

Archbishop Marcos McGrath of Panama gives Bishop Joseph L. Hogan an on-the-spot description of

Bishop Hogan's Tour: First Hand Look at the Church

The Church in Panama has been working to become more missionary, evangelistic, integrated and self-supporting.

From 1513 when Santa Maria la Antigua became the first mainland diocese in the Western Hemisphere covering present-day Panama as well as other parts of Central America, times have been poor for Panama.

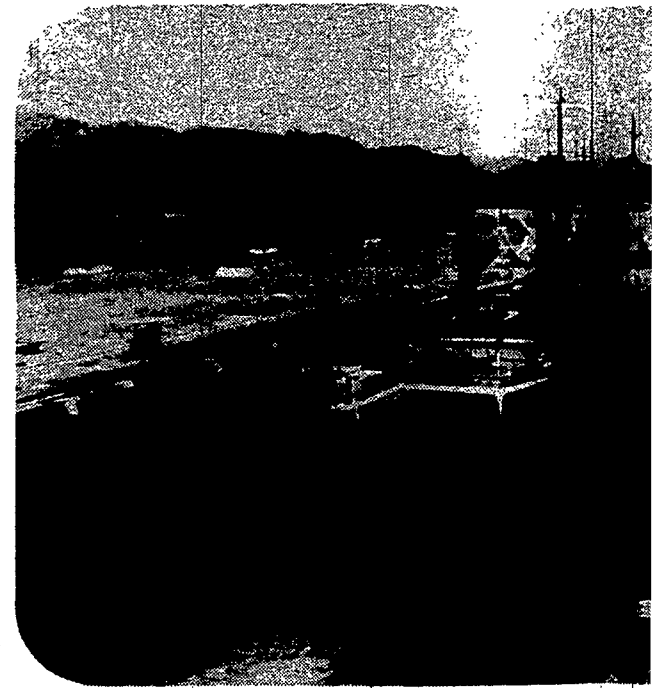
Though linked with such romantic historical figures as Christopher Columbus and the English pirate Henry Morgan, the isthmus has been a transient area, dependent upon the flux of trade and wars. In 1821 it declared its independence from Spain and joined the Colombian union which also included Venezuela and Ecuador. Again the nation was neglected and cut off from the Colombian government.

In 1903 it once more declared itself independent, this time from Colombia, and with the support of the United States made it stick. Shortly after, the canal treaty was drawn up without the participation of any Panamanian and approved in Panama as a condition of its independence.

The economy of Panama for the most part has risen and fallen with the fortunes of the canal although in recent years other undertakings such as imports-exports, banking, and tourism have changed the picture somewhat. For instance, 25 years ago 67 per cent of the nation's income derived from the canal and now only 12 per cent does. Thus, while the economic aspect of the canal is important in current discussions as are several other factors, basically what is at issue is sovereignty.

Of the present population of more than 1.7 million, some 600,000 live in Panama City, the capital. And although the per capita income is the third largest in Latin America, it is misleading because peasants in the rural areas suffer supreme neglect.

Archbishop Marcos McGrath who works out of the Curia Metropolitana or Archdiocesan Center has been the ordinary since 1969. Last week, he told a group of officials from the Rochester diocese that at one time the whole country had just one bishop but "since the Council (Vatican II) there has been movement for more pastoral service."



The center of the issue — the locks



The papal nuncio to Panama, Father Eduardo Rovira, visits with Bishop Hogan and Archbishop McGrath.

Now the country is divided into six episcopal vicariates, each with about 250,000 to 300,000 people and each with about 10 to 15 parishes.

"Some of the larger are divided into zones," he said, "and meetings are held by zone or vicariate." Religious and laity also take part in these conferences. In the past, the priest would do much of the leading but now the effort is to get teams to lead organized communities of Christians.

Such teams usually consist of a priest, local lay leaders and a small group (two or three) of Religious sisters.

"We now have about 20 teams of Religious sisters in this work," the archbishop said.

A fact sheet about the archdiocese says that the total of priests is 176 (135 from abroad) and of Religious sisters 325. Over 70 per cent of both priests and sisters are foreign born, and are frequently changing since provinces are usually for the whole of Central America.

Most priests are in parish work. The percentage outside the capital city, in rural areas, has doubled over the past eight years as part of increased emphasis on evangelization. Sisters work in schools, asylums, social centers but lately there has been a trend toward work with evangelization teams in parishes, both in urban and rural settings.

"We also have apostolic movements such as cursillos, Christian Family Movement, charismatic groups and Legion of Mary," the archbishop said.