

Bishop Bernard Joseph Nolker, C.Ss.R., Papers

Baltimore Province of the Redemptorists Archives
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The scope of the papers of Bishop Bernard J. Nolker, C.Ss.R., a member of the Baltimore Province of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, encompasses his personnel files, letters, reports, news clippings, and photographs. The materials date from 1928 to his death in 2000. The collection is especially important—however partial—for research on the episcopal history of the Catholic Church in Puerto Rico, especially in the 1960s through the 1980s. The entirety of the collection is open to qualified researchers, with the exception of the marriage subject file, which is restricted. Consultation of these materials will be at the discretion of the Province Archivist.

Biography:

Bernard Joseph “Ben” Nolker was born September 25, 1912, in Baltimore, Maryland. He was the son of Frederick J. and Mary E. (née Yake) Nolker. The boy was baptized in St. Thomas Aquinas Parish, Baltimore, on October 6, 1912, where he was also schooled, and confirmed there on January 13, 1924. Still, it was at St. James Church, where he made his first holy communion, that Nolker felt the call to ministry, principally through the encouragement of Fathers Alfred Menth, C.Ss.R. and Francis Bader, C.Ss.R. He entered St. Mary’s High School at North East, Pennsylvania in 1927 and remained until 1933, the same year as his mother’s death. He made his temporary profession as a Redemptorist August 2, 1934, at Ilchester and his perpetual vows September 2, 1937 at Mt. St. Alphonsus, Esopus, New York. At Esopus he pursued theological studies from 1934-1940 and was ordained to the priesthood on June 18, 1939 by Bishop Stephen Donahue of New York. His second novitiate was pursued at St. Mary’s, Annapolis, Maryland, between September 1940 and March 1941, whereupon he was assigned to the Vice-Province of Campo-Grande, Brazil.

Nolker served in the following locations: Ponta Grossa I (1941-1943); Tibagi (1943-1946); Telemaco Borba (September-December 1946); Bela Vista (1946-1947); Ponta Pora (superior, 1947 to 1950, with the Parish of Mato Grosso, which was twice the size of the State of Maryland); Paranaguá I (superior, 1950-1956); Ponta Grossa II (Seminary of the Holy Redeemer; superior, 1956-1961); Paranaguá I (superior, 1961-1963). For most of these assignments, he logged about a thousand miles a year on horseback, visiting remote parts of these far flung parishes. In 1943, for instance, the Redemptorists of the area of Tibagi baptized 2,200 children. Snakes and spiritism, fleas and saddle sores—Nolker braved them all. He worked for twenty-one years on the mission in Brazil, until January 7, 1963, when he was elected to the newly erected See of Paranaguá (July 21, 1962, per bull “Ecclesia Santa” of Pope John XXIII). He was consecrated a bishop on April 25, 1963 in the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, Baltimore, by the ordinary, Archbishop (later Cardinal) Lawrence J. Shehan. Co-consecrators were Bishop Edward Harper, C.Ss.R. and Archbishop Manuel da Silveira D’Elboux of Brazil.

When he began his episcopate, he had charge of the pastoral care of approximately 150,000 souls who were cared for by nine priests (seven Redemptorists, one Capuchin, one secular). The territory amounted to about 8,000 square miles. In 1967, the bishop received a Jeep. Two decades later there were 23 priests and 43 women religious, and a minor seminary. Nolker retired in 1989 and returned to the United States and took up residence in the Redemptorist community at Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish, Baltimore. The last several years of his life were marked by declining health, including the inability to

write. Bishop Nolker died on January 17, 2000, aged 87, and was buried from Sacred Heart Church, Baltimore, Maryland, January 22, 2000. Cardinal William Keeler was the main celebrant. Bishop Nolker survived his two siblings, Marie Nolker and Irene Nolker Dalton, but left several great nieces and great nephews, a brother-in-law, Joseph Dalton, and his son, Fred.