

Parish History

Breaux Bridge is a small farming community on the Bayou Teche, 13 miles northwest of St. Martinville and 30 miles east of Crowley, its closest Josephite neighbor, when it was established as a Josephite mission in 1923. A Catholic school for African Americans had been established early on in the century, taught by the Sisters of Perpetual Adoration.

In 1920, this school was turned over to the Sisters of the Holy Family and a house, adjacent to the school, was purchased for a convent.

In July of 1923, Bishop Jeanmard requested that the Josephites establish a mission for African Americans at Breaux Bridge. Father Pastorelli, S.S.J., accepted, and on October 12, 1923, Father James Albert, S.S.J. arrived as the first pastor. Father found almost 1,000 African Americans, all of whom were nominal Catholics and most of whom spoke only French, scattered tenant farmers and living within a radius of 5 or 6 miles. Fr. Albert lived at the rectory of St. Bernard's and had a special Mass for its African American parishioners at 8 a.m. every Sunday. Within 6 months, he bought a house and had it moved next to the school and convent. Father Albert fashioned this into a rectory and began saying Sunday Mass in the school. Fr. Albert was fortunate to have many good friends in his hometown, Brooklyn, who supported his work. He was able to begin building a permanent church which was dedicated April 19, 1925. The church had a capacity of 400 persons.

The church was built at a cost of \$12,000.00. In his report for the year 1924, Fr. Albert listed the congregation as 950 and reported 135 children in the school. In 1926, the church bell was installed.

On May 15, 1927, a serious flood inundated Breaux Bridge and surrounding areas, causing much damage and suffering. All members of the community worked together to lessen the destruction.

In 1928, Fr. Albert was able to build a new school. This was completed by Fr. Edward Youngkin, S.S.J., the second pastor of St. Francis of Assisi, and Fr. Albert returned for the dedication. Fr. Youngkin salvaged whatever he could from the old school and constructed a new enlarged parish hall to fill the needs of the growing parish. By 1930 the congregation increased to 2,000 members.

In 1934, while Fr. George Hanks, S.S.J., was pastor, a mission station was established in Cecelia, a town 9 miles north of Breaux Bridge. By that year, the school enrollment had risen to 305.

Also in 1934, while Fr. Edward Walsh, S.S.F., was pastor, a new convent was built and the mission plant received a real improvement - 600 feet of concrete side walks between the several buildings.

In 1947-48, under the leadership of Fr. Michael Parent, a new school was constructed by him and the parishioners.

In 1972, when all of the African American Catholic Schools in the Lafayette Diocese were required to pair with adjoining white schools, the enrollment of St. Francis of Assisi School had sunk to only 93. With the building of fine Public Schools in area, the receiving of Federal Funds for disadvantage children, free bussing, and

the policy of the Public School board of no longer providing transportation for Catholic School students caused a gradual but severe reduction of enrollment down to 60 plus students. St. Francis of Assisi School was closed. An intensified program of C.C.D. was developed.

In 1974, when Father Joseph Brown, S.S.F., was pastor the convent was remodeled and became the church rectory.

On June 18, 1976, a tremendous fire destroyed the 50 year old St. Francis of Assisi Church. The question of integrating St. Francis' Parish with St. Bernard's Parish caused much discussion. Fr. Eugene McManus, S.S.J., wrote a position paper on Black Institutions, justifying the existence of voluntary Black Institutions. It was decided to rebuild the church. On February 19, 1978, a new church capable of seating 500 persons was dedicated by Bishop Frey. The new church was built at a cost of \$300,000.00.

In 1982, a ceremony was held for the burning of the mortgage marking the complete payment of the parish debt. This occurred while Fr. Francis McCarthy, S.S.J., was pastor.

Also, under Fr: McCarthy's tenure at St. Francis of Assisi in 1985, a new Family Life Center was built and put into service.

While Father John McBrearty, S.S.J. was pastor, the bell from the original church was mounted in front of the present church and the cemetery was upgraded and sidewalks added.

Presently, under the tenure of Fr. Richard Wagner, S.S.J. (October 1993 -), a beautiful shrine was built to the Holy Family, the landscape enhanced and adequate running water added to the cemetery. St. Francis of Assisi Parish continues to be a viable parish with many parishioners. Because of job opportunities, the impact of the Josephites' apostolate is being felt throughout the United States and the world.