

spanish-american work of priestly cooperation



Three hundred and eighty four years after a Diocesan priest, Father Francisco Lopez de Mendoza Grajales offered the first Mass at Nombre de Dios in St. Augustine, Florida, an event of special significance took place in Spain.

Responding to an earnest desire on the part of South America for closer ties with the Motherland and Europe, especially in the intellectual field, the Spanish Government, through its Ministry of Education, put into motion a well organized effort to provide students and intellectuals from the Americas an easy access to the educational system of Spain, mainly in the Universities of Madrid and Comillas in Santander.

One of the group of young intellectuals working on this project, in cooperation with the Spanish-American Cultural Institute in Madrid, was Monsignor Maximino Romero de Lema, a priest of the Diocese of Santiago Compostela, Coruna, Spain. Monsignor Maximino thought that the Catholic Church should also be involved in a program of evangelization through which the Spanish Bishops would send diocesan priests to serve in specific dioceses in America at the request of the American bishops.

At that time the Spanish seminaries were full of young men eager to serve as missionary priests in South America. The Spanish hierarchy approved this new concept and put into motion an organization to facilitate, prepare, and assign diocesan priests to work in the Americas. This organization was called Spanish American Work of Priestly Cooperation (OCSHA).

The project was embraced by the Spanish bishops, and blessed by Rome. OCSHA began its work with the first preparatory course in November 1949. Courses lasted from two to three months, during which time the priests familiarized themselves, under the direction of competent and specialized teachers, with the geography, history, and culture of the dioceses to which they were assigned.

Among the third group of priests to be sent to the Americas there was one who would be the first diocesan priest to be sent by OCSHA to Florida: Father Luis Altonaga Ibáñez, from Bilbao, who arrived at St. Augustine in 1952.

Archbishop Joseph P. Hurley prepared a ceremony to which he invited the Catholics of Florida to join at St. Augustine in welcoming Father Altonaga to that diocese. The event took place on the grounds of Nombre de Dios and in the sanctuary of Our Lady of La Leche. Archbishop Hurley spoke at a Mass celebrated by Father Altonaga on an outdoor rustic altar. "Here," said the Archbishop, "Spanish Father Francisco López de Mendoza Grajales offered the first parish Mass in the United States of America. He was truly the first Pastor of America. We are grateful to Spain and to the Spanish bishops for having sent to us Father Altonaga. We welcome him and we very much hope that we may never want for Spanish priests in this land which so proudly is called with the Catholic name of Pascua Florida".

Once the first phase of OCSHA was well underway, the second phase began. Having fulfilled all the necessary requirements from the Holy See, on January 11, 1954 the Spanish-American Seminary was inaugurated in the heart of the University City of Madrid, to prepare young men to serve in the

Americas as diocesan missionary priests. The first graduating class was ordained on June 24, 1957. Eight young priests from this class were sent to the Diocese of St. Augustine, in Florida. They arrived there in February 1959. Eventually, St. Augustine would have 16 Spanish diocesan priests sent at the request of Archbishop Hurley.

In the history of the seminary written by its rector, Father Melquiades Andrés, we find the following entry: "I remember that at the end of February or the beginning of March of 1954 the Bishop of Florida was the first American bishop who visited our home.... We know that he was very good to us in the seminary and to our priests who had been sent to Florida."

Since its inception OCSHA has sent about 60 priests to Florida and about 900 priests to South and Central America. We join Archbishop Hurley in his prayer, "We very much hope that we may never want for Spanish priests in this land which so proudly is called with the Catholic name Pascua Florida".

Diego Conesa



The first alumni of OCSHA, ordained on June 24, 1957 by Cardinal Hildeliando Antonette, Papal Nuncio to Spain. Eight of these young priests were invited to work in Florida.