

## *The History of the Diocese of St. Petersburg*

**T**he Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg was established on June 17, 1968, with territory taken from the Diocese of St. Augustine and the Diocese of Miami. It is a suffragan see of the Province of Miami along with the Dioceses of St. Augustine, Orlando, Pensacola-Tallahassee, and Venice. Situated on Florida's west coast, along the Gulf of Mexico, the diocese covers 3,177 square miles in five counties: Pinellas, Hillsborough, Pasco, Hernando, and Citrus. The principal cities of the diocese are St. Petersburg, Tampa, and Clearwater. The diocese serves a total population of approximately 2,900,000, of whom over 425,000 are Catholic.

### **Historical Foundations**

The Church's presence in this part of Florida stretches back nearly five hundred years to the arrival of the Spanish explorers and the missionaries who accompanied them. After Juan Ponce de Leon's initial discovery of Florida and Tampa Bay in 1513, explorers over the next several decades such as Panfilo de Narvaez and Hernando de Soto came



here, bringing with them priests and religious in the hope of native conversions. The hostility of the native peoples in this area, however, continued to frustrate Spanish missionary and expansionist plans as demonstrated by the martyrdom of Fr. Luis de Cancer on the shores of Tampa Bay in 1549. Spain finally gained a firm foothold on the Florida peninsula with the establishment of the St. Augustine colony in 1565.

The Tampa Bay area remained largely unpopulated until Florida became a territory of the United States in 1821. Shortly thereafter, the Ft. Brooke military garrison was established in what is today downtown Tampa. The founding of St. Louis Catholic Church in Tampa in 1860 provided a focal point for Catholics. Jesuits Fathers came over from New Orleans and were responsible for founding many of the early parishes and schools of the area. In 1905, a new Church was constructed in Romanesque style and the parish was renamed Sacred Heart. It is the oldest parish and church within the diocese.

After the establishment of the Catholic colony of San Antonio and the Parish of St. Anthony of Padua in the 1880s, the Benedictine monks and nuns who came to Pasco County founded and staffed for many years, most of the parishes of Pasco, Hernando and Citrus Counties. Other early pioneer Religious includes the Sisters of the Holy Name of Jesus and Mary, who founded our oldest Catholic school in 1881. The Sisters of St. Joseph, who came to educate Black children, and the Redemptorists and Salesians, both of whom worked in the immigrant Latin community.

The growing population and economic boom following World War II brought major changes to this area, much of it under the tutelage of the sixth bishop of St. Augustine, Joseph P. Hurley. Because of the growth of the Church in Florida, plans for new dioceses were developed as early as the mid-fifties. Miami diocese was created in south Florida in 1958. Five years later, plans were drawn up for two new dioceses in central Florida. On June 17, 1968, the Catholic Diocese of St. Petersburg was formally established with Bishop Charles B. McLaughlin as its first and founding bishop. Since Bishop McLaughlin, the diocese has had four bishops; Bishop William T. Larkin, Bishop John Favalora, Bishop Robert Lynch, and our current bishop, Most Reverend Gregory L. Parkes.

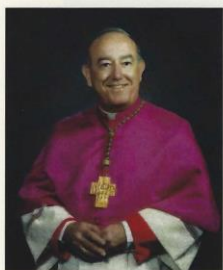
Previous Bishops of Saint Petersburg



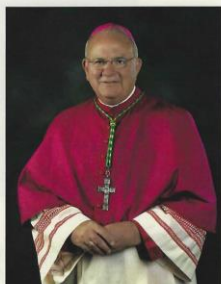
Most Reverend Charles B. McLaughlin  
(1968—1978)



Most Reverend W. Thomas Larkin  
(1979—1988)



Most Reverend John C. Favalora  
(1989—1994)



Most Reverend Robert N. Lynch  
(1996—2016)



The Most Reverend Gregory L. Parkes