“In a masterful survey of research on Catholicism in the South, Woods has done for that region what James Hennesey did for the Catholic Church in the United States in American Catholics.”—Fr. Gerald P. Fogarty, SJ, University of Virginia

“This is a book we have long needed. Over the last four decades, the history of the evangelical tradition in the South has been discovered and much written about, but the Catholic dimension of southern religious history has lagged behind in the historiography. Finally, here is a synthesis of almost three centuries of the Catholic Church in the region. The book is broad in scope, deeply researched, with attention to institutional history as well as popular faith, clearly written, and fully conversant with the secondary literature.”—John B. Boles, Rice University

No Christian denomination has had a longer or more varied existence in the American South than the Catholic Church. The Spanish missions established in Florida and Texas promoted Catholicism, which was also the dominant religion among French settlers in Louisiana. Until the mid-nineteenth century, most American Catholics lived south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Anti-Catholic prejudice was never as strong in the South as in the North or Midwest and was rare in the region before the twentieth century.

James Woods’s sweeping history employs a dynamic integration of a wide variety of secondary accounts and original research to create a compelling new interpretation of southern Catholicism. Stretching from the first European settlement of the continent through the early Republic, the Civil War, and Reconstruction to the end of the Spanish-American War, this work explores the unique ethnic and racial diversity of a religion that some Protestants refused to acknowledge as Christian well into the twentieth century.

Woods pays particular attention to church/state relations, mission work and religious orders, the church and slavery, immigration to the South, and the experience of Catholicism in a largely Protestant region. He highlights the contributions of southern prelates such as John England of Charleston, who first wrote thoughtfully on church/state relations in a free society, and Bishop Edward Fitzgerald of Little Rock, who was the only English-speaking bishop to vote against papal infallibility at the first Vatican Council in 1870.

Spanning nearly four centuries, A History of the Catholic Church in the American South, 1513–1900 reveals the creation of a rich tapestry of faith shared by southerners of many different origins, races, and social classes.

James M. Woods, professor of history at Georgia Southern University, is author of Mission and Memory: A History of the Catholic Church in Arkansas and Rebellion and Realignment: Arkansas’ Road to Secession.

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A History of the Catholic Church in the American South, 1513–1900
A History of the Catholic Church in the American South, 1513–1900

James M. Woods
This book is lovingly dedicated to my children:
Matthew, Theresa, and Lydia.

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Fr. Abram J. Ryan
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Introduction

During the late summer and early fall of 1878, a yellow fever epidemic struck the lower Mississippi River valley, and panic spread throughout the region. Cities like Memphis, Tennessee, and Grenada and Vicksburg, towns on the Mississippi River, were also afflicted. Holly Springs, Mississippi, a community just over forty miles southeast of Memphis, which had escaped the disease before, was now suddenly struck by this terrifying plague. While most citizens fled, the Marshall County Courthouse was turned into a hospital for both the sick and the dying. Serving in this make-shift facility were six women of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, a Catholic religious order founded in Kentucky earlier that century. The sisters had been in Holly Springs for only a decade. Once the first frosts came in early November, the disease’s rampage subsided and citizens returned. When the townspeople returned, they discovered that all six sisters had perished, apparently dying between September 22 and October 11. Not all, however, proved as unselfish as the nuns. One historian wrote that “While the sisters’ services were irreproachable, without thought of personal reward, others volunteered as nurses for financial gain. They risked death for profit, and many of their patients suffered from neglect or mistreatment.”¹ A doctor from Texas, R. M. Swearinger, had witnessed the nuns’ devotion and wrote their names on the wall at the courthouse. In the Hillcrest cemetery in Holly Springs, the sisters were buried together and a metal monument was placed over their graves. Their full names and ages: Sr. Stanislaus Morrissey, thirty-nine; Sr. Stella Fitzgerald, thirty-three; Sr. Margaret Kelly, forty-three; Sr. Corintha Mahoney, twenty-nine; Sr. Victoria Stafford, forty; and Sr. Laurentia Harrison, forty-seven.²
These six Catholic women were indeed part of “a tapestry of faith.” They represented a rich heritage of Roman Catholicism that had been present in the southern region since the sixteenth century. Unique in their religious garb, their celibacy, and their Catholicism, these women distinguished themselves by their bravery; indeed, they were clearly “martyrs of charity.” Some relatives on my father’s side are also buried in Hillcrest cemetery: an aunt and uncle, a grandmother, and my great-grandmother’s brother, Colonel Thomas J. Hardin, C.S.A., who was killed on the morning of May 12, 1864, at the battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse, Virginia. My mother was an Irish Catholic from Jersey City, New Jersey, right across New York City’s harbor. Raised as Roman Catholics in Little Rock, Arkansas, my siblings and I often visited our relatives in northern Mississippi. One of my aunts, Ms. Sue Graham, showed me the monument to these Holly Springs heroines. This was my first experience with the heritage of southern Catholicism.

Growing up Catholic in the American South meant understanding two important facts of life. One was that you were part of a very small religious minority; in Little Rock, Catholics had parochial schools, so many did not attend public schools. Yet in most towns in the South, Catholics were often a small minority within the public schools. The other fact of life was that, for the most part, the non-Catholics in the region were kind and devoted to their Protestant religion. My own aunt was a sincere and dedicated Methodist woman of deep faith and love. She always treated her Catholic nephews and nieces with the highest respect. During vacations, when our parents left us with her in Coahoma, Mississippi, she dutifully brought us to St. Elizabeth’s Catholic Church in nearby Clarksdale.

Any account of southern Catholics must confront the fact that Catholics have been a small, mistrusted minority for much of the past two centuries. Twentieth-century historians who witnessed the anti-Catholicism directed against Al Smith and John Kennedy correctly located much of this antagonism within the South; consequently, a conventional opinion arose of a benighted, backward region, steeped in racial and religious (specifically anti-Catholic) prejudice. Following the English Reformation, Protestants viewed colonial Catholics with deep hostility and suspicion, an attitude that carried over into the developing American South. Except for the era of the Know-Nothings in the 1850s, and animosity to a growing Irish presence in cities such as New Orleans, Louisville, and Baltimore, Catholics fared a little better below the Mason-Dixon Line. While anti-Catholic riots occurred in both North and South during the antebellum era, church and convent burnings were narrowly averted in four southern cities; however, Catholic
institutions were actually torched in several northern states. Even in the late nineteenth century, the anti-Catholic American Protective Association was primarily based in the Midwest, not the South. As a minuscule minority in the region, the Catholics appeared far less threatening than they did in other areas of the United States. Contempt for Catholicism certainly existed in the largely evangelical Protestant South prior to 1900, yet it need not be exaggerated.

Yet in attempting to establish Catholics’ place in southern history, there is a strange lacuna. As any scholar of the South knows, there are many significant books and articles on religion in the region. Even that general observation is an understatement when you look at the historiography of southern religion. However, works on southern Catholicism are quite sparse when compared with those concerning other religions, especially Protestant Christianity. This is to be expected, as Protestants played such an important role in southern history. For much the same reason that Protestants are covered, Roman Catholic historians have tended to overlook their own denomination within the South. There might be cursory coverage of the early missionaries, yet most of their studies center, naturally, on those places where there were Catholics; and, until very recently, these are outside the American South. However, a recent overview of American Catholicism completely ignored the Spanish missions in the American Southeast and in Texas, and also French Catholics in Louisiana and along the Gulf coast. Except for a brief account of the contributions of Bishop John England in Charleston in the early nineteenth century and the mention of two prominent Confederate Catholics, Catholicism in the South prior to 1900 has been virtually ignored.

It is not that southern Catholicism has been totally overlooked. More than a half a century ago, Carlos E. Castañeda and Roger Baudier produced pioneering volumes on Catholicism in Texas and Louisiana, respectively. Building upon these earlier works, scholars have, since 1980, turned their focus to other southern states. Moreover, for the past half century, archaeologists and historians have made exciting discoveries regarding the Spanish missions, especially in the Southeast. I have used both those older works and the newer accounts to compose this narrative of southern Catholicism. If scholars are hoping for something jarring or provocative in these pages, they might be disappointed. This book is primarily a synthesis, using many earlier published works by other scholars. I have relied mainly, yet not exclusively, on Catholic writers. This work is a traditional, institutional narrative of Roman Catholicism from the colonial era until 1900. In a sense, then,
this book is certainly not new, but rather an attempt to write a history of the oldest Christian faith in the American South, Roman Catholicism. That story must blend aspects of a Spanish, French, and English heritage, and that blending is a major focus of this narrative.

One question we must address is what constitutes the American South. No one disputes that the former Confederate states qualify for that distinction, yet beyond those eleven? As this history indicates, Maryland and the Baltimore archdiocese played a significant role in shaping Catholicism in the South. Until 1820, most of the states south of Maryland and stretching to the Mississippi River belonged to the Baltimore see. While few now think of Maryland as southern, its sympathies were with the Confederacy at the start of the Civil War. Historian James L. Swanson, author of an outstanding account of the search for Lincoln’s assassin, has observed that “Maryland was as Confederate as a state could be without actually joining the Confederacy.” Moreover, both West Virginia and Kentucky were once part of Virginia, with Kentucky playing an important role in Catholicism west of the Appalachians and south of the Ohio River.

What of Missouri and Delaware, two slave states left out of this study? While Delaware had slaves, its large free black population, its economic ties to the Northeast, and its historical tie to Pennsylvania made it easier to exclude. The same is to be said of Missouri, which, surrounded on three sides by free states, was already moving away from the South by the time of the Civil War. The famous arch in St. Louis and its tie to the Missouri River pointed that state and metropolis more toward the American West, not the South. The archdiocese of St. Louis, for instance, covered the Midwest more than it did the South. This exclusion of Delaware and Missouri is affirmed in the present and popular perception of what constitutes the South. In 2007, articles highlighting the statistical growth of Catholics in the South appeared in St. Anthony’s Messenger, a popular Franciscan monthly published in Cincinnati, and Our Sunday Visitor, a Catholic weekly published in Huntingdon, Indiana. These periodicals contained maps of what they consider the South, which included the eleven Confederate states plus Kentucky and West Virginia. One article excluded Maryland and the other included it, yet neither map included Delaware or Missouri in the South.10

Both maps also included Oklahoma, making this study a fifteen-state overview of the South. Until the 1889 land rush, Oklahoma was known as the Indian Territory. This area was first given to Arkansas’s Little Rock diocese and was not given its own vicariate apostolic until 1891. Oklahoma’s
first Catholic prelate came from Belgium by way of the Mississippi diocese of Natchez. A diocese of Oklahoma City was not established until 1905, and Oklahoma’s early history would be titled *Bible Belt Catholicism*. Certainly Oklahoma fits within the South, but most of the Catholic activity there would have to wait until the twentieth century.

Southern Catholicism really has been “a tapestry of faith.” It is a unified cloth of religious doctrines and beliefs, to be sure, yet with many different colors and hues spread across its texture. Some episodes or events may be brighter or darker than others, but they all form a part of this overall, widespread “blanket” of southern Catholicism, which now spans almost five centuries. This book condenses the narrative from its beginning to the end of the nineteenth century. My hope is that this book will make a contribution to southern religious history and American Catholic historiography.
I. The Colonial Context, 1513–1763
On the Saturday after Easter, April 2, 1513, Juan Ponce de León first sighted the coast of what would become the United States and part of the American South. He was not, however, the first European to see these shores. For at least a decade, slavers operating out of La Española (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) occasionally searched for Indians on this continent to replace the indigenous people of that island who were dying from overwork and from diseases introduced by the Europeans. The next day, Ponce de León set foot on his new discovery. This thirty-nine-year-old former Spanish governor of Puerto Rico designated it La Isla de la Florida, as he believed this tierra to be an island. He thus gave the first permanent name to any portion of North America. This region would be a state within the United States and, for four years, a star in the constellation of the Confederacy. Ponce de León’s importance regarding religion is minimal, for although he was a Catholic, he brought with him no priest-missionaries to convert the natives. Exactly where he landed is still debated. One historian places it south of Cape Canaveral along Melbourne Beach, another at