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## FATHER MICHAEL WALRATH 'God Threw his Mold Away'

By Father John Dwyer, printed in the August 19, 1976 issue of the *Catholic Herald*



**Father Michael Walrath 1841 – 1917**

**One of the remarkable facts** about the old Grass Valley Diocese was the multi-national background of its pioneer priests even though the majority was Irish and from All Hallows Seminary in Dublin.

Among its outstanding priests we have listed the Italians, Peter Magagnotto and Dominic Monteverde; the Frenchman; John Mary Mevel; the Mexican, Luciano Osuna; the Austrian, Florian Schwenniger; and we now come to the Prussian born, Michael Walrath, the outstanding pioneer of the mid-Sacramento Valley.

Born in Bochum, Prussia, on January 17, 1846, Michael Walrath was the son of Zachaus Walrath and Catherine Jansen. Because of political problems, several members of the Walrath family fled from Prussia and first took refuge in London, but eventually came to America. It was to a brother in Auglaize, Ohio that Michael came in 1867.

Here he entered a seminary in Cincinnati, but in 1869 transferred to the Precious Blood Fathers house in Eureka where he completed his theological studies and at the same time taught in the little seminary there. When ready for ordination, Bishop O'Connell ordained him a priest of the Grass Valley Diocese in the Marysville Cathedral on September 24, 1871. Father Walrath then returned to the Precious Blood Community and taught in their newly opened college at Rohnerville.

In 1873, he was transferred by Bishop O'Connell to Crescent City for three years. A marvelous letter from Father Walrath to Bishop O'Connell describes in detail Father Walrath's work among the Indians he found in Humboldt and Del Norte Counties. It was while in this mission that he built the first of the fourteen churches listed to his credit, that of Trinidad which celebrated its centennial last year.

The assignment in Crescent City was followed by one in Weaverville from 1877-1879. But it was his next assignment that distinguished this priest and made him a legend in the mid Sacramento Valley.

When he was moved to Colusa in 1879, he began a ministry of 33 years, a ministry to be marked by extensive missionary work up and down the entire valley, to be crowned by the building of 11 churches, by opening in 1892 of a Catholic school staffed by the Ursuline Sisters and by a remembrance of this remarkable man which made him a legend throughout the valley for decades.

For example, since Father Walrath needed a quicker and more efficient mode of conveyance to service the many towns and villages strung along the railroad line. He obtained the use of a handcar, such as the track workers employed, and often propelled himself up and down the rail until several encounters with oncoming scheduled trains made this method of travel unpopular with the railroad company.

Church building was his specialty. He dotted the valley with them – in such places as Willows, Maxwell, Orland, Arbuckle, Stony Ford, Sites, Grand Island, Woodland, Madison, Washington, Riverbank, Guinda, and the one in Williams in 1885 by razing the German parish church in Marysville, transporting it by railroad to Williams and reconstructing it there.

The account so far does not begin to exhaust the dynamism of this remarkable priest. A new Catholic cemetery for Colusa County was his concern as soon as he arrived in Colusa. He also engaged in commercial building in Colusa, putting up the Washington block in 1889 and at least eight dwellings.

Yet his concerns were not limited to material building. He ran his own printing press, concerned himself with the teaching of religion in the schools and was known for his generosity to the poor. In earlier life, a user of tobacco, he gave it up in order to save the money for the church. His average day was from 6 AM until 10 PM during which he offered Mass, prayed his breviary, taught school, cared for his horse, did gardening, was his own sacristan, and supervised whatever building program he then had underway.



Photo from the Diocesan Archives

### **Holy Rosary Church built by Father Michael Walrath in 1913**

Since Father Walrath never took a vacation, but had often expressed a wish to visit the Holy Land, many of his admirers raised enough money for him to fulfill his life's ambition. He stopped over in Ireland and when he witnessed the destitution of the people there, he gave away all his money and had to return home without ever seeing the Holy Land.

In 1912 Bishop Grace transferred Father Walrath to Woodland. Here he built the last of his churches, dedicating a beautiful steel and concrete structure in 1913 at a cost of thirty thousand dollars.

By 1916 his health having failed him, Father Walrath had to give up his parish duties and enter the hospital. On Saturday evening, August 26, 1917, while his niece, Mother Dolorosa and another Dominican nun were reciting the rosary at his bedside, the generous soul of Father Walrath departed this life after 46 years of zealous apostolate. After his Funeral Mass, his body was laid to rest in the priests' section of St Joseph Cemetery in Woodland.

Father Walrath's family was always very dear to him and he took care of them with wonderful solicitude. His father lived with him until the old gentleman died. His only sister, Kate became Mrs. Catherine Maher, the mother of two Jesuits, Father Martin Maher and Father Zaccheus Maher. His older brother William was a Jesuit priest in India. His brother Joseph eventually settled in Antioch, California and his brother Peter remained in Indiana. Anyone who came in contact with Father Walrath always remembered him. His personality was such, his ways often so remarkable that one never forgot him. It certainly can be said of Michael Walrath that after God created him He threw the mold away.



Photo by John E Boll 2013

**Tombstone of Father Michael Walrath  
Saint Joseph Cemetery, Woodland**