick had been established at the request of English speaking Catholics who wished to have what they considered their Mother Church, just as the St. Louis Cathedral in the French Quarter served the French inhabitants. On the 27th of August, 1892 the Archbishop blessed the Convent, that is the two separate schools for boys and girls to which the Marianites had been invited as teachers. The students were faithful to their studies and the sisters had the consolation of seeing progress made in both secular and religious studies. Records show that the Pastor visited the school very often, that he was particularly interested in the progress of the pupils and was always mindful of the needs

of the Sisters. Throughout the chronicles of this mission there is mention of serious sickness, possibly in reference to the epidemics of yellow fever and cholera which were frequent during these years.

These three parochial schools, St. Vincent, Sts. Peter and Paul and St. Patrick's, were followed by several others in the uptown section of the city as well as in church parishes in or bordering on the Third district. The aim of the sisters, when they approached a new mission field, was to apply all of religion to all of life and to inculcate the conviction that all daily activities are conditioned by the truths of religion. They started Sodalties of the Children of Mary and of the Guardian Angels and many records show the development of these Societies throughout the years. Faculty followed faculty, each one endeavoring to meet the educational needs of the day.

The Academy of St. John was founded by the Marianites in Franklin, Louisiana in 1871. Franklin was a picturesque little town situated along the banks of Bayou Teche. The concern of the Archbishop, Napoleon J. Perche, expressed in his pastoral letters for the spread of Catholic Education in the growing St. Mary Civil Parish, prompted him to call on the Marianite Provincial. He did not ask, but commanded, the Provincial to take charge of a mission in Franklin. He told her that if she was not able to purchase a building for a school it could be done in the name of the Archdiocese until such time as the community could pay for it. The Provincial insisted that they would have to get proper permission from their General Superior before they could carry out his wishes. The archbishop was so insistent that he himself wrote the major superior. The Marianite superiors saw clearly that it was their duty to comply with the command of the Archbishop and prepared for their first mission in the Bayou Teche Country. The Marianites, escorted by the Provincial, arrived in Franklin on October 31, 1871. Settled by French and Spanish adventurers, and later by a number of Acadians, it is surprising that apparently the sisters were not welcome. Their residence, which also served as the school, was a two story building which had formerly served as a Methodist seminary. There were no locks on the doors and there was little furniture. Rough boards covered with newspaper served as wash stands, but by the end of the week both the school and the sisters' quarters had a semblance of cleanliness and comparative comfort. The blessing of the building took place on November 4 and thus began the institution to be known as The Academy of St. John. But there were still difficulties to overcome. The sisters received two anonymous letters stating that they were not wanted and that a Catholic school would not survive. It was first thought that this was the work of the Methodists, but when it became known that the culprit was a teacher connected with the local public school, a public letter expressing sentiments of respect and loyalty of the Catholics of Franklin was published in a New Orleans newspaper. Several natural disasters visited the town in quick succession and the school suffered because parents were not able financially to

send their children to the school. It took ten years for St. John Academy to see daylight. There was an increase in the number of students, who paid twenty dollars per month for board and tuition, and the sisters felt that St. John's was on the road to success. The Prospectus of St. John Academy stated: "No particular kind of dress is required, except on Sundays. The uniform consists of green merino for winter; for summer a white muslin. The trimmings for the hats change according to the two seasons. These can be furnished by the Institution."

In comparatively quick succession the Marianites spread through southwest Louisiana. There were no public schools in the Acadian country. Arnaudville, a Catholic settlement, had no school and there was little possibility of the public school system becoming interested in that part of the state. The pastor requested that the Marianites come to take care of the spiritual and intellectual formation of the children. The chronicles describe the village as being a very pretty little town situated at the junction of Bayou Teche and Bayou Fusille in St. Landry and St. Martin civil parishes. School opened on January 4, 1891 with 25 boys and 24 girls, but by the end of the month the enrollment had increased in both schools - the boys and girls were taught in separate buildings - and it was necessary for another sister to join the pioneer group of three, one English and two French speaking sisters. The surrounding country was known as one of the richest farming areas of the state where the principal crops were cotton, corn and rice. Although there was little ready cash the sisters never went hungry. What could not be given in tuition was well made up with fresh vegetables, milk, poultry and eggs. The Provincial's account of her visit to Arnaudville stated that "the good seed has been sown and is bearing abundant harvest. There is great evidence of the industry and economy of the dear sisters, while the privations are borne with commendable patience and cheerfulness." **There is no reason to doubt the cheerfulness as the Superior, a native of France, was of a very jovial disposition. Now and then harmless pranks were played, and it was not unusual to find delicious pop corn balls with the center filled with cotton.**

Two years after coming to Arnaudville the sisters opened a school for the black children. The dyed-in-the-wool segregationists, who did not have such a distinguished name in those days, but were known as "Regulators" against the advancement of Negroes, did not hesitate to show their dislike even going so far as to attempt to burn down the school. This disaster was no great setback and when all was put in order, Sister Martina continued to teach her black charges for the twelve years that the school remained in service. Because of a shortage of sisters and difficulties after World War I the sisters were withdrawn in 1919. In 1945 at the end of the Second World War they returned to Arnaudville at the insistent begging of the Pastor and remained there until the late seventies.

In 1882 the Marianites went to Lake Charles, a Louisiana city on

the Texas border. Lake Charles, a prosperous oil center received the Marianites with open arms. However fate was not with them and a disastrous fire destroyed the convent and school. Undaunted, the parishioners, under the able leadership of the pastor and the Marianite superior, undertook to rebuild the school and the convent. Completed in record time the parents of young Catholic families were happy to have their offspring back in the classrooms with the sisters. The boarding school was a great success receiving young girls from the neighboring towns and farms.

In the foregoing foundations it was at the request of the Bishop or the pastor of the town that the Marianites opened schools. In Morgan City it was an interested group of secular women wishing to secure a religious, intellectual and moral education for their daughters, who sought the sisters' services. Through the pastor they contacted the Provincial Superior of the Marianites and after a visit and favorable response they went immediately to the Archbishop who gave his consent for the foundation of the school. Plans were made, ground was purchased, public support was solicited and within the year the new convent and school were blessed by the Archbishop and placed under the patronage of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Five Marianites formed the first faculty. An encouraging enrollment gave evidence of the support enjoyed from the people at large. Four years later two sisters were sent across the Bay to the thriving little town of Berwick to open a small school in the home of one of the church parishioners. In 1897 a school was constructed in the vicinity of the church and dedicated to St. Stephen, Patron of the Parish. Here the sisters continued their ministry.

Other missions were opened by the Marianites. In Pensacola, Florida the Marianites taught in Saint Charles School for two years. Saint Henry School in Jennings, Louisiana had a Marianite faculty from 1904 to 1916. An elementary school in Ocean Springs, Mississippi brought the Marianites to the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. Saint Alphonsus School, today a thriving institution and a credit to the Biloxi Diocese, struggled for many years with a sprinkling of students. **The convent, destroyed in 1968 by Hurricane Camille, served for many years as a vacation spot for the Marianites, at the same time as the school grew in popularity, numbers and scholastic achievement.**

The Chronicles specifically state "that the sisters of the missions returned to the provincial house to spend their vacation and at the same time improve themselves in various branches of study". From the beginning the superiors had endeavored to answer this challenge by securing lay professors who held classes for the teachers during the scholastic vacation. Under their direction the teachers studied the subjects they were scheduled to teach the coming school year. The annual retreat followed these courses and the sisters returned to the classroom fortified scholastically and spiritually. In the first decade of the twentieth century the scholastic preparation of

the sisters became a more serious question. Education was becoming a nationwide concern and the state of Louisiana was waking up to the need of raising the standards of its educational institutions. They began making demands on the faculties of private and parochial schools, as well as on their own.

Loyola University, a Jesuit institution, opened its doors to members of religious orders of women in the city of New Orleans. In 1913 Mother Mary of Saint James Dooley, especially interested in the intellectual development and educational qualifications of the teaching sisters, encouraged them to matriculate at the University. This required a big shift from classes under a private tutor to lectures in a big university. Knowing how difficult an adjustment this could be and to give example, as well as add support to her encouragement, Mother James attended classes at Loyola University with her sisters. She also succeeded in getting the approval of the State Legislature for offering college courses at the Academy of the Holy Angels. Act # 257 passed on July 6, 1916 by the Louisiana State Legislature empowered the Academy to confer degrees in its "College Department". Later, in 1931 Mother Liguori Mazerat, received accreditation of Holy Cross Normal School after a series of communications with the State Department of Education. Doctor De Luca, Vice-President of Our Lady of Holy Cross College, will continue this story tomorrow morning.

In the field of education the Marianites experienced many successes and overcome many obstacles. As has been seen expansion for the Marianites in education began very early in Louisiana. This growth continued until the first World War when the financial situation in the south became precarious thus stifling the growth of Catholic schools. But a period of growth took on greater allure as the Second World War approached. Catholic parents became more conscious of the necessity of a strong formation of their children in their faith, as well as in a fundamental education based on good moral principles. The Church reminded parents of their obligation to take advantage of every opportunity, even to make opportunities, for their children to enjoy growth as Christians. Urged by their Bishops to provide education facilities, and aided by the parents of the youth of their parishes, Pastors began to build schools and to request religious congregations to staff them. The Marianites, as every teaching congregation of women and men, were faced with their responsibility to respond to this important need of the church and of the world. In the next two decades the Marianites were staffing twice as many schools as previously. At the end of that period, according to Diocesan statistics, the Marianites were teaching the largest number of students enrolled in the Catholic Schools of Louisiana. God favored us with a remarkable increase in vocations which made our participation in this growth possible.

Wherever Marianites ministered in the field of education the curriculum integrated religious truths and values within a framework of learning experiences in all matters. Teacher-student

relationship constituted the basis of quality education. The administration provided opportunities for the faculty to engage in various instructional designs and methods. Student organizations allowed individual students to develop personal ability in decision making, in self-understanding and self-responsibility in attaining values, attitudes and skills for a productive and active Christian life. Parents of students formed active and interested organizations to assist in the development of the schools.

The sixties were exciting years, but at the same time difficult ones. Everything was changing and we were challenged to change in order to answer the call of the Church and become a part of the Modern World. Were not the needs of the Church always of primary concern to Father Moreau? Encouragement came from all sides and generously the sisters responded to the new and changing needs of the Church. The liberty, provided by the decrees of the Special Chapter of Aggiornamento in 1968 and 1969, enabled them not to change their ministry of education, but to use it in accord with the signs of the times. Mother Mary of the Seven Dolours wrote to her daughters in 1873, "The spirit of our Congregation is primarily a spirit of faith, of complete abnegation." This faith was the inspiration and support of all during this time of renewal. Many sacrifices were asked of the province and of the individual sister. Today the sisters are engaged in education in a number of fields and the Province maintains two parochial schools in the city of New Orleans.

Father Moreau was ever conscious of the need for encouragement at times of difficulty. Leaving the schools was a difficult time. But our Founder Basil Moreau provided the necessary courage and consolation.

I close with a quotation from his letter of November 9, 1847. "Oftentimes in the past when observing the ways of Providence in regard to the work of Holy Cross you have recognized that in the service of God joys and consolations are always mingled with afflictions and bitterness. It is only after having us taste the mildness of the Lord's yoke and the lightness of his burden that God sends us a trial. This is his choicest grace, a grace for purifying and strengthening his saints, a grace which is usually announced by abundant consolations. After the example of the saints let us thank God for having initiated us into the secret of his providential action on those he loves, because as you well know, this how his goodness deals with us."

N.B. Sections in bold print were omitted from oral presentation at the 1999 Holy Cross History Conference.
Presenters' note.

R E S O U R C E S

BOOKS

Annals of Marianites of Holy Cross, 1841-1948, Le Mans, France

Costin, Georgia, csc -- Priceless Spirit, A History of the Sisters of the Holy Cross, 1841 - 1893. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1994

Klawitter, George, csc -- Adapted to the Lake, Letters of the Brothers Founders of Notre Dame, 1841 - 1849. Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York, 1993

Marianites of Holy Cross, Marianite Centennial in Louisiana, 1848-1948, Hope Haven Press, New Orleans, La. 1948

Morrisson, Betty L. -- A History of Our Lady of Holy Cross College, New Orleans, La. Her Publication Co. Inc., Gretna, La., 1977

Sorin, Edward, csc, Chronicles of Notre Dame du Lac, Translated by William Toohey, csc and Edited and Annotated by James T. Connelly, csc -- University of Notre Dame, Indiana, 1992

CHRONICLES

Chronicles of St. Mary's Orphan Boys Asylum

Chronicles of Marianites of Holy Cross