

Major religious orders of men in Modern Florida history



As seen earlier in this history, for over a century and a quarter Florida's native populations were served spiritually by Spanish Franciscan missionary friars, members of the Order of Friars Minor (O.F.M.). In the modern history of the Florida church attention turns to other religious orders of men, the most numerous of which have been the members of the Order of Saint Benedict (Benedictines); of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits); and of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer (Redemptorists).

Bavarian-born Gerard Pilz, O.S.B. was the first Benedictine priest to serve in Florida. Sent to sparsely populated Hernando County by St. Vincent Archabbey in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, Father Gerard arrived by train at Dade City on May 12, 1886. From there he proceeded by rented horse and buggy to nearby San Antonio Church and its largely German-speaking parishioners. Other Benedictines followed. In the next year, by an Apostolic Indult from the Holy See, priests of the Order were given jurisdiction "in perpetuum" over what are now Hernando, Pasco, and Citrus counties. And on September 15, 1890, the Benedictines founded St. Leo College, situated a mile east of San Antonio. A university today, with an enrollment of 10,000 students, Saint Leo is the oldest formally organized Catholic institution of higher learning in the state.

The monks at San Antonio and Saint Leo originally served five outlying missions: Dunnellon, Brooksville, Crystal River, Inverness, and New Port Richey. Later they took on Zephyrhills, Homosassa, and Masaryktown. By 1992, twenty Benedictine missions had developed into full-scale parishes and two inter-parochial schools.

The first Jesuit priests to serve in modern Florida were Philippe de Carriere, at Tampa, and James Duffo, at Jacksonville. Both came from New Orleans in 1888 to replace diocesan priests struck down in the yellow fever epidemic of that year, during which Bishop John Moore of the Diocese of St. Augustine lost one quarter of his clergy. Additional Jesuits arrived after 1891 when Moore granted the New Orleans Jesuits spiritual jurisdiction over the whole of South Florida, excepting the three counties assigned to the Benedictines. Jesuit priests were soon directing parishes and missions in Tampa, St. Petersburg, Pinellas Park, Kissimmee, St. Cloud, Tarpon Springs, Fort Myers, Key West, Jupiter, and Palm Beach. Father Patrick Kennedy, S.J. ministered to 2,000 troops quartered in Miami during the Spanish-American War of 1898; and a larger number of soldiers in Tampa were served by Jesuits in that city. One notable missionary, Father Alfred Latiolais, S.J., was responsible for the building of eleven churches in the years 1912 to 1923. At Tampa Father Felix Clarkson, S.J., pastor of Sacred Heart Church, developed Jesuit High School into one of the leading all-boys schools in the state.

Since 1921 when Bishop Michael J. Curley of St. Augustine returned South Florida, with few exceptions, to the jurisdiction of diocesan clergy, the Jesuit presence in the southern half of the peninsula has declined. Today the sons of St. Ignatius Loyola administer the parish of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Jesuit High School, in Tampa, and in Miami the downtown parish church Gesu and the Belen Jesuit Preparatory School

Redemptorist priests first came to Florida on preaching missions in 1857. Their first permanent

foundations here date from 1926, at New Smyrna, where they established a parish, Sacred Heart, and a house of studies for three priests. Their superior was John Boleman, C.S.S.R.

By 1937, in addition to statewide preaching mission services, Redemptorists administered four parishes and missions in the Tampa Bay area: Our Lady of Perpetual Help and Most Holy Name (Ybor City), St. Joseph (West Tampa), and Most Holy Redeemer (Sulphur Springs). Most Holy Redeemer became a diocesan parish in 1952. A Polish mission, St. Mary's at Korona, also became a diocesan parish in 1953.

Though, from the beginning, the Redemptorists conducted a mostly English-speaking apostolate, they specialized in serving ethnic groups, such as Italians, Spanish, Latin Americans, and Poles, as well as African Americans. In 1956, the Redemptorist Fathers were placed in charge of a new parish at Opa Locka named St. Mel's, later changed in name to Our Lady of Perpetual Help. They soon had a mission nearby in their care also, St. Philip's, at Bunche Park, a predominantly black community.

In 1960 the Redemptorists extended their parish apostolate to Holy Rosary Parish, Jacksonville, and in the following year returned to Sulphur Springs to assume the pastorate of the newly erected Epiphany Church.

Following the formation of the Diocese of Venice in 1986, the Redemptorists were assigned to St. Michael's parish, Wauchula, and to Holy Child mission, Bowling Green.

Currently, members of seventy-five different religious orders (institutes) of men serve in the seven dioceses of Florida.