



+ Bishop Eugene O'Connell

Bishop of the Vicariate of Marysville 1861 - 1868
Bishop of the Diocese of Grass Valley 1868 – 1884
Died in Los Angeles on December 4, 1891



**Tomb of Bishop Eugene O'Connell
Saint Mary Cemetery, Sacramento**

SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

Vol 1

No 2

Father John E Boll, Diocesan Archivist

On Memorial Day, May 31, 1982, the remains of Bishop Eugene O'Connell, bishop of the Vicariate of Marysville and founding bishop of the Diocese of Grass Valley, were returned to Sacramento for reburial at the Bishops' Crypt of St Mary Cemetery. The final concelebrated Memorial Mass was held at the cemetery that day and the homilist was Monsignor John Dwyer, the biographer of Bishop O'Connell. Dwyer's book, *Condemned to the Mines*, is the story of Bishop O'Connell's life. The homily Monsignor Dwyer gave that day follows.

THE HOMILY

Today is certainly an historic day. Bishop Eugene O'Connell has come home. It is certainly a long time ago since the first day he set foot in Northern California way back in 1851. The story that led up to his coming here as the bishop of this area was indeed a peculiar one but one which shows clearly the hand of Divine Providence.

I would like you to go with me in imagination to the year 1848, just at the turn of the New Year. All of California belonged to Mexico; it is Spanish in its language and culture. The 21 Missions established by the Franciscan Friars dot the land from San Diego to Mission Dolores with two more missions just across the bay in Sonoma and San Rafael. But they have been confiscated and their wealth of cattle, sheep, crops and learning turned over to avaricious administrators who cared little for the Indians or the friars for that matter. The whole mission system had deteriorated. North of San Francisco there were few white men, scattered all along the fertile valleys occupying huge ranches given to them by the Mexican government, one of which was that of Captain John Sutter at what was called Sutter's Fort in present day Sacramento. The status of religion wasn't much better. There had been no bishop since 1842 when Bishop Garcia Diego y Moreno had died. There were only the few scattered Franciscans, most of them either old or ill.

At the beginning of 1848 two extraordinary things happened which were destined to change the face of California. On January 24, 1848, gold was discovered at Coloma by James Marshall, one of John Sutter's men. It took a full year for the word to reach the East Coast of America and for men to prepare for the now famous Gold Rush of 1849, but that single event was to touch off one of the greatest migrations in history. The second event occurred just a few days later, when by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico ceded to the United States a huge territory north of the Rio Grande which included all of California. With the advent of the Gold Rush in 1849 and the fact that California now belonged to the United States, the American bishops became interested in the care of the thousands of Americans who were flooding California.

The church had to minister to them and they were not Spanish speaking but English speaking. There was need for a bishop who was bi-lingual, Spanish and English. Rome found such a man in

the provincial of the Dominican Fathers in Ohio, and so on June 29, 1850 Joseph Alemany was consecrated in Rome as bishop and sent to California to administer a diocese which stretched from the Oregon border to Mexico and from the Pacific to the Rocky Mountains.

On his way from Rome to the California which he had never seen, Bishop Alemany of Monterey in California stopped at All Hallows Seminary in Dublin, Ireland and pleaded for volunteers to come and help him in California. One of the professors, Father Eugene O'Connell, was struck by the visiting bishop's plea and volunteered to come to California to assist the bishop. Father O'Connell left Ireland on April 9, 1851 and set sail for California. It took him three months of traveling to get to California. He landed in San Francisco on July 1, 1851 and reported to Bishop Alemany who resided at St Francis Church on Vallejo Street, which was his temporary Cathedral.

Bishop Alemany needed a priest in Mission Santa Inez (located at present day Solvang) and so Father O'Connell was appointed pastor of that mission and instructed to open a seminary at the same place. In that territory the language of both the Mexicans and the Indians was Spanish and Father O'Connell knew not a word of Spanish so that became his first task. He was able to preach in it within a year's time.

When Bishop Alemany went back to Baltimore for the First Plenary Council of the American Bishops he explained to them the vastness of his diocese and asked that it be divided. He further explained that the southern half was mainly Spanish speaking, whereas the northern half where the gold seekers had settled was English speaking.

The fathers of the Council assured him that his request would receive their full approval and be sent on to Rome for its attention. When he returned from the Council, Bishop Alemany began to prepare for the split. He transferred Father O'Connell from Santa Inez to St Francis on Vallejo Street in November 1852. The division had been approved by Rome on July 23, 1853 when the Archdiocese of San Francisco was created and the southern part of the old diocese became the Diocese of Monterey/Los Angeles. Thus in September 1853, Archbishop Alemany sent Fr O'Connell to be pastor of Mission Dolores and founder of the first seminary of the archdiocese which the Dominican Archbishop named after St Thomas Aquinas who was also a Dominican. While at Mission Dolores Father O'Connell had six seminarians, all of them Spanish speaking; he was the rector and the sole teacher in that little seminary.

In May 1854, the seminary of All Hallows in Dublin summoned Father O'Connell to come home and much to the regret of the archbishop, he had to depart from Mission Dolores and go back to Ireland. But the archbishop did not forget the priest who in his own words "does more good" than all the others.

In 1860, six years later, the archbishop petitioned Rome once again to divide the archdiocese as its growth had made it necessary for him to be away from San Francisco too frequently. Rome agreed and on September 23, 1860 divided the archdiocese at the 39th parallel and created a diocese of missionary status called a vicariate with the See City in Marysville. The new vicariate

extended from the 39th parallel to the Oregon border and from the Pacific to the Rocky Mountains including all of Northern Nevada and also Salt Lake. But who was to be the new bishop? Although Father O'Connell had gone back to All Hallows and put California out of his mind, little did he dream that he would be returning as its bishop.

In October he received from Rome a letter informing him that he was the one chosen to be the bishop of Marysville. So much was he against the idea that he made a special trip to Rome to see Pope Pius IX and asked to get out of the appointment. When the Holy Father refused, Eugene O'Connell said "You mean I am condemned to the mines."

He arrived back in San Francisco on April 24, 1861 and came directly to Mission Dolores where the rector and pastor, Father Prendergast, had a warm welcome awaiting the newly consecrated bishop of Marysville. So that was the second time he had been welcomed at Mission Dolores.

Eugene O'Connell was installed on May 5, 1861 in his cathedral, St Joseph in Marysville, by Archbishop Alemany. Both of them had traveled there by boat, first on the Sacramento River and then up the Feather River in a steamer to Marysville. When the archbishop returned home, Bishop O'Connell had only six priests in six parishes scattered from the Klamath River to Weaverville to Yreka on the north, and Downieville and Grass Valley near Marysville.

His principal contribution to the Church in California during the next 23 years was populating the area with priests. His selection as the new bishop was indeed very providential; who could supply priests to this mission land better than the one who had been a professor at the seminary in Ireland? And so due to the influence of Bishop O'Connell, California, Nevada and even Salt Lake City were to receive their first priests all due to the care and concern and sacrifices of this bishop. He sent every penny of the meager support he received from the Propagation of the Faith back to Ireland to pay for the education of his priests and to pay their passage by ship and train from Ireland to California.

When Rome considered the missionary territory of Marysville was able to stand on its own feet as a diocese in 1868, the See church chosen for the new diocese was not Marysville but Grass Valley. Although Bishop O'Connell did not approve of Rome's choice, he was none the less the tireless bishop of Grass Valley from 1868 until his retirement in 1884.

During his tenure as bishop, the diocese grew from the original six until there were twenty-five parishes and thirty-one priests, six convents of sisters, two orphanages and 23 missions dependent on fifteen of the parishes. He himself visited every parish in the diocese at least every two years, and when he came he stayed for a week or more for the visitation. This toilsome traveling, at first by stagecoach, then by train and ship took him to such far flung parishes as Crescent City, Eureka and Mendocino City which he reached by ship from San Francisco; Chico, Red Bluff, and Yreka which he reached by stagecoach; Reno, Carson City and Virginia City which he reached by train.

After many pleadings to Rome he was given a coadjutor bishop in 1881 in the person of the former pastor of Virginia City, Bishop Patrick Manogue. Three years later Bishop O'Connell resigned and Bishop Manogue became the second bishop of Grass Valley. Seeing that the center of population had shifted, Bishop Manogue persuaded Rome to detach Sacramento from the Archdiocese and to move the 39th parallel boundary to county lines, and thus in 1886 was born the Diocese of Sacramento with Bishop Manogue as its first bishop. But every parish Manogue inherited had been established by Bishop O'Connell. That same year Bishop O'Connell retired to Los Angeles where he lived a happy and peaceful life until his death at the age of 76 on December 4, 1891. He lay in an obscure grave in Los Angeles under a stone which said on it simply these words: Rt. Rev. Eugene O'Connell, 1815-1891.

No one walking on that grave in the priests' plot in Los Angeles would ever dream that they were at the grave of the sacrificing missionary bishop who pioneered the founding of the church in all of northern California and Nevada. Finally he has come home. With the transfer today of his remains from Los Angeles to Sacramento, the last of California's bishops has come home. Archbishop Hanna was brought back from Rome where he died; Archbishop Alemany from Spain where he died, and now Bishop Eugene O'Connell. He will lie in the Bishops' Crypt in St Mary's Cemetery next to the first two bishops of Sacramento, Manogue and Grace, both of whom were brought here by Bishop O'Connell and both of whom received their various assignments as priests from him, and both of whom succeeded him as bishop of this vast territory. This is indeed a historic occasion, and we are privileged to be witnesses to it on this day.

On this weekend of Pentecost when we invoke in a special manner the Holy Spirit, let us pray fervently that the same Holy Spirit who inspired the choice of Eugene O'Connell to be the founding bishop, the one who populated this area with priests, Bishop Manogue to build the beautiful Cathedral which graces the State Capitol, Bishop Grace who ruled over this Diocese of Sacramento for twenty-five years, that this same Holy Spirit will inspire many new vocations from this territory to take the places of these giants among the bishops, giants which were raised up to match the mountains of California and in whose footsteps we walk today with gratitude.

**May Bishop Eugene O'Connell
Now Rest in Peace**