

**History of the Catholic Church in Wyoming**  
**Msgr. James O'Neill**

**January 19, 2010**

**History – the history of the Catholic Church in Wyoming... History is “His Story” -- “His Story”... It is the story of the Church. It is the story of the Risen Body of Christ. It is Jesus’ story. We are all part of that story. We all have lived or are living that story. We are not alone in living it -- We are, first of all, one with Christ Himself, and we are one with all who have gone before us and with all who will come after us. For the story to be full and complete will take the best effort on the part of all of us. We have to work together, not for ourselves, but for others. For to be a Catholic, to be a Christian, is to be for others. A lone ranger may be of value elsewhere, but in the Church, in the Body of Christ, he or she is misplaced.**

**What a great, great privilege it is and what a great privilege it has been to be part of that story -- the history of the Catholic Church in Wyoming. What a great privilege it is to have lived or be living that great story. The Hand of the Lord has had a part in it. Yes, it is our vocation, our calling, our mission to have had a part in that great work -- our life’s work -- the work of building the Body of Christ --- through Him, with Him and in Him.**

**You know, I have the greatest admiration for all the Pioneer Bishops, Priests, Sisters, and Laity who came to Wyoming -- as it were, out of the desert -- and who lived the faith here under what must have been demanding and trying circumstances. In my book they are the great unsung heroes.**

**Each bishop, each priest, each sister, each lay person who served the Lord and served God’s people here through the years is a hero. We are grateful that they lived and kept the faith and that they passed on that gift of faith to the next generation.**

**I arrived in Wyoming in 1954 --- Fifty-five years ago --- having just celebrated my 25<sup>th</sup> birthday. The Diocese of Cheyenne was then very much in its infancy, as dioceses go -- just under 67 years old --- having been established on August 7, 1887 --- just one or two days before Denver. The Diocese of Cheyenne was then very much a missionary diocese --- which is why I chose to come to Wyoming. There were then, I believe, only five native-born Wyoming priests here: Fathers Leo Morgan, Bill McCormick, Bill Delaney, Joe Fraher, and Charlie Taylor. Father Kimmett grew up in Powell, but was born in Colorado. All the other priests in Wyoming then were from other dioceses in the United States or from European countries --- with about half the priests in Wyoming then from Ireland. So, the diocese was almost totally dependent on other dioceses and other countries for its priests. Financially, too, the diocese was greatly dependent on outside sources of income for its operation...e.g. The Catholic Extension Society and other national collections. Even**

today our -diocese is subsidized to the tune of a quarter – million a year by the Catholic Extension Society.

Again, when I arrived in Wyoming in 1954, Bishop McGovern had finished a very long tenure as bishop --- almost 40 years: 1912-1951. Bishop Newell, who had served as Co-adjutor since 1947, had just taken over. Of Bishop McGovern it was said that he was hard on his priests, but he was truly a delight to the lay people. I never knew him. While he served as Bishop associate pastors couldn't own cars... Imagine, being a priest in

Wyoming without a car! The associate had to borrow the pastor's car to go to the missions and sick calls. The bishop himself didn't own a car. He traveled the diocese then by train. By the way, an associate's salary at that time was \$50. a month. No other perks, like car allowance, health insurance, or retirement benefits.

Under Bishop Newell things changed noticeably. Bishop Newell was a builder --- not just brick and mortar --- and he was that --- but a builder of community --- a builder of Church --- a builder of the People of God. During his years as Bishop he inspired and oversaw new buildings in almost every parish in our diocese... new churches, new schools, new convents, new rectories, parish halls, and catechetical centers. Parishes became very alive and active... Parishes became the Church in Wyoming.

To help with communication in the vast Diocese of Cheyenne --- 92,000 square miles --- a weekly, a weekly Diocesan Newspaper was started in 1952 --- The Wyoming Catholic Register. The Register has done so very much in keeping people informed as to what was happening in the Church locally, nationally, and internationally. What a beautiful and memorable edition we had of our new bishop's ordination!

Also in 1952 the Diocesan Council of Catholic Women was started --- an organization that has been the backbone of the Church in Wyoming and that has done so very much through the years in helping women assume their rightful place as leaders in our Church --- in the diocese, in the parish, and in the community. A beautiful spirit of solidarity soon emerged as Catholic women throughout the state got to know each other and were so delighted to work together. Yes, we owe the members of the D.C.C. W. and their

counterparts, the Knights of Columbus a great, great debt of gratitude.

To fund the various needed diocesan projects and programs the first diocesan-wide major capital fundraising campaign, the Bishop's Fund Campaign was conducted in 1955. It was very, very successful. Among the projects funded by the campaign was St. Paul's Newman Center in Laramie --- the Newman Center that has been such a vital presence of Church at the University of Wyoming through the years and has also been so instrumental in developing Catholic Lay leadership for our parishes.

**These years were, if you will, the golden years of the history of the Church, not only in Wyoming, but in the United States and throughout the world... an age in which abortion was rarely, if ever mentioned --- in which divorce and remarriage was taboo --- when fidelity to Sunday Mass by all Catholics, young and old, was a record --- when people lived and breathed and relished the Catholic faith.**

**A notable theologian once said that every Catholic should be one who holds up the sign saying: THERE IS MORE...And so, in the 60's we had the Second Vatican Council with such great hopes and dreams for Church and also challenges for all of us. The Council was the work of the Holy Spirit and it is part of history, part of the history of the Church in Wyoming. Bishop Newell, who attended the Council, was very conscientious and very compassionate as he worked to implement the directives of the Council. He led by example. Soon a Priests' Council, a Sisters' Council, a Diocesan Pastoral Council, a Finance Council, a Liturgical Commission, Ecumenical Commission, Personnel Board, etc., came into existence with strong involvement by the Laity. Clergy Institutes and**

**Clergy, Religious, and Lay Institutes were established to help keep Church leadership fully informed.**

**One of the very vital and effective programs conducted in our diocese was RENEW --- a program that had its origin in New Jersey and was conducted in our diocese by Dawn and Don Green. It was a three year program of study and action. It did so very much to make us all more aware and more appreciative of who we were as Church. I recall that in St. Anthony's we had 600 involved in small group prayer and discussion. Just one weakness in the program: We didn't have a viable, follow-through program in place when the 3 year formal program ended.**

**And then there was the CYO, the predecessor of Youth Ministry, that had such a long and colorful history in our Diocese. The CYO, started in the late 50's, so effectively touched many generations of young people over the years. The CYO so ably directed by Fathers Charlie Brady, Tom Sheridan, Gene and Jerry Sullivan, Joe Fraher, Ron Stolcis and others. Those were years when Diocesan Youth Conventions had record attendance and when the Diocesan CYO gained national recognition through its participation in National Youth Conventions. Those were truly historic and memorable years. So many of our Catholic Adult Leaders today had their start in CYO. We are deeply grateful to all for their years of service to Youth Ministry.**

**A diocesan-wide survey known as Vision For a New Day was conducted in the 70's by Charlie Hardy to establish needs and priorities. Five priorities emerged...among them: religious education, youth ministry, and family life. Full-time Diocesan Directors were hired for these ministries with offices in Casper. Brother Martin, Sister Kyran Shea, John and Mary O'Connor, Pat and Ed McCarthy, Jim Zierden among them. Earlier, Catholic Social Services, an adoption agency, was founded by Msgr. Etchingham.**

To effectively underwrite these many Church-related programs that came into existence under Bishop Hart, the Annual Bishop's Appeal was started --- effectively directed by Finn McCarthy.

I believe that the Centennial Celebration of our diocese that we celebrated on August 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of 1987 was truly the Church in Wyoming coming together as Church. Every

parish in the diocese was present and participated. Each parish had a display at the Events Center depicting its birth, its life, and its growth. A historic Pageant, written by Tom Empey, longtime drama director at Casper College, and Sister Janice Hasselo --- was presented on the evening of August 7<sup>th</sup> by a talented cast of local parishioners --- young men and women who became dear friends and very active members in their local parishes and in the Church of Wyoming. The Pageant was modeled after a pageant presented by the Church in Texas celebrating their Sesquicentennial. The difference was that they had grown from one diocese, the Diocese of San Antonio, to some 13 dioceses at the time of their pageant. We had grown from one parish in 1887 to 36 parishes. The Centennial Mass was attended by some 40 bishops and the apostolic nuncio, over 100 priests and sisters, and over 5000 lay people. It was the largest gathering of the American Hierarchy in Wyoming ever. And we commemorated, not only our 100 years of existence, but also the 140<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first Mass in Wyoming celebrated by Father Pierre De Smet...and the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Episcopal Ordination of Bishop Hubert Newell...who was unable to attend because of ill health and who died September 8, 1987.

And then we had the Diocesan Synod, a three year study program convoked by Bishop Hart to establish long range goals for the diocese... the culmination of which was a 3 day convocation in Casper, attended by delegates from every parish in the diocese who finalized the Synod Document. As I've said so often, the great value of the Synod was not, I believe, in its final document, but in the 3 year Synod process --- for the participants lived and breathed Church for 3 years! The Synod Document, however, needs to be revisited as it has invaluable information that will be such a great guide

going forward.

When I came to the diocese in 1954 there was no Chancery Office, no Pastoral Center. Bishop Newell didn't have a secretary. He took care of all his own correspondence. He was an expert at it. We sometimes jokingly said that he sent thank you notes for thank you notes. Msgr. Hartman, longtime pastor of the Cathedral, was the Chancellor. He took care of dispensations by return mail and that was all. There was no Tribunal, no annulments. Thanks to Father Mike Carr, who as a young priest took the initiative to get something started. With the blessing of Bishop Newell, he spent a couple of summers at the Chancery Office of St. Paul, Minnesota, learning the annulment process...and then returned and started our Marriage Tribunal --- A Tribunal that has been such a gift and blessing -- not only to parishioners in broken marriages, but also to us priests who are called upon to minister to them. The Tribunal is, I believe, one of our diocesan highlights.

**Under Bishop Hart the very attractive and imposing Pastoral Center next to the Cathedral in Cheyenne was acquired and a very professional staff was put in place to take care of ever-expanding needs of the Church in Wyoming. Our gratitude to all who have worked so effectively.**

**Much, much more needs to be said about all that has happened in our diocese throughout history. First, our gratitude to the Jesuit Priests and Franciscan Sisters who have ministered to Native Americans at St. Stephen's Mission for over 125 years. They have left their mark in Wyoming and we are grateful. May the Lord reward you and them.**

**By the way, too, thanks for being such dear friends through the years.**

**So much could be said and needs to be said about the Lay Ministry Program, Strategic Planning, The Theology of the Body, St. Joseph's Children's Home, St. Joseph's Retirement Program, Wyoming Catholic College, and Stewardship. Just one word on stewardship. Stewardship, I believe, had the potential of completely transforming our diocese spiritually, if the factor of gratitude had been fully grasped by us and by all our people. The Holy Child Academy, built in Cheyenne before Wyoming became a state, St. Mary's High School, its successor in Cheyenne for some 50 years, St. Stephen's High School, The Wyoming Catholic School System, DePaul Hospital, the Religious who have served our diocese, sisters and brothers, the Diaconate Program, St. Mary's beautiful Cathedral, built in 1909, presently being refurbished – a place of many memories... Father Mike Carr and others will speak about some of these. They all deserve recognition and gratitude. For me, this has truly been a trip down memory lane -- very nostalgic.**

**And so, now we have reached a very significant milestone in our journey as a diocese and as God's people with the ordination and installation of our new bishop, Bishop Paul Etienne. May the years ahead be glorious, and inspiring, and productive for all the people of Wyoming, Catholic and non-Catholic. It will be a new chapter in our history, in our story, in His Story that we will live together, that you will live together. An old Mexican proverb puts it this way: Traveler, there is no road. One makes the road by walking. Walking, one makes the road...Let's get started! Happy Trails!**

**Msgr. James O'Neill**

October, 2007

James O'Neill + BIOGRAPHY +

James O'Neill was born in Bantry, County Cork, Ireland, to James and Jane O'Sullivan O'Neill on August 8, 1929. He was the 9<sup>th</sup> of 13 children, the 2<sup>nd</sup> boy. He received his early education at the local school. He attended St. Fachtna's High School, Skibbereen, graduating in 1948. He rode his bicycle 20 miles round trip each day for 4 years to High School.

He entered St. John's Seminary, Waterford, Ireland, to study for the Priesthood in September, 1948, and was ordained a priest in the Cathedral of the Most Holy Trinity, Waterford, along with 18 classmates on June 17, 1954. He celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of his Ordination with celebrations in Casper, Wyoming and Ireland in 2004.

It was his lifelong desire to serve as a missionary priest in an area of greatest need. While still a student, he was accepted by the then bishop of Cheyenne, the Most Reverend Hubert M. Newell, to serve the people of Wyoming. At that time, he didn't know where Wyoming was geographically. After he had said, "Yes", he obtained a map of the United States and located the great State of Wyoming. All he knew about the state at the time was that it was a place of wide open spaces and prairies as far as the eye could see and in great need of a priest to minister to its people.

Coming from Ireland, he envisioned long, green fields extending forever. Seeing the reality, at first he was a little disappointed. But, with time, he discovered that Wyoming has a beauty and enchantment all its own. He never regretted his decision. As he said,

**“Wyoming has been good to me.” And his prayer was that he has been good to Wyoming.**

**On September 11, 1954, the young priest left his home and family in Ireland for Wyoming. He traveled by boat, “The Mauritania”, to New York --- a journey of five days, and then by air from New York to Denver --- his first of many plane rides.**

**His first assignment was Assistant Pastor of St. Patrick’s, Kemmerer, with a mission church in Jackson, some 300 miles round trip. It was winter time of year, and, never having had the experience of driving in snow and ice, sliding off the road became a weekly occurrence for the young, inexperienced priest. Fearing that he would not survive, the then pastor, Msgr. John O’Connor, suggested to Bishop Newell that James O’Neill should be moved to a less hazardous assignment.**

**So, after 4 months in Kemmerer, in January of 1955, he was assigned as Assistant Pastor of St. Mary Cathedral, Cheyenne, with Msgr. James A. Hartmann as Pastor. Next he served St. Joseph’s Parish, Cheyenne, from 1958—1959; Corpus Christi Parish, Newcastle, with missions in Sundance, Upton, Huleete, and Moorcroft. In April of 1962 he was appointed Pastor of St. Joseph’s Parish, Cheyenne and in September, 1964, he was appointed Pastor of St. Mary Cathedral, Cheyenne --- an assignment he filled for almost 20 years. On April 1, 1983 he became Pastor of St. Anthony’s Parish, Casper. On April 1, 1998 he retired as Pastor of St. Anthony’s due to ill health, and took up residence at St. Patrick’s Casper, where he continued to give priestly service to the people of the community.**

After a lifelong interest in TV ministry, especially to the sick, the aged, and the handicapped of Wyoming, he started the celebration of a TV Mass every Sunday at 9:00 A.M.. This TV ministry brought him great joy and happiness during his retirement years. He felt that he could still be useful as a priest and that he was able to make God's presence felt wherever people were --- in their homes, in hospital, retirement and nursing homes. It was a ministry and a service that was very well received by the people of the entire state, and in Northern Colorado and Western Nebraska.

On \_\_\_\_\_ he was appointed Vicar-General of the Diocese of Cheyenne. He served in that capacity under two bishops, Bishop Newell and Bishop Hart for Years. A Vicar-General is next to the bishop in the administration of the diocese. He takes the bishop's place when he is unable to be present.

On \_\_\_\_\_ he was named Prelate of Honor to the Holy Father with the title "Monsignor".

While Pastor of St. Mary Cathedral, he guided the people in building a much-needed Rectory, Administration Building, and Parish Hall, blending beautifully with the Cathedral and Pastoral Center in Cathedral Square, on Capitol Avenue. The people of St. Mary's also renovated St. Mary Cathedral during his tenure there to make it more in compliance with the prescriptions of Vatican II. The beautiful woodwork was restored to its natural finish, the altar was positioned permanently for the Liturgy. The Cathedral was aesthetically painted and new lighting and a sound system were installed.

While at St. Anthony's, Casper, the present Shepherd's Staff --- Parish Office Building --- was acquired and redesigned, a very fitting addition to the Parish Complex. The Rectory was renovated strictly as a residence for the priests. Until then it doubled as an office building. St. Anthony Church was renovated. The original 1920 hardwood floor in the sanctuary was uncovered and refinished. A hardwood floor was installed in the entire church. The church was painted and a new sound system was installed.

In late 1983, St. Anthony Manor, a 64 unit housing complex for low-income senior citizens was completed and dedicated. A new addition was added to St. Anthony School to better accommodate students, teachers, and administration.

Holy Cross Center, a food service staffed by the Holy Cross Brothers, was acquired and renovated, as well as a residence for the brothers who staffed the food service. Seton House, a complex for needy mothers with children was acquired and renovated. Raymond Phillips, then a Holy Cross Brother, was very instrumental in getting both of these projects and programs operational. The people of Casper owe him a great debt of gratitude. Brother Francis continues this service work for the people of the community today.

Msgr. O'Neill chaired the Diocesan Centennial Celebration the weekend of August 8, 1987, attended by some 40 bishops throughout the U.S.. More that 100 priests and religious and some 5,000 people from throughout the entire state were present. The Liturgical Celebration was preceded by an historic pageant under the direction of Tom Empey and a talented group of parishioners.

**Msgr. O'Neill also chaired the celebrations for the Episcopal Ordination and Installation of Bishop Joseph Hart. He also chaired the Synodal Process --- a 3 year assessment of the pastoral needs of the Church in Wyoming, culminating with a Synodal Convocation in Casper with delegates from all the parishes in Wyoming.**

**He also worked with Bishop Newell in implementing the directives of Vatican II in the diocese ---The Presbyteral Council, serving as its first President; the Diocesan Pastoral Council; the Liturgical and Ecumenical Commissions. St. Mary Cathedral, Cheyenne was also the first parish in the state to organize a Parish Council and a Board of Education, both of which were of great assistance in the administration and financial health of both.**

**He was named "Hidden Hero" in 2007 by the Catholic Extension Society of America, a national organization assisting with the pastoral needs of Catholic parishes and dioceses in the U.S., for his service to the people of Wyoming through his TV ministry in his retirement years. He also served as a member of the Board of Directors of the N.F.P.C. (National Federation of Priests' Councils) when it was still in its infancy. This is a national organization of priests providing leadership and guidance to local priests' councils.**

**Msgr. O'Neill has often said that he has been truly blessed in his life and his priesthood by all the good, holy, and saintly people that he has met and that he has been privileged to serve in his priesthood. "The people I have served have been a great challenge and inspiration to me to strive to be truly a servant of God. I am deeply indebted to the bishops whom it has been my great privilege to serve and to emulate:**

**Bishop Newell, Bishop Hart, and Bishop Ricken. My life, too, has been blessed by all the wonderful priests with whom I have shared ministry and friendship in Wyoming. And, my very heartfelt thanks to my good parents and brothers and sisters who shared, not only life, but the priceless gift of faith with me, and who have been such a strong support in my life.**

**The greatest joy in my life has been to know people, to minister to people, and to serve people. I have received much more from people than I could ever hope to give to them.**

**I have enjoyed being a priest, being a priest for all God's people. The greatest honor and privilege in my life has been to celebrate Eucharist, to celebrate Mass, to stand at God's altar each day as priest, to offer Mass with and for God's people. To do so, even once in a lifetime, would be the greatest gift and privilege of all! "**

**Surviving Msgr. O'Neill are two brothers, Dan and his wife, Noreen, of New York and John and his wife, Noreen, also of New York; Four sisters, Peggie Keohane and Bridie Keane of Ireland, Eileen O'Driscoll and Sister Pauline of England; Nieces and Nephews, grandnieces and grandnephews, great grandnieces and great grandnephews. He was preceded in death by his parents, two brothers: Patrick and Michael, and four sisters: Ann Gair, Mary and Kittie O'Neill, and Jean McGee, three nieces and two nephews.**