

THE CHURCH IN "THE NEW WORLD," IN LOUISIANA AND THE FLORIDAS, AND IN NEW ORLEANS

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The first Mass was celebrated in the New World in 1494. Then, in 1554, the first Catholic Parish was established at St. Augustine, Florida, by the Spanish. That this parish included persons of several races is attested in the parish's carefully kept baptismal, marriage, and death records. Since these settlers had come by way of the Caribbean islands, they included indigenous people as well as the Europeans and their navigational and medical personnel who had come to Spain from Africa.

Hernando De Soto discovered the Mississippi River in 1541. Robert Cavelier de La Salle went down the Mississippi from the Illinois in 1682. The area now comprising the State of Louisiana was part of the Louisiana Territory, claimed for France in 1682 by R. C. de La Salle.

In 1622 Pope Gregory XV placed America under the aegis of the Congregation de Propaganda Fide. The United States remained under their care until 1908.

In 1634 the "Ark" and the "Dove" brought Catholics to Maryland, Lord Baltimore's colony. Maryland's general assembly proclaimed religious freedom for all Christians. However, in 1654 the Puritan regime repealed this act of religious toleration. Between 1634 and their suppression in 1773, one hundred eighty-six Jesuits worked in the colonies. Among other missions, they established Immaculate Conception Church in New Orleans, to which they returned after their suppression was lifted in 1814. Their works are presently flourishing in this parish and in Holy Name of Jesus parish in New Orleans, in Loyola University of the South, and in other works in Louisiana, notably St. Charles College, the Jesuit Spirituality Center in Grand Coteau.

THE ARCHDIOCESE OF NEW ORLEANS

The parish church with the longest uninterrupted history is St. Louis Cathedral, which has existed practically from the founding of the city of New Orleans in 1718 by Jean Baptiste LeMoyne, Sieur de Bienville. In April 1727 the first substantial St. Louis Church was completed. Secular, Carmelite, Jesuit and Capuchin priests labored in this region. This structure was destroyed by a fire in 1788. Andr s Almonester y Roxas promised to build a new rectory, parish church, and cabildo. The new structure, to become the Cathedral of New Orleans, was completed in 1794. Renovated several times, it remains the same building, still in use. In 1964 it was designated a minor basilica. Facing each other across the square in front of St. Louis Cathedral are the apartments built by Almonester for his daughter, the Baroness Pontalba.

The first Mass in the area of the New Orleans Archdiocese was said March 3, 1699, by the Rev. Anastase Douay, a Franciscan missionary with Pierre LeMoyne, Sieur d'Iberville, who sailed up the Mississippi River from the Gulf of Mexico that year. Iberville established the power of France in the Lower Mississippi Valley. On a later expedition to Louisiana with Iberville the Jesuit Paul du Ru produced a rudimentary catechism with the languages of Bayagoula, {H}Ouma,

and Natchez Indians. In spring of 1700 du Ru had a small church built in the Indian village near the present Bayou Goula, Iberville.

Jean Baptiste LeMoyne, Sieur de Bienville and brother of d'Iberville, in 1722 transferred the capital of French Louisiana from New Biloxi on the Gulf Coast to "la Nouvelle Orléans," which he had founded in 1718. Its site on a bend of the river gives it the name "the Crescent City."

Bishop Louis Duplessis-Mornay of Quebec in 1722 entrusted the spiritual care of the Indians to the Jesuits, who looked to their spiritual and economic welfare, managing a sugar and indigo plantation. In July 1763 the Jesuits were dispossessed of their property and banished from Louisiana.

The community of Les Allemands on the west bank of the Mississippi had a chapel in 1724. The first school for boys in New Orleans, founded in 1725, lasted for only five or six years. A pioneer group of the Ursulines of Rouen, France, who had been asked to come to New Orleans, arrived August 6, 1727. The edict granting land to the Ursulines, signed by King Louis XV, was later sustained by President Thomas Jefferson, after France sold the Louisiana Territory to the United States in 1803. The Ursulines' educational enterprise has continued without interruption up to this day.

Looking toward ending the Seven Years War, the "Most Holy Monarchs" of France had ceded the Louisiana Territory to the "Most Holy Monarchs" of Spain. The first Spanish governor {1762-1769} was not successful. Hence the Spanish sovereign Charles III sent Alejandro O'Reilly, a native of Ireland, in 1769 to establish Spanish authority, religious and civil, in the Territory where the French inhabitants were displeased with Spanish rule and religious practices.

The Church in New Orleans, after 1776, bore a Spanish imprint. Cirillo de Barcelona had been chaplain of the Spanish expedition against the British in West Florida. He was consecrated in Cuba in 1785 as auxiliary bishop of New Orleans. Cirillo appointed his assistant, Antonio de Sedella, later known as Père Antoine, as pastor of St. Louis parish. He also secured four Irish priests who had studied at the University of Salamanca in Spain to minister in West Florida. They also served in Louisiana and in Natchez, Mississippi, where San Salvador, the first Catholic church there, was built by the Spanish. It later burned.

The Metropolitan See of New Orleans was erected April 25, 1793, as the Diocese of Louisiana and the Floridas by Pius VI at the request of King Charles IV of Spain. The original diocese, except for the area under the authority of the Diocese of Baltimore, reached from the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic, and from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. Before 1762 Quebec had jurisdiction over French colonial Louisiana. In 1762 the territory passed under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Santiago de Cuba, then of Havana, from which it was detached in 1793.

Luis Ignacio de Peñalver y Cárdenas, a native of Cuba, was consecrated as first ordinary and arrived in New Orleans on July 17, 1795. In 1801 he was transferred to the Archdiocese of Guatemala. Jurisdictional quarrels marked the next fifteen years. Rev. Patrick Walsh and Canon Thomas Hassett tried to administer the diocese during the episcopal vacancy. {Father Patricio Walsh was an Irish priest from Spain. }

Louisiana was under Spanish control 1762 to 1801, when Spain ceded Louisiana back to France, which sold it to the United States in 1803. In 1805 the Holy See placed New Orleans under the temporary care of Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore, who appointed Jean Olivier, the chaplain of the Ursulines, as his Vicar. Wardens of the cathedral, in their administration, were considered arrogant. The charismatic Père Antoine, who opposed Walsh and Hassett, gained a following.

Since this area now belonged to the United States, English-speaking streamed into New Orleans. Not welcome into “the Quarter”, they set up lovely houses on the other side of Canal Street, which grew into the present Garden District. This city also became a target of the British in the War of 1812, which sought to bring back the rebellious American colonies.

When General Andrew Jackson, with the assistance of the Baratarians Pirates under Jean Lafitte, had overcome the superior British forces in the battle which took place in Chalmette, just below New Orleans, he asked that a Te Deum be sung in St. Louis Cathedral January 8, 1815. The Ursulines cared for the sick and wounded of both sides. Their present school on State Street, New Orleans, is home to the National Shrine to Our Lady of Prompt Succour, where each January 8th a Mass is celebrated, remembering that the city was spared through her intercession.

August 18, 1812, Archbishop Carroll named Rev. Louis William DuBourg, president of Georgetown College and founder of St. Mary's College in Baltimore, administrator apostolic of the New Orleans diocese. Then, this Sulpician priest, Louis William DuBourg, became the second ordinary of New Orleans, 1815-1826. Louisiana became a state of the U.S.A. in 1818.

The Vincentian Joseph Rosati, consecrated coadjutor bishop March 25, 1824, was administrator of the diocese from 1826 to 1829. He was appointed bishop of St. Louis in 1827, residing principally in St. Louis. Bishop Rosati recommended Leo Raymond de Neckère, C.M., who became the third bishop of New Orleans, 1829-1833. He was succeeded by Antoine Blanc, Fourth Bishop 1835-1850 and First Archbishop 1850-1860.

It was during the celebrations for the installation of Bishop Blanc in 1835 that the Connellys were in New Orleans, preparing for their departure for Rome, to embrace the Catholic faith. Having already become a friend of Bishop Rosati in St. Louis, Pierce Connelly and his brother were invited to the celebratory banquet. Departure of their ship was delayed. But Cornelia, having already embraced the faith, on December 9th made her Profession of Faith to Bishop Rosati in the Bishop's residence on Chartres Street, which had been the Ursuline Convent. On the next day, in St. Louis Cathedral, a few blocks away on Chartres Street, she received her First Communion in the Catholic Church from Bishop Antoine Blanc.

Pope Pius IX raised New Orleans to Metropolitan See July 19, 1850. Its first suffragan dioceses were Galveston, Texas; Mobile, Alabama; Natchez, Mississippi; and Little Rock, Arkansas. The present Louisiana dioceses of which New Orleans is the Metropolitan See are Alexandria, Baton Rouge, Houma-Thibodaux, Lafayette, Lake Charles, and Shreveport.

Mother Henriette Delille, a free woman of color, under the spiritual guidance of Père Etienne Rousselon and in collaboration with Juliette Gaudin, Josephine Charles, and Marie Jeanne Aliquot, founded the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans, Louisiana,

November 21, 1842. Their mission was to care for the spiritual, temporal, and educational needs of the poor, including slaves. The ministry of the Sisters of the Venerable Henriette Delille continues in Louisiana and other parts of the world. Slavery had existed in Louisiana long before Louisiana joined the Confederacy and seceded from the Union. Both free Blacks and Whites were slave holders. The "Code Noir" required that families be kept together, that catechetical instruction be given and Baptism be administered, and that Sunday be a free day for worship and rest for all.

Jean Marie Odin, C.M., succeeded Bishop Blanc as Second Archbishop 1881-1870. During his tenure Louisiana, being a southern state, joined the Confederacy. Coadjutor Bishop Napoléon Joseph Perché succeeded when Odin died in France May 25, 1870. He was Third Archbishop 1870-1883. Coadjutor François Xavier Leray of Natchitoches became Fourth Archbishop {1883-1887} upon Perché's death December 27, 1883.

Leray was followed by Francis Janssens, Dutch-born Bishop of Natchez, in 1888-1897. Placide Louis Chapelle, was Sixth Archbishop, 1898-1905. James Hubert Blenk, S.M., 1906-1917, John William Shaw, 1918-1934. Joseph Francis Rummel, 1935-1964. John Patrick Cody 1964-1965. Philip Matthew Hannan, 1965-1989. Francis Bible Schulte, 1989- present. Archbishop Schulte had been Superintendent of Schools for the Philadelphia Archdiocese, then Auxiliary Bishop in Philadelphia. In June 1985 he became Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston. He was promoted to the Metropolitan See of New Orleans, taking office February 14, 1989. *added on 6-7-02*

In 1915 the Archdiocese of New Orleans requested Mother Katharine Drexel, foundress of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, to come to New Orleans. The Sisters opened a normal school there in 1917. In 1918 the State of Louisiana granted approval to this institution to conduct colleges and confer degrees. This is the present Xavier University of Louisiana, the only primarily Black Catholic University in this hemisphere. Saint Katharine Drexel was canonized in Rome October 1, 2000. Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos, C.Ss.R. a missionary in New Orleans, had been beatified the same year. There is a shrine to Blessed Seelos at St. Mary's Assumption Church, administered by the Redemptorist Fathers, at 2030 Constance Street, New Orleans.

The Rector of St. Mary Church, 1116 Chartres Street, New Orleans, greatly restored the Old Ursuline Convent and grounds on which this church stands. Monsignor Alvin J. O'Reilly had commissioned a mosaic for the garden, depicting Mary under her title of Our Lady of Prompt Succour, patroness of New Orleans, surrounded by persons of all states of life who have come to this city. He continued on the restoration of the gardens as they were when the first woman pharmacist in this country, an Ursuline nun, grew her medicinal herbs there. Furthermore, Monsignor O'Reilly commissioned a statue of Mary under this title, and statues of five religious women who had come to New Orleans, St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, St. Philippine Duchesne, St. Katharine Drexel, Venerable Henriette Delille, and Venerable Cornelia Connelly. Tours of this historic shrine, led by volunteer guides, are conducted daily.

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SOURCES CONSULTED include these:

Cross Crozier and Crucible; A Volume Celebrating the Bicentennial of a Catholic Diocese in Louisiana. Glenn R. Conrad, General Editor. Published by the Archdiocese of New Orleans in cooperation with the Center for Louisiana Studies, c.1993.

The New Catholic Encyclopedia, volumes 8 & 10.