

2003-7

(THE WORKS OF) THE MARIANITES OF HOLY CROSS
IN THE DIOCESE OF ALEXANDRIA
BY SISTER MARY DAVID HECKER, MSC
SAINT EDWARD'S UNIVERSITY
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If there is a phrase that identifies Louisiana, I put my money on "Laissez les bons temps roulez" - "Let the good times roll!" Louisiana may sit on the bottom of many lists, but it must be high on the lists of places celebrating two centuries of its heritage. Was it not in 1803 that the Louisiana Purchase was finalized? Was the Purchase not the deal of the century, nay of the millenium? For about three cents an acre the United States added 800,000 square miles to the existing territories and doubled the country's size with one stroke of the pen. Eight present states and parts of five others owe their origins to the Louisiana Purchase.

This year, 2003, is the Bicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase. On July 18, 1803, General Horatio Gates wrote to President Jefferson: "Let the land rejoice, for you have bought Louisiana for a song." The melody from that purchase is still increasing throughout the land this year, especially in the Pelican State. But we are here not to celebrate the Louisiana Purchase. There is another celebration taking place in the deep South. We speak here of the Sesquicentennial of the Diocese of Alexandria and the part the Marianites of Holy Cross have contributed in these years.

The origins of the Diocese of Alexandria pre-date the Louisiana Purchase. In the seventeenth century, French and Spanish missionaries were at work in this land. The Franciscan Zenobius Mabre served as Chaplain to Robert LaSalle's expedition which explored the mighty Mississippi River. In 1662, he made contact with the Tensas Indians near present day Newellton, Louisiana.

In 1716, the Spanish established a mission near the present city of Natchitoches. We learn the following from The History of the Diocese:

The French military leader Jean Baptiste le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville heard of the Spanish activities in Louisiana while he was engaged in the Natchez War of 1617. . . . Bienville sent a company of soldiers to establish Fort St. John the Baptist on an island in the Red River near Natchitoches to take possession for . . . France. Thus the oldest permanent settlement was established in the Louisiana territory, later to become the Diocese of Alexandria. The settlement was named La Poste de Natchitoches.

A century of growth, conflict, chance, and change took place in this territory before a Diocese of the Catholic Church was established. To quote once again from the History:

On July 29, 1853, Pope Pius IX created a new diocese that had but five priests and five churches to serve over 20, 000 Catholics who were spread throughout the entire northern half of the Louisiana territory. The Holy Father named August Marie Martin, Bishop and established the seat at Natchitoches, oldest permanent settlement in the Louisiana territory in 1714.

Right Reverend Auguste Martin served the new Diocese for twenty-two years. He survived the Civil War along with his flock, witnessed the deaths of five priests while these were ministering to yellow fever victims in the Epidemic of 1873. Yet he managed to set the diocese on a firm basis.

For the Sesquicentennial celebration, Bishop Sam Jacobs, present Bishop of the Diocese of Alexandria, discovered through correspondence with Rome that the most Reverend Anthony Mancini, D.D. was Titular Bishop of the Diocese of Natchitoches. He was located in Canada and was invited to the opening Liturgy on July 14, 2002, at the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Natchitoches. Reverend Stephen Scott Chemino, Master of

Ceremonies and pastor, made the following announcement: "Immaculate Conception Proto Cathedral Church was named by the Vatican as the Titulary Cathedral and the See of Natchitoches in the year 2000." For the occasion Father established a museum which contains many artifacts connected to the establishment of the Diocese. It is now a permanent part of the parish.

In 1904, Most Reverend Cornelius Van Der Van, a native of Holland, had the distinction of becoming "the last Bishop of Natchitoches and the first Bishop of Alexandria". In 1910 the See City was transferred to Alexandria and St. Francis Xavier Church was designated its Cathedral which it remains to this day.

The church is maturing when a native born citizen becomes Bishop of a diocese, which for eighty years has been shepherded by foreign born Bishops. In 1933, when Most Reverend Daniel F. Desmond was named Bishop of Alexandria, this dream was realized. His tenure was one of rapid growth and expansion: thirty five new church parishes and ten new Catholic schools were the result of Bishop Desmond's leadership.

Most Reverend Charles P. Greco was the first Bishop to invite the Marianites to work in the Diocese of Alexandria. As a young lad he was very dedicated in serving as an altar boy. One day, Mother Cabrini visited his parish and after Mass, the pastor introduced Charles to the future Saint. This first naturalized citizen of the United States to be declared a Saint, placed her hand on the boy's shoulder and said to him: "One day you will be a Bishop". This lad always remember this prophecy and recounted the story repeatedly. To this day, it is a story which is fondly recalled. He established a hospital and named it Mother Cabrini Hospital.

Today it functions as Christus St. Francis Cabrini.

A second anecdote pertaining to Bishop Greco is as follows: In the late 1930's the boarders at the Academy of the Holy Angels on Rampart street, then the Provincial House for the Marianites of Holy Cross, during evening recreation, always strolled up and down between the rows of sycamores lining the walk at the rear of the Academy building. The telephone rang and was answered. The caller asked to speak with Mother Mary Xavier, the Provincial. Later it was discovered that the caller was Bishop Greco, who was inviting the Marianites to work in the Diocese of Alexandria. Unfortunately, the number of Marianites was not sufficient to fill the request. The Bishop would have to wait until 1967 to have this request honored.

Most Reverend Charles P. Greco served as Bisop of Alexandria for twenty-seven years, beloved by priests and people alike. He established thirty-three new parishes, more than 125 new churches and chapels, and one hundred convents and rectories, fifty schools, and seven health facilities. Of his vast accomplishments, St. Mary's Residential Training School and Holy Angels' School for the Retarded were his pride and joy.

On November 17, 1967, some thirty plus years after his request to Mother Mary Xavier, Bishop Greco travelled to Lake Providence (how appropriate a name!) to welcome the Marianites of Holy Cross to his diocese. The Marianites began work at East Carroll Parish Hospital on December 1, 1967. A five year contract had been signed. The Franciscan Sisters of Steubenville, Ohio were in charge of the hospital when the Marianites took over.

The Marianites felt that their work "should extend beyond hospital nursing to include a nurses' program, home health services, and neighborhood service centers." The Marianites at Lake Providence accomplished the following:

- 1) Compliance with regulations for Medicare patients as set down by the Office of Health, Education and Welfare - a source of unrest for the Sisters
- 2) Helping with Welfare work
- 3) Teaching in the Science Department in the Public High School System
- 4) Assisting the pastor with the High School of Religion
- 5) Improving the interior of the hospital
- 6) Boosting the morale of the hospital personnel

In April, 1971, because the Marianite community was not growing in the area of Health Care, the contract with the Board of Commissioners of East Carroll Parish was not renewed. In September 1972, only three Marianites were still in Lake Providence. They requested to be released from their contract, but promised to remain "until a complete lay staff could be obtained".

A decade later a Golden and a Silver Jubilarian began ministries in the Diocese of Alexandria - Shreveport in 1982. Sister Madeleine Sophie Hebert was employed as Coordinator of the Lay Ministries Training Program. Sister Kay Viellion began work as Archivist for the Diocese of Alexandria-Shreveport. Have you noticed that the name of the the Diocese is now Alexandria-Shreveport? This occurred under the Most Reverend Lawrence P. Graves, who became Bishop in 1973. The Co-Cathedral was Saint John Berchmans, but nine years later, in 1982, Pope John Paul II established the Diocese of Shreveport. Bishop William B. Friend, who was

serving as Auxiliary of the Diocese of Alexandria - Shreveport, became Bishop on January 11, 1983, still holding the position today.

On August 1, 1983, Sister Madeleine Sophie moved into the chancery office in Alexandria to begin full time ministry with the Permanent Diaconate Formation Program. Sister Kay Viellion was appointed by Bishop Friend as Vice-Chancellor of the Diocese, thus becoming the first woman in the Diocese to hold that position. The sessions for the training of Permanent Diaconate Candidates began in September 1983. There were fifteen candidates: thirteen married men and two singles, along with five instructors, and two directors.

By October, 1984, the number of participants had dwindled to twelve. The remaining twelve continued to persevere.

Sister Madeleine travelled to Canada where she met a Eudist Father who was the scholastic director of the Houston program. He was a student at Berulle whose theology Father Moreau had also studied. The Eudist was keenly interested in the Congregation of Holy Cross because of Father Moreau, who had connections with Mother Euphrasia Pellitier with whom Father Moreau had co-founded a monastery of the Good Shepherd.

In January, 1986, Sister Madeleine met with Bishop Friend and Sister Margaret Dawes, Administrator, concerning the program for the ordained Permanent Deacons in the Diocese, to make arrangements for the closing of the office of the Diaconate Formation Program. In February, a simple but impressive ceremony for the applicants' admission to candidacy was held. Bishop Friend received them at Liturgy. He spent almost an hour in discussion before the ceremony.

Msgr. Walter Walsh gave them special instructions in Canon Law.

In 1995, Sister Kay was named Secretary of the Education Board of Prompt Succor Parish. Meetings were held monthly with three mini-series to help the group grow. This is an example of a way in which the Marianites participated in parish activities and displayed generosity in their ministries. Sister Kay was likewise Diocesan Representative to the LCC Committee, which in 1985, was planning the Acadian Odyssey Bicentennial. It was recalled that Msgr. Henry C. Bezou, Superintendent of Catholic Schools for the Archdiocese of New Orleans for many years, always maintained "that to educate the general public, it is wise to make the part played by the Church an effective one in the celebration".

Quoting directly from the records in the Archives, one can experience the impact of the following unexpected development:

Before the Easter holidays, Bishop Friend dropped a bomb on the Diocesan employees. Sisters Madeleine and Kay were no exceptions. . . . the news that Sisters Kay and Ann were becoming members of an entirely new structure was a great shock to us all. The decision was reached when Sister Kay was in New Hampshire and announced to her when she returned to New Orleans by Sister Judy Gomila, who, as Provincial, was informed . . . by Bishop Friend. What [did] the future hold? There [was] no [immediate] answer for the Sisters concerned, but others must wait for some time, before they are certain what the future holds. A spirit of unrest [was] apparent in the office. May the Lord care for us all and may His Spirit be with us as we prepare for the future.

Researching the Chronicles of Maison Frere Andre in Alexandria, one is impressed by the many and varied activities of this generous duo:

- 1) Property Search Education
- 2) Permanent Diaconate Formation
- 3) Women in the Gospel Ecumenical Group
- 4) Ministries' Resource Center Meetings
- 5) Direction of Ministries Training Program

Life continued and the Permanent Deacons were ordained in Alexandria on June 28, 1986, at Saint Francis Xavier Cathedral by Bishop William B. Friend. This ordination marked the close of this ministry for Sister Madeleine Sophie as Directress of the Formation Program, a ministry which provided fond and lasting memories. On July 17, 1986, the Marianites left Maison Frere Andre. The work of these Marianites in the Diocese terminated, so they ventured forth into the new ministries which awaited them.

The year 1983 brought to the Marianites a new offer of a unique ministry in the Diocese of Alexandria. Sister Mary Bertilla McNeely, Provincial, advised two Marianites, Sisters Consuelo Champagne and Vivian Coulon that a search was being conducted for a new Director and Assistant Director for Maryhill. Maryhill had been established by Bishop Charles Greco in 1949. He wanted it to be a place for youth and for seminarians. Maryhill "is nestled in a clearing of two hundred acres of pine forest". It is within driving distance of many major cities in the deep South.

On June 19, the two Marianites submitted their applications, went to Maryhill for interviews before a panel of seven members of the Board. They were chosen and the hiring committee requested that they begin their work at Maryhill during the summer of 1984. With a group of girl campers and their Counselors, the Sisters attended a Mass under the pavilion at the campsite. Bishop Charles P. Greco, retired but still very active, was the Celebrant. Thus the work began at Maryhill with the Marianites leading at the helm.

Managing Maryhill proved to be quite a challenge. Juggling retreat schedules along with the retreatants themselves, dovetailing various organizations for use of the facility, along with many activities proved to

be a gigantic challenge. Mother Nature had daily to be taken into account also as storms caused damage which had to be repaired.

In early January 1987 it was recorded that: due to the inability to obtain adequate insurance against moral misconduct, Bishop Favalora, Bishop of the Diocese of Alexandria, decided that the Maryhill KC camp would no longer operate. This telling sentence shows how history repeats itself, especially when history is ignored: "It is so painful that good done by the camping program must be curtailed because of evil in other areas - sexual molestation and exorbitant court cases."

A NEEDS/FEASIBILITY STUDY of Maryhill was undertaken by the Diocese. The entire staff connected with the facility was interviewed in May of 1987 by Dave Ramey of Dayron, Ohio.

Bishop Favalora met with the Sisters and expressed confidence that the Maryhill Renewal Center would continue and that more staff would be required. Two gentlemen who work closely with The Louisiana Foundation arranged for an endowment ~~for~~ which provided for "Tomorrow's Maryhill".

However, in early September, a one page written report of the Maryhill Study/Evaluation shocked Sisters Connie and Vivian. The report, among other things, stated that "there were many unexpressed disappointments on the part of the diocesan administration." For three and a half years the Sisters never heard any negative comments pertaining to their regulation and leadership of the camp. Yet, only now are they told, that there was a general lack of confidence in the leadership of the Maryhill Renewal Center". The very next day, after prayer and discussion between themselves, the two Sisters drafted letters of resignation.

Sister Connie's immediate supervisor accepted her resignation, and ^{she} was told that Father Joe would take over that afternoon. Were the Marianites gone for good from Maryhill? The answer to that question is found in a communication from Sister Suellen Tennyson, Marianite Continental Administrator the dated March 4, 1988:

After a few months the new administrative structure was determined. A national search was conducted and from thirty-two applicants, three were interviewed. Sister Ann Lacour was interviewed and accepted the position of Executive Director. Sister Antoinette Spinella accepted the position of Program Director. . . . Bishop Greco must have been watching over his special foundation and his desire to have the Marianites in his diocese, as it was a short span of time before Maryhill was again under the leadership of the Marianites.

That Holy Cross has had an ongoing connection with Maryhill is verified by the latest booklet on the Maryhill Renewal Center. While giving a brief history, it states: "On August 30, 1970 Father Richard C. Nowery, CSC presided at an organizational meeting of the Maryhill Advisory Board. The meeting was called "to discuss facts, figures, and promotions, and to elect officers".

Sister Marjorie Hebert got the call to ministry in the Diocese of Alexandria via Bishop Friend, in August, 1981. This came from the Provincial, Sister Mary Bertilla McNeely. She was to become Assistant Superintendent of Schools in the Diocese. She remained until November, 1989. Sister Marjorie said that this call and the subsequent nine years became some of the most challenging and rewarding in her work of Catholic Education. Meeting with people: Principals, Pastors, Teachers,

Secretaries, lunch room program workers, and parents, to mention but a few while travelling around the 25,000 square miles . . . became quite a challenge to say the least.

Some of the most important issues addressed by the Catholic Schools Office were ~~among~~ the following:

- * Development and implementation of Certification Program for Religion Teachers
- * Recruitment and retention of Certified Teachers and Principals
- * Developing Faith Communities at the school level based on the Documents:
 - "To Teach as Jesus Did"
 - "Evangelization in the Modern World"
- * Self - Evaluation Improvement Program for all schools
- * Development of a school calendar that provided for required instruction days, and teacher in-service days.

These years were filled with challenges and the most wonderful opportunities . . . for fulfilling the mission of our Marianite of Holy Cross Congregation.

Sister Ann Lacour was certainly no stranger to the Diocese. In 1981 she joined the Office of Religious Education working with Sister Marjorie Hebert who had simultaneously accepted the position of Assistant Superintendent of Catholic Education in the Diocese of Alexandria. In 1989 Sister Ann became Executive Director of Maryhill Renewal Center. Sister states: "At Maryhill, I was first introduced to Development and all that is needed to keep a piece of property alive at Maryhill. . . . I experienced great joy of service to 'ALL GOD'S PEOPLE . . .'"

Sister states further:

" . . . Women religious in leadership positions were a novelty in the Diocese, . . . I came to know the principals and Directors of religious education . . . [and] those who worked in social ministry. It [is] ten years since I left the Diocese . . . [Today] I am more sensitive to nature and the sacredness of the earth because of my years in this rural area that will always cause me to remember that God's ways are gentle and lead me to peace."

When these two talented Religious were called to major positions in the Congregation, the Marianites left the direction of Maryhill in the hands of others.

Another Marianite who worked in the Diocese of Alexandria was Sister Mary Albina Guillory. She was welcomed as the new Administrator of Our Lady's Manor, which was founded by Msgr. Frederick J. Lyons. It is an independent complex for Senior citizens on fixed incomes. Sister brought with her the experience she had gained as administrator of an independent living complex in the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Sister was called to similar service in the Diocese of Lafayette after less than two years of service at Our Lady's Manor.

In 1991, after having returned from India, Sister Rochelle Perrier began as Director of Religious Education at Sacred Heart Parish in Pineville, Louisiana, which also belongs to the Alexandria Diocese. In 1994, the CEO of St. Francis Cabrini Hospital was seeking a person for a new position as Mission Effectiveness Coordinator. This choice was Sister Rochelle . . . Her role was to insure that the Mission and Values of the sponsoring Congregation, the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, were integrated into all aspects of hospital life . . . [and] that Jesus' healing ministry would be at the center of [the hospital's] mission. . . . By 1997 . . . this position was elevated to Vice-President of Mission Integration with increased responsibilities. . . . In 2001, Sister was elected to the Congregational Leadership Team and had to resign her position.

Sister Verda Frederick, MSC, came to the Diocese in October, 1996 as Vice President for Mission Integration in eight Catholic Hospitals. It was her mission to establish the position for Mission Integration. She needed to accomplish the following: to define its concept; to plan the training; to emphasize the importance of Mission in each hospital. Sister spent a great deal of time overseeing the orientation of the program in various hospitals. Because this work grew so rapidly and was so important to the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, the headquarters were transferred to Houston, Texas and Sister moved with the position.

In 1991, the Marianites assumed responsibility for work in Saint Rita Parish in Alexandria. Sister Nell Murray was sent as Director of Religious Education, the position she still holds today. Sister Marie Noel was Principal of Saint Rita School. Sister Phyllis Fuselier, who began a sabbatical, was in residence. Saint Rita's is a favorite gathering place for Holy Cross. Shortly after the Sisters' arrival, Brother Joel Giallanza joined eight Marianites for a discussion on the book, Reweaving Religious Life.

In 1992, Sister Kathleen Farrell had just returned from her years of missionary service at Hogar San Jose in Talagante, Chile. She went to Saint Rita's in the early part of the school year and remained to teach. New members of the school faculty included Sister Nell Murray's sister, Sister Mary Murray and Sister Mary Elaine Thompson.

Sister Mary Murray was already in the Alexandria Diocese when the Marianites went to Saint Rita Parish. She had begun as a hospital chaplain

at Saint Francis Cabrini Hospital, before joining the faculty at Saint Rita School. She served on Saint Rita's faculty until she changed Dioceses, where she serves as a vital part of Saint Peter's Parish in Pine Prairie, Louisiana in the Diocese of Lafayette.

Presently, there are two Marianites residing and working at Saint Rita's: Sister Nell Murray who remains Director of Religious Education, and Sister Hannah Marie O'Brien, who plays an extremely vital part in the ministry for the poor and elderly. A third Marianite is due to arrive in August, 2003.

Some 30.98 degrees north of the equator and 92.05 west of the prime meridian lies the picturesque town or community of Cottonport, Louisiana. Bayou Rouge flows through the town along side highway 29. As of 2002, Cottonport has been home to Christmas on the Bayou for thirty-six years. Cottonport is likewise the home of the historic Ducote Oaks which overlook Bayou Rouge. These trees mark the site where the town originated.

In 1992, the Marianites were invited to Cottonport by Reverend William Provosty or "Father Bill" as he was affectionately known, pastor of Saint Mary's Assumption Church. Sister Cor Mariae was leaving a ministry in New Iberia, Louisiana and Sister Mary David Hecker had just completed an assignment in Talagante, Chile. These two were no strangers to one another. They were boarders together at the Academy of the Holy Angels, had entered the Marianites together, and had spent the first years of educational formation at Holy Name of Mary School in Algiers, located on the west bank of New Orleans. Sister Cor Mariae came to work in the

position of parish minister and Sister Mary David was needed as a teacher/librarian for Saint Mary's Elementary School. Both were hired. Sister Mary David, however, needed a "crash course" in Library Science and asked Sister Mary Paschal Lump, a past master at the art of setting up libraries to do this for her.

Sister Cor Mariae put her many years of experience as parish coordinator into the hands of "Father Bill" and was soon introducing herself to the Parishoners. Some of her achievements during the eleven years spent in Cottonport are the following:

- RENEW for five seasons
- Little Rock Bible Study for four seasons
- Jubilee 2000
- Hospital Visitation Weekly
- Weekly Ministering to Avoylles Men's Prison - Cottonport

Sister leaves Cottonport this summer.

Brother Andre Lucia, Principal of Saint Joseph School in Plaquemine, Louisiana approached Sister Mary David about the possibility of getting a Marianite for Saint Joseph High School in Plaquemine, because they were losing their high school English teacher. Brother has a special affinity with the Marianites, because his mother was a Marianite "product". Amelie LeBlanc Lucia attended Saints Peter and Paul Elementary School on Burgundy Street in New Orleans. She was a graduate of the Academy of the Holy Angels in the class of 1931.

At the spring assembly in 1993, Sister Mary David approached Sister Joel Sperier about the possibility of going to Saint Joseph's. Sister visited Mansura, where Sister Mary David and Sister Cor Mariae were living, though ministering in Cottonport, and with the Administration's blessing accepted the position of English teacher at Saint Joseph High School in Plaquemine. Because Sisters Mary David and Cor Mariae were in ministry in Cottonport, Sister lived in Community at Holy Cross Convent in Cottonport and commuted the six odd miles to Plaquemine.

Sister Mary David joined the faculty of Saint Joseph School in August for the 1996 - 1997 school year. She was teacher/librarian, and the two were commuting daily from Cottonport to Plaquemine. At the end of the school year, 1999, a special gift to the Marianites by the parish was provided for them: a convent which was a stone's throw from the school. They named it Maison Andre Bessette. The new year was also a tremendous source of celebration for Saint Joseph School, because it was the centenary year of the foundation of the school. The following year, 2000, there was a four-in-one celebration of the religious: Sister Mary David, celebrated her Diamond Jubilee of Religious Profession a year ahead of time, along with Sister Joel Golden Jubilarian, Brother Paul Casey, FSE, forty Years, and Brother Andre Lucia, FSE thirty-five years, most years for these Brothers ~~were~~ right at Saint Joseph School. Father Craig Scott planned and executed a first class celebration for these Jubilarians

The year 2000 brought another blessing to Saint Joseph School. Sister Mercedes Spotorno, a former Daughter of the Cross, who joined the

Marianites with six of her community, came as first grade teacher to Plaucheville. There were five religious on the school faculty, two Brothers of the Holy Eucharist and three Marianites of Holy Cross.

And there you have it! A rather "abbreviated" account of the Marianites of Holy Cross in the Diocese of Alexandria, Louisiana. The Marianites began serving in the Diocese in 1967, some thirty odd years after the initial invitation from Bishop Greco. The Marianites are still serving, especially at Saint Rita and Mater Dolorosa Parishes. The Providence of God has guided us to this Diocese, and our special Patroness, Our Lady of Seven Dolors, seems to be keeping us here. If you followed the account, did you not notice that a Bishop called and the Marianites answered? Isn't that what Father Moreau did?

The Paschal Mystery is a series of life, death, and resurrection of our Savior. Marianites began, left, and started again. The Mystery continues as each year re-appears.

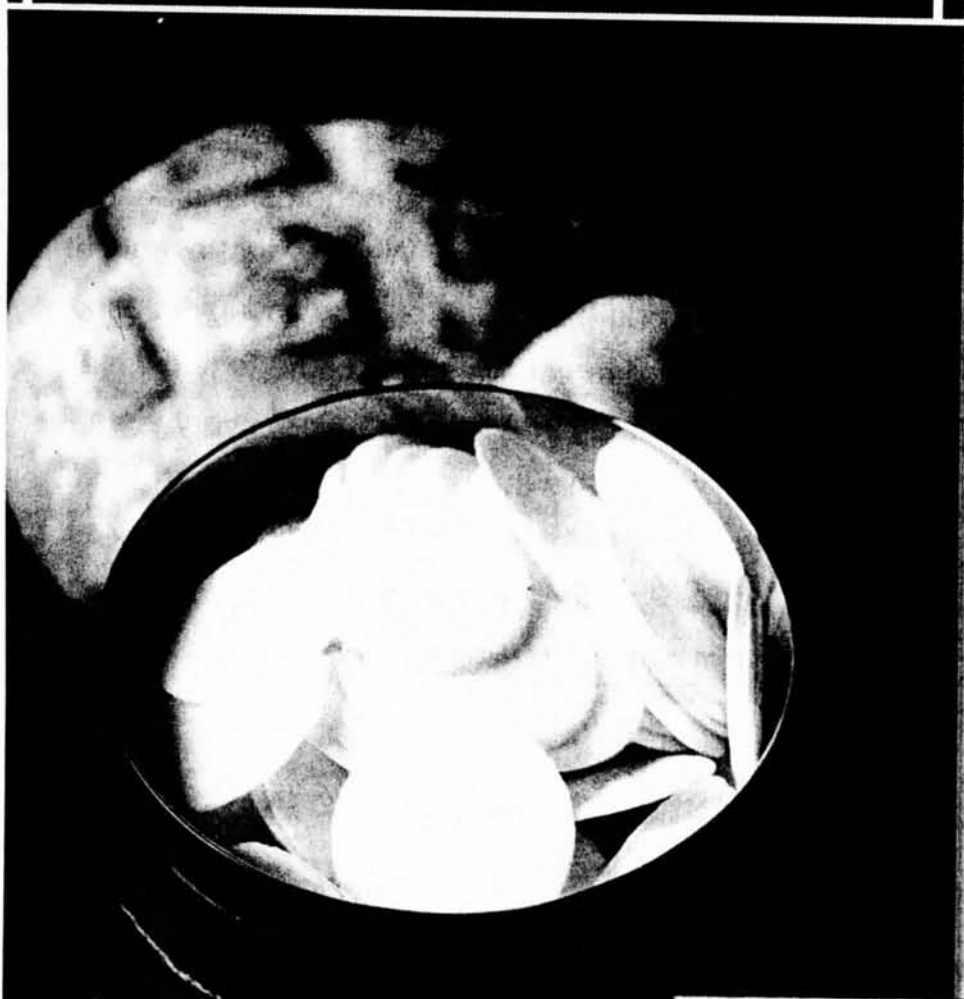
This account opened with a celebration - the Bicentennial of the Louisiana Purchase and the Sesquicentennial of the Diocese of Alexandria. The celebrations continue.

The tenth and present Bishop, the Most Reverend Samuel Jacobs, brings this account to a close. In his pastoral letter of July 8, 2002, the Bishop wrote:

As we celebrate our Sesquicentennial, we give thanks to God for all those who have labored so faithfully and zealously over the years in our diocese: for the nine

previous Bishops, the hundreds of priests, deacons, religious men and women, and the thousands of committed lay men and women. It is not possible in the limitation of this pastoral letter to recount what these dedicated witnesses of faith have achieved through their sacrifices, their ministries, and their struggles. But we know that we would not be where we are today had it not been for them. May the final victory they sought be theirs in the presence of God.

THE DIOCESE OF ALEXANDRIA



Celebrating 150 years!

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