

## The Diocese of Palm Beach



he first recorded history of Catholicism in what are now the five counties of the Diocese of Palm Beach dates from 1889, when Bishop John Moore of the Diocese of Saint Augustine invited the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) to assume pastoral care of the lower third of Florida, an area sparsely settled at the time. In

1892, Father Conrad M. Widman, S.J. arrived by boat from Jacksonville at Lake Worth, a broiling, mosquito infested area, now known as Palm Beach. He stayed at the home of an Irish immigrant and local pioneer, John Purcell McKenna, where he baptized McKenna's son and celebrated Mass.

Saint Ann Catholic Church was built in West Palm Beach on land donated by legendary developer Henry Flagler, who was building his Royal Poinciana Hotel nearby. The construction of that enormous wooden structure attracted engineers, laborers, and especially carpenters who were Catholic. Saint Ann Church was dedicated on March 15, 1896 by Bishop Moore, and although a larger church was built in 1913, the original building was preserved and is now used for parish offices.

Another early center of Catholicism in what is now the Diocese of Palm Beach was Fort Pierce. In 1905, Father P.J. Bresnahan, a priest from the Diocese of St. Augustine, conducted there a mission for both Catholics and non-Catholics. Subsequently, the small, mostly German-speaking Catholic community built a church and asked for a pastor. In 1910, Benedictine Father Gabriel Ruppert established Saint Anastasia Parish. Much to the joy of Florida's ravenous termites, the original church was built of wood and was quickly infested beyond repair. A second church was built on the same site but the stucco veneer was still no match for the termites. In 1975, the present church was dedicated, where worship continues today.

In 1916 Catholics in Stuart built St. Joseph Mission. The first pastor, Father Joseph J. Fahy, began living there in 1928.

In the early 1920's, several hearty Catholic families settled at Canal Point on the shores of Lake Okeechobee to farm. They established a church at a private residence. By 1924 their congregation had grown to thirty and the settlers built a small church, but the building was destroyed by a hurricane in 1928. As residents grew, they raised money for a new church that was finished in 1933 and stands today as St. Mary Parish in Pahokee. Saint Mary also operates a free medical and dental clinic that serves the many migrant farm workers who toil in this agricultural community. By 1930, there were five parishes in the region, and by 1950 there were nine.

When the Vatican established the Diocese of Miami



*Crest of the Diocese of Palm Beach.*



*Bishop Gerald M. Barbarito.*



*Cathedral of St. Ignatius Loyola.*

in 1958, this area came under its jurisdiction. Subsequently, the counties of Indian River, Okeechobee and St. Lucie became part of the Diocese of Orlando when it was established in 1968. That same year, the Diocese of Miami became an archdiocese. Martin and Palm Beach Counties were included within the archdiocese.

Saint Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary in Boynton Beach was dedicated in 1963 by the Vincentian Fathers. The seminary provides a human, spiritual, academic, and pastoral program to prepare candidates for the Catholic Priesthood. The seminary also provides continuing education for clergy, religious, and

laity of all denominations. It is owned and operated by all seven of Florida's dioceses.

On October 24, 1984, Bishop Thomas V. Daily, from the Archdiocese of Boston, was named the founding bishop of the newly created Diocese of Palm Beach. The diocese began with 38 parishes serving about 103,000 Catholics.

That same year, the centrally located St. Ignatius Loyola Cathedral in Palm Beach Gardens was dedicated. Founded in 1970 with 400 families, the parish had outgrown its multi-purpose building. The new diocesan cathedral was designed to utilize natural light. It has stunning stained glass windows and native Florida coral rock walls. The cathedral was built to hold 1,400 worshipers and was designed with the bishop's chair as its focal point.

In 1990, Pope John Paul II appointed Bishop J. Keith Symons as the second bishop of the Diocese of Palm Beach. By October of 1995 the Diocese of Palm Beach had 46 parishes and five missions, serving a Catholic population of nearly 200,000.

In 1998, Pope John Paul II appointed Knoxville, Tennessee Bishop Anthony J. O'Connell as the Third bishop of the Diocese of Palm Beach.

In 2002, Fall River, Massachusetts Bishop Sean O'Malley was installed as the Fourth Bishop of the Diocese of Palm Beach; but, in less than a year, he was appointed as the Archbishop of Boston, Massachusetts. In 2003, Bishop Gerald M. Barbarito, of the Diocese of Ogdensburg, was installed as the Fifth Bishop of the Diocese of Palm Beach. Bishop Barbarito had served in Ogdensburg, New York, since 2000. Prior to that, he served as Auxiliary Bishop of Brooklyn, New York.

This culturally diverse diocese offers masses in English, Spanish, Spanish/Kanjobal, Creole/French, Lithuanian, Polish, Tridentine Latin, Vietnamese, and Portuguese in its forty-nine parishes and four missions.



*St. Ann Church.*

Within the Diocese of Palm Beach there are two Catholic pre-schools, fifteen Catholic elementary schools, two private elementary schools, three Catholic high schools, and a seminary. The diocesan communications office produces a weekly televised mass for the infirm, and contributes to the statewide publication, *The Florida Catholic*.

The Diocese of Palm Beach serves Catholics who have come to this dynamic and diverse area of South Florida from every state and from every nation in Central and South America, the Caribbean, and other continents. Due to the desirable climate in South Florida, the diocese also serves as a home to many retired priests, religious, and religious sisters from every part of the country.

The diocese encompasses the five counties of Indian River, Okeechobee, St. Lucie, Martin, and Palm Beach, consisting of 5,115 square miles with a population of nearly one and one-half million people, seventeen percent of whom are Catholic. The parishes and missions extend from Boca Raton in the south to Sebastian in the north, from the Atlantic Ocean on the east to Lake Okeechobee in the west. Palm Beach is one of the youngest of the seven Catholic dioceses in Florida, and is served by 111 diocesan priests, 11 extern priests, 145 religious sisters, 17 seminarians, 30 religious priests, five religious brothers, and 44 permanent deacons.

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