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BISHOP EUGENE O'CONNELL A TOUGH MAN FOR TOUGH TIMES

By Father John Dwyer, printed March 25, 1976 in the *Catholic Herald*

When Archbishop Alemany decided in 1859, after six years of trying to administer a diocese which stretched from San Jose to Oregon and from the Pacific Ocean to Utah, to ask Rome to divide the huge territory, he offered suggestions as to boundary lines and he also recommended who he thought would be the best candidate for bishop of the new diocese. It was Father Eugene O'Connell, at that time the Dean of All Hallows College in Dublin.

One wonders at first how this Spanish-born bishop in California would even know this Irish born seminary professor back in Dublin. But the Archbishop knew him well and admired him. They had met in September 1850, when Alemany stopped at All Hallows on his way to California and made a plea for priests to help him. The 35 year-old professor was the first to volunteer.

When he finally arrived in California on July 1, 1851, the Bishop of Monterey sent him to be pastor of Mission Santa Inez. To his amazement he found that the only one who spoke English there was the caretaker of the Mission. The bishop also established a "paltry seminary" at the Mission and put Father O'Connell in charge. Two years later, when California was divided for the first time and Alemany was about to move to San Francisco as Archbishop, he transferred Father O'Connell to Mission Dolores and along with him the seminary. When the flow of priests began to increase, All Hallows called Eugene O'Connell home and in July 1854, he sailed for Ireland with his memories of California, never expecting to see it again.

Now five years later, the Archbishop was suggesting to Rome that this same seminary professor be returned to California as a bishop. Rome acquiesced, and on September 23, 1860, made several decisions: The Archdiocese should be divided; the new section to the north should not be a diocese but a Vicariate Apostolic; the 39th parallel from the Pacific to the Colorado River should be the line that divided it from the Archdiocese; Marysville should be the new See City, and Eugene O'Connell the new bishop.

But this last item was not to Father O'Connell's liking. He didn't want to be a bishop, and to prove it he set out for Rome to talk Pope Pius IX out of the decision. When Pius IX said no, Eugene O'Connell obeyed, saying: "that means I am condemned to the mines."

He returned to All Hallows and was consecrated a bishop on February 3, 1861. He sought volunteers but found only one priest and one seminarian. They sailed for California on March 14, 1861, and finally arrived in San Francisco on April 24, 1861. On May 2, 1861, the two

bishops and the volunteer priest boarded the boat for Sacramento, and then the steamer for Marysville, setting foot in Marysville on Saturday, May 4, 1861. The next day, Sunday, Archbishop Alemany installed Bishop O'Connell in his new Cathedral, and on Monday boarded the "down boat" for San Francisco.

Bishop O'Connell found himself alone with his new responsibility, a vast territory with only six parishes and six priests: his own assistant Father Bernard Morris in Marysville; Father Dalton in Grass Valley; Father Cornelius Delahunty in Downieville; Father Thomas Crinion in Yreka; Father Patrick O'Reilly in Weaverville; and the Benedictine Father Florian Schwenninger in Sawyers Bar, and now his new recruit, Father Francis Joseph Blake who came with him.



Painting from the Diocesan Archives

+ Bishop Eugene O'Connell
Founding Bishop of the Vicariate of Marysville 1861

Worse still, he found the Marysville church in poor condition, a box like affair as wide and as high as it was long, and a miserable fly, mosquito and rat infested rectory which, he said, was "more tolerable to live outside than inside its wooden walls."

But Eugene O'Connell came to work, and he set about doing just that. He sent Father Morris off on a begging expedition to do something about raising funds to replace the decrepit house, and he himself set out to visit his six priests and parishes. First he went to Weaverville; then Yreka and Sawyers Bar. When he returned he visited Downieville and Grass Valley. He started a new rectory and rejoiced that he and Father Morris and the newly arrived Father John Griffin were able to move in on St Patrick's Day in 1862.

Meanwhile, he established a new parish, sending Father Blake to found St Joseph parish in Forest Hill on July 14, 1861. As fast as the new priests came, he established new parishes -- Virginia City in 1862 when Father Patrick Manogue arrived; Mendocino on the coast when the Franciscan Bernadine Sheehan came to the Vicariate in 1863; Eureka, California in the same year; and Gold Hill, Nevada in 1864, and Carson City, Nevada in 1865, and so on as fast as he could get the priests to accomplish his purposes.

Meanwhile the bishop was determined to do something about his Cathedral. In 1865 he began to improve it. He added a forty foot extension which included the present sanctuary and sacristies, and on the front he added a tower, a total expenditure of \$20,000, a goodly sum in those days. Yet so successful was his soliciting and that of Father Morris, that when finished he owed only \$9,000. In the same year he opened a boys school in the basement of the church, as the girls were being well taken care of by the Notre Dame Sisters.

In 1866 his concern extended as far as Salt Lake City which was in his diocese, so that he appointed Father Edward Kelly the first pastor. Meanwhile a call had come for the bishops of the USA to attend the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore. Eugene O'Connell and the Archbishop and Bishop Amat of Monterey left together on the Steamer Panama on August 18, 1866. He was gone until November 24, 1866. At the Council, the question of erecting Marysville into a diocese came up, as well as erecting a Vicariate in Colorado which would include Utah. At this meeting Bishop O'Connell favored the See being moved to Virginia City and he gave all the arguments in its favor.

In the final year of the Vicariate, the bishop had much sorrow. Father Crinion died on January 20, 1867; and Father Patrick O'Reilly died at sea in February. Yet this was offset by the joy of his ordaining young Lawrence Kennedy a priest in the Marysville Cathedral on November 1, 1867. Thus at the end of 1867, the bishop was able to report to Rome that he now had 15 parishes and 19 priests -- two on the coast: Eureka and Mendocino; three in the north: Yreka, Weaverville and Red Bluff; six in the central portion: Oroville, Marysville, Grass Valley, Nevada City, Downieville and Forest Hill; and four in the State of Nevada: Carson City, Virginia City, Austin and Gold Hill -- remarkable progress in less than seven years.