EARLY HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC PARishes AND MISSIONS OF FLORIDA

In the Beginning...

depth within the chart room of the Spanish Naval Museum, which stands just off the promenade Paseo del Prado in Madrid, one can find a property map of St. Augustine [San Agustín], Florida, dating from the year 1769. Executed by a Spanish chief auditor named Juan José Elíxio de la Puente, the highly detailed map depicts the old Spanish walled city and its near environs. At a site four-tenths of a mile due north of the city's fortress, Castillo de San Marcos, on land where Hospital Creek runs through meadow and woods, the cartographer has written:

Place called Nombre de Dios [Name of God], which is the same where the first Mass was said on September 8, 1565, when the Spaniards under the command of the Adelantado Pedro Menéndez de Avilés set out to conquer these provinces; and afterwards an Indian mission was built there, with a chapel in which was placed an image of María Santísima de la Leche.

Thus, at that place and on that date were born the first permanent European city on American soil north of Mexico, St. Augustine [given that name by Menéndez because it had been on that saint's feast day, August 28, that his fleet first sighted Florida, at Cape Canaveral], and the first American Roman Catholic parish, of the same name. Soon afterwards, at the landing site Nombre de Dios, a formal Christian mission to the native people of this country would begin its salvific work.

That 200 years later a Spanish cartographer would make special note of those events, and of the place where they occurred, is a sign of the faithfulness with which the Catholic residents of the city revered the founding site and held it sacred in their memory.

Any Florida Catholic Heritage Trail must begin at Nombre de Dios, for there priests of an established parish first raised hands in benediction over Florida, and from there missionary priests at a permanent base first carried lamps of faith into the Florida wilderness.

The pioneer pastor of the infant parish of St. Augustine was Father Francisco López de Mendoza Grajales, a native of Jerez de la Frontera in southern Spain. He left us a memoir in which he recorded the founding ceremonies:
On Saturday the 8th the General landed... As I had gone ashore the evening before, I took a cross and went to meet him, singing the hymn Te Deum Laudamus [O God, We Praise You]. The General, followed by all who accompanied him [500 soldiers, 200 sailors, and 100 civilian settlers], marched up to the cross, knelt and kissed it. A large number of Indians [natives of the Seloy tribe, Timucua speakers, who occupied the site] watched these proceedings and imitated all they saw done.

Upon an improvised altar, possibly made from fresh-hewn palmetto logs, Father López then celebrated a Mass of Thanksgiving in gratitude for the party's safe arrival; after which Menéndez "had the Indians fed and dined himself." From what we know of his ships' stores that meal probably was cocido, a stew made from salted pork and garbanzo beans, laced with garlic seasoning, and accompanied by hard sea biscuits and red wine. The religious service and the communal meal, taking place over fifty years before the better-known English thanksgivings at Berkeley Plantation near Charles City, Virginia and at the Pilgrims' Plymouth Plantation in Massachusetts, constituted the first community act of thanksgiving in a permanent European settlement in what is now the United States.

Mass had been offered to hallow the ground before the first step was taken to raise a human habitation. As historian Peter Guilday wrote early in the last century, "The altar was older than the hearth." While a church and living quarters were being erected, the large congregation at St. Augustine no doubt worshipped on Sundays and feast days before a rustic outdoor altar. Even the completed first church could not contain the parishioners. Early buildings were of wattle-and-daub (cuije y embarrado) construction: Wood poles were joined by a latticework over which river mud was spread; when the mud dried it was covered inside and out with whitewash. Like the Seloy tribe the Spaniards used palm thatch for roofing.

church building

The first churches stood adjacent to the Nombre de Dios site, and eastward on the northern tip of Anastasia Island across Matanzas River where the community lived in the period 1566-72, after which St. Augustine was relocated to the mainland site it occupies currently. There, at the southeast corner of the Plaza that one sees today, a parish church was erected under the patronage of Nuestra Señora de los Remedios [Our Lady of Healing]. This waterfront building was constructed of vertical wood planks with a thatch roof. No glass of any kind was used in the windows. A cross and weathervane surmounted the façade. To one side stood an open timber belfry (campanario) with four bells. Like the rest of the
town, the church would be ransacked and burned by an English pirate force under Francis Drake in 1586.

The parish church was reconstructed, in wood as before. It would fall victim to fire again in 1599, and be rebuilt in 1602. Between the two fires it became home to an event that, only in retrospect, had a great significance to the history of Catholic Florida. On January 24, 1594, the pastor of St. Augustine, Diego Escobar de Sambrana, brought a couple before the altar of Los Remedios to be married. They were Gabriel Hernández, “a soldier of this presidio,” and Catalina de Valdés. Upon completion of the ceremony Father Escobar entered the matrimonial data in the parish register. That page is the first surviving page we have of the registers and is the oldest European document of American origin extant in our country. The registers, a near continuous record of Catholic life in the city—baptisms, confirmations, marriages, and burials—from 1594 to the present, are preserved in the archives of the Diocese of St. Augustine. Nothing is known of the registers from the first twenty-nine years of the parish’s existence.

In the gradual rebuilding of St. Augustine the parish constructed a hospital and chapel dedicated to Nuestra Señora de la Soledad (Our Lady of Solitude). Completed in 1598 on a site opposite today’s St. Joseph Convent on south St. George Street (originally called Calle Real), Soledad was the first hospital in what is now the United States. In 1605, members of the mendicant Order of Friars Minor, founded by St. Francis of Assisi in 1209, and popularly called Franciscans and friars, opened a seminary for the instruction of local aspirants to the priesthood. It would be the first formal school in what is now the United States, and the source of the first twenty ordinands in this country -- whether to major or minor orders it is not clear -- when the city was visited the following year by the Bishop of Santiago de Cuba, whose see was at Havana.

**Missions**

It is thought that the first Christian evangelization of the Seloy tribe at nearby Nombre de Dios was conducted by pioneer pastor Father López and the three other parish [also called secular] priests who had accompanied him to Florida. Missionary work was not the primary mission of the parish clergy. However, since Pedro Menéndez had been so expressive of his own missionary intentions -- writing three days after his landing to Spanish monarch Philip II, “I have offered to Our Lord all that He may give me in this world, all that I may acquire and possess, in order to plant the Gospel in this land
for the enlightenment of its natives"-- it is reasonable to suppose that he commanded Lópe and his clerical colleagues to begin a ministry, even if part-time, among the Seloy.

Such an undertaking by seculars was not unheard of elsewhere: In the following year, Menéndez ordered his military to conduct an overland reconnaissance of the interior west of what is now Parris Island, South Carolina. The expedition included a secular chaplain named Sebastian Montero, who had arrived from Spain at St. Augustine in June, 1566. Deep in the Carolina hinterland, at the town of Guatari, of the Wateree tribe, Father Montero remained for six years, achieving among the Wateree the first known missionary success among the natives of this country.

Menéndez had recruited members of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) to take charge of native missions, and the first contingent of two, arriving belatedly in 1567, took up station well to the south at Biscayne Bay and Charlotte Harbor. Their efforts were not successful, however, and the Jesuits abandoned the field in 1572. In the same year Menéndez secured a missionary commitment from the Franciscan Order in Spain, and the first friars arrived in Florida the following year. Their labors centered on coastal tribes north and south of St. Augustine. Under their supervision Nombre de Dios seems to have been elevated to the formal status of mission (doctrina, a place with a resident friar where Christian doctrine was taught) around 1577. Replacing a wattle-and-daub chapel, a larger church walled with hewn timbers was erected there about 1587.

The first projection of missionary activity outside of the St. Augustine region was to the north. In 1587 mission San Juan del Puerto was established on an island at the mouth of the St. Johns River. Thereafter the friars moved onto Amelia Island, and thence onto the coastal islands of Georgia, as far as present-day Savannah, where the objects of their attention were the tribes of the Guale nation. The first push westward into the interior of today's State of Florida came in 1606 when friar Martin Prieto departed Nombre de Dios, where he had been stationed, crossed the St. Johns north of Palatka, and traveled overland around lakes and swamps to the rolling woods and fields of today's Gainesville. There, among the Potano people, whose chiefdom embraced much of present-day Alachua County, Fray Martin established the mission San Francisco de Potano. "I commenced to build a church there named San Francisco [Saint Francis]," he wrote later. "The Indians listened to my instruction and with great diligence learned the things of God that I taught them." This was the first church and catechetical center in the Florida interior, and the first use of the name San Francisco for a church or geographical location in what is now the United States. The better-known mission (and later city) of San Francisco in California would be founded 170 years later.

It was Prieto who also first reconnoitered the Timucua chiefdoms to the north, and afterwards, crossing the Aucilla River, encountered the populous Apalachee nation who lived in and around present-day Tallahassee. One of Florida's first peacemakers, he brought a halt to the chronic warfare between the Timucua and the Apalachee. From 1608 forward the Franciscans kept in touch with the Apalachee, but it was not until 1633 that they were able to supply full-time resident missionaries. During the
remainder of the seventeenth century the Apalachee lands between the Aucilla and Ochlockonee Rivers became a thriving source of new Christians and home to a high concentration of doctrinas.

Thus, two branches of the first Florida Catholic Heritage Trail lay north of St. Augustine to the Georgia border, and west of that city to Gainesville, thence to the juncture of the Santa Fé [named after the mission Santa Fé de Toloco] and Suwannee Rivers: and, finally, to the district around Tallahassee. The mission buildings were of simple lumber construction with palmetto thatch roofing. The principal mission in Apalachee was San Luis de Talimali, on the western edge of Tallahassee. Its church, now reconstructed on the original foundations, was as large as the parish church in the capital city of St. Augustine. Other missions of the province had such sonorous names as San Antonio de Bacuqua, San Martín de Tomole, San Lorenzo de Ivitachuco, and Santa María de Ayubale.

By 1655 the Franciscans in La Florida claimed 26,000 native converts, in thirty-eight mission compounds, most of them connected by a royal road [camino real]. In 1674-75, when there were fifty-two doctrinas, a visiting bishop from Havana, Gabriel Díaz Vara Calderón, conferred the sacrament of Confirmation on 13,152 adults. The natives lived in a relatively autonomous "Republic of Indians." The friars, unlike their later counterparts in California, did little to alter the aboriginal settlements. Nor did they expropriate the natives’ lands or push them back along an ever-advancing European frontier, as happened in the English colonies to the north. Instead, the Florida missionaries lived among their charges as Peace Corps volunteers live respectfully within foreign societies today. Their primary mission was to preach the Gospel, celebrate Mass, and administer the sacraments. In the native pueblos they taught not only the catechism of Christianity but also European farming, cattle and hog raising, weaving, music, and, in many instances, reading and writing. To that labor they devoted, individually, as many as thirty or forty years, and always in hardship conditions far removed from the relative comforts of baroque monasteries in the madre patria. One can only imagine the ordeals they suffered and the burdens they bore from long overland treks, hunger, heat, semitropical diseases, and unending clouds of mosquitoes. Truly, theirs were lives of total service, devoid of any ambition for human glory.

In 1702-06, after a century and a quarter, that great work of the human spirit came to a tragic end. English soldiers and Indian allies from Carolina descended on St. Augustine, seeking to extirpate Spanish presence in the American Southeast. On their way south through the intracoastal waterway they destroyed, one after another, the Franciscan missions to the Guale and northern Timucua. At St. Augustine, unable to reduce its stalwart fortress, the Carolinians vented their frustration by torching the entire town, excepting its hospital. Lost in the conflagration was the motherhouse of the Franciscan order, Convento de la Concepción Immaculada, at the corner of today’s St. Francis and Marine Streets. The
Florida National Guard Headquarters, or State Arsenal, occupies the site today. When the English force withdrew, a war correspondent from a New York newspaper lamented the sacrilege that had been done in burning the monastery's library with its copies of the Holy Bible. A modern historian may be forgiven for lamenting more the fiery destruction of the Florida mission records: maps, drawings, studies, interviews, correspondence, all irretrievably gone.

An even larger Carolinian and Indian force returned to Florida in 1704, this time to the interior mission fields of Apalachee. There, where friars and natives had lived peacefully for generations within the sound of mission bells, the invaders spread death and destruction. Many of the Christian natives were impaled on stakes. Every mission was depopulated. Every cross-topped structure was burned. Altogether, the Carolinians killed 1,000 Apalachee converts, forced 2,000 into exile, and took 1,000 to Carolina as slaves. It was the largest slave raid ever in the South. Only in the last quarter century, owing to research conducted by Florida historians and archaeologists, has the curtain that was dropped over that Apalachee pogrom by Anglo-American writers of Southern history been lifted from the frontier prosenium. English-led Indians returned to eradicate Timucua missions in 1706. San Francisco de Potano fell exactly one hundred years after its founding. The Apalachee and interior Timucua missions would never be revived.

**West Florida**

Meanwhile, another branch of the Florida Catholic Heritage Trail was being blazed 175 miles to the west of Apalachee. In 1693, one hundred thirty-two years after the failure of the Tristán de Luna expedition at Pensacola, a Catholic priest entered the same deep-water bay. Sailing aboard the ship of Spanish navigator Andrés de Pez, he was the Reverend Doctor Carlos de Sigüenza y Gongora, a secular priest from Mexico where he had been both cosmographer and professor of mathematics. As the vessel sailed through the channel Father Sigüenza chanted the Te Deum Laudamus and rechristened the bay Bahía de Santa María de Galve, in honor of the Virgin Mary and the Viceroy of New Spain (Mexico), the Conde de Galve. The ship's party spent twenty days familiarizing themselves with the shoreline, and on the feast of St. Mark, April 25, the priest erected a cross and celebrated Mass, it is thought at Point Sigüenza on the western end of Santa Rosa Island. The Catholic Faith had

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**Before Menéndez**

The four secular (parish, or dioecesan) priests who accompanied Pedro Menéndez to Florida in 1565 were not the first Catholic clergy to reach this peninsula and panhandle. The explorer Juan Ponce de León, who had discovered the peninsula in 1513, brought both secular and regular religious orders! priests, the latter to evangelize Florida's natives, on a return voyage to San Carlos Bay in 1521. Attacked almost at once by the Calusa inhabitants of the site, Juan Ponce and his landing party were forced to withdraw. Two priests and one lay brother, all Dominican friars, sailed with the expedition of Lucas Vásquez de Ayllón to Sapelo Sound, Georgia (part of Spanish-claimed La Florida at the time) in 1526. There they erected a chapel dedicated to St. Michael the Archangel. Owing to hunger, unusually cold temperatures, and sickness, most of the 600 settlers died, and the colony was abandoned after only a few months.

Panfilo de Narváez brought five Franciscan friars and an unknown number of secular priests to the Gulf coast in 1528, but, after five months of failure to live off the land, that expedition, too, collapsed. Eleven years later, Hernando de Soto arrived at Tampa Bay and began a four-year overland reconnaissance that would take his originally 622-man army through ten of our present Southern states. The eight secular and four regular priests in the party never had a chance to put down roots and begin a ministry to the native populations. Half of the expedition died before the survivors, including two seculars, two Dominicans and one Franciscan, reached Mexico and safety.

In a purely missionary and humanitarian venture, Fray Luis Cárdenal de Barbastro, O.P., led three other Dominican friars from Mexico to Tampa Bay in 1549. After numerous misadventures and tragedies, the last being the slaughter of Cárdenal by a club-wielding native, the survivors sailed home to Vera Cruz. A memorial to Cárdenal is located on Tampa Bay near the mouth of the Hillsborough River.

The last unsuccessful Spanish attempt to establish a permanent parish and mission base in Florida took place in 1559-1561 at Pensacola Bay. There five priests and one lay brother, all Dominicans, served the large expedition of Tristán de Luna y Arceño and endeavored to make contact with the native societies. But a devastating hurricane, raw hunger, and mismanagement by de Luna doomed the colony. By the settlers' withdrawal to Mexico in 1561 the missionary effort had resulted in only one convert, a woman of the Coosa nation baptized at the point of death.

M.G.
returned to West Florida.

Five years later, Spain established a permanent settlement at the site named Panzacola and began the construction of fortifications. Nothing found to date in the records describes the first church, but it must have been primitive since the soldiers' barracks were made from bark, without windows or fireplaces. Three priests were at the presidio in 1698. In 1699 we have a report indicating that there were then two Augustinian priests and several Franciscans in the settlement. In 1703 we find three Franciscans, but in 1713 only one. Further documentation of church activity is scanty, but these are the numbers of clergy that are typical throughout Pensacola's first Spanish period. That there was missionary work among the surrounding native tribes is evidenced by the fact that by 1763 there were 108 Catholic Indians at or near the site.

The colony itself survived on a bare subsistence level, subject to revolts by its largely prisoner work force and to attacks by nearby English and French forces. Fire and hurricanes did great damage. But the faith, we may assume, never faltered. A 1743 sketch of Santa Rosa Island, by the French artist Dominic Serres, the only one we have of the presidio from the period, shows a polygonal church building with a central belfry. Standing alongside the two-storied governor's house, it was the second tallest structure on the horizon. Alas, nine years later, a hurricane destroyed the church and most of the town. In 1757, the presidio was relocated to the mainland site where the city stands today and took the name San Miguel (St. Michael) de Panzacola (Pensacola). A new church was constructed to serve the 700 Catholic colonists and Indians but it was substantially damaged by a hurricane in 1761.

rebuilding St. Augustine

Apart from the Castillo de San Marcos, the only structure that survived the Carolinians' incendiary attack on the Ancient City in 1702 was the hermitage and hospital Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, fittingly a name that honored Mary's period of solitude following the crucifixion. La Soledad now became the parish church. About 1740 it was rebuilt with stone, more exactly a shellrock the Spaniards called *coquina* that was quarried on the barrier island Anastasia to the east across the Matanzas River. Coquina consists of tiny mollusk shells cemented together by their own lime. The Castillo had been fabricated entirely from the rock (1672-95), and now both public and private construction in the city employed the fireproof material. La Soledad was given a new stone façade with three arches and a belfry above. Its nave was twenty-three yards long and twelve wide.

The church at pueblo Nombre de Dios had been rebuilt with stone prior to the English attack. Its sanctuary contained a sculpture piece depicting Mary in the act of breast feeding the infant Jesus, and Spanish as well as native women who were expecting or nursing a child came in pilgrimage to the church to ask the blessing of Mary under her title Nuestra Señora de la Leche y Buen Parto, Our Lady of the Milk and of Happy Delivery. The Marian devotion had been brought to Nombre de Dios from Spain in the 1620s. (The pilgrimage of expectant and nursing mothers to the site continues today.) In 1728, an English and Indian force from Carolina burned the mission church and carried off the statue of Mary. The church was rebuilt of stone and a replacement statue was obtained from Spain. The chapel that one visits at Nombre de Dios today is the latest of a line of chapels that stood at the site but were destroyed over time by storms or fire.

The Franciscan convento was also rebuilt with stone. The church was completed about 1737,
The British Interregnum

In accordance with the terms of the Treaty of Paris ending the French and Indian War (1754-63), the provinces of Florida were ceded to the victor, Great Britain. Thus began a twenty-one year occupation by an officially Anglican (Church of England) nation, not of one Florida but of two, for the Florida awarded Britain in the treaty extended as far west as the Mississippi, and London decided to divide it into two royal colonies: East Florida with a capital at St. Augustine, and West Florida with a capital at Pensacola. To the Spanish Catholic population King George III pledged to guarantee the free exercise of their religion if they chose to remain in the Floridas. But the Spaniards both east and west, not trusting the British to observe that pledge, elected to depart, most of them to Cuba, some to New Spain (Mexico), others to Spain.

Altogether 3,104 residents of St. Augustine and environs sailed away from what Spain called la siempre fiel ciudad — the always faithful city. Included in that number were 80 Christian Indians from the nearby towns of La Leche, which we have already remarked upon, and Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de Tolomato, where there was a small stone church. Also on board the departing transports were forty-six free black families who had lived since 1738 in full and unfettered state of Spanish citizenship in their own town and fort, Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose, the first sanctioned free black community in what is now the United States, situated two miles north of the Castillo. Originally fugitive slaves from English Carolina and Georgia, they had received baptism as Catholics and worshipped in their own board-and-thatch church.

Three Spanish men with their families chose to remain in the deserted city of 300 dwellings: two farmers, Francisco Javier Sánchez and Manuel Solana, and the merchant Luciano de Herrera. They would become the sole presence of the Catholic faith in East Florida for the next five years. All other vestiges of parish life were on board the transports, the last of which, a schooner, arrived at Havana in February 1764 bearing the altars, chalices, images, vestments, canopies, candlesticks, bells, and other objects from the
parish church, the Castillo chapel, the Franciscan convent, La Leche, Guadalupe, and Mose. Also on board were St. Augustine’s last pastor, Father Juan José Solana, and his acting chief sacristan, who escorted fifteen folio volumes of parish registers that formed a continuous record of Catholic life in St. Augustine for the previous 170 years. The registers were placed in the basement of the cathedral church in Havana where they would remain, forgotten, for the next 107 years.

Many of the *floridanos*, as the émigrés were called, settled in the Matanzas province of Cuba, where they reconstituted their town and parish under the name San Agustín de la Nueva Florida (St. Augustine of New Florida). Many of their descendants live there today. Though the town is now known as Ceiba Mocha, the parish church contains an image of St. Augustine. The Florida Indians, a tiny remnant of the once numerous mission converts, were settled in the Havana suburb of Guanabacoa, where they suffered from communicable diseases to which they had no acquired immunities: within five years eleven of fifteen heads of Indian households were dead. While thirteen black families are known to have settled in San Agustín de la Nueva Florida, most took up residence in Havana and in the suburb of Regla southeast of the capital.

A similar evacuation took place at Pensacola, where only one Spaniard remained behind. More than 600 soldiers, civilians, convicts, and Christian Indians took ship to Vera Cruz in New Spain (Mexico). The lot of the 108 West Florida Indian émigrés was worse than that of their brethren in the East. Fewer than one-half made it safely to their new pueblo of San Carlos de Chachalacas in Tempoala. All but sixty-nine died during the sea and land passage, and the survivors had all their valuables and personal belongings stolen, but after fifteen months much of their property was recovered.

When British forces occupied the evacuated Pensacola they found a dilapidated fort and a village consisting of “about one hundred huts.” During the British period of rule that followed, Pensacola was not distinguished for its religious vigor. Frequently the town was without a licensed minister of the Church of England, and no church building was ever erected for Anglican worship. Nor was any effort made to evangelize nearby tribes. The most positive feature of the period was Britain’s firm support, as promised, for the principle of religious freedom.

By contrast, the British government and clergy at St. Augustine energetically adapted the Spanish parish church La Soledad to Anglican use. Under the direction of the rector John Forbes, an altar was placed at the eastern end of the nave, pews were installed, and a seventy-foot-high tower and steeple, in the same Georgian style one sees today on colonial churches in New England, was added to the west exterior. On the new structure the British mounted a town clock, bells, and a weathervane. And they rechristened the church St. Peter’s. [When most of the British evacuated the city following the retrocession of the Floridas to Spain in 1783-84, they took the pews, clock, and bells with them]. Having no apparent intent to evangelize the Indians -- now Lower Creeks called Seminoles -- and with no missionary order to undertake that work, the British converted the Convento de San Francisco from a friary into a soldiers’ barracks. A two-story
hospital on Avilés Street they adapted for a courthouse; medical services were transferred to Nombre de Dios, accounting for the name there of Hospital Creek. And on the corner of St. George and King Streets, as one of their numerous construction projects in the city, the British enlarged the Spanish bishop's stone residence (Casa de Piedra de los Señores Obispos) with a second floor and new wings to serve as a neoclassic style statehouse.

Roman Catholic sacramental life returned to East Florida only five years after its sudden departure, when a priest from Minorca, the second largest of the Balearic Islands in the western Mediterranean Sea, arrived in the colony to serve as pastor to Catholic and Greek Orthodox laborers at New Smyrna, where the city of that name stands today. He was Pedro Camps, a secular with a doctorate in theology from the University of Mallorca. With him came an Augustinian assistant pastor named Bartolomé Casanovas. Camps's congregation of Minorcans, Greeks, and Italians had been transported to Florida to work an indigo plantation owned by a Scottish physician named Andrew Turnbull. They came as indentured servants, promised their freedom and land of their own after a specified period of servitude. During the nine-year life of the plantation, the laborers experienced seemingly unending sicknesses, privations, brutal treatment, and death. Originally, 1,403 in number -- to that date the largest importation of Europeans to Florida at one time -- 148 were buried at sea, 477 died during the plantation's first two years, and 67 in the three years following. The settlers' principal human source of hope and comfort was Father Camps, who preached and administered the sacraments to them in a commodious brick church named San Pedro (St. Peter's), which contained to either side of a high altar images of Saints Peter and Anthony of Padua.

That New Smyrna's Catholic clergymen and congregants enjoyed free exercise of their faith is a testament to the sincerity of Great Britain's guarantee of religious freedom. The assurance would gain added significance in 1777 when then Governor Patrick Tonyn disbanded the ill-starred colony and permitted its people, with their pastor, to take refuge in the capital. The settlers made domiciles in the northwest quarter of St. Augustine and found work as farmers, fishermen, tradesmen, and ship captains. (Many of their descendents live in the city today.) In a building on north St. George Street their beloved Father Camps formally reestablished the pastorate of San Pedro, twin by name to the Anglican St. Peter's on south St. George. The shepherd and his wronged flock had found a new home. The date was November 9, 1777.

The Spanish Restoration

In the terms of a second Treaty of Paris, dated 1783, this one concluding the American Revolution, the two Floridas were transferred to Spain. In West Florida the retrocession was a mere formality since, in May 1781, armed forces from Spanish Louisiana allied with George Washington's patriot army had captured British Pensacola and, with it, the whole of West Florida. Restoration of Catholic authority in the colony followed at once. On May 11, one day after the British surrender, a Capuchin (regular) priest, Cyril de Barcelona, who accompanied the victorious Spanish army, celebrated the conquest with a Te Deum. Prior to the military campaign, the bishop of Santiago de Cuba had appointed Father Cyril his vicario, or vicar forane, over West Florida. With that authority Cyril canonically erected in Pensacola the Parish of St. Michael the Archangel, which has lasted from that day to this without interruption. Though not the first parish in Florida, St. Michael's would become by the present date Florida's oldest parish in continuous existence. There being no suitable church structure in the presidio, Cyril blessed
an old two-story wooden almácen, or warehouse, to that purpose. The building, which stood on the
beach near the plaza, had a brick foundation and floor measuring eighty-five feet in length and thirty-
four in width. The first pastor appointed to the restoration parish was Capuchin Father Pedro Vélez.
Pensacola at the time had 300 inhabitants.

During these years prior to 1802, when Louisiana reverted to French rule, the Spanish flag and
Catholic cross stood together in constant display along the southern rim of what is now the United
States, Atlantic to Pacific. From an eastern anchor at St. Augustine the Spanish Borderlands, as the rim
came to be called, ranged west to Pensacola, New Orleans, and farther still to missions or presidios
named San Antonio and El Paso in Texas, Santa Fé (Holy Faith) in New Mexico, Tucson in Arizona,
and the chain of missions in Alta California, from San Diego (founded in 1769) in the south to San
Francisco (1776) in the north. Thus, by the last quarter of the eighteenth century the original Florida
Catholic Heritage Trail connected to other trails that reached 3,000 miles from ocean to ocean, twice
the distance of Ancient Rome's Rhine-Danube line in Europe.

With restoration of Spanish rule in East Florida, the Spanish Crown (which by virtue of a special
relationship with the Vatican called the patronato real had the right to appoint bishops and pastors in
the American possessions) made an unusual decision. To the newly reconstituted Parish of St. Augustine
it appointed two young Irish priests, natives of Longford, who had just completed theological studies at
the Irish College in Salamanca, Spain. Father Thomas Hassett would be pastor and Michael O'Reilly his
assistant. The Crown's rationale was plain: Numerous British planters with their families had elected to
remain on their farmsteads along the St. Johns, Nassau, and St. Marys Rivers; and it was expected that
thousands of English speaking immigrants would come into a largely vacant Florida from the southern
regions of the infant United States. Bilingual priests like Hassett and O'Reilly might bring American
frontiersmen into the Church just as Franciscans in the preceding century had converted the native
societies. It bears mention that Hassett and O'Reilly were not the first Irish clergy to serve in Florida.
Father Ricardo Artur (Richard Arthur) was pastor at St. Augustine for a term beginning in June 1597.

In the beginning years of the second Spanish period Hassett's parishioners were not numerous.
Only about 100 floridanos returned from Cuba to reclaim their properties. Father Camps's newly freed
Mediterraneans, now collectively if not accurately called Minorcans, were the largest body of Catholics,
and the military forces the second largest. For Sunday Mass Father Camps's building was too small;
Hassett found it "wretched" and "lacking in all things appropriate for the celebration of the divine
liturgy." And the Anglicans' St. Peter's (née La Soledad) had been gutted by the departing British and was,
in the words of one royal engineer, "a useless pile of masonry." Before the British period, the parish had
begun construction of a new church on the southwest corner of the plaza near the governor's house, but
it never reached usable form. Hassett probably agreed that the iglesia mayor of a capital city should stand
on the plaza, so he chose to employ the second floor of the masonry British statehouse, fifty by ninety
feet, for parish liturgies. And there the city worshipped for the next thirteen years.

A census from 1787 tells us that in all East Florida there were 905 white persons of all ages and
both sexes and 490 slaves of whom most worked on the English plantations. Of the white population,

-31 were natives of Spain,
-25 were Canary Islanders,
-62 were floridanos;
-448 Minorcans,
-448 Italians,
-448 Greeks,
-339 Britons.
Regardless where they lived all who were baptized, excepting the Britons and their slaves, were considered members of the parish. Until 1787, East and West Florida came under the jurisdiction of the bishops of Santiago de Cuba. In that year, they were transferred to the newly erected Diocese of San Cristobal, with its see at Havana. In 1795, the Floridanas were transferred again, to the new Diocese of Louisiana and the Floridanas, with its see at
New Orleans. That part of the Floridas which today forms the American state east of the Apalachicola River would not receive its own resident bishop with ordinary (that is, full and independent) powers until 1858. Before that date, it would be the stepchild of New Orleans, Havana, Mobile, Charleston, and Savannah. Florida west of the Apalachicola, after various jurisdictional permutations, would end up in the Diocese of Mobile, and remain there from 1829 to 1968, when ten western counties were transferred to the Diocese of St. Augustine. In 1975, eighteen West Florida counties were erected to the present Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee.

Father Camps died in 1790. His name and the story of his heroic service live on in St. Augustine. In 1795, Father Hassett was promoted to canon and vicar-general in New Orleans and was succeeded as pastor by Father O'Reilly. Hassett is remembered in history for three initiatives. The first was his founding in September 1787 of a school for Minorcan children. Instruction was given in reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography. It was apparently the first free school in what is now the United States, and remained open for thirty-five years. His second initiative was to undertake missionary work among the English-speaking frontiersmen and their families settled along the St. Johns, Nassau, and St. Marys. These Anglo-Americans had been allowed to retain their beliefs or nonbeliefs, which for Spain was an unusually tolerant policy, but the Spanish Crown wanted an attempt made to bring them, or at least their children, into the Catholic fold. In 1790, Hassett traveled 600 miles over a period of five weeks among those families, finding many men and women who had never seen a Catholic or Anglican priest or a Protestant minister in their entire lives. He handed out catechisms in the English language that had been printed in New York at the Spanish Crown’s expense, and gave instructions that were received so eagerly that he was able to baptize seventy-eight children and fifty-one black slaves. The experience led him to press for more Irish clergy, and three were sent, but before they could take up posts among the northern settlers sickness forced the withdrawal of all three. In the end, Spain’s missionary policy in East Florida never got beyond the planning stage, and the Anglo-Americans on the frontier continued unattended by the consolations of religion.

The third notable Hassett initiative was his proposal in 1784 to King Charles III, through the Captain-General of Cuba, that a new, commodious, and, if possible, ornate parish church be built on the plaza of the capital city. Two years later, the monarch gave his approval and directed that money for the project be raised in Cuba. Costs were reduced substantially by salvaging coquina rock from the old churches of La Soledad, La Leche, and Guadalupe. A design was produced by the royal engineer Mariano de la Rocque and in 1793 a cornerstone was laid east of St. George Street on the north side of the plaza. During the four years of construction that followed, Hassett was transferred to New Orleans and it would be Father O'Reilly who presided over the building's completion and consecration, on December 8, 1797, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Rectangular in shape, 124 by 44 feet, the coquina exterior was fronted by a Spanish-Moorish façade that swept upward in graceful ogee curves to a belfry containing four bells, the oldest dated 1682.
Behind the belfry was a wooden balcony where boy acolytes rang the bells by pulling ropes attached to clappers or by hitting the bells with mallets. The interior nave, designed to hold 547 worshippers, led to an imposing marble main altar flanked by two side altars. Crystal chandeliers, statues, and paintings adorned the interior. St. Augustine finally had an iglesia mayor worthy of its history.

Meanwhile, at Florida’s other parish, St. Michael’s in Pensacola, the congregation continued to worship in the same old, now leaky, almácén, without much hope of building a proper church anytime soon. The main reason for pessimism was found in the somewhat leaky faith that prevailed there. Like the city itself, the state of religion was in ruinous condition. Many parishioners had not confessed their sins for as long as five years; in 1790 only 7 of 411 Catholics received Holy Communion during the Easter season, which was one of the grave precepts of the church. At the same time, owing to strong Protestant immigration from U.S. states to the immediate north, the age of Roman Catholic dominance in West Florida was slowly and painfully ebbing.

Spanish priests in the colony had difficulty conversing with newcomers both in the city and on the frontier, and, recognizing that, diocesan authorities used the same expedient as that practiced earlier in East Florida: importation of English-speaking Irish clergy. In 1792, six Salamanca-trained Irishmen arrived in Pensacola. Two were assigned to St. Michael’s: Francis Lennan and James Coleman. Four others, Gregory White, Constantine McKenna, Michael Lamport, and William Savage, were assigned to frontier missionary posts, where, according to the scant surviving record, they achieved considerable good both for the frontiersmen and for their faith. After 1798 Father Coleman soldiered on as the lone priest at St. Michael’s, where conditions were so parlous that the bishop in New Orleans lamented that he could “not get even angels to go to Pensacola.” Occasionally, Coleman received assistance from military chaplains in the region. But, basically, he was alone in charge when Pensacola, like St. Augustine, passed from Spanish rule to that of the United States on March 3, 1821.

American Florida

The change of flags at Pensacola introduced a new national culture into the old city. Father Coleman, with his Spanish connections, thought that he should leave West Florida, and we find his last signature in the parish register under the date March 6, 1822. Many of the Spanish parishioners left, too, either before or after him. For twenty-eight years thereafter a clerical presence at St. Michael’s was irregular at best. The nationalities of priests serving from time to time in the parish included French, Italian, and Mexican. Even the French-born Bishop of Mobile Michael Portier took his turns. The most interesting new wrinkle resulting from American occupation was the incorporation of St. Michael’s by the U.S. Territory of Florida and the entrusting of its property and other “temporalities” to a parish board of wardens. The “lay trustee” system worked reasonably well at Pensacola, though at St. Augustine, as will be seen, it led to schism.

In late 1830 the old walls of the almácén church buckled and collapsed. With funds that Bishop Portier obtained from France, the lay wardens commenced construction of a proper church. In June 1831, just as the frame structure was being rooted, a storm destroyed the work. Finally, in 1833, after the infusion of more funds from France, and the incurring of serious debt, St. Michael’s Church stood complete, its dimensions forty by eighty feet. First pastor in the new edifice was Father John Symphorian Guinard, newly ordained from France. An unbroken list of pastors followed his tenure. By 1851 a second parish was formed, St. John the Evangelist, in Warrington, a suburb to the southwest of
the city. Its first pastor was Dominic Manucy, a Minorcan native of St. Augustine, and future Bishop of Mobile (1884-85).

With the change of flags in East Florida in 1821, the parish of St. Augustine suffered substantial loss. Claiming that they were the property of Spain, not of the church, U.S. federal officials seized the church building, burial ground, episcopal residence (statehouse in British times), the former Franciscan convent, and Nombre de Dios. Bishop John England, of Charleston, took up the parishioners' cause, and early in 1823 managed to secure the return of the church and cemetery. He could not prevent title to the old episcopal residence and lot being awarded in 1825 to the Episcopal Church, which in 1831 built Trinity Church on the site; nor were Nombre de Dios and the convent property returned.

The major problem facing the parishioners both before and after the restitution of St. Augustine Church was the nonavailability of clergy. An empty church was little better than no church at all. Irish-named priests would visit occasionally from Charleston, and in 1825, one stayed for as long as two years before, lacking support from the lay wardens both for the liturgy and for his food, he took ship back to Charleston. In 1828, Irish-born Father Edward Francis Mayne came from Charleston to take up the position of pastor. All went well until the following year when the wardens attempted to interfere in spiritual matters where, as Mayne argued, only the priest had competency and authority. During a two-and-a-half year confrontation Mayne was locked out of his church, and in December 1831 a Florida Superior Court judge issued a ruling that supported the action of the wardens.

In this unique Florida Catholic parish event, the wardens, representing the parishioners, had enlisted the sanction of the secular arm against the spiritual order. A full-blown schism was the result. Similar lay trustee-induced schisms during this period occurred at New Orleans, Charleston, Norfolk, and Buffalo and lasted for several years. Florida's lone such incident.

Father Varela

Closely connected to the story of St. Augustine Parish is the name Félix Francisco José María de la Concepción Varela y Morales, who currently is under consideration for beatification, the first stage to canonical sainthood. Born in Havana in 1788, Varela was brought to St. Augustine at the age of six by his father, a captain in the Cuban regiment stationed at the Castillo de San Marcos. He learned Latin, Religion, and Music from Father Michael O'Reilly. At age fourteen, he returned to Cuba to complete his education and attend seminary. He was ordained a priest in 1811.

Becoming a professor of philosophy, law and science, with a wide following, Father Varela openly called for Cuban independence from Spain, and in 1821, he won election as one of three Cuban representatives to the Spanish Cortes or parliament. There his advocacy of Cuban rights angered Spanish King Ferdinand VII, who drove him into exile.

Traveling to New York City, he became pastor there of the Church of the Transfiguration and vicar-general of the Diocese of New York. His writings and other scholarly attainments soon won him national stature, and he never neglected the cause of Cuban independence and democracy. During thirty years, Varela made frequent trips to his boyhood home St. Augustine, and he retired to the old Spanish city in 1850, eager to be of assistance to the priests of the parish church.

In that final ministry of his life, every resident of the city was touched by his sweetness of nature, his kindness, and his holy simplicity. Though frail, poor, and lonely, he was obviously rich in love. It was said that his smile alone cured heartaches. Many regarded him as a saint. He had spent much of his priestly life promoting tolerance and inter-faith relations; when he lay dying in St. Augustine a Protestant mother asked him to bless her children.

Upon his death on February 25, 1853, the parish church buried his remains in Tolomato Cemetery, on Cordova Street, where the body of his teacher Father O'Reilly lay. Cuban admirers exhumed his body and placed it in a new mortuary chapel vault befitting the Father of Cuban Independence. When, at last, independence came, an official delegation from Havana removed his bones to Cuba where they were enshrined in a monument honoring him as a national hero.

In 1983 the Holy See authorized the Cuban Episcopate to begin a canonical process for sainthood. Varela is Florida's candidate as well as Cuba's.

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was resolved, finally, in February 1832, when Bishop Portier, who then had charge of East Florida, visited the parish and negotiated a reconciliation before the altar of wardens and pastor. He also made clear, it should be added, that interdict and excommunication would be imposed upon the parish if there was any further lay interference with spiritual discipline. The supernatural realm also had its sanctions.

The rejected Mayne resumed his ministry in the church building and also began making mission trips to the commercial and plantation villages that were sprouting along the St. Johns River and the Atlantic shore: Jacksonville, Pilatka [Palatka], Pablo [Jacksonville Beach], and Old Town [Fernandina]. After Mayne’s death in 1834, the parish was served by a succession of Irish-born pastors, including two future bishops, Andrew Byrne [later first Bishop of Little Rock] and John Barry [later second Bishop of Savannah]. A young French-born recruit to the position, Claude M. Rampon, would stay seven years -- the longest pastorate since Spanish times. During his tenure Rampon established mission stations at Black Creek [Middleburg], St. Johns Bar [Mayport], Mandarin, Picolata, and at the distant village of Tampa.

This outreach program developed further under the direction of two French Fathers of Mercy, Benedict Madeore, who succeeded Rampon as pastor in 1844, and Edmond Aubril, who took up residence at Fernandina on Amelia Island. Soon afterwards, churches and mission chapels were erected at Fernandina, Jacksonville, Mandarin, and Black Creek. (On March 3, 1845 the Territory of Florida was admitted to the Union as the twenty-seventh state.)

Soon mission stations were appearing at communities scattered across the northern and western counties. In the state capital city of Tallahassee a small church in honor of the Sorrowful Mother was built in 1846 and subsequently was visited by priests from St. Augustine and Columbus, Georgia. When, a year later, the church was destroyed by fire, a second church, not completed until 1853, was first named St. Mary’s, later St. Peter’s. Two church buildings later, in 1893, the parish was named Blessed Sacrament. Catholics in Apalachicola to the west built a church dedicated to St. Patrick in 1851-52. What had been a mission at Jacksonville was elevated to the status of parish in 1857, when a small frame church built ten years before by Father Aubril, at the northwest corner of Duval and Newnan Streets, was canonically erected as the Parish of the Immaculate Conception. Its first pastor was Irish-born William J. Hamilton, of whom more will be said.

In 1851, Bishop Francis X. Gartland of the newly erected Diocese of Savannah, with temporary responsibility for all Florida east of the Apalachicola, sent a priest, John F. Kirby, to the farthest point on the peninsula, Key West. There Kirby found 300 Catholics, blacks as well as whites, out of a total population of 2,000, the most notable Catholic name being that of Stephen Russell Mallory, who would serve as United States Senator from Florida and, later, as Secretary of the Navy in the Confederate government. The town, prosperous from an active maritime salvage industry, desired a parish, Gartland decided, and Kirby built a church for that purpose on the west side of Duval Street, between Fleming and Eaton Streets. On February 28, 1852, Gartland dedicated the church under the title Saint Mary Star of the Sea. To the new pastor was given charge of missions to the Catholics of Tampa and Tallahassee, which could be reached more easily by coastal schooner than by overland conveyance.
Florida’s First Bishop

In 1857, Florida east of the Apalachicola was raised to the dignity of a Vicariate Apostolic, the near equivalent of a diocese, with a resident bishop exercising ordinary jurisdiction. That bishop, consecrated in Baltimore on April 25, 1858, was French-born Jean-Pierre Augustin Marcellin Vérot, a Sulpician (secular) who had spent twenty-two years as a professor of mathematics and the physical sciences at St. Mary's College, Baltimore, and, afterwards, five years as a pastor in nearby Ellicott’s Mills. Upon his arrival at St. Augustine in June he plunged into a thorough study of the recent parish registers and of such other historical documents as existed in the city at the time. After several months reflection, he wrote in a pastoral letter to his people: “Over an immense region including more than six degrees of latitude we have but three clergymen, but three missionaries to act as the co-operators of our ministry. How strange! How desolating is this statement for such a country as Florida which two hundred years ago abounded with devoted and self-denying missionaries who had set at naught everything that the world holds dear, for the sake of diffusing the light of heaven -- O the dreadful effect of human vicissitudes! O the desolating proof of the instability of every thing here below!”

With an energy that belied his fifty-three years Verot traveled from mission to mission throughout his vicariate, and then, pained that he could not provide resident pastors to towns and villages that asked for them, he sailed for France to recruit priests. After a six months search he returned with seven seculars, two of whom, Henry Peter Claverul and Peter Dufau, would become his close associates in the Florida apostolate. He personally instructed them all in the English language and sent them out into the field. In 1860, one of their number, twenty-seven-year-old Charles A. Mailley, became pastor of Tampa’s first church, dedicated to St. Louis. Among the new missions established at this time were: Monticello, St. Mark, and Newport, attended from Tallahassee; Stark, Gainesville, and Newnan’sville, attended from Fernandina; Moccasin Branch and Pellicer’s Creek, attended from St. Augustine; and Cedar Keys and Manatee, attended from Tampa. In 1859, Bishop Verot recruited five sisters of the Order of Mercy from the Diocese of Hartford in Connecticut and three Christian Brothers from Canada to open, respectively, a girls’ academy and a boys’ day school in St. Augustine.

In the same year, 1859, the western counties of Florida received a new bishop in the person of John Quinlan, of Cincinnati, who succeeded Bishop Portier, upon the latter’s death, as Bishop of Mobile. Of the 3,000 souls in Pensacola at the time, approximately 1,600 were Catholic communicants. Quinlan traveled to the nearby city twice, in 1860 and 1861, to administer the sacrament of Confirmation at St. Michael’s and St. John’s. It would be five years before Pensacola saw him again, however. What intervened

Augustin Verot, first bishop to exercise ordinary episcopal authority in Florida (1858-70) and first Bishop of the Diocese of St. Augustine (1870-76). His remains are buried in Tolomato Cemetery, on Cordova Street in St. Augustine.
was political secession and civil war.

Upon Abraham Lincoln’s election to the presidency in November 1860, all the southern states began talking of separation from the American Union. On January 10, 1861, Florida became the third state to secede and help form a new Confederate States of America. When war broke out between the North and the South, Pensacola was the Florida site most dramatically affected. Several raids and two artillery bombardments were exchanged between Federal troops on Santa Rosa Island and Confederate forces in the city. Bishop Quinlan sent six Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul from Mobile to nurse the wounded and diseased men in the Confederate command. In May 1862, the Confederates withdrew to Alabama, and with them departed almost all the parishioners of St. Michael’s and St. John’s. St. Michael’s Church burned to the ground, it is thought by accident. St. John’s Church was destroyed during one of the Union bombardments. Feeling threatened by Union soldiers who landed at Apalachicola, most of the parishioners at St. Patrick’s fled the city for the duration.

In East Florida, Union troops landed without significant opposition at Fernandina (March 2, 1861), St. Augustine (March 11), and Jacksonville (March 12). The first two sites would remain in Federal hands for the duration of the war. With many residents of St. Augustine having fled into the interior, the Sisters of Mercy and Christian Brothers were compelled to close their schools. Jacksonville would be occupied off and on four separate times. On March 29, 1863, during the third Union abandonment, units of the Eighth Maine and Sixth Connecticut regiments sacked and burned Father Hamilton’s Church of the Immaculate Conception. Carried off were the sacred vessels—chalice, paten, and monstrance—required for Mass and Benediction. A correspondent of the New York Tribune reported, “The organ was in a moment torn to strips and almost every soldier who came out seemed to be celebrating the occasion by blowing through an organ pipe.” Earlier, Union troops had pillaged the churches at Fernandina and St. Johns Bar (Mayport); in the latter case they paraded about in the priest’s vestments. There had not been such desecrations, as Verot called these actions, since Colonel John Palmer from Carolina despoiled La Leche church outside St. Augustine in 1728.

On July 22, 1861, Verot had been named third Bishop of Savannah while retaining jurisdiction over Florida. Overnight he had added to his responsibilities the entire state of Georgia with its 8,000 Catholics. Based now in Savannah, he made two wartime trips by horse and buggy through north Florida, and from his diary we learn the names of three new settlements where Catholics were found: Quincy, Lake City, and Diego (Palm Valley). Everywhere his communicants were living at anxious, bare subsistence levels. It was no different in Georgia, except that that state contained one of the true horrors of the war, the Confederate prison camp (Camp Sumter) at Andersonville. Between February 1864 and April 1865, some 50,000 Federal prisoners were held there in an open pen where, during the summer of 1864, 10,187 prisoners died from disease and malnutrition. Verot visited the camp twice and estimated that about one-fifth of the POWs were Catholics. He assigned five priests to tend to their spiritual wants. They were the only representatives of religion who ever entered the compound. Two were originally Florida clergy, William J. Hamilton, who had moved to Macon, Georgia after Immaculate Conception was burned, and Henry Peter Clavreul, who had transferred to Savannah after the Union capture of Fernandina. The report that Father Hamilton wrote of his experiences is as heartrending today as it was 140 years ago.

When the war finally, and mercifully, came to an end in April 1865, the now empty flagstaffs of the Confederacy looked out on what Verot called “a heap of smoking ruins.” The bishop spoke compassionately to the people of his Florida vicariate: “The war has left you poor, distressed, and reduced to beggary. Be not dismayed: this state of things so untoward in the eyes of the world is full of hope, of consolation, and of spiritual treasures in the eyes of faith and religion.” Florida Catholics should be further comforted, he
told them, by the fact that the Church had come out of the war richer than she was before in reputation and esteem. Many Floridians "have heard the preaching of our missionaries; they have seen them in the hospitals and in the camps; they have witnessed their zeal and their devoutness." Verot now became a beggar himself. He appeared for financial assistance from a missionary aid society in France, saying that, without help, "many [Catholics] will have to abandon their homes and flee elsewhere lest they die of hunger." Similarly, he asked for money from less afflicted dioceses to the north, and was profoundly grateful when Archbishop Martin J. Spalding of Baltimore sent him $2000. After seeing to the bodily survival of his people, there was need now to rebuild or reopen churches and schools.

To the west, Bishop Quinlan was taking stock of his own resources. Because of his support for the Confederacy, he had not been allowed to visit Union-controlled West Florida during the war. Now he traveled freely to Pensacola and Warrington to view the ruins of St. Michael's and St. John's, and to spur their returning congregations to rebuild. Reconstruction of St. Michael's was made possible by a bequest of $1,000 worth of property in the will of Father James Coleman, who had been the last of the Spanish-Irish pastors of the parish. The new church, on East New Street, was dedicated by Quinlan on December 22, 1867. Reconstruction of St. John's was made possible largely by the generosity of U.S. Navy officers and seamen. St. Patrick's at Apalachicola had not been harmed during the war. Deserted by its congregation in 1862, it now filled again and took on new vigor. A succession of young priests in the years that followed gave all three West Florida parishes a marked renewal in their material and spiritual condition. By 1870, Pensacola had St. Michael's Academy and Parish School, with 100 pupils, conducted by the Sisters of the Holy Cross. And by the fall of 1877 a total of 390 pupils were enrolled in two Catholic schools in Pensacola and one in Warrington, all operated by the Sisters of Mercy.

Bishops Verot and Quinlan had both been strong supporters of the Confederacy and of the institution of slavery. It comes as a surprise to modern readers to learn that before the Civil War most U.S. bishops, both north and south, saw nothing inherently wrong with slavery. Indeed, the bishops pointed out, the New Testament books, especially the writings of St. Paul, contained plain approbations of it.

But Verot, in a now famous sermon that he delivered at St. Augustine on January 4, 1861, condemned abuses in the slavery system. Some masters had treated their African-American workers with unconscionable cruelty. He gave numerous examples, which he condemned, and then, insisting that masters had moral duties as well as rights, he proposed a servile code, the first such code governing slavery to be presented in the South. As the Civil War ran its course, similar demands for slavery reform were heard in other quarters of the Confederacy. By 1865, the Southern Protestant and secular press alike were supporting all the same conditions that Verot had laid down in 1861 as necessary for a just and lawful slavery. But by 1865 Verot himself had gone further. He had grown to understand that slavery itself was wrong.

That is why, at war's end, he threw all his energies into the task of educating the freed African-American children. In June 1865, he sailed to France where, in his native city of Le Puy, he asked for nuns from the Congrégation de St. Joseph (Sisters of St. Joseph) to teach black children in Florida and Georgia. Sixty volunteered. The bishop chose eight. He told their mother superior: "I want you to understand fully and clearly that it is for the Negroes [as blacks were called then] and for them almost exclusively that I have arranged for the daughters of your Order to come into my diocese. I have five or six hundred thousand Negroes without any education or religion for whom I wish to do something."

When the sisters arrived at St. Augustine in September 1866, and were given temporary quarters with the Sisters of Mercy at their St. Mary's Convent on the northwest corner of St. George Street and what is now Cathedral Place, Verot gave them personal instruction in the English language just as he had done for his French priest recruits of 1859. Only five months later, the sisters opened a school for black children
on the east side of south St. George Street. Soon afterwards, they had their own convent, on Charlotte Street. More sisters arrived from Le Puy in 1867 and 1868, enabling the congregation to open schools at Jacksonville, Fernandina, and Savannah. Still later, the sisters opened schools for black children in Mandarin and Palatka. Looking to the most distant needs of his people, in 1876 Verot sent sisters to open a similar school in Key West. No other bishop in the South matched Verot's earnestness or success in these endeavors on behalf of Florida's black children.

In 1869-70, Verot carried his advocacy of African-Americans to the first Vatican Council in Rome. Asserting himself as one of its most vocal participants, Verot delivered long lectures in Latin, the language of the worldwide gathering of cardinals and bishops, that emphasized pastoral needs rather than theoretical propositions. The only prelate present to plead the cause of the blacks, Verot emphasized on January 3, 1870 that, "Venio de America -- I come from America [and] from a diocese [Georgia and Florida] in which there are many Negroes, more than a half-million Negroes, in fact. We condemn the inept error of those who allege that Negroes do not belong to the human family, or that they are not endowed with spiritual and immortal souls." The Roman correspondent of the Chicago Tribune wrote that Verot's address that day was "not only eloquent" but a "warning and a rebuke... a vehement excoriation of those who were letting mankind perish while they discussed impractical and non-essential things."

While in Rome, on March 11, 1870, Verot learned that Pope Pius IX had elevated the Vicariate of Florida east of the Apalachicola to the dignity of an independent diocese with a see at St. Augustine. Offered his choice as bishop of Savannah or St. Augustine, Verot chose the latter. In a letter to the superior of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Le Puy he explained: "I have chosen St. Augustine in preference to Savannah, principally because St. Augustine and Florida are the place where I was first sent, and also because in Florida there is more holy poverty as well as more good to be done in building churches and founding schools." The church at St. Augustine was now a cathedral. At that date, the new diocese could count nineteen churches (including a rebuilt Immaculate Conception in Jacksonville) and mission chapels, seven schools, twelve priests, and about 8,000 Catholics. The numbers represent an accomplishment well out of proportion to available resources.

Verot recovered the lost Nombre de Dios property for the sum of one dollar and had a chapel reconstructed on the foundations of the last La Leche church. In 1875, while on a trip to Europe, he commissioned a painting of the first Mass offered at Nombre de Dios, on September 8, 1565, and afterwards had it hung on the interior east wall of the cathedral. On photoengraved reproductions of the painting he had inscribed: "With Religion came to our shores Civilization, Arts, Sciences and Industry." On a trip to Cuba in 1871 he made another recovery, which he recorded in his diary thus: "I found the old records [parish registers] of St. Augustine for three [actually two] hundred years." After lengthy negotiations, the registers were returned to St. Augustine in 1906.

During the last years of his life Verot lived the life of a missionary, traveling the length of his peninsular diocese by horse and buggy, sometimes accompanied by Father Clavreul. Rather than the churches and chapels, he chose to visit isolated Catholic families in individual bare country dwellings or in tiny towns and backwoods hamlets. On one such circuit, in spring 1874, for example, he traveled from Pilatka to Manatee [two miles east of what would become downtown Bradenton] and return, stopping at or staying with these persons -- Gerigan, Crenshaw, Caruther, Michael Gough, Mrs. Stanley, David Hope, Wekter, Mrs. Ellis, Mrs. Griffin, Foggerty, Wiggins, Monroe, Jesse Smith, Mrs. Bon, Boughs, Thomas, Mrs. Griggs, John Night, Tim Ward, Tim Guilfoyle, Dann, Owen, Mrs. Harris, and Simmons -- and in these places -- Deep Creek, Orange Springs, Silver Springs, Ocala, Carrey, Columbus, Sumterville, Brooksville, Cat Bottom, Tampa, Point Pinellas, Manatee, Bayport, Homosassa, Crystal River, Camp Ground, Cabbage
Hammock, Evekirk, Pilatka.

It was after another such trip in spring 1876 that Verot, worn out by labor and by age, died at age seventy-one years, two weeks, and two days. Father Clavreul stated that that last missionary circuit consisted of "sleepless nights, protracted fasts, exposure, long and interminable rides through roads often impassable, in wretched and incommodious stage coaches." It is well that those circuits, too, be remembered as parts of the Florida Catholic Heritage Trail.

By the year of the learned and saintly bishop's death the Diocese of St. Augustine could count twenty churches, seventy mission stations, six convents with schools, and a Catholic population of 10,000 souls.

During the century and a quarter since, the Catholic Trail from St. Augustine and Pensacola lengthened and branched out southward to include, today, seven Florida dioceses, including an archdiocese; 480 parishes and 46 missions, served by seven bishops (ordinaries), and one auxiliary bishop, 1,299 diocesan and religious (secular and regular) priests, 595 permanent deacons, 158 brothers, and 1,164 sisters. Lay people number 2,316,652. The Florida Catholic landscape also contains: four universities, two seminaries, 35 high schools, 183 elementary schools, and eight hospitals. Catholic Charities, found everywhere, is a blessing for all Floridians.

The Cross embraced at Nombre de Dios, now 440 years ago, has been carried by priests, brothers, sisters, and lay people over a long, blazed trail that we can trace in the historical record. Stat crux cum volviter orbis. The trail's end, of course, is beyond our ken.

Michael Gannon