

Shepherd of Faith: Father Pedro Camps and the Legacy of the Minorcan Spirit

Prologue

The Treaty of Paris in 1763, which concluded the French and Indian War,¹ resulted in the transfer of Florida to Great Britain, while Cuba was returned to Spain. Colonel James Grant, a distinguished veteran of the war, was appointed Governor of East Florida by King George III and arrived in St. Augustine on August 29, 1764.² By Royal Proclamation, land grants in East Florida were offered, encouraging white Protestant settlers to develop the region into a productive, self-sustaining enterprise.³ Most of the land was cultivated using enslaved Africans as laborers. However, in New Smyrna, a notable exception existed, where white indentured servants from Mediterranean countries were employed for labor by Dr. Andrew Turnbull, a Scotsman who also served as British Counsel in Izmir, Turkey.⁴

The indentured servants at Dr. Andrew Turnbull's New Smyrna colony were primarily Minorcan Catholics, along with about 110 Italians from Livorno, several hundred Greeks from the Peloponnese, and a few people from France and Corsica. In total, 1,403 colonists set sail from Port Mahon aboard eight ships, and after a journey of 70 to 80 days, they arrived in East Florida. Among them were two brave religious leaders, Father Pedro Camps and Father Bartolome Casanovas. Father Casanovas was later expelled from the Turnbull colony for speaking up for the Minorcans,⁵ leaving Father Camps to teach, offer Mass and hear the confessions for the entire community.

This account centers on Father Pedro Camps, who, after leaving his native Minorca, devoted the rest of his life to guiding his Minorcan community. In 1768, Father Camps brought Catholicism to New Smyrna, and in November 1777,⁶ he reintroduced the faith to St. Augustine, thus restoring Catholicism to the city where it had first been established in 1565⁷ when Father Francisco Lopez de Mendoza Grajales celebrated the first Mass, on September 8, 1565.⁸

* * *

¹ The Treaty of Paris [Treaty of Paris \(1763\) – Key Provisions, Outcomes & Significance - World History Edu](https://worldhistoryedu.com/treaty-of-paris-in-1763-key-provisions-outcomes-and-significance/)

<https://worldhistoryedu.com/treaty-of-paris-in-1763-key-provisions-outcomes-and-significance/>

² *The South-Carolina Gazette* (Charleston, South Carolina) · Mon, Oct 1, 1764 · Page 3

³ *Account of East Florida-Governor Grant Proclamation-Published by Dr. Stork*

⁴ [Andrew Turnbull \(abt.1718-1792\) | WikiTree FREE Family Tree](https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Turnbull-956) <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Turnbull-956>

⁵ [Stories | HistoricCoastCulture.com](https://historiccoastculture.com/stories/culinary-arts/st-augustines-minorcan-history-culture/) <https://historiccoastculture.com/stories/culinary-arts/st-augustines-minorcan-history-culture/>

⁶ [1700's - Diocese of St. Augustine \(dosafi.com\)](https://dosafi.com/timeline/1700s/#:~:text=1777%20Minorcans%20flee%20the%20oppression%20of%20the%20Indigo,St.%20Augustine%20after%20an%20absence%20of%2013%20years.)

<https://dosafi.com/timeline/1700s/#:~:text=1777%20Minorcans%20flee%20the%20oppression%20of%20the%20Indigo,St.%20Augustine%20after%20an%20absence%20of%2013%20years.>

⁷ [The First Thanksgiving - Castillo de San Marcos National Monument \(U.S. National Park Service\) \(nps.gov\)](https://www.nps.gov/casa/learn/historyculture/the-first-thanksgiving.htm)

<https://www.nps.gov/casa/learn/historyculture/the-first-thanksgiving.htm>

⁸ [Colonization and Conflict – St. Augustine: America's Ancient City \(ufl.edu\)](https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/staugustine/timeline/colonization-and-conflict/#:~:text=Father%20L%C3%B3pez%20came%20to)

<https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/staugustine/timeline/colonization-and-conflict/#:~:text=Father%20L%C3%B3pez%20came%20to>

Father Pedro Camps was born in Mercadal, Provincia de Islas Baleares, Spain, in 1720.⁹ He was “the son of Francisco and Catarina Herero Camps.”¹⁰ Father Pedro Camps “studied at the Augustinian convent of El Toro¹¹ (a monument to Father Pedro Camps is located at El Toro) and at the University of Majorca, where he received a Doctorate of Theology.” Although the exact areas of study are not available to the author, Father Camps would have studied a combination of theology, philosophy, and related disciplines, all deeply rooted in the Thomistic-Scholastic¹² curriculum common at that time, shaped by Catholic orthodoxy. The curriculum was heavily influenced by the works of Thomas Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Catholic Church's doctrines, particularly following the reforms of the Council of Trent (1545–1563).¹³

There is no doubt, in this author's belief, that seminarian Pedro Camps and all seminarians studied the Old and New Testaments in the Latin Vulgate Bible,¹⁴ as well as the critical interpretation of it. There was probably considerable time spent studying the theological works of Thomas Aquinas, especially his *Summa Theologica*.¹⁵ He would have been well taught in theology, philosophy, languages, canon law, and biblical studies, all framed by the Catholic tradition of the period, with instruction primarily conducted in Latin. In the final analysis, he would have been well educated and could have spoken Greek, Italian, and Hebrew—which, if that did happen, made him invaluable at the Turnbull colony, for he already spoke Catalan and Spanish. He served for twelve years as the pastor of San Martin Church in Mercadal, Minorca. Many Minorcans from Mercadal are among those recorded as part of the group that chose to immigrate to British East Florida. Having their parish priest accompany them as their spiritual leader would have provided great comfort and familiarity as they adjusted to life in the New World.

* * *

Establishing a parish at the New Smyrna colony was a daunting task from the outset. While Minorca was under British rule, the bishop in charge of the Catholic faithful on the island resided in Majorca, which was under Spanish control, making communication challenging. According to church protocol, Father Camps and Father Casanovas needed the Majorca bishop's approval to leave Minorca and establish a new parish in British East Florida.

⁹ [Rev Fr Pedro Camps \(1720-1790\) - Find a Grave Memorial](https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/167709523/pedro-camps) and spent twelve years as pastor of the San Martin Church in Mercadal.” <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/167709523/pedro-camps>

¹⁰ [Father Pedro Camps and The Minorcans by Joseph Viladomat | Flickr](https://www.flickr.com/photos/73683441@N07/albums/72157672660629043/)
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/73683441@N07/albums/72157672660629043/>

¹¹ [Discover Monte Toro: Menorca's Highest Peak \(calamenorca.com\)](https://www.calamenorca.com/things-to-do/place/monte-toro) <https://www.calamenorca.com/things-to-do/place/monte-toro>

¹² [Education - Thomism, Philosophy, Pedagogy | Britannica](https://www.britannica.com/topic/education/Thomist-philosophy) <https://www.britannica.com/topic/education/Thomist-philosophy>

¹³ [Council of Trent | Definition, Summary, Significance, Results, & Facts | Britannica](https://www.britannica.com/event/Council-of-Trent)
<https://www.britannica.com/event/Council-of-Trent>

¹⁴ [Vulgate Latin Bible With English Translation](https://vulgate.org/) <https://vulgate.org/>

¹⁵ [Microsoft Word - Aquinas_The_Five_Ways.rtf \(purdue.edu\)](https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/AquinasSummaTheologicaEdit.pdf)
<https://web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/AquinasSummaTheologicaEdit.pdf>

According to Roman Catholic canon law at the time, only a bishop had the authority to create a new parish within his diocese or jurisdiction: The geographical territory of every Catholic diocese is divided up into parishes, and only a diocesan bishop has the authority to establish new parishes, close existing ones, or merge multiple parishes into one (c. 515.2). This ensured that the new parish would be canonically legitimate and properly integrated into the church's hierarchy. In the case of a new parish in British East Florida, Father Camps would be under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Cuba, and contact with Bishop Morel presented a very significant challenge.

Pedro Agustín Morel de Santa Cruz¹⁶ was bishop when the Minorcans arrived in June and August of 1768. He died on December 31, 1768, adding yet another layer for proper recognition of a Minorcan parish in New Smyrna. Bishop Morel had a very interesting life. When he was selected to become bishop, there was opposition because of his "being the public and notorious son of a mulatto woman who was legitimized by Captain Don Pedro Morel by the consequent marriage he contracted with her."¹⁷

Following Bishop Morel's death, Father Camps dealt with Bishop Santiago José Echaverría Nieto de Osorio y Elguera (1770–1788).¹⁸ Bishop Echaverría knew nothing about the establishment of a new parish at the New Smyrna colony. The letters written by the Vicar-General of Minorca, the Cuban bishop and the Valencia bishop can be read on-line and they are in great detail.¹⁹

Father Camps had ministered to the Catholic community in Mercadal for twelve years after his ordination, while Father Casanovas served the faithful in Alayor. Both priests were under the authority of the Bishop of Minorca, and the island was under British control at the time. However, Minorca remained part of the Diocese of Majorca, which fell under Spanish jurisdiction. British authorities prohibited communication between the bishops of Majorca and Minorca. Regardless, permission for the two priests was given by the Bishop of Minorca without any proof of permission from the Archbishop of Majorca.

They made the voyage from Port Mahon to St. Augustine and then to New Smyrna along with 1,403 others. Father Camps and Father Casanovas probably gave the Last Rites to the men, women and children who died on the vessel or vessels they were on, but there were 148 deaths and burials at sea. It is very unlikely all the deaths occurred in the presence of the two priests.

There are a number of accounts on the church that was built at the New Smyrna colony. According to one account, a letter came from the Bishop of Cuba, dated February 19; on the same subject in response to the order sent by Royal Cedula of November 7th. He says, "That having devoted himself to find out, with every precaution, he was able to obtain the following information from one of the fishermen who has been in the Catholic Minorcan settlement. That

¹⁶ [Pedro Agustín Morel de Santa Cruz - España | Royal Academy of History \(rah.es\)](https://dbe.rah.es/biografias/13263/pedro-agustin-morel-de-santa-cruz)

<https://dbe.rah.es/biografias/13263/pedro-agustin-morel-de-santa-cruz>

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ [Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Santiago de Cuba - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholic_Archdiocese_of_Santiago_de_Cuba)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholic_Archdiocese_of_Santiago_de_Cuba

¹⁹ [The Project Gutenberg eBook of The unwritten history of Old St. Augustine, by Mrs. Annie Averette.](https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/54804/pg54804-images.html)

<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/54804/pg54804-images.html>

these families are established in their homes, the house of Dr. Campos and Padre Casanovas being the principal one of the place. They have a church built of brick, quite commodious and decent.”²⁰

Father Camps found himself in need of Holy Oils and other essential items. On October 20, 1769, he wrote a letter to the Bishop of Santiago, Cuba, requesting these supplies. He then persuaded two Cuban commercial fishermen, returning from a fishing trip to the north, to deliver the letter to the bishop.²¹ The governor of Cuba, Antonio María de Bucareli y Ursúa Henestrosa y Lasso de la Vega, read the letter and gave it no credence. On the other hand, Bishop Santiago José Hechavarría y Elguesúa, the successor after Bishop Morel’s death, “sent the message to Spain which eventually had to go to Rome for validation. This process took two years.”²²

The fact that Father Camps mission and authorization reached all the way to the Pope reflects highly on these two Minorcan priests. The revival of Catholicism in Florida and the establishment of a Minorcan community and culture in America in 1768 remain integral to St. Augustine today, serving as a testament to the courage of this immigrant colony.

* * *

There are no specific records of the Minorcans who died between 1768 and 1777 in Turnbull’s colony near what is now New Smyrna Beach, Florida. While records of births, baptisms, and marriages remain, they appear incomplete, suggesting that some documentation—including death records—was lost. Father Pedro Camps, who ministered to the colony from 1768 until his death in 1790, would almost certainly have kept death records. His sacred collection, known as the *Golden Book*, preserves important historical data, though the absence of death records leaves many stories untold.

The following is an example of the records contained in the Golden Book in the chapter on marriages. “*Antonio Alzina, widower, and Rafaela Capo, widow married on February 9, 1777. Antonio Alzina, Widower, son of Miguel (Alzina) and Catarina Pons, married couple, widower of Catarina Moll, widow, daughter of Pedro (Moll) and Maria Menesell, married couple, native of Ysleoria Parish, Isle of Minorca, married Rafaela Capo, widow daughter of Antonio (Capo) and Rafaela Fabregas, married couple of Mercadal Parish, Isle of Minorca, widow of Joan Sabater, son of Miguel (Sabater) and Catarina Coll, married couple. Witnesses Laurentio Boxentini and Mateo Pons. Priest Pedro Camps*”

This single entry pulls back the veil on a few lives lost to time. Antonio Alzina, a widower, emerges from the pages with the name of his first wife and the parents who gave her life. Rafaela Capo, too, carries the weight of loss—her first husband named, along with the mother and father who once claimed him as their son.

Though death records are gone, erased by the careless hand of history, Father Camps left behind these fleeting traces: Catarina Moll Alzina and Joan Sabater, recorded among the dead. Buried

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ [Father Pedro Camps:A True Apostle - Halsema.org](https://halsema.org/father-pedro-campsa-true-apostle/) <https://halsema.org/father-pedro-campsa-true-apostle/>

²² Ibid

somewhere beneath the soil of the Turnbull colony, they rest with 962 others, their names and stories slipping deeper into silence with each passing year.

Records from Father Camps' parish show many widows and widowers remarrying, though the available documents are far from complete. While a researcher could compile a partial list of those buried in New Smyrna Beach, assembling a comprehensive record remains impossible with the data uncovered so far.

* * *

I won't attempt to recreate conversations that might have taken place at the Turnbull colony; that task belongs to writers of historical fiction who weave dialogue from the threads of fact. But what I can explore are the emotions that remain constant across centuries—the grief of losing a son or spouse, the fear that gnaws when food is scarce, the helplessness as a hurricane rips apart a palmetto hut, or the anger and sorrow stirred by the cruelty of an overseer. Everything that unfolded between June, 1768, and November, 1777, revealed the depth of Father Pedro Camps' wisdom and kindness. The emotions the Minorcans experienced, though rooted in the late 18th century, continue to resonate with us just as deeply today.

All we have to do is think about someone who we love dying to understand that these Minorcan men and women had the same emotions. They hurt in ways words could not express; their tears were constant, and grief became a part of every breath. They grieved in an unforgiving land far from home. The one constant was the presence of Father Pedro Camps, whose only role was to provide love, kindness, and understanding as the shepherd of his flock.

Imagine seeing 450 of your brother and sister colonists die in less than six months.²³ Imagine how horrible it would have been for your mother, father, husband, wife, daughter, son or other family member or friend dying from scurvy or malaria right there in your hut and there was nothing you could do for them. Imagine having to dig graves and bury people you love day in and day out during those first six months when most of the deaths occurred.

Imagine Father Camps hearing confessions and consoling people who were almost past the ability to be consoled. How difficult it must have been living in cramped quarters suffocated by death. They could not escape from the sound of weeping, moaning, and the clinking of shovels in the soil, nor the heavy air thick with grief and freshly turned earth. These were real people, connected to us by blood or by shared humanity, not a statistic or a 'settler' just passing through.

* * *

Father Camps was like sunlight slipping through a break in the clouds over the Hillsborough River on a chilly afternoon, or the one face in a crowd whose warm smile finds you just when you need it most. He was only thirty-eight when he stepped onto dry land after seventy grueling days at sea. He knew all the Minorcans on board from his parish, and by the end of the voyage, he had probably come to know everyone on the vessel. More than likely, he administered Last

²³ Governor Tonyn to Lord Geore Germaine-December 29, 1777. The James Grant Papers. Colonial Office Papers (CO 5/558) www.minorcans.com

Rites to those who perished before their bodies were committed to the sea. He had buried parishioners back home in Minorca, but he could never have imagined that he would soon be burying his fellow Minorcans beneath the waves.

Like all the other colonists, he would have wanted to know where he and Father Casanovas would be living. It's unclear whether he knew that housing and a church were planned for the Greek priest Turnbull was bringing. If they traveled on the same vessel, perhaps they had a conversation about it. If they had spoken during the voyage, what might they have shared—and what might they have chosen to leave unsaid? Did the Greek priest arrive at the same time as the Catholic priests? Would they have shared the same house? The same church?

In Turnbull's letter to Governor Grant, July 1766 he says, "I mentioned before to your Excellency of settling a Greek colony in that Province." Consequently, Governor Grant assured the Earl of Shelburne that, "Greeks who settled in East Florida would have free exercise of their religion: a church has been reserved in this town for that purpose and that town lots shall be given adjoining the said church to such Greek inhabitants as shall choose to settle at St. Augustine—that all possible attention shall be shown to Greek Priests who shall have Glebe's assigned to them upon their arrival in this Province."

In a January 21, 1767 letter, Turnbull reports to Sir William Duncan that: "I shall only acquaint you that I have engaged for and purchased forty Negroes, with two able overseers. One is to clear land for provisions and to take care of some hundreds of cattle. The other is to raise cottons. I have also augmented the number of whites to about twenty. They are to be employed with building houses for the Greeks."

It is quite obvious that Turnbull was fully prepared to provide a church and houses for the Greeks. He follows up with a letter to Duncan that everything was being done to make the Greeks happy. Sadly and unfortunately, the Greek priest, whatever his name was, was forced on a boat during the rebellion in August 1768 and was drowned.²⁴

There is no mention in any of the letters written by Turnbull, Grant or Duncan that mentions a replacement Greek priest. What a turbulent time that was. Turnbull wrote to Duncan telling him that the last ship, the *Charming Betsey* was putting passengers ashore on August 20²⁵ which seems to be the day of the Carlo Forni rebellion was underway. Then on August 22, 1768, Turnbull reports, "Mr. Toronty's schooner was retaken here this day after the *East Florida* had fired one gun at her, and she is now aground in going up to the store to unload. About thirty people on got off. Some of them went off on Sir Charles Burdett's boat, some in Mr. MacDougall's canoe, and others went ashore on the South Beach, without water and bread. The chief mutineers are among the last fugitives, and therefore I intend to offer here twenty dollars a head for every one of them who shall be brought to me, and I beg your Excellency would be pleased to desire Mr. Skinner to put up such an advertisement in St. Augustine, which I think the

²⁴ Andrew Turnbull to James Grant New Smyrna, August 25, 1768. The James Grant Papers, Roll 16, File 78-80. www.minorcans.com

²⁵ Andrew Turnbull to James Grant New Smyrna, August 22, 1768. The James Grant Papers, Roll 16, File 75-77. www.minorcans.com

more necessary as I imagine that most of them will cross the Mosquito Inlet and make for towns.”²⁶

In 1768, Father Pedro Camps recorded seventy-eight baptisms that are documented in the Golden Book.²⁷ Seventy days at sea. Seventy-eight pregnant women. How many would survive the crossing from Port Mahon, Minorca to St. Augustine, East Florida. The trip was on a slow, overloaded sailing vessel. The slow, crowded ship was a world of suffering, especially for those who had never seen the sea before. In 1768, 300 men and 150 women perished,²⁸ their graves scattered across the 103,000 acre Turnbull colony.

Scurvy among the colonists started sometime during the voyage. Turnbull wrote to Sir William Duncan that when he returned to Smyrnea the first part of October 1768, “On my arrival at Smyrnea 18 days ago I found our People sickly and many much disgusted from that sickness having carried off some of the oldest People and several children. This was caused by a sudden and violent storm of wind followed by incessant rain for three days. The Blast of wind uncovered some part of most of the Houses and Hutts, by which the families were exposed to wet and dangers which brought on a violent bloody flux, and carried off such as were afflicted with the scurvy, which manifested itself on many of them sometime after their arrival.”²⁹

He followed through with a letter to Governor Grant about the scurvy describing how horrible it was as it was manifested in the mouths of the Minorcans. He said, “A scurvy which brought on gangrene mostly in the mouth, is almost the only disorder among us at present. The weather is fine and without a drop of rain since the 18th of last month.”³⁰

Governor Grant reported to William Knox about the scurvy also when he wrote, “the Greek colonists have been quiet of late, but they have been sickly, suffering from “a virulent scurvy contracted during their long voyage is their only remaining disorder.” The settlement has lost by death since landing 300 people, chiefly the old and young children.”³¹

Imagine the unbearable sorrow a mother must have felt watching her child die—or her husband, or her parents. In their deepest grief, many must have questioned whether it was a tragic mistake to leave their homes in search of a better life, only to witness those they loved perish. And to lose them, not to old age or accident, but to something as agonizing and cruel as scurvy—how devastating that must have been. As one writer said, “Scurvy: By the end, Death is a Mercy.”³² It was a blessing that scurvy is not contagious as Father Camps and Father Casanovas administered to the hundreds who were dying from it every day for the first six months. 1768 was the year most of the deaths occurred at the colony.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ <https://lafloida.org>

²⁸ Governor Patrick Tonyn letter to Lord George Germaine dated December 29, 1777. The Letters of Dr. Andrew Turnbull (unf.edu)

²⁹ Andrew Turnbull to Sir William Duncan, October 22, 1768. Dundee City Archive. www.minorcans.com

³⁰ Andrew Turnbull to Governor James Grant, November 15, 1768. James Grant Papers, Roll 16, File 233-235

³¹ Governor James Grant to William Know, November 24, 1768. James Grant Papers, Roll 2, File 168-170

³² [Scurvy: By the End, Death is a Mercy - Atlas Obscura](https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/scurvy) <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/scurvy>

* * *

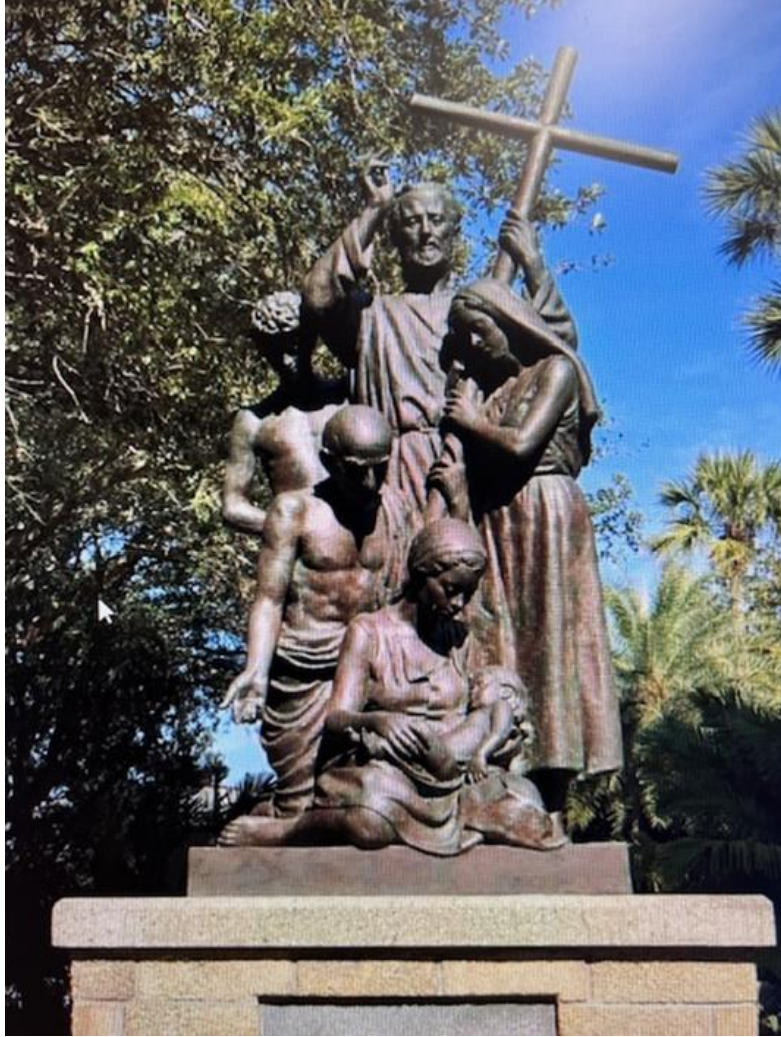
Letters from the time confirm that, after the death of their priest, the Greek colonists were left without one of their own to guide them. Despite their Greek heritage, the colonists had little choice but to accept Father Camps's ministry until they arrived in St. Augustine in November 1777, where they were able to attend services from a Protestant pastor.

After the Minorcans were free from the Turnbull colony and settled in St. Augustine "he [Father Camps] reestablished the Church of San Pedro on 41 St. George Street (now the St. Photios shrine). The church sponsored a free school in 1787 with classes taught in Spanish."³³

Nine years of hardship had left Father Pedro Camps gaunt and bent, his body exhausted from answering every call, day and night, without rest. Yet he remained unwavering, ministering to the spiritual needs of the hundreds of Minorcans who had entrusted him with the care of their souls. When their yoke of indentured servitude was finally lifted, the Minorcans brought their faith and traditions to St. Augustine, planting roots that continue to thrive to this day.

This saintly priest faithfully served his people until his death on May 19, 1790. May his soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, Rest In Peace. Amen

³³ *Father Pedro Camps and The Minorcans* by Joseph Viladomat



Monument to Father Pedro Camps located in the courtyard of the St. Augustine Cathedral Basilica. This beautiful monument represents his faithful and lifelong service to the Minorcans.