

Storm Winds That Fulfill His Word: Tempests, the Jesuits, and the Evangelization of Florida, 1566-1572

by Frank Mariotti

Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all depths;
Fire and hail, snow and mist, storm winds that fulfill his word;
(Psalm 148:7-8 NAB)

To enter Florida is to enter the realm of storms. For hundreds of years, Florida has lured migrants to its shores, inviting them to pursue their dreams. But then there are the storms. Pánfilo de Nárvaez, Tristán de Luna y Arellano and Angel de Villafane, all sixteenth-century would-be *conquistadors*, saw their visions of glory dashed in howling winds and heaving seas. In our own century, hurricanes in 1926 and 1928 killed thousands, administering a *coup de grace* to Florida's fabulous land boom of the Roaring Twenties. Several years later, in 1935, another hurricane sent four hundred people to their graves, while obliterating the so-called "Eighth Wonder of the World," the Key West Extension of Henry M. Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway. Most recently, in 1992, a rampaging Hurricane Andrew made a major contribution to Florida's "State of Rage."¹

The Jesuits laboring in Florida between 1566 and 1572, the first of their religious order to evangelize in Spanish America, also saw their share of storms. They devoted pages of their letters to descriptions of the perils that they endured on sea and land because of rain, shoals, wind, waves, and tempests. These storm narratives give us keen insights into the interior world of the missionaries. Through them, we glimpse their faith, love, suffering, and dreams. Moreover, the lengthy, detailed reports of the deprivations that they suffered as

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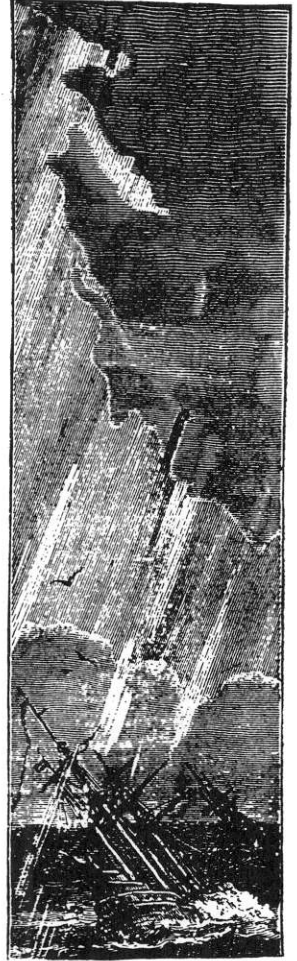
victims of Florida's weather helped to eventually persuade their European superiors to abandon the Society of Jesus' apostolate along the Atlantic.

When Spain's King Philip II charged Pedro Menéndez de Avilés with evangelizing, fortifying, and colonizing *La Florida* (eastern North America) in 1565, the Asturian adventurer accepted his daunting task partly because of storms. Less than two years earlier, Don Pedro's only son Juan foolishly ignored his father's warning not to sail from Cuba during hurricane season. A September tempest counted Juan Menéndez as one of its victims. Still, there was a chance that he would be found amongst an estimated 250 Spanish castaways held in bondage by Florida's Calusa Indians and their allies. These shipwrecked Spaniards would have to be rescued and the Florida coast secured for future storm-ravaged mariners. Pedro Menéndez, now the *adelantado* of La Florida, enlisted the Society of Jesus to preach the gospel in his territories. Its mission would end in 1572, after warriors in the Chesapeake Bay region killed eight missionaries.²

In his book, *Contact with God*, the modern Jesuit retreat master Anthony de Mello wrote:

If in our lives we never or hardly ever experience God's miraculous interventions, it is either because we are not living dangerously enough or because our faith has grown dim and we hardly expect any miracles to occur. How important it is that there be miracles in our lives if we are to preserve a keen consciousness of God's presence and power. . . . For a miracle to occur in my life it is enough for me to have the deep conviction that it was a direct intervention of God on my behalf.³

The Florida missionaries, living in a century imbued with a "fervent religious spirit," expressed piety in their letters with "unabashed freedom."⁴ They described miracles everywhere, for they lived dangerously, possessed strong faith, and believed that God directly intervened in their lives.



In the Old Testament, Yahweh had used the sea to rescue the Israelites from Pharaoh's chariots. He spoke to Job from a whirlwind, revealing his providence by asking, "Who decreed the boundaries of the seas when they gushed from the depths?" Psalm 107 tells of seafarers who:

Observe the power of God in action. He calls to the storm winds, the waves rise high. Their ships are tossed to the heavens and sink to the depths; the sailors cringe in terror. They reel and stagger like drunkards and are at their wit's end. Then they cry to the Lord in their trouble, and he saves them. He calms the storm and stills the waves. What a blessing is that stillness, as he brings them safely into harbor.

The Book of Jonah also dramatically illustrates the Creator's control over the oceans when he sends a storm and a whale to chastise a reluctant missionary.⁵

Jesus revealed his divinity to the apostles by calming a turbulent Sea of Galilee. St. Paul washed ashore on the island of Malta, later declaring: "Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I was in the ocean all night and the whole next day."⁶ As in the Old Testament, God used the terror of churning waters to display his power and mercy. After passing through the frightening ordeal of ocean gales, the Almighty's servants emerged holier, wiser, and closer to him.

Irving A. Leonard, in *Books of the Brave*, traces the influence of romances of chivalry upon the early Spanish *conquistadors*. The Jesuits, spiritual *conquistadors* by their own definition and self described as "raised in studies," valued books highly. In fact, Pedro Menéndez purchased nearly one hundred ducats' worth for their use in Florida. Their "Books of the Brave" were the Scriptures, as well as the letters of their confrere, Francis Xavier, who had sailed to the Far East to convert the heathen in 1541. Members of the order were weaned on the carefully-edited writings of Xavier. The Florida missionaries referred often to the Bible and sometimes to Xavier when describing their own experiences.⁷ Like the worldly conquerors of the Indies, they found themselves acting out dreams that for years had fired their imaginations. While waves crashed about them, and winds pierced them like arrows, the Jesuits thought of Job, Jonah, St. Peter, St. Paul, Xavier, and Jesus. They felt God's intervention in their lives. They saw miracles in the midst of storms.

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Sixteenth-century voyagers braving the wide Atlantic were acutely aware of their mortality. One Florida missionary, Father Gonzalo de Alamo, commented upon the spirituality displayed by passengers sailing with the Indies fleets. Those arriving from Spain rejoiced to have safely reached Havana, Cuba. Outbound travelers anxiously sought Jesuit confessors, knowing the perils that awaited them. Monotony, thirst, unvaried meals, nausea, heat, cramped quarters, cockroaches in swarms, rats, pirates, agonizing calms, and storms tormented those risking ocean crossings.⁸ The fleets were placing themselves in God's hands, trusting that his love would lead them to their destinations.

As Father Pedro Martínez, Father Juan Rogel, and Brother Francisco de Villareal awaited the departure of the New Spain fleet at the port of Sanlúcar de Barrameda in the summer of 1566, they enjoyed numerous opportunities for exercising their respective ministries. Contrary weather was detaining the Spanish ships, so anxious sailors repaired to the sacraments with great fervor. The demand for confession and communion was so pressing that all could not be accommodated. Consequently, Rogel recommended that Jesuits visit Sanlúcar each time that the fleets gathered there so that they might spend fifteen to twenty days carrying out spiritual works of mercy.⁹ In his inscrutable way, God had used the winds to reap a rich harvest of souls.

The fleet's lengthy delay also allowed the Jesuits to devote themselves to some key programs of the Catholic Reformation. In Spain of the 1500s, church authorities conducted a vigorous campaign against a widespread ignorance of the tenets of Catholicism. The Jesuits were particularly active in religious education. They were highly-trained clergy reputed to be learned preachers and innovative teachers. Thus, it is not surprising to find Father Martínez enthusiastically offering instruction in Christian doctrine to rapt audiences of mariners who were facing the open Atlantic. In the afternoon, on all of the ships, the crews sang the *doctrina*, a practice instituted by Martínez.¹⁰

The Spanish church also targeted blasphemy as an abuse that merited serious attention. Most offenders, upset at God for not granting their petitions, would utter oaths in "anger or haste." For example, when a gambler's cards started turning bad, he might challenge the Lord's might by exclaiming, "God doesn't have power if . . . (he does not turn things around)." Martínez and his companions convinced the

fleet's captains to assist them in their war against oaths. Offenders were punished by forfeiting food or drinking rations, as well as by paying fines. The Jesuit-led battle turned out to be so successful that one high official commented that in comparison to other fleets, all acts on this one were holy.¹¹

Most fittingly, on Friday, June 28, 1566, the eve of the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the Lord, in the words of Rogel, freed the fleet from its twin afflictions of poor weather and enemy raiders. Suddenly, God sent an east wind that gradually grew stronger so that the ships at last could depart. Then he sent a breeze so strong and seas so rough that the vessels were quickly driven far away from the Iberian coast, out of range of Turkish galleys. Prayers of thanksgiving were offered and a *Te Deum* sung.¹² God's first miracle, on the first Jesuit expedition to Spanish America, was a storm.

After stopping in the Canary Islands and navigating to the Caribbean isle of Montserrat, the vessel carrying the Jesuits separated from the fleet, and sailed between Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands bound for Florida. Its specific destination was Santa Elena, modern Parris Island, South Carolina. Rather ominously, the weather began to turn "not so fair." The missionaries' troubles multiplied when, on August 28, they reached the peninsula's coast. Neither the pilot nor the crew had ever been along these shores. Moreover, the Jesuits were traveling on an *urca*, a large, slow, flat-bottomed storeship upon which winds and shoals could wreak havoc. To make matters worse, it was hurricane season.¹³

Now God, according to Rogel, "began to visit us with afflictions and signs, giving us a small part of his cross." On September 3, a hurricane hammered the Jesuits, who proceeded to hear the confessions of all who could understand Castilian. Many of the sailors spoke only Flemish. Powerful surges crashed onto the ship as it rocked for twelve hours in a "storm from which few escape." The sails broke, and one of the *urca*'s two launches filled with water and had to be thrown overboard, lest it damage the rudder. At noon on September 4, the weather cleared.¹⁴

It took two days for the *urca* to regain the sight of land. The pilot thought that a large bay that he spotted was near Santa Elena, so he moved closer to shore. That night, another storm struck, which carried the ship so far out to sea that it required four days to return to the coast. At this point, the crew was thirsty and hungry. They had requested water when they left the main fleet, but had received

none. With great difficulty, the clumsy vessel slowly drew near enough to land so that its remaining launch could be despatched to look for drinking water.¹⁵

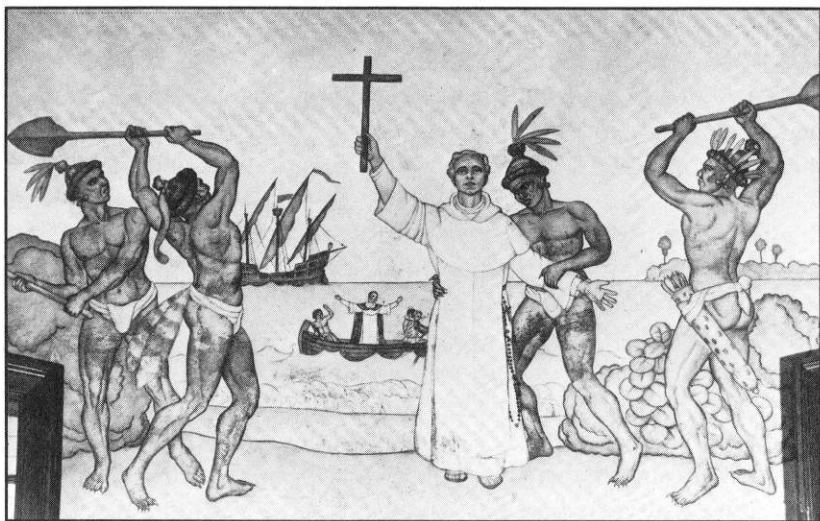
Father Martínez led the shore party that consisted of two Spaniards and six Flemings. As dusk approached, Martínez and company were nowhere in sight. The *urca* fired a cannon to signal that it was getting late. When this salvo received no response, the pilot, sensing yet another storm, moved away from the coast to avoid running aground. When the anticipated hurricane struck, it blew the ship far to the south. The sailors feared a wreck upon a notorious stretch of beach that was swarming with hostile Indians. Father Rogel busily heard confessions, although he lamented that with no other priest aboard, he could not comfort himself with the sacrament. Just when all seemed lost, however, the sea calmed and abundant



rain quenched the mariners' thirst. When the pilot stubbornly opted to continue his search for Santa Elena, the battered crew almost mutinied.¹⁶

To Rogel's relief, the skipper heeded his men, setting a course for Santo Domingo on September 28. Unfortunately, poor weather prevented them from reaching their destination. Instead, they made the port of Monte Christi, on Hispaniola's north coast, arriving on October 24. After four months at sea, the crew disembarked. Rogel commented that the Lord twice freed them from "the sight of death" by calming a storm and by sending a strong wind that blew the *urca* out of the middle of some treacherous shoals.¹⁷

Ironically, on September 14, Pedro Menéndez spotted the *urca* about two leagues off St. Augustine. Menéndez realized that the pilot did not recognize the port, so he attempted to send a launch to the lost ship. Unfortunately, a contrary wind, rough seas, and the incoming tide, combined with a storm, prevented contact with the helpless vessel. Twenty days later, a small boat was found anchored at the mouth of the St. Johns River near the fort of San Mateo. Six Flemings and a Spaniard recounted how the previous day, a league away,



A priest being killed by Indians. (HASF x-297-x)

Indians killed Father Martínez and three other men. A tempest had prevented the shore party from returning to the urca, so the stranded men wandered through the territories of friendly tribes for about two weeks, until meeting with catastrophe when they were within reach of the fort.¹⁸ In effect, an untimely storm had resulted in the death of the leader of the first Jesuit expedition to Florida.

The missionaries departed from Hispaniola on November 25, bound for Havana. Along the way, their urca was becalmed and cast into the shallow waters surrounding a group of keys. To avoid running aground, the pilot used three anchors in succession, all of which, even the best one, were torn to pieces by sharp coral. A storm raged for four or five days. To make it easier for the remaining anchor to hold, two of the urca's masts were cut and thrown overboard. When the weather cleared, the crippled vessel attempted to enter deep water. As the anchor was lifted, the ship struck bottom, but no damage was done. Slowly, the urca moved toward Havana. Not far from the Cuban port, while coasting along after sunset, Rogel's ship struck some rocks, which tore two gaping holes below the water line. The pilot's only hope was to try to run the urca aground so that the crew could attempt to swim to safety. Rogel and Villareal, however, could not swim. Sailors succeeded in plugging the leaks, and everybody took turns manning the vessel's three pumps. Many distress signals were fired, which brought a rescue ship from Havana with an

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anchor and a large group of black slaves to work the pumps for the exhausted crewmen. Later, to the great distress of the weary mariners, a contrary wind would not let them approach Havana. Launches had to be sent to transfer the missionaries to shore shortly after midnight, on December 10. They had been at sea for sixteen long days.²⁰

In Cuba, Rogel saw scores of Spaniards and thousands of Africans who required serious spiritual succor. He and Villareal also met eighteen Indians from Carlos (modern Mound Key in Estero Bay, southwestern Florida) and Tequesta (present-day Miami). As at Sanlucar, natural catastrophes revealed fertile fields for the Society of Jesus to plant the gospel. Visiting Florida soldiers lifted Rogel's spirits even higher, for they reported that the Lord had miraculously manifested himself there through a rainstorm. It seems that Pedro Menéndez had visited a chief whose corn crop was on the verge of ruin because of a drought. The chief told him that since the Christian God was so powerful, Menéndez should ask him for rain. The Asturian subsequently knelt before a cross, prayed, and a half hour later, it poured, much to the chief's edification.²¹

Rogel's long letter is important, for it is the first Jesuit account of the Florida mission. Storms and the perils of ocean travel are featured prominently. For much of their initial time in the New World, Rogel and Villareal were either suffering from the sea or from "fevers." "Traacherous" natives had slain their leader, Pedro Martínez. Yet, Rogel concluded, God had been merciful, delivering them from death while leading them to discover a tremendous number of Africans, Europeans, and Indians in need of salvation. Father Rogel saw storms as God's hand guiding the Society of Jesus to Florida.

The fledgling Jesuit undertaking had incurred a maiming blow when it lost its first superior, the "soul and support" of the Florida enterprise. The "crushing loss" of Pedro Martínez, a "born leader of men," thrust Rogel, a devoted and saintly man who nevertheless did not possess natural leadership qualities, into an unforeseen role. The *Adelantado* deeply grieved the passing of Martínez, "in whom he was envisioning a Francis Xavier of the West." Furthermore, his death ignited a storm of controversy in Jesuit Europe that turned several influential superiors against the mission. A combination of masterful public relations by Menéndez, Rogel's optimistic conclusions, and cautious support by Father General Francis Borgia in Rome, managed to win back the support of the Spanish hierarchy. Conse-

quently, on March 13, 1568, a second Jesuit expedition to Florida departed from Seville for Sanlucar. This "heavy reinforcement" of the Society's previous trio consisted of three priests, three brothers, and eight young aspirants to membership in the order. The group's superior and new mission leader was Father Juan Baptista de Segura.²²

Meanwhile, back in Florida, storms and swarms made Rogel's life at Carlos and Villareal's at Tequesta miserable. A political controversy between rivals to the Calusa chieftainship embroiled the Spaniards in turmoil that eventually would end in the deaths of numerous Indians and the abandonment of the Jesuit mission on Mound Key. To make matters worse, rainstorms ruined the Spanish provisions. Despite Estero Bay's plentiful seafood, a Castilian's state of mind in the absence of bread, olive oil, and wine (the basic elements of a "civilized" diet) might cause him to consider himself "starving," which would aggravate an already tense situation. Likewise, in Tequesta, where the mosquitoes were so bad that the soldiers could not sleep, constant fatigue sharpened the pain of isolation and culture shock. Rogel resorted to storm imagery to express his frustrations: "Great have been the whirlwinds that the devil has raised and raises every day in these Indians to push them away so that the law of God is not preached to them."²³ His optimism was quickly turning to pessimism. He now saw Satan in Florida's storms.

Antonio Sedeno, a priest sailing on the second Jesuit expedition, left a description of his voyage to Florida that mirrors Rogel's first letter. The missionaries were delayed at Sanlucar for a month, so they preached and taught Christian doctrine by singing it in processions through the town's streets. On the Saturday before Palm Sunday, they were able to sail. The Jesuits made sure that everyone on their ship, and on the one accompanying it, confessed and received communion. A week later, they safely disembarked in the Canary Islands. Sedeno felt that the fair weather that they enjoyed en route was "a great mercy of the Lord," for the seas were reputed to be dangerous off the African coast. Notwithstanding the smooth sailing, the Jesuit landlubbers arrived "badly treated by the sea." Three days of island hospitality, however, refreshed them, and they were soon on their way to the New World. For twenty days the missionaries were becalmed, but they believed that this was only God saving them from French Protestant corsairs. On board their vessel, they preached and instructed the sailors. Each time a mariner swore, he immediately would make a cross on the deck and kiss it. As a result Sedeno

reported, "Our Lord gave us afterward such good weather that we succeeded in sighting land within fifteen days."²⁴

Now they were entering the realm of storms. Because their pilot was unsure of the identity of a distant Caribbean island, and it being night, the Jesuits' ship entered a shallow bay and almost foundered. At the last moment, the wind that was driving them to their destruction calmed and was replaced with a "land breeze by which we were departed at a distance." Once the missionaries were safely in deep water, Sedeno wrote "the Lord then returned to us the wind that we first had." All were amazed at their deliverance, especially since cannibals were thought to inhabit the isle. A *Te Deum* was sung in thanksgiving, with Father Segura using the occasion to admonish the passengers to cultivate a greater fear of the Lord.²⁵

During the next four days, the Jesuits traveled "among very beautiful islands" before reaching Puerto Rico, "an island of the King, very beautiful and rich, although very poor in what matters for going to heaven." After a brief rest, the ship made for Florida. Upon leaving port, however, it almost wrecked because the wind died at the harbor's narrow entrance. As the waves pushed them toward some rocks, the crew began to sing litanies and pray. They believed that "The Lord freed us, giving us a wind to depart from such affliction." As well as from a storm that "all feared was a hurricane, which usually casts the ships to the bottom, almost regularly, no matter how strong they are." Father Sedeno reflected on the fact that the Lord always chose to comfort them on Saturday, the day dedicated to "His Most Holy Mother":

Because on Saturday we left Sanlucar, Saturday we reached the Canaries, Saturday we sighted land and we were freed from that danger, Saturday we stopped at Puerto Rico and Saturday we reached Florida, so that we might understand that all the graces and mercies are to come through Mary and we might be very dedicated to her.²⁶

By June 21 the second expedition found itself in St. Augustine. Sedeno felt fortunate. The men were seasick, but they had suffered relatively little: "everything was very slight from what they tell me usually occurs in these waters." Bartholomew Menéndez, the Adelantado's brother, though very hospitable, bluntly informed them of Florida's hardships. Still, the Jesuits had cause for optimism. They soon met a friendly, well-disposed native leader. Father Rogel, who

had abandoned Mound Key, arrived from Guale (coastal Georgia) with a very positive opinion of the Indians living there. Segura decided that the priests should journey to Havana to establish a college for the education of chiefs' sons and to discuss an evangelization strategy for Florida.²⁷

On the way to Cuba, the Jesuits had to enter the Bahama Channel, "which are some strong sea currents that, if the wind calms, is dangerous." Ships would often be wrecked upon hostile shores "where they might perish at the hands of those barbarous heathen." Unfortunately, the winds died just as the missionaries were sailing through the channel. The frustrated pilot, fearing ruin, "engaged in the worst evil that he could take":

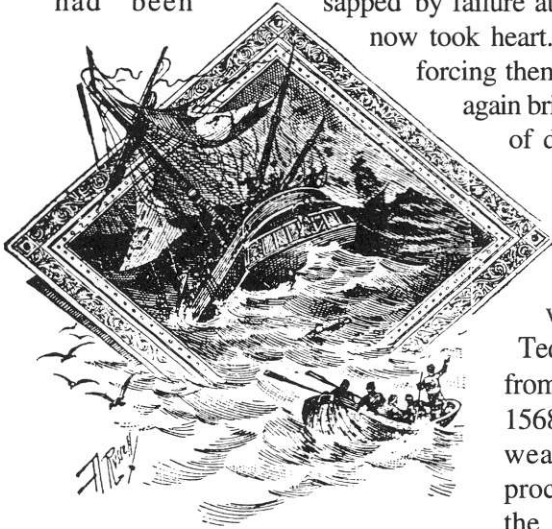
In place of calling out to God, blaspheming God and saying words very much cursing His Divine Majesty and His Providence; among other words he said that the cause of God not giving us good weather, was because we were serving Him and we were Christians, that if we were heretics or Moors, that God would give us everything good.

To counter this scandalous talk, which ran square against the Jesuit campaign against oaths, the priests prayed for good weather, with the result that "His Majesty gave it to us instantly so good that with incredible speed and brevity we reached the port of Havana." The other ship sailing with the Jesuits received no such favor. At a later date, when the blasphemous pilot was plying the very same route, accompanied by a ship carrying Father Segura, a storm struck. Segura's vessel weathered the gale. The pilot's went to the bottom of the sea. Storms had portended a very successful fate for the second expedition.

Incredibly, this same voyage from St. Augustine to Havana featured yet another seemingly miraculous event. A boy on board began to move toward the side of the Jesuits' ship on a calm, clear night, as the vessel sailed along rapidly before the wind. It being midnight, most were asleep. One of the missionaries spotted the lad, and realizing that he was sleepwalking, quickly grabbed him. It turned out that the youngster had been dreaming that his shoes had fallen into the ocean and he was preparing to jump overboard to retrieve them. This boy eventually "came to be a very good religious of our Company, and he died and lived happily in it."²⁹

The writers of the above accounts, Rogel, Sedeno, and Brother Juan de la Carrera, believed that God had worked miracles for them throughout their arduous journeys to Florida. The storms that he sent were to test their faith, and increase their need for him in their lives. By suffering at sea, their spiritual strength would reach the level that was necessary to bring the heathen to the light of the gospel. Their prayers and devotions always had delivered them from danger. Even Pedro Martínez's death could be seen as a sign of God's favor, because the Church's great foundations traditionally arose upon lands irrigated with the blood of martyrs. Rogel and Villareal, whose spirits had been

sapped by failure at Mound Key and Tequesta, now took heart. Their confreres were reinforcing them, and the storms were once again bringing heavenly grace instead of demons.



As the evangelization of Florida continued, so did the storms. Rogel's attempt at a roundabout voyage to Mound Key via Tequesta and the Florida Keys from Havana on September 22, 1568, was foiled by inclement weather. When he opted to proceed directly to Estero Bay, the usual two-day trip turned into a nineteen-day nightmare.

At the entrance to the bay, one ship almost met its end on the bar. A skillful Pedro Menéndez Marques, the *Adelantado's* nephew, saved the vessel.³⁰

On December 4, a party of missionaries left Matanzas, Cuba, reaching Tequesta in three days. When they attempted to proceed to St. Augustine:

A north wind so strong hit us, that we got lost from each other, and we do not know if Pedro de la Sierra has been wrecked; because we had a stormy night that, although our frigate was large, the sea was entering us from stem to stern.

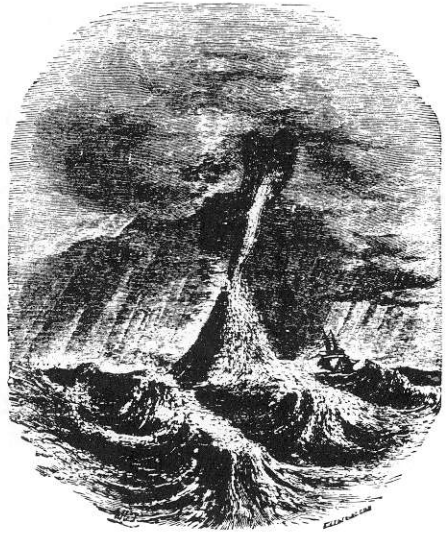
This weather lasted three days for us.

Sedeno saw God's wisdom in this setback, for the gale forced the Jesuits to return to Tequesta, where a peace treaty was concluded with the Indians. The missionaries, therefore, left a brother and two young catechists to carry on the evangelization process.³¹ A storm had led to a wonderful reopening of doors among a people who had previously closed their hearts to the gospel.

Brother Juan de la Carrera, writing in his old age, recalled yet another example of God's mercy in a storm.

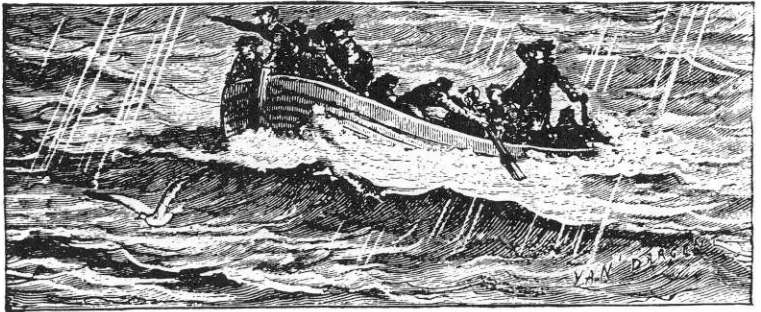
While the missionaries were sailing on a ship with no deck among many islands, a fierce hurricane struck them. Thunder, lightning, rain, and furious winds rocked their exposed vessel. Carrera saw "a large rod . . . carried from one place to another, that with human industry it appeared it could not be moved." In addition, "trees of incredible size" were uprooted. The Jesuits' ship ran aground on an uninhabited island. After a few days, the ship that previously seemed so useless became more seaworthy than before, so that the missionaries were able to safely reach port. The hurricane was the most violent in anyone's memory. It deforested islands so that they looked as if fire from heaven had scorched them. The buildings of one town disappeared beneath the sea. Brother Carrera related this tale as an example of the many dangers from which the "powerful hand of God freed us . . . so that one may see the care that He has for attending to those who occupy themselves in His service, so that by it His creatures may bless Him."³²

In the ensuing months, the Florida mission began to disintegrate. Internal dissension hampered the Jesuit evangelization effort. Segura wrote Father General Borgia to have him advise the Spanish provincials to send only healthy and emotionally mature men, because Florida was a harsh land. Later, to his horror, Borgia, a future saint, would discover that one superior actually forced a troublesome brother to



“volunteer” to go to Florida. The Father General ordered that a suitably heavy penance be assigned to those responsible for this outrage. To make matters worse, the missionaries quarreled with Menéndez. Soldiers set bad examples for the Indians, taking their women and food when it suited them. Supplies ran low. Illnesses struck. The natives grew weary of the Spaniards and their priests. Some told the Jesuits to go away. Others scattered into the wilderness. Brother Diego Agustin Baez, a master linguist, unexpectedly died of fever. By mid-June of 1569, South Florida had been abandoned. Afterward, things went so poorly in Guale and Santa Elena that between May and July of 1570, these two posts were also deserted.³³

Segura, unlike Sedeno and Rogel, who came to the conclusion that cultural clashes were the major reasons for their scant success, attributed his woes to the poor example of the Spanish military. He consequently decided to follow his idol, Francis Xavier, who, seeking a mission field free from European, Jewish, and Moslem influences, had made his way from Portuguese Goa to Japan. Afterward, Xavier saw China as the key to the conversion of the whole East. There he hoped to find an uncorrupted land in which he could preach the gospel in peace. The head of the Florida Jesuits planned to sail to Ajacan, on modern Chesapeake Bay, which was rumored to be located near China. He would take as his guide a converted native of that region, Don Luis. No escort of troops would accompany him. Also, he handpicked his companions, who were either newcomers to Florida on a third expedition that had left Spain in February 1570, or young catechists. On August 5, 1570, Segura sailed from Santa Elena,



reaching Chesapeake Bay on September 10.³⁴

By February 1571, the entire party, except for a young boy, had been slain by the Indians. Don Luis had apostasized. The Jesuits remaining behind suspected potential trouble when they received

Segura's farewell letter from Ajacan. They instantly organized a relief expedition that witnessed the ghastly sight of natives clad in cassocks parading along a beach. When the Spaniards drew nearer to investigate, canoes attacked their ship. They luckily managed to capture some warriors from whom they surmised that only young Alonso de Olmos remained alive.³⁵

Now that all seemed lost, the Jesuit sea narratives reflected a different perspective. On one occasion, Menéndez brought a disease with him when his fleet docked in Havana. Sedeno complained that the "whole burden fell on us for since the sickness was contagious, few were willing to hear their confessions." Ten days later, the fleet returned to Florida, with Father Sedeno and Brother Villareal aboard. At Santa Elena the epidemic spread, striking down the Jesuits. The brother soon recovered, but the priest remained ill for two months with fever. Still, he found himself forced to hear confessions "at all hours." Then, the fort's storehouse caught fire, "destroying many casks of wine which was the only gratification the poor people had, and all our food, gunpowder, etc., were burned as we stood helplessly by."³⁶

Sedeno's illness was worsening, so he opted to accompany Menéndez to Havana "in a very small open boat." Along the way, the passengers "suffered extremely from the cold and rain as well as from hunger for our rations were reduced to a bit of roasted cornmeal, only two spoonfuls meal." At St. Augustine, they had the good fortune of running into Brother Carrera and a ship loaded with supplies to be used in the unlikely event that Segura was still alive at Ajacan. A few days earlier, St. Augustine had witnessed its own catastrophe: "the sea had risen because of the wind, flooding the store houses and dwellings," forcing the inhabitants to sustain themselves "on herbs and roots." Carrera's provisions, in the words of Sedeno, "helped us all, for we could not make the journey to Jacan, it being mid-winter, and had we gone would have perished due to the terrible north winds that sweep that coast and prevent dwelling or landing there."³⁷

On December 12, 1571, Sedeno and Menéndez continued on to Havana. The *adelantado* and the pilot decided to save time by passing "through the very narrow channel between the mainland and the shoals off Cape Canaveral, a place where many ships had been wrecked." The passengers were a bit concerned when the wind began to blow harder, but since Menéndez and the pilot were familiar

with those waters, they remained calm. Then the unexpected happened:

It seems that Our Lord in His hidden judgments permitted that the pilot should be so blind that intending to avoid the shoals, though under the direction of the Governor and with a fair stern wind, he piled the ship upon the shore where it went to pieces. With great difficulty we saved the provisions, the food, the stock and all the passengers. Drenched and cold we spent that night on guard for the Indians on that coast are fierce and a short while ago killed twenty-six Christians and captured three women and two children from a ship which was wrecked there.³⁸

The castaways were in especially bad shape because they had few weapons and even fewer people who knew how to operate them. Menéndez had placed all of the soldiers in another ship as a “convoy,” but it was nowhere to be seen. The *Adelantado*, even though he was “a brave captain,” found himself “irresolute, and with reason.” Sedeno’s quick thinking rallied the dejected Spaniards, however, when he suggested that they build a fort in order to stave off an Indian attack. His strategy worked. When the natives saw the Spanish defenses, they decided to devote themselves to looting rather than killing. The party immediately began to walk to St. Augustine. Along the way, they had to entrust themselves to the hospitality of several different groups of Indians whose underlying motives for assisting them were always suspect. At one point, native guides offered to transport the Spaniards in canoes across a “very wide deep bay.” Once in the middle of the bay, their guides “did their best to drown us,”

They broached the canoe to the waves so as to drown us, or at least to wet all our supplies and weapons, so that we would be forced to leave them behind. One after another the waves washed into the canoe almost swamping them and all the time we could not move, seated in water and thinking only of preparing for death as we despaired of life.³⁹

As had happened again and again, however. Sedeno reported that, “it seems the sea was calmed by a relic and an Agnus Dei which Brother Carrera trailed through the water.” The Indians then paddled the Jesuits ashore. All of the Spaniards then continued their journey. While resting at a grove of palms, Sedeno wrote that “God visited us with two or three heavy showers as a crown to our other trials, all

praise to His Divine Majesty.” Weak, wet, hungry, cold, and barefoot, the party trudged onward. Believing that the Lord was giving them “many an opportunity to meditate on Christ’s Passion and the sufferings He endured for our sins.” Near St. Augustine, a friendly Indian swam across a sandbar to give assistance to the exhausted castaways, who waited three days for succor, “subsisting on herbs and shell-fish during which a wind and rain storm arose renewing our hardships unsheltered as we were in an open field.” The long-awaited rescue ship disappointingly brought only some “rotting corn” and a “small boat” upon which the party embarked. En route, another storm arose and the Jesuits became lost. Finally, at dawn, they reached St. Augustine.⁴⁰

A ship full of grain soon arrived from New Spain, so Father Sedeno and Brother Carrera decided to sail with Menéndez on a relief mission to Santa Elena. When the small settlement was spotted, the Adelantado wished to make quick contact with the town by dispatching a shore party. Feeling that the valiant Sedeno’s presence would provide moral support, Menéndez asked him to disembark with the pilot in a small boat. Since the sea was calm and the moon shone, both Sedeno and Carrera agreed to go. No sooner had they left the ship “than the wind rose and the waves increased so that the pilot regretted having gone.” The wind and the current started driving the Jesuits out to sea. The launch cast its “light anchor” and the “wind increased and lifted up mountainous waves which time and again broke over our boat drenching us all.” As the sea raged, the missionaries bailed water. Sedeno called it “the most fearful night I ever spent.” He passed it “imploring God to have mercy on us all and forgive our sins.” At the break of day, “the gale and enormous waves” still prevented their rescue. When the mother ship’s “cable broke,” it was “forced to come to us and so rescued us drenched and frozen.” They stopped at Santa Elena for a month, suffering from the cold weather. On the eve of their departure for Havana, Sedeno nervously wrote that: “We think our trials are not over for we are going in another small open boat.” Then he added:



Rather we hope God will grant us even greater sufferings for I assure Your Reverence . . . that those who bear them for Him patiently and joyously learn that truly His yoke is sweet and His burden light, that He is with them in their tribulation and will save those hoping in him.⁴¹

Sedeno's harrowing adventure, in addition to the other discouraging accounts from Florida, certainly moved the Jesuit hierarchy to abandon the mission in favor of New Spain in 1572. Before his death trip to Ajacan, Segura, while admitting that Florida offered numerous occasions for sharing in Christ's passion, still maintained that the Jesuit presence there violated the order's Institutes. They were making a pitifully low number of converts, only a few adults and children baptized at the point of death. To comply with their organizational mission, they were supposed to labor for the greater glory of God. This suggested a post like China, where a bountiful harvest of souls could be gathered.⁴²

The Jesuit hierarchy soon came around to Segura's point of view. The Florida enterprise was bearing little fruit. The missionaries lived hard lives scattered among barbarous natives. They existed on poor rations and had suffered death, stomach ailments and fevers. The fact that the men were rather bookish by inclination made the conditions in Florida seem even more dangerous and deplorable. According to Christ's command, they believed that when a people refused to listen to the gospel message, missionaries were justified in shaking the dust of their villages from their feet. Moreover, the Institutes of the Society of Jesus did state that the order was to minister for the greater glory of God and the greatest good of their neighbor. They hardly could achieve these ends in Florida.⁴³

Whereas the Jesuit leadership in Europe had previously counseled patience, it was now admitting that Florida was indeed a sterile vineyard. Recent scholarship attests to the wisdom of Francis Borgia's command to shake the dust of Florida from the Society's feet. Following work by James Axtell, John H. Hann in *Missions to the Calusa* reminds his readers that the Jesuit mission in Florida from 1566-1572 did not exactly "fail":

A more balanced assessment, however, might note that from Calusa territory to Guale and Santa Elena the Jesuits dealt with natives whose confidence in their own value systems and Weltanschauung had not been sufficiently shaken to make

them susceptible to the European Christian message. . . . Consequently a more just assessment of the Jesuit effort in Florida is that it was made before the time was right and in the case of the Calusa, to people for whom the time would never be right.⁴⁴

What then do the Jesuit storm narratives tell us about the Florida mission? They certainly help us to understand the motivations of the missionaries. They also demonstrate their attitude toward suffering and their deep faith in God's mercy. Furthermore, the letters reveal subtle shifts in the Jesuits' view of their surroundings; from an optimism that things would turn out well in Florida to a discouraged call for the abandonment of their apostolic undertaking in favor of more fertile fields. Reports of agonizing sea voyages supplied European superiors with important data for decision making and resource allocation. In addition, the storm letters help us to comprehend Alfred W. Crosby's assertion that man is "a biological entity before he is a Roman Catholic or a capitalist or anything else." William Cronon adds that "natural ecosystems . . . provide the context" for all human institutions. Storms are a fact of life in Florida. Therefore, no history of human endeavors there can legitimately ignore this aspect of Florida's natural surroundings. Tempests tormented the missionaries at every turn, shaping their attitudes toward their new environment and its potential as a mission field. They used storms to help them to discern God's will for the Society of Jesus in Spanish North America. At first he seemed to be guiding them to Florida. With the passage of time, it became clear to the Jesuits that he actually was telling them to move on to New Spain. Finally, the storm narratives help us to see the Jesuits as they saw themselves. At a time when Spanish colonizers are under fire from a variety of interest groups, these writings add a very human dimension to quincentenary-related debates concerning the conversion of native peoples in the wake of Christopher Columbus.⁴⁵

To those living in our present age, Sixteenth-Century Europeans, particularly Jesuit missionaries, represent the Other, as do the Florida natives who they were attempting to convert. The Twentieth-Century Jesuit spiritual director, Father Anthony de Mello, writing for an audience composed primarily of Catholic clergy, demonstrates how different we are:

Today we seem to be losing this sense of God's direct intervention in our lives. The Jews in the Bible had a tremendous

sense for this. . . . All their attention was focused on the Primary Cause, on God. They seem to have just overlooked secondary causes. . . . With us it is just the opposite. . . . We have become so conscious of secondary causes that God no longer features in our life and our thinking. . . . God is as much a need in every event and action of our modern lives. . . . as he was to the Jews in the desert. We have just lost the faith-sense that enables us to see him operating behind every secondary cause, to see his hand guiding events personally through the veil of human agencies.⁴⁶

When attempting to enter the minds of Father Segura and his companions, it is important to bear in mind that they saw the world as a miraculous place. Their focus was on the "Primary Cause."

Endnotes

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