

2. Early Roman Catholic Missions in America

The earliest expressions of mission work in this continent came from Romanists...in many cases priests, et al, travelling with colonizers, entrepreneurs, conquistadors, etc. There was less of this on the eastern seaboard, simply because colonization did not seem attractive there and little wealth was apparent among the natives. Motives among Catholic missionaries are about as diverse as they are among non-catholic workers in the same end. But many of them were martyred and some are enormously heroic figures in the "propagation of the faith." The bulk of the colonial movement came after the reformation-schism and the immediacy of gold in central America and south America drew the attention of the imperial lords of Europe...the sea-faring nations...who needed such gold to pursue their own ends...and the national churches required it as well. So the great thrust of the Catholic work of mission and establishment was in south and central America, the burden of their work in north America was in exploration. A strict chronology section by section of the Roman work is not possible in this course but the following notes will help us track it out a bit.

a. in the East:

- (1) in 1523, de Ayllon received papers from Charles V entitling him to exploration and conversion work in the east. He had previously discovered the St. John's river (Florida) and was interested in settling the land. Founding a work in Virginia, 1526, his hopes were overcome through death, mutiny and Indian attack.
- (2) Among other attempts of interest was the work of Cancer in attempting a Dominican mission at Tampa Bay. He and his party were martyred...while the sailors on ship watched rather helplessly.
- (3) Following a Huguenot settlement near the mouth of the St. John's in 1564, Menendez (Florida "belonged" to Spain, too military action in that area, drove out the French and founded St. Augustine (1565). With him came the Jesuits and they soon filtered as far north as Chesapeake Bay. But the hostility of the Indians was great and by 1571 the Jesuits had been recalled south. Some Franciscan fathers pursued the work and actually had about 44 mission stations by 1634. But the failure to find riches, the Spanish preoccupation with the south/central America regions, and the lessening of Spanish authority in general would combine with native hostility and difficult climate to minimize this work. The Catholic mission work could hardly be called a success in the east and southeast.
- (4) In the northeast the picture was somewhat different. After Cartier's exploration of 1534, considerable work was attempted among the Hurons and the Iroquois. De Brebeuf was the prime worker among the Hurons after 1625 and by 1640 had established five "chapels". The massacre of Christian Hurons in 1659 and the martyrdom of de Brebeuf himself, set this work back considerably.