

History of the Diocese of Houma Thibodaux

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The Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux's colorful history dates far beyond 1977 when it was officially established. The first record of exploration in the area was in 1699, when the French explorer and colonizer Bienville explored Bayou Lafourche, visiting the Washa Indian Villages.

The Houma-Thibodaux-Morgan City area was settled by peoples of many various cultures over the centuries. The Houmas Indians moved into the Lafourche country, black slaves were imported in large numbers in Louisiana by the Company of the West (Indies), and the Chitimacha Indians moved in the Lafourche country.

German families from the Rhineland and Switzerland settled the German Coast (St. Charles and St. John the Baptist Parishes) and some migrated to the Lafourche country. The Germans were followed, as settlers in this land, by the large group of Acadians who were expelled from their home in Acadia (Nova Scotia).

Spanish immigrants, many from the Canary Islands, came to Louisiana in the 1770s, some settling in the Lafourche country.

In the 1800s, Anglo-Saxon immigrants from east of the Mississippi came in increasing numbers to the Lafourche, St. Mary and Terrebonne area.

With the 1820s there came a great influx of slaves to sugar plantations in the Lafourche-Terrebonne area.

During a 30-year period, 1880 to 1910, Italian families from southern Italy and Sicily came to Louisiana to work on the sugar cane plantations.

In the 1970s, Vietnamese refugees settled in the area surrounding Morgan City, Houma and Thibodaux.

As all of these ethnic groups settled along the bayous, they established churches and found livelihoods in the sugar cane, seafood and oilfield industries.

Father Charles M. Menard was appointed vicar of St. Joseph's parish in 1842. This was the beginning of the extensive missionary work to be done by "Pere Menard," who came to be known as "The Apostle of Bayou Lafourche." He would found the majority of church parishes which comprise the diocese today.

Pere Menard led his faithful through the Yellow Fever Epidemic, the Civil War which came to Thibodaux, a hurricane and tidal wave that destroyed Last Island leaving many casualties from Lafourche and Terrebonne, and the fierce hurricane of 1893 which destroyed the community known as Cheniere Caminada.

The Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux was established by Pope Paul VI in March, 1977, and the Most Reverend Warren L. Boudreaux, Bishop of Beaumont, TX, was named the first Ordinary. He was installed on June 5, 1977.

The diocese was formed with 36 church parishes and 14 Catholic schools already in place.

The Clarion Herald, the archdiocesan newspaper of New Orleans, published the first issue of its Houma-Thibodaux edition the year the diocese was established.

During that eventful year, Central Catholic High School in Morgan City became a diocesan high school, and the Chancery building at 1220 Aycock St. in Houma was dedicated by Bishop Boudreaux, followed by an open house.

The Diocesan Clergy Council was formed in 1978. On Aug. 7, 1978, Pope Paul VI, who had established the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux just a little over a year earlier, died. Pope John Paul I was installed as pontiff on Sept. 3, and died after only one month in office.

Pope John Paul II was elected pontiff. He was the first non-Italian pope since 1593.

Locally, the Mission of Sacred Heart in Stephenville, LA, became a part of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux in 1979. The mission name has since been changed to St. Rosalie in honor of longtime caretaker, Mrs. Rosalie Crochet.

The year 1980 was filled with firsts. The first diocesan school board was established, the first issue of the *Bayou Catholic* was published and the first annual Bishop's Stewardship Appeal was announced by Bishop Boudreaux.

A Vietnamese parish, Thanh Gia (Holy Family) was established in 1981 in Amelia. A new monastery of Dominican cloistered nuns was established in the diocese, also in 1981.

Bishop Boudreaux officiated groundbreaking ceremonies for the Archives Building on the Nicholls State University campus during 1982. The Historical Research Center was dedicated by Bishop Boudreaux in 1983.

A new parish was established in Thibodaux in 1983, with the name Christ the Redeemer. A retreat center was opened in the diocese in 1985. Local artists donated more than 100 paintings and other works of art to be displayed in the retreat center. A dedication ceremony for the Lumen Christi Retreat Center was held on June 2, 1985.

Hurricane Juan inflicted massive damage from flooding in many areas of the diocese in 1985.

An addition to the Lumen Christi Retreat Center was dedicated on Jan. 18, 1986, the Father Souby Building (a youth retreat facility).

In that same year, Bishop Boudreaux issued a policy to rid the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux of all gambling and fairs as a means of church support. St. Lucy parish in Houma and St. Luke parish in Thibodaux were re-established.

The former TBW Building, located on Hwy. 311 in Schriever, adjacent to Lumen Christi Retreat Center, was purchased in 1986 for the new Chancery office. The following year the Chancery was opened and dedicated by Bishop Boudreaux. The open house coincided with Bishop Boudreaux's 25th anniversary as a bishop and the 10th anniversary of the diocese.

The Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux began broadcasting locally-originated shows and programs from the Catholic Television Network of America (CTNA) in 1987.

A new church, administration offices and a rectory were blessed for Christ the Redeemer in Thibodaux in 1987. The next year, the new Maria Immacolata Church and administration building was blessed and dedicated.

The LaSalette Fathers left the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux after more than 50 years of service due to a lack of priest personnel in their order during 1988.

Bishop Boudreaux celebrated his 30th anniversary as bishop, 50th anniversary as priest and the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, its 15th anniversary in the year 1992.

In August of 1992, Hurricane Andrew hit the area causing damage primarily to the Morgan City area and lower Terrebonne Parish.

On Dec. 29, 1992, Bishop Boudreaux officially announced the acceptance of his retirement and the appointment of the bishop-designate Michael Jarrell.

With the beginning of 1993 came news of two diocesan school closures, Sacred Heart Elementary School in Morgan City and St. Hilary Elementary School in Mathews.

Bishop Michael Jarrell was ordained and installed bishop of the Houma-Thibodaux diocese at ceremonies on March 4, 1993, at St. Francis de Sales Cathedral. That year, Bishop Jarrell appointed diocesan officials and created a Bishop's Cabinet.

In 1994, Bishop Jarrell restated and clarified the ban on fairs and fundraisers for church support in the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux.

The year 1995 brought some progress and some sadness to the diocese. The outlook for Catholic schools in the diocese was considered in a long-range strategic plan, Bishop Boudreaux released his autobiography entitled *Memoirs of a Cajun Bishop*, while Father Robert Melancon was accused of improper behavior with a minor. Bishop Jarrell visited parishes most affected by the accusation.

In 1996, two parishes, Christ the Redeemer and St. John the Evangelist parishes in Thibodaux, were the first to be linked as part of the pastoral staffing plan of the diocese. Bishop Jarrell released his pastoral on Catholic schools that same year.

The diocese bid farewell to the last two Mt. Carmel sisters serving in the diocese in 1997. This order had existed in Thibodaux since before the Civil War, staffing the girls' school and St. Joseph Hospital.

On October 6, 1997, the diocese mourned the passing of Bishop Boudreaux who died at the age of 79. His body was waked at the four corners of the diocese as he had willed.

This same year the Bishop's Stewardship Appeal took on a new name and look. It was renamed the Annual Bishop's Appeal.

In 1998, St. Patrick in Gibson and St. Lawrence in Chacahoula merged into one parish. It was the first and only merge of its kind in the diocese to date. The two parishes took on the name of St. Lawrence.

Also in 1998, RENEW 2000 began in the diocese as small sharing groups which met seasonally until Pentecost 2000; however, the meeting of small Christian communities carries on to the present.

At the beginning of 2000, the *Bayou Catholic* newspaper took on a new look with a fresh layout, more color and a larger variety of columnists and features. Also, that year, Msgr. James B. Songy's book *Questions and Answers for Catholics* was released. Also, that year, Internet users were able to access the new diocesan website online.

In June of 2000, 4,000 faithful turned out for a festive, ecumenical celebration of music, song, drama and speech at the Houma-Terrebonne Civic Center to celebrate Pentecost 2000.

The entire year of 2002 was filled with celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the diocese with its theme "One Faith, Many Cultures."

In spring 2002, the Cathedral of St. Francis de Sales in Houma underwent a major restoration, which was completed in time for the diocesan 25th anniversary Mass in June.

In April of the 25th anniversary year, the book *Celebrating Faith Along the Bayous*, a pictorial and historical book on the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, was released.

On Sept. 26, 2002, Tropical Storm Isidore dumped 12 inches of rain on Aycock Street in Houma damaging St. Lucy Church and Child Development Center.

Hurricane Lili flooded the areas of Grand Caillou, Montegut, Golden Meadow and Pointe-aux-Chenes when it made landfall on Oct. 3, 2002.

In response to the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux set up a Child Protection Contact Line on Nov. 4, 2002.

At a press conference at the Pastoral Center on Nov. 8, 2002, it was announced that Bishop Michael Jarrell, the Second Bishop of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, had been appointed as the Sixth Bishop of the Diocese of Lafayette.

Twenty-six Papal Awards and 158 Bishop's Medals were presented by Bishop Michael Jarrell to outstanding lay men and women of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux at the Cathedral of St. Francis de Sales on Nov. 24, 2002.

A draft of the diocesan policy for the Protection of Children and Young People was submitted for review to all parishioners of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux on Dec. 5, 2002.

Bishop Michael Jarrell was installed as the Sixth Bishop of the Diocese of Lafayette on Dec. 18, 2002, at St. John the Evangelist Cathedral in Lafayette.

Msgr. Joseph N. Latino was elected as diocesan administrator on Dec. 19, 2002. As administrator, he was charged with the responsibility of overseeing the operations of the diocese until a new bishop could be elected.

On Jan. 11, 2003, at a press conference at the St. Francis de Sales rectory, the announcement was made that Msgr. Latino had been appointed the 10th Bishop of the Diocese of Jackson, MS.

Msgr. James Songy was appointed apostolic administrator of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, effective Jan. 20, 2003. Msgr. Songy replaced bishop-designate Latino.

Also in January 2003, Vandebilt Catholic High School in Houma announced that they were moving to the president-principal model of administration for the school year 2003-2004.

At a press conference at the diocesan Pastoral Center on Aug. 1, 2003, it was announced that Bishop Sam G. Jacobs of the Diocese of Alexandria had been appointed as the Third Bishop of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux.

Capacity crowds were in attendance at both St. Joseph Co-Cathedral in Thibodaux and the Cathedral of St. Francis de Sales for the evening prayer service and installation Mass for Bishop Jacobs on Oct. 9 and 10, 2003.

Msgr. James B. Songy was appointed vicar general of the diocese in October 2003.

Bishop Jacobs decreed the enactment of a revised "Policy for the Protection of Children and Young People," which became effective Oct. 24, 2003.

In November 2003, all diocesan employees and volunteers who work with or have contact with children and young adults in the church parishes, schools and institutions of the diocese attended educational training workshops concerning safe environments for young people.

Father Jay L. Baker was appointed vicar general of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux effective Dec. 15, 2003. He replaced Msgr. James B. Songy who was serving in that capacity since October.

On Dec. 12, 2003, at a press conference at the St. Joseph Co-Cathedral rectory in Thibodaux, the appointment of Father Oscar A. Solis as Titular Bishop of Urchi and Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles, CA, was announced. He was the first Filipino-American to be ordained a bishop in the United States.

A special liturgy was celebrated at St. Lucy Church in Houma in May 2004 upon the completion of extensive renovations that the church underwent following flooding from Tropical Storm Isidore in September 2002.

In September 2004, church parishes across the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux were getting ready for “The Diocesan Census of 2005.” Every parish of the diocese conducted a census in the spring of 2005.

Also in September 2004, the Eucharistic Missionaries of St. Dominic ended their service to Holy Family Church parish in Grand Caillou, where they had been serving for the past 65 years.

Over 150,000 people died in the Indian Ocean Tsunami disaster on Dec. 26, 2004. A special collection was taken up in the diocese for the Tsunami victims. Over \$155,000 was sent to Catholic Relief Services, the largest amount ever collected for a disaster from the diocese, as of that date.

Following the completion of an audit by the Gavin Group, Inc., it was announced in January 2005 that the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux was fully compliant with all articles of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*.

Six soldiers of the Houma-based Black Sheep Company of the National Guard were killed in Iraq January 2005. The six men were honored at a prayer service at the Cathedral of St. Francis de Sales the same month.

The diocesan Office of Hispanic Ministry was formed in February 2005, with Father Nelson Restrepo named as its first director.

The Knights of Peter Claver Father John Grooten Council No. 126 was recognized during a Mass at Sacred Heart Church in Morgan City in February 2005 for its faithful presence in Morgan City for over 50 years.

Pope John Paul II died April 2, 2005, at the age of 84. His funeral was celebrated April 8, at St. Peter's Square. The faithful of the diocese mourned the death of Pope John Paul II through prayers, prayer services and Masses. Hundreds of people gathered to remember the late pope at a memorial Mass celebrated by Bishop Jacobs at the Cathedral of St. Francis de Sales.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger of Germany was chosen as the successor to John Paul II on April 19, 2005, and took the name Benedict XVI.

Bishop Jacobs issued a pastoral letter on "The Year of the Eucharist" in April 2005.

In May 2005, the Bayou Confirmation committee presented the new confirmation program to confirmation coordinators, catechists and pastors from throughout the diocese. Confirmation students of the diocese will now have more complete confirmation training through their 11th grade year.

In honor of the Year of the Eucharist a special eucharistic procession was held in Houma on the feast of Corpus Christi on May 29, 2005.

In August 2005, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille celebrated 150 years of dedicated service. Locally, four Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille minister to the people of the diocese in the areas of healthcare and social ministries.

On Aug. 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated Southeast Louisiana and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Floodwaters left thousands homeless in New Orleans. People of the diocese provided much needed comfort and support to those affected by the storm. Emergency

shelters were set up throughout the diocese to care for evacuees locally. Catholic schools of the diocese welcomed hundreds of students who were displaced by the hurricane.

Hurricane Rita made landfall along the Louisiana/Texas border on Sept. 24, 2005.

Thousands of residents along lower Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes within the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux were forced to flee the floodwaters to shelters at area high schools and recreation centers. Hurricane Rita's floodwaters devastated thousands of homes in the southern portion of the diocese.

A Mass marking the closing of the Year of the Eucharist was celebrated on Oct. 23, 2005, at the Cathedral of St. Francis de Sales.

The diocese launched a conference ministry in November 2005. The vision for this ministry is to host events, conferences and gatherings that will provide solid teachings, testimonies, praise and worship, music and fellowship with other Catholics in the same age or peer group.

St. Joseph Co-Cathedral in Thibodaux underwent a major restoration during 2005. The project, which took over five months, was completed just in time for Christmas Masses.

As of January 2006, the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux had received \$5,903,387 in response to the needs of the area after the unprecedented back-to-back hurricanes that devastated much of the Gulf South.

The first Women of God Conference was held Feb. 3-5, 2006, at Vandebilt Catholic High School in Houma.

In March 2006, the Franciscans of St. John the Baptist Province, who had been serving the people of Houma at Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Church parish since 1986 and

St. Lucy Church parish since 1997, returned the care of the parishes to the bishop of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux.

A Sesquicentennial Jubilee Mass marking 150 years of Catholic education in Thibodaux was celebrated in March 2006 at E.D. White Catholic High School in Thibodaux.

The first Steubenville on the Bayou youth conference was held on the campus of Nicholls State University in Thibodaux in June 2006. The event attracted 2,500 youth and adults.

In June 2006, E.D. White Catholic High School in Thibodaux announced that it was moving to the president-principal model of administration effective for the 2006-2007 school year.

Bishop Jacobs delivered a pastoral letter in March 2007 in conjunction with the 30th anniversary of the Diocese of Houma Thibodaux. The pastoral, entitled “Be Renewed to Renew” set the tone for the vision and spiritual renewal strived for in the diocese.

In March 2007, the first of the yearlong celebrations in conjunction with the 30th anniversary, the Diocesan Leadership Conference, was held on the campus of Nicholls State University in Thibodaux. Approximately 400 diocesan employees and parish leaders attended the event. Msgr. Raymond East, a nationally recognized speaker serving as the executive director of the Office of Black Catholics and vicar for evangelization for the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., was the keynote speaker of the conference, which featured workshops, prayer, food and fellowship. Every diocesan office set up a booth at the conference to provide parish leaders with information about the services provided by the office.

Other diocesan events which took place during the 30th anniversary year included an Evening Prayer Service at St. Joseph Co-Cathedral in Thibodaux on Monday, June 4, and

a diocesan Anniversary Mass on Tuesday, June 5 at the Cathedral of St. Francis de Sales in Houma with music provided by a special diocesan multi-ethnic choir.

An Open House at the Pastoral Center and Lumen Christi Retreat Center in Schriever was held in October, and a eucharistic procession from St. Luke Catholic Church to St. Joseph Co-Cathedral in Thibodaux marked the closing of the diocesan 30th anniversary year.

In September 2007 the diocesan Office of Religious Education implemented its new Adult Faith Formation Program. Bishop Jacobs issues a pastoral letter entitled “A Time to Pray for Wisdom, Love and Guidance” concerning the “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People” which had been issued by the USCCB.

Bishop Jacobs designated 2008 as the “Year of the Family” in the diocese. The Sisters of Mount Carmel celebrated 175 years of ministry in Louisiana in 2008. Also, in 2008 the diocese launched a revitalized, more interactive website.

Pope Benedict XVI made his first trip as pope to the United States in April 2008.

The first diocesan wellness celebration and health fair was held at the Pastoral Center in May 2008.

Hurricane Gustav made landfall near Cocodrie Sept. 1, 2008, causing widespread damage to the coastal areas. Two weeks after Hurricane Gustav made landfall, Hurricane Ike brushed the coastline and flooded hundreds of homes in low lying areas of the diocese. Bishop Jacobs declared 2009 as the “Year of the Word” in the diocese. The first Junior High Faith Experience sponsored by the diocesan Office of Youth Ministry was held in January 2009 at St. Hilary Church parish in Mathews. Approximately 340 youth and adults were in attendance.

The groundbreaking for the expansion of the Pastoral Center building project was held February 2009. The addition will include a meeting facility with a maximum capacity of about 400 people and administrative offices that will house approximately 10-12 staff. Catholic Social Services changed its name to Catholic Charities Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux in March 2009, in order to better take advantage of the recognition Catholic Charities USA received in recent years for its excellent work.

On June 12, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI named Bishop Gregory M. Aymond, a native of New Orleans, as archbishop of New Orleans.

Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed June 19, 2009, to June 19, 2010, as the Year for Priests, a time of special focus on the world's Catholic priests. Locally, priests across the diocese were honored at various events.

The diocese sponsored a new monthly lunchtime speaker series entitled "Food for the Journey." Priests of the diocese were featured as speakers.

A ministry of Catholic presence was instituted at the Southland Mall in Houma during the months of November and December 2009.

The pastoral center expansion dedication was held Jan. 31, 2010. Bishop Sam G. Jacobs blessed the addition to the pastoral center which was named in honor of Bishop Michael Jarrell, the Second Bishop of the diocese.

The New Orleans Saints won Super Bowl XLIV in Miami, FL, on Feb. 7, 2010.

The Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux became the first diocese in the State of Louisiana to receive diocesan accreditation for its quality school system from the AdvancED Accreditation Commission in March 2010.

The Deepwater Horizon drilling rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico on April 20, 2010, killing 11 workers and unleashing millions of gallons of crude oil for several months.

Lumen Christi Retreat Center in Schriever celebrated its 25th anniversary in June 2010.

Bishop Sam G. Jacobs appointed Deacon Jim Swiler as the new chancellor of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux in July 2010.

In December 2010 Bishop Jacobs announced in a Pastoral Letter that the year 2011 would be a “Year of Reconciliation” in the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux. At the end of June 2011, after 24 years as superintendent of Catholic Schools, Sister Immaculata Paisant, M.S.C., left the diocese, thus bringing to an end a 141-year presence of the Marianites of the Holy Cross in the area which now comprises the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux.