



Most Rev. Augustin Verot

Born: May 23, 1805, Le Puy, France

Ordained: September 20, 1828, Paris

Professor: St. Mary's College, Baltimore, 1830-1852

Named Vicar Apostolic of Florida: December 11, 1857

Episcopal Ordination: April 25, 1858, Baltimore

Named Bishop of Savannah: July 14, 1861

Named Bishop of St. Augustine: March 11, 1870

Died: June 10, 1876, St. Augustine



Augustin Verot, the first bishop of the Diocese of St. Augustine, was looking forward to a quiet retirement after a career in academia when he was thrust into the role of missionary bishop of the territory of Florida during one of the most divisive eras in the nation's history.

The son of a French lace dealer, Verot planned on a life in academia when in 1828 he joined the Sulpician Order, which educated seminarians. But he soon found himself headed for the mission field in America, where he taught mathematics and the physical sciences at St. Mary's College, Baltimore, for more than 20 years.

Despite his protests that at the age of 52 he was an old man – he was deaf in one ear and almost toothless – Verot was named vicar apostolic of Florida in 1857 and a year later ordained a bishop. Florida was a special challenge because the 1,300 souls in his care were clustered at opposite ends of Florida. He had only three priests to cover two parishes, St. Augustine and Immaculate Conception in Jacksonville, and six missions, Mandarin, Palatka, Mayport, Fernandina Beach, Middleburg, and Key West. He immediately returned to France and recruited six priests.

In 1861, Verot was named bishop of Savannah, adding the 8,000 Catholics in the state of Georgia to his flock. He must have accepted the crozier with a heavy heart. He knew he would be a wartime bishop. And he gained national attention and the moniker, “rebel bishop,” when he delivered a robust defense of the Confederacy and the institution of slavery, but not the mistreatment of slaves. Though he was not the only bishop to

*“He was a man who literally died in harness,
who succumbed to sickness only when
he succumbed to death. And after 50 years’ sacerdotal life,
he descended below the horizon without a single cloud to darken his fair name.”*

Bishop James Gibbons, who later became a cardinal

support the Confederacy, Verot's remarks were quoted in the *New York Times* and received national attention.

On January 4, 1861, in response to President James Buchanan's call for a day of prayer and fasting, Verot preached a sermon that would be widely quoted in the North and South.

“Servitude is legitimate, lawful, approved by all laws and consistent with practical religion and true holiness of life in masters who fulfill those conditions,” Verot said.

He then laid out the “false and unjust principles of abolitionism” that were undermining the economy of the South. He also called for the humane treatment of slaves, including their right to marry and practice their religion, and legal protection for free Negroes.

It was a long four years for the divided nation, including Verot's diocese. In Florida, Union troops burned down Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Jacksonville and pillaged the church on Amelia Island.

But throughout the war, Verot continued to minister to Catholics – bereaved families, the wounded of both armies and the imprisoned, including the Union soldiers held at the infamous Andersonville, S.C., prison camp. Verot traveled by horseback across his far-flung diocese to hear confessions, celebrate Mass and administer the last sacraments.

After the war, the rebel bishop now urged Catholics “to put away all prejudice” and threw himself into the task of rebuilding.

Verot also addressed a new need – the education and evangelization of thousands of freed slaves. He again turned to his native country for help, recruiting eight Sisters of St. Joseph from his hometown of Le Puy to establish a school for black children in St. Augustine. St. Joseph Academy was the seed that would blossom into a statewide parochial school system.

In 1870, the Vatican accepted his recommendation to separate Florida into its own diocese and named him its first bishop. But something even more important happened to Verot that year – he joined the American delegation to Vatican I.

The Vatican's first council in 300 years was called to address issues facing the modern church – materialism, science, and papal authority. Verot had strong opinions about all of them and shared them with his brother bishops in several lengthy speeches.

His presentations earned him the epithet “Enfant terrible.” As a man of science, he candidly defended the role of science, even when its findings contradicted the Bible. As a bishop from a predominantly Protestant country, he argued strenuously against adding infallibility to papal authority, saying it would undermine the church's evangelization in America. When the councils declared the pope infallible in matters of faith and morals, Bishop Verot accepted the council's decision.

After the council, Verot returned to St. Augustine and spent the final years of his life in the new diocese. By the time of his death in 1876, 10,000 Florida Catholics worshipped in 20 parishes served by 11 priests.