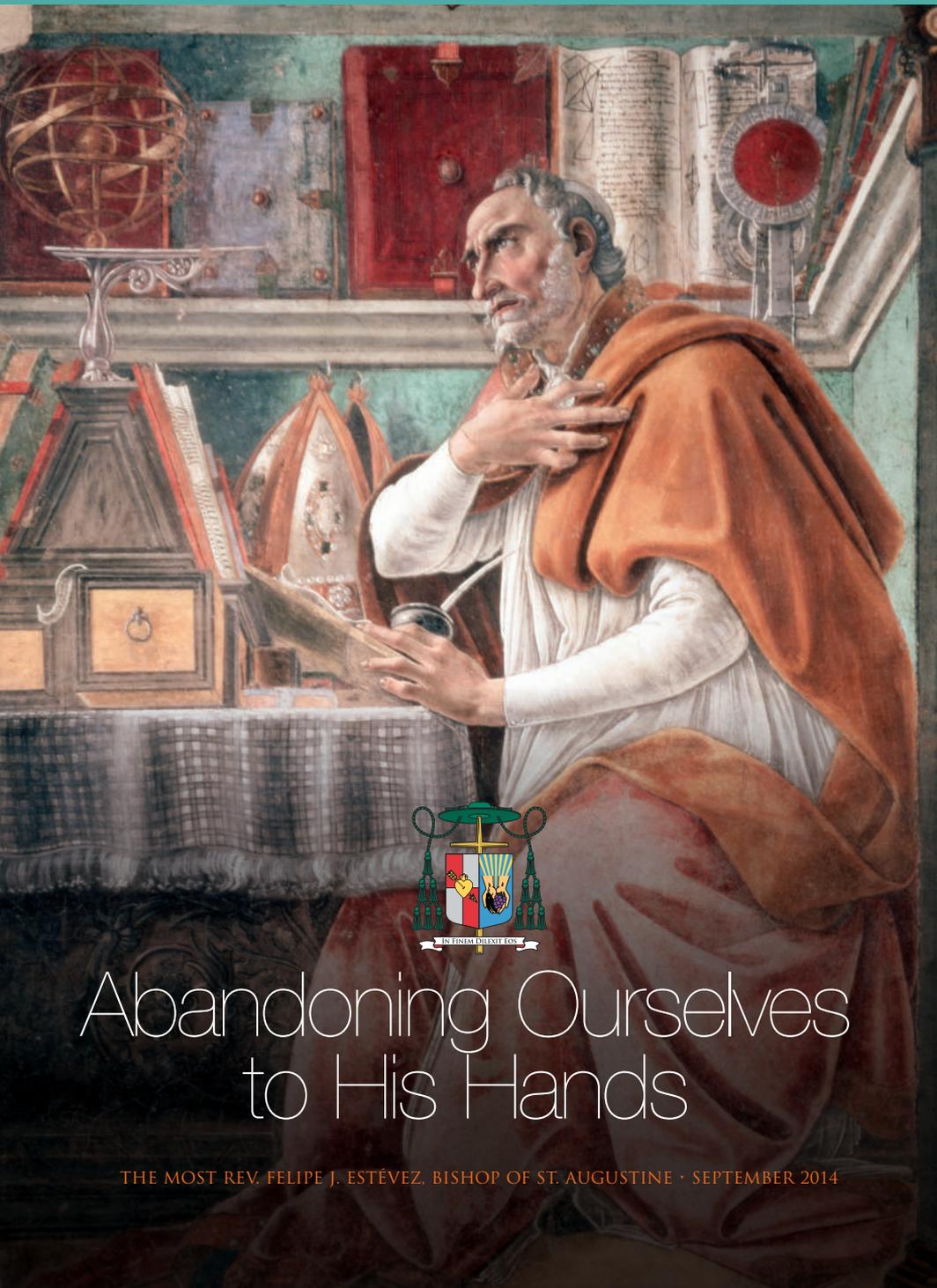


A PASTORAL LETTER TO THE DIOCESE OF ST. AUGUSTINE



Abandoning Ourselves to His Hands

THE MOST REV. FELIPE J. ESTÉVEZ, BISHOP OF ST. AUGUSTINE · SEPTEMBER 2014



Abandoning Ourselves to His Hands

A PASTORAL LETTER BY BISHOP FELIPE J. ESTÉVEZ



Although he lived 16 centuries ago, our patron, Saint Augustine of Hippo, was one of the very first writers of two modern forms of literature. In his *Confessions*, he wrote the first real modern autobiography. It was self-conscious, introspective and written in the first person. More than being the honest confessions of his sins, the book is about how God's grace changed his life from vice to virtue.

His *City of God* is a modern history in that it does not attempt to focus on a hero or a war or disaster, but on something bigger. He looks at his era and tries to find a thread to connect it to every other era. Augustine saw everywhere, at every turn, the loving care of God, who as he said in his *Confessions*, is “nearer to me than I was to myself.”

This year as we prepare to celebrate the 450th anniversary of the founding of the city and of the faith community of Saint Augustine, in this pastoral letter to you, I would like to refer to the example of our patron saint and look beyond the dates, events, the “firsts” and “greatest,” to ask, “Where has God been in all of this journey?”

Like Augustine, we find God everywhere, and not only in the particular instances of our lives. As each of us discovers, when we look back on our lives, the Lord has been present in every single moment too, right along with us. And more! He has a great plan for us, a plan that His good grace has led us to, sometimes despite ourselves! (Eph 1, 3-14)

The Lord Jesus himself explained his master plan to his disciples as they walked on the Road to Emmaus still feeling the grief of Calvary. (Lk 24:13-28) And the great evangelizer, Paul, years after the tumult of his conversion, explains to the Galatians “now finally I see” God's plan for me, which was at work even in my early persecution of the “Christians.” (Gal 1:11-18)

As I reflect on the days, years and even centuries of God's grace that are part of the history of the people of God in Florida, the



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“thread of grace” that seems to tie them together best for me is this wonderful challenge of St. Ignatius of Loyola, in a letter to Ascanio Colonna, written in Rome on April 25, 1543 – 22 years before the first Mass on our shores:

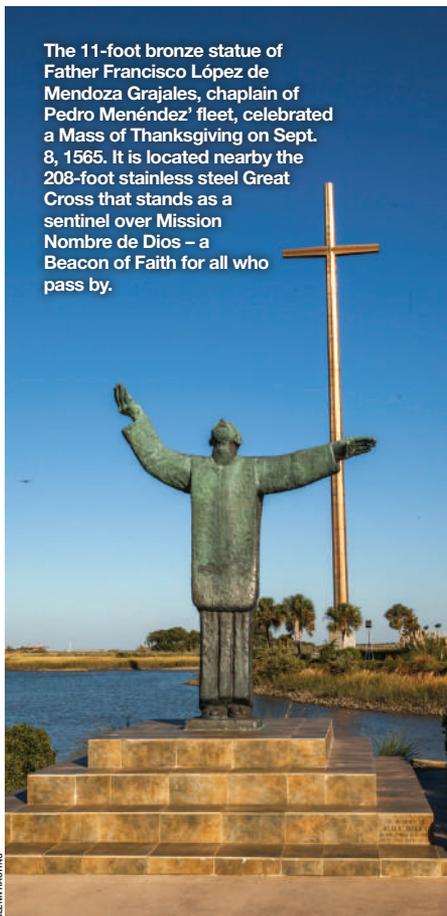
“There are very few men who realize what God would make of them if they abandoned themselves entirely to his hands, and let themselves be formed by His Grace.”

Like the Prodigal Farmer, (Matt 13:1-8) who sowed his seed with almost reckless abandon, the Lord has been pouring his grace generously on daring pilgrims, brave missionaries, religious sisters and priests who left hearth and home to serve here, on generations of Catholics who have educated and even fought for those “on the periphery,” on mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, and grandparents, who have, as St. Ignatius put it, “abandoned themselves entirely to his hands, and let themselves be formed by His Grace.”

The first actors in the Lord’s great drama of grace in La Florida – Don Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, Father Francisco López de Mendoza Grajales, and the first European citizens of St. Augustine – left Spain in 1565 with as many varied intentions and plans as there were settlers. Some came for fortune. Some came to escape old family structures. Many came for the glory of the Spanish Crown in the New World.

“Motivations of faith” were just as varied. Some came to share the light of the Gospel with the new people of this mysterious peninsula. Others were caught up, in the theological and geopolitical disputes of the Reformation era and – used religion as an excuse to claim hegemony over La Florida for one crown or another – all too often resorting to excessive violence. And many, of course, who left their homeland and came to La Florida, simply brought with them their Catholic faith as an essential of daily living, like

The 11-foot bronze statue of Father Francisco López de Mendoza Grajales, chaplain of Pedro Menéndez’ fleet, celebrated a Mass of Thanksgiving on Sept. 8, 1565. It is located nearby the 208-foot stainless steel Great Cross that stands as a sentinel over Mission Nombre de Dios – a Beacon of Faith for all who pass by.



GLENN HASTING



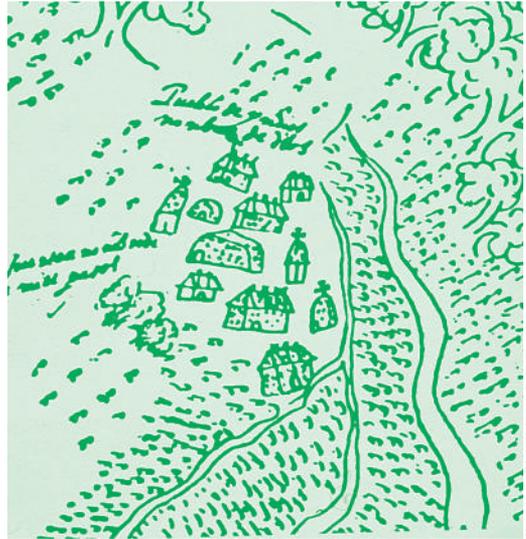
A 1593 Spanish map, the earliest demarcation of the Mission Nombre de Dios in St. Augustine – the “Indian Village Nombre de Dios.”

an instrument for eating or for clothing.

The Lord’s “motivations of faith” are not as muddled as those of man and woman. Seen in the scope of even less than a half-century, the Lord’s motivation of faith – His faith in the basic goodness of those early believers – brought forth greater fruit than even the purest-intentioned missionary could have imagined. A local church in St. Augustine that would grow and endure persecution; mission churches northwards through coastal Carolina and westwards beyond Tallahassee; Jesuit and Franciscan and lay faithful martyrs who died for the faith in Virginia, coastal Georgia and Florida; and an unheard-of peaceful coexistence between settlers and natives. (Rom 11, 33-34)

To their families and friends back in Spain, their departures for this peninsula may well have looked like reckless abandon. In hindsight, we see that they would have been right about the abandonment, but were they reckless? No, rather, they “abandoned themselves entirely to his hands, and let themselves be formed by His Grace” or at least they were not an obstacle to God’s plan for us.

This is the unifying story – the “thread.” Not the varied, ambitious plans of mortals, but the amazing grace of God and those good people who allowed God to act through them to achieve his purpose. It is the thread that ties together the myriad of “firsts” of our rich history, which are at times completely unknown to us, such as the first bishop designated for Florida, for the Diocese of “Terra Florida” in 1527 as it was then called: Franciscan Bishop Fray Juan Suarez, who regretfully could not take possession of the “first” Diocese in Florida, dying near the Mississippi River. He was also known as one of “the twelve Apostles of Mexico.” Another important “first,” the pastoral visit of Dominican Bishop Fray Juan de las Cabezas Altamirano, in 1606 celebrated the first confirmations in our nation. There were



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Venerable Father Felix Varela

2,482 confirmed with meticulous care. I am proud to mention the “first” bishop to serve in Florida was also the first Cuban bishop to be ordained here, Dionisio Recino Ormachea, who came to reside in St. Augustine in 1705. (*Grandes Figuras y Sucesos de la Orden Franciscana en Cuba* por Larrua Guedes, 2006)

Think of the tiny little ship of the French Sisters of St. Joseph back in 1866, barely weeks from their familiar convent in Le Puy, dressed in their heavy black habits as they came ashore that steamy day in Picolata, Fla. Fired by their imagination, they were doing “something little for God,” setting up a school for blacks, or helping the local priests, or teaching the catechism.

Those good sisters, along with the Irish Sisters of Mercy who welcomed them and the hundreds of other religious who followed them – discovered that God was “able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine.” (Eph 3:20)

The hand of God’s Providence led an orphaned child, Felix Varela to be educated by the Irish pastor of the Cathedral. Varela eventually became a priest, a philosopher and a famous writer – the Apostle to the Irish immigrants in New York in the 1830s. The U.S. Postage Service has honored him with a stamp and the Holy See has recognized him as Venerable, the first step toward sainthood. What an honor for our Cathedral to have been blessed by the presence of this great servant of the poor and of the truth.

We cannot neglect to mention Father Augustin Verot (bishop from 1870 to 1876), who, like the Sisters of St. Joseph of Le Puy, came to America with modest goals – to assist in the formation of priests as a member of the Sulpician Fathers – and who was ordained a bishop for the Diocese of Savannah, Ga.

In 1857, Bishop Verot was appointed Vicar Apostolic of Florida before we were a diocese when there were only three priests in his entire territory.

Things were nearly as bleak in 1870 when St. Augustine was finally named a diocese, instead of Terra Florida as it was going to be called. Bishop Verot worked tirelessly to recruit priests and establish parishes. Swamp or no swamp, this is what Augustin Verot had been entrusted with, and for six years until his death,



he worked tirelessly for the advancement of blacks and the creation of missions in an immense territory.

Today, the St. Augustine diocese serves more than 172,000 faithful Catholics in 61 parishes and missions spread throughout 17 counties from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. In just the last 20 years, our diocese has nearly doubled in size.

Our Lord is weaving that same thread – of his great love, of his amazing grace and, power – through us and oftentimes despite us – even in our own days. When I look around at the very robust presence of the Catholic Church in the life of its citizens of Florida today, I think of generous stewardship, the faithful abandonment into God’s hands of those who built up that church in the 20th century, as the Mother Diocese grew into seven dioceses with more than two million active, faithful members.

I think in particular of the hundreds of missionaries from Ireland and Spain who left their families and native lands to make their home with us, as our state’s population swelled from 2.7 million in 1950 to its 2013 count of 19.5 million. I think of the famous Father Patrick J. Bresnahan, who from 1904 until the early 1930s labored tirelessly as the first (and last) diocesan priest to be officially assigned as the “Diocesan Missionary.” Father Bresnahan traveled the highways, and mostly the byways, of a rural Florida preaching the Gospel literally to anyone who would listen. As he says in the closing paragraph of his memoir, “The need of missionary preaching in our land is very evident . . .” And preach he did! And he and many other courageous men and women built churches and schools in what seemed to be the middle of nowhere; they set up social services wherever there was a need. They built up the present Church of Florida. Our young people will not forget their names; our gratitude is real.

Bishop Augustin Verot



SPECIAL



Most of them came because they were invited – urgently – to “help as you can” by our then-Archbishop Joseph P. Hurley (1940-1967). Most have gone home to the Lord, but some still serve in our parishes today, and they will tell you about “the thread.” Once they learned to consent to God’s call, God led them and their life’s ministry beyond their wildest dreams.

One of those quiet heroes of the 1950s and 1960s was a Miami priest named Bryan Walsh. Like most priests of the day, Msgr. Walsh multi-tasked, assisting in a parish, teaching in our schools, while heading up Catholic Charities for the Archdiocese of Miami, which also covered the counties of the present Dioceses of Palm Beach and Venice.

In December 1960, Msgr. Walsh got a call from his bishop: some parents in Cuba, concerned about the closure of Catholic schools by the new political regime, were simply putting their kids on airplanes headed for the United States hoping generous families would take care of them “for a while.”

The number of children put on airplanes bound for the U.S. in a secret operation for the U.S. ended up being more than 14,000 in a two-year period including myself at the age of 15. What was supposed to be very temporary ended up being long and enduring, as the hopes for a democratic Cuba never materialized. The news media called the amazing welcome, care and placement of the Cuban children, Operation Pedro Pan (after the mythical young boy who could fly). This miracle of biblical-style and proportion

was primarily the work of that one parish priest, Msgr. Bryan Walsh, who simply took the phone call that day from Bishop Coleman Carroll. He was passionate about welcoming the immigrants to a future of hope.

Today, there are other children crossing our borders; I hope this generation will be as bold and daring as previous generations and remain open to providing loving care for the strangers who in fact are our brothers and sisters.

Asked often how he pulled off such a gargantuan feat, Msgr. Walsh always gave



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Archbishop Joseph P. Hurley





A generation of missionary priests, from left, Father P.J. Bresnahan, Bishop William Kenny, Father Henri Clavreul and Father James Veale, c. 1910.

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the same answer: “It wasn’t my doing. Thousands of generous souls did the heavy lifting. And, in the end, it wasn’t their doing. It was all the Lord’s wonderful grace.”

St. Ignatius was right. “There are very few men who realize what God would make of them if they abandoned themselves entirely to his hands, and let themselves be formed by His Grace.”

In our own time, God is making a new kind of history. The heroic Irish and Spaniards are being replaced by the Polish, Indians, Latinos, Africans and Haitians, and – praise God – great numbers of our own young people who are answering God’s call to serve the church as priests and religious women. And the needs are so different in 2014 than they were in 1565. Now we have a wonderful network of Catholic schools and parishes; we serve migrant farm workers, the urban poor, families torn asunder by the challenges of today’s life, bright-eyed college students eager to serve the disabled, those near life’s end, and a myriad of others. (Mat 9, 35-38)

We are all dedicated to the same mission: *evangelizing*, sharing by our actions the Good News of Jesus Christ, with those who have never heard it, with those who may have “forgotten” it, even with those who may be hostile to it. It is a daunting challenge, to





Msgr. Bryan Walsh visits with youth from Cuba who came to America as part of Operation Pedro Pan in the 1960s.

be certain. To all of you, I urge you, “Come, Live in the Light.” Why fear God when in fact God is love and God loves us first? (1 John 4, 7-12)

But this New Evangelization is not our task, it is the Lord’s doing and from the time of Peter and Paul to today, it is unstoppable because it is animated by the Holy Spirit of Pentecost. Seeing the historic image of Our Lady of La Leche gaze lovingly on her Son, one cannot but hear her say: “Do what He tells you,” abandon entirely to his hands and allow yourself to be “formed by His Grace.” He can do great things in your lives... for the Lord is the master of the impossible.

A major blessing was given to St. Augustine a few decades after its founding – Our Lady of La Leche y del Buen Parto. Soon after, the first Christian Native Americans grew very close to the image of the Mother of the Lord in a most tender expression of Mother Mary nursing baby Jesus, the divine Child.

The presence of Mary under this title echoed the season of Christmas in a permanent way like in the Holy Land where she is known as Our Lady of Bethlehem. The theme of Epiphany was renewed by the people as they would come to the little shrine to adore the Child in the arms of His Mother.

Thousands of parents have come to pray at Our Lady of La Leche Shrine for the gift of fertility and thousands joyfully return giving thanks that their prayers have been granted. We are honored that Our Lady of La Leche is the first Marian devotion in our country. This historic shrine is bound to become one of the most prominent Marian destinations for pilgrimages in North America. It is here, the Gospel of Life is proclaimed for all.

+Felipe J. Estévez, S.T.D.
Bishop of St. Augustine
September 8, 2014

Statue of Our Lady of La Leche
in St. Augustine, Fla.



SCOTT SMITH



THE DIOCESE OF ST. AUGUSTINE



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