

A Brief History of the Episcopal Church in Puerto Rico

So far we have seen in very general terms the development of the history of the Island since its discovery to its present situation. Now we will attempt to follow, also in a very concise fashion, the development of the history of the Episcopal Church in Puerto Rico from its foundation, back in the second part of the nineteenth century, up to its present state.

We can say that Christianity came to Puerto Rico with the first settlers around the year of 1508. It was the policy of the Spanish Crown to Christianize the natives of the newly discovered lands at the same time that colonization was taking place. Unfortunately, as a general rule this Christianization came to be characterized by an imposition and transplantation of Western World forms and standards (mainly the Spaniard's), which have left deep marks in the character, culture and religion of the Puerto Rican people and of our Latin American brethren.

As has been mentioned in our survey of the history of the Island, the Spaniards extended its rule over Puerto Rico until the year of 1898. It was as a result of the Spanish-American War that the United States took over Puerto Rico from Spain extending thus, its sovereignty over the Island. With this change of sovereignty, Puerto Rico came to be opened to non-Roman Catholic missionaries for the first time in its history. Consonant with its political institution, the United States immediately started a policy of religious toleration. However, prior to that date, in the year of 1869 a small nucleus of non-Roman Catholics had been begun in the city of Ponce, located on the very South coast of the Island. This small nucleus marks the beginnings of what later on was to become our dear Holy Trinity Church. Holy Trinity was started under special permission

from the government, in order to meet the needs of the many British West Indian migrants in the area of Ponce. A church building of iron and wood construction was shipped from Liverpool, England, in the year of 1873. That same year, the Church was opened for divine services (the first time that a non-Roman Catholic body held religious services in the history of the Island). It was subsequently consecrated the next year by the Bishop of Antigua, the Rt. Rev. William W. Jackson.

According to the records of Holy Trinity, the very same year of its consecration the civil authorities ordered it to be closed. Nevertheless, thanks to the good auspices of Queen Victoria of England before the Spanish Crown, permission to re-open the church was soon secured. Yet strong restrictions were imposed by the local authorities: the front door was to remain locked at all times; the church bells were not to be rung under any circumstances; no religious symbols nor signs were to be displayed on the outside, and no work was to be carried out among Puerto Ricans. But, in spite of these strong restrictions, the work at Holy Trinity continued to grow. At the arrival of the American troops in the year of 1898, the bell at Holy Trinity was rung for the first time proclaiming the new religious freedom. This bell remains today "the Religious Liberty Bell" of the Church in Puerto Rico. It has been enshrined in the cloister wall of our present Holy Trinity parish.

The pioneer activity of the Church of England in Puerto Rico, was not limited exclusively to the foundation of Holy Trinity church in Ponce. It was also extended to Vieques, a very small island 9 miles off the East coast of Puerto Rico. Vieques has been always dependent both politically and economically from Puerto Rico. Work there was begun in

the year of 1880 by Mr. Joseph N. Bean, a native from Bermuda, who felt called to spread the ministry of Christ to the many British West Indians dwelling in Vieques. His exemplary work led to the foundation of All Saints Church at Isabel Segunda, the only established city in the island of Vieques.

Thus, by the end of the Spanish-American War we find two Anglican churches established in Puerto Rico. With the change of sovereignty, the Church of England transferred jurisdiction of the Anglican churches in Puerto Rico, over to the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States. Very soon the new jurisdiction was placed under the care of the Bishop of Chicago, who in turn appointed the Rev. George B. Pratt, as the first missionary to the new Church. Father Pratt soon organized the church of St. John the Baptist in San Juan, capital city of Puerto Rico. This was the mother church of our present cathedral which carries the same name.

The Church in Puerto Rico received two official visits from American Bishops during the years 1900-1901. Under the recommendation of these Bishops, a new missionary, The Rev. James Haert Van Buren, was appointed, in order to succeed Father Pratt, who had returned to the United States the year before. Through action of the General Convention of 1901, Puerto Rico was made a Missionary District of the Episcopal Church. The following year Father Van Buren was elected as the first missionary Bishop of Puerto Rico. He travelled to the United States to be consecrated on St. John the Baptist Day, 1902, at his home parish in Massachusetts. The consecration of Bishop Van Buren was a very significant event in the history of our church in Puerto Rico, which for the first time came to have her own pastoral head.

During the 10 years of the episcopacy of Bishop Van Buren, the Church in Puerto Rico was able to establish very strong roots. His apostolate was marked by a strong interest in education, since he felt this was one of the most pressing needs in the Island. New work was begun under him. A new church was built in order to meet the needs of the congregation of St. John the Baptist. A new mission named St. Luke's was established in the section known as Puerto de Tierra in the vicinity of San Juan. In Mayagüez the third largest city on the island, full time work was organized in the spring of 1905, giving birth to St. Andrew's Church. A school involving industrial training for boys and embroidery classes for girls, was founded as part of the ministry of St. Andrew's. Two years later, St. Luke's Hospital in Ponce, was founded. Since its opening, St. Luke's has been the most outstanding institution operated by the Church in Puerto Rico. It has always been self-supporting, except for the cost of buildings. It is a general hospital with a special rehabilitation program for veterans. As part of its facilities it has a very excellent Nursing School. St. Luke's plays a very important role in the community of Ponce and is making a tremendous contribution in terms of service and witness of Christ.

In April, 1912, Bishop Van Buren was forced to resign due to poor health. At the General Convention of 1913, the Very Rev. Charles P. Colmore, Dean of the Cathedral in Havana, Cuba, was elected the second missionary bishop of Puerto Rico. He was consecrated on Dec. 17, 1913, at All Saints Chapel, University of the South, Tennessee. Bishop Colmore soon recognized the need for expanding the work of the Church into rural areas of the island since the population was primarily rural. Therefore, during his episcopacy we see the foundation of thirteen small rural missions, all

of which are still in existence today ministering to this simple and needy people.

Bishop Colmore also saw the need for developing a native clergy in order to expand the work of the Church to new areas. Under his wise leadership a small seminary was founded in San Juan, in the year of 1918. The first two men to complete their training, the Villafañe brothers, were ordained to the diaconate by Bishop Colmore on June 24, 1923, a special date to be remembered.

In 1942, Bishop Colmore was forced by poor health to ask for a coadjutor bishop. Following his request the General Convention of 1943 elected the Rev. Charles F. Boynton to this post. He had arrived in Puerto Rico the previous year to take charge of St. Andrew's mission in Mayagüez. He was consecrated at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in San Juan, P. R., on January 2, 1944. Bishop Colmore retired in March, 1947, Bishop Boynton being formally enthroned at the Cathedral on St. John the Baptist's Day.

Before his retirement, Bishop Colmore saw the establishment of some important new work. For an example of this we have the beginning of the work of the Community of the Transfiguration in December, 1945, establishing a Convent on the grounds of St. Luke's Hospital. Their primary purpose was that of witnessing to the Religious Life and doing missionary work in St. Luke's Hospital and the Ponce Churches. Theirs has been a very significant and effective ministry not only in the area of Ponce, but also in the entire community of Puerto Rico.

Bishop Boynton's episcopacy saw the opening of Colegio San Justo in the year of 1948, a boarding school for boys with an academic high school program. It has been rated as one of our best preparatory schools on the Island. Attention has been drawn to St. Just recently through its excellent

Steel Band, which has toured part of the United States, under Church sponsorship.

In 1950, Bishop Boynton resigned in order that he might accept his election to be suffragan bishop of the Diocese of New York. At the meeting of the House of Bishops in January, 1951, the Rev. A. Ervine Swift, the Rector of Holy Trinity Parish, Manila, the Philippines, was elected the fourth missionary bishop of Puerto Rico. He was consecrated on May 3rd of the same year, and enthroned at St. John's Cathedral on St. John the Baptist Day, also of the same year (1951).

Bishop Swift's episcopate was a very fruitful one. His emphasis was one of strengthening and consolidating the work, and re-orienting it in line with the rapidly changing conditions in Puerto Rico. He felt that although historically the Episcopal Church in P. R. had ministered to the rural areas, today it needs to expand its ministry to urban areas, which have developed fantastically in the last two decades in keeping with the tremendous industrial upsurge.

One of the most important steps taken by Bishop Swift to strengthen the work was that of developing a native well-trained clergy. At first candidates were sent to different schools in the States. Fortunately, with the opening of the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Caribbean, in Carolina, P. R., in the year 1961, candidates can complete their training without need of going abroad.

New work was also begun under Bishop Swift. In Ponce, the Sisters of the Transfiguration added a center for underprivileged boys to their work. This center came to be baptized as "St. Michael's House". A full-time chaplain has been added to the staff. Social services as well

as Christian witness of love, care and service, are the outstanding works of St. Michael's. Approximately 150 boys and families are helped through this Center, the only institution of its kind in Puerto Rico. A new mission has been organized as a result of the work of St. Michael's in the community.

Besides St. Michael's Center, new work has also been started in urban areas. In the last 4 years, 4 new missions have been founded in great urban centers in an effort to minister to these expanding areas.

In the 65 years of the Church's work in Puerto Rico it has grown not merely in terms of numbers, but in maturity and responsibility. At the last General Convention of 1964, Bishop Swift asked for the election of a native coadjutor bishop. He felt the time had come for the Church in Puerto Rico to have her own native bishop leading it. At the meeting of the House of Bishops (Oct., 1964) the Very Rev. Francisco Reus Froylan, Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist and a very dear son of the Island was elected bishop coadjutor of Puerto Rico. He was consecrated on St. Andrew's Day (30th of November) of 1964. Very shortly afterwards, Bishop Swift resigned his jurisdiction in order to become Assistant Bishop to the Bishop of Pennsylvania. Bishop Reus was officially enthroned on Dec. 4, 1965. Both his consecration and his enthronement were unforgettable events in the life of our Church in Puerto Rico. Now, that we are "on our own feet" we look with confidence and trust for the continuous growth and strengthening of our Church, both physically and spiritually. The Church is fulfilling a special calling; that of ministering to a dynamic and changing society. Therefore if it is to survive and to provide an effective ministry, it needs to adjust itself to this changing society and to get involved in all its changes being an active and effective agent of the ministry of reconciliation.