

Bishop Aloysius J. Willinger, C.Ss.R. Papers

Baltimore Province of the Redemptorists Archives

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The scope of the papers of Bishop Aloysius J. Willinger, 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 1929-1980. The collection is especially important—however partial—for research on the episcopal history of the Catholic Church in Puerto Rico, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. The entirety of the collection is open to qualified researchers. Consultation of these materials will be at the discretion of the Province Archivist.

Biography:

Aloysius Joseph Willinger was born April 19, 1886, in Baltimore, Maryland. He was the son of Louis and Anne Regina (née Hebrank) Willinger—one of eleven born to these devout parents. The family lived on Asquith Street and was supported by the father's coal business. They attended the German parish of St. James (though nearby the Irish parish of St. John's was also available). Sickly in early age, he eventually entered at St. Mary's College, North East, Pennsylvania and Mount St. Alphonsus Seminary, Esopus, New York. It was while he was at North East that he was confirmed by Bishop John Edmund Fitzmaurice of Erie, in St. Gregory's Parish. Willinger joined the Redemptorists June 15, 1905 and was first professed August 2, 1906. Willinger was ordained to the priesthood at Esopus by Bishop Thomas Francis Cusack of Albany, July 2, 1911 and said his first Mass on Sunday, July 9, at St. James Church, Baltimore.

From 1911 to 1929 he was engaged in missionary work in the United States and Puerto Rico and served in and around Puerta de Tierra for six years. In 1921 he was made Vicar for the Redemptorists with residence in Mayaguez (where he nearly died of typhoid) and in 1927, he returned to the United States to oversee a building project for the Congregation at North East, Pennsylvania. While at this work, on March 8, 1929, he received a telegram that he was to succeed Bishop Edwin V. Byrne as bishop of Ponce. He was consecrated a bishop for that See on October 28 of that year in Our Lady of Perpetual Help Church in Brooklyn, NY, the first several Redemptorist bishops to have been consecrated in that holy place. The consecrators were Brooklyn's Bishop Thomas Molloy, who was assisted by Bishops John Mark Gannon of Erie and John Joseph Dunn, auxiliary to the archbishop of New York. In his ministry to the people of Ponce, he wisely sought and obtained the services of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, New York, the first of several orders of women religious who would serve the diocese in ensuing decades. Four of these sisters arrived in August 1930. Willinger's tenure on the island coincided with the governorship of Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., the son of the former American president. The two cooperated in fostering recognition among the American people of Puerto Rico's potential strengths, as well as its dire poverty. Roosevelt left to become governor general of the Philippines in 1932, but Willinger continued his advocacy on behalf of the poor in his diocese, castigating Roosevelt's successor, James Beverly, who believed this poverty was linked to over population, the only cure of which was birth control. Despite these controversies, his was a relatively quiet episcopate, which included a Eucharistic Congress in Puerto Rico in 1933, the first such in the West Indies. Willinger was translated to the Titular See of Bida, December 12, 1946, and appointed coadjutor bishop of Monterey-Fresno, with right of succession. At this time he relieved Bishop Joseph McGucken, who was on loan from the Archdiocese of Los Angeles as Apostolic Administrator, and who had been assisting in the Diocese owing to a severe stroke suffered by then-Bishop Philip G. Scher. Upon the death of Bishop

Scher, Willinger assumed his duties as bishop of Monterey-Fresno on January 3, 1953. He was made an assistant at the Pontifical Throne in 1954.

The then Diocese of Monterey-Fresno—which possessed a storied history stemming back to the Franciscan missions—contained at the time of Willinger’s installation 65 parishes, 43 missions, 21 Mass stations, 75 chapels, 40 parochial schools, 7 high schools, 5 hospitals, 130 priests, 14 brothers and 343 sisters. The Catholic population was over 167,000. Within a decade’s time, Willinger was shepherd to a local church undergoing tremendous growth. By 1955, it had 99 parishes, 51 missions, 17 Mass stations, 75 chapels, 20 elementary schools, 9 high schools, 7 hospitals, 220 priests, 60 brothers and 480 sisters. The Catholic population exceeded 300,000. As a bishop in Monterey-Fresno, he opened the cause for canonization, December 12, 1948, of Blessed Fray Juniper Serra (beatified 1988), which is ongoing as of this writing. He established the Apostolate of Christian Action in the Diocese to see to the needs of the poor in the region. In 1954 he completed the building of a new chancery complex, with an archive containing materials dating to 1770. That same year he was appointed an assistant at the Pontifical Throne. He introduced a number of new religious communities into the diocese, including the Camaldolese, the first such community in the United States. Bishop Willinger attended the sessions of the Second Vatican Council. He was gracious enough to enlist his confrere, Father Francis X. Murphy (a.k.a. ‘Xavier Rynne’), as his peritus. Murphy was then a professor of patristic moral theology at the Alfonsiana in Rome. Within two years of the Council’s close, on October 16, 1967, Bishop Willinger resigned as the Titular Bishop of Tigualla and ordinary of the diocese. He was over 81 years old at the time. Upon his resignation, the Diocese of Monterey-Fresno was divided by the Holy See into two separate dioceses. Bishop Timothy Manning, an auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles, succeeded Willinger as Bishop of Fresno.; Bishop Harry Clinch, who was Willinger’s auxiliary since 1954, succeeded him as Bishop of Monterey.

Bishop Willinger died on a Wednesday morning, at 1:30 a.m., July 25, 1973, in the company his fellow Redemptorist, Father Francis Dowd, C.Ss.R., who was saying the prayers for the dying when the Bishop breathed his last. The funeral Mass took place in St. John’s Cathedral and the principal celebrant was Archbishop Joseph McGucken of San Francisco, with the homily preached by Bishop Clinch. Burial was in St. Peter’s Cemetery in Fresno. He was a priest for 61 years and a bishop for nearly 44.