



History of the Diocese of Orlando

R. Bennett

There is a long history of Catholicism in Florida that precedes the formation of the Diocese of Orlando. In the 16th century, Spanish explorers searching for untold riches in the new world found the Florida peninsula. On the shores of a sandy beach in northeast, Florida, on August 28, 1565 (the feast day of St. Augustine) Pedro Menendez De Aviles landed his ship and on September 8 took formal possession of the area, claiming St. Augustine and Florida for Spain.

The first mission in St. Augustine, established at the Spaniards landing site, was christened Nombre de Dios, the oldest of Florida's enduring missions. Spanish Franciscan missionaries worked faithfully to form missions and built churches and schools throughout the upper Florida peninsula, ministering and teaching native Floridians such as the Timucua and Apalache. Thus, began the Catholic Church's place in the history of education in Florida, by serving and ministering to marginalized peoples. Historically, during this time, there was growing unrest and open rebellion from some of the Indian tribes due to treatment by the Spanish military and local governing body. The Franciscans defended and openly supported the rights of the Indians further cementing positive relationships and trust between them.

Between the 17th and 18th Centuries, Florida changed hands from Spain to England and back to Spain, causing disruption in the service of the missions and education.

In 1784 Spain regained Florida and revived the schools. In 1787 a new school was opened in St. Augustine by Fr. Thomas Hasset. The new school taught girls as well as boys and black children were also able to attend the school.

During this time an appeal was made for Irish priests to come to Florida to aid in evangelization to English frontiersman.

Moving forward, in 1870, the Diocese of St. Augustine was formed and, for nearly a century, presided over the entire state of Florida. Archbishop Jean-Pierre Verot was the first bishop. Bishop Verot invited the Sisters of St. Joseph of Le Puy, France (his home town) to come to Florida specifically to serve and teach the children of newly freed African American slaves. His recruitment of religious orders is viewed as an action of great vision which began the system of Catholic schools in Florida which we have today. The Sisters of St. Joseph continue to serve to this day and SSJ Sister Kathleen Power is Associate Director of Vocations for the Diocese of Orlando.

Joseph Patrick Hurley was Bishop of the Diocese of Saint Augustine, beginning in 1940. During the 1940's and 50's, the state experienced unprecedented growth. Up to this time Florida had been a single Diocese (Diocese of St. Augustine.) In 1958, 16 counties in the south of the state were separated to form the Diocese of Miami. Bishop Hurley ("Ten-Acre Joe") predicted the future of Florida Catholic growth and initiated a comprehensive plan of real estate procurement for parishes and schools. Sophisticated purchasing strategies, the use of airplanes to circle cities from the air and gauge suburban sprawl, were employed. Land purchasing through the 1940's and 1950's confounded many at the time, but proved invaluable as the

Sunshine State's Catholic population exploded through the 1960's and 1970's.

In 1958, as the population started to increase around Miami, the southern half of Florida became its own Catholic territory, the Diocese of Miami. Ten years later, population numbers justified another split and the central part of Florida became the Diocese of Orlando on **June 18, 1968**.

Five Bishops have guided the Diocese of Orlando during its history, directing the remarkable growth and serving as spiritual leaders to the thousands who flock to the area.

Bishop William Borders, 1968-1974

Bishop William Borders chartered new ground as he formed the structure necessary to organize a brand new diocese. The first three priests ordained for the new diocese of Orlando were Fathers Richard Walsh, Peter and Paul Henry. Parish councils and education boards were created. There was the first ever participation of laity as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion. A Sisters' Council was formed to provide support and camaraderie to diocesan nuns. A migrant ministry was formed and four Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur arrived to join the apostolate to the "agri-poor" in central Florida. A campus ministry program commenced which received national acclaim.

Bishop Thomas Grady, 1974-1990

Bishop Thomas Grady was shepherd of the diocese during a period of impressive growth. Eighteen new parishes were established and a tourism ministry was born. Eventually, a place of worship which would be

named Mary, Queen of the Universe was built.

Bishop Grady also oversaw the establishment of San Pedro Spiritual Development Center, a place of prayer and renewal for Catholics.

In 1975 Vietnamese refugees were welcomed to the Diocese; in 1977, at the request of Bishop Thomas Grady, Pope Paul VI granted permission to honor Mary, the Mother of God as patroness of the Diocese of Orlando; In 1983, he established a Mission Office to forge a relationship with a sister diocese in the Dominican Republic; in 1982 after having established a permanent diaconate program, the first permanent deacons for the Diocese were ordained; 1986, the first Red Mass was held.

Bishop Norbert Dorsey, 1990-2004

Bishop Norbert Dorsey continued to add parishes and schools, as well as expand the ministry to the growing Hispanic community by establishing Spanish radio and health clinics for migrant and farm workers. During his tenure, he presided over a diocese that nearly doubled, growing from 230,000 parishioners to 400,000.

In 2001 the first Blue Mass was held in the Diocese.

In 2001, the historic post office on Robinson Street in downtown Orlando was purchased to house the growing Chancery offices. The diocese had previously owned that property and it was the site of Orlando's first Catholic school. The property was sold due to financial necessity during the Depression. The 2001 purchase placed Diocesan offices right next door to St. James Cathedral.

Bishop Dorsey established Bishop Grady Villas in 2003 to provide a safe and caring environment for adults who

are intellectually and developmentally disabled. To honor the memories of deceased priests and recognizing the sacrifices they make to serve, Bishop Dorsey established a cemetery for priests located at San Pedro Center.

A remarkable event planned under Bishop Dorsey's leadership was a diocesan wide Confirmation held at the Orlando Arena in 1996. Eleven thousand people gathered together for this special celebration of the Sacrament of Confirmation. On this memorable day, Catholics came together from near and far to show their unity and passion for their faith.

Bishop Thomas Wenski, 2004-2010

In July 2003, the Holy Father appointed Thomas Wenski as the first Coadjutor Bishop of the Diocese of Orlando. On November 13, 2004, Thomas G. Wenski was appointed bishop of the Diocese of Orlando.

Bishop Wenski was the first Florida-born bishop of the Diocese of Orlando and previously served in the Archdiocese of Miami. He brought to the Diocese a strong record of social justice and spiritual advocacy on behalf of immigrants and the poor.

In 2004, Bishop Wenski convoked the first-ever synod for the Diocese of Orlando. The synod was a coming together of Catholics from throughout Central Florida to discern their most pressing issues

Bishop Wenski designated 2008 as the "Year of Evangelization," putting a greater emphasis on deepening the faith of all people. The highlight of the Year of Evangelization was a celebration event, the "Festival of Faith" held May 8-10.

During Bishop Wenski's time in the Diocese of

Orlando, he established six parishes and 2 missions: St. Philip Van Minh, Corpus Christi, Most Precious Blood, St. Mark the Evangelist, St. Maximilian Kolbe, and St. Faustina. The missions are Centro Católico La Guadalupana and Santo Toribio Romo. He also oversaw the renovation and expansion of St. James Cathedral in Orlando.

Bishop John Noonan, 2010-

John Noonan was named the fifth bishop of the Diocese of Orlando on October 23, 2010 and installed December 16, 2010 at the Basilica of the National Shrine of Mary, Queen of the Universe. He had previously served as auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Miami. His Episcopal motto “God before me and God with me” originates in Exodus when Moses was leading the chosen people out of slavery and into the Promised Land. That same prayer was spoken by St. Patrick as he preached the Gospel in Ireland.

During his first year, Bishop Noonan visited a number of parishes, missions, schools and entities in an effort to meet Christ’s faithful. Additionally, a new Haitian mission, Our Lady of Fatima, was opened under Bishop Noonan’s leadership in January 2012. He also met with Pope Benedict XVI in May 2012 during an ad limina visit, which typically occurs every five years.

Bishop Noonan instituted a logo and guide for the Diocese: “Teaching and Living the Light of Christ.” He is a bishop on the go, visiting parishes, schools, interacting with clergy, religious and lay people throughout the diocese and visiting the people of our sister Diocese of San Juan de la Maguana in the Dominican Republic.

For more information on the history of
Catholicism in Florida please visit:
annunciationorlando.org/florida