

History of St. Joseph Parish, Winter Haven

1923 - 2003

The Seed of Martyrs



The history of St. Joseph parish can, no doubt, be traced back to the martyrs whose blood was shed by the waters of Tampa Bay in the 16th century. Missionary priests accompanied all the early Floridian explorers; Ponce de Leon, Panfilo Narvaez, and Hernando De Soto. (Florida at that time consisted of all the land between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mississippi River.) Spain was eager to convert the natives and, of course, claim their land. The Indians early on had been terrorized, killed, and taken as virtual slaves to serve as translators, particularly by De Soto, and, consequently, they were less than eager to welcome the missionaries.

Because previous aggressive efforts had failed, Friar Luis de Cancer, O.P. was convinced that a peaceful approach to the Indians would be effective. An expedition begun in 1549 landed in Charlotte Bay and was first met with friendship. However, in meeting with the local Indians, the group of four missionaries with one Indian translator became separated. Frs. Luis and Juan Garcia traveled eight days to the bay, named by De Soto, Espiritu Santo, which is Tampa Bay today. They celebrated Mass there on June 20, the Feast of Corpus Christi. While there, they learned that the two other friars had been captured and scalped. Fr. Luis returned to the ship, but he wouldn't give up his belief that a peaceful approach would work; further, he disagreed strongly with the alternative, a military approach. He swam ashore in rough weather and knelt in the sand to pray. The Indian's response was to club him to death on June 26, 1549. He was the first martyr of colonial North America but not the last. The ship with the remaining sailors and friars left the Tampa Bay area June 28, 1549. Surely the blood of these martyrs prepared the land for Catholic ministry, although it would be almost 300 years before the area around Tampa Bay would begin to be settled. In 1860 the first parish in Tampa, St. Louis, with 41 families was established. (The church was named to honor Fr. Luis and King Louis IX of France, but was later renamed Sacred Heart Church by the Jesuits.) Although they would not shed their blood, the sweat and toils of the early Catholic settlers would nurture the growth of St. Joseph parish.