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Pensacola-Tallahassee Edition • History

## Fort dedication ends with Mass in Mission San Luis church

**PEGGY DEKEYSER** of the Florida Catholic staff

**TALLAHASSEE** — A day that saw the rededication of a Spanish mission fort culminated in a fitting and proper way — with the celebration of Mass.

Mission San Luis, once the western capital of Spanish Florida, is a national historic landmark at which a church, a council house, a plaza and a Spanish deputy governor's home have been reconstructed since. The Franciscans who oversaw the building of the church also maintained a friary on the grounds. Religious conversion was a central aspect of Spanish colonization strategy, so religion played an important part in life at Mission San Luis.

The Dec. 10 celebration began with the dedication of the latest addition to the mission site, the newly reconstructed *El Castillo de San Luis*, which is nearly done and scheduled to open to visitors in January. Construction on the original fort, on one of Tallahassee's highest hilltops, began in the 1690s to protect the settlement from English attacks. The two-story blockhouse and stockade were surrounded by a dry moat. From the completion of its construction in 1703, it provided protection for residents only until 1704, when the mission fell to the British.



**Deacon Santiago Molina proclaims the Gospel from the raised pulpit inside the church at Mission San Luis.**

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PEGGY  
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Following the rededication of the fort, the Friends of Mission San Luis recognized donors to a \$4 million endowment campaign. Florida's first lady, Columba Bush, is honorary chairwoman of the campaign, and Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ, serves as co-chairman. SunTrust Banks of Florida Foundation will fund a theater at the mission, which will be in a new visitor center. Julia Munroe Woodward and Jay I. Kislak were also honored for their contributions to fund a nature trail and a classroom, respectively.

The mission church, with its dirt floor and thatched roof, was adorned for the Mass with evergreens and pine cones tied with ribbon. The only lights were those necessary for the choir and the front of the sanctuary. Among those in the assembly were volunteers who guide tours at the mission, clad in period costumes. As the aroma of incense drifted through the simple structure, the men of the Blessed Sacrament Parish choir intoned the Advent song "On Jordan's Bank," which dates to the 18th century, as does the mission fort. Gov. Jeb Bush joined the celebration.

Bishop Ricard presided at the Mass. Franciscan Father Robert Young, the first of his order to serve in the area in the 300 years since the fall of the mission, concelebrated, along with other priests from the Tallahassee area. Deacon Santiago Molina proclaimed the Gospel in both English and Spanish.

In his homily, Bishop Ricard reflected on the second Sunday of Advent Gospel of Luke (3:1-6), in which John the Baptist calls for conversion.

"God asks each of us to let him fill the valleys of our hearts with his love. To let the mountains of our pride be leveled so that he might shine brightly through each of us. To let all of our paths be made smooth — to get off of the wrong, rough paths. Like John, he calls each of us to the desert, to turn our lives around and feel the fullness of his love."

At the conclusion of Mass, Dr. Michael Gannon, distinguished service professor emeritus of history at the University of Florida and foremost expert on the early history of the church in Florida, spoke briefly, saying, "We truly stand today on holy ground. San Luis was the western anchor of the string of Spanish missions that were strung across north Florida like rosary beads. The British were determined not only to rid the New



**Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ, greets Mission San Luis volunteer Diane Moliteris, a member of Good Shepherd Parish in Tallahassee, following Mass at the Spanish mission whose history dates to 1656.**

World of the Spanish flag, but also to rid it of the Catholic cross. They laid waste to eight of the 12 Spanish missions."

For 143 years, the region was without a Catholic presence. Then in 1846, Mary, Mother of Sorrows Parish was founded in Tallahassee.

Eventually, it grew into Blessed Sacrament Parish and the Catholic Church has been firmly established here ever since.

## HISTORY

### Mission San Luis

The Apalachee Indians were among the most advanced native people in *La Florida*. Their agricultural system thrived on crops of maize and squash.

The mission system was the most effective way for the Spanish to influence the native population and establish a foothold to support the capital at St. Augustine. And the densely populated and extremely fertile Apalachee province in what is now northwest Florida was pivotal to the Spanish plan.

The San Luis de Talimali mission was moved to its present location, in the Apalachee province, by Spanish authorities in 1656. It was home to a deputy governor, garrison and civilians, including the Franciscan friars who served the people's spiritual needs — the only sizable European population west of St. Augustine.

At one time, as many as 1,500 Apalachee Indians lived in or near Mission San Luis, the western capital of Spanish Florida. Many warriors trained as militia to help defend the mission.

When the British settled Charleston in 1670, the threat of English attacks on Spanish Florida intensified.

The construction of *El Castillo de San Luis*, the military complex, was begun in the 1690s and completed in 1703. In 1704, the British overtook the mission, burning it to the ground and killing many of the Apalachees.

For more information, log on to [www.missionsanluis.org](http://www.missionsanluis.org). [Back to Top](#)

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