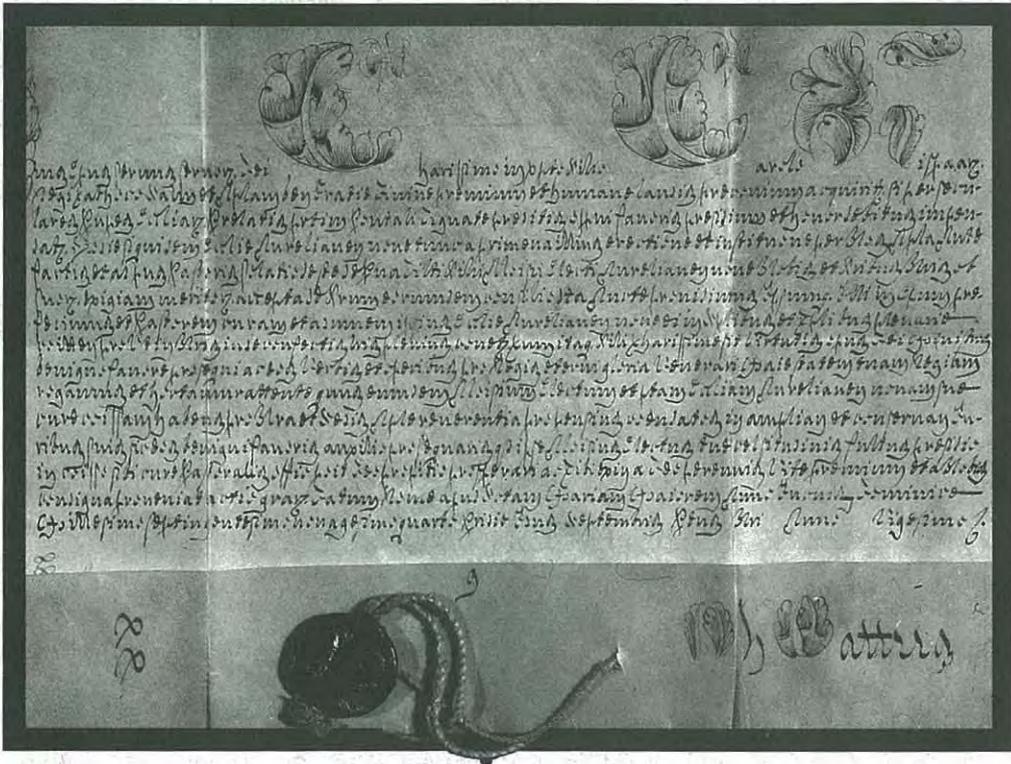


CROSS CROZIER AND CRUCIBLE



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of a Catholic Diocese in Louisiana**

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Missionaries Compromised: Early Evangelization of Slaves and Free People of Color in North Louisiana

by
Elizabeth Shown Mills and Gary B. Mills

Catholic missionaries in colonial and antebellum Louisiana were fired by faith and felled by frustration. The evangelization of nonwhites was, by the Church's own standards, a failure. In retrospect, the greatest miracle of the endeavor seems to be the degree to which the seeds of faith did take root and survive among people of a more ancient culture who had one message imposed upon them by their new ministers and another by their new masters.

Demographic Framework

Chroniclers of Louisiana society have traditionally portrayed a dual environment: the *real* Louisiana, which centered (of course) upon New Orleans and the southern parishes; and the *other* Louisiana, somewhere within the farther reaches of the modern state. Intellectually undefined even yet, the "North Louisiana" created by early French and Spanish settlers is nonetheless assumed to be drastically different from its southern counterpart. The present essay examines one small facet of life on Louisiana's nebulous frontier, with a twin objective: first to place early Creole Catholic treatment of slaves and free people of color into sharper historical focus; and, second, to provide part of a framework for studying North Louisiana society against the better known southern parishes.

The modern city of Alexandria serves as a convenient divider for the two societies. Above this, few early Catholic congregations existed. Overshadowing all was the outpost of Natchitoches; created in 1714, it boasted a resident priest (intermittently) from 1729 and sprawled across some twenty-two thousand square miles. Avoyelles, on the lower Red River, next earned parish status in 1796. Priests from both posts served the middle settlement of Rapides (present Pineville-Alexandria) until 1849—a blessing in retrospect, since the records subsequently created at Alexandria were destroyed during the Red River Campaign of the Civil War. Smaller

chapels, visited occasionally by itinerant priests, thinly dotted the rest of the region until the 1853 creation of the Diocese of Natchitoches resulted in a spate of new parishes.

Theological Roots

Slavery existed in the Louisiana colony almost from its founding; and the souls of the bonded were necessarily the concern of the Church. The spiritual need of the servant and the religious responsibility of the master were integral parts of the morality in which colonial missionaries were instructed. Most would have studied Jean Benedicti and Antoine Blanchard, theologians whose manuals for confessors dwelled upon the sins to be guarded against in the master-servant relationship. According to Benedicti:

Masters who do not care about the salvation of their . . . servants, who do not try to correct their faults, and allow them to swear, blaspheme, fornicate, steal, etc., share in their sins. . . . Likewise, he who does not trouble about making them go to Mass, go to Confession, receive Communion, and have Extreme Unction administered to them [and] who keeps them busy on holy days with mechanical labour . . . all these people commit offenses. . . . Those who prevent their men and women servants from marrying . . . and who see that otherwise they will be in danger of fornicating and forming some guilty liaison, commit a sin.¹

The treatment of New World slaves by Catholic laymen and clerics was but an extension of the master-servant relationship already developed within French families. Although servitude, rather than slavery, was by then the rule within Europe, the moral dangers of the continental servant differed little from that of the colonial slave. Writing contemporaneously with the birth of the colony, Blanchard challenged all Catholic masters: "Have you not scandalized [your servants] by your bad example? Have you not uttered dirty words in their presence? Have you not said anything before the servant girls with evil intent? Have you not tempted them to [sins of the flesh] by promises and presents?"² Clearly, in the New World as in the Old, the missionary could never hope to win the souls of the "unenlightened" slave until and unless he overcame the cupidity of the master class that was, at least nominally, Christian already.

¹Jean Benedicti, *Somme des péchez* (Paris, 1601), bk. II, chapt. II, no. 41.

²As presented in J.-P. Migne, *Collection intégrale et universelle des orateurs sacrés du premier et du second ordre*, 99 vols. (Paris, 1844-1892), 32: cols. 1324-8.

Laws of Church and State

Louisiana's religious community did not, as a rule, question the morality of slavery. Although the institution was being phased out in Europe, it was generally accepted as necessary for taming the New World. In Louisiana, church personnel bought and sold Africans in accordance with the prevailing laws. It was the *conflict* between Church and civil law that first put the parish priests upon the proverbial horns of a dilemma; and it was the response of their flocks to each dilemma that stranded them there.

Louisiana's *Code Noir* was based upon long-standing Christian precepts of slave-master relations. It required masters to catechize their slaves and to provide for the infirm. It punished those who sexually exploited female servants. It forbade slave labor on Sundays and the many religious holidays. It proscribed the separation of slave couples or mothers from young children. But it also forbade the marriage of whites with blacks—slave or free—as well as the marriage of slaves without the consent of their masters.³ In so doing, it contravened the Church's tenet that any man and woman between whom there were no canonical impediments had the right to the sacrament of marriage.⁴

The priest who complied with the marriage provisos of the Code, in his own eyes, condemned Christian souls to lives of sin and eternal damnation. Nevermind that European youth needed parental consent to marry or that soldiers could not wed without military approval. Disabilities of minority and terms of enlistment were temporary matters. From a legal standpoint, slaves were perpetual children,⁵ and few could realistically hope for an end to their servitude. Slave and missionary were clearly in a moral box. The dynamics of the system and the economic interests of the master encouraged procreation, as did human needs. Slaves thus formed whatever unions the Code and their masters permitted, while the conscientious priest became a man of unreasonable expectations, condemning them for actions not of their choosing while purporting to teach them the love and forgiveness of his God.

³B. F. French, *Historical Collections of Louisiana*, 5 vols. (New York, 1851), III:89-95.

⁴Charles Edwards O'Neill, *Church and State in French Colonial Louisiana: Policy and Politics to 1732* (New Haven, 1966), p. 270.

⁵A perceptive discussion of this subject appears in Mathé Allain, "Slave Policies in French Louisiana," *Louisiana History*, 21 (1980): 127-37; hereafter *LH*.

Clerical Action and Reaction

Throughout most of the French regime, frontier laymen and clergymen contrived a satisfactory relationship. The intermittent priests of the first three decades were virtual shadow figures who baptized, married, buried, but otherwise left little track of their activities. Most quietly promoted the faith among a population that still clustered closely around the post. For the remainder of the century, however, the role of the frontier priest bore little resemblance to the model. Indeed, it went virtually haywire.

While the population of the Natchitoches jurisdiction tripled and quadrupled, while young males took to the woods and planter families moved away from the eye of the church, village priests seem to have lost their own sense of direction. Their civil records for the remainder of the century frequently revolve upon petty personalities and political activism. From Père Valentin of 1759, whose personal insults from the pulpit prompted his arrest and ejection from Natchitoches,⁶ through the incendiary Jacobin of the 1790s, Père Jean Delvaux, who was recalled and constrained by his superiors,⁷ the late-eighteenth-century servant of God in North Louisiana tended to be driven by concerns other than nurturing faith. In wholesale numbers, the frontier population slipped from the moral grasp of the Church.

Politics of the 1760s exacerbated the conflict between religious control and personal independence. The Spanish Capuchins were scandalized by the "irreligion" of French colonists and their slaves. In their view, the city flaunted its worldliness and much of the rural population had simply lost the faith after years of limited contact with it. A decade of clerical laments to Seville prompted the Royal Decree of 1788, imposing regulations that were unworkable for the colonists, rural authorities, or priests. Masters were to catechize promptly new imports and baptize them within a year. Outlying plantations were to install their own chaplains. Owners were to establish separate tasks and living quarters for unmarried males and females. To safeguard against exploitation, masters were to keep detailed records of each slave's hours of labor and work performed. Above all, the sexuality of slaves was to be channeled into holy wedlock.⁸

⁶Docs. 304, 308, French Archives, Office of the Clerk of Court, Natchitoches.

⁷For Delvaux's activities, see University of Notre Dame Archives, "Microfilm Edition of the Records of the Diocese of Louisiana and the Floridas" (hereafter "Records of the Diocese"), 12 reels (University of Notre Dame, 1967), Reel 1, "Calendar," under the beginning date of October 21, 1795; and Juan José Andreu Ocariz, "The Natchitoches Revolt," trans. Jack D. L. Holmes, *Louisiana Studies*, 3 (1964): 117-32.

⁸*Real cédula de su magestad sobre la educación, trato y ocupaciones de los esclavos en todos sus dominios de Indias é Islas Filipinos, Aranjuez, May 31, 1788* (Madrid, 1789).

A Plethora of Frontier Problems

Spiritual needs were real, but coercion was no solution. Implementing such measures would have required not merely a rebirth of piety but a restructuring of the very underpinnings of the colony. Systems of transportation, education, and economics would have needed a financial, material, and human investment that neither the crown nor the Church could afford.

Nature itself warred against religion in North Louisiana. Inspecting the area in 1796, one official reported "No other known river doubles upon itself so often in such a short distance . . . a point within hearing distance can only be reached by way of the river after a journey of two or more leagues. Windings are such that, for inhabitants who live only two leagues apart . . . it is necessary to cross the river once or twice, unsaddling the horses and making them swim."⁹ Eighty years had passed since Natchitoches had been founded. Its farms and ranches now spread over fifty miles in all directions. Yet, there was still no serviceable network of roads and no public funds to develop one.

Ordering the religious instruction of all slaves was clearly pointless, when the masters were equally deprived. As the Natchitoches curate reported in 1795: "The major part of the parishioners live a great distance from the post and are not able to come to the instructions that are held for them." And again in 1796: "The great distance of the inhabitants from the church makes it impossible for fathers and mothers to send their children to instruction classes. It would be desirable that little catechisms be held for them in their areas by those who know how to read."¹⁰ Therein lay another problem. One study of the region reveals that only thirty-eight percent of second generation frontiersmen were capable of even scrawling their names—and only twenty percent of the fifth generation.¹¹

The scheme to install chaplains on outlying plantations was doomed by the colony's economy and the Church's own limitations. The material wealth of the "typical" North Louisiana slaveholder remained at subsistence level throughout the century. In dejection, Father Pavie of Natchitoches wrote in 1798: "The church does not have a fixed fee schedule. The new vestry-board has received nothing, but efforts will be made to

⁹Lawrence and Lucia B. Kinnaid, "The Red River Valley in 1796," *LH*, 24 (1983): 191.

¹⁰Pavie to Peñalver, September 10, 1796 (1795 census); and Pavie to Peñalver [n.d.] (1796 census), Roll 6, "Records of the Diocese."

¹¹Elizabeth Shown Mills, "Family and Social Patterns of the Colonial Louisiana Frontier: A Quantitative Analysis, 1714-1803" (B.A. thesis, University of Alabama New College, 1981), p. 71.

collect the little that is due."¹² More painfully, an adequate supply of clergy never had existed. The lament by Father Raphaël in 1724—that "he did not have enough priests to minister to the whites, let alone the Negroes and Indians"¹³—became a perpetual refrain. And, throughout the century, any parish curate who posed a personal problem became a major crisis. If his flock could not live with him, his superiors could not afford to replace him.

Nor did these troubles abate after the sale of the colony to the United States. The Louisiana parishes were reassigned to the control of the remote, equally understaffed Diocese of Baltimore. Years elapsed during which North Louisiana had no resident priest at all. While the economy prospered from the introduction of cotton, that prosperity only worsened the spiritual neglect of the slaves who made wealth possible. As pointed out by the bishop of the adjacent Diocese of Natchez in 1858, providing religion to slaves was not simply an expensive burden for the planter but an impossible drain on the short supply of ministers. The slaves of four or five adjacent plantations "would fill up a church, with no room for white parishioners or the other Negroes."¹⁴

The culture of the African-American also thwarted Catholic evangelization. Protestantism, especially the more primitive frontier varieties, provided emotional outlets that were important to blacks; but physical exultation and spontaneity had no place in the Catholic liturgy. In the symbols and statuary of Catholicism, transported Africans did sense an echo of their own heritage, enabling them to adapt Christianity to their cultural needs. So long as the Catholic rite remained the only legal mode of worship, this adaptation sufficed. Out of it, orthodox Catholic piety developed in many black and mixed-race family lines. But from the 1780s onward, the injection of Protestantism into Louisiana, with its less-inhibited forms of worship, was yet another stumbling block for the already faltering Catholic missionary.¹⁵

¹²Pavie to Peñalver (1798 census, Parish of Natchitoches), "Records of the Diocese," Roll 7, n.d.

¹³As quoted in Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York, 1978), p. 113.

¹⁴Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York, 1990), p. 44.

¹⁵For excellent treatments of this subject see Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, and Randall M. Miller, "The Failed Mission: The Catholic Church and Black Catholics in the Old South," in Randall M. Miller and Jon L. Wakelyn, eds., *Catholics in the Old South: Essays on Church and Culture* (Macon, Ga., 1983), pp. 149-70.

Quantifying the Struggle

Little direct evidence exists to explain the role Catholicism played in the lives of black slaves of North Louisiana; and the telltale snatches left by certain elite freedmen reveal egocentric attitudes destructive to any black evangelization effort.¹⁶ The present study attempts to formulate conclusions by a probing analysis of sacramental registers and related civil documents created by individual parishioners.

Most striking is the dominance of baptism over such other recorded ceremonies as marriage, confirmation, and burial. (Virtually no data exists to quantify communions; and, apparently, no nonwhite from North Louisiana received holy orders before the twentieth century.) Earlier chroniclers of Louisiana Catholicism routinely cite thousands of black baptisms as evidence of the missionary's success. But equally quoted is the Church's lament that masters "usually" postponed the baptism of slaves for "several years" and sent slaves "to be baptized without specifying the sex, the age [or] the name of the mother," thus creating blanks in the baptismal registers.¹⁷ The experience of North Louisiana suggests that these generalizations deserve some tempering.

Baptismal Patterns

Throughout the French era, when most families clustered around the fort and mission, virtually all black and white baptisms occurred within a week of birth. The rare deviance was usually the child of a trader deep within the interior. This pattern generally held through the 1760s, even as farm families moved downriver to the Côte Joyeuse, some five to fifteen miles away as the crow flies (or double that by the twists of the river). The Spanish saw gradual but drastic changes, as the population increasingly wondered whether compliance with Church law was worth the personal hardships involved. For the most part, those changes seem rooted in individual reaction to the radical volatility of two drastically different priests who excited North Louisiana from 1775 to 1795.

The first Spanish Capuchin assigned to the area was a man pious, racially unbiased, but overbearing. When he arrived at Natchitoches, he signed his missives as "Father Luis de Quintanilla, who is supreme." The

¹⁶Gary B. Mills, "Piety and Prejudice: A Colored Catholic Community," in Miller and Wakelyn, eds., *Catholics in the Old South*, pp. 171-94; and Mills, "Liberté, Fraternité, and Everything but Egalité: Cane River's Citoyens de Couleur," in B. H. Gilley, ed., *North Louisiana: Volume One: To 1865; Essays on the Region and Its History* (Ruston, 1984), 93-112.

¹⁷For example, see Peñalver to Parish Priests, December 21, 1795, "Records of the Diocese," Reel 2; and Report of Father Sébastien Flavian Besançon, St. Charles des Allemands, December 29, 1795, "Records of the Diocese," Reel 1.

mounting resistance to his reforms eventually reduced his signature to "Father Luis de Quintanilla, humble servant."¹⁸ For his first half-decade, the registers reflect a mean of eleven days elapsing between births and baptisms of black infants within the post or down the Côte Joyeuse—still a tolerable record. In the waning years of his administration (1780-1783), however, the mean for nearby families increased to twenty-three days. Among households at Rivière aux Cannes, a settlement sprawling twenty-five to forty miles from the post, that mean fell to three months. The three free, nonwhite mothers who gave birth during Quintanilla's era did not present their infants for baptism for one, three, and thirty months, respectively.

The Francophile Jean Delvaux arrived in 1786, replacing the shortlived tenure of the relatively quiet Francisco de Caldez (1783-1785). To part of his flock, Delvaux was a "good sport," a *confrère* who shared their Jacobin designs. To the others, he was a hard-drinking, gambling, politico who ill-deserved reverence. His superiors ultimately relegated him to house arrest.¹⁹ Delvaux's lack of leadership, coming as it did on the heels of Quintanilla's dictatorial regime, sent frontier religion into a tailspin.

Delvaux's indifference to the enslaved manifested itself in numerous ways. From the start, he frequently rounded off ages of slave infants rather than register exact birth dates that the parishioners commonly supplied. Eventually, he gave up all pretense of recording ages. During the last half of his tenure, almost none of the families from distant Rivière aux Cannes or Bayou Pierre bothered to bring in slaves at all; and he made no spiritual demands upon them while traversing their neighborhood to agitate against the Spanish crown. Among townfolk living a short walk from the church, the delay between the birth and baptism of slave (and white) infants fell to a mean of fifteen days. That figure plummeted to four months among planters, and eleven months among free people of color.

More telltale were changes within the burgeoning planter class. The nearby slave owner on the Côte Joyeuse now dallied as long as those at great distance formerly had—if they complied at all. Moreover, the worst offenders among the "fallen away" planters were the same men who shared with Delvaux their wine and song, their card games, and their subversive plots. Illustrative of the manner in which these heads of households fulfilled their religious duty toward their slaves are the figures in Table 1.

¹⁸*Rex v. de Soto*, Doc. 1227, French Archives, Natchitoches.

¹⁹See the discussion under n. 7.

Table 1

Baptismal Pattern of Nonconforming Planters—A Sampling

Delvaux Compatriots	No. of Slaves ²⁰			Increase in Slaves	No. Baptized by Delvaux
	1787	1790	1795		
Prudhomme brothers	24	40	65	41	5
Remy Lambre	6	38	39	33	9
Dr. François Monginot	-	9	16	7	4
François Rouquier	6	13	22	16	8
Joseph Capuran	4	10	8	6	0
Athanase Poissot	8	8	15	7	5
				110	31

Of these thirty-one baptisms, eighteen occurred only by mass ceremony when a clerical visit occurred in their neighborhood. Moreover, a study of notarial records in all the colonial posts where these men had dealings reveals that virtually all of their increase were fresh imports and newborns, rather than previously baptized slaves purchased from other planters.

Delvaux's replacement, Father Pierre Pavie of La Rochelle, was a blessing personified—a man sincere, dedicated, and self-effacing. In a decade of labor he reignited the prodigal consciences of several key slaveholding families. Never, though, did he or his sporadic successors succeed in reconvincing the populace that prompt baptism of infants was their Christian duty. If "private baptism" in the family home could save the souls of their children for years until it was convenient for the Church to send a priest, then it could also suffice for a few months until one could conveniently go to town.

Statistics for the remainder of Louisiana's slaveholding experience reflect negligible differences in baptismal patterns for whites, free people of color, or slaves. Table 2 illustrates the point, drawing from baptisms performed at the Chapel of St. Jean Baptiste des Cloutierville (Rivière aux Cannes) during the first four years after the re-creation of the Diocese of Louisiana. This parish's comparative laxity in recording slave data defies a philosophical interpretation. Invariably, erring masters acted inconsistently. On one occasion they might supply birth dates for several slaves; on the next, none. Nor does a pattern emerge when data are grouped according to the officiating priests. The apparent explanation is that most

²⁰All church and civil censuses of Natchitoches, cited herein, have been published in Elizabeth Shown Mills, trans., *Natchitoches Colonials: Censuses, Military Rolls, and Tax Lists, 1722-1803* (Chicago, 1981).

masters kept records, but did not always remember to carry them along when taking a child to church.

Table 2

Cloutierville Baptisms, 1825-29

Yardstick	FPC	Slave	White
Mean age at baptism (in months)	14	11	13
Exact birth dates given (% of cases)	100	55	97

The most notable change in baptismal patterns over the late colonial and antebellum period is found among free people of color. As extensively discussed elsewhere in print,²¹ their initial indifference to Church law gave way to increased conformity as the individual's community status rose. Those belonging to families with a significant group identity became model Catholics; illegitimacy rates dropped below white norms and other religious barometers rose noticeably.

Marriage and Miscegenation

The conflict between civil marriage laws and Church precepts produced dismal but predictable results. The 150 years of slaveholding at Natchitoches saw only three periods in which attempts were made to convert slave unions into Church-sanctioned marriages. The catalyst was neither ecclesiastical nor royal edicts, but the leadership of certain men of strong conviction.

Louis Juchereau de St. Denis must head the list. As founder and long-term commandant of Natchitoches, St. Denis controlled the frontier with an iron hand and a patriarchal heart. Extant church records for the period 1729-43, augmented by notarial files, document twenty-seven slave marriages—representing virtually all of the adult female slaves (black and Indian) and over half the adult male slaves enumerated on the one extant census (1737). In some cases, the church marriage merely formalized unions already blessed with children. In other cases, particularly in the St. Denis household, evidence suggests that the master paired off new arrivals as soon as he catechized and baptized them. Some such marriages were abundantly fruitful; for others no children can be found—suggesting,

²¹Mills, "Piety and Prejudice," pp. 171-94.

perhaps, that the master's choice did not necessarily appeal to the parties involved.

Concern for sanctifying slave unions at Natchitoches virtually died with St. Denis in 1744. Subsequent priests rarely mentioned slave fathers; many omitted the names of mothers as well. More telling is the eruption of miscegenation; and *most* telling is the identity of the households in which this first occurred: i.e., 1746 (St. Denis); 1747 (St. Denis); 1747 (Father Eustache); 1751 (De Mézières, noble son-in-law of St. Denis and future commandant); 1754 (De Mézières); 1755 (St. Denis); 1757 (De Blanc, noble son-in-law of St. Denis and commandant); 1758 (LeCourt, noble lieutenant of the militia); 1766, 1768, 1770, 1772, 1774, and 1776 (St. Denis). The conclusion is clear: if neither the mission's priest nor the ruling families of the post could prevent miscegenation within their own households, prospects for controlling it within the larger population were virtually nil.

Father Luis de Quintanilla tried. Curbing licentiousness among both blacks and whites was his overriding passion. Nine slave marriages appear amid his extant entries; and five additional couples were cited as married within his recorded baptisms. Miscegenation rates defy quantification, however. Chagrined by failure to control visibly illicit unions, he frequently omitted ethnic designations; and colonial census takers dropped the custom as well.

Combatting interracial alliances was a struggle neither Church nor state could win in Louisiana, America, or elsewhere. Quintanilla's one attempt in 1777 illustrates the problem and the futility of the effort. His protagonist was the post's most prominent matron, whose slave woman lived openly with an unmarried merchant and bore him several children.²² In vain, the Capuchin counseled the matron to reclaim her wayward servant, counseled the couple to honor the single state of chastity, and begged the commandant to order the slave's return to her mistress. Seeking the advice of his bishop in Cuba, Quintanilla was instructed to "persuade the couple to sanctify their bad concubinage by the union of matrimony," an order that would have civilly compromised the priest.

Instead, he filed charges against all local parties, with results disastrous for his ministry. His character was publicly attacked by the slave owner, who filed a litany of countercharges against him. His complaints were shrugged off by the commandant, who had more serious political concerns. Ultimately, the black woman was publicly whipped for creating scandal, in compliance with a post regulation that was never before or thereafter evoked. The mistress and the merchant safeguarded their arrangement by a deed of transfer and a clandestine manumission.

²²*Rex v. de Soto*; for a more extensive account of the parties involved, see Gary B. Mills, *The Forgotten People: Cane River's Creoles of Color* (Baton Rouge, 1977).

Quintanilla's loss of face is visibly evident in most statistics drawn from subsequent records of his tenure.

Father H. Figary of the 1840s achieved results in a much milder manner. Public recognition of slave unions was, as a rule, rare throughout the antebellum era; and baptismal entries routinely read "father unknown." However, the slave baptisms recorded at Natchitoches by Figary, in the first months of his service there in the 1840s, were tantalizingly nonconformist. While he frequently omitted names of owners (a practice no other priest followed), his identification of fathers for numerous baptized infants imply his recognition of the stability of unsanctified slave relationships. Abruptly, his entries revert to the format of his predecessors—whether due to orders of his superiors or pressure from his parishioners is debatable. However, slave marriages were quietly performed. One appears in the registers of Natchitoches, one on Isle Brevelle, ten at Campti, and none at Cloutierville. Similarly, the published registers of Avoyelles through 1830 include none.

The mushrooming population of free nonwhites, by contrast, is amply represented in all the registers of the civil parish of Natchitoches. Again, the defined patterns suggest that social ambition influenced this class far more than Church policy or personnel. A search of the extant records for subtle clues to parity in the manner in which priests responded to the free nonwhite reveals virtually no substantive distinctions. For example, the 1847-65 registers of Cloutierville indicate that fewer free people of color were permitted to marry without banns (seven percent contrasted with eighteen percent for whites); but, for most nonwhites, only partial banns were required. Dispensations from the impediment of consanguinity were rarely mentioned, even when spouses bore the same family names, perhaps due to a sympathetic understanding that marital choices were considerably more limited for the free person of color. Titles of respect (i.e., madame, sieur, or mademoiselle) were inconsistently applied; but for both whites and nonwhites, they appear equally in forty-three percent of the cases.

Confirmations

The ecclesiastical requirement that confirmation be administered by bishops meant that virtually all colonial-born Catholics, whatever race or status, were deprived of this sacrament. Within North Louisiana, confirmation was first administered in 1796, when Luis de Peñalver y Cárdenas ventured into the hinterlands of his new see—but would not be again until the reorganization of the Louisiana diocese in the mid-1820s. The records that Peñalver created, throughout the colony, provide the historian with the best currently available benchmark to measure North Louisiana Catholicity against those of more southern parishes.

Table 3

A Comparative View of Colonial Confirmations

	Population ²³		Total	No. Conf.		% of Pop. Conf.	Nonwhites as % of Pop. of Conf.	
	White	Nonwhite		White	Nonwhite			
<i>New Orleans</i> (1790-1803)	2,065	2,451	4,516	521	224	17	54	30
<i>Other Southern parishes (1796)</i>								
Ascension	-	-	-	352	0	-	-	0
Assumption	-	-	2,058	170	0	8	-	0
Attakapas	-	-	1,450	24	0	2	-	0
Baton Rouge	-	-	206	38	0	18	-	0
Mississippi Coast	-	-	-	14	9	-	-	39
Mobile	-	-	-	49	97	-	-	66
Natchez	2,538	2,019	4,557	153	18	4	44	10
Pointe Coupée	1,838	1,262	3,100	25	4	.9	41	14
St. Bernard	-	-	493	183	164	40	-	9
St. Charles	-	-	2,189	7		.3	-	0
St. Gabriel	674	366	1,040	100	7	10	35	7
St. James	-	-	2,224	21	0	1	-	0
St. John	540	18	1,090	68	0	6	2	0
St. Landry	3,601	1,762	5,363	108	13	2	33	11
<i>North Louisiana Parishes</i> (1796)								
Avoyelles	338	105	443	98	11	25	24	10
Natchitoches	769	945	1,714	71	14	5	55	16
Rapides	394	140	543	47	7	10	26	13
(Totals for North Louisiana)	1,501	1,190	2,700	216	32	9	44	13

Table 3 is revealing. The white-nonwhite population ratio for the Natchitoches Post, comprising most of North Louisiana, was virtually identical with that of New Orleans itself; but nonwhites at Natchitoches were scarcely half as likely to be confirmed. That disparity is not unexpected, given the large number of nonwhites in New Orleans who were free to make religious decisions for themselves and the fact that virtually all nonwhites at Natchitoches were still enslaved. More revealing,

²³Population statistics for New Orleans are those of 1791, as given by Carolyn Maude Burson, *The Stewardship of Don Estevan Miró, 1782-1792* (New Orleans, 1940), p. 280. Statistics for the other parishes are those of 1795-1796, drawn from "Records of the Diocese," Reels 5-7.

however, is the example of the rural parishes that surrounded New Orleans as compared to that of the more remote parishes from Natchez to Natchitoches, and from the Mississippi Coast to Mobile. It does not appear that the Church's diminished presence in the isolated posts contributed in any measure to the religious neglect of enslaved souls.

The extent to which nonwhites dominate the Mobile statistics also presage a phenomenon taking root at Natchitoches. By the 1790s, Mobile had a significant body of free nonwhites that was roughly one generation ahead of Natchitoches in its development. The mixed families of Mobile were already realizing that their social status could be enhanced by becoming *more Catholic* than whites themselves. The North Louisiana *Créole de couleur* learned this lesson also. Within the civil parish of Natchitoches, the ratio of nonwhite participation in confirmation would significantly climb throughout rural areas while remaining stable in the town of Natchitoches itself. At Campti, 1858-60, for example, free nonwhite confirmations outnumbered white ones two to one. In Natchitoches proper, 1850-64, the proportion of white to nonwhite confirmations differed not at all from the practice of 1796.

Burials

Existing records are highly incomplete. Those that remain reflect an erratic pattern of slave and free Negro burials; and all races fall far short of the population at large. The latter fact is not surprising in light of two particular circumstances: the great distance of many outlying farms from the church; and the fact that burial fees were customary. Only baptisms were expected to be free.

Inexplicably, the colonial period in which the slave and free Negro burial rate achieved the closest parity to that of the white population was the era of Father Delvaux. Between 1785 and 1793, the representation of nonwhites in the burial registers was virtually identical to nonwhite representation in the population at large. This rate was, in fact, aberrant when viewed over the whole colonial experience, as Table 4 illustrates. Perhaps masters who neglected the spiritual needs of their living slaves did suffer an attack of conscience as a neglected soul slipped away.

Most striking is the pattern of the pre-1750 period. For the first dozen years of extant records, Indian-slave burials exceeded those of blacks five to one, although the 1737 census tallied eight times as many blacks as Indians. In short, the newly arrived *nègres brut* not yet baptized, were not accorded a Christian burial; thus no record of their deaths was maintained. Within the 1750-1760 decade, an even balance occurred between African and Indian burials; but combined, they never reached a parity with whites.

Table 4

Ratios of Burials to Population in Colonial Natchitoches

Time Period	Burials			Population at Large		
	No. Whites	No. Black	Ratio W per 100B	No. Whites	No. Blacks	Ratio W per 100B
1729-41 Registers	18	2	90.1			
1742-50 Registers (1737 Census)	23	8	287.1	112	107	105.1
1750-60 Registers	63	18	350.1			
1760-75 Registers (Missing) (1766 Census)				308	254	121.1
1775-84 Registers	123	199	62.1			
1785-93 Registers (1787 Census)	56	64	88.1	661	734	90.1
1795-1803 Registers (1796 Census)	55	38	145.1	769	929	83.1

As the French regime gave way to Spanish regulations, Indian slavery dwindled to relative insignificance.

Current histories of Catholicism and black America frequently present slave-burial patterns as visible evidence of indifferent spiritual care on the part of masters. Frequently cited in this context is the letter of Father Pedro de Zamora of Opelousas to Bishop Peñalver in 1796, in which he notes seventeen burials of whites for the year and only two of Negroes. According to Zamora, "The Negroes are buried in the mount, and some who have burial ground in their house, bury them there, depriving in this way Father Zamora and his church of stipends."²⁴ A comparative view of Natchitoches data suggests a high degree of variance between individual communities as well as within the same parish in different periods. For example, Father Pavie of Natchitoches provided a similar breakdown in 1801, citing two burials that year of whites and five of Negro slaves.²⁵

At no point in the colonial era did there exist enough free Negro burial records to quantify. However, the rapid growth of that population during the

²⁴Zamora to Peñalver, January 12, 1796, "Records of the Diocese," "Calendar," Reel 1.

²⁵1801 Census of Natchitoches, March 15, 1802, "Records of the Diocese," Reel 10.

nineteenth century and the establishment of a church and cemetery on Isle Brevelle by elite *Créoles de couleur* brought a sharp rise in the number of free nonwhite burials. The corresponding increase in detail throughout the region permits some additional analysis of more subtle data, as outlined in Table 5, drawn from the mixed-race parish of Cloutierville.

Table 5

Cloutierville Burials, 1847-57

Ethnic Group	Last Rites		Parents or Spouse Identified	Age Given	Death Date Given
	Yes	No			
Whites	17%	83%	56%	80%	79%
Free People of Color	11%	89%	70%	92%	76%

Conclusion

Historian Randall Miller has concluded that "Catholic slaves, like their Protestant counterparts, adapted the master's religion to fit their own community needs. They were not passive recipients of the slaveholder's culture."²⁶ The example of North Louisiana suggests that the situation was even more complex. Masters also were adapting their own religion to fit personal and community needs and were not passive recipients of the culture imposed upon them by the Church of their fathers. This phenomenon perhaps echoes the reality that Church authorities themselves were *individuals* from different communities and diverse cultures; thus, localized social thought permeated their religious interpretations.

Illustrative of this point might be the debate which took place late in the antebellum era between Bishop Auguste Martin of Natchitoches, a native of St. Malo, France, who had labored in Louisiana for some years, and Mother Marie Hyacinthe Le Conniat, a newly arrived native of Plounez. Writing to her brother, Mother Hyacinthe reported:

These poor negroes are *really* slaves. They are absolutely sold and bought like the beasts or animals in Europe. How sad this is. . . ! The first time I saw a rational human being exposed "For Sale," in New Orleans, I was seized with horror. The Bishop proposed that we buy one slave. I showed my repugnance, and he did not insist! These poor negroes are not well fed, nor well clothed. They work only with a stick over their heads. They do not live

²⁶Miller, "Failed Mission," p. 38.

in the master's house. They are degraded. . . . And yet, they are children of God!²⁷

In stark contrast to Mother Le Conniat's moral stance is that of her bishop, a man described by historians as one of "two American bishops [who] openly embraced the institution of slavery and sought to show how it could be a force for good."²⁸ Martin was elevated to the Natchitoches see after serving the parish for three years as its curate—three years in which he enjoyed a quite symbiotic relationship with a vestry board composed heavily of prominent slave owners. Martin's "Pastoral Letter of the Bishop of Natchitoches on the Occasion of the War of the South for Its Independence," reflects not merely the diversity of thought that existed among Catholic leaders but also the extent to which religious convictions can be altered by social environment. According to Martin:

God snatches from the barbarism of savage morals some thousands of the children of the race of Canaan on whom there continues to weigh nearly everywhere the curse of an outraged father. . . . The manifest will of God is that in exchange for a freedom of which they were incapable and for a labor of the whole life, we should give to these unfortunate ones, not only the bread and the clothing necessary for material life, but also and especially their legitimate portion of the truth and the goods of grace, which consoles them in their present miseries through the hope of rest in the bosom of the Father.²⁹

The ambivalence of white Catholic views toward black Americans, and the impact of acculturation is further demonstrated by Mother Le Conniat herself. Few months had passed before her moral abhorrence to the thought of owning another person had given way to acquiescence. Throughout the remainder of the antebellum era, the teachings and writings of both she and her bishop echo the patriarchal view of much of the Louisiana clergy, justifying slavery for the moral good it might achieve while lamenting spiritual neglect on the part of Catholic masters. For over a century and a half of labor, the black evangelization effort in North Louisiana had merely treaded water.

Among slaveholders, the compromise between religious duty and economic practicality focused upon the passage of the soul into and out of this life. Catholic masters in North Louisiana baptized their slaves with much the same faithfulness as they did their own children. They generally

²⁷Dorothea Olga McCants, ed. and trans., *They Came to Louisiana: Letters of a Catholic Mission, 1854-1882* (Baton Rouge, 1970), p. 28.

²⁸Davis, *Black Catholics*, p. 50.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 52.

buried the slave with "Christian respect," if not pomp and circumstance. But between those hallmarks, slaves were commonly left to adapt Catholicism to their own circumstances.

Within the clergy, the holy mission was compromised by factors they were impotent to overcome: an untamed wilderness; manpower and fiscal shortages; a settlement pattern that stripped them of the influence traditionally held by village priests; a population that prized secularism and resisted all forms of authority; and, above all, conflict between the laws of Church and state.

For the nonwhite masses, life's compromises centered upon the balance scales of survival and upward mobility. Those whom slavery conditioned to "merely survive" were the souls the Church commonly lost after Emancipation. Among the ambitious, however, Catholicism had become entirely synonymous with the coveted status *free person of color*. Those who did not succeed in attaining that status, prior to the war, did in no way equate political emancipation with freedom from the bonds of the Roman Church. Their tenacity to the faith, whether based upon piety or ambition, earned them a new cross: a caste-based prejudice imposed upon them by the pre-war free nonwhite elite who saw more ambition than piety in the black Catholic freedman.

The *ancien régime* in North Louisiana was more than a culture and more than a vast sprawling community dominated by one church. It was a perpetual enigma, colored by contrasts and controlled by conflicts. The relationship between the Church and the African-American in that society could be nothing more or less.