

Beginning a Biography of Father Pedro Camps

Early Life and Education

Father Pedro Bartolome' Patricio Camps was born on August 24, 1729, in Es Mercadal, Menorca, Illes Balears, Spain. He lived during a time of dramatic changes taking place in the world. Spain and other European powers were working hard to build their overseas empires at the expense of Indigenous populations. Britain's Thirteen colonies were growing and the slave trade was expanding, with all its associated social and ethical issues. This was a dark chapter in human history.

When Pedro Camps was born, the British flag fluttered over the island of Minorca. Even though Minorca was occupied by the British, the Treaty of Utrecht allowed Catholics on Minorca to freely practice their religion, as long as it didn't violate British law.

Monte Toro is located near his hometown of Mercadal. It is the highest point on Minorca and is 1,175 feet above sea level. The Augustinians occupied the sanctuary of Mare de Deu del Toro beginning in 1595 and remained there until they were forced out by The Dissolution Act of 1835.

If this was the site where Father Camps received his early education he would have studied at the shrine dedicated to the Black Virgin Mary. Father Camps may have received his doctoral degree in Palma, Majorca, which was under the Spanish flag and the headquarters of the diocese. He was more than likely fluent in Latin, Spanish and Catalan, Father Camps possibly also spoke English—a critical skill given that Minorca was occupied by Britain during his time.

A patron saint in Minorca is Saint Narcissus, Bishop of Jerusalem who lived past 100 years. One of his miracles was turning water into oil so that all the lamps of the Church would shine bright. Saint Narcissus is the patron saint against insect bites. If only the Minorcans could have carried Saint Narcissus to Los Mosquitoes.

Early Ministry

Following his studies and ordination, Father Camps, 26 years old, returned to his native Mercadal. He served as pastor and vicar of the parish of San Martin for twelve years. He garnered a reputation as a man of deep faith and unwavering devotion to his spiritual duties.

Navigating the complexities of serving as a pastor in the very community where he was born and raised must have presented Father Camps with a unique set of challenges. Hearing confessions from familiar faces could have been awkward, but this situation is not entirely unique; most pastors endeavor to form close bonds with their congregations in order to serve them more effectively.

It's also noteworthy to consider the historical context in which Father Camps operated. Up until the reforms enacted by the Second Vatican Council in 1962, all Catholic Masses were conducted in Latin. This tradition, dating back to the Council of Trent in the mid-16th century, served as another layer of consistency across parishes. While the use of Latin could provide a sense of universality, it may also have served as a barrier to full engagement for those less familiar with

the language. Father Camps likely gave the Homily in the Catalan language which was spoken by the Minorcans.

Father Camps likely led a celebration that occurs each year on May 8 celebrating the Virgin of El Toro, the mountain which is the spiritual center of the island. The carved wooden statue of the Black Madonna can be viewed at the monastery. The Black Madonna is the patron saint of the whole island, and thus, worshipped by Catholics who believe.

In 1768, Father Camps undertook the monumental task of leading a multicultural group of 1,403 individuals—comprising Minorcans, Greeks, Italians, and Corsicans—on an ambitious migration from Mahon, Minorca, to St. Augustine in British East Florida. The initial assembly in Mahon included 110 Italians Dr. Andrew Turnbull brought from Ligorno, Italy. He later brought Greeks and the Minorcan contingent continued to grow, far beyond Turnbull's expectation.

As would be expected, young men from this diverse group began courting and marrying the beautiful young Minorcan women. Although there are no available records relating to these marriages, it is reasonable to assume that Father Camps performed the Sacrament of Marriage for many of these couples. It is reasonable to assume that any births occurring on the vessels Father Camps or Father Casanovas were on would have received the sacrament of baptism.

Father Camps' decision to accompany his congregation to America was fraught with complexity, attributable in part to his unique geopolitical positioning. He resided in Minorca under British jurisdiction, whereas the ecclesiastical hierarchy to which he reported was located in Mallorca, a Spanish territory less than a hundred miles away.

In Michael V. Gannon's book, *THE CROSS IN THE SAND*, he wrote: "Although neither priest was able to secure permission from his immediate ecclesiastical superior to join the expedition, owing to a rupture in communications, the Holy See at Rome gave its own consent, and directed Father Camps to consult with the bishop who ruled Florida on his arrival in America."

The acknowledgement of the San Pedro Parish in New Smyrna under the spiritual guidance of Father Camps and Father Casanovas was intriguing and finally fully recognized by Pope Clement XIII in 1771.

Although the Bishop of Mallorca did not give the priests permission to accompany his flock, historians have noted that the Bishop of Minorca did give his permission not to offend the British governor who supported the creation of a British colony in East Florida.

The Voyage to America

Father Pedro Camps began his journey from Minorca to East Florida at the age of 38, taking on the role as the spiritual leader for the Minorcan colonists. He was accompanied by Father Bartolome Casanovas the assistant pastor. Camps dedication to his people was apparent during the 70-day voyage to St. Augustine.

He performed 78 baptisms in 1768, some of them must have been aboard the vessels. The journey across the vast Atlantic Ocean was a harrowing experience, especially for the oldest

people on board and the pregnant women trying to survive the best they could on the crowded ships.

Father Camps and Father Casanovas were well-prepared for their spiritual duties aboard the vessel, carrying vestments to conduct the sacraments of Baptisms Marriage, and Extreme Unction. Clearly, the sacred oils were a precious commodity, as evidenced by Father Camps' immediate requests for replenishment of the Holy Oils from the Cuban Bishop.

Pope Clement XIII's appointment of Father Camps and Father Casnovas

Pope Clement XIII, having heard whispers of their struggles through secretive channels, took an extraordinary step. In a parchment sealed with the papal insignia, he personally appointed the two priests to their new parish in the wilderness of East Florida.

Father Camps and Father Casanovas were honored with their prestigious appointments by Pope Clement XIII as Pastor and Vicar. They were the spiritual leaders for the newly established Minorcan San Pedro Parish at the Turnbull plantation in New Smyrna. Receiving personal recognition and blessings from the Pope himself, they were entrusted with the monumental task of revitalizing Catholicism in British East Florida because the Church vanished when its last Spanish clergy sailed away on ships to Cuba in 1763.

The Papal recognition, especially during a time when the church faced many international challenges, underscored the significance of their mission. The Holy See's confidence in their ability to shepherd the spiritual life of their community is a highlight of the twenty-two years Father Camps served the Minorcans from 1768, until his death in 1790.

Father Camps faced a logistic ordeal corresponding with the Bishop of Cuba. He depended on fishermen, unsung heroes, bringing him letters from the Bishop and delivering his letters to the Bishop. They were his only link to civilization.

Father Camps claim of an appointment by Pope Clement to serve as spiritual leader of the Minorcan community at the Turnbull colony was initially questioned and dismissed by the Governor of Cuba. The governor said, "The letter is not worthy of his consideration and not recognizing the legitimacy of the letter of the pretendent nor his pontifical jurisdiction. Affirming that the testimony was of little value or belief." It seems understandable Father Camps' letter would be questionable because the Bishop of Cuba had not received notification from the Holy See saying a new Catholic colony had been established in his diocese.

In a letter dated October 20, 1769, Father Camps informed the Bishop of Cuba about his recent appointment as parish pastor, and Father Casanovas as the vicar. This letter was delivered by a Cuban fisherman who stopped at the Los Mosquitoes Inlet probably for a little rest and to see what was going on in an area fished for centuries. Father Camps explained that both he and Father Casanovas were natives of Minorca and that their three-year appointments had come directly from the Pope. He went on to explain that Minorca was under the political jurisdiction of the King of Great Britain but spiritually answered to the Bishop of Minorca. Additionally, Father Camps recounted that sixteen months prior, Dr. Andrew Turnbull had brought over 1,400 people from Minorca to establish a colony in British East Florida, specifically at a location known as

Los Mosquitos. Father Camps also asked for some Holy Oil used in baptism and extreme unction and that all these be sent him by the same secret means of the fishermen for the spiritual aid and advancement of these Catholic people.

Trials in East Florida

Father Camps received his appointment from the Supreme Pontificate with instructions to contact the local bishop reporting the new parish in British East Florida. However, this proved to be a useless directive, as there were no bishops in Florida. Catholicism vanished from East Florida when over 3,000 Spanish persons evacuated to Cuba during a nine month period beginning on April 12, 1763. Maybe a half dozen Spaniards missed the last boat and became known as the Floridanos. They, along with Indigenous people or enslaved individuals still residing within their communities who may have been converted by missionaries, made up the Catholic presence until Father Camps brought Catholicism back to where it began in America.

Their remote plantation had no means of contacting any bishop directly. The soil was hostile, and the conditions harsh. Father Pedro and Father Bartolome could have been emaciated and fatigued but bound by a duty that extended beyond life itself—the duty to administer the sacraments.

Whether by serendipity or divine intervention, two fishermen from Cuba arrived at New Smyrna Inlet, providing Father Camps with an unexpected opportunity. He seized the moment to send a message to Bishop Echevarria, outlining his challenging circumstances and requesting Holy Oils. Almost two years would elapse before King Charles III formally instructed Bishop Echevarria to officially recognize Father Camps as the parish pastor and Father Casanovas as the assistant pastor at the Turnbull colony.

Had it not been for the timely intervention of fishermen who informed Cuban Bishop Echevarria and Governor Bucarelli y Ursua about the British colony, Father Camps might have remained isolated and deprived of essential supplies even more than two years after establishing his Catholic parish in Florida. These fishermen served as unsung heroes, acting as the vital conduits between disparate worlds. They navigated perilous waters, risking arrest on suspicion of espionage, all in the service of spreading the Catholic faith. Offering more than mere spiritual support, they may well have ventured to the secluded plantation to barter their fish for much-needed fruit.

The fishermen, as humble transporters of crucial information, played an unexpectedly critical role in the preservation and propagation of Catholicism following in the 'Footsteps of the Fisherman'. Once again, fishermen played a large part in perpetuating the Catholic Faith. This historic event has been greatly under recognized and appreciated by most British authors and scholars. To dismiss or undervalue this series of events is to overlook the complexities and synergies that shaped the religious landscape of America.

The letter from Rome eventually reached Havana. Bishop Santiago Echevarria of Cuba weighed its contents against the gravity of the spiritual vacuum in Florida. He also remembered a parallel request for Holy Oils for baptism and last rites that he had received from Father Camps some months earlier.

Father Camps was granted broader ecclesiastical powers than those typically afforded to bishops, and these were set to last for a twenty-year span. Given these extended authorities, it's reasonable to surmise that Father Camps possessed the jurisdiction to consecrate 'sacred ground.' This authority would have been especially pertinent when selecting the location for a cemetery, a need that became pressing upon the arrival of the Minorcans in New Smyrna. Father Camps established the parish of St. Peter in Protestant East Florida. Catholicism would never leave again.

Despite numerous challenges, including abuse and oppression by the colony's overseers, Father Camps remained steadfast in his spiritual leadership. When his assistant, Father Casanovas, was banished in 1774 for speaking out against the abuses faced by the colonists, Father Camps was left to minister to his flock alone. Although he petitioned for better conditions, his pleas were dismissed.

In the correspondence made public between Andrew Turnbull and various parties, Father Camps name and services are conspicuously absent. This omission suggests that matters related to Catholicism were considered taboo or inappropriate for discussion in the letters or official reports. This absence becomes even more noteworthy when one considers that the original plan for the Turnbull colony was to establish a community exclusively composed of white Protestants.

Spiritual Resilience

Father Camps drew strength from the devoutness of his Minorcan community. He encouraged and observed their frequent reception of Holy Communion and the practice of daily recitation of the rosary among his people. Father Camps himself was well respected, finding solace in the devotion of his followers, including the Catholic wife of the colony's founder. Catholic religious processions were conducted without hindrance from Turnbull or the overseers. Father Pedro Camps and Father Bartolome Casanovas, toiled to save souls in a land where saving lives was not always possible.

The Turnbull colony's church, dedicated to Saint Peter, was a beacon of faith. Children were thoroughly taught Christian doctrine by Father Camps and Casanovas. During the times when food was scarce, they too were emaciated and fatigued, but bound by sacred duty that extended beyond life itself—the duty to teach, preach and administer the sacraments.

Father Camps and Father Casanovas brought their vestments with them in order to properly offer Mass, baptisms, marriages and Last Rites. Not all Vestments are blessed, but those that are must be blessed by a bishop so, in Father Camps and Casanova's cases the Bishop of Mallorca probably blessed the vestments when they were ordained. They had to pack their vestments, holy oils and other things for the voyage across the ocean. If the vestments are altered the blessing ceases. Yet, in some circumstances a priest may perform the blessing of the vestments. Being in a wild country, far from any bishop, Father Camps could bless any vestments that must have been altered during his twenty-two years "shepherding his flock."

After Father Casanovas was banished from the colony for criticizing the treatment of the Minorcans, Father Camps conducted two services each Sunday and continued to perform all

religious rituals as he had done before. However, he was plagued by the nagging fear that, should he also be dismissed, or die, he and his parishioners would be left without the comfort and grace of the Last Rites that had to be administered by a priest.

Though the physical graves of the Minorcans have never been located, the spiritual solace found in that tiny vial of oil transcended all barriers. The often-overlooked efforts of fishermen, bishops, and even a Pope have ensured that the Minorcans who perished are immortalized in a tapestry of faith that transcends both distance and desolation. Locating their final resting places is imperative.

And so, the unseen guardians of souls continued their work, fortified by their unwavering faith and the invisible threads that linked them to shepherds in lands far away, in realms both earthly and divine.

Father Camps and the Minorcans Changed History

Before leaving the plantation, it can be presumed that Father Camps knelt and whispered prayers for the journey ahead and offered special prayers for the repose of the souls of the 964 Minorcans that died during the nine years of suffering on the Turnbull plantation.

The exact date of Father Camps' emancipation from the harsh conditions of the Turnbull colony is unknown, but sacramental records reveal that on November 9, 1777, he and his Minorcan community were relocated to St. Augustine, Florida. There, he continued to serve as Parish Priest and Missionary Apostolic, leading his flock in a new and safer environment.

During his years serving his Minorcan community he baptized approximately 500 people, mostly children, and performed over 50 marriages according to sacramental records, found in the 'Golden Book of the Minorcans'.

The first marriage ceremony Father Camps performed in 1777 while still in New Smyrna was Antonio Alzina, widower, to Rafaela Capo Sabate, widow, on February 9, 1777.

His first marriage ceremony after moving to St. Augustine was between Juan Capo, widower, and Maria Sintes, widow, on November 18, 1777.

His first baptism in St. Augustine was on November 16, 1777 when he baptized Jose Bea "about the seventh hour of the evening."

When the Spanish Catholic clergy fled from St. Augustine to Cuba taking everything with them, including written records, the ability to participate in Catholic sacraments ended. Father Camps brought Catholicism back. He served the Minorcan survivors community in St. Augustine for thirteen years after he left New Smyrna. It is likely that Father Camps, the elderly, and the sick were transported to St. Augustine by a British vessel. There was no Catholic church or rectory in St. Augustine when he arrived.

After completing a grueling 70-mile trek, the Minorcans were settled in an area to the southwest of St. Augustine's city gates. This district became known as the Minorcan Quarter, although some critics derisively referred to it as the Minorcan ghetto. Many of the dwellings they inherited from

the British were in a state of neglect, forcing them to seek shelter in improvised huts constructed from scrap wood and palmetto fronds, or even under the open sky amid the trees.

During all these struggles Father Camps was their one place where they could find love and assistance.

As with any community, the pillars of human necessity—food, shelter, and clothing, in addition to safety—were a constant concern. Striving for self-sufficiency, the Minorcans faced difficulties in securing stable employment. However, those who were skilled in fishing capitalized on the abundant marine life, catching fish not only for sustenance but also for potential sale. There were seafaring men among the survivors that sought employment as well as stone masons, shoemakers but mostly farmers who set about planting crops as soon as they could find available land.

It's likely that among the British residents, there were individuals who offered charitable aid in the form of food and clothing to the Minorcans. Conversely, there were also probably those who were less welcoming and wished for the immigrants to return to their place of origin—a recurring, unfortunate sentiment throughout history.

Death and Legacy

Father Camps was the sole priest in St. Augustine from 1777 until 1784 when Father Hassett arrived to reestablish the parish.

Father Pedro Camps died on May 19, 1790, in St. Augustine, Florida, at the age of 61. He was laid to rest first in the Tolomato cemetery and then in the St. Augustine Cathedral, leaving behind a legacy of resilience, faith, and unwavering devotion to his community. Intriguingly, Father Camps is conspicuously absent from the public correspondence involving Andrew Turnbull, Governor Grant and Governor Tonyn.

Governor Zespedes praised Father Camps for his constant devoted love for his flock and keeping the Catholic faith alive. Father Michael Curley, in his dissertation to the Catholic University of America in 1940, *CHURCH AND STATE IN THE SPANISH FLORIDAS* wrote, “For sheer devotion to a missionary ideal, his record stands unapproached in the story of the Floridas during this period of time.”

Father Pedro Camps—enriched by serendipity, tenacity, and unanticipated alliances—deserves a prominent place in the tapestry of America's religious history. To overlook or underestimate its significance prevents an understanding of the intricate web of factors that contributed to the spiritual fabric of a nation.

The compelling statue of the Minorcans with their spiritual leader on the grounds of the Cathedral-Basilica in St. Augustine is a dedication to Father Pedro Camps. He arrived with the 1403 Minorcans, Greeks, Italians and a few others from the Mediterranean Isles and served the Minorcan community until his death.

Sainthood

Many believe that Father Camps' exceptional virtues and lifelong dedication to service make him a worthy candidate for canonization in the Catholic Church—a faith he reinvigorated in Florida during its period under British colonial rule. He returned Catholicism to Florida.

Leaving behind the relative sanctuary of the Isle of Minorca, Father Camps undertook a formidable journey to accompany nearly 1,000 Minorcans to British East Florida. Some of them could have been members of his St. Martins congregation in Mercadel. The obstacles he surmounted to secure recognition and permission from the Cuban diocese for this colony were only the first of many incredible challenges he faced. For the rest of his life, he committed himself to the pastoral care of his flock, confronting and overcoming unimaginable hardships.

While no records provide specific details—such as names, ages, or birthplaces—of those who died during the grueling 70-day voyage from Gibraltar to St. Augustine, it is reasonable to assume that Father Camps, adhering to the solemn traditions of his faith, donned his liturgical vestments to administer the Last Rites to those who died.

Tasked with overseeing baptisms and marriages, as well as offering sacramental comfort to those facing life's final threshold, Father Camps diligently performed these spiritual duties for the Catholic passengers aboard his vessel. In a parallel display of devotion, Father Casanovas would have undertaken similar responsibilities had he been aboard a different ship.

Father Camps was a firsthand witness to the unfolding events at the Turnbull plantation, bearing the spiritual weight of both triumph and tragedy. He was present during Carlo Forni's short-lived rebellion, which resulted in the deaths of Dr. Stork and John Cutter. Most poignantly, he bore witness to an especially devastating period between July 1 and December 31, 1768, when mortality reached an unprecedented peak.

During those grim six months, Father Camps and Father Casanovas confronted the heart-wrenching loss of 300 men, as well as 150 women and children from their flock. The emotional and physical toll of administering the Last Rites and overseeing the burials for such a staggering number of souls is difficult to fathom, highlighting the extraordinary resilience and devotion both priests demonstrated in the face of overwhelming adversity.

Father Camps and Father Casanovas, until he was banished in 1774, provided spiritual guidance and care to everyone in his parish. Father Camps was responsible for maintaining their spiritual life. Judging from all the data found, he performed his duty of spiritual leader to the highest degree.

Over the course of nine grueling years at the Turnbull plantation, followed by an additional thirteen years in St. Augustine, Father Camps exhibited ceaseless dedication and tireless labor. Working both day and night, he ministered to the impoverished, tended to the sick, and nourished the hungry. His pastoral duties extended to hearing confessions and providing spiritual guidance to parishioners who sought his counsel. Given the often harsh and sometimes inhumane conditions under which the Minorcans labored at the plantation, it is likely that Father Camps found himself summoned for his spiritual leadership every single day.

In recognition of the selfless sacrifices he made with love and willingness, as well as his pivotal role in reviving Catholicism in a region where it had once flourished, Father Camps emerges as a compelling candidate for canonization within the Catholic Church.

Robert P. Jones

bobfish@aol.com