

KINGSTREE

Site of the Shrine of Our Lady of South Carolina

by Rev. Stanley Smolenski

South Carolina has its own shrine to Our Lady. Bishop Robert J. Baker of Charleston has designated the former parish church in Kingstree as the site for the Shrine of Our Lady of South Carolina, Our Lady of Our Joyful Hope.

The location of the shrine is very significant in the history of Catholic evangelization in this state. Two very apostolic ministries were centered in Kingstree, that of Fr. Patrick Quinlan and that of Fr. Patrick Walsh, OP. Kingstree is located in Williamsburg Country, one of the largest and perhaps severely poverty stricken areas in this state. South Carolina has recently increased to 4% Catholic with only 50 Catholic families in the entire 900 sq. mile county. Kingstree, the county seat of 3,800 persons, got its name after a great northern pine tree was discovered by an explorer on the scenic Black River before 1730. That was unusual since those pines are indigenous to the northeast. As the law of the time required, the tree was marked with an arrow reserving it for the King's navy since that species made the best masts on the royal ships. It then became the directional point in that area. "Kingstree" could also be seen as spiritually signifying the cross of Jesus, the crucified king, also giving direction to our eternal destiny. A recent newspaper article said that the main interests of the people there are (1) religion, (2) history, (3) football. Their openness to religion is helpful toward evangelization.

Fr. Patrick Quinlan, originally a seminary professor and pastor of a prestigious parish in the diocese of Hartford CT, dedicated several decades of his priesthood to promoting a unique catechuminate system of preparing the poor in the farming areas to become Catholics. He established chapels in their small communities and spent a full day at each one for their spiritual and material needs with the assistance of three religious and a lay volunteer. Being in the Bible-Belt before the civil rights movement did not make it easy for them.

Fr. Patrick Walsh, O.P., while doing parish missions in the southeast, originated a church-on-wheels apostolate to introduce the Church, especially in areas where there were no Catholics. He would open his mini-church in the center of small towns and invite people to see what a Catholic Church actually looked like with its altar, pews, stained glass windows and confessional. This was an opportunity to distribute catechetical literature to correct any misunderstandings about the Catholic Faith. Eventually an estate in the outskirts of Kingstree was given him for a retreat facility. Father Stan Smolenski at that time was a brother in the same religious order as Fr. Walsh and came to help in these apostolates. After eighteen months Fr. Stan decided to study for the priesthood. Fr. Walsh's original Dominican Retreat House of Our Lady of Springbank was later altered by several Sisters into a Christian Center for Eco-Spirituality.

Bishop Baker, a history buff, was impressed with their ministries. In honor of the humble zeal of such pioneers in evangelization, Bishop Baker has established the Fr. Quinlan Center for Priestly Spirituality in Kingstree at Fr. Quinlan's former residence. Providentially, just when the bishop was considering this center, he received a letter from a brother expressing his desire to found a Baptistine monastery whose ministry would include hospitality to priests. Bishop Baker told him of his idea for the Fr. Quinlan Center and Brother Augustine Kelly accepted its management.

Just one block from the Fr. Quinlan Center is the Shrine of Our Lady of South Carolina. It just so happened, again providentially, that recently the Parish of St. Ann acquired a new church. While in the process of campaigning for renovations of the original church, built in the mid-1940's, the local synagogue became for sale. Financially, the cost was lesser for the acquisition of the synagogue with larger and improved facilities than for the renovation of the original church. The diocese approved the transfer.

Meanwhile, the icon of Our Lady of South Carolina was housed in the St. Katharine Drexel Volunteer Residence on Wentworth St. in Charleston. Its location in the far end of a sitting room, used also for storage of chairs, was not conducive for veneration, just decoration. Its custodian, Fr. Stan Smolenski, Director of the Diocesan Marian Programs, had already asked Bishop Baker in February 2003 if there could be a shrine to Our Lady. The Bishop said that we must pray about it first just as they prayed about the foundation of the drug rehabilitation center in St. Augustine, FL. So Fr. Smolenski prayed to St. Joseph to find a suitable house for the image, as he found a home for Jesus and Mary in Bethlehem, Egypt and Nazareth.

One day, while Fr. Stan and Brother Augustine were visiting Fr. Michael Okere, the Nigerian administrator of St. Ann parish in Kingstree. Fr. Okere mentioned that the two Felician Sisters have developed an excellent social outreach program there. But, what he also wanted to see was something in the spiritual dimension. Fr. Stan inquired whether a shrine to Our Lady would be satisfactory, and Fr. Okere became very enthusiastic about it. A few weeks later at a priests' meeting in Charleston, Fr. Stan, with Fr. Okere present, proposed to Bishop Baker the idea of such a transformation of the former parish church in Kingstree. The Bishop approved of this effort for evangelization. That requires a thorough renovation of the property for the purposes of the pilgrimages there. Fr. Smolenski is seeking assistance for this endeavor, as he returns to Kingstree after forty seven years, now appointed by Bishop Baker as the director of the Shrine.

In preparation for the commencement of the Holy Year 2000, the Vatican published two documents relevant to shrines and pilgrimages, defining the purposes and goals of each. Shrines have their own charism and message and therefore have a unique contribution to make in the life of the universal and local church. They give something which parishes and universities do not. And, therefore, shrines are not to be considered peripheral but complementary and are to be included in the pastoral activity of the diocese.