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Archdiocese's history began long before it was established

By Elaine Ayala

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Many friends lobbied for Archbishop Flores' appointment to succeed the late Archbishop Francis J. Furey, who died in April of 1997. Flores came from El Paso and was escorted from the edge of the Archdioceses to San Fernando Cathedral. Photo: Courtesy UTSA Special Collections

In many ways, the history of the Archdiocese of San Antonio is a series of immigration stories that reflect the state's political shifts, its segregation, its social changes and the succeeding waves of religious leaders and workers who came to Texas to convert the population and lead the faithful.

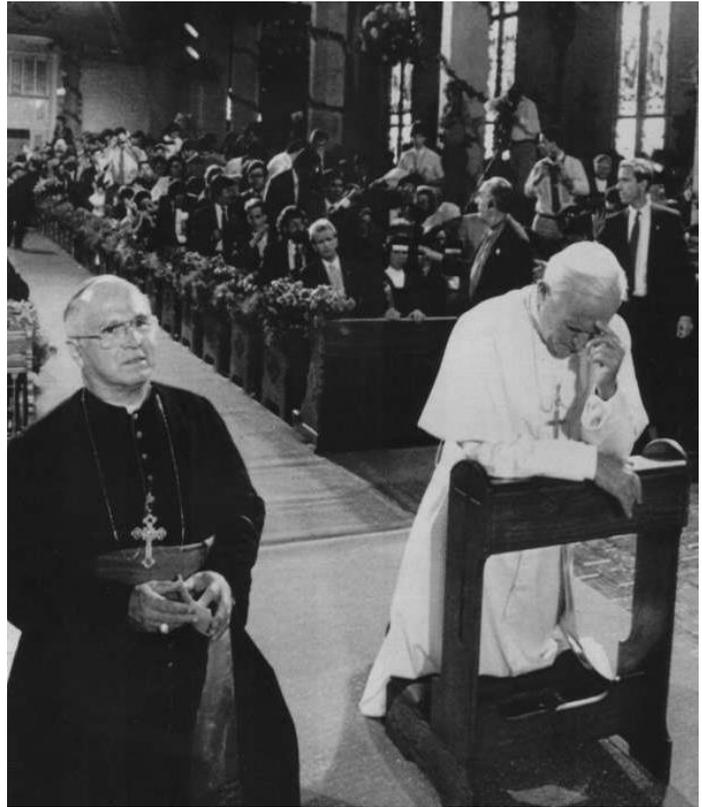
Officially, its start date was 1874, when the Vatican created the Diocese of San Antonio by splitting it from the Texas Diocese, then based in Galveston.

Spanish Catholic roots, however, were deeply established long before that.

During the 18th century, Franciscan friars and indigenous neophytes built the city's Spanish colonial missions that today enjoy UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

Waves of immigration in the 19th century had a significant Catholic component, bringing newer Spanish, French, Irish, German and Mexican priests and parishioners to San Antonio. Dogged and determined religious women arrived, too, and their orders established Catholic institutions that contributed to the growth of the faith.

Like other institutions of the 20th century, Catholicism here was marked by demographic shifts and internal dissension. The archdiocese saw the appointment of the nation's first Mexican-American bishop, the rise of lay movements and, more recently, its first woman chancellor.



Archbishop Flores and Pope John Paul II pray at the altar at San Fernando Cathedral during his visit in San Antonio Sept 13, 1987. The pope met with seminarian candidates for religious orders at the cathedral. Photo: Associated Press File Photo

In the early 1800s, though, Rome was baffled by the territory, a frontier at the edges of Latin and Anglo America that would someday become a U.S. state.

“The Vatican wanted to know, ‘What was this place called Texas?’” said Brother Ed Loch, who has worked at the archdiocese for more than four decades and is its archivist.

The Catholic Church in Texas once fell under the jurisdictions of the Guadalajara, Durango and Monterrey archdioceses, according to a 1974 book commemorating the archdiocese's centennial. The book refers to San Antonio's post-mission period as “the dark night of the church.”

By the 1870s, when Rome named Father Anthony Dominic Pellicer its first bishop in 1874, San Antonio had only a few parishes, according to the Handbook of Texas: “San Fernando (1731) for the Spanish speaking, St. Mary’s (1856) for the Irish, St. Michael’s (1866) for the Polish community and St. Joseph’s (1868) for Germans.”

Bishop John C. Neraz, a Frenchman, was the second bishop, growing the diocese from 1881 to 1894 and ushering in a French period for it. French Vincentian priests arrived, and the diocese “mined France for vocations,” Loch said.

The Vincentians would run St. John’s (minor and major) Seminary, now shuttered, the precursor to Assumption Seminary. The Irish were next.

Each time an immigrant religious group dried up, the diocese turned to another or back to a previous group, as it did in the early 1890s when the Spanish Claretians arrived.

Loch said they drew a top-priority assignment of beautifying and completing San Fernando Cathedral. The seat of the bishop still had oil-treated canvas for windows; stained glass wouldn’t come until 1918.

San Fernando’s original chapel has been described as Romanesque for its rounded features, or as a “little Mexican church.” The newer, larger portion introduced its famous French Gothic façade.

In 1926, the diocese was elevated to an archdiocese and continued to grow despite the Great Depression. It was bolstered by Mexican Catholics who sought refuge here



*COPS / Metro Alliance representatives hold a press conference after a petition drive in 2002.
Photo: Bob Owen / San Antonio Express-News*

before, during and after the Mexican Revolution. Mexican priests came to the archdiocese, too.

The 1960s ethnic, cultural and political upheavals would affect the American church. That might have been most apparent here in 1968, when more than 60 priests asked Rome to retire Archbishop Robert E. Lucey. Though liberal on labor and social issues, a story in the San Antonio Express about his retirement described him as “too conservative for priests.”

He was regarded as the archdiocese’s “last imperial bishop,” Loch said. Before leaving, newspaper accounts say, Lucey fired several priests, including four at Assumption Seminary, and transferred more than a dozen others regarded as dissenters.

In the 1970s, PADRES, a group of Mexican-American priests, and Las Hermanas, a group of Mexican-American nuns, advocated for inclusion and more Latinos in positions of power both in and out of the church.

Meanwhile, the grass-roots social justice group **Citizens Organized for Public Service, now COPS Metro Alliance**, grew out of West Side parishes.

Given San Antonio’s status as a mecca for all things Hispanic, it would be no accident that Patricio Flores, a migrant farmworker in his youth, would become the nation’s first Mexican-American Catholic bishop. After being named auxiliary bishop in 1970, his episcopal ordination in the old Convention Center was packed with everyday citizens and national Hispanic leadership.

He became archbishop of San Antonio in 1979, paving the way for other U.S. Latino church leaders; and he would be at its helm during one of the archdiocese’s most celebrated chapters — Pope John Paul II’s visit to the Alamo City.

Flores was a major voice for Latino social and civil rights, a tradition that has continued in the social advocacy leadership of Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller, who

has been an advocate for immigrants and refugees and a critic of gun violence and proliferation.

In 2014, he selected Sister Jane Ann Slater as chancellor, making her the first woman to hold a post historically held by a priest, typically a monsignor.

Today, the archdiocese still has thriving parishes in the inner city, though several have been closed or combined. Some priests do double duty and lead two parishes.

The archdiocese expects to have 1 million Catholics under its domain by 2028 and is planning for that “demographic explosion” with a \$60 million capital campaign.

Its goals include raising \$7 million to buy land for at least eight more parishes to serve an estimated 250,000 Catholics moving into the archdiocese.

And in keeping with its long immigration story, the archdiocese has parishes made up of Italian, Vietnamese, Korean and Burmese Catholics and is now recruiting priests primarily from India, Africa and the Philippines.

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