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BISHOP EUGENE O'CONNELL PIONEER BISHOP OF GRASS VALLEY

By Father John Dwyer, printed April 1, 1976 in the *Catholic Herald*

When Rome approved the decisions of the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore on March 3, 1868, the old Vicariate became a diocese but the new See City was to be Grass Valley, a decision that did not meet the approval of Bishop O'Connell. According to him it was "going from the greater to the lesser" because the mines were dying out at the time. Nevertheless the decision had been made: Grass Valley was the See. However, Bishop O'Connell partially won his point because Rome never compelled him to give up his residency in Marysville.

No sooner had he become the ordinary of Grass Valley than the summons came for the bishops of the world to come to Rome for the First Vatican Council. Meanwhile, the transcontinental railroad had been completed and when Bishop O'Connell left for Rome it was by train. When Archbishop Alemany and Bishop Amat arrived by train in Reno on October 7, 1869, Bishop O'Connell was waiting for them on the platform. The three prelates then journeyed together to New York where they boarded a ship for Europe.

Bishop O'Connell was gone from his diocese for a full year, returning to Grass Valley on November 22, 1870. His arrival at the Papal audience caused quite a stir as his gift for the Holy Father Pius IX was somewhat unusual. Denis J Oliver of the Grass Valley Diocese gave him a 300 pound ingot of silver. It required six papal guards to carry it to the Holy Father at the audience. Bishop O'Connell had an opportunity at the end of the Council to visit his beloved All Hallows before his return to California.

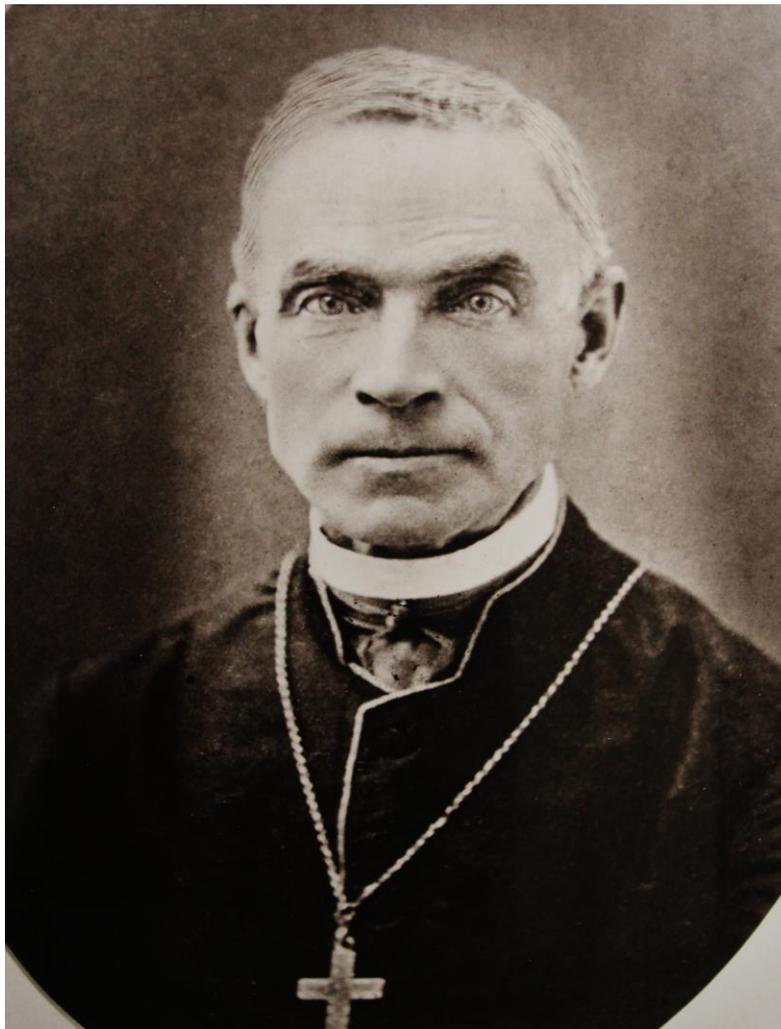
Meanwhile Bishop O'Connell continued to pay for the education of young priests at All Hallows, and as fast as they came, he populated the towns of the diocese with parishes and priests.

Thus at the end of 10 years in 1871, he was able to report that he had 22 parishes and 28 priests. The parishes were as follows: On the coast: Crescent City, Eureka, Rohnerville and Mendocino. In the north: Yreka; Weaverville, and Red Bluff. In the center: Colusa, Oroville, Marysville (2 parishes), Grass Valley, Nevada City, Forest Hill, Downieville and Truckee. In Nevada: Virginia City, Gold Hill, Carson City, Austin, Hamilton and Pioche.

There were now five convents of Sisters: the Notre Dame Sisters in Marysville and the Mercy Sisters in Grass Valley, and the Daughters of Charity in Virginia City. Likewise there had been foundations of Mercy Sisters in Yreka and also in Eureka.

In 1875, Bishop O'Connell was 60 years old, a remarkable age for those days. He now began to speak about getting old and needing a coadjutor. He always found that no one either in Rome or in Paris, which sent him the support he needed for the diocese, fully understood the vastness of the territory of the Grass Valley Diocese.

One time he tried to describe it by saying that it exceeded England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales by 77,000 square miles. Another time Father Manogue compared it to the Empire of France which was only 7,800 Square Miles bigger. As a result of the size, now 22 parishes to be visited regularly, he began to agitate for a coadjutor bishop to help him. Rome made two attempts to appoint a coadjutor bishop in 1875, and again in 1877, but both appointees refused to be made bishop. After these two refusals it would take Rome four years before a coadjutor bishop would be found who would accept.



**+Bishop Eugene O'Connell, Founding Bishop of the Diocese of Grass Valley
March 3, 1868**

Meanwhile, Bishop O'Connell continued to carry on alone. On September 24, 1873, he had the joy of a second ordination in the Marysville cathedral in the person of Father Michael Walrath.

However, the year 1877 was marked by the death of “the good man and true” Father Patrick Farrelly of Red Bluff. In 1875 he had been saddened by the news that the beautiful St Mary’s in the Mountains had been destroyed in the great fire of October 26, 1875, which burned most of Virginia City to the ground. Likewise, fires had wiped out the churches in Yreka in 1875 and in Reno in 1879. Bishop O’Connell continued his round of visitations and the establishment of new parishes until finally by 1881, his twentieth year, he felt satisfied that all the principal areas of population had a priest. Colusa, Smartsville and Cherokee had become parishes in California so that the total was now 25 with 31 priests, a remarkable advancement from six priests and six parishes in 1861.

Finally, on October 29, 1889, Rome named the new coadjutor bishop of Grass Valley in the person of the pastor of St Mary’s in the Mountains in Virginia City – Father Patrick Manogue. He was consecrated bishop in San Francisco in Old St Mary Cathedral on January 16, 1881.

In the spring of 1882 both bishops attended the Second Provincial Council called by Archbishop Alemany in San Francisco. In 1883 both set out on the rounds of confirmations and visitations in the parishes. Bishop Manogue visited Weaverville and its two missions, Oregon and Arcata. This proved to be Bishop O’Connell’s last round for on March 26, 1884 Rome finally accepted his often tendered resignation. Bishop Manogue was automatically the second bishop of Grass Valley.



Picture from Diocesan Archives

Third Plenary Council of Baltimore 1884

Meanwhile a call had come for the US Bishops to come to Baltimore for the Third Plenary Council. Both the new and the former Bishops of Grass Valley attended. When it ended in December 1884, Bishop O’Connell did not come home. He began an extended visit to friends in the east which lasted some nine months. In May 1886, Bishop Mora of Monterey-Los Angeles

asked Bishop O'Connell to come and take his place during the months he would be away in Europe.

Thus in June, 1886 Bishop O'Connell moved to Los Angeles to help out. Meanwhile word had come from Rome in 1886 that Bishop Manogue's request was to be granted. There would be a boundary change between the San Francisco and Grass Valley Dioceses and the City of Sacramento would be transferred from San Francisco and would be the new See City. Thus the old Grass Valley Diocese survived two and a half years from the resignation of its founding bishop. Bishop Manogue was now the first Bishop of Sacramento.

Bishop O'Connell continued to live a vigorous life in Los Angeles until suddenly a bout with pneumonia snuffed out his life on December 4, 1891 at the advanced age (for those times) of 76. He lies buried in the priests plot in Calvary Cemetery under a simple marker which says "Rt Rev Eugene O'Connell 1815-1891." There is no way to know that one is walking on top of the grave of a bishop, much less that of California's pioneer Bishop of Northern California and Nevada.

Since the writing of this article in 1976, Bishop O'Connell's body was returned to Sacramento at the request of Bishop Francis Quinn. A Mass and reburial of Bishop O'Connell took place on Memorial Day, May 31, 1982, at St Mary Cemetery, Sacramento. His body was buried in a simple marble vault in the Bishops' Crypt at St Mary Mausoleum.

