

Winter 2026

Newsletter of the Texas Catholic Historical Society

Texas Catholic Historian





Letter from the Editor

Since our last edition of the newsletter, I have taken some time to reflect on the past year. We lost Pope Francis, we welcomed Pope Leo XIV, some of us toured churches in Texas, and I passed my qualifying exams. In sum, it's been a year of change. Change has also impacted this edition of the newsletter. You will notice a condensed version. Still, I want to showcase the highlights of the Painted Churches Tour and events that happened last year. I am also eager to share some of the insights I gained at the American Catholic Historical Association earlier this year. Many of our TCHS members also attended. See you in the next newsletter!

-Gabby

Archivist's Corner

During the Texas 89th Legislature's Regular Session, I testified in support of HB 4103, a bill to expand the Eyes of Father Margil site within the Lanana Creek Trail in Nacogdoches.

The bill also proposed transferring the park's status from a city to a state park. Earlier this year, Bishop Gregory Kelly of Tyler designated the Eyes of Father Margil Park as a pilgrimage site for the Jubilee 2025 Pilgrim of Hope celebration. One of the events attributed to Margil, and associated with the park's spring, occurred in the Nacogdoches area during a period of drought. After a night of prayer, Margil woke the next morning and led a group to a rock inside a dry creek bed. While praying, Margil tapped the rock with his staff, and two springs of water gushed forward. Other miracles attributed to Margil include traveling long distances on foot in a short period, levitating during prayer, and escaping a fire without sustaining any burns. Unfortunately, HB 4103 remained pending in the House Committee on Culture, Recreation & Tourism and was not presented for a vote during this legislative session.

In addition to HB 4103, Margil remains a revitalized figure for East Texas Catholics as Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Nacogdoches is in the process of reopening Margil's canonization cause. In 1836, Pope Gregory XVI declared Margil "Venerable," and in the 1930s, Archbishop José Orozco y Jiménez of Guadalajara was the last to reopen Margil's canonization cause. Currently, I am scanning material within the Spanish and Mexican Manuscript collection at the Catholic Archives of Texas from the late 18th century, 1830s, and 1930s for the Margil canonization committee. The committee hopes to translate the Italian and Latin records from earlier causes and is seeking all available primary source material from Margil.

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Church, High Hill
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Brown Bag Events 2025

The Establishment of the Unión Nacional Sinarquista in Texas and the United States, 1940-1941

In February 2025, Nathan Ellstrand (San Diego State University) shared their paper on the Unión Nacional Sinarquista's presence in the United States. Using *El Sinarquista*, the UNS's newspaper, Nathan shed light on the expansion of the UNS into the United States--Texas, California, and Chicago. Gaining support from the US government, the UNS also gained support among the National Catholic Welfare Conference and conservative Catholics throughout the country. Nathan contends that UNS's ideology reached different parts of the United States because of their use of media--poems, periodicals, and songs. During its short time in Texas, and the United States, the UNS created structure and community. Maggie Elmore (Baylor University) provided commentary.

“Bachiller Pedro Fuentes: A Young Priest on a Wild Frontier, 1771-1790

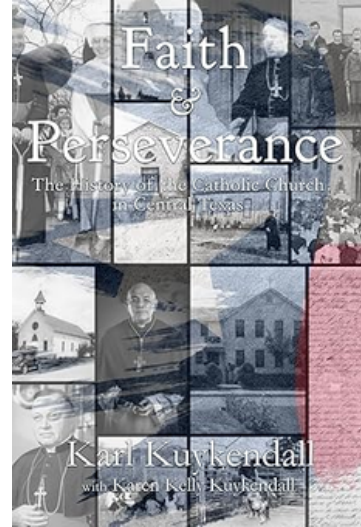
In May 2025, Jesús “Frank” de la Teja (Texas State University) shared their paper on Father Pedro Fuentes. Frank points out that Father Fuentes has been left out of the historiography of Spanish Texas because much of Texas history focuses on the missionary church. Even with sources like Carlos E. Castañeda's *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas*, archival materials have the potential to neglect lived religion thus contributing to an incomplete history. Therefore, Frank sets to correct this by reconstructing Father Fuentes's career as pastor of San Fernando de Béxar. Using baptismal records between Father Fuentes's arrival in San Antonio in 1771 and his departure in 1790, Frank reveals the diverse community Fr. Fuentes served and the priest's rocky relationship with it. Still, Frank leaves this part of Fr. Fuente's life as a point of departure for further research on his impact of those he pastored and taught. Fr. Bob Wright OMI (Oblate School of Theology) provided commentary.



Annual Meeting 2025

Book Launch

Karl Kuykendall talked to us about their publication, *Faith & Perseverance: The History of the Catholic Church in Central Texas*. Christopher J. Wolfe (University of Saint Thomas Houston) gave commentary.



Faith & Perseverance:

The History of the Catholic Church in Central Texas

By Karl Kuykendall and Karen Kelly Kuykendall

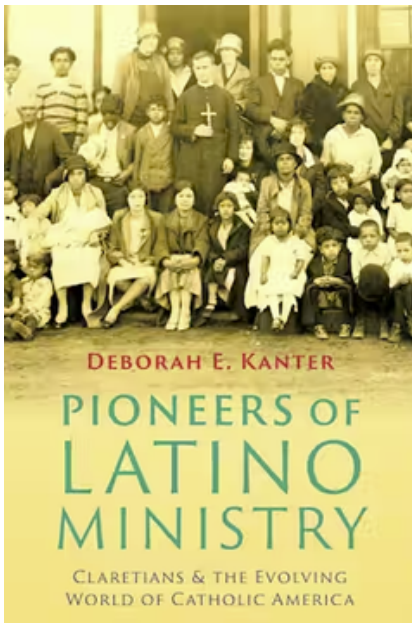
Painted Churches Tour

After the annual meeting, a handful of us went on a tour of the painted churches. Of course, we had to stop for kolaches at Hruška's Store & Bakery (10 out of 10 recommend) alongside the State Highway 71 in La Grange, TX before making the drive to the churches. Our expert tour guide was Certified Heritage Interpreter Ted Eubanks.

Our first stop was St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Ammannsville, Texas. Its white exterior blended into the morning's cloudy sky. In contrast, pale pink walls adorned the inside of the church. Our second stop was Sts. Cyril and Methodius Church in Dubina. Here, the walls were a bright sky blue. The hand-painted gold stars made this church enchanting. Our third stop was St. Mary Catholic Church in High Hill. And while the outside of the church was simple, the inside was anything but ordinary. The ornate details reminded me of the baroque churches in Mexico. Even with all intricate details throughout, the painted portions of the church were still stunning and held their own. After a quick lunch break, we drove to our last stop, St. Mary's Church of the Assumption in Praha. The church interior was richly adorned with white and gold detailing throughout, reflecting and amplifying the natural light.

After a long day of walking, driving, and observing, we returned to the Diocese of Austin Pastoral Center. My writing cannot do justice to the beautiful churches, so I attached some of my favorite pictures at the end of this newsletter. Enjoy!

TCHS Member News



*Pioneers of Latino Ministry:
Claretians and the Evolving World of Catholic America*
by Deborah E. Kanter

ACHA 2026 - Chicago, IL

In January, Gabby Perez (UCLA) presented a paper, "A Chicano Response to Vatican II: Patrick F. Flores and His Ministry of Liberation," on a panel entitled, "Mexican American Catholics in Texas Before and After Vatican II." Deborah E. Kanter, author of *Chicago Católico: Making Catholic Parishes Mexican*, was also on the panel presenting on their recent publication, *Pioneers of Latino Ministry Claretians and the Evolving World of Catholic America*. The panel also had Amirah Orozco (University of Notre Dame) present their paper entitled, "The Mexican American Cultural Center in 1972-87: Virgilio Elizondo and Reception of Vatican II in the United States."

Selena Aleman (Catholic Archives of Texas) presented a paper, "Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe's Divided City," on the panel entitled, "Displacement and Dislocation in Mexican American Ethno-Catholic Spaces in Urban Communities." Additionally, Rachel Smith (Diocese of Austin) presented their paper entitled, "In the Shadow of Christ the King: The Smelertown Community," on the same panel. John Catton (University of Texas at Austin) provided commentary.

TSHA 2026 - Irving, TX

For their recent 130th annual conference, the Texas State Historical Association highlighted a panel featuring some of our members. "The Wild Country: Mesteñas and Fighting Bulls in Mexico and Texas," took place Friday March 6, 2026. Matthew Butler's presentation was, "From Veracruz to El Paso: Tom Lea's Search for Mexico's Brave Bulls." José Roberto Campos Cordero (University of Texas at Austin) presented, "Breaking Free: The Origins of the Borderlands' Wild Horses and Cows." Jesus F. de la Teja served as session chair for the panel.

TCHS Member News (continued)



The Carlos Castañeda symposium book is now under review for inclusion in the Vistas Series run by Texas A&M San Antonio, in conjunction with Texas A&M Press. Updates to follow.

A marker for Castañeda at his home in Austin, that Gabriel Ozuna and Selena Aleman submitted to the Texas Historical Commission through their Undertold historical marker project, has been approved. This will be the first historical marker for Castañeda in the state, adding to his legacy of being the namesake for the main library at UT Austin and an elementary school in McAllen.

Have News
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TCHS?

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Matthew Butler will be giving a talk, "JFK in Mexico: Catholicism, Memory, and Mourning Across Borders," at the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas on Sep. 10.

In mid March, Matthew Butler will go to Hebbbronville to give a talk on the history of the town's Franciscan convent and ex-seminary (Scotus College) in relation to the Mexican religious conflict.

The Scotus College museum is open to visitors Monday-Friday, 9:00am-4:00pm. Fr. Juan Jose Ibarra, OFM at the nearby Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, founded by the college, is leading a preservation project to restore Scotus. He's trying to get attention for the college through a book, speaker series, and a documentary to fundraise for the restoration.

Next year TCHS will return to TSHA with a panel on Texas and the US Southwest's role in the Cristero War, marking the conflict's centenary.

Upcoming Events



New Publications

*San Antonio and Its Missions:
Three Centuries of History,
Memory, and Heritage*
By Joel Daniel Kitchens



SAN ANTONIO AND ITS MISSIONS
THREE CENTURIES OF HISTORY, MEMORY, AND HERITAGE
JOEL DANIEL KITCHENS



Anthony Head has a forthcoming book on the painted churches through Texas A&M University Press.

TCHS Annual Meeting 2026

There will be a deferred TCHS meeting this summer. More information to follow.

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<https://txcatholic.org/historical-society/>



St. Mary's Church, High Hill.



St. Mary's Church of the Assumption, Praha.



St. John the Baptist Catholic Church, Ammansville.



Sts. Cyril and Methodius Church, Dubina.