

MARIST LIVES

BISHOP JOHN E. GUNN, SM

Bishop of Poor Churches

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The final requests of Marist priest John E. Gunn were very modest - a plain pine casket and simple grave marker. He even asked that his family in Ireland not be notified of his death because it was too far for them to travel. His will enumerated what he considered his sources of greatest pride: his Irish heritage, his Catholic faith and his American citizenship.

Bishop Gunn's humility belies his true record as a scholar, superior and bishop. Born in 1863, he earned a Doctorate in Theology and was ordained a priest before he was thirty. By the age of 40, he had served as both Superior of Sacred Heart Church and founder of Marist College (now Marist School) in Atlanta, Georgia. He raised the funds to construct and furnish the buildings, while at the same time overseeing missions scattered throughout northern Georgia.

The success of Bishop Gunn in Atlanta attracted the attention of Pope Pius X, who in 1911 appointed him the sixth Bishop of Natchez, Mississippi. His ordination was held on August 29, 1911 at Sacred Heart Church in Atlanta, Georgia, where he was consecrated by fellow Marist and Archbishop of New Orleans, James Blenk, SM.

Although his administrative and financial acumen earned him the episcopate, he used his new position to continue his work in promoting education and missions for all Catholics, particularly those who had been neglected. Bishop Gunn had learned during his time in Georgia that people crave an altar and a cross. He became known as the "Bishop of Poor Churches" for his determination to make Mass more accessible to marginalized worshippers, such as the growing number of Indigenous and African-American Catholics, as well as all poor Catholics. He often traveled to several distant missions in a single day for confirmations and communions. As he brought churches to Catholics, he also brought Catholics to churches as people converted to Catholicism in significant numbers during his leadership.

In 1914 he requested a census of Black Catholics in Biloxi, Mississippi. Determining there was a sufficient number to fill a church, he built the Church of Our Mother of Sorrows, which was dedicated in July 12, 1914. At the dedication he confirmed twenty Black children. Three years later, Mother Katharine Drexel sent three sisters to establish an elementary school for children of the parish.

Under his leadership, the Society of the Divine Word opened a preparatory seminary in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi for African-American boys. Among the seminary's alumni was Bishop



Harold R. Perry, auxiliary bishop of New Orleans and the first African-American bishop in the United States.

Bishop Gunn's work with Native Americans included missions and schools for the Choctaw people. In 1917, at a mission conducted at the Church of the Holy Rosary in Tucker, Mississippi, he confirmed 75 adults and children. The ceremonies, conducted in the Choctaw native language, were followed by a barbecue and baseball game.

Shortly after his ordination, Bishop Gunn spoke of his impressions of the diocese: "Mississippi has the soil and it has the climate. Unity of purpose, energy of method and a campaign of education are needed to realize for the state its true heritage." He maintained his early interest in education, and in his twelve years as bishop the number of students in parochial schools nearly doubled.

When the United States entered the war in Europe in 1917, Bishop Gunn showed his love for his new country by consolidating with other bishops to form the National Catholic War Council and by calling upon Mississippians to join the war effort, either through enlistment or participation in the Knights of Columbus, Red Cross, United War Activities work, food conservation or by buying Liberty Bonds. He asked every pastor in the diocese to form a Parish War Council - to organize for service, sacrifice and peace. His success is again shown in the record. He so motivated men to enlist that a greater number than were eligible did (an astounding 124%).

Although contemporary accounts describe Bishop Gunn's incredible energy, ultimately his heart could not keep pace with the strain of ministering to a diocese spanning 46,000 square miles with a population of 31,000 Catholics. By late 1923 he was forced to alternate official events with periods of rest. On December 9, 1924 he dedicated St. Stephen's, an African-American church in DeLisle, Mississippi. Later that month, he officiated at a midnight mass in Natchez, Mississippi attended by 2,000 people which was immediately followed by a second Mass for orphan children. However, on December 29, 1924 his doctor ordered him to Hotel Dieu in New Orleans, Louisiana for bed rest. There he died on February 19, 1924. His final wish to be buried in Natchez was granted, but with a grander marker than the simple one he requested. Among the heartfelt tributes, Bishop John Morris' eulogy summarized Bishop Gunn's personal mandate best: "Like his Master, he did not abide with those alone who were rich and cultured and could amuse him, but went out into the highways and by-ways to gather the sheep that were lost."