

Mass honors Catholic Native Americans of early 1700s

The annual tribute is held at Mission San Luis, the site of an early Spanish mission.

JULIE S. BETTINGER | FLORIDA CATHOLIC CORRESPONDENT

Published: 12.21.07

TALLAHASSEE | About 350 people gathered for a commemorative Mass Dec. 9 at the site where hundreds of Catholic Native Americans and Spanish missionaries died, and thousands more were enslaved following a series of attacks by British soldiers in the early 1700s.

Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ, who concelebrated with four priests in the dirt-floor Spanish church, said the Franciscans who brought the Catholic faith to the Native Americans had a “living faith,” and that gathering to celebrate Eucharist was a way of offering “a living memorial” to them.

The “Holiday Festivities and Commemorative Mass” each December at Mission San Luis in Tallahassee honors their sacrifice, while helping to educate people about early Florida. “It’s a chance to really make a statement about the importance of religion to the early Floridians,” said David B. Ramsay, chairman of the Friends of Mission San Luis, which hosted the event.

As the crowd gathered in the dimly lit church before Mass, Ramsay explained that the floor of the structure — a replica of the one burned by the Indians to prevent the British from capturing it — still contained the remains of Christianized Indians who were buried with their heads toward the altar, in the Catholic tradition.

Mission San Luis, on a hill west of the Capitol building, was one of more than 100 Spanish missions that existed in La Florida during the 16th and 17th centuries. San Luis de Talimali was the western military, administrative and religious capital of Spanish Florida from 1656-1704. Spanish friars, soldiers and civilians established Mission San Luis at the request of the Apalachee Indians who converted to Catholicism. After their conversion, Apalachees and Spaniards attended evening prayers, Sunday Mass, holiday services, choir practice, baptisms, marriage and funeral services together at the mission.

Many aspects of the early missions are truly remarkable, Ramsay said. “You had two very diverse cultures come together and tolerate each other.” And the Apalachees, whom historians describe as a fierce tribe, were receptive to Christianity. Once converted, they held strongly to their religious beliefs.

“Many of them died for their faith,” he said. Historical research reveals stories of martyrdoms that occurred in the region during the mission era. Families, priests and Native Americans were tortured, burned at the stake and beheaded while proclaiming the Gospel.

Adding a hint of authenticity during Mass in the unheated, non air-conditioned church, costumed living history interpreters in period dress sat among the mixed crowd of families, university students and senior citizens. Bishop Ricard climbed some steps leading to an elevated pulpit where he delivered his homily. Referring to the Gospel of

Matthew 3:1-12, he drew correlations between Advent preparations today and the one that John the Baptist preached.

While some might think John's message stern, the bishop said the warning was given in the hope that listeners would repent.

"St. John was warning us in love — as a good parent warns us, admonishes us. It's a hopeful warning," he said.