

Early Explorers Came to Diocese of Venice as Missionaries

It is hard to image what the Diocese of Venice in Florida might have been like when the first Spanish explorers came ashore in the 16th Century.

Their arrival brought the first Catholic missionaries who were intent on setting up permanent missions in the name of Spain and the Catholic Church.

Conquistador Juan Ponce de Leon is credited with discovering Florida in 1513 and exploring the west coast of the state between 1513 and 1521.

De Leon encountered the native Calusa Indians who first welcomed the Spanish but later objected because the explorers had desecrated their Indian Mounds and the Indians fought back. The Indians were fearful of the missions being constructed and frequently attacked the structures in hopes of driving the explorers off. When Ponce de Leon was injured in an attack the expedition and mission on the West Coast was abandoned.



It was another seven years before Spanish explorer Hernando De Soto brought priests to Florida in an attempt to evangelize the native tribes during an exploration of the coast from 1539-1542. DeSoto led an expedition of 10 ships and 620 men, which included 12 priests. They landed near present-day Bradenton on May 25, 1539. Mass was celebrated almost every day by the expedition priests. Later, when DeSoto landed at Shaw's Point near the mouth of Tampa Bay, the men were so taken with the peace and beauty of the water that they named it "La Bahia de Espiritu Santo," in honor of the Holy Spirit. The sheer number of DeSoto's forces caused the Calusas to abandon their settlements along the harbor entrance.

A memorial to the Eucharist and a Memorial Cross were built and dedicated in the area near DeSoto's landings by Bishop Emeritus John J. Nevins in 1994 at what is the DeSoto National Memorial Park in Bradenton.

Other efforts to bring missionaries to Florida were unsuccessful until Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, founder of Saint Augustine and Governor of Spanish Florida, sought peace with the Calusa and founded a military outpost there in February of 1566. Pedro Menendez sought assistance from the Jesuits, who agreed to send a small contingent to Florida. Before leaving the San Carlos Bay area, Menéndez established a Jesuit mission at Mound Key near the mouth of the Estero River in present-day Lee County and left a garrison of soldiers to guard it.

Father Juan Rogel and Brother Francisco de Villareal spent the winter studying the language, and proceeded to work among the Calusa tribe in southern Florida. The establishment there of a fort and settlement at Mound Key was the first such effort to colonize the area. A Jesuit mission, San Antonio de Carlos was also the first such mission in the Spanish New World and was founded by Father Juan Rogel when a chapel was built in 1567. This mission was the first place where a Catholic presence was established that lies within the territory of the present Diocese of Venice in Florida.

After the Civil War, missionaries from Savannah, St. Augustine, and Tampa began visiting the areas south of Tampa Bay that would later become the Diocese of Venice. In 1889, the care of the area within the Diocese fell under the jurisdiction of the Jesuit Fathers from Tampa, who made regular visits to Bradenton, Fort Myers, Arcadia, and adjacent missions. The first missions and Catholic



communities within the current Diocese of Venice in Florida were located at Sacred Heart in Bradenton (1868), Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (later St. Francis Xavier) in Fort Myers (1878), St. Paul in Arcadia (1882), Sacred Heart in Punta Gorda (1888), Saint Martha in Sarasota (1889), St. Michael in Wauchula (1915), St. Joseph in Bradenton (1915), and St. Catherine in Sebring (1918).