

Bishop Joseph Francis McGrath

6th State Chaplain of Oregon 1920-21



Joseph Francis McGrath was born on March 3, 1871, in Kilkenny, Ireland to James and Margaret Farrell McGrath. After completing his classical education, he studied philosophy at St Kieran's College, Kilkenny, Ireland. McGrath immigrated to the United State in 1890. McGrath was sponsored to study for the priesthood for the Diocese of Springfield in Massachusetts by Bishop Patrick Thomas O'Reilly, who sent McGrath to complete his theological studies at the Grand Séminaire in Montreal.

While in Montreal, McGrath was ordained a priest on December 21, 1895, by Archbishop Édouard-Charles Fabre. Following his ordination, he served as assistant pastor at St. Thomas Church in Adams. In 1900 McGrath was loaned to the Diocese of Portland, Maine, where he was made an assistant at St. Joseph Church in Old Town and did missionary work among Native Americans on the Penobscot Indian Island Reservation.

Facing poor health, McGrath sought a warmer climate and spent a few months in San Antonio, Texas. A visit to the Pacific Northwest brought him into contact with Bishop Edward John O'Dea, who needed more English-speaking priests in the Diocese of Seattle and appointed McGrath as an assistant at St. James Cathedral in 1904.

After two years at the cathedral, McGrath became pastor of St. Patrick Church, Tacoma, in January 1906. A fire had destroyed the church the year before McGrath's appointment, and he immediately began construction on a new church. The cornerstone was laid in March 1906 and the building was dedicated in June 1907. In addition to his pastoral duties, McGrath was named a diocesan consultor in 1910 and dean of the counties of Pierce, Thurston, and Grays Harbor in 1915.

In July 1918, Rev. Terrence G. Brady, the vicar general of the Archdiocese of Dubuque and rector of St. Raphael Cathedral, was named the next Bishop of Baker City, Oregon, to succeed Bishop Charles Joseph O'Reilly. However, Brady declined the appointment and Pope Benedict XV instead named McGrath as bishop on December 21, 1918, the twenty-third anniversary of his priestly ordination. He took formal charge of the Diocese of Baker City on April 1, 1919, when he was installed at St. Francis de Sales Cathedral.

During McGrath's 31-year tenure in Baker City, the Catholic population increased from 6,755 to 14,729 and the number of priests increased from 26 to 39; however, the total number of churches (including parishes and missions) fell from 54 to 50. With only one parochial school in the entire diocese at the beginning of his tenure, McGrath mandated that the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine be established in every parish and mission.



Bishop McGrath became Oregon Knights of Columbus State Chaplain 1920-21.

In 1948, the 77-year-old McGrath received Leo Fabian Fahey as a coadjutor bishop to assist and eventually succeed him. However, before he could replace McGrath, Fahey fell ill and died on March 31, 1950. Less than two weeks later, McGrath himself died on April 12, 1950.

Bishop Joseph Francis McGrath is buried at Mount Hope Cemetery in Baker City, OR.

