

A Brief History of the Archdiocese of Seattle

In 1775, a Franciscan priest and others sailing with the Spanish expedition of Heceta and Bodega y Cuadra erected a cross at Point Grenville on the Pacific Coast north of Grays Harbor. But Catholicism did not take root in Western Washington until nearly 50 years later.

Dr. John McLoughlin, the chief factor of the Hudson Bay Company, established a permanent Catholic presence when he set up company operations at Fort Vancouver on the Columbia River in 1824. The Quebec-born McLoughlin recognized that many of the 151 traders and trappers he employed throughout the Northwest were French-Canadian Catholics. He personally translated Scripture into French and allowed a literate French-Canadian carpenter to teach catechism to Catholic children.

In 1837, however, the Catholic community at Fort Vancouver wrote to the bishop of Montreal, complaining that they were surrounded by almost every religion but their own. They begged the bishop to send a priest. The bishop complied, and sent two.

After traveling across Canada and down the Columbia River, Father F.N. Blanchet and Father Modeste Demers arrived at Fort Vancouver on Nov. 24, 1838. They celebrated a sung Latin Mass for the 76 Catholic residents and a host of curious onlookers. Using Vancouver as their home base, the two priests set out, establishing missions at Cowlitz, in the Willamette Valley and on Whidbey Island. Within the first few months, they had performed 53 baptisms and 24 marriages.

The two priests recruited lay catechists and converted Native Americans through use of the "Sahale stick," a visual representation of the Christian plan of salvation. Meanwhile, missionary priests such as Jesuit Father Pierre DeSmet and Oblate Fathers Eugene Chirouse and Charles Pandosy were evangelizing the Flathead, Nez Perce and other Native Americans east of the Cascade Mountains.

In 1846, Father F.N. Blanchet was named archbishop of Oregon City (later Portland) while his brother Augustin Magloire Alexander Blanchet was appointed bishop of Walla Walla. Bishop A.M.A. Blanchet arrived in Walla Walla in 1847. These pioneer years were marked by hostilities between settlers and Native Americans as well as by conflict and suspicion between Catholic and Protestant missionaries. In 1850, three years after Cayuse Indians killed Presbyterian missionary Marcus Whitman and his family, the Walla Walla Diocese was vacated. Bishop A.M.A. Blanchet moved across the Cascades when the Diocese of Nesqually was established on May 31, 1850. On June 29, 1853 the Diocese of Walla Walla was suppressed by Rome.

On Oct. 27, 1850, at St. Francis Xavier Mission at Cowlitz, Bishop Blanchet officially announced the new diocese and established his cathedral at St. James Church in Vancouver. As more people came west to settle in the Washington Territory, the population of the Diocese of Nesqually soared. Mother Joseph and four other Providence Sisters began work in health care

and education in 1856. By 1864, 31 Providence Sisters, seven diocesan priests, five Jesuit priests and two Oblate missionaries were serving a Catholic population of about 8,000.

Bishop Aegidius Junger, who succeeded Bishop Blanchet in 1879, established parishes in Aberdeen, Bellingham, Chehalis, Everett, Puyallup, Seattle, Snohomish and Tacoma. In 1903, Bishop Edward O'Dea, his successor, moved the seat of diocesan government from Vancouver to the booming port city of Seattle. On Sept. 11, 1907, the diocese was renamed after its principal city.

At that time, the Diocese of Seattle covered all of the state of Washington. The eastern Washington dioceses of Spokane and Yakima were created, respectively, in 1913 and 1951.

With the advent of the 20th century, the Catholic Church in Western Washington entered a period of rapid growth. Scores of new parishes were founded. Holy Names, Providence and Dominican sisters opened schools, orphanages, hospitals and other Catholic institutions.

Benedictine monks from Germany started St. Martin's College in Lacey in 1895. The Jesuits established high schools for boys in Seattle and Tacoma and a college in Seattle. Between 1903 and 1915, Mother Cabrini, who would be the first saint to work in the diocese, and the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart founded a school, a hospital and a home for children. In 1920, the Maryknoll Sisters arrived in Seattle to set up a school for Japanese-Americans that later evolved into Our Lady Queen of Martyrs parish.

While clergy and religious women set up and staffed Catholic institutions, a vibrant laity rallied to Catholic causes. The first state council of the Knights of Columbus formed in Seattle in 1902. The Seattle Council of Catholic Women was created in 1919 and the first conference of the St. Vincent de Paul Society was established in St. Benedict Parish in Seattle in 1920. Lay efforts were crucial in defeating an anti-private school initiative sponsored by the Ku Klux Klan in 1924. In 1935, a group of Seattle laymen founded the Serra Club which would become an international organization dedicated to promoting vocations to priesthood and religious life.

A committee of laymen worked with Bishop O'Dea to first build and then rebuilt St. James Cathedral after a 1916 snowstorm collapsed the roof. When Bishop O'Dea died in 1932, his successor, Bishop Gerald Shaughnessy needed lay help during the depths of the Depression to retire a considerable church debt.

Bishop Shaughnessy, who died in 1950, turned a financially-solvent church over to his successor, Bishop Thomas A. Connolly, who was elevated to archbishop when Seattle became an archdiocese on June 23, 1951.

Archbishop Connolly renovated St. James Cathedral, built St. Thomas Seminary and opened a host of new schools and churches. The archbishop became known for his opposition to abortion as well as his advocacy of civil rights and just wages. Bishop Thomas Gill, Seattle's first auxiliary bishop, served under the archbishop from 1956 until his death in 1973.

Bishop Raymond G. Hunthausen of Helena, Montana succeeded Archbishop Connolly, who retired in 1975 and died in 1991. The new archbishop was assisted by Auxiliary Bishop Nicolas E. Walsh from 1976 to 1983, when Bishop Walsh resigned.

Under Archbishop Hunthausen, the church in Western Washington worked with other denominations and faiths, championed justice and peace efforts, and further implemented the church reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). The archbishop attracted international attention for his tax protest in opposition to the nuclear arms race and for a Vatican investigation of his ministry. The Vatican transferred some of the ministerial powers to Auxiliary Bishop Donald W. Wuerl in 1986 but restored them in 1987. Bishop Wuerl was transferred in 1987 and was named bishop of Pittsburgh a year later. Bishop Thomas J. Murphy of Great Falls-Billings, Montana was named coadjutor archbishop of Seattle in 1987.

Archbishop Murphy succeeded Archbishop Hunthausen when the latter retired in 1991. He emphasized stewardship, religious education, vocations to priesthood and service to immigrant Catholics and economically-depressed timber communities. An increased awareness of the diverse multicultural nature of the archdiocese emerged during the 1990s. Archbishop Murphy was diagnosed with leukemia in December of 1996 and died on June 26, 1997. Bishop Alex J. Brunett of Helena, Montana, was appointed as the eighth bishop, fourth archbishop of Seattle on October 28, 1997 and installed at St. James Cathedral on December 18, 1997. On November 19, 1999, the Rev. George L. Thomas was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Seattle and on January 28, 2000, he was ordained at St. James Cathedral. The Archdiocese of Seattle welcomed Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo and Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Tyson on June 6, 2005.