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## Fayette St. Anne Parish

“**Y**ou are already shining brightly for me. It is a wonderful thing to be among your goodness. It’s like being given charge of Fort Knox. No, it’s much greater than that because you are more valuable to me than all the gold in the world.”

You have just read the closing lines of a love letter — not one found somewhere in a dusty attic, nor even one from a man to a woman, but one from a pastor to his congregation.

“The people don’t want ‘good ideas’ from their priest,” explains Father Richard Wagner, SSJ, pastor of St. Anne Parish, Fayette. “They want to see his heart.”

So, every morning after 7 a.m. Mass, Father Wagner reveals his heart to his congregation in a letter. Are these love

letters responsible for the special spirit one senses among the parishioners at St. Anne? Perhaps, or maybe Father’s letters affirm a goodness that has been growing there all along.

### Rich early history

Jefferson County is old and its earliest history — even before the See of Natchez was established by papal decree in 1837 — is too rich to resist.

The Natchez Trace cuts through part of the county which was called Pickering at first. In 1801, the name was changed to Jefferson in honor of the current president, Thomas Jefferson.

Before that new century, however, the first Baptist church in Mississippi had been established at the mouth of Cole’s

Creek, a county landmark, and the state's first cotton gin had been built by a Jefferson County black man. Lanky, raw-boned Andrew Jackson had followed his beloved Rachel here to claim her hand in 1791 at "Springfield," a plantation near Fayette.

Two notorious Natchez Trace outlaws, members of the Mason gang, were captured in Natchez in 1804 trying to claim the \$2,000 reward for the head of their leader and Revolutionary War veteran, Samuel Mason.

Wiley "Little" Harp and James Mayes were tried, convicted and executed in Greenville, Jefferson County's first county seat, and as a gory warning to future thieves, their heads were stuck on poles at opposite ends of the town.

Aaron Burr was apprehended at a county home in 1807 by the territorial militia, but he escaped and was recaptured in Mobile, Ala.

122 And Andrew Jackson returned, this time as a general. He had high praise for the soldiers from Jefferson, Adams, Amite and Wilkinson counties who, under the command of Gen. Thomas Hinds, for whom Hinds County was named, had successfully defended his flank against a British division during the War of 1812.

"You have this day been the astonishment of one army," said Jackson, "the admiration of another."

In 1825, Fayette was given its name in honor of a French general, Marquis de Lafayette, who was visiting in Natchez at the time. Three old Jefferson County men, veterans of the Revolution, were taken to Natchez to greet the general who "embraced and kissed the men and they all cried like babies."

And all of this — and much more, only slightly less spectacular — took place in Jefferson County before Bishop John Joseph Chanche arrived in nearby Natchez on the night of May 18, 1841, unheralded, unmet and alone.

Our first bishop had come from a life of wealth, privilege and comfort in his native Maryland. In 1832, for example, he had assisted at the deathbed of America's most prominent Catholic, Charles Carroll, the only Catholic signer of the Declaration of Independence.

When Bishop Chanche arrived in Natchez that May night to begin to shepherd Mississippi's 10,000 Catholics, his new diocese was without a single church and his two priests, on loan from Louisiana, were planning to leave shortly.

### First diocesan priest

Recruiting priests became an immediate priority, one that would send the bishop to visit European seminaries. But the first priest to visit Fayette was a maverick Frenchman from Canada who had wandered down the Trace to Natchez, stayed a few years and then left.

His name was Father Rene Francois, and before he left, he had begun the first organized ministry to the slaves on the area plantations. The baptismal records at Fayette indicate he was in the town on May 4, 1844.

One of Bishop Chanche's French recruits was young John Andrew Fierabras who arrived in the diocese a deacon but was ordained by the bishop in Natchez in March 1850.

Almost immediately, he was appointed pastor of Port Gibson, an assignment which included the rest of Claiborne County and all of Jefferson County, as well.

Young Father Fierabras did not confine his ministries to Catholics alone, but made significant attempts at evangelizing both the white Protestants in the towns and the slaves at the numerous plantations in the area.

In 1852, he wrote to Bishop Chanche, "Finally, I baptized 23 Negroes on a plantation between Rodney and Port Gibson. All the adults are preparing for

baptism.”

This missionary was a great advocate of Catholic libraries, of making Catholic books available to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. And he had a master plan for spreading the faith in the remote areas.

### Small churches

It involved building a number of small, plain Catholic churches all over the countryside to familiarize “our separated brethren with the word Catholic, constrain them to look upon us as resembling other men, and finally to agree that fundamentally we are not as absurd as they first supposed.”

And St. Anne Parish developed in very nearly that way.

Most of the parishioners at the present parish can trace their roots to one of three small, plain country churches — one for blacks, two for whites.

Whether these little mission churches made really significant inroads on “our separated brethren,” is debatable except for St. Anthony in Harriston. What they did do was help nurture the faith of a few devout families and enable them to pass it down to their children and grandchildren.

And the proof of this is found not only in the parish at Fayette today but in the vocations which come from the missions. The grandson of one mission founder became a priest. The great-grandson of another founder became one, too. And a number of the girls chose religious life.

But Father Fierabras did not see his prophesy fulfilled. His first assignment was also his last. He died of yellow fever in 1853, leaving St. Joseph Church in Port Gibson and the Catholics in Jefferson County to be attended by Natchez priests for the greater part of the next 100 years.

Fayette is only mentioned twice in the diocesan archive for the years that remained of the 19th century. Father Germain Marty visited there in 1871, and, two years later, Father Daniel Jones was in

attendance. Mass was celebrated in homes until the little mission churches were built.

Mr. and Mrs. William Cogan of the now extinct village of Stonington, a few miles south of Red Lick, opened their home for Mass occasionally.

In Red Lick — and the natives give the accent to the word lick — two brothers, Joseph and James Brown, in 1907, built St. Mary of the Pines Mission on land they had donated for that purpose. Msgr. John M. Prendegast was then pastor of St. Mary Cathedral in Natchez.

### Natchez priests

For nearly 50 years, Natchez priests came once a month to St. Mary of the Pines to offer Mass for the small Catholic congregation there, most of the members related to the Brown family.

Before a church was built at Red Lick, two cousins became Sisters of Mercy — Sister Siena Cogan and Sister Genevieve Chandler. Both taught in schools throughout the state.

Later, near McNair, at a spot called Gilbert Place, James Gilbert erected a little church, St. James. Father Daniel J. O’Hanlon was the founding priest and this place, too, was served by Natchez pastors. The congregation was made up primarily of Gilbert relatives. Two vocations, those of Father James Gilbert, Gilbert’s grandson, and Sister Virginia Dulaney, DC, came from St. James Mission at Gilbert Place.

Both St. Mary of the Pines and St. James were churches for whites. The mission for blacks was St. Anthony at Harriston, and, for a time, this one included not only a church, but a one-room, six grade Catholic school as well.

Melissa Wright Vauce, a black convert, was the great-grandmother or the great-great-aunt of a number of the adult parishioners at the present parish. She donated the land upon which the church

was built.

She instilled in her only child, Amanda Vauce Harris, such a deep love for God and for his children that Mrs. Harris became a sort of local missionary. A midwife, steeped in the knowledge of herbal medicine, she visited the sick in the community, carrying with her the Good News, and leading by her example many of the people she cared for to accept Catholicism.

The legacy of these two good women is a living one at St. Anne. The bulk of the parish is made up of people from Harriston, most of them related to one another, most of them now with the last name of Brinkley.

Mrs. Harris' grandson, Elbert Harris Jr., now deceased, became a Josephite priest. And Edith Brinkley became Sister Ethel Brinkley, a Sister of the Holy Family. Until the 1960s, St. Anthony continued as a mission of Holy Family, the parish for blacks in Natchez.

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### An integrated parish

As you may have guessed by now, St. Anne is an integrated parish. From these three missions and from people whose backgrounds are diverse, a genuine parish family has been forged, but the forging of St. Anne was not painless. This is how it happened.

By the late 1940s, the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity (ST), commonly called Trinitarians, were staffing St. Joseph Parish in Port Gibson. It was decided to build a church at Fayette.

Considering the town's long history and the fact that it had been the county seat for more than a century, it is surprising that no Catholic church had been built there before.

Apparently, there had been strong anti-Catholic sentiment in the town. The Ku Klux Klan was active there, and, even as late as 1948, land on which to build a

Catholic church in Fayette had to be purchased with deception. Father Timothy Lynch, ST, the pastor at Port Gibson, with the help of a local convert, Gordon Myers, purchased a lot.

It was left to Father Athanasius Goode, ST, Father Lynch's successor, to found the new parish. Through the generosity of the John Tully family of Chicago, who gave \$20,000 through the Extension Society, the church was built.

It was dedicated to St. Anne, the mother of the Blessed Virgin, in memory of Anna Tully, John Tully's mother, by Bishop Richard Gerow on Dec. 10, 1950.

St. Anne was serving primarily the Fayette white Catholics who had been attending Mass for years at Port Gibson, at Rodney or at one of the two missions for whites nearer to Fayette. Responsibility for St. Mary of the Pines at Red Lick and St. James at Gilbert Place was at this time removed from Natchez to St. Anne.

Bishop Gerow's diary indicates, by the late 1950s, there were racial troubles at St. Anne, troubles so severe that the bishop took an unprecedented step.

From time to time, blacks had attended Mass at St. Anne, and some of the white parishioners objected. When Bishop Gerow heard some of the blacks had been threatened not to attend services at the church again, he made a surprise visit to Fayette.

It was on an August night in 1958. The Holy Name Society was meeting. In his diary, Bishop Gerow recalls explaining the seriousness of preventing a Catholic from attending Mass.

Then, he said, "Should such an incident occur in the future, those who are guilty of it are not to receive absolution until the matter has been referred to me.... In other words, on a local basis, I made it a reserved sin — the first time in the 34 years of my episcopacy that I have ever reserved a sin to myself."

The late '60s decision to close St.

Anthony Mission has had an impact on the sort of community St. Anne Parish has become. The first Sunday blacks attended Mass at St. Anne en masse saw the exit of a number of white parishioners, a great many of whom have never returned to St. Anne.

Today's parish is made up of the black families whose roots are in the Harriston mission and the whites who have remained faithful to the parish.

A Josephite priest, Father William Morrissey, was the pastor until his death in 1983. He was a controversial figure in Fayette, involving himself in community matters as well as in matters which pertained to the parish alone, and he put his life in danger.

Twice he was fired upon — once in town and another time on a deserted country road.

His death to diabetes in '83 ended a life of great service to St. Anne Parish and to Jefferson County. He is given credit for leading the parish through difficult years.

### Love letters

Like his predecessors, Father Wagner is the pastor of two parishes — St. Anne in Fayette and Holy Family in Natchez. But this man has another interest, as well. He is involved in the Marriage Encounter movement.

It has been through Marriage Encounter that he has learned the value of love letters. "The letters help me stay vulnerable, help me stay in touch with my feelings toward my parishioners," he says.

He believes the strong marriages in his parish have made St. Anne strong, and he is probably right.

Willie Ethel Brinkley from Harriston, married to Leonard Brinkley for over 40 years and the mother of six living children, has her own formula for a successful marriage: "Hard work and lots of love."

And love keeps cropping up in this parish. The parishioners are comfortable

with this word, comfortable with using it to describe how they feel about one another.

If one were a romantic, one would give credit to the ghosts of Andrew Jackson and Rachel Donaldson who married up the road apiece, loved each other long and well, and suffered because of it.

But something else is at work here. There is no "typical" parishioner at St. Anne, no stereotype, no profile. From Cleora Cogan, who is white, widowed twice, farms alone and lives alone in a house built in 1849; to Dr. Lenore Collins, a retired black woman who returned to Jefferson County after a lifetime career in the Midwest; to Mrs. Brinkley, a black convert from her early marriage, who gathered her children in her bedroom each night for the family rosary; the ties that bind these people together are love for the church and love for home.

Did the little mission churches have something to do with that? "If you missed Mass on a Sunday," says Mrs. Cogan, who was a member of St. Mary of the Pines, "it was a terrible thing to have to wait two months to go to Mass."

Whatever has made these people, this place, and this parish special, its story is a success story. It is good news. And, to borrow from the love letter of the pastor, it has been a wonderful thing to be among such goodness.

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