

Bishop Thomas F. Reilly, C.Ss.R. Papers

Baltimore Province of the Redemptorists Archives
7509 Shore Road
Brooklyn, New York 11209-2807

The scope of the papers of Bishop Thomas Reilly, C.Ss.R., a member of the Baltimore Province of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, encompasses letters, reports, news clippings, photographs, and one video cassette tape. The materials date from 1942 to 1992. The collection is especially important—however partial—for research on the history of the Catholic Church in the Dominican Republic, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. The Province Archives is also in possession of Bishop Reilly's dissertation, a thesis completed in the School of Canon Law at the Catholic University of America, entitled "The Visitation of Religious" (1938). The entirety of the collection is open to qualified researchers. Consultation of these materials will be at the discretion of the Province Archivist.

Biography:

Thomas Francis Reilly was born in the Dorchester section of Boston December 20, 1908, the son of Thomas and Anne Catherine (née O'Reilly) Reilly. Baptized in the parish of St. Leo he attended a public grade school and for three years, the Boston Latin School, before entering the Redemptorist high school at North East, Pennsylvania in 1923. His novitiate was spent at Ilchester and theological studies were completed at Mt. St. Alphonsus, Esopus, New York. He was first professed August 2, 1928 and made final vows on September 2, 1931. Ordained at Mt. St. Alphonsus, June 10, 1933, by Bishop John Dunn, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of New York (who died in August of that year), Reilly was assigned for further studies in canon law at the Catholic University of America. His thesis was guided by Monsignor Francisco Lardone, who would go on to become the nuncio to Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Graduating with the JCD in 1937, he joined the community of St. Mary's at Annapolis, Maryland, for the second novitiate which ended in March 1938. From 1938-1940 he worked in Immaculate Conception Church in the Bronx, where he also edited *Perpetual Help Magazine*. There he also "dabbled" in the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, the Catholic Worker, and the Catholic Peace Society. From 1940-1947 he was attached to Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish in Brooklyn, preaching with the Mission Band, though Reilly served as an Army chaplain during World War II, from 1942-1946. His chaplaincy brought him to Alaska, the Philippines, and to Japan where in 1946, in the city of Yokohama, he became the first Redemptorist in that devastated nation to preach the mission. Post war ministries included work in the Caribbean mission, including time spent in Miramar, Puerto Rico where he traveled around the hill country on horseback and learned Spanish. From Puerto Rico, and on the advice of the nuncio, then Archbishop Lardone, in 1948 he launched a new mission into the Dominican Republic, establishing himself at San Juan de la Maguana. By 1950, he was in Las Matas de Farfán and in 1953, he was in San Juan de la Maguana. In both locations he became the rector of the community. There being no diocesan clergy to care for the people, Reilly became the Apostolic Administrator for San Juan when it became a prelate nullius in 1954 (a division he initially opposed) and a titular see in 1956. On July 22, 1956, Reilly was appointed by Pope Pius XII to be titular Bishop of Themisonium and Prelate Nullius of San Juan de la Maguana. He was consecrated bishop—in the presence of his 82 year-old mother and two siblings—on November 30, 1956, in the Cathedral of San Juan Bautista by the then-nuncio, Archbishop Salvatore Siino. The formal erection of the diocese came on November 21, 1969 (though it is listed as November 19 in recent editions of the *Annuario Pontificio*).

The Prelature Nullius of San Juan de la Maguana comprised several provinces in the Western section of the Dominican Republic, comprising over 8,800 square miles. In this territory some 356,000 people resided, most of whom were Catholics. At the time of his consecration, Reilly could only count 12 priests and by the time he retired, the number increased to 42, with more than one hundred religious and a dozen lay missionaries. Reilly served as bishop until becoming the ordinary emeritus, July 20, 1977, but remained in the Dominican Republic until he asked to be recalled to Boston just over a decade later. In retirement he lived at the Mission Church rectory before moving finally to the St. John Neumann Residence in Saratoga Springs, New York. It was there that Bishop Reilly died, July 21, 1992. The funeral mass took place at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church, Mission Hill, Massachusetts, on July 25. Bishop Reilly remains interred in the land he labored so long and hard for, in the Cathedral in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. He was survived by one brother, Appellate Court Judge Gerard Reilly of Washington, D.C.

While Reilly was administering the prelate, a cordial and efficient relationship between the government and the Church prevailed. However, Reilly became a vocal opponent of Rafael Trujillo, a tyrannical leader who felt no compunction at visiting retribution on the Church. Already in 1956, Trujillo had 26 men and women suspected of rum smuggling put to death. They were from Reilly's former Redemptorist parish in Las Matas de Farfán and their bodies were made to hang along the border between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. In mid-January 1960, Trujillo was taking action against several hundred young proponents of government reform, including several radicals who had hatched a plot to assassinate "el Patronato de San Rafael." A pastoral letter was issued in protest of the government's heavy-handedness and read out at all Masses on January 21, taking Trujillo by surprise. The people did not rise up in indignation with their bishops and as a consequence, calumnies against priests were issued, and the Bishop himself was targeted for deportation. A personal interview with Trujillo resulted in a temporary reconciliation, with the Bishop eventually receiving him in the Cathedral later that April. Afterward, "over cognac, he poured out his not inconsiderable charm" and left \$20,000 on the table. Weeks later, nothing had changed, and Reilly returned to the capital and left Trujillo a check for \$20,000. In March 1961 matters were so bad that rectories were stormed and destroyed and an indictment against the Bishop was issued for "terrorist acts" and he was arrested in the capital. His captors were under orders to shoot the Bishop if he tried to escape. He was protected by the vice-president, Belangar, and Divine Providence, who instructed the heart of Reilly's would-be executioner not to act upon Trujillo's wishes. On the day when Trujillo ordered Reilly's death, a reversal of fortune awaited the dictator, who was himself gunned down by an assassin's bullet on the George Washington Boulevard, a modern highway leading from Ciudad Trujillo to San Cristobal.

In a later communication with the Province Archivist, Father Alfred Rush, C.Ss.R., Reilly maintained that in the wake of the conflict with Trujillo the Bishop was frequently consulted "by those who had to undertake democratic governments." In the mid-1960s Reilly "worked in close collaboration with U.S. Ambassador Tapley Bennett for a swift and reasonable solution before the whole country was torn apart" by further civil strife. "My efforts at that seem to me more valuable than my part in the struggle against Trujillo," he told Rush.