



July 23, 2018

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE

DIAMOND ANNIVERSARY PLUS FIVE IN BROUSSARD, LA

Father Jerome LeDoux, SVD

Seventy-five years ago, Harold Robert Perry was entering his final year of theology at Saint Augustine Major Seminary in Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi. At the age of 13, I was just beginning my first year of studies in Saint Augustine Minor Seminary in September, 1943. Homesick after some hours of my first day there, I sat down on the steps of the auditorium and cried myself to sleep. Evidently alerted by someone, Harold approached me and we talked about my homesickness. Buoyed by his words, I got up, walked around and was soon running wild with the other boys. That was my first and only instance of homesickness in the seminary.

How many others did Harold help along the way? He was ordained to the priesthood on January 6, 1944. He was the 26th African American to be ordained a Catholic priest. Unbelievably, there was just over a score of U.S. black priests at that time, compared to about 250 now, most of them not members of the Society of the Divine Word. There are also well over 400 black permanent deacons now.

His first assignment was as associate pastor at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Lafayette until 1948, when he was transferred to Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in Saint Martinville. Next, he served at Saint Peter Church in Pine Bluff, Arkansas 1949-51 and at Saint Gabriel Church in Mound Bayou, Mississippi 1951-52, before returning to Louisiana in 1952 as founding pastor of Saint Joseph Church in Broussard, Louisiana. Thus, sixty-five years ago, during his six years as pastor, he built the church, rectory and school. Reflecting on Father Harold Perry's historic pastorate at Saint Joseph Church in Broussard in 1952, I penned the following reflections on his ministry March 30, 2009.

"Il semble comme nous!" (He looks like us).

With recognition and pleasure, the Creole-speaking gens de couleur (colored people) of the townlet of Broussard (circa 10,000), Louisiana proudly commented on the image of Jesus Christ concreted in relief against the wall above the front entrance of their spanking new church.

"He looks like us!" they exulted, much to the delight of their new pastor, Rev. Harold Robert Perry, S.V.D. After all, years ahead of his time, it was a bold statement back in 1952 for him to dare depict Jesus with obviously Negroid features. As I introduced a parish revival there at Saint Joseph Church in 2014, I was pleased to learn that many recalled having said that at their church's birth.

Since his ordination on January 6, 1944, Father Perry had cut his pastoral teeth under the tutelage of the first four black SVDs ordained in Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi May 23, 1934: Anthony Bourges, Maurice Rousseve, Vincent Smith and Francis Wade.

Taught well by the Famous Four, Harold, a native of Lake Charles 83 miles to the west, was now on his own in the middle of Acadiana, surrounded by sugar cane as far as the eye could see, plus Louisiana yams, soybeans and other favorite staples.

Led by Father Thomas James, S.V.D., the current pastor of Saint Joseph Church in Broussard, Louisiana, the parishioners of Saint Joseph Church hosted a Founder's Day Prayer Breakfast of Gratitude at the Bishop Perry Learning Center of the church on Saturday, July 14, 2018 at 9:00 a.m. Saints Joseph/Anthony Gospel choir fired all with *Lead Me Guide Me*, keying a 30-minute prayer service of gratitude that segued into breakfast, then remarks by Doctor James Perry, D.D.S., the youngest and only-surviving Bishop Perry's sibling. A Gospel choir song preceded the guest speaker, Perry cousin Father Jerome LeDoux, S.V.D. Petitions written by the folks were burned ritually. A song led into the presentation of a glass-etched portrait of Bishop Harold Perry to his family and another to the people of Saint Joseph Church. Father Thomas James offered a joyous closing prayer of thanksgiving.

For the adventurous, a trolley car awaited Saturday afternoon to tour Longfellow-Evangeline State Historic Site, Avery Island and other desirable sites.

Bishop Charles Michael Jarrell and concelebrants led a festive Mass of thanksgiving with a full house in Saint Joseph Church at 10:00 a.m., Sunday morning. A light reception in the Bishop Perry Learning Center concluded the festivities.

Named Rector of his Alma Mater, Saint Augustine Divine Word Seminary in Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi in 1958, Father Perry was elected Provincial Superior of the SVD Southern province of the U.S.A., in 1964. He was ordained a bishop for the Archdiocese of New Orleans by Archbishop Egidio Vagnozzi, the Apostolic Nuncio to the U.S., on January 6, 1966 in the Cathedral-Basilica of Saint Louis, King of France.

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"God is love, and all who abide in love abide in God and God in them." (1 John 4:16)