



Missionary Patrick “P.J.” Bresnahan

By Lilla Ross

Irish priests were the mainstay of the Diocese of St. Augustine for many decades.

In the early part of the 20th century, Bishop William Kenny ordained a newly arrived Irish seminarian, Patrick J. “P.J.” Bresnahan.

Though he served in many capacities during his long tenure with the diocese, one of the most interesting was his service as a missionary to non-Catholics. He wrote a book about his adventures, *Seeing Florida with a Priest*, published in 1937.

At the time, the diocese covered the entire state of Florida east of the Apalachicola River, and the interior of the state had few parishes. People in rural areas only attended Mass when a traveling priest came through, so most of the time, they had no access to the sacraments.

Bishop Kenny assigned Father Bresnahan to travel the interior of the state in search of Catholics and to assess whether a group of Catholics was strong enough to support a mission or parish.

Bresnahan did his traveling from 1904 to 1910. Florida had already gone through one boom period, thanks to the establishment of Henry Flagler’s Florida East Coast Railway. Tourists flocked to Florida, primarily South Florida in the new resorts like Palm Beach.

But tourism was confined to the coastal areas. The interior of the state was very different. It was mostly rural with farms clustered around small towns where the churches were Baptist, Methodist and occasionally Pentecostal.

Bresnahan traveled to these towns on horseback, by wagon and on foot. He would stay with a Catholic family and find a place in town to hold missions each evening and say Mass.

In Live Oak, he celebrated Mass at the courthouse using the judge’s bench for an altar. At Brady’s Farm, south of Madison, he found an abandoned chapel “in the possession of goats.”

Bresnahan was good at making do with what he had. The important part was to connect Catholics in

the area, hear confessions, baptize babies, perform the occasional wedding and encourage lapsed Catholics to return to the fold.

In the evenings, he would hold missions, where he would give a talk and answer questions. You can imagine that in a rural area where there was little to do besides farm chores, the chance to hear someone as exotic as a Catholic priest with an Irish brogue was not something to be missed.

Bresnahan's missions were usually well attended, but not always by people with an interest or fondness for the Catholic Church. In the rural parts of Florida, there was great suspicion of the Catholic Church and Catholics, whose patriotism was often questioned.

Were they more loyal to the Vatican or the United States?

Bresnahan got all kinds of questions, some seeking guidance; others baiting him. With his Irish charm, Bresnahan did his best to give everyone an answer and to put down myths and misunderstandings about Catholicism.

And gradually, the Catholic communities in the interior of Florida grew stronger and able to support a parish.

Learn more about the history of the diocese in *Faith on a Mission: A Portrait of the Diocese of St. Augustine at 150 years*, on sale this summer.