

**Most Reverend Joseph Melcher
(1868-1873)**

On March 3, 1868, Pope Pius IX in the 22nd year of his pontificate signed a Papal Brief establishing the Diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin as an Episcopal See. This decision resulted from a petition made at the Second Plenary Council in Baltimore, Maryland in October 1866.

The original boundary lines of the new diocese have been changed several times since that Brief was issued. Counties were taken from the Diocese of Green Bay in May 1905 when the Diocese of Superior was established. Again, in 1946, with the erection of the Diocese of Madison, more territory was given over.

The March 7, 1868 issue of the *Green Bay State Gazette* reaffirmed the newly established Diocese of Green Bay:

A large number of Catholic Sees have been recently established in this country....Among these is the See of Green Bay. The Rt. Rev. Father [Joseph] Melcher, of St. Louis has been appointed to this bishopric, and it is expected that he will enter upon the discharge of his duties within a short time.

In the same article the rationale for Green Bay being chosen as the See City is recorded as follows: "There are quite a number of Catholic Churches in this city and vicinity, as well as a number of individuals who profess this faith, and it is quite fitting that in constituting a new bishopric this should be the designated place."

Great excitement intensified when The Most Reverend Joseph Melcher as the first Bishop of Green Bay arrived on Wednesday, July 22, 1868. Again the July 25 issue of the *Green Bay State Gazette* recorded the joyous event:

He came to De Pere on the early morning train, and was there welcomed by a number of priests and citizens. Taking a carriage at that place, he rode to this city [Green Bay]. Arriving at Fort Howard he was reverently greeted by a large concourse of people. A line being formed, the procession moved across the bridge and thence to the German Catholic Church....Arriving at the Church, a solemn service was held, at which time the new Bishop was invested with his robes, accompanied by an impressive and solemn ceremony.

The installation of Bishop Joseph Melcher as the first Bishop of the Diocese of Green Bay took place in the old St. Mary Church. It was located on Madison Street where the Diocesan Office building once stood.

It was on March 18, 1807, in Vienna, Austria that Joseph Melcher was born and baptized the following day in the Church of St. Mary of Consolation. His parents were Matthew Melcher and Theresa Leibel who moved their family to Modena, Italy when Joseph was only seven years

old. Being intellectually gifted, he achieved great academic success culminating with a doctorate of divinity. Since he also was religiously and devotionally motivated, Joseph was received into the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary, received permission to receive the clerical habit and accepted tonsure and minor and major orders leading to ordination to the diocesan priesthood on March 27, 1830.

Following twelve years of service in the Diocese of Modena, Italy--- including being received into the devotional Confraternity of St. Sebastian---Father Melcher desired to devote himself to the missions of some foreign land. For this very noble purpose he was allowed to travel to Rome to request permission from the Pope. Unfortunately it seemed that without joining some Religious Order or Missionary Society he would not be able to fulfill his deep missionary zeal.

Fortuitously, however, while in Rome, Father Melcher met Bishop Joseph Rosati of St. Louis, Missouri who was there for a twofold purpose: to report the result of his successful mission on behalf of the Holy See to Haiti and to look for missionaries for his See. Happily, Father Melcher offered his services and they were accepted for the Diocese of St. Louis.

On January 20, 1843, Father Melcher was released from the duties of the Confraternity of St. Sebastian since the duties of a missionary life were incompatible. As he and Bishop Rosati left Rome for the United States, the Bishop became ill and had to return to Rome where he died. In the midst of this tragedy, however, with the testimonies in hand, Father Melcher sailed for America then as a priest of the Diocese of St. Louis; he was cordially received by Bishop Peter Kenrick.

Prior to the establishment of the Diocese of Little Rock, Arkansas in 1844, Father Melcher served zealously in Little Rock. Then from 1844-1886 he was pastor at Mattice Creek in St. Louis County, Missouri. His poverty was so great that he had to beg for his meals from one house to another; he was even accustomed to judge whether or not a family was home by observing if smoke was coming out of the chimney.

In 1846, Father Melcher accompanied Bishop Kenrick to Rome for the Provincial Council of Baltimore. As earlier, this dedicated missionary priest was well received and gained the love and respect of the people wherever he went. In fact, his Bishop had formed such a high estimate of Father Melcher--- both as a priest and a man--- that he appointed him in 1847 Vicar General of the Diocese of St. Louis and pastor of St. Mary Church in St. Louis where he continued in service for twenty-one years until 186

. Even though he was said to be almost Bishop for the Germans, he always consulted Archbishop Kenrick in important matters. Like every pastor—even though he was also Vicar General—Father Melcher faced challenging situations, such as unfounded complaints brought to the Archbishop from some people that the pastoral residence was too large and extravagant.

After mature deliberation, on July 29, 1853, Father Melcher declined the appointment he was offered as the first Bishop of Quincy, Illinois (now Alton, Illinois) and the administration of the Diocese of Chicago.

Again in 1855--- at the direction of his Archbishop---Father Melcher traveled to Europe to get priests for his diocese. During this visit, he also made a strong and successful appeal to the Ursuline Sisters in Germany to send Sisters to America to educate girls and young women. When he returned from this trip, one priest, four subdeacons and two theological students came back with him.. When he went to Europe again in 1864 to visit his father, Father Melcher was successful in his mission of getting priests for the Diocese of St. Louis.

When the new See of Green Bay, Wisconsin was erected in 1868, Father Joseph Melcher did accept his appointment as its first Bishop. In his own Church of St. Mary in St. Louis where he had been so loved as the pastor for almost 25 years, he was consecrated Bishop by Archbishop Kenrick on Sunday, July 12, 1868. At this time his new diocese only had 16 priests with a Catholic population of 40,000 of many different ethnic backgrounds. The Diocese of Green Bay then comprised that part of Wisconsin from the east bank of the Wisconsin River to Lake Michigan and running north from the Fox and Manitowoc Rivers to the line of the State.

The following graphic description of the momentous challenge facing Bishop Melcher on his arrival in Green Bay (dated October 8, 1868) set the stage for his vigorous and prudent ministry until he died in 1873. In his own strong words:

....In the month of July, this year, I was consecrated at St. Louis as the first Bishop of Green Bay, situated in the coldest and consequently the least fertile part of the State of Wisconsin...I leave it to you to imagine in what embarrassment a bishop of 61 years would find himself, taking possession of the Episcopal city without finding there a single church in stone, without an Episcopal residence, without schools, without religious institutions of any kind....In the City of Green Bay there are, in truth, four churches, but what churches! All four in wood, without a school building, without organs and lacking just about everything. The Catholic population is numerous enough, but in general, poor. The Canadians and Belgians are the predominant nationalities. Then come the Irish, the Dutch and the Bohemians. The German nationality is the least numerous.

Bishop Melcher's modest cathedral was the old St. Mary Church. He lived in a one-story frame building which occupied the adjoining lot. The new academy for girls, which was operated by the Ursuline Sisters of St. Louis, was a great help to the work the new Bishop began in the diocese, Unfortunately, he would only be able to serve in Green Bay for a few years.

From the latter part of 1869 until March 1870, Bishop Melcher was absent from his diocese while attending the First Vatican Council in Rome. By the time of his death the Diocese of Green Bay had grown to include 56 priests, 93 churches, 2,000 children in Catholic schools and a Catholic population of 60,000. An Episcopal residence was built and preparatory work had begun towards the erection of the new Cathedral.

Bishop Joseph Melcher died at the age of 66 on December 20, 1873. He was buried on December 27 of that year as he was mourned by so many people who deeply respected and loved him. Four years after his death, his body was removed from its original grave

in Allouez Cemetery in Green Bay and was placed in the vault of the cemetery chapel. During the administration later of Bishop Paul Rhode (1915-1945) the body of Bishop Melcher was transferred to its present resting place in the Bishop Joseph Fox Mausoleum in the Allouez Cemetery.

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