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A History of the American Vincentian Fathers in Panama

Robert J. Swain, C.M.

On October 30th, 1963, while climbing the steps of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome to attend a session of the Second Vatican Council, the Dutch-born Archbishop of Panama, Francis Beckmann, C.M., collapsed of a heart attack and died. This sudden death symbolized the end of one historic era and the beginning of another.

Since 1903, the year of Panamanian independence from Colombia, the head Bishop of Panama had always been a foreign-born missionary. After sixty years, the changing times in Latin America had finally caught up with the Isthmian Church. Beckmann's successor as Archbishop would be an Isthmian-born diocesan priest. In 1972, Panama's revolutionary government would expressly write into the new constitution that "officials of the Catholic Church in Panama . . . must be Panamanian citizens by birth."¹

From 1903 until the 1960's foreign priests dominated the policies of the Catholic Church in Panama. After 1963,

¹ Republic of Panama, *Constitution of Panama, 1972*, English Translation (Washington, D.C.: General Secretariat, Organization of American States, 1974), Article 41.

perhaps because of the emerging spirit of the Second Vatican Council, Isthmian-born clergy and religious, together with a more educated Panamanian lay people, joined a more conscious effort to determine their own national policies. American Vincentian priests witnessed this evolution of the modern Panamanian Church almost from the beginning.

The American Vincentian Fathers of the Eastern Province made a permanent commitment to Panama in 1914. Their continuing years of service to the Isthmus remain unbroken. Up until the Second Vatican Council, the history of the U.S. Vincentians in Panama was intimately tied to the four bishops who headed the Church from 1903 till 1963. Each prelate was foreign-born and a member of a religious congregation: Bishop F.X. Junguito, S.J., from Bogotá, Colombia, 1901-1911; Archbishop Guillermo Rojas y Arrieta, C.M., from Costa Rica, 1912-1933; Archbishop Juan José Maíztegui, C.M.F., of Spain, 1933-1943; and Archbishop Francis Beckmann, C.M., of Holland, 1945-1963. A Jesuit, two Vincentians, and a Claretian guided the Church during the formative years of the young Republic. They had severely limited financial resources and scant religious personnel. During these critical years, American Vincentians cooperated to help these prelates to develop the Panamanian Church.

BACKGROUND

Parallel to the increasing involvement of Panamanians directing their own Church was the growing self-determination in political affairs. Isthmians stood resolute in throwing off the foreign influence that so long had controlled their national politics and economy. For three hundred years, Panama served as a colony within the

Spanish Empire. In 1822, too weak to survive complete independence, the Isthmians temporized and joined Simon Bolivar's new Republic of Colombia as a mere province.² They regretted this merger for many decades to come because the central government in Bogotá sorely neglected Isthmian interests. Panamanians never felt content under Colombian rule.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Colombian government in Bogotá granted a United States corporation the right to build a railroad across Panama. American engineers successfully constructed this railway that shortened the journey from New York to the gold fields of California.³ In the 1880's, Ferdinand deLesseps, famous for his triumph at Suez, attempted to dig a sea-level canal across Panama. For a while, the Isthmus enjoyed this economic boom and contact with European modernization. Unfortunately, plagued by financial corruption and natural disasters, the French venture collapsed into bankruptcy in 1889.⁴ Once again, economic stagnation settled over the Isthmus.

During these latter years, the Daughters of Charity, exiled by anticlerical laws of Mexico, transferred their works to Panama.⁵ A small group of Sisters conducted schools and a hospital. In the 1880's they accepted a

²Mariano Arosemena, *Apuntamientos históricos, 1801-1840* (Panama: Publicaciones del Ministerio de Educacion, 1949), pp. 129-131.

³Miles P. DuVal, Jr., *And the Mountains Will Move* (N.Y.: Greenwood Press, 1968), pp. 3-30.

⁴Maron J. Simon, *The Panama Affair* (N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971). Entire book covers the corruption in the French Canal Company.

⁵Ernesto J. Castellero, "Cómo vinieron y se establecieron en Panamá las Hermanas de Caridad," *Revista Lotería*, no. 94 (March 1949), pp. 13-17.

request from the French Canal Company to administer hospitals for the workers. Vincentian missionary priests from Central America and Colombia served in the work camps as chaplains.

As the twentieth century dawned, Colombia suffered the ravages of a fierce civil war, the War of a Thousand Days, 1899-1902. Some of the bloodiest battles of the war took place in Panama.⁶ The United States expressed keen displeasure for the economic disruption on the Isthmus and demanded a restoration of law and order. The warring factions signed a peace treaty on board an American warship anchored near the Panamanian coast. This treaty did not resolve Isthmian dissatisfaction with Colombian rule.

Meanwhile, the French bankers were desperately trying to salvage part of their financial debacle in Panama. They hoped that the ambitious Americans would take over their canal holdings and reimburse the French banks. When alert Colombian officials blocked the deal, the French entrepreneurs plotted to separate Panama from Colombia. A group of conspirators staged a successful revolt in 1903.⁷ The United States fully cooperated in this revolution and immediately recognized the new Panamanian Republic. Why? President Theodore Roosevelt urgently insisted that America should have an interoceanic canal capable of defending both her coastlines and of expanding international commerce.

After the controversial revolt, a French negotiator,

⁶ Hezekiah A. Gudger (U.S. Consul in Panama, 1898-1905), *Dispatches From United States Consul in Panama City, Panama, 1895-1904*, microfilm rolls No. 23, No. 24, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁷ Ernesto J. Castellero R. *Episodios de la independencia de Panama* (Panama: Ministerio de Educación, 1958). A Panamanian View of the conspiracy.

Philippe Bunau-Varilla, used his temporary authority as Minister Plenipotentiary for Panama's revolutionary government to hand the United States the infamous Panama Canal Treaty of 1904. Needing American protection against a vengeful Colombia, the newly formed Panamanian legislature was obliged to approve the treaty. As a result, the United States received in perpetuity the use of a territorial strip across the Center of Panama. In this Canal Zone, the Americans would triumphantly build a multiple-lock canal within ten years. Needless to say, Panamanian nationalists denounced this coerced treaty and gradually raised the people's consciousness against America's alleged injustice.⁸ The U.S. government later amended parts of the treaty in 1936 and 1955, but did not fully satisfy Isthmian desire to regain full sovereignty over the Canal Zone. After World War Two, the Communist influence in Panama grew into a significant threat; and anti-American feelings heightened after the Cuban revolution of Fidel Castro. Anti-U.S. riots frequently flared up on the Canal Zone borders and reached their culmination in a 1964 bloodbath. The Isthmians stubbornly resolved to reassert national sovereignty in the Zone. Eventually, the United States, after its tragic entanglement in the Vietnam War, decided to abrogate the old canal treaty.

A similar pattern parallels Panamanian self-assertedness over both State and Church. Just as Isthmian nationalism would demand complete political sovereignty over the Canal Zone, so Isthmian Catholics would strive for a greater leadership role in the Church's development. Here we begin an examination of the Panamanian Church's

⁸Ernesto Castellero Pimentel, *Panama y los Estados Unidos* (Panama: Editora Humanidad, 1964). Son of Ernesto J. Castellero R. This author holds a very anti-U.S. view.

development under foreign bishops up until the 1960's, and the role that American Vincentians played in it.

BISHOP JUNGUITO

When Panama emerged as a nation in 1903, a conservative Colombian Bishop headed the country's Catholics. A Jesuit priest, Francisco Javier Junguito, had succeeded Bishop José Alejandro Peralta to the Panamanian See in 1902. The sufferings experienced by this Bishop during his career strongly shaped his policies in Panama City.⁹

Born into a distinguished family in Bogotá in 1841, Junguito enjoyed the privileges of his class, including a formal education. In 1861, this serious young man decided to become a Jesuit. While planning to enter their novitiate in Bogotá, he was caught in the outbreak of a Colombian civil war. This nation periodically underwent civil wars as two rival political parties contended for power — the Liberals and the Conservatives. The Liberal Party represented the liberating spirit of the French Revolution with its democratic and secularistic approaches. Freemasons often served as the party's leaders and pressured for separation of Church and State.

Conservatives, on the other hand, were more restrained in their enthusiasm for social and political changes. The Conservative Party adhered more to the traditions of Hispanic culture and to the Roman Catholic faith as the unifying element in society.¹⁰ Both parties could claim many followers through Colombia, but some provinces

⁹Pedro Mega, *Compendio biográfico de los Illmos. y Exemos. Monseñores, Obispos y Arzobispos de Panamá* (Panama: Ministerio de Educación, 1958), pp. 293-307.

¹⁰Hernan Porras, "Papel histórico de los grupos humanos de Panamá," *Revista Lotería*, no. 14 (April, 1969), pp. 40-73.

were almost completely loyal to one camp. Panama was strongly sympathetic to the Liberals. During the nineteenth century, dissatisfied provinces would rebel against the opposition party controlling the central government. Provincial militia and volunteers would fight it out with the national army.

In 1861, Conservatives rebelled against the Liberal dictator, General Tomás Cipriano Mosquera, when he persecuted the Catholic Church and exiled the Jesuits. Oddly enough, Mosquera's brother was the Archbishop of Bogotá. Meanwhile, the youthful Junguito travelled to Guatemala and entered a Jesuit novitiate. In this exile, the cleric took his vows and taught classes in Jesuit schools. Unluckily, persecution struck again. A Liberal dictator, Miguel García Granados, hounded the Church in 1871 and drove the Jesuits from Guatemala. This time Junguito sought refuge in Nicaragua where he could finish his studies for the priesthood.

At age thirty-four, Junguito was ordained a priest and was willing to spend his life in this Nicaraguan mission. Incredibly, he found his life disrupted again. A Liberal persecutor, General Zavala, seized control of Nicaragua and threw out the Jesuits in 1881. In that same year, the deLesseps enterprise began construction of the Panama Canal. Jesuit Superiors sent the exiled Junguito to the Isthmus.

Sobered by three religious persecutions, Junguito was content to return to his native country, albeit a remote province. In 1881, Panama City flourished in the booming expansion. This forty-year-old remained in Panama for the next fourteen years. He became a familiar figure in the city. Besides being Jesuit Superior, Junguito worked as a seminary professor, a high school teacher, a military chaplain for the Colombian army, and a faithful minister to the sick in the local hospital.

Instability interrupted this Jesuit's life in 1895. When Bishop Peralta tried to reclaim some buildings used by the Jesuits, a serious dispute resulted. Stubbornly defending their legal right to this property, the Jesuits withdrew from Panama. Junguito moved to a new appointment in the Caribbean seaport of Cartagena, Colombia, and was assigned to the historic house of St. Peter Claver.

In 1899, another bloody civil war broke out between Colombian Liberals and Conservatives and lasted until 1902. It is called the "War of a Thousand Days" and spread to Panama. The Isthmus suffered physical damage as a battle field between the warring factions. Just before the war, Bishop Peralta died and the Panamanian See remained without a leader. In 1902, the Vatican named Junguito as the new Bishop of Panama, and he returned to the Isthmus with his Jesuit companions. Meanwhile, the United States had intervened in peace negotiations, as the Liberals and Conservatives worked out a treaty. The much-exiled Junguito now faced his greatest challenge. When he arrived in Panama, the Bishop witnessed the horrible consequences of the long war. Many Isthmian churches were damaged and abandoned. The fighting had destroyed villages and the population was severely reduced. Panama's clergy numbered far too few to serve the people's needs. The seminary had been closed for years. Government funds for the Isthmus grew sparse because the Conservatives in Bogotá's Congress wanted to punish this Liberal and rebellious province.

Only a year after his arrival in Panama, Bishop Junguito experienced the upheaval of Panamanian independence. Through the machinations of the French Canal Company and Roosevelt's Cabinet in Washington, a new Republic emerged. Although Conservative conspirators in Panama had cooperated in the separation from Colombia, Liberal politicians in exile rushed home to

organize the new government.¹¹ They formed a majority of representatives in the Constitutional Convention in 1904. Poor Junguito had to endure the nightmare of a Liberal faction writing the Panamanian Constitution. The Founding Fathers voted for the separation of Church and State. They incorporated many of the secularistic principles which the Bishop abhorred. The Canal Zone Treaty made it possible so that American Protestants would have a religious base of operations in order to spread their many sectarian creeds to the Isthmus.¹²

American engineers and workers soon began the enormous enterprise of interoceanic canal construction. Their ships brought thousands of contract laborers and adventurers from foreign lands. These people introduced their alien lifestyles and multiplied the national vices. Meanwhile, Junguito's homeland, Colombia, refused to recognize Panamanian independence and delayed official recognition for twenty years. The Bogotá-born Junguito found himself in a controversial and challenging position. His biggest problem was the rebuilding of the Catholic Church in Panama. Since he lacked native clergy, the Bishop sought the cooperation of foreign missionary communities.

The Vincentian Fathers of the Pacific Province had years of experience with the French canal operations and offered to serve with the new American enterprise. Unfortunately, President Theodore Roosevelt's invitation to the Daughters of Charity to continue administering the Canal Zone hospitals was refused by the Sisters.¹³ The

¹¹G. A. Mellander, *The United States in Panamanian Politics, The Intriguing Formative Years* (Danvill, Ill.: Interstate Printers, 1971), pp. 54-57.

¹²Robert H. Rolofson, *Christian Cooperation at the Crossroads* (Panama: Star and Herald, 1950), pp. 64-90.

¹³Guillermo Rojas y Arrieta, *History of the Bishops of*

Daughters preferred to concentrate their works across the Zone line in the Republic of Panama. A small team of Vincentians joined forces with secular priests to establish parishes in the transisthmian work camps.

Workers poured into Panama from Europe, the United States, and the Caribbean islands. Europeans and Americans usually performed the more highly skilled jobs in construction, while black laborers from the West Indies provided the muscle power. High unemployment and overpopulation in the sugar islands forced many Negroes to seek work in Panama. The Canal Company contracted thousands of West Indian blacks and guaranteed them return passage home when the construction days should end.

Two standards of pay scale and living accommodations coexisted.¹⁴ The Americans and Europeans received their substantial salaries in gold payment; the Negroes and Panamanians had theirs in the lesser value of silver. Living quarters and working conditions also favored the whites. "Jim Crow" segregation laws of the southern United States were applied to the Canal Zone. This apartheid policy angered the Panamanians who felt themselves second-class citizens in their own homeland.

Construction crews endured the sweltering heat, torrential rains, hordes of annoying insects, and the frustration of constant landslides that refilled their excavations. More than the backbreaking work, they felt the painful separation from their families. Workers sought an outlet for their anxiety and excess cash in the bars and brothels of Panama. Most of them had little interest in religion.

Panama, trans T. J. McDonald, C.M. (Panama: Imprenta de la Academia, 1929), p. 255.

¹⁴ John and Mavis Biesanz, *The People of Panama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), pp. 67-91.

Bishop Junguito found himself caught up in an explosion of change. He had two major fields to administer: the *new Republic* rebuilding itself from revolution and independence; and the *Canal Zone* burgeoning with the wonders of modern, twentieth-century engineering.

French and Latin American Vincentians pitched in as salaried chaplains for the Isthmian Canal Company (ICC), the American-controlled enterprise building the canal. Company officials awarded a monthly salary to priests appointed by Bishop Junguito to the hospitals and work camps.¹⁵ The chaplains built chapels in the construction sites along the route from the Caribbean to the Pacific Coast. Vincentians were assigned to the town of Gorgona on the Chagres River and to the mountainous camp of Empire. These Lazarists spoke Spanish and French fluently, but their English was weak. Bishop Junguito recognized the need for English-speaking priests for the thousands of American, Irish, and black West Indian workers scattered over the work camps. He was forced to enlist help from foreign priests of questionable origin who ventured to the Isthmus in search of a chaplaincy. One or two of these secular priests rendered effective service; others only gave the good Bishop more headaches.

The Vincentian chaplains resorted to the traditional device of the parish mission in order to revive a moral discipline in the work camps. This time-honored practice held an attraction for the Catholics. After six years of experience, the Vincentians realized that they could not effectively reach the English-speaking workers because of the language barrier. While journeying home on vacation to France, Father Ferdinand Allot, a French Lazarist,

¹⁵ *Canal Record*, (Ancon, Panama Canal Zone), Vol. I, no. 49 (Aug. 5, 1908) p. 391. This was the official publication of the Panama Canal Company during the construction days, the I.C.C.

appealed to the Vincentians in Philadelphia for an American preacher. He wanted a priest to preach missions during the relatively dry month of January in 1910.¹⁶

Father Patrick McHale, Provincial in Philadelphia, complied with the request and appointed a veteran missionary working in Alabama to take the assignment. In Opelika, Alabama, Fathers Thomas McDonald and Joseph McKey preached the Catholic faith in a strongly Protestant environment. These daring men were ready to confront any obstacle. The railroad from Opelika's junction made New Orleans very accessible. Ships from New Orleans set sail regularly for the Panama Canal Zone.

Fr. McDonald journeyed south to Father Allot's mission station at Gorgona. Here he preached the first mission to the English-speaking workers and surveyed the construction sites during the dry season. In 1911, the following year, the American Provincial, Father McHale, grew so interested in the Canal Zone enterprise that he sailed down to give a series of mission talks. The Philadelphia Province now seriously explored the possibilities of a permanent commitment to Panama.

Meanwhile, the harried Bishop Junguito, worn out by sickness and weary from a long life of suffering, died in October, 1911. Within a year, the Vatican named a Vincentian missionary priest in Panama to succeed as Bishop of Panama City.

ARCHBISHOP ROJAS

In the light of events to come, the Papacy made a wise decision in appointing Guillermo Rojas y Arrieta. This priest possessed the leadership and adaptability to lead the

¹⁶Thomas J. McDonald, "History of the Vincentian Missions in Panama," unfinished manuscript, Provincial Archives, St. John's University, Jamaica, N.Y., p. 4.

Panamanian Church through the new crises provoked by World War One and the Great Depression.¹⁷ Unlike his predecessor, Bishop Rojas appeared more open to change and ready to adjust to the pragmatic values of the colonizing Americans.

Guillermo Rojas was born in Cartago, Costa Rica, in 1855. When he was still quite young, both his parents died. Rojas' uncles brought him to El Salvador where he received his early schooling. With a view toward a business career, the wealthy Rojas family sent him to Europe where he learned to speak French, English and German. Returning home, young Guillermo tried studying medicine and law, but dropped out of each discipline. Feeling unfulfilled in secular life, he entered the diocesan seminary in San Salvador and was eventually ordained a priest in 1882. Because of his strong personality and well-founded training, Rojas became the personal secretary of the Bishop of San Salvador.

In these early years, his Bishop assigned Rojas to accompany Vincentian missionaries preaching to simple farmers in rural areas. The young priest felt attracted to the Community of St. Vincent DePaul and aspired to join them. In deference to his Bishop's wishes, however, Rojas waited a few years until the old man died. Guillermo left for Colombia in 1887 to enter the Vincentian novitiate and to pronounce his vows. Within a short time, this new Vincentian became the rector of the archdiocesan seminary of Popayán, Colombia, and founded a house in Nategá that preached missions to the frontier Indians. After twenty years as a renowned missionary, his Superiors sent Rojas to the Panama Canal Zone in 1910 at age fifty-five. He had volunteered his multi-lingual services in

¹⁷ Ernesto J. Castellero R., *Breve historia de la Iglesia panameña* (Panama: Impresora Panamá, 1965), p. 45.

the work camps around the village of Gorgona. Here he successfully labored when Bishop Junguito died in 1911 and Rome designated him the Apostolic Administrator of Panama. On account of his proven abilities and solid reputation, the Vatican appointed him as the ordinary Bishop during the following year.

More travelled and less victimized by persecution than his Jesuit predecessor, Bishop Rojas was more flexible when dealing with changes in Panama. He fused together the qualities of a businessman, lawyer, physician, teacher, and missionary pastor. The new Bishop had a dour appearance and demanded discipline from his followers. He would strive to organize this sprawling diocese and worrisome clergy. Rojas grew impatient with the transient priests left him from construction days and turned again to religious communities for the apostolic workers that he so sorely needed. It seemed natural for him to have recourse to his own Community, the Vincentians.

In 1912, the Liberal Party gained full control of the Panamanian government under the new President, Belisario Porras.¹⁸ This politician cut off public funds to the Catholic seminary and to the Indian missions. Rojas excommunicated Porras and other politicians for this betrayal of the Constitution, but to no avail. The Bishop had to find the necessary means to run a seminary and to evangelize the Indians. He began negotiations with the American Vincentians in Philadelphia with the hope of relieving his difficulties in the Canal Zone.

Bishop Rojas had met Father McDonald and the Provincial, Father McHale, when they preached missions in the work camps. In 1912 and 1913, the missions had continued with Father Thomas Gorman and John

¹⁸ Mega, p. 313.

Molyneaux.¹⁹ These preaching efforts could realize only temporary effects unless the workers had the year-round ministry of zealous priests. Bishop Rojas offered the American Vincentians the exclusive ministry inside the Canal Zone. The Americans could provide the well-trained personnel and financial help from the United States. These priests best understood their people's culture and laws and could advantageously deal with the administrators of the Canal Zone government.

After Father McDonald made a survey of the entire apostolate in 1913, the American Vincentians accepted the commitment.²⁰ Canal construction reached completion in 1914, and the first ship sailed across the Isthmus in August, just as World War One was breaking out in Europe. Ready now for permanent settlements, the American governor, General G.W. Goethals, planned a new city at the Pacific terminal near Panama City. A tidal swamp filled in with excavated dirt would become Balboa, the administrative center of the Canal Zone. Meanwhile, unneeded workers were discharged, the work force was reduced to maintenance, and construction camps were mostly dismantled and abandoned. Bishop Rojas' mission in Gorgona was buried under the waters of an artificial lake, Lake Gatun. American workers were settling down with their families in newly built communities along the canal route. Many foreign workers returned to their homelands; some to fight in the war. Unwilling to live again in their economically depressed islands, West Indian blacks crossed into the Panamanian slums of Panama City and Colón and sought employment in the Republic.²¹

¹⁹*Canal Record*, Vol. V, no. 28 (Mar. 6, 1912), p. 223; and Vol. VI, no. 26 (Feb. 19, 1913), p. 210.

²⁰McDonald, pp. 4-9.

²¹Biesanz, pp. 314-323.

During his apprenticeship in 1913, Father McDonald had gone to live with Father Allot and the Central American confreres in Empire. Governor Goethals closed Culebra and Empire and moved his administrative headquarters to Balboa. When the Central American Vincentians withdrew, Father McDonald realized full pastorship over the churches in the Canal Zone. He carefully planned his moves to consolidate authority over church property in the area. Even Bishop Rojas had experienced difficulties with the secular priests working there. McDonald had to establish a central house in Balboa and to gather up the legal titles to all church buildings in the Zone. His work would not be easy.

Father McDonald set his immediate goals. American Vincentians would replace the transient priests contracted for the Canal Zone by Bishop Junguito. As pastor, McDonald required all the legal deeds to church-owned property. Relying on his Irish wit and pugnacious temper, he accomplished his ends. The sojourning priests either found new assignments in the Caribbean or left the priesthood entirely. In the embarrassing struggle for church property, one secular priest sued Father McDonald and made him appear before Governor Goethals. The Vincentians settled the conflict by paying the disgruntled priest several thousand dollars in claims.²²

Once McDonald had ousted the secular clergy and won legal right to church properties, he was ready to begin establishing mission stations along the route of the Panama Canal. Raised in the canal region of upstate New York, this priest planned to follow the missionary methods that he had seen in his youth. He would have a central house for a team of priests living together who would travel by train to

²² McDonald, p. 13.

their mission posts. Father McDonald had used this technique in Alabama.

Balboa became the administrative center of the Canal Zone. Here the Vincentians established their main house. In early 1915, when Goethals offered Catholics a swampy site for their church, McDonald stubbornly refused to accept it. The pastor went personally to Goethals' office and fought for an elevated shoulder of Sosa Hill where St. Mary's Church stands today. The Governor acceded to his request and granted this strategic high point.²³

In 1915, Father McDonald launched a building fund to build a small rectory housing three priests at the cost of \$7000. Although only twenty-five Catholic families lived in the immediate area, both whites and blacks made generous contributions. A cement house with a Spanish tiled roof became the base of Vincentian operations. The old chapel in Balboa was dismantled and sold.

The following year, McDonald laid the cornerstone for St. Mary's combination church and parish hall. Designed by Panamanian architects, this two-story building, consisting of cement walls and a tiled roof, proudly stood on a promontory overlooking the town and the sea. Despite the rising costs of construction inflated by the World War, Fr. McDonald successfully paid off the \$60,000 debt in five years.

Father James Hafner headed a long list of young Vincentian priests who found themselves assigned to the Canal Zone. From Balboa the two priests had a farflung apostolate. The thirty-mile canal route was divided into three general regions: the Pacific side, the lake area, and the Caribbean side. Father McDonald took charge of several operations on the Pacific side. He tended the sick

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

patients in Ancon Hospital (later to be called Gorgas Hospital) where an elderly Jesuit from Costa Rica still served as chief chaplain. After several years, the American Vincentians received the exclusive pastorship by 1919. The Daughters of Charity had left behind a small chapel on the hospital grounds.

During the frantic years of the First World War, military camps abounded in the Canal Zone. For a time, Fr. McDonald offered Masses for civilian employees in a converted camp house near Corozal. Later, the U.S. Army appropriated this property as a military site. Two miles from Corozal, the American government built a large army base called Fort Clayton. Here Vincentians helped out the military chaplains by celebrating Masses for the soldiers. Concerned for the moral welfare of the Catholic troops, Father McDonald requested help from the Bishops of the United States to establish a social center in Balboa.²⁴ The National Catholic Welfare Council responded by funding a recreation building in Balboa for off-duty service men. McDonald wanted to counter-balance the influence of the nearby Balboa Y.M.C.A. installation. In the postwar period, this Catholic center would become a catechetical center conducted by Swiss Franciscan Sisters.

In the central lake region of the Zone, where huge dams flooded a jungle valley, the Vincentians opened up two chapels for the civilian workers. At Pedro Miguel, a settlement where the Pacific locks meet the lake, Fr. McDonald erected a little chapel in 1916 to serve both whites and blacks. Racial segregation stirred up ill-feeling in the Canal Zone. McDonald's plans to integrate the parishes met stiff opposition from some whites. Since most parishes had only a few families, and the poorly paid black

²⁴T.J. McDonald, C.M., personal letter to Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore, Dec. 14, 1918, in Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

workers could not afford large contributions, the Vincentians were forced to face the economic reality. They began to build separate chapels for whites and colored residents.

On the lake shore, about midway across the Isthmus, the dredging division stationed its headquarters. Here in Gamboa, a Vincentian offered an occasional Mass in makeshift settings. An American family in Gamboa produced a son in 1924 who grew up to become one day the Archbishop of Panama City — Mark McGrath.

At the northern end of the artificial lake, the Americans constructed the shipping locks leading to the Caribbean. At Gatun, seven miles from the sea, the town contained a racially mixed population. An unfortunate experience during construction days dampened religious fervor. A disoriented priest, contracted by Bishop Junguito, scandalized the faithful. Father Giamona, an Italian ex-priest, had first arrived here as a timekeeper for the canal company. While employed in Gatun, he received permission to return to the active ministry.²⁵ He soon brought his parents from Italy and opened a profitable general store. When the Vincentians took exclusive charge of the Canal Zone parishes, Giamona cheerfully deserted the active ministry again and moved on. For years Catholics in Gatun lacked much enthusiasm for parish life.

The hot and humid city of Colón served as the Caribbean terminal port for the canal. Once known as "Canal City," this landfill covered marshlands and housed about 30,000 people. Colón boasted the best seaport on the Caribbean coast of Panama and was the center of maritime trade. Ships from all over the world anchored here. The Canal Zone Treaty with Panama permitted the United States the right to lease sections of Colón for

²⁵ *Canal Record*, Vol. II, no. 33 (Apr. 14, 1909), p. 258.

company development. The Americans utilized the area to build giant piers and warehouses similar to those in Balboa.

A limited number of Vincentians simply could not minister to the Catholic population of Colón. Their principal apostolate extended to the English-speaking of the Canal Zone and in a few sections of Panama. An extraordinary secular priest from New Orleans, Father Joseph Volk, continued to serve in the Panamanian sections of Colón. As pastor of the Immaculate Conception parish, he ministered to most of the city and made mission trips along the Caribbean coast as far west as the province of Bocas del Toro.

In 1915, Fr. McDonald sent Fr. James Hafner to the Americans in Colón. Hafner endured months of hardship setting up a Vincentian base of operations in a ramshackle church on the Canal Zone boundary line. For a while, the priest lived in the sacristy of this St. Joseph's church. Thanks to the Knights of Columbus and other charitable people, Fr. Hafner eventually arranged for better quarters nearby. The Vincentian commitment to the English-speaking soon extended itself beyond Colón to the far western province of Bocas del Toro.²⁶

An emergency in World War One forced Bishop Rojas to request an American Vincentian for Bocas del Toro. Situated about four-hundred miles west from the Canal Zone, this jungle province had only a few thousand inhabitants. Isolated from the outside world by its rugged Caribbean coast and higher interior mountains, Bocas could only be reached overland through Costa Rica. German Vincentians in Costa Rica periodically crossed the frontier to help out in Panamanian mission stations.

²⁶ Angelina O'Neill Peck, personal letter to Fr. Bernaad McGinn, C.M., Feb., 1974. Vincentian Archives of St. John's University, N.Y. A lifelong resident of Bocas, 1898-1975, Mrs. Peck was made an affiliate of the Double Family of St. Vincent.

Side effects of the First World War gravely complicated missionary work. An anti-German propaganda swept over the Panamanians who had access to the national press. Panama City's largest newspaper, *The Star and Herald*, remained under American influence. In Bocas del Toro, German planters and tradesmen had infiltrated from Costa Rica for many years. When the United States entered the fighting in 1917, Panama also declared war against the Germans. The Panamanians ordered the internment of German nationals on the Isthmus. German Vincentians based in Costa Rica were no longer welcome across the frontier.

Since 1900, the United Fruit Company managed extensive banana plantations along the frontier of Bocas del Toro Province and had developed a railroad to the new Panamanian seaport of Almirante. American executives with their families lived in the company installations from the frontier to the coastal Almirante. Catholics working for United Fruit wanted priestly services and petitioned Bishop Rojas for help from Panama City. This demand grew even more acute when the only priests in Bocas, two Costa Ricans, underwent accusations as German sympathizers.

Bishop Rojas turned to the American Vincentians in the Canal Zone to help out in the emergency.²⁷ In 1917, Father Robert Schickling embarked from Colón on a temporary assignment to Almirante. Little did he realize the commitment would become permanent. When the Costa Rican priests withdrew in 1920, Father Schickling received the pastorship of the entire province. This underdeveloped and isolated territory contained a polyglot population of Panamanians and foreigners and missions to

²⁷ "Fifty Years in Bocas del Toro: First Chapter, 1917-1922," *Heri-Hodie*, Vol. 29, no. 5 (Mar., 1957), p. 4. This was the official publication of the Eastern Province of the United States.

the pagan tribes of the Guaymí Indians.

Meanwhile, Bishop Rojas encountered another emergency in Panama City that resulted from the racial segregation in the Canal Zone. American regulations enforced "separate but equal" facilities for whites and non-whites in the Zone. A wall of apartheid practices separated the races even in the churches. Father McDonald stubbornly fought to maintain racial integration in the Canal Zone chapels.²⁸ The local housing codes separated the living quarters of each race at considerable distances. The Catholic chapels stood mainly in the white areas. In Balboa, the colored Catholics walked to St. Mary's for Masses, but did not feel too comfortable with their white co-religionists. McDonald had headaches trying to keep blacks in the church choir.

The non-whites themselves pressed the issue. Justly upset with their treatment, West Indian Catholics sent a delegation to Bishop Rojas in 1921. The prelate had known these people when they lived in the construction camps of Culebra, Gorgona, and Empire. Rojas understood the embarrassing situation and the spiritual needs of the black people. He promised to provide them with a national parish in Panama City for English-speaking West Indians. Many West Indians lived outside the Canal Zone in the slums of Panama City. The Bishop agreed to provide a church right across the Canal Zone border on Fourth of July Avenue. West Indian Catholics formed a committee to collect the funds to erect a church in an urban slum called Guachapali, right across the street from Ancon.

With the help of a Catholic Negro organization, the Knights of St. John, they successfully conducted a building campaign. Again, Bishop Rojas turned to Father McDonald to assign American Vincentians to the new

²⁸ McDonald, "History," p. 30.

parish. Young C.M.'s, newly arrived from the States, Fathers Charles Stouter and William O'Neill, set up a temporary center in a local hall. They laid the cornerstone for St. Vincent DePaul Church in January, 1925, and finished the construction the following year. By 1930, the English-speaking Catholics in this national parish reached 25,000. Only about five hundred regularly attended Masses on Sunday. The parish even founded a makeshift parochial school in the space underneath the church elevated on pillars.

During the early 1920's, Panama and the United States straightened out diplomatic relations with the Republic of Colombia. Colombia accepted financial compensations for the loss of Panama and officially recognized Panama's independence. Meanwhile, the Vatican decided that the ecclesiastic status of the Panamanian See, which had been subordinate to the Colombian Church so long, had need for a change. Hierarchically, the Diocese of Panama remained suffragan to the Archbishop of Cartagena. In 1925, Rome decided to make Panama an Archdiocese and promoted Rojas to the rank of Archbishop.

Archbishop Rojas negotiated for a Vicariate Apostolic in eastern Panama, the primitive jungle province of Darien.²⁹ The Spanish Claretian Fathers espoused the commitment to the Indian tribes in the Vicariate. Rome's Society of the Propaganda Fidei would support the missions there. Father Juan José Maíztegui, a Spanish Claretian with years of experience in California, led a team of missionaries. Rojas consecrated Maíztegui a Bishop having his Cathedral in Colón. The Province of Colón formed part of the new vicariate. Catholics living on the Caribbean side of the Canal Zone came under the

²⁹"Vicariato Apostolico del Darien, 1926-1954," *Revista El Faro*, March 1954, pp. 4-6.

jurisdiction of Bishop Maíztegui and the Vicariate Apostolic.

Rojas continued his search abroad for missionary communities to help build up the Panamanian Church. He attracted the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception and other orders of nuns.³⁰ The Swiss Franciscan nuns had many successful mission schools in Colombia and Costa Rica. These self-sacrificing Sisters founded schools for girls in Panama City and Colón. They also volunteered their services teaching in the Vincentian parishes. Their expertise in English made them extremely valuable for catechizing children in the Canal Zone.

After a quarter century of nationhood, Panama had achieved a firmer hold on its own destiny. In 1923, a short war with Costa Rica resulted from the disputed boundaries of the western frontiers, including Bocas del Toro. The old Conservative Party that had engineered independence in 1903 fell apart after 1932 and lost all influence. The Liberals dominated Panamanian politics, but had divided themselves into many minor parties. No single party could win an election. Panamanian politics depended on coalitions and a complicated spoils system. Whenever national problems threatened the incumbent government, politicians would distract the people by inflaming resentment against the American Canal Zone Treaty. This reliable ploy worked for seventy-five years.

Civilian life within the Canal Zone resembled a prosperous enclave in southern Florida.³¹ American

³⁰*La Madre Caridad: Apuntes para su biografía* (Pasto, Colombia: Editorial Cervantes, 1944). The author of this biography of the Mother Foundress of the Swiss Sisters is anonymous.

³¹*Living and Working in the Canal Zone, A Manual of Information Pertaining to Working and Living Conditions for U.S. Rate Employees of the Panama Canal and Canal Zone Government* (Balboa Heights, C.Z.: Personnel Bureau, 1951).

ingenuity and technology enhanced the area that pampered its white executives and employees. The Canal Company, an agency of the U.S. Government, provided comfortable stateside living in an overseas territory. As long as American employees worked for the Company they could enjoy the facilities. The moment they quit, they had to abandon this tropical paradise. All power resided in the hands of the Governor who ruled for a four-year term. For purposes of continuity, Washington always appointed a former colonel in the Army Engineers Corps who had served previously as a Lieutenant Governor. Catholics claimed that the appointees usually were Protestants and Freemasons also.

Panamanian life in the 1920's depended on the American economy and interoceanic traffic through the Canal. In the 1930's when the economic depression brought a decline in business, Panama suffered right alongside the United States.

In these years, the numbers of American Vincentians increased in Panama. Father Frederick Maune, who succeeded Father McHale as Provincial in 1919, had committed the Eastern Province to foreign missions in Kanchow, China, in 1920. The Provincial had to divide his missionary personnel among the Southern United States, China, and Panama. Priests who went to China normally had to stay for ten years because of prolonged language training and the immense journey by ship. Vincentians stationed in the Canal Zone underwent a short term of service and could manage on speaking English exclusively. Knowledge of Spanish helped in Panama, but was not imperative in the Canal Zone.

Father McDonald remained Superior in Balboa until 1927, when he turned the job over to his cousin, Father Peter Burns. This saintly Fr. Burns presided over the mission works until 1934. Illness eventually forced Fr.

McDonald to return to Philadelphia where he died in 1939. He had begun the Canal Zone mission in 1914 with only two priests. By 1920, the personnel rose to seven; and by 1934, it reached fifteen Vincentians.³² The sole Superior in Balboa dispersed the priests into three missions: Balboa-Panama City, Cristobal-Colón, and Bocas del Toro. At times, Panama received a reputation as a place where the Vincentians sent troublesome individuals for reform. More often, it served as a solid training ground where a young priest could taste all aspects of the ministry in a short time.³³ The Vincentian mission to China projected higher prestige because of its difficult work. An assignment to Panama denoted a shorter commitment and only temporary exile in an American colony.

For the sake of continuity in pastoral work, the Vincentian parishes in the Canal Zone and in Panama modeled themselves on the urban churches in the United States. They offered the same liturgies, organizations, devotions and lifestyles. Newly arrived priests from stateside enjoyed a reasonably simple adjustment to the mission. During these years, the Provincials, Fr. Maune, and his successor in 1932, Father William Slattery, relied on a personnel combination of a few seasoned missionaries in command and young priests as active curates.

Archbishop Rojas ended his days by writing a history of the Bishops of Panama. Father McDonald translated the work into English and added his own trenchant comments. In 1933, at the age of seventy-eight, Rojas died in Panama

³² *Catalogue des Maisons et du personnel de la Congrégation de la Mission* for 1921, 1935.

³³ Antonio Conte, C.M., *Cien Años de Labores en Centro América y Panamá: Los Padres Paulinos y las Hermanas de la Caridad* (Guatemala City: Imprenta Santa Isabel, 1960), pp. 59-67. Fr. Conte, a French Missionary sent to Central America in 1903, lived to celebrate his hundredth birthday in Panama. His commentaries contain valuable insights.

City. This Costa Rican Vincentian had developed his Archdiocese for twenty-one years and established a firm foundation of parochial life and Catholic education.

One year after Rojas' death, the first and only American Canal Zone resident to become a Vincentian priest was ordained in Philadelphia — Father Patrick Doran.³⁴ Doran's father had brought his family from Brooklyn, New York, to join the work force in building the canal. In these early days, young Patrick had served as an altar boy for Father McDonald. Now he would return to the Canal Zone as a missionary priest. Twenty years of Vincentian influence in the Zone seemed epitomized by this ordination in 1934. Rojas' leadership and American missionary work had reaped their first fruits.

ARCHBISHOP MAÍZTEGUI

A few months before Archbishop Rojas' death in 1933, the Vatican had appointed Bishop Maíztegui as Auxiliary in Panama City. As everyone expected, Juan José Maíztegui received the pallium as Rojas' successor. Once again a well-experienced foreigner guided the Panamanian Church.³⁵

Born in the Basque area of Spain in 1878, Maíztegui joined the Claretian (C.M.F.) community when he was only eleven years old. Displaying remarkable promise, he received priestly ordination in 1902 and apprenticed as curate in a small village in Portugal. When an anticlerical government persecuted the Catholic Church in 1910, Maíztegui spent a few days in a Portuguese jail for his outspokenness. He had to return to Spain where his

³⁴ "Ordination Class," *Heri-Hodie*, Vol. 66, no. 10 (May, 1934), p. 3.

³⁵ J.M. Bebengueras, C.M.F., *Juan José Maíztegui, Archbishop of Panama, Republic of Panama* (Panama: N.P. 1943). This booklet was sponsored by the Knights of Columbus on the Isthmus.

Superiors decided to appoint him to the far western United States. There he would minister to Spanish-speaking parishes in California and Texas from 1911 to 1924. Maíztegui mastered the English language and became a popular preacher, pastor, and builder of churches. Talented at raising money, he moved to Texas as a religious Superior in 1923 where he founded a Claretian novitiate. When Claretians accepted the missionary commitment to the Vicariate of Darien, Maíztegui appeared the Community's best choice to head the mission as a Bishop. Beginning in 1925, he had to organize the new Vicariate. Utilizing his fundraising talent, the Bishop rebuilt the Cathedral in Colón and established Indian missions among the insular tribes of San Blas and the Chocó aborigines in Darien's eastern jungles. By 1932, Maíztegui's familiarity with the Panamanian nation made him the logical choice as Archbishop Rojas' successor.

During Maíztegui's administration, 1933-1943, Panama underwent the painful hardships of the Great Depression and the critical years of World War Two. The socializing influence of Totalitarianism in Russia, Italy, Germany, and Japan had its impact on Panama. An intensely nationalistic movement called "panamenismo" found popular support under the charismatic leadership of Dr. Arnulfo Arias, a Harvard-trained surgeon turned politician.³⁶ Arias proclaimed a social welfare state that exceeded the ideas of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal in the United States. He championed the native-born mestizos and sought to defranchise English-speaking citizens of Negro West Indian and Chinese origin. In 1940, when elected to the Presidency for the first time, Arias cracked down on English-speaking public and private schools that flourished

³⁶ Demostenes Vega Méndez, *El Panameñismo y su Doctrina* (Panama: La Estrella de Panama, 1963).

in Colón, Panama City, and Bocas del Toro. This nationalist leader insisted on the Spanish language as an integral part of Panamanian patriotism. The Vincentian Fathers felt this political pressure on their parishioners and schools.

Meanwhile, the United States spent the 1930's strengthening the bulwarks of the Panama Canal area for the impending world crisis. In international relations, American diplomacy turned away from "gunboat diplomacy." Roosevelt encouraged the "Good Neighbor Policy" toward the Latin American republics.³⁷ The need for increased trade and fear of Nazi influence in the Caribbean accelerated America's friendliness. President Roosevelt decided to assuage Panamanian grievances in 1933 by slightly amending the old Canal Zone Treaty. The Roosevelt-Harmodio Arias Agreement raised the annual U.S. rental rate and ceded back some disputed territory to Panama.³⁸ This gesture won Isthmian cooperation during the war years. When Arnulfo Arias' demagoguery seemed to endanger American security in Panama, Roosevelt's agents intervened. In 1941, when Arias briefly left the Isthmus, the National Legislature ousted him from the Presidency. Panama remained a close ally of the United States for the rest of World War Two. American wartime defenses required large-scale military facilities in Panama. U.S. Army engineers built permanent highways across the Isthmus, constructed new air bases in the interior, and increased maritime traffic through the canal. All these expensive operations sharply increased the prosperity and modernization of Panama.

³⁷ Lawrence O. Ealy, *The Republic of Panama in World Affairs, 1903-1950* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1951), pp. 72-87.

³⁸ Walter La Feber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 87.

During his ten years as Archbishop of Panama, Mafztegui continued the expansionist policies of his predecessor. He encouraged the establishment of more religious orders in Panama and the founding of more parishes and schools. The lay apostolate also received strong encouragement. A native-born clergy held the best hope for a genuinely Panamanian Church. The Vincentians from Central America conducted a seminary near Panama City to train diocesan priests.

The American Vincentians maintained their personnel numbers and missionary system during these years. Father William Slattery, the Provincial, relayed several newly ordained priests each year on a three-year hitch. The young missionaries usually divided their stay among the three areas: Balboa, Colón and Bocas del Toro. Father Joseph McKey, a veteran priest who had pioneered with Fr. McDonald, succeeded Peter Burns as Superior in 1934, but ill-health forced him to return to the States in 1936. Fr. Robert Gillard guided the Vincentian apostolate until 1940, when Fr. John Hild took command during the wartime years.

An immense influx of servicemen before and during the war brought a response from the Vincentians. Fr. Hild encouraged Catholic recreational centers for servicemen in the Canal Zone parishes.³⁹ In Balboa, the parish hall, perched above the lower church, presented dances and entertainments for the lonely troops. Parishioners pitched in to help the war effort. They wanted to counter the honky-tonk saloons of Panama City and Colón with a healthy environment where Catholic servicemen could find a refuge. Wartime drunkenness and prostitution flourished in the Panamanian streets across from the Zone.

In 1942, the last Vincentian pioneer still active in the

³⁹ "The History of St. Mary's Mission," *Heri-Hodie*, Vol. 28, no. 9 (Jul.-Aug., 1956), p. 3.

Canal Zone died. Father Peter Burns, seventy-three-years-old, passed away in his beloved Colón and was buried in a local cemetery.⁴⁰ The citizenry of Colón thronged to his funeral and rendered tribute to his holiness. For almost thirty years he had walked the streets of the hot and humid city evangelizing the local people. Burns particularly loved the Negro West Indians who responded generously to his devotion. During his years of ministry, a whole new generation of Catholics grew up and felt affected by this priest's good example. To this day many people there still speak of him as a "saint."

At the height of World War Two, in September, 1943, Archbishop Maíztegui also died. His health had broken down in his last years. In 1940, he had requested an auxiliary bishop from Rome. The Vatican appointed a Dutch Vincentian from the Central American Province who was Rector of the Panamanian Archdiocesan Seminary, Father Francis Beckmann. Beckmann would eventually succeed Maíztegui as the Archbishop of Panama.

ARCHBISHOP BECKMANN

Over a year passed between the death of Maíztegui and the appointment of Archbishop Beckmann in January, 1945. The Allied invasion of Italy, 1943-44, had delayed communications with the Vatican. Beckmann received his See the same year that the first atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima and the war finally ended. With his excellent mind, linguistic ability, Dutch practicality, and broad smile, the new Archbishop guided the Panamanian Church from the termination of World War II until Vatican Council II.

⁴⁰ Buried next to Fr. Burns in Mount Hope Cemetery, C.Z., is Fr. Leo Murray, C.M., who drowned at Gorgona Beach while trying to rescue a swimmer at an altar boys' excursion.

As soon as the Axis powers surrendered, Soviet Russia lowered an iron curtain around Eastern Europe and began building a Communist World empire. Confrontation between East and West reached a high point when the Reds erected the Berlin Wall in 1961. In China, a civil war erupted between Chiang Kai-shek's government and the Red forces of Mao Tse-tung which the Communists eventually won in 1949. The Cold War flamed up in 1950 when Communist Korean armies invaded South Korea.

The Marxist-Leninist thrust extended to the strategic area of the Caribbean and Latin America. Communist propaganda emphasized the injustices of the American capitalistic system and Yankee imperialism. The Marxists insidiously infiltrated the labor unions, student organizations, the universities, the media, and even the clergy. In 1948, violence erupted over a disputed Presidential election in Bogotá, Colombia. Government troops fought with leftist protesters in the streets. During the "Bogotazo," a foreign student from Cuba, Fidel Castro, allegedly entered the Communist struggle.⁴¹ A few years later, he would bring a guerrilla war to his native island. In 1959, Castro expelled President Fulgencio Batista and effected his Cuban Revolution. Meanwhile, in Colombia, a young and idealistic priest returned home after studying sociology at Louvain University and resolved to reform his country's society. By 1963, this Father Camilo Torres had abandoned the Catholic Church and was seeking social justice through Marxist-Leninist revolution. Torres became a model figure for some radical Catholics.⁴²

⁴¹Herbert L. Matthews, *Revolution in Cuba* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), p. 45.

⁴²Dorothy Day, "A Preface" in *Camilo Torres, His Life and His Message*, ed. John Alvarez García and Christian Restrepon Calle, trans. Virginia M. O'Grady (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate Publishers, 1968), pp. 5-36.

The United States dominated economic trade in the years immediately following the war. Washington pumped billions of dollars into Western Europe to rebuild the democracies through the Marshall Plan. Latin America received no such largess. Big business suffered a downtrend in the early postwar adjustments. The Korean War helped to cause an economic resurgence that lessened after hostilities ended.

American corporations made heavy investments in the Caribbean, particularly in Panama.⁴³ The United Fruit Company expanded its agricultural enterprises in the provinces of Bocas del Toro and Chiriquí. Petroleum and mining companies explored for resources on land and sea. American engineers studied ways of improving and expanding the Panama Canal. The Canal Zone government underwent an overhauling and streamlining to exercise more efficiency in these years of expansion.

Panama experienced mushrooming urban development in Panama City, Colón, and David, Chiriquí. The Isthmus also fell into the Latin American trend of military strongmen meddling in politics.⁴⁴ Limited by treaty to a national police force, the Panamanian National Guard began to assume a powerful role in government. A strong military appealed to the United States as the best counterbalance against Communist subversion.

The Republic celebrated the half-century mark in 1953 when its population soared to a million people. A hundred thousand Isthmians crowded in and around Panama City seeking a better life. Panamanian politicians, like puppets manipulated by a few wealthy families, had to deal with the

⁴³Ricardo Jaén, Jr., *Problemas Socio-economicos de Panamá* (Chitré, Panama: Librería Avance, 1965), pp. 124-131.

⁴⁴Edwin Lieuwen, *Generals vs. Presidents: Neomilitarism in Latin America* (N.Y.: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), p. 131.

complex economic and social problems irritating the restive Isthmians.

President Truman's Administration had to contend with aroused Panamanian nationalism and rising complaints about the U.S. Canal that cut the Isthmus in two. During the Korean War, the presence of armed forces personnel and military bases intensified the complaints. The Eisenhower Administration in 1955 tried to soothe Panamanian ire by negotiating with President José Antonio Remón, an ex-colonel of the National Guard, for a revision of the canal treaty.⁴⁵ This agreement worked out higher rentals, a return of more territory and rights to Panama, officially ended racial discrimination in the Zone, equalized pay scales, and promised construction of a modern bridge over the canal waterway. The bridge would provide a traffic link between both halves of the country. In 1961, John F. Kennedy inaugurated his Administration by offering Latin Americans equal partnership in an Alliance for Progress, his own version of the Marshall Plan. He also sent down youthful volunteers for social reform in the Peace Corps.

Meanwhile, the Panamanian Church responded to the exciting times of expansion and change. With good reason, the postwar Church feared the Communist threat. Catholics learned about the persecution of religion in Eastern Europe and China. After the war, missionary priests passed through Panama returning home by ship from the Orient and recounted their horrible experiences.

The Church also had to meet the challenge of the expanding cities and the upwardly mobile middle class. Private schools conducted by the Jesuits, Christian Brothers, Salesians, and other Communities left the crowded inner cities and built spacious campuses in the

⁴⁵ La Feber, pp. 331-332.

suburbs, where the affluent now lived. A movement also began to urge a Catholic university in Panama in order to counterbalance the national university which was infested with Marxists. The poor and the unemployed herded into the inner-city slums or shack-filled lots that rimmed the cities. This growing populace also required new parishes and more ministering priests.

Archbishop Beckmann possessed the leadership to meet the postwar challenges.⁴⁶ Born in the Netherlands in 1883, he joined the French Vincentians and received his ordination in Paris at age thirty. His Superiors shipped him to the Central American missions in 1913, just before the Great War. Familiar with Panama and Guatemala, the Hollander spent his younger years preaching missions mainly in rural El Salvador. His missionary habit of sleeping in a native hammock lasted until old age. In 1931, the Vincentians assigned him as Rector of Archbishop Rojas' seminary in Panama City. Beckmann trained native clergy until 1940 when the Vatican appointed him Auxiliary Bishop to Maíztegui, whom he later succeeded. The new Archbishop made many trips to Europe and the United States searching for more missionary clergy and mission funds. Beckmann struck a friendship with Fr. Daniel Leary, the new Provincial of the Eastern Province in Philadelphia. The previous Provincial had moved to Paris, France, where he was elected the postwar Superior General of the Vincentians. This Eastern Province had made heavy commitments to its educational institutions: seminaries, universities and high schools. Nevertheless, Fr. Leary contributed generously in money and personnel to Panama.

The Philadelphia Province enjoyed a healthy expansion in manpower and works after the war. Larger ordination

⁴⁶Mega, pp. 331-332

classes resulted from the Depression and World War Two. Perhaps the hard times increased priestly vocations. As the Communists closed down the missions in China, former missionaries became available for work and some were channeled to Latin America. In Philadelphia, Father Joseph Skelly's Miraculous Medal Association, dedicated to Marian devotion, had swelled its membership during the War. This Vincentian charity had the financial means to contribute significantly to the foreign missions.

In Paris, Father Slattery, now Superior General, could view the full panorama of worldwide missions. He encouraged Fr. Leary, and his successor as Privilial, Fr. Sylvester Taggart, to supply help to Panama. Between the Wars, the Eastern Province had sent an equal number of about fifteen men to China and Panama. After 1949, the Red Chinese persecution exiled the Americans. To most American Catholics, the term "Marxist" was synonymous with diabolical evil. Having endured imprisonment and torture, Vincentian Bishop John O'Shea of Kanchow was released half-dead by the Reds in 1952.

Pope Pius XII stressed the importance of evangelizing Latin America where a large portion of the world's nominal Catholics lived. In the 1950's, U.S. religious communities responded to the Pope's call for help by pledging, wherever possible, ten percent of their personnel to the missions. The Eastern Province appointed younger clergy to Panama in increasing numbers. By 1955, the Vincentians in Panama had doubled from a prewar maximum of fifteen to a postwar high of thirty-two priests, ten percent of the total province. These missionaries made a broader commitment to the Spanish-speaking Panamanians. They no longer thought in terms of a three-year hitch, but of a long-term career. These new recruits reached out beyond the traditional pale of the English-speaking Catholics in either the Canal Zone

or the banana plantations of Bocas del Toro. Archbishop Beckmann directed American Vincentians to the understaffed parishes in the western province of Chiriquí. Between 1944 and 1961, while personnel numbers in Balboa and Cristobal remained the same, the ranks in Bocas increased from three to six; and eleven priests received appointments in Chiriquí.

Postwar Vincentians found out that missionary work did not just mean donning a white cassock. Nineteenth-century imperialism had finally ended, although the “colonialist mentality” was slow to die. Former European colonies were achieving political independence in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Each modern missionary had to adjust to new missiological approaches, either by on-the-job shock experience or by previous orientation courses.

Vincentians of the Eastern Province constantly searched for the perfect training ground in the new era. Candidates required speaking ability in Spanish and acculturation to Latin America. Even before the War, young priests had spent time with the German Vincentians in San José and Limón, Costa Rica. Again, in the 1950's, they studied in the Costa Rican seminary and learned to live totally immersed in a local parish for a few months. Many Americans acquired fluent Spanish and solid pastoral preparation; others complained that they did not. In the late 1950's and early 1960's, Vincentian Superiors in Philadelphia tried sending young priests to summer courses at Georgetown University and subsequent field work in Mexico City, Guatemala City and Puerto Rico. They even experimented with intensive courses at institutes founded by Monsignor Ivan Illich in Puerto Rico and in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Yugoslav-born Illich was a protégé of Cardinal Spellman of the New York Archdiocese and stressed the importance for Americans to strip away their gringo

mentality and capitalistic values. He promoted the adaptation of native cultures in Latin America.

This variety of training schools indicated that the Vincentians never found the perfect formula for preparation. Fluency in a foreign language seemed a gift. Some men acquired Spanish with ordinary effort; others could never master the language. Sometimes, however, the less facile of tongue could adapt better to the climate, food, lifestyle, and idiosyncrasies of the Panamanian people. No foolproof system emerged to train Vincentian priests for the postwar mission stations in the Canal Zone and the Republic.

In Balboa, Father Raymond Machate replaced Fr. Hild as Superior in 1946. Ordained in 1933, Machate had trained under Fr. Burns in Colón and felt uncomfortable in Balboa. He decided to reside in New Cristobal and to have the Assistant Superior, Fr. Louis Storms, supervise the Balboa mission. Machate conscientiously made periodic visits to all the mission houses by plane, train, boat, and jeep. He checked the operations and transferred the men from place to place, depending on the needs. The Superior could also monitor the distribution of finances among the mission stations.

Within the Balboa apostolate, the Vincentians had a score of parishes and social works. The white American parishes of St. Mary's, Balboa, and Sacred Heart, Ancon, were solidly supported by over three thousand Catholics. Vincentians also supplied Masses in Canal Zone mission chapels in Pedro Miguel, Paraiso, Cocoli, La Boca, and Corundu. They visited the lepers in Palo Seco Leprosarium twice a week; ministered to the sick in Gorgas Hospital in Ancon; tended to the aged and mentally disturbed in Corozal's Canal Zone asylums; and visited the prisoners in Gamboa penitentiary. Several priests continued to serve the 18,000 West Indian Catholics in St.

Vincent's Parish in Panama City. As these people moved to the new suburbs, they requested an American priest for their enclaves. Archbishop Beckmann heard their pleas and appointed a Vincentian pastor to 4000 black West Indian Catholics living in Rio Abajo in 1946.⁴⁷ A decade later, Spanish Augustinian priests replaced the American Vincentians in the parish.

Father Louis Storms distinguished himself in Balboa during the postwar struggle for a parochial school at St. Mary's.⁴⁸ Outside the Zone, the Vincentians had parish grade schools at St. Vincent's, Panama City, staffed by Maryknoll Sisters since 1943; and also conducted parochial schools in Colón. For years, Canal Zone officials stubbornly refused to permit a Catholic school inside their jurisdiction. They claimed such schools had the status of a private enterprise, prohibited inside the Zone by the Canal Treaty of 1904. Parochial schools were "not essential to the operation of the Canal." Storms would not accept this refusal in the postwar era. He started a controversial campaign for a parochial school and enlisted the broadbased help of Archbishop Beckmann, the Papal Nuncio in Panama, the Knights of Columbus, Catholics on both sides of the Canal Zone, and the local Panamanian press.

In 1948, Harry Truman was fighting a tough campaign for re-election to the Presidency and needed all the political help that he could muster. He courted the popularity of ethnic and religious lobbies in Washington. Through Catholic lobbyists and Congressmen, Canal Zone

⁴⁷"A History of St. Mary's Mission," p. 3.

⁴⁸"Conferees Open First Parochial School in Canal Zone," *Heri-Hodie*, Vol. 23, no. 1 (Oct. 1950), p. 8. Also, an interview with Fr. Louis Storms, C.M., held in Vincentian Residence, St. John's Prep, Brooklyn, N.Y., June 1970.

Catholics put pressure on Truman to permit parochial schools in the overseas territory. The newly appointed Canal Zone Governor, Francis Newcomer, was called to Washington where he learned of Truman's decision to grant permission. Newcomer returned home to reverse a forty-year-old policy. Catholics had the freedom to open parochial schools in Balboa. The Swiss Franciscan Sisters converted their catechetical center in Balboa to a grammar school for English-speaking children. In the first year, 314 pupils were enrolled. Ten years later, the Franciscan Sisters withdrew and handed the teaching to American Mercy Sisters from Long Island, New York. In 1958, St. Mary's School had 400 students instructed by twelve nuns.

Archbishop Beckmann also understood the impact for Catholic radio propoganda in the postwar era to present the Christian perspective to the people. He encouraged Fr. Storms to purchase a radio station with transmission to both the Zone and the Panamanian Republic. Using the call letters, HOLY, this station set up its studio and transmitters in the Archbishop's Palace in Panama City. Fr. John Savage, C.M. arrived from the States to become the first director of operations for English and Spanish programs. Eventually, the Americans turned the radio station over to the Panamanian Church.

In 1950, Fr. Leary assigned an exiled missionary priest from China to make a four-month survey of the Vincentian missions in Panama. Fr. Joseph Konen arrived in January, 1951 and traveled everywhere. He returned to Philadelphia and drew up an impressive resumé.⁴⁹ In 1952, the Provincial appointed four Superiors to four separate Canonical houses: Balboa on the Pacific, Cristobal on the

⁴⁹ Joseph Konen, C.M., "Panama Missions: Missionary Survey of the Vincentian Fathers, Eastern Province of the United States, Jan.-Apr., 1951," This thirty-three page typewritten account is in the Vincentian Archives of St. John's University, N.Y.

Caribbean side, Almirante in Bocas del Toro Province, and David in Chiriquí Province. Fr. Konen remained in charge of Balboa until 1958 when all four Superiors were changed. A veteran priest working in Cristobal, Fr. James Murphy, then moved over to Balboa as the new Superior. Murphy represented the old school of Zonian priests, who spoke only English, and governed until 1964.

During the prewar period, the Cristobal mission also progressed considerably. The main base consisted of a seven-block section of Colón city leased by Americans from Panama called New Cristobal. Besides a rectory, the Vincentians had the parish church of the Miraculous Medal and St. Mary's Academy, a private girls' school conducted by Swiss Franciscan Sisters. Since this area existed outside the official Canal Zone, the American officials did not impede private education. Seventeen nuns educated 560 English-speaking pupils in three buildings. Around 1950, the Vincentians purchased an unused private hospital nearby and eventually converted it into a modern school building to house the academy.

Fr. Peter Burns had lived in this city during his long ministry in Panama. Under his guidance, the priests had established chapels in many outlying communities in Panama and the Zone: Silver City, Gatun, New Providence, Frijoles, and Gamboa. After the war, the Vincentians continued to minister to these mission stations. Their main effort went to St. Joseph's Church on the principal avenue of Colón, where the black West Indians were concentrated. The parish claimed about 2000 parishioners and had a parochial school staffed by five Franciscan nuns for 560 children. Fr. Machate had succeeded Burns as pastor in this mission of the Vicariate. In 1955, Fr. John King became the first Superior of the newly erected religious house; and Fr. Robert Vignola replaced him in 1958 for a nine-year term. From prewar times until 1963, the Vincentians

maintained a staff of seven or eight priests.

In 1950, as it became apparent that the Canal Zone Government would soon withdraw from New Cristobal, the Vincentians contracted for land in a new American settlement in the Canal Zone three miles from Colón. Called Margarita, this town would become the equivalent of Balboa as a white American settlement on the Caribbean side. When the U.S. signed the Eisenhower-Remón Agreement in 1955, New Cristobal was returned to the Panamanian Republic, including its public buildings. The American residents withdrew into Margarita where a Vincentian priest, Fr. William Finn, had established the parish church of the Holy Family.⁵⁰ By 1958, a rectory was built, and Fr. Vignola established his headquarters as Superior. Although they had one religious house, one-half of the personnel lived in Margarita and the other half remained in New Cristobal close to their parishes. Since Gamboa was so distant from Colón and closer to the Pacific, the Bishop in Colón approved the idea that the curate assigned to Gamboa could reside in the more accessible Vincentian house in Balboa.

Before World War Two, Colón's seaport delivered most of the supplies and travellers to Bocas del Toro by coastal steamship. The Vincentians in Bocas kept contact with the Canal Zone through Colón. After the war, aviation revolutionized travel in Panama. Commercial airlines flew around the Isthmus on dependable schedules. Missionaries now had an easier time flying between Panama City or Albrook Air Base in the Canal Zone to Bocas del Toro. American wartime defenses had constructed landing strips in the Panamanian interior. As Archbishop Beckmann advanced in age, he found travel around Panama more difficult, even by airplane. He began planning to separate

⁵⁰The first priest actually assigned to Margarita was Fr. Martin Peterson, C.M., who offered Masses in a Canal Zone public building.

remote areas like Bocas del Toro as either dioceses or vicariates.

The Vincentian parish based on the island of Bocas del Toro lay about thirteen miles from the Panamanian mainland. It covered a parochial area about the size of the state of Rhode Island. On the island itself, the Panamanian government had built the provincial seat of government. Here resided the Governor and all the official bureaucracy. Poverty in this town of 2000 contrasted sharply with the thriving economy on the mainland. One Vincentian report on Bocas stated: "...far from self-supporting. Sometimes very badly in the hole."⁵¹

In the postwar boom, the United Fruit Company pumped millions of dollars into the vast tracts of land leased on the mainland from Panama. Innovative agricultural techniques restored the long-defunct banana plantations formerly crippled by a fruit blight. Unifruco also diversified its crops by raising sisal for ropemaking, cacao, coffee, and tropical fruits on the farms. Cattleraising also became important. All the production was shipped from the farflung farms by a narrow-gauged railroad to the company's own seaport on Almirante Bay. This port of Almirante grew into the nerve center and headquarters of the Chiriquí Land Company, a subsidiary of the United Fruit Company in Panama. Postwar prosperity developed Almirante into a population of 4000, so that the mission church required a full-time pastor. A variety of Protestant sects had congregations in the area. In previous years, the Vincentian priest assigned to Almirante had to shuttle over by ferry boat for his weekly appointments. In the 1950's, Father Stephen Strouse became resident pastor in Almirante. With the help of the Chiriquí Land Company, he built a church and residence

⁵¹ Koenen

outside plantation land in the town. Later, he added a primary and secondary school staffed by missionary nuns from Colombia. In 1955, Strouse was appointed the first Superior of a separate canonical house in Almirante and presided over Bocas province until 1958, when Fr. Robert Doherty replaced him.

The postwar search for petroleum pumped excitement into the sleepy island of Bocas. In 1947, when the Sinclair Oil Company was drilling for petroleum along the Bocas archipelago, the Vincentians enjoyed an influx of American workers as parishioners. Frs. Strouse, Doherty and Edward Gómez thought that this was the opportune time to build a parochial school in Bocas.⁵² Fr. Doherty journeyed to Colombia to recruit the Capuchin Sisters from Medellín as primary and secondary school teachers. With Archbishop Beckmann's approval, the Vincentians conducted a fundraising campaign and erected the wooden buildings. Contributions from Sinclair Oil and United Fruit helped considerably. Some of the same Capuchin nuns who staffed the school in Bocas later went over to teach in the Almirante mission. Every year the Bocas parish dangled on the precipice of financial disaster. It survived only through the generosity of American Catholics living in the Canal Zone, Fr. Skelly's Marian association, and mission collections by Vincentians in the Eastern Province.

Father Gómez, meanwhile, pursued the evangelization of the fruit plantations on the mainland above Almirante.⁵³ For many years, a priest from Bocas had traveled by rail to offer Masses in the farm chapels. Fr. Gómez thought that the time had come to establish a permanent residence in the farm region. He chose a center

⁵² "Forty years in Bocas del Toro: Third Chapter, 1950-1956," *Heri-Hodie*, Vol. 29, no. 7 (May, 1957), p. 4.

⁵³ *Heri-Hodie*, Vol. 21, no. 9 (Summer, 1949), p. 5.

situated along the railroad line called Changuinola, halfway between Almirante and the Costa Rican frontier. The Chiriquí Land Company granted him a house elevated on pillars as his residence and converted the ground floor underneath into a chapel. Unlike most American Vincentians, Fr. Gómez was completely fluent in Spanish which he learned at home as a child. He circulated around the ten farms which contained 8,000 people and ministered from Guabito on the Costa Rican border to the Changuinola River in the south. Fr. Gómez began plans to build a regular church in Changuinola when he was transferred to a new mission in Chiriquí province. A newly arrived Vincentian, Fr. Italo Chialastri, continued the work of churchbuilding. Largely through this young priest's physical labor, the Fruit Company workers enjoyed a new church in 1951.

On the island of Bocas, the Vincentians maintained their maritime apostolate along the coast. For decades they had visited tiny villages on the shoreline, bringing the Sacraments once or twice a year. The priests made the trips by boat and used a cabin cruiser belonging to the mission. Their launch stopped at isolated spots like Bastimentos, the Lagoon of Chiriquí, Bluefields, and the mouths of many rivers, including the Cricamola River. Up the Cricamola River lived migratory tribes of primitive Indians called the Guaymí. American Vincentians had visited these Indians periodically, but no permanent mission was ever established. Fr. Doherty became the pastor in Bocas and made Cricamola his personal apostolate. He exercised his talent as a fundraiser and constantly mailed out mission appeals. During the 1950's, he received permission to build a mission station high up the Cricamola River at Kan Kin Tu.⁵⁴ Once a year, during

⁵⁴ "Forty years in Bocas del Toro: 1950-1956."

the dry season, he stayed there for a month catechizing the Indians with the help of several Colombian Capuchin Sisters. Up until 1963, Fr. Doherty pestered his Provincials to assign him as resident priest in the Indian mission. The American Vincentians did not have the personnel to spare for this apostolate. A commitment to the province of Chiriquí, requested by Archbishop Beckmann, depleted the ranks of new recruits to Panama.

In 1948, Archbishop Beckmann recognized a serious religious problem in Chiriquí. The Chiriquí Land Company there had expanded its operations in the District of Barú in far southwestern Panama. This western district was growing rapidly as an agricultural center. Postwar transportation and highway construction had begun linking isolated areas to the mainstream of Panamanian economy. The province of Chiriquí became the breadbasket of the Republic. Commercial farming of vegetables and fruit supplied the domestic and foreign markets. Chiricano cattlemen grew prosperous as they trucked their herds to Panama City on the half-finished highways. Local entrepreneurs developed family fortunes in the postwar development.

Archbishop Beckmann turned his attention to Puerto Armuelles, the Unifruco seaport in the district of Barú. This town was the commercial center of the entire banana industry in this section. The town, the banana farms, and the local villages contained about 1600 Catholics who had not had a resident priest since 1940. For lack of Catholic priests, Protestant missionaries were proselytizing everywhere. In 1948, Beckmann besought the American Vincentians to send missionaries to this neglected region. Father Leary responded by sending Fr. Joseph McNichol to Puerto Armuelles as pastor.⁵⁵ American priests had a

⁵⁵ "Community Chatter," *Heri-Hodie*, Vol. 20, no. 6 (Mar., 1948), p. 4.

psychological edge working with the U.S.-owned and operated Chiriquí Land Company. Company officials liked the comradery of the American Vincentians far from home. The Unifruco executives tended to show extraordinary generosity toward gringo priests whom they could trust. They cooperated especially with a young priest who arrived in 1950 — Fr. James Gleason.

Ordained in 1949, Gleason learned Spanish in Costa Rica and became a curate in Puerto Armuelles. He and a classmate, Fr. William Grass, evangelized the Spanish-speaking Panamanians in the farms and villages. They ranged far and wide by rail and on horseback. The gringo priests ignited the Catholic faith in Barú and its agricultural zones of Blanco, Corredor, and Laurel. These priests also taught catechism in the public schools. Fr. Gleason had a remarkable rapprochement with the townspeople of Puerto Armuelles and the Unifruco officials. Although considered young for the job, he soon succeeded Fr. McNichol as pastor of San Antonio parish. Gleason started a parochial school in 1951 that developed during the decade into Colegio San Antonio, a primary and secondary institution staffed by Maryknoll Sisters. Fr. Gleason also began the construction of a large and modern church in Puerto Armuelles that symbolized the spiritual and economic progress of the town. Besides generous contributions from the townspeople and the Fruit Company, the pastor paid the bills one year by holding the winning ticket to the National Lottery of Panama.

In 1960, the labor union of banana workers declared a strike against the Chiriquí Land Company in Puerto Armuelles and Bocas del Toro. Workers took over the company installations and threatened officials with violence. The bitter strike dragged on for weeks. Panamanian national guardsmen had to march into the plantations in order to re-establish law and order. The

former conviviality and delicate social balance between the local people and the American officials fell apart and could never be completely restored. After settling the strike, each side viewed the other with cold suspicion. Americans feared Communist influence in the labor unions.⁵⁶

When Father Gleason returned to the United States in 1962, all factions in Puerto Armuelles turned out for a public tribute in the local baseball stadium. Gleason handed over his pastorate to Fr. John Ford, who continued the work in the town and farms with two other Vincentians. Additional personnel was unavailable because the American priests had moved into other parts of Chiriquí province.

In 1951, Archbishop Beckmann urgently needed priests for another district of Chiriquí province called Bugaba. Over 28,000 Panamanians dwelled in over eleven little towns with only one Spanish priest available. Protestant missionaries were making serious inroads among the neglected Catholics. This hilly region enjoyed a cooler climate which attracted vacationing American employees from the Canal Zone. The Americans brought their Protestant sects with them. Beckmann had to blunt this proselytizing. The Archbishop appealed to the American Vincentians again to assume the pastorate in the district center, La Concepción, which contained an old church and rectory. In 1949, Fr. Leary agreed to transfer Fr. Edward Gómez from Bocas to Concepción, and added two newly ordained priests who had received language training in Costa Rica.⁵⁷

La Concepción served as the apostolic center of the

⁵⁶U.S. Army, *Special Warfare, Area Handbook for Panama* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1962), pp. 449-450. It was prepared by Special Operations Research Office, The American University, Wash., D.C.

⁵⁷*Heri-Hodie*, vol. 22, no. 5 (Feb., 1950), p. 1.

Bugaba region. A small, single-track railroad ran through the town connecting Puerto Armuelles with the provincial capital city of David. The priests tended to all the little villages bordering the railroad line. They also rode on horseback or bounced in a jeep to reach settlements that were inaccessible by train. In La Concepción, over 4,500 Catholics required evangelization which the Vincentians tried to provide by teaching religion in the public schools, organizing the youth, and establishing the Ladies of Charity and Catholic Action. Fr. Gómez proved himself effective in raising money from the local business community, a talent to be used to greater advantage very soon.

In 1955, Archbishop Beckmann prevailed upon the Vatican to establish a new diocese in western Panama consisting of the provinces of Chiriquí and Bocas del Toro.⁵⁸ Beckmann consecrated a Panamanian priest, Tomás Clavel, as Bishop with his Episcopal See in David, the capital of Chiriquí. Clavel selected Father Gómez as his Vicar General and turned to this Vincentian for fundraising and organization. Gómez employed banquets, raffles, radiothons, and other techniques to finance the Bishop's new residence and office building. He rubbed shoulders with the leading politicians in Panama, including President Ernesto de la Guardia, Jr. Unfortunately for Fr. Gómez, his entanglement in Panamanian politics later infuriated striking students, who forced him into a hurried exile to the United States in 1958.⁵⁹

David had entered the scene as another Vincentian foundation during these years. Catholic parents in Chiriquí already supported a private school for girls in David

⁵⁸ Mega, pp. 353-366.

⁵⁹ "Community Chatter," *Heri-Hodie*, Vol. 30, no. 4 (Feb., 1958), p. 4. Also, "Area Handbook for Panama," p. 169.

conducted by the Swiss Franciscan Sisters. For a boy's Catholic education, these same families had to send their sons to Costa Rica or distant Panama City. Archbishop Beckmann constantly heard appeals for a religious school in David. Finally, in 1951, he turned again to Father Leary and the U.S. Vincentians.⁶⁰ The Americans had to admire this Dutchman's persistence.

In Brooklyn, New York, the Vincentians supervised a topflight Catholic high school, St. John's Preparatory School, that had evolved from the educational conglomerate of St. John's University. This Prep School enjoyed a solid reputation and produced many priestly vocations for the Congregation of the Mission. The idea of a similar school in Panama appealed to Fr. Leary and his advisers. In November, 1951, the Visitor sent Father John Cusack, an experienced Prep administrator, to David for the founding of a model "colegio." Archbishop Beckmann had received many promises of financial support from the Chiricano families. When Cusack arrived, he found that these same parents had prepared virtually nothing. They had not delivered money, land, or buildings. Determined to succeed, Fr. Cusack resolved to launch the first classes in April, 1952. For weeks, the priest improvised as best he could by renting an old building in town. With a limited budget, Cusack repaired the house and gradually filled it with donated furniture. Two American priests, formerly stationed in La Concepción, Frs. Robert Galchus and George Mullen, moved to the makeshift school as faculty members.

Classes began in April, even though the Vincentians had to use borrowed classrooms in a nearby public school. They moved into their renovated building in January,

⁶⁰ "First Graduation Crowns Brief History of David's Colegio San Vicente," *Hieri-Hodie*, Vol. 29, no. 4 (Feb., 1957), pp. 1-4.

1953, to educate 145 boys distributed into the upper grades of primary school and the lowest grade of the secondary level. Seven pupils stayed with the priests as boarders. The opportunity to learn English attracted many families to send their sons. Each year more grades were added to the school until both primary and secondary levels consisted of six years.

Living right in the center of David city, the Vincentians developed a good rapport with the townspeople. By 1955, Fr. Cusack had returned to the States. The school had adopted the name Colegio San Vicente de Paúl. In that year, Fr. John Doyle came to David as the resident Superior for all Vincentians in Chiriquí province. Fr. Mullen, who had gained much popularity in the city, served as the school's Headmaster.

Meanwhile, in Philadelphia, the Vincentian Provincial Council decided that their priests had lived in squalid conditions long enough. They planned a new and permanent campus for the school to be situated in the David suburbs bordering on the Inter-American Highway. A Catholic layman, Professor Sebastian Ríos, and other local families donated the land for development as a Catholic school. Father Taggart arranged for a Vincentian loan to help accelerate the building campaign. In September, 1957, engineers finished constructing a modern secondary school, and classes began for the first graduating class. In quick succession, the Eastern Province erected a priests' residence, a primary school, and recreational facilities. The rapid growth of this plush campus gave Panamanians the impression that American priests had found an educational goldmine.

In 1958, another priest-instructor at St. John's Prep, Brooklyn, Fr. James O'Keefe, received the appointment as Headmaster of the Colegio and Superior of Chiriquí. The priests abandoned their rented installations downtown and

moved permanently to their new campus. Colegio San Vicente provided a six-year primary school and a six year secondary school, staffed by five teaching priests and several Panamanian lay teachers. For a few years, the Vincentians had the volunteer teaching help of Catholic laywomen from the States. By 1962, Colegio San Vicente numbered 310 students whose families paid an average yearly tuition of \$115 each. For the ordinary Panamanian family, this cost of an education seemed exorbitant. Only the affluent could afford the private Colegio; enrollment did not grow. Each year the Vincentian school fell deeper into debt and, except for generous subsidies from Philadelphia, appeared headed for bankruptcy. Nevertheless, this David house became the center of Vincentian operations in the province of Chiriquí. Archbishop Beckmann had fulfilled the educational request of the Catholic families in David.

In 1963, Archbishop Beckmann completed his fiftieth anniversary of the priesthood and his eighteenth year as Archbishop of Panama. When he journeyed to Rome for the second year of Vatican Council II, the old Netherlander could take satisfaction in the progress of the Panamanian Church. He had split the jurisdiction of the Isthmus into two new dioceses and was planning more changes. Accompanying him on the trip were Panamanian-born Bishops: Tomás Clavel of David, Chiriquí, José María Carrizo of Chitré; and the Auxiliary Bishop of Panama City, Marcos McGrath, C.S.C.⁶¹ Beckmann was already planning to establish a new Diocese in Santiago, Veraguas, and a Prelature Nullius in Bocas del Toro.

During his Administration, the Archbishop had

⁶¹ *Anuario Eclesiástico de Panamá, 1965* (Panama: La Estrella de Panama, 1964), p. 175.

ordained nineteen Panamanian secular priests for the Isthmian Archdiocese. He had founded a community of Panamanian Catechetical Sisters who worked around the country, including La Concepción, Chiriquí. Archdiocesan expansion resulted from the arrival of more religious communities supplying missionary clergy. With the help of interested parents, Catholic schools had spread to most cities in the Republic. A Spanish Augustinian, Father Benjamín Ayechu, was already organizing a Catholic university in Panama City, Universidad Santa María la Antigua.⁶² The Panamanian Government had granted a decree permitting the foundation of a private university.

Beckmann had borne well the immense responsibility passed to him by his foreign-born predecessors in the Panamanian Episcopate: Junguito, Rojas, and Maiztegui. The golden jubilarian arrived in Rome as the true pastor of his people. Ironically, almost one hundred years previously, another Bishop of Panama, Fray Eduardo Vásquez, had attended Vatican Council I in 1869 and died suddenly in Rome.⁶³ As Beckmann climbed the steps of St. Peter's Basilica on October 30, 1963, he collapsed with a heart attack and died. Several days later, his Panamanian Bishops buried him in Panama City and ended a historical era. In succeeding weeks, Bishop Clavel replaced him as Archbishop. Beckmann would most likely stand in history as the last foreign-born Archbishop of Panama, and probably the last Vincentian.

⁶² Benjamin Ayechu, O.A.R., "Historia de la fundación de la Universidad Santa María la Antigua," *La Antigua*, no. 1, 1969, pp. 1-112. Extraordinary edition of first journal published by the university.

⁶³ Rojas, p. 211.

CONCLUSION

In 1963, the American Vincentians were completing fifty years of missionary commitment in Panama. A half-century had passed since Fr. McDonald arrived in the work camps of the Canal Zone to make his mission survey. The Vincentians from Philadelphia could look back contentedly on their accomplishments on the Isthmus. Over thirty American priests worked in the Canal Zone and in the Republic. The majority of these men spoke fluent Spanish. These Vincentians had established four canonical houses on the Isthmus: Balboa, Cristobal, Bocas del Toro, and David. Besides building dozens of churches and chapels, these priests were operating ten Catholic primary schools and seven secondary schools. Already the American Vincentians were training Panamanian vocations in their stateside seminaries.

Instead of forwarding young candidates to the Central American Province, the Americans had permission to train them in English in the United States. The aspirants mastered two languages and two cultures. One day, as priests, Panamanian Vincentians would replace their American counterparts on the Isthmus. In 1963, one of the first graduates of Colegio San Vicente in David, José Pío Jiménez, joined Winston Auguste, a graduate of St. Vincent's High School in Panama City, in studying theology at the Vincentian major seminary in Northampton, Pennsylvania. More Panamanian vocations were preparing to go to the United States.

All the signs seemed bright for a successful future of Vincentian works in Panama. In 1963, the Eastern Province could rejoice in its significant contributions to the Isthmian Church. Little did the Vincentians realize that the world situation would change drastically very soon.

The reforms of Vatican Council II would shake the foundations of the international Church. The impact of the escalating Vietnam War would pinch the American economy and split the national unity. Political tension in the Caribbean would spread to Panama. Only a few weeks after Beckmann's death, street riots broke out in Panama City just outside the Canal Zone. International relations between the United States and Panama would reach the breaking point. Neither the Panamanian Church nor the American Vincentian Fathers were spared in the shock waves of the changing times. These changes form the subject of another history.

As Archbishop Beckmann lay dying on the steps of St. Peter's Basilica, the Dutchman symbolized the end of one historic era in Panama, and the beginning of another.



The works of God are done by degrees, both in their beginnings and through the course of their progress. It is not expedient to wish to accomplish everything suddenly and at once and to think that everything is lost unless everyone is eager to cooperate with the little good-will that we have. What then should be done? We should proceed gently, praying earnestly to God and acting in concord.

ST. VINCENT de PAUL

I have great affection for the propagation of the Church in infidel countries because of the fear I have that God may permit it to be slowly destroyed in our own. Blessed are they who may be able to cooperate in extending it elsewhere.

ST. VINCENT de PAUL



Let us not be discouraged either by dangers or by the apparent fruitlessness of our zeal. Do merchants refrain from going to sea because of the dangers to be met with, or soldiers from going to war because of the wounds and death to which they are exposed? Does not the husbandman wait long before seeing the fruit of his labors and does he always see the abundant harvest produced by the seed?

ST. VINCENT de PAUL



You must hope from the goodness of God that He will bless your work and give you all the graces you need to carry out His most holy Will, since you have been chosen by God for that duty through the dispensation of His Providence.

ST. LOUISE de MARILLAC