

Fr. Edwin O'Hara (1881-1956)

By Robert Bunting

Fr. Edwin O'Hara—Roman Catholic priest, educator, social reformer, and historian—was instrumental in shaping innovative Catholic educational practices and social action in Oregon and the nation.

Edwin Vincent O'Hara was born on September 6, 1881, to Irish Catholic immigrant parents and was raised on a Minnesota farm. He was ordained a priest for the Archdiocese of Oregon City by St. Paul Archbishop John Ireland on June 10, 1905. Appointed assistant pastor at the Pro-Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and editor of the *Catholic Sentinel*, O'Hara quickly demonstrated his talent for organization and commitment to education and social activism. He organized parish clubs, including one to promote the arts, literature, history, and philosophy; served as a part-time chaplain at St. Vincent de Paul Hospital; and taught in a local high school.

O'Hara organized the Catholic Education Association of Portland in 1907 and two years later formed the Catholic Women's League of Portland. He completed *The Pioneer Catholic History of Oregon* in 1911 and assumed the pastorate at the Cathedral Church of the Immaculate Conception. O'Hara was named Diocesan Superintendent of Catholic Schools in 1912, and in 1917 he persuaded the Archbishop to found the Catholic Children's Bureau.

In 1912, the Oregon branch of the National Consumers' League asked O'Hara to become chair of a committee to study the minimum-wage question in Oregon. That work resulted in Oregon's passage in 1913 of the first effective minimum wage law for women in the United States and to O'Hara's appointment by Governor Oswald West to head the Oregon Industrial Welfare Commission.

During 1918, O'Hara served as an army chaplain in France in World War I. Returning to Portland in March 1919, he continued his war ministry and social concerns and established a center in downtown Portland that provided returning soldiers with a reading room, classes, and an employment agency.

Appointed pastor at St. Mary's Church in Eugene on May 29, 1920, O'Hara reanimated the Newman Club at the University of Oregon and was a leader in the fight against the state's 1920s anti-Catholic movements. But his real focus was in the countryside. In 1922, O'Hara organized the first summer catechetical vacation schools for children in rural areas. He started religious correspondence courses for isolated Catholic families; encouraged Eugene's Mercy Hospital to send doctors, nurses, and information to rural areas throughout Lane County; and organized a Clinic on Wheels that toured small towns, offering medical checkups. O'Hara also sponsored informational programs to rural residents about home improvements, modern business practices, credit unions, rural cooperatives, and modern agricultural practices.

In 1923, O'Hara served as executive secretary of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference. Those responsibilities resulted in his leaving Eugene in 1929 for the Rural Life Office in Washington, D.C. The next year, he was elevated to the episcopacy. He was consecrated the second bishop of Great Falls, Montana, on October 28, 1930, at St. Mary's Cathedral in Portland. In 1939, he was appointed bishop of Kansas City, Missouri, and in 1954 he was made a personal archbishop (a term used for a bishop who is being personally honored with the metropolitan title by the Holy See). O'Hara died in Milan, Italy, on September 11, 1956.

Sources

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