

Bishop Edward J. Harper, C.Ss.R. Papers

**Baltimore Province of the Redemptorists Archives
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Brooklyn, New York 11209-2807**

The scope of the papers of Bishop Edward Harper, C.Ss.R., a member of the Baltimore Province of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, encompasses letters, manuscripts (including memoirs), a medallion keepsake of the Second Vatican Council, news clippings, and photographs. The materials date from 1888 to as late as 1991, several months after Bishop Harper died. The entirety of the collection is open to qualified researchers, excepting one folder related to marriage cases, which are restricted. Consultation of these materials will be at the discretion of the Province Archivist.

Biography:

Edward John Harper was born July 23, 1910, in Brooklyn, New York, to John Edward and Josephine (née Realander) Harper. Their second child—a sister Frances preceded him—Edward Harper was baptized in Our Lady of Angels Parish at 74th Street and 4th Avenue. The family moved to Our Lady of Help Parish, where he made his first communion. He was educated in the primary grades nearby at P.S. 118 on 59th Street, though as a seminarian the future bishop recalled “from the way we were harped at by our Catholic teachers, you would think that 118 was a semi-Catholic if not a Catholic school.” It was at OLPH that he was catechized by Sisters of St. Joseph. Harper’s family again moved, this time into St. Thomas Aquinas Parish, at 9th Street and 4th Avenue, where he received the sacrament of confirmation at the hands of Bishop Thomas Molloy. He entered high school at Commercial (the future Alexander Hamilton High School) and after graduating went to work at W. R. Grace. He had entertained the idea of going to the Redemptorist preparatory school at North East, but initially “backed out.” This would change, however, for in his daily grind and in night school, he found solace in the idea of doing something exciting and, he said, “I nursed the new urge within me.” His vocation to the Redemptorists was renewed and he entered the juvenate at North East (1928-1933) only to find that his many years of toiling at bookkeeping, typing, shorthand, and commercial law were for naught. Nevertheless, he persevered to matriculation and to hear the words of Father John Harkins, then Socius at the school, “anyone who serves six years here deserves a diploma!”

Upon entering St. Mary’s College at Ilchester, Maryland, he began the regular course leading to his entrance into the Redemptorists. His first profession was made on August 2, 1934 and his final profession was made on September 2, 1937. He completed the theological course at Mt. St. Alphonsus in Esopus, New York, in 1940, and was ordained there by Bishop Stephen Donahue of the Archdiocese of New York, June 18, 1939. His second novitiate was spent in Annapolis, Maryland, at St. Mary’s Church, 1940-1941. Beginning in 1941 he undertook mission work at La Candelaria, Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, and was based there until 1946. For several months at the beginning of his ministry, he went around the territory on horseback, calling the people to Mass by means of large rocket flares and building chapels for them brick by brick. In October 1946, he was among the first American priests to work in Santo Domingo. From November 1946 to 1950 he was rector of the community at Las Matas de Farfan, Dominican Republic, having taken over the mission—a territory of about 2,400 square miles with 56,000 souls—from Spanish Capuchins. Here, too, Harper traveled extensively in the back country, often erecting a simple “bohio” or small hut from palm fronds for his “rectory.” Before leaving for his new assignment, he poured the concrete for what became a permanent rectory. He returned to La Candelaria as rector from 1950 to 1956. There he founded the Legion of Mary and built a new high

school for 400 pupils. Between 1956 and 1960 he was the Vice-Provincial Superior of the Vice-Province of San Juan, encompassing Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and the Virgin Islands. In San Juan, he also served as the Diocesan Vicar for Religious and the Director of Vocations.

On July 23, 1960, on his fiftieth birthday, Harper accepted the Prelature Nullius of the Virgin Islands and accordingly was named Titular Bishop of Heraclea Pontica. His episcopal motto: "Emitte Spiritum Tuum," which is translated as "Send Forth Your Spirit." He was consecrated a bishop in Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in Brooklyn, October 6, 1960, as the first residential bishop in the United States Virgin Islands. Brooklyn's Bishop Bryan McEntagert was the principal consecrator and Harper's two brother Redemptorist bishops, McCarty and McManus, were co-consecrators. He took possession of the prelature October 18, 1960, at the installation Mass celebrated in the presence of Archbishop James Davis of San Juan in the church of Sts. Peter and Paul in the capital on St. Thomas, V.I., Charlotte Amalie. Among Harper's episcopal duties was to serve as the Secretary of the Bishops' Conference of Puerto Rico as well as the President of the Commission on the Interdiocesan Seminary of Puerto Rico. As a newly elected bishop, he participated in all of the sessions of the Second Vatican Council. In 1965, the Virgin Islands was separated from the Province of Puerto Rico and attached to the Province of Washington, DC, which counted it as its first suffragan see. Bishop Harper's prelature was raised to the dignity of a Diocese and was renamed the Diocese of St. Thomas in April 1977. He was installed as its first residential bishop September 18, 1977, in the Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul, St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. His Eminence William Cardinal Baum, in the presence of the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Jean Jadot, performed the installation.

After celebrating his silver jubilee in the episcopate, Bishop Harper became the ordinary emeritus on October 15, 1985, but continued to serve as Diocesan Vicar General until August 1989, when he returned to the United States for medical treatment. Owing to Hurricane Hugo, which did severe damage to his home in the Virgin Islands, he remained in the United States, taking up residence at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Rectory in Brooklyn. He stayed there until September 3, 1989, whereupon he moved to the St. John Neumann Residence in Saratoga Springs, New York. Bishop Harper died there December 2, 1990. His body was taken back to the Virgin Islands and a Mass was celebrated in the Cathedral on December 10. Bishop Harper's mortal remains were then transferred back to Brooklyn, where a funeral Mass was celebrated on December 12, in the Basilica of Our Lady of Perpetual Help. His body was then taken for burial in Mount Saint Alphonsus Cemetery in Esopus, NY.

The Prelature of the Virgin Islands grew under Bishop Harper's tenure. He established the Knights of Columbus and Catholic Daughters of the Americas, built St. Joseph's High School, and founded the Light of Christ Retreat Center in St. Croix. He established four parishes and missions. Among his contributions to the social apostolate, he was most notably the originator of the Catholic Social Action Program—later transformed into the Christian Community Consciousness Center—and formally launched the permanent diaconate in 1981. By 1984, he ordained the first seventeen deacons for the diocese. Bishop Harper was among the consecrators of Bishop (later Cardinal) Sean O'Malley, OFM Cap., who served as Harper's coadjutor until he succeeded to the See of St. Thomas upon Harper's retirement. At Bishop Harper's funeral, whose sermon he preached, O'Malley noted that the late bishop was both a friend and a mentor.