

July 12, 2009

On July 4th, we celebrated the birth of our country as an independent nation. Two months ago, I participated in the 175th Anniversary of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis. I was joined by the bishops of the other four dioceses in Indiana, Cardinal Francis George from Chicago, and the bishops of the dioceses in the Eastern half of Illinois as all of our dioceses were part of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis, previously the Diocese of Vincennes when it was founded by Pope Gregory XVI in 1834.

French explorers such as DeLaSalle, Joliet, and Marquette brought the faith to our area from France. The French missionaries were under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Quebec. After the American War for Independence, Catholics were under the care of Father John Carroll, S.J., a priest with jurisdiction over the 13 States and the entire Northwest Territory.

Father John Carroll became the first Bishop for the United States in 1789, and he governed all of us who were then a part of the Diocese of Baltimore. When the Diocese of Bardstown, Kentucky, was created in 1808, we fell under the jurisdiction of Bishop Joseph Flaget, and then we were governed by Bishop Fenwick when the Diocese of Cincinnati was created in 1821.

When Bishop Simon Bruté was consecrated the first Bishop of the new Diocese of Vincennes in 1834, he had responsibilities for the entire State of Indiana and the Eastern half of Illinois, including what is now Chicago. Bishop Bruté borrowed two priests, and from the beginning, the three of them were constantly on the move throughout the State, visiting the faithful, preaching the Gospel, and celebrating the Sacraments. Bishop Bruté established the first parish in our area, St. John the Evangelist in St. John.

Bishop Bruté was born in France. He studied medicine and was offered the position of physician of the French imperial court by Napoleon. He turned it down to study for the priesthood and was ordained in 1808. He rejected a life of material comfort and prestige in France for the rigorous life of a missionary in the New World. Against his wishes, the Holy Father appointed him Bishop of the new Diocese of Vincennes in 1834. The new diocese had one small church, St. Francis Xavier in Vincennes. It became his Cathedral.

In 1898, the Holy See transferred the title of the Diocese of Vincennes to the Diocese of Indianapolis. However, by that time, we were part of the Diocese of Fort Wayne. In 1857, Father John Henry Luers, a priest from Cincinnati, was appointed the first Bishop of the new Diocese of Fort Wayne which comprised the 42 counties of Northern Indiana. We remained part of the Diocese of Fort Wayne for 99 years until Pope Pius XII appointed Father Andrew Grutka, pastor of Holy Trinity Parish in Gary, as the first Bishop of the new Diocese of Gary which would consist of Lake, LaPorte, Porter, and Starke Counties.

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He entrusted His mission to the apostles and disciples: “Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth; go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world!” (Mt 28:18-20).

It is sobering to reflect upon the beginnings of the faith in this part of the world. Many new immigrants from Europe brought the faith with them. Even with a great scarcity of priests, they remained faithful to the practice of the faith and built magnificent churches, schools, and hospitals. Devout Catholic families

would eventually give to the Church many vocations to the priesthood and religious life as well.

Now it is our turn to nurture the gift of faith which has been handed down to us. Our challenges are very different from those of the early settlers, from those who lived during the great depression, and even from the difficulties faced by our grandparents.

The present materialistic and secular culture has a great impact upon our families and upon us as individuals. In many areas of our life, we are challenged to live with countercultural values. Not everyone stands with us in the defense of human life and dignity from conception until natural death, in promoting marriage and family life in accordance with God's purposes, in attending to the needs of the poor, immigrants, and other disenfranchised, and in keeping Jesus and the values of His kingdom as first in our hearts and our lives.

Yet, the admonition of Jesus before His Ascension is given to us. Let us use our gifts and talents to live and to share our faith with the same determination and passion as the apostles, as Bishop Simon Bruté, and as St. Theodora Guerin. During these summer days, we reflect upon and give thanks to God for the gift of our country and freedom, but even more for the gift of our faith.