

+ BISHOP EUGENE O'CONNELL

Bishop of the Vicariate of Marysville 1861—1868

Founding Bishop of the Diocese of Grass Valley 1868—1884

1815 – 1891

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Born in the parish of Kingscourt, County Cavan, Ireland on June 15, 1815, Eugene O'Connell was the eldest of four children. He attended the diocesan seminary at Navan and at Maynooth in Dublin. He was ordained a priest at Maynooth on May 21, 1842. Father O'Connell taught at the seminary in Navan from 1843 to 1846 and then transferred to the seminary of All Hallows College, Dublin in 1846. He witnessed the desperate famine years of 1845-1848 in Ireland.

In August 1850, the newly appointed bishop of Monterey, California, Bishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany, visited All Hallows Seminary on his way from Rome to California and pleaded for volunteers to help him start the new Diocese of Monterey. Father O'Connell was touched by the words of Bishop Alemany and volunteered to give three years of service to the new diocese.

O'Connell left Ireland by ship and passed the Isthmus of Nicaragua on April 9, 1851, arriving in San Francisco on July 1. He was appointed pastor of Mission Santa Inez, now located in the city of Solvang, forty miles north of Santa Barbara. He was put in charge of the diocesan seminary which was located at the mission. He had to learn Spanish in order to minister to his Native American Indian parishioners and to teach his Spanish speaking seminarians.

When Bishop Alemany returned from the First Plenary Council of Baltimore, knowing that his huge diocese was about to be divided with the addition of the northern portion of California, he transferred Father O'Connell to San Francisco and appointed him to Saint Francis Church on Vallejo Street from November 1852 to September 1853. On July 23, 1853, the Archdiocese of San Francisco was established with Bishop Alemany as the first archbishop.

In September 1853, Archbishop Alemany assigned Father O'Connell to Mission Dolores as pastor and established Saint Thomas Seminary at Mission Dolores with six Spanish speaking seminarians. O'Connell was both the rector and professor of the seminary. The following year Father O'Connell was recalled to All Hallows College in Ireland. He left San Francisco in May 1854 and was appointed Dean of All Hallows. He lived the quiet life of a seminary professor for six years and California became a distant memory of the past. But that would be a temporary respite.

Archbishop Alemany petitioned Rome to divide his archdiocese and to create a new diocese in the northern portion of the state. On September 23, 1860 Rome made the division at the 39th parallel, creating a provisional diocese called a vicariate with Marysville as the See city. Archbishop Alemany sent to Rome a list of three names of his recommendations for bishop of the new vicariate. In first place was Father James Croke, Alemany's Vicar General and pastor of Old Saint Mary Cathedral in today's Chinatown. Next was Father Eugene O'Connell, professor at All Hallows College, Dublin who was deemed by Alemany as "extremely worthy." In third place and deemed as "worthy" was Father Thomas Foley, secretary to the archbishop of Baltimore. In late October, Father O'Connell received a letter from Pope Pius IX appointing him bishop of the new Vicariate of Marysville.

In November, Bishop-Elect O'Connell left for Rome to plead with the Pope to be released from his appointment. In an audience with Pope Pius IX the Holy Father insisted that O'Connell accept. Eugene O'Connell's reply to the Pope was: "Holy Father, I am condemned to the mines." He was consecrated bishop in All Hallows Seminary chapel on February 3, 1861 by Cardinal Paul Cullen, Archbishop of Dublin.

Bishop O'Connell left Ireland for California on March 14, 1861 and arrived in San Francisco via Panama on April 24. On May 4, he and Archbishop Alemany arrived in Marysville by steam ship from San Francisco and the following day, Sunday, May 5, the archbishop installed O'Connell as bishop of the Vicariate of Marysville in Saint Joseph Cathedral, Marysville.

Photo by John E Boll 2012



St Joseph Church, the First Cathedral of the Vicariate of Marysville

Bishop O'Connell was the overseer of a territory that extended from the 39th parallel to the Oregon border, from the Pacific Ocean to the Rocky Mountains, including all of Northern California, Nevada and part of Utah. He had six parishes and six priests. This territory was as large as the empire of France, bigger than all of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales together.

His first visitation by stage coach took him from Marysville to Weaverville and on to Yreka, then back to Marysville and on to Grass Valley and Downieville. He established his first parish, Saint Joseph in Forest Hill, on July 14, 1861. Today, this is the parish of Saint Joseph in Auburn.

Bishop O'Connell's chief focus was the recruitment of priests from All Hallows Seminary and

providing money to pay for their education and transportation from Ireland to Marysville. In May 1862 he established the parish of Saint Mary in the Mountains in Virginia City and appointed Father Patrick Manogue as its founding pastor. On March 10, 1864 he wrote that he now had eleven priests and nine parishes, two of which were in Nevada.

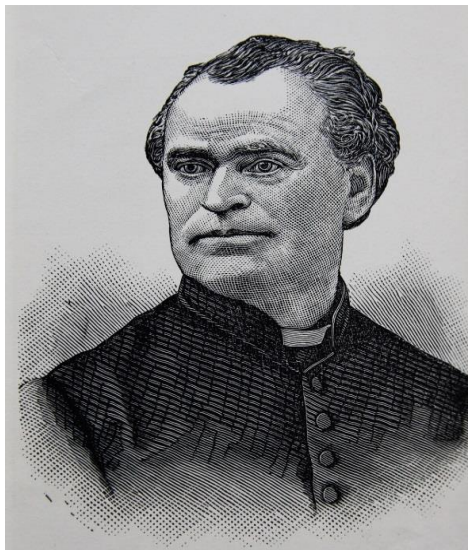
In 1863 he brought the Sisters of Mercy to Grass Valley and in 1865 opened an orphanage there. He established the parish of Saint Bernard in Eureka in May 1864 and in May 1866 appointed Father Edward Kelly as the first pastor of Salt Lake City. In 1865 he enlarged Saint Joseph Cathedral in Marysville with a forty foot addition.

Father Thomas Crinnian, the first of his priests to die on January 2, 1867, was buried in Saint Joseph Cemetery, Marysville. Two more priests died soon after, Father Jeremiah O'Sullivan on April 14, 1867 and Father Florian Schweninger on July 28, 1868. Three were ordained at All Hallows on June 11, 1867 for service in the Vicariate of Marysville.

On March 3, 1868 the Holy See raised the Vicariate of Marysville to the dignity of a diocese, establishing the Diocese of Grass Valley. There were now fifteen parishes, eleven in California and four in Nevada and nineteen priests. Bishop O'Connell continued to keep his residence in Marysville. In October 1869 he left for Rome to participate in the First Vatican Council and did not return to his diocese until November 22, 1870.

During these years he supplied priests to serve the Native American Indians, the Italians, the French, the Germans and the railroad construction workers. The Indian mission was in Big Valley, Lake County. The German parish was in Marysville. The railroad parish gave birth to Truckee and Reno. He established Saint Joseph College in Rohnerville, today's city of Ferndale which is now part of the Diocese of Santa Rosa. This college opened in 1872 but was forced to close in 1879 because of a lack of students.

Bishop Elect Patrick Manogue



Bishop O'Connell continued to receive priests from All Hallows College in Ireland but he did not treat them with trust or respect. In long letters to Rome and to Ireland he lamented the drunken and self-indulgent clerics with which he was regularly afflicted. He moved his priests around the diocese like a chess player which caused some priests to abandon the diocese. From the late 1860s into the 1870's Bishop O'Connell's relationship with his priests deteriorated.

By 1872 Bishop O'Connell found the territory of the diocese too vast to administer effectively by himself and he began to petition Rome for a coadjutor bishop. Rome made two attempts to appoint a coadjutor but both nominees refused the appointment. Finally, on January 16 1881, Father Patrick Manogue, pastor of Virginia City, accepted the appointment as bishop and

was consecrated in San Francisco as coadjutor of Grass Valley. The diocese then had twenty-five parishes and thirty-one priest. In addition, fifteen of the parishes had thirty-two missions. There were also six convents of sisters and two orphanages, one in Grass Valley and the other in Virginia City.

Bishop O'Connell submitted his resignation to the pope and it was accepted on March 26, 1884. On that same day the pope appointed O'Connell Titular Bishop of Ioppe. He left Marysville in June of that year and went to Oakland to visit his brother. Bishop Patrick Manogue became the second bishop of the Diocese of Grass Valley upon O'Connell's retirement.

In November 1884, Bishop O'Connell attended the third Plenary Council of Baltimore together with his friend Archbishop Alemany. On February 17, 1886 he quietly observed his 25th anniversary as a bishop with the Dominican Fathers in Benicia. On May 16, 1886, Rome changed the southern boundary of the Grass Valley diocese to existing county lines and moved the See to Sacramento. By this act, Bishop Manogue became the first bishop of Sacramento.

In June 1886, Bishop O'Connell went to Los Angeles at the request of Bishop Francis Mora to fill in for him while he was in Europe. O'Connell resided at the Cathedral rectory in Los Angeles. In January 1890, Bishop O'Connell was appointed resident chaplain to the Immaculate Heart Sisters in Pico Heights, Los Angeles and on June 15, 1890 he observed his 75th birthday.

Bishop O'Connell died on December 4, 1891 and his Funeral Mass was celebrated at St Vibiana Cathedral in Los Angeles. His body was interred in the grounds of the Immaculate Heart Academy in Pico Heights where he had lived and served as chaplain, professor, confessor and friend to the sisters.

Nineteen years later the Immaculate Heart Sisters decided to extend the sanctuary of their chapel which made it necessary to exhume the body of Bishop O'Connell from the cemetery and move it to Old Calvary Cemetery in Los Angeles on November 16, 1910. Eleven years later, Bishop O'Connell's body was exhumed once again and moved to the priests' section of Calvary Cemetery on Whittier Boulevard.

In 1982 Bishop Francis Quinn approached the Archdiocese of Los Angeles about bringing the body of Bishop O'Connell back to Sacramento. With the help of Monsignor Francis Weber, Archivist of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, the archdiocese graciously allowed the body of Bishop O'Connell to be returned to Sacramento. In his September 29, 1981 letter to Bishop Quinn, Monsignor Weber wrote: "Bishop O'Connell lived in virtual poverty, due to the lack of cordiality on the part of his successor. He should have been buried with his people but there was no one to pay for that luxury in 1891."

The Diocese of Sacramento set into motion a plan to receive the body of Bishop O'Connell. A decision had to be made where to bury Bishop O'Connell's body; should it be Marysville, Grass Valley or Sacramento? St Joseph Parish declined the request because there was no appropriate place for the burial in Marysville. Grass Valley was deemed unsuitable because Bishop O'Connell had never lived in Grass Valley but remained in Marysville even after the Vicariate became the

Diocese of Grass Valley. Bishop Quinn and his advisers decided that Bishop O'Connell should be buried in the Bishops' Crypt at Saint Mary Cemetery in Sacramento where the other deceased bishops of the diocese have been laid to rest.

On Bishop O'Connell's final journey home to Sacramento, three celebrations were held. The first was a Memorial Mass at Old Mission Dolores in San Francisco where Bishop O'Connell had been pastor. This Mass was held on Saturday, May 29, 1982 at noon. Later that same day, Bishop O'Connell's body was taken to Saint Patrick Church in Grass Valley where it would lay in state in the former Cathedral of the Diocese of Grass Valley. After the last weekend Mass in Grass Valley, Bishop O'Connell's body was taken to Sacramento for the final Memorial Mass at Saint Mary Cemetery held on Memorial Day, May 31, at 10 AM. Bishop Francis Quinn presided at this Mass and was joined by Bishop Alphonse Gallegos and the priests of the diocese as concelebrants. Monsignor Francis Weber, Archivist of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, participated in the Memorial Mass and Monsignor John Dwyer, biographer of Bishop O'Connell, gave the homily.

At the conclusion of this final Memorial Mass, Bishop O'Connell's body was placed in a simple marble sarcophagus in the Bishops' Crypt at Saint Mary Cemetery mausoleum. The inscription on the sarcophagus reads as follows:

***The Very Reverend Eugene O'Connell
Vicar Apostolic of Marysville
First Bishop of the Diocese of Grass Valley
Alumnus of the College of St Patrick, Maynooth
Professor at the Missionary College of All Hallows, Dublin
Born in Ireland 1815 – Ordained Priest 1842
Consecrated Bishop 1861
Died in Los Angeles 1891
Merciful Lord Grant Him Rest***

After burial in Los Angeles for 91 years, the 76 year life journey of Eugene O'Connell finally ended. He has returned home to his own diocese and his own people. The serenity of seminary life at All Hallows give way to a new and dynamic era of struggle and growth as he became the founding bishop of a new diocese thousands of miles away from the land of his birth. As the bishop "condemned to the mines," Eugene O'Connell became a man of faith and trust in God, a disciple of Christ, a servant and priest, seminary professor and dean, missionary to the new frontier and founding bishop of the Diocese of Grass Valley. Having come full circle, he has returned home at last.

May God Grant him Eternal Peace.



From the Diocesan Archives

Bishop Eugene O'Connell's Coat of Arms

"In you, O Lord, I have Hoped"