



+ BISHOP ROBERT JOHN ARMSTRONG

Priest of the Diocese of Seattle 1910 - 1928
Fourth Bishop of the Diocese of Sacramento 1929 - 1957
1884 – 1957

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Fr John E Boll, Diocesan Archivist

We now begin the era of personal memory when our senior priests and laity of the diocese knew or worked with Bishop Robert Armstrong, the fourth Bishop of Sacramento. I remember the day when Bishop Armstrong confirmed me at my home parish in Placerville in 1955 when I was in the sixth grade.

If it be true that only the humble deserve to rule, then Robert Armstrong, by his simplicity, humility and fun loving way, was well fitted for the ministry of bishop of the Diocese of Sacramento. He was the son of William and Margaret (Ryan) Armstrong, born in San Francisco in 1884. His family moved to the Pacific Northwest and settled in the Spokane area. Bob attended Gonzaga High School and University in Spokane and then went to Montreal's Grand Seminaire for his seminary training under the direction of the Sulpician Fathers. He was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Seattle on December 10, 1910 by Bishop Edward John O'Dea.

During his early years as a priest, Fr Armstrong was a curate at Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Spokane. In 1914 he was assigned to Yakima as pastor of the newly established parish of St Paul. There he built a church, rectory and school and remained as pastor for 15 years. "Father Bob," as he was affectionately called by his parishioners, was admired and loved and he achieved an enviable reputation as "a magnetic and dynamic personality, a man's man, a builder, humble, zealous, a friend of the poor." In short, he was an ideal parish priest.

Shortly after the death of Bishop Patrick Keane in Sacramento in 1928, Pope Pius XI appointed Father Armstrong as bishop of Sacramento. He was ordained a bishop on March 12, 1929 at St James Cathedral in Seattle by Bishop Edward O'Dea of Seattle with co-consecrators Bishop Mathias Clement Lenihan of Great Falls and Bishop Joseph Francis McGrath of Baker City.

During his 28 years as bishop of Sacramento, Bishop Armstrong built more churches, schools and religious facilities than had been built in the entire previous history of the Sacramento Diocese. In addition to opening 21 chapels and 31 mission churches, he increased the number of parishes from 52 to 79. During his administration, 21 schools were built and Catholic school enrollment increased from 3,000 to 11,500.

Early in 1930, Bishop Armstrong inaugurated a diocesan newspaper to succeed the previously privately owned *Catholic Herald* which had ceased publication in December 1929. Under his leadership, religious activities continued to increase far beyond anyone's expectation. The qualities most remembered by the priests and people of the Diocese of Sacramento about Robert Armstrong are his human qualities of charity, patience and humility. He was the kind of person who, when he saw a group of youth playing ball, would join them in the game. He was, no doubt, seen as the friendly priest in the neighborhood who was a good ball payer.



Photo from the Diocesan Archives

Bishop Armstrong's Silver Jubilee Mass as Bishop of Sacramento

In the Diocesan Archives, there are many pictures of Bishop Armstrong showing him camping in the mountains of Northern California and fishing or hunting. He always loved the annual trip north to the Ellis Louie Ranch near Weed when the priests of the northern counties would gather with him for a few days. He was gregarious and fun-loving, ruddy in complexion, rugged in character yet generous of heart. He loved the beauty of the mountains and he took pride in his garden which produced excellent fruits and vegetables. At the same time, he was a man who shunned everything pretentious or artificial.

In the mid 1950s, Bishop Armstrong was diagnosed with cancer which caused his death in 1957. Knowing of Armstrong's deteriorating health, Pope Pius XII appointed Los Angeles auxiliary bishop Joseph Thomas McGucken coadjutor bishop of Sacramento on October 26, 1955. Two years later, after the death of Bishop Armstrong on January 14, 1957, Bishop McGucken became Bishop of Sacramento.

Bishop Armstrong lived 73 years, 46 as a priest and 27 of those as a bishop. During those years he saw the beginning of the 20th century, experienced World War I, the Great Depression, World War II and the Korean conflict. He also saw the tremendous growth of the diocese in the post-war years of 1946 to 1957. It had been a time of dynamic growth for California and tremendous change for the world. For his part, he left the world a better place.

After his Funeral Mass in the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, the body of Bishop Armstrong was laid to rest in the Bishops' Crypt at St Mary Cemetery in Sacramento. He was a priest and bishop loved by his people even to this day. The senior priests among us who knew him still tell

humorous stories about Bishop Bob who never lost his human touch and who was a man who loved his priesthood and happily served the people entrusted to his pastoral care. May Bishop Robert John Armstrong enjoy the fruits of his labors in the glorious Kingdom of Glory!



Photo from Diocesan Archives

Funeral Mass for Bishop Armstrong at the Sacramento Cathedral



From the Diocesan Archives

Bishop Robert Armstrong's Coat of Arms

"All for the Sake of the Elect"