


5-2001

The Mission of the Eastern Province in Panama

John Prager C.M.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana>

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Methodologies and Theories Commons](#), [History of Christianity Commons](#), [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Prager, John C.M. (2001) "The Mission of the Eastern Province in Panama," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 45: No. 3, Article 5.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol45/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Digital Commons@DePaul. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentiana by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@DePaul. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

The Mission of the Eastern Province in Panama *

By John Prager, C.M.
Province of USA-East

Antecedents

The unique geography of the isthmus has marked the history and development of Panama for centuries. In colonial times mules transported people and goods the short fifty miles between the oceans. In the middle of the 19th Century, the first transcontinental railroad replaced the old Spanish road through the jungle. In 1914, the opening of the Panama Canal increased the importance of Panama as a center of trade and transportation.

The first Vincentians to reach the isthmus were Daughters of Charity and members of the Congregation of the Mission who passed through on the way from Emmitsburg to California in the 1850s. The Vincentian presence became more stable in 1875 when Daughters of Charity, exiled from Mexico, opened a school in Panama City. Confreres from the Province of the Pacific (which included all the members of the Congregation of the Mission in Central America and the Pacific coast of South America) visited the sisters from time to time. Finally, in 1880, the Congregation opened a house in Panama City for confreres preaching missions and acting as chaplains to the sisters.

In the last two decades of the 19th Century the French began building a sea level canal. The construction camps attracted workers and traders from all over. Thousands died because of poor conditions in the camps and especially from malaria and yellow fever. Itinerant diocesan priests, many of dubious character, had charge of the pastoral activity in the camps. The confreres preached missions in French and Spanish to the workers and acted as chaplains in the French hospital staffed by the Daughters of Charity.

In 1903, Panama separated itself from Colombia and became an independent nation. The United States quickly negotiated a treaty with the Frenchman Philippe Bunau-Barilla, who was more interested in selling the assets of the French canal company than promoting Panamanian sovereignty. When the Panamanian diplomatic delegation arrived in Washington, they found themselves obliged to accept an agreement granting the United States a zone five miles wide on either side of the proposed canal, effectively cutting the country in half. Faced with the political and economic realities of North American expansionism, the fledgling Panamanian government had little choice but to accept the treaty.

* Fuller treatments of the history of Panama Mission can be found in the following works: CONTE, Antonio. *100 Años de Labores en Centroamérica y Panamá*, Guatemala, 1960; SWAIN, Robert, "A History of the American Vincentian Fathers in Panama," in *Vincentian Heritage* 3 (1982), pp. 43-98; UDOVIC, Edward, "Go Out to all the Nations: The Foreign Missionary Apostolate: 1914-1987," in *The American Vincentians* (New York:1988), ed. John Rybolt, pp.347-369.

Beginnings of the North American Vincentian Mission

Thousands of workers from North America and the English-speaking islands of the Caribbean flooded into Panama as the United States resumed the building of the canal. The French and Latin American confreres, who had been working in Panama since the days of the French canal project, continued to organize missions and other pastoral activities among the newly arrived workers. It soon became evident, however, that their lack of fluency in English made efforts at evangelization difficult.

In 1909, Fr. Allot passed through Philadelphia on his way home to France. He invited the Eastern Province to send confreres to preach missions in the work camps. In January 1910, the province sent Fr. Thomas McDonald to Panama to help with missions during the dry season. The province continued to send missionaries every summer for the next few years.

The Vincentian Bishop of Panama, Guillermo Rojas y Arrieta, began to consider the permanent pastoral needs of the Catholics in the new Canal Zone. The work camps were disappearing as the canal neared completion and stable communities of North Americans were being established. He needed priests who were fluent in English and who would understand the customs and cultures of the north. In 1913, he asked the Eastern Province to assume responsibility for the whole area. After some discussion and investigation, Thomas McDonald was sent in 1914 to lay the foundations for the new work.

At first McDonald lived with the confreres from the Province of the Pacific in Empire and Gorgona. Soon the other confreres withdrew and he transferred his residence to Balboa. McDonald used a system that had proved successful during his years as a missionary in Alabama. A central mission house was established near a rail center. The confreres would travel by rail to visit the communities of Catholics living in the Canal Zone. A large rectory and St. Mary's Church were built on the Pacific side of the Zone. In 1915, a confrere was sent to the Atlantic side for the English-speaking Catholics in Colón and Cristobal on the Atlantic coast.

Consolidation of the English Apostolate

Life in the Canal Zone for white North Americans resembled that of communities in Florida. The Canal Company, a department of the United States Government, took pains to provide an attractive and comfortable lifestyle for its North American employees. Consequently the ministry developed by the confreres in the Canal Zone was similar to pastoral practices in the United States. The same parish societies and activities that the confreres had known in the north

were easily transferred to the American colony in Panama. It also made it easy for the province to send men to the mission since little acculturation was necessary and no language studies were required. It became very common to send confreres for two or three years of experience in the Canal Zone and then transfer them back to the United States.

North Americans were not the only English speaking Catholics in the Canal Zone and the adjacent areas. Thousands of African-Antillean workers had come to Panama during the construction of the canal. Some stayed on in the Canal Zone, while others moved into Panama City and Colón. Racial segregation was the institutional policy of the Canal Zone government. Separate and unequal living arrangements, pay scales and benefits existed. The segregationist attitude carried over into the Church. Despite the confreres' efforts to integrate the parishes, friction existed between the races. In 1921, the West Indian Catholics petitioned the bishop for their own, separate parish. He granted the request and asked the confreres to staff the new St. Vincent de Paul Parish for black Catholics. By 1925, the new church was built just across the street from the Canal Zone in Panama City.

On the Atlantic side of the isthmus, the confreres were given charge of St. Joseph's Church in Colón. In 1919, they built a rectory and the Miraculous Medal Church for Canal Zone residents. In 1926, work was begun on a new St. Joseph's Church for West Indian Catholics. More than just creating an infrastructure, the confreres made strong efforts to evangelize. Fr. Peter Burns, who walked the streets of Colón and visited the poor in their homes for 25 years, is still revered there as a saint more than half a century after his death.

In 1917, Bishop Rojas y Arrieta asked the confreres to accept a temporary commitment in Bocas del Toro, a remote, sparsely populated province on the Caribbean coast. A German diocesan priest, sometimes assisted by German Vincentians from Costa Rica, had attended the mission stations in Bocas del Toro for many years. When Panama entered the First World War on the side of the allies, German citizens were interned or expelled. Fr. Robert Schickling was sent as temporary pastor to the Catholics who lived in the banana plantations of the United Fruit Company and the small communities scattered along the Caribbean coast. This temporary commitment became permanent in 1920 and lasted until 1964. By the time the confreres withdrew, they had established residences on the island of Bocas del Toro and on the mainland at Almirante and Changuinola. They visited the banana plantations by rail and the coastal communities by small boat. Schools were opened and churches built. Outreach to the indigenous peoples in the mountains had also begun in the last few years that the confreres were in charge of this enormous area.

Beginnings of the Spanish Apostolate

Shortly after the Second World War, Archbishop Beckmann, C.M., became concerned about evangelization in the western part of Panama in the Province of Chiriquí, along the border with Costa Rica. Puerto Armuelles, the center of the United Fruit Company's Pacific operations, had been without a pastor for several years. Protestant sects had filled the void and were actively proselytizing on the banana plantations. The archbishop asked the Eastern Province to send some confreres to the area. In 1948, Fr. John McNichol arrived to assume responsibility for Parroquia San Antonio in Puerto Armuelles.

The confreres set about evangelizing the new parish entrusted to their care. Frs. James Gleason and William Grass had a tremendous impact on the people of the parish. They organized parish societies and visited people in their homes. A high school was founded for the children and a savings and loan cooperative was begun for the workers on the plantations. A huge church was constructed.

In 1950 Archbishop Beckmann again asked the Eastern Province to send men to a parish in Chiriquí. Fr. Edward Gómez was sent to begin work in the enormous parish of Concepción. The parish extended for almost two thousand square miles and included a few small towns and over a hundred villages in an area with few roads.

Three years after accepting the parish in Concepción, the Eastern Province founded a high school in the city of David, Chiriquí. Parents had petitioned the archbishop for a Catholic high school. Once again, he turned to the North American confreres who quickly responded by sending Fr. John Cusack. He was soon joined by other confreres in the new Colegio San Vicente de Paul. The high school enjoyed a good academic reputation, but always had financial difficulties. In 1968 it was handed over to the diocese.

The expansion into Chiriquí by the North American Vincentians signaled changes for the mission in Panama. First, the number of confreres assigned to Panama doubled to almost 35. This increase of personnel was made possible by large post-war ordination classes and the loss of the Eastern Province's mission in China.

The second change for the mission in these years was the need for Spanish language studies and an understanding of Panamanian culture. Knowledge of Spanish had always been useful, but not necessary, for assignment to Panama. But, since the confreres had been working primarily with English-speaking people in the Canal Zone, and frequently stayed for only two or three years, long-term commitments to the mission were not the norm prior to World War II. The

new works in Chiriquí, which required studies in language and culture, meant that confreres now assigned to the mission had to think in terms of a longer commitment to the mission.

Medellín and Its Aftermath

Shortly after the Second Vatican Council ended, the Latin American bishops met in Medellín, Colombia, to reflect on the implications of the Council for the continent. The bishops began by analyzing the social and ecclesial situation of Latin America. They produced a series of documents designed to respond to that reality. The bishops made a prophetic call for justice and clearly put the Church and its resources on the side of the poor. The Medellín Conference, followed by the meeting at Puebla in 1979, inspired a whole generation of Latin American theologians and pastoral agents. The Theology of Liberation attempted to create a new way of reflecting on the Christian message from the perspective of the poor. Small communities of committed Christians sprang up all over the continent. The socio-political implications of the Gospel provoked any number of practical initiatives.

In Panama, 1968 marked the beginning of 22 years of military rule. The disappearance of Fr. Héctor Gallego in 1971 and the murder of our confrere, Nicholas van Kleef, in 1989 were only two examples of the many of the abuses of human rights during these years. The Church was one of the few institutions capable of questioning the regime and its actions. The pastoral letters of the bishops, as well as the words and works of many pastoral agents, caused frequent tensions between the Church and the military government.

In 1979, after years of negotiations, Panama and the United States ratified the Torrijos-Carter Treaties. These treaties began a gradual return of the Canal Zone to Panama, the removal of all United States military bases and finally, in 1999, the return of the Panama Canal to Panamanian control.

The North American Vincentian Mission in Panama was deeply affected by the political and theological currents present in Latin America. Three areas became the particular concerns of the confreres:

1. Promotion of the laity

Medellín and the subsequent meetings of the Latin American Bishops' Conference called for making the laity active protagonists of the new evangelization. In the Vincentian parishes of Chiriquí this was a particular need because of the extensive territory and the large number of towns and villages served by the confreres. Programs of lay formation were established at Centro Héctor Gallego for Concepción and Centro Oscar Romero for Puerto Armuelles.

Lay ministers prepared in the formation centers took charge of evangelization in each community. This provided more consistent pastoral care and catechesis. In the urban setting of Colón lay ministers participated in the diocesan formation programs.

Pastoral teams were begun in Chiriquí and Colón in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Lay representatives from geographical sectors or pastoral groups in the parishes met with the confreres each month to plan and evaluate the pastoral activities of the area.

2. Option for the poor

The North American Mission had always maintained a concern for the poor. After Medellín, this concern took a different shape. The promotion of the laity, mentioned above, involved the poor more directly in the process of evangelization. A new consciousness of the causes of poverty created a greater sense of the need for involvement in socio-political problems. Efforts were made, especially through basic Christian communities, to help people organize themselves to respond to needs in their communities.

3. Indigenization of the mission

The Mission in Panama started as a service to the English-speaking communities in and around the Canal Zone. For decades all the personnel came from the United States. As a result, the vision of the mission was oriented toward the north. The foundation of houses outside the Canal Zone slowly created a different consciousness. Service in the Republic helped initiate a greater sensitivity and interest in Panamanian concerns and culture. Recognizing the need for further inculturation of the mission became pronounced after Medellín.

In the late 1950s the first Panamanian students were sent to study in the United States. Eventually more than 20 students went to study and six returned as priests. The problems with language and culture, however, caused the mission to look for another way to prepare Panamanians interested in joining the Congregation. In 1977 a small residence for candidates was opened in Concepción. Two years later a house was purchased in Panama City for philosophy students. In 1984 the internal seminary opened in Boquerón, Chiriquí. For awhile students were sent to study theology in Mexico. In 1991 a house of studies was opened near the major seminary in Panama City. Despite the inevitable set backs and difficulties, more than 10 confreres have received all of their formation in Panamá. Half the confreres in the mission are now native Panamanians.

Looking Towards the Future

The mission in Panama can look back on 85 years of service to the poor. But it also has to look to the future. The handing over of the canal to Panama and the exodus of North Americans has made ministry to the English-speaking less of a priority. Ways to strengthen recently established works among the poor in the prisons, the indigenous Ngobe people near Soloy, Chiriquí and the Darién area that borders Colombia are being explored or developed. Perhaps most importantly, the presence of more and more Panamanian confreres and fewer North Americans indicates the need for a new entity. A plan for the eventual establishment of a Panamanian Province of the Congregation is being prepared. Some obstacles still need to be addressed, especially the present economic dependence on the Eastern Province and stabilizing the vocation program. The final plan proposes to offer concrete steps to guide the mission as it begins the new millennium.