

FLORIDACatholic

HOME YOUR DIOCESE OPINION NATION & WORLD THE POPE TEENS YOUNG ADULTS SPECIAL SECTION
 PRAYER REQUESTS | ABOUT US | CONTACT US | SUBMIT YOUR PHOTOS | CLASSIFIED ADS | ADVERTISE | SUBSCRIBE | FAQ | LINKS | SEARCH

October 14, 2007

SHARING THE VISION – GROWING IN FAITH

Gifts from the past create faith legacy

PEGGY DEKEYSER | FLORIDA CATHOLIC PENSACOLA - TALLAHASSEE BUREAU EDITOR

PENSACOLA | The roots of Catholicism in northwest Florida may be planted in sandy soil, but they are as firmly fixed as the roots of the live oak trees that first lured naval shipbuilders here in the early 19th century.

The Catholic roots go much deeper, in fact, tracing to the first Mass in 1559. The earliest Spanish Catholics here didn't stay long, driven away by fierce hurricanes.

Even so, they left their faith imprint, founding what would become [St. Michael the Archangel Parish](#).

As the diocese undertakes its first-ever capital campaign, it's asking people to consider how they might contribute to endow the future of the faith in northwest Florida. The precedent for generosity, though, was set long ago.

Any history of the diocese has to include the devotion and sacrifice of the early priests and bishops, supported by the generosity of the laity, who had the vision to build up the church.

Over the years, the lands that now comprise the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee have belonged to the dioceses of Santiago de Cuba (1781-1795), Louisiana and the Floridas (1795-1806), Havana (1806-1823), New Orleans (1823-1826), Mobile (1826-1850, and the western eight counties until 1968), Savannah (east of the Apalachicola River, 1850-1870), St. Augustine (eastern 10 counties: 1870-1967, all 18 counties: 1968-1975)

Other Stories

Halloween has its roots in Catholic Christian holy da
 Ministers bring compassion, sacraments to hospitals

Exploring Parish Churches: Blessed Sacrament

Spirit Night at the Catholic Student Union

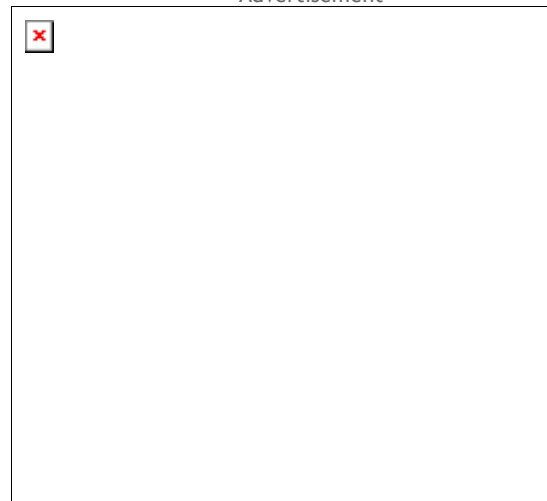
Theology on Tap: Bishop encourages young adults to exhibit mercy.

Former student returns to preschool as teacher's pe
 News Briefs

Good For You Pensacola-Tallahassee

Previous Pensacola-Tallahassee Edition of Florida Catholic Online

Advertisement



and finally, the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee, established Nov. 6, 1975.

The lineage of parishes and the subsequent faith communities to which they gave birth share similarities. In very few cases is it completely clear that one parish gave rise to another, according to Carlisle Semmes, diocesan archivist.

"The priests from one parish might have served the needs of the people in a developing area for awhile, giving that parish a claim of parenthood in the fledgling parish. But then over time, something would happen and another parish, and its priests, would travel to step in to fill the need. Some parishes were carved out of two existing parishes, as population grew and needs changed," Semmes said.

An example is St. Thomas More Parish in Pensacola. It drew parishioners from both St. John the Evangelist and St. Stephen parishes when it was formed in 1956. At the time, nearby Naval Air Station Pensacola was booming, and a new parish was warranted to serve the growth in population.

ECONOMIC GROWTH BRINGS PEOPLE, FAITH TO REGION

The presence of the military as a factor affecting the growth of the church in northwest Florida was especially felt during and immediately after World War II, when the parishes of St. Anne in Marianna, Holy Spirit, St. Anthony and St. Mary, all in Pensacola, St. Ann in Gulf Breeze, St. Jude Thaddeus in Cantonment, St. John the Evangelist in Panama City, Little Flower in Pensacola, St. Thomas the Apostle in Quincy, St. Bernadette in Panama City Beach, Our Lady of Victory in Crestview, St. Eugene Catholic Chapel at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee and Sacred Heart of Jesus in Lanark were formed.

The military influence began with the arrival of the first Europeans to the Gulf Coast. As Spanish, British and French forces fought back and forth over the land, each culture left its faith imprint. Dating to 1698, strong Spanish presence produced a very Catholic territory. Later, the French left a similar heritage, mitigated somewhat by intervening British rule.

As Florida entered the union in 1845 to become the 27th U.S. state, it was a state with only two main cities, Pensacola and St. Augustine, according to Mary Dawkins, who has written many histories of the parishes of the diocese.

"When anyone wanted to travel from St. Augustine to Pensacola, they could either make the difficult and

dangerous journey over land, or they could sail around the Strait of Florida, past Cuba, and up through the Gulf. Tallahassee was established as a midway point, and that's where they decided to locate the state government. The presence of the state government there, along with Florida State University (established in 1851) and Florida A&M University (established in 1887), have also been significant growth factors," Dawkins said. The first Catholic church, now Blessed Sacrament Parish, was established in Tallahassee the same year the state entered the Union.

The thriving ports that dotted the Gulf Coast brought population growth, too. Apalachicola, known today as a sleepy fishing and artist enclave, was a booming cotton and lumber port. Fishing, both commercial and sport, brought waves of newcomers, as in 1900 northwest Florida was known as the "red snapper capital of the world" according to Dawkins.

After the Civil War, lumber became a driving force for growth in the area. The arrival of rail transport in 1869 helped feed the tons of lumber being harvested and milled to the ships waiting in port.

With each wave of growth, the people brought with them their Catholic faith, built churches, schools and hospitals and laid the foundation for the future.

THREE BISHOPS, ONE LEGACY

Perhaps three bishops who shared a dynamic vision for these piney woods and seashores, bays and bayous, created some of the most lasting footprints on the sandy soil.

[Bishop Michael Portier](#) (1826-1859) of Mobile, Ala., served as shepherd to a vicariate, later to become a diocese that spanned from west and north of Mobile to St. Augustine. At the time of his accession, he was the only clergyman in the vicariate and had only three parishes, Mobile, St. Augustine and Pensacola. Bishop Portier began his administration by walking through his vicariate, offering the holy Eucharist, preaching, and administering the sacraments as he went, according to Dawkins.

[Bishop Thomas Joseph Toolen](#) (1927-1959) of Mobile saw the phenomenal WWII-related growth in his diocese, and decided that there should be a Catholic church in every county. Bishop Joseph Patrick Hurley (1940-1967) of St. Augustine also bought land in the eastern counties of what is now the Pensacola-Tallahassee Diocese, building faith communities as he did. Together, these two bishops established 19 parishes and additional

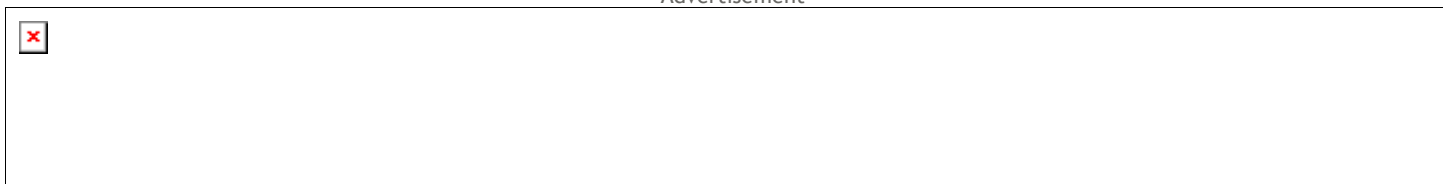
missions in eight different counties.

"Mobile [Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb](#) (1980-present) used to say about Bishop Portier that the region grew in faith because of the people, clergy and laity who came together to preach and share the word of God, to worship and celebrate the sacraments, and to serve others. Those are our true roots," Semmes said.

[Return to Diocese of Pensacola - Tallahassee Front Page](#)

[Archdiocese of Miami](#) | [Diocese of Orlando](#) | [Diocese of Palm Beach](#) | [Diocese of Pensacola - Tallahassee](#) | [Diocese of St. Petersburg](#) | [Diocese of Venice](#)

Advertisement



Copyright © 2007 (except stories and photos by CNS) | All Rights Reserved | The Florida Catholic, Inc. | 50 E. Robinson Street | Orlando, FL 32801 | (407) 373-0075