

HISTORICAL FACT SHEET: Catholic Beginnings in St. Augustine

Where Catholicism began in what is now the United States: Mission Nombre de Dios, St. Augustine

- On Sept. 8, 1565, the first Mass of Thanksgiving in a permanent European settlement in what would become the United States was celebrated in St. Augustine.
- That Mass marked the beginning of Catholic life in the first permanent European-founded city in what is now the United States.
- Settlers processed to the site with Father Francisco López de Mendoza Grajales, who celebrated Mass in thanksgiving for their safe arrival.
- An earlier Mass was celebrated in Pensacola in 1559 during a short-lived Spanish settlement that was abandoned within two years.

St. Augustine's distinction lies in continuity:

- » The city became the first permanent European settlement in what is now the United States, and Catholic life established in 1565 endured through centuries of colonial change.
- » The Parish of St. Augustine – today the Cathedral Basilica of St. Augustine – is recognized as the oldest Catholic parish in what is now the United States, with roots dating to the founding of the city in 1565.

Important Historical Note

- » **1763–1777:** Under British rule, Spanish clergy departed Florida and Catholic parish life in St. Augustine was interrupted. Although some Catholics remained, there were no priests to celebrate the sacraments during this period.
- » **1777:** Minorcan settlers arrived with Father Pedro Camps, who restored regular Catholic worship in St. Augustine and celebrated Mass in his home.
- » **Despite colonial transitions, wars and cultural change, the Catholic faith endured in St. Augustine.**

Oldest Marian Shrine in the United States

- The founding Mass in St. Augustine was celebrated on Sept. 8, the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
- Sept. 8 is also the Feast of Our Lady of Covadonga, the patroness of Asturias, Spain — the region that includes Avilés, the hometown of Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, the founder of St. Augustine. In his diary, Menéndez referred to the day as “Our Lady of September.”



- Marian devotion later developed at Mission Nombre de Dios with the Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche, recognized as the oldest Marian shrine in the United States.
- Our Lady of La Leche has long drawn pilgrims seeking the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, especially couples praying for the gift of children and families seeking her maternal care.

Why This Matters Nationally

- As the United States approaches its 250th anniversary, St. Augustine stands as a reminder that the Catholic faith — centered on the Eucharist and devotion to Mary — was present in the earliest chapter of the American story.

St. Augustine offers a distinct perspective:

- » Catholic faith was present in North America more than two centuries before the founding of the United States.
- » The Eucharist was present at the earliest moments of this European settlement.
- » Marian devotion shaped the spiritual life of the earliest Catholic community.
- » St. Augustine is the oldest continuously occupied European-founded city in what is now the United States.
- » Launching a national Eucharistic pilgrimage from this location highlights the continuing role of faith in the American story.

Launch of the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage

- In May 2026, the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage will launch the St. Cabrini Route from the National Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche, near the site of the 1565 Mass of Thanksgiving.
- The Eucharist present at the founding of Catholic life in what is now the United States will once again lead a new generation in pilgrimage.
- The pilgrimage will include an outdoor Mass, Eucharistic processions, speakers and young adult pilgrims traveling up the East Coast, along with many local events.
- While the national pilgrimage will take place Sunday and Monday, May 24–25, the National Shrine of Our Lady of La Leche will host local events, including a Friday evening concert featuring local and national artists and additional events on Saturday.

SOURCES:

- Gannon, Michael. *The Cross in the Sand: The Early Catholic Church in Florida, 1513–1870*. University Press of Florida.
- Hann, John H. *A History of the Timucua Indians and Missions*. University Press of Florida.
- National Park Service historical resources on St. Augustine and Castillo de San Marcos.
- Diocese of St. Augustine historical archives.
- U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops historical resources on Catholic missions in North America.