

SOUTH TEXAS

# Catholic

SERVING THE CHURCH OF CORPUS CHRISTI



## DOMINICAN PRIESTS

leaving diocese a better place

# DOMINICANS MOVING BACK HOME TO SPAIN



**Rebecca Esparza**  
*Correspondent*

**T**he last two remaining Dominican priests in the Diocese of Corpus Christi are returning home to Spain on July 1, bringing to end more than 80 years of service to the parish communities in San Diego and the surrounding area.

Father Benito Retortillo, O.P., 76, has been all over the world during his 51-years of service to the Church, from the Dominican Republic to the mountains of Guatemala to working with the poorest of the poor in Mexico. More than half of his time as a priest has been in San Diego.

He arrived in San Diego 27 years ago and has been making a difference in the lives of parishioners at St. Francis de Paula ever since, alongside 85-year-old Father Epifanio Rodríguez, O.P., or Father Epi as he is known by his parishioners. Father Epi arrived in San Diego in 1957.

But now, the time has come for both priests to return to Spain.

The Dominicans have called all remaining priests in the Americas back to Spain, due to a shortage in vocations. Father Benito and Father Epi's last day of service at St. Francis de Paula will be June 30. The details of their return have yet to be confirmed, but

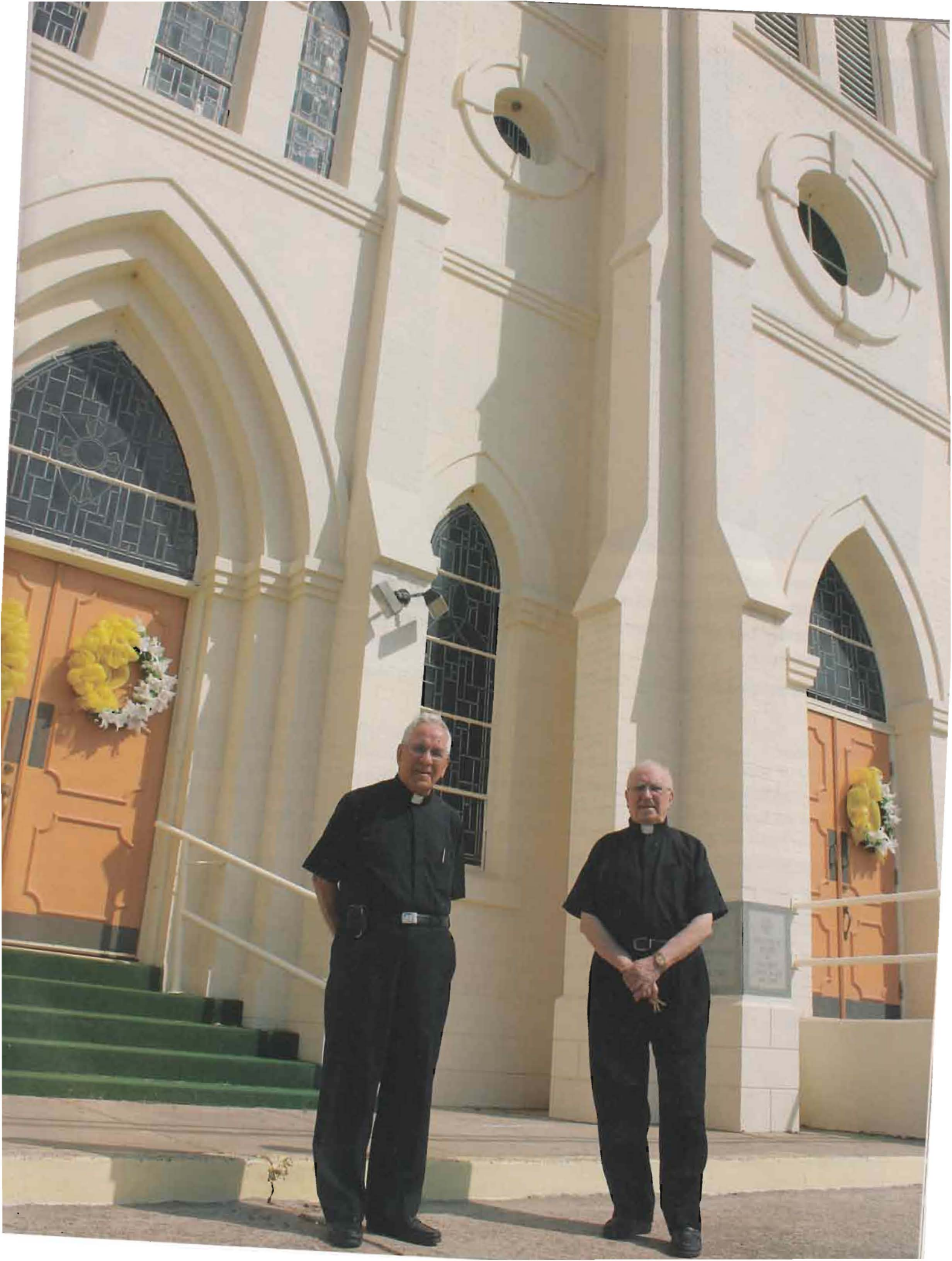
one thing is certain: on July 1 both priests will board a plane for Spain.

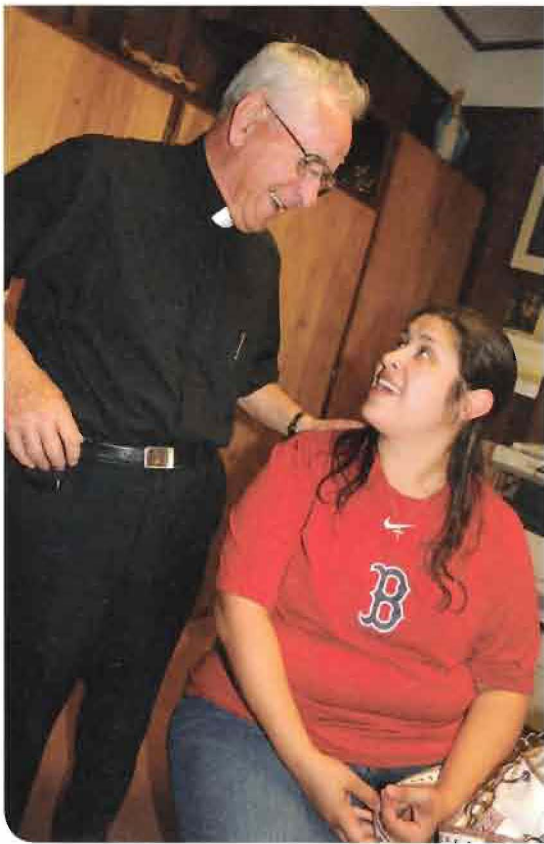
Father Benito, pastor and superior at the church, said although he will miss his parishioners, which he considers his extended family, the time has come to



A 29-year-old Father Epi visited St. Francis De Paula in San Diego a few years before he would be assigned to the parish in 1959. At right, Father Benito Retortillo, O.P. and Father Epi in front of St. Francis De Paula in San Diego, their home for many years.

*Rebecca Esparza for South Texas Catholic*





Father Benito shares a laugh with Kimberly Soliz at the church's rectory recently. Soliz and her husband Isidro Perez met with Father Benito to discuss getting married in the church.

*Rebecca Esparza for South Texas Catholic*



Father Benito (right) has served at St. Francis De Paula church in San Diego since 1986. Benavides and Freer through the years.

go home.

"I've enjoyed serving the people of San Diego, including the smaller communities and ranches around this area, but we have been called home. Retirement is waiting for us both back in Spain," he said. "It's definitely a bittersweet time for us all."

Father Epi, said parishioners at St. Francis de Paula are the most kind and giving people he's ever met.

"Everyone is always ready to help. We have music at each Mass and we have volunteers who make sure every role is filled. I've loved working with our generous and friendly parishioners over these years," Father Epi said, who celebrates 59 years as a priest this year.

He recalled an instance when he traveled to Mexico in 1960 to procure ornate stained glass windows for the church. The windows continue to adorn the church to this day, perfectly intact.

"I've seen the church grow and change tremendously over the years, including the closing of our school in 1962," he lamented.

Pointing to several beautiful large trees between

the rectory and the church, Father Epi said proudly, "I remember planting those trees many, many years ago."

St. Francis de Paula was established in 1866, making it one of the oldest parishes in the diocese. In 1931, the Dominicans came to serve in the diocese, specifically Duval, Jim Wells and for a short period in Brooks counties.

"By the late 1960s, we had 11 Dominican priests throughout the area. Today, Father Epi and I are the only ones left," Father Benito said. "Throughout our many years here, we have never once missed a Mass. And we have Mass everyday."

Ramona "Monche" Trejo, 77, parish secretary, has been a lifelong parishioner at St. Francis de Paula. Although she began volunteering with the church back in 1963 as a CCD teacher, she officially joined the staff in 1996.

"It's the end of an era," she said. Trejo said working with the two priests has been a wonderful experience and added she feels their presence will be sorely missed.

"I was as an altar server with Father Epi, and my



Father Epi has been in San Diego, on and off, for 54 years. They also served in Alice,

*Rebecca Esparza for South Texas Catholic*



Father Epi visits with Isidro Perez and his son Alvaro Jose at the parish rectory recently. Father Epi is set to retire by July 1 after 59 years of service to the church.

*Rebecca Esparza for South Texas Catholic*

children served with Father Benito,” Alfredo Cardenas, editor of the South Texas Catholic said. “We will miss them greatly. So will the community, they have been pillars of San Diego for a long time.”

Father Benito said he’s seen many moving things during his tenure at the parish, but one of the most memorable was a young disabled boy who never missed one Sunday Mass with his family.

“His determination to attend Mass every week was so inspiring to me. It’s not easy for the family, not easy for him, but they never missed a Sunday Mass,” Father Benito said. “It would make me think about this young man’s devotion to be closer to God. Witness-

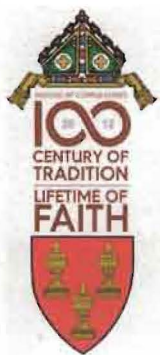
ing his courage on a weekly basis is something I will never forget.”

Like this boy’s witness, Father Benito and Father Epi’s devotion to God and his Church will never be forgotten in San Diego. ☕

Father Epi tells story of when he traveled to Mexico in 1960 to retrieve the numerous stained glass windows that adorn the church to this day.

*Rebecca Esparza for South Texas Catholic*





# Dominican priests will end 82-years of They came, the

**Alfredo E. Cardenas**

*South Texas Catholic*

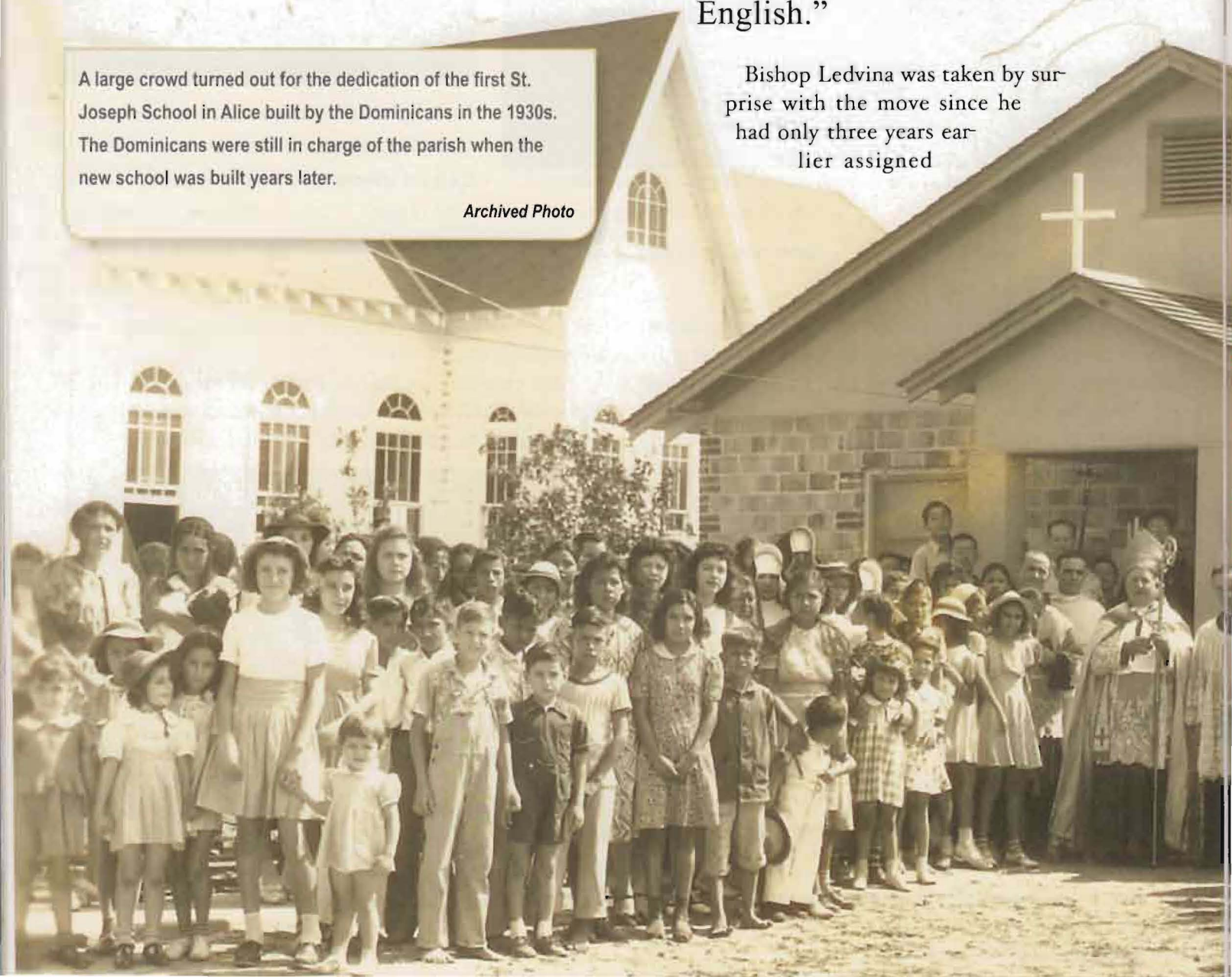
**I**n April 1931, the Claretian Provincial Secretary in Mexico City informed Corpus Christi Bishop Emmanuel Ledvina that they could no

longer serve the parish in San Diego. He informed the bishop that the order simply did not have enough priests who could “speak and preach in correct English.”

A large crowd turned out for the dedication of the first St. Joseph School in Alice built by the Dominicans in the 1930s. The Dominicans were still in charge of the parish when the new school was built years later.

*Archived Photo*

Bishop Ledvina was taken by surprise with the move since he had only three years earlier assigned



# service to Diocese of Corpus Christi

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the parish to the Claretians on a “permanent” basis. They had, moreover, done very good work at San Diego. Still, it was at the height of the Cristero War in their native Mexico, making things very uncertain.

By July, the Claretians were gone and the bishop moved Father José Muras from St. James the Apostle in Refugio to temporarily take over at San Diego and its 13 missions. The transfer was finalized in July.

This was only a temporary fix, and Bishop Ledvina still faced the task of finding permanent caretakers for St. Francis de Paula in San Diego and its missions strung out throughout the brush country.

His prayers were soon answered.

Quite unexpectedly, Bishop Ledvina received a letter on Aug. 12, 1931 from Father Juan Blázquez, O.P. with the Order of Preachers in San Antonio advising him that they were expecting new arrivals from Spain ready to do mission work. San Antonio Archbishop Arthur J. Drossert highly recommended them.

Bishop Ledvina quickly responded and offered Father Blázquez the church in San Diego that had a house that could accommodate two, maybe three priests. The bishop mentioned only six missions had chapels. The bishop told Father Blázquez that the Augustinians from Mexico wanted to establish a foundation in San Diego much like the one that the Franciscans had in Hebbbronville where they could train priests uninterrupted. Bishop Ledvina, however, preferred to have the Dominicans.

Father Blázquez urged the bishop not to make any other agreement, that the Dominicans were very interested and would expedite approval from Spain. By late September the parties had





The new Santa Rosa de Lima church was dedicated in December 1940 after Dominicans took several years to raise the needed funds to build it.

*Archived photo.*

sealed an agreement. Bishop Ledvina offered to turn over the parish "*cura animarum...in perpetuum.*"

"It practically amounts to total surrender of all jurisdiction outside of the canonical rights and privileges of the bishop, and keep the ownership, title, legally in the name of the diocese," Bishop Ledvina wrote to Father Blázquez.

Three days later, the Chancellor transferred titles to chapels of St. Francis de Paula in San Diego; St. Patrick at Mendieta; St. John at Rosita; St. Paul the Apostle at Benavides; St. Catherine at Los Reyes; St. Clement at Guajillo; and St. Joseph at Eva to the Dominicans. The bishop also ordered a piano to be shipped to San Diego for the Dominicans.

On Oct. 9, Bishop Ledvina informed Father Muras that the Dominicans would

take charge of San Diego and to transfer the parish to Father Juan Zabala. Later in the month, Bishop Ledvina and the Dominicans agreed that they could also have Sacred Heart church in Alice. The following year, Sacred Heart became San Jose, now known as St. Joseph. In August 1932, an agreement was reached that the Dominicans would take over Sacred Heart in Falfurrias. The Dominicans now had five priests in the area, two each at San Diego and Falfurrias and one in Alice.

In no time, Father Zabala and his associates were off to a fast start building up the parishes under their charge. In February 1934, Bishop Ledvina gave Father Zabala the Stations of the Cross from the Cathedral and suggested that he give the ones in the San Diego church to the new church being built in Benavides, which would be known

as Santa Rosa de Lima.

The following year Father Zabala was raising funds in Ben Bolt for a new church, while the Benavides church was under construction. In 1937, Father Zabala had added



The first mission church in Freer was dedicated May 22, 1938. Dominicans were also responsible for the current St. Mary's sanctuary built in 1991 under Father Luis Fernando Iglesias, O.P.

*Archived photo.*





Dominicans built a new mission church in the east side of Ben Bolt in 1936.

*Archived photo.*

a new parochial school in San Diego to his construction portfolio. The bishop was so impressed with the school that he asked Father Zabala for a copy of the plans so that he could build one in Auxiliary Bishop Mariano Garriga's birthplace of Port Isabel.

Bishop Ledvina had been holding on to a city block in San Diego, donated by Anna Collins, in hopes of building a school and convent but, he wrote to a prospective buyer, "...there is now a pretty school in San Diego through the zealous and indefatigable work of the fathers now in charge of San Diego." He cited the "good work of the Dominican fathers progress for the up building of the parish..."

In addition to new construction in San Diego, Benavides and Ben Bolt, the Dominicans were building a new church for St. Joseph in Alice, a new school in Falfurrias and a new sanctuary in Freer. In addition, they were active in the Fiestas Patrias in San Diego and Father Zabala was organizing a Sociedad Católica Mutualistas, or mutual aid society.

While things were going well in the Diocese of Corpus Christi, they were not going well at all for the Dominicans in their native Spain, as the Spanish Civil War had claimed the lives of many priests and seminarians. They asked Bishop Ledvina to relieve them of Sacred Heart in Falfurrias but the bishop was concerned that their leaving would cause harm to the new school. The bishop of-

ferred that they could give up Benavides and Freer instead, but the Dominicans opted to leave things as they were.

In 1940, the Dominicans were near completing a school at St. Joseph as well as a residence for the sisters in Alice. That same year they secured priests for "the American missions." Father Peter O'Brien and Father Mark O'Dowd, however, only stayed a short time.

In December of that year, the church in Benavides was complete and both Bishop Ledvina and

Auxiliary Bishop Garriga wanted to participate in the blessing scheduled for Dec. 22, 1940.

By 1941, the Dominicans did in fact transfer Sacred Heart in Falfurrias to the Oblates. Father Zabala moved from San Diego to Alice in 1946 and left the area in 1950, only to return to San Diego for a short time from 1957 to 1960. The growth of the Church in Alice and Duval County, however, continued at a steady clip.

In 1948, Santa Rosa de Lima became a parish. In 1950, the Dominicans had charge of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Alice. Five years later, old Sacred Heart in Alice was reopened as a mission of St. Joseph. That same year, 1955, a mission was established in San Jose in Duval County. In 1960, there were nine Dominicans serving the area.

As the years rolled by, however, the well of priests and women religious began to dry up. The school in San Diego closed in 1962. In 1970, Our Lady of Guadalupe was given to diocesan priest. By 1986, the Dominicans left St. Joseph in Alice and were down to three priests, one each in Freer, Benavides and San Diego. Today, only two Dominicans remain in San Diego and they have been called home.

For 82 years the Order of Preachers served the Diocese of Corpus Christi in exemplary fashion. They came at a time of great need for the diocese and contributed greatly to the building-up and maintaining the Church. 