

## Irish-born clergy in Modern Florida



Irish-born diocesan priests have been a part of the Florida Catholic story since its beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. As related in the opening chapter of this booklet, the first priest from the Emerald Isle to serve in Florida was Father Richard Arthur, known to his Spanish congregation as Padre Ricardo Artur. The Irish clergyman presided over the parish of St. Augustine from 1598 until his death there in 1606. Mention was also made of Fathers Thomas Hassett and Michael O'Reilly, both natives of Longford, who served in East Florida during the Second Spanish Period. They were followed by Michael Crosby, Michael Wallis, and Constantine McCaffrey. Six Irish priests served during the same period at St. Michael's, Pensacola, and in the West Florida frontier missionary posts: Francis Lennan, James Coleman, Gregory White, Constantine McKenna, Michael Lamport, and William Savage.

During Florida's U.S. Territorial Period and early statehood years (1822-1858) the care of Florida souls was entrusted to numerous Irish-born clergy: James Hasson, Simon Felix Gallagher, John McEncroe, Andrew Doyle, Francis Boland, Timothy McCarthy, Edward Francis Mayne (who was caught up in the lay trustee controversy at St. Augustine), John Barry (future Second Bishop of Savannah), John F. Kirby, James H. O'Neill, Edward Quigley, Edward Murphy, Patrick Hackett, Patrick J. Coffey, and William J. Hamilton (of later Andersonville fame).

When French-born Augustin Verot became the first resident bishop with ordinary power in 1858, he found only three priests in the State of Florida east of the Apalachicola River. Early in the following year he wrote to the rector of All Hallows College in Dublin asking that a seminarian there be assigned to missionary work in Florida. He was rewarded with the appointment of James O'Hara, who, after ordination, arrived in 1863 to take up station at Saint Mary Star of the Sea Church on Key West.

During the episcopacy of Verot's successor, Bishop John Moore (1877-1901), himself a native of Rossmead, County Westmeath, the following Irish clergy were incardinated in the diocese: Michael Maher, John F. O'Boyle, Michael Fox, Patrick J. Lynch, John O'Brien, Bernard O'Reilly, James Veale, James J. Nunan, and Patrick Barry (later Fifth Bishop of St. Augustine, 1922-1940).

During the first seventy years of the twentieth century the pilgrimage of Irish priests to Florida accelerated to meet the needs of a rapidly expanding Catholic population. Three particularly notable young clerics arrived in the state during the first decade of the new century: Michael J. Curley (1904, the year of arrival in and incardination in the Diocese of St. Augustine); Patrick J. Bresnahan (1904); and William Barry (1910), younger brother of Patrick. Having started seminary training at either Mungret College, Limerick, or at All Hallows, Dublin, this threesome were sent elsewhere by the diocese for the completion of their education, Curley to the Urban College of the Propaganda in Rome, Bresnahan to the North American College in Rome, then to St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, and Barry to St.



*Patrick Barry, native of County Clare, Ireland, Fifth Bishop of St. Augustine, 1922-1940*

Mary's. Each would leave a singular mark on the Florida church.

Curley, born in Athlone, County Westmeath, demonstrated early on in his priesthood unusual intellectual and oratorical gifts, which he employed in defense of the church against then widespread anti-Catholic criticism fomented by the Ku Klux Klan. His sermons, while pastor of St. Peter's in DeLand, were attended by as many Protestants as Catholics. On April 3, 1914, Pope Pius X appointed him Fourth Bishop of St. Augustine. In that capacity Curley expanded his protection of Florida's Catholics (who were 3 % of the state population), most notably in 1916, when Sidney J. Catts was elected governor of Florida on an anti-Catholic platform, and three white Sisters of St. Joseph in St. Augustine were arrested on the charge of "unlawfully teaching Negroes," which their community had been doing in the city since 1866. When one of the sisters, Mary Thomasine, S.S.J. was placed on trial, where she was exonerated, the young bishop financed litigation to have the offending law declared unconstitutional. The favorable national publicity surrounding Curley's reasoned and eloquent defense of the Florida church in that period no doubt had a role in his selection, on August 10, 1921, to be the Tenth Archbishop of Baltimore, succeeding James Cardinal Gibbons.

Following ordination, P.J. (as he liked to be called) Bresnahan undertook a special ministry to Florida non-Catholics, particularly the unchurched, white and black alike. His spiritual adventures, during which he sometimes wore a concealed revolver, are recounted in a delightful memoir, *Seeing Florida With A Priest*, published in 1937. Though formally removed from missionary work in 1910, so that he might build and serve in parish churches, Bresnahan retained the "missionary impulse" throughout the rest of his career, taking pride in being both the last "Diocesan Missionary to Non Catholics" and an "alien" who gloried "in the title of 'Florida Cracker'."

William Barry belonged to a County Clare family unusually committed to the Florida church. His older (by 23 years) brother Patrick helped recruit him to the mission field, and later became Fifth Bishop of St. Augustine (1922-1940). His sister Catherine took the name Sister Gerald as a member, later superior, of the Adrian Dominicans, and in 1940 founded Barry College for Women (now Barry University) in Miami Shores. In 1926 William was sent by his brother to establish St. Patrick's Parish on newly developed Miami Beach, where he would reign as patriarch of South Florida for forty years, receiving a multitude of honors, both civil and religious, including an honorary LL.D. from the University of Notre Dame in 1946, and the rank of protonotary apostolic from Pope Pius XII in 1953.

The roster of Irish clergy from the 1920s included six men who would also have long careers at specific parishes: James J. Meehan (1921) at Immaculate Conception in Jacksonville; Patrick E. Nolan (1921) at St. Paul's in Jacksonville; Thomas A. Colreavy (1926) at St. Cecilia's in Clearwater; James F. Enright (1927) at St. Paul's in St. Petersburg; John J. Mullins (1928) at Christ the King in Tampa; and James B. Cloonan (1929) at Assumption in Jacksonville. Other arrivals in Florida during the early period of the century were: John J. O'Riordan (1913), M.F. Monohan (1917), Thomas Comber (1919), Michael J. Farley (1920), John H. O'Keefe (1920), Robert P. Brennan (1920), John Vincent O'Sullivan (1927), W.J. Carroll (1927), John J. O'Looney (1928) Anthony McGowan (1928), Patrick D. O'Brien (1928), Jeremiah Patrick O'Mahoney (1928), John J. Kellaghan (1929), Patrick Donohoe (1929), John Murphy (1929), and Peter Reynolds (1929).

Incardinated during the 1930s were: Daniel C. Hegarty (1930), Michael Reynolds (1930), William A. O'Farrell (1931), Timothy J. Geary (1931), William J. Holmes (1932), Peter Reilly (1932), Mark J. McLoughlin (1933), Michael J. Fogarty (1933), Joseph A. Barry (1935), P.J. O'Donoghue (1938), and Francis P. Dixon (1939).

The number of volunteers for the Florida apostolate dipped, understandably, during the disruptive

years of the Second World War and recovery. Arrivals were: Francis Dunleavy (1940), Michael J. Kelly (1942), Thomas O'Donovan (1942), James Keogh (1943), John O'Dowd (1943), William J. O'Farrell (1943), and Patrick J. Trainor (1944).

These were the pioneers among the Irish clergy in Florida during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1950s the number of ordinands from Irish colleges (seminaries) soared. Forty-one came in that one decade, two short of the number who had come in the preceding half-century. The colleges most represented were St. Patrick's, Thurles; Mungret, Limerick; All Hallows, Dublin; St. Patrick's, Carlow; St. Kieran's Kilkenny; and St. Peter's, Wexford. The figures remained generally steady throughout the 1960s when arrivals numbered thirty-nine. But with the coming of the 1970s the number of men ordained for Florida began to trail off, and by the millennium reached zero. Various reasons for the decline have been advanced, among them the emphasis of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) on lay forms of service to the church; the changing culture of Irish society and economy in the wake of computer and other high tech prosperity; and, throughout the country, flagging faith and church attendance. Where a college like St. Patrick's, Maynooth, in the 1950s boasted an enrollment of 500 to 600 seminarians, today that enrollment is in the low double digits. In 2004 only eight men were ordained in the whole of Ireland, with none to spare for the United States, New Zealand, India, or other overseas destinations, and all the colleges, save Maynooth, were closed.

The State of Florida, which is twice the size of Ireland, is still graced from the Panhandle to the Keys by the presence of active Irish-born clergy, and will continue to be for some years to come, until their numbers are thinned by retirement. In that autumn the Sons of Erin can take holy satisfaction from the decisive role they played in the maturation of Florida Catholicism, and from the prominent places they occupy along the Florida Catholic Heritage Trail.