

**A History of Catholicism in  
Yellowstone National Park  
1865-1977  
Msgr. Francis T. Penny**

The history of Catholicism in Yellowstone National Park begins in a remote way with the visit of Father Francis Xavier Kuppens, S.J., a young Belgium priest who was laboring as a missionary among the Piegan (Blackfoot) Indians of Montana. Although he was stationed at the old Mission of St. Peter's on the Missouri near the mouth of Sun River, much time was spent with bands of Indians roaming the country southward to the Yellowstone River and it was on such an excursion in the spring of 1865 that he induced a small party of buffalo hunters to show him the things of which they had talked. He was "very much impressed with the wild grandeur of the scenery," which was at that time unmarred by the hand of man; but we do not know if he said Mass in Yellowstone Park.

The area we know today as Yellowstone National Park was made a National Park by an act of Congress on March 1, 1872. From the inception of Yellowstone as a National Park, it was administered by the U.S. Army until 1916 when the National Park Service was founded.

In late June of 1873 a young Methodist minister William Wesley Van Orsdel came into the park with a clerical friend. There were a number of people camped near the lower Geyser Basin and Rev. Orsdel held a Methodist service for them on Sunday, July 4, 1873. This was the first religious service held in Yellowstone National Park.

From then on religious services in Yellowstone Park were sporadic. But at the instigation of the Hon. John W. Meldrum, the first National Park U.S. Commissioner, with the endorsements of Bishop William F. Nichols, an Episcopal Bishop from California, Bishop Nathaniel S. Thomas, the Episcopal Bishop of Wyoming, and Bishop James J. Keane, the Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Cheyenne in Wyoming, the Congress of the United States enacted a bill to erect a chapel within the military reservation of Yellowstone National Park on January the 13th, 1911. The construction of the Chapel was actually begun in 1912 and was completed on January the 8th, 1913. It was dedicated on Wednesday, June the 25th, 1913, by Bishop Nathaniel S. Thomas, the Episcopal Bishop of Wyoming.

A bronze plaque was placed in the chapel on July the 9th, 1930, with the following wording:  
Chapel

Erected 1913

At the Suggestion of

Honorable John W. Meldrum,

First National Park U.S. Commissioner

And Endorsed By

Bishop William F. Nichols

Bishop Nathaniel S. Thomas

Bishop James J. Keane

Brigadier General Lloyd M. Brett  
By Act of Congress  
Chapel Provision Introduced by  
Honorable Francis E. Warren  
U.S. Senator from Wyoming

From the inception of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 until 1924, there were no regular Catholic Services in Yellowstone National Park. From 1920 to 1925 arrangements were made for Mass to be said at the Mammoth Chapel in Yellowstone by priests visiting during the summer months\*

In 1924 Bishop Patrick McGovern added Yellowstone National Park as a mission to St. Barbara's Parish of Powell, Wyoming. However, Mass was not said regularly in the Park until 1925.

In the summer of 1924 Father John Spillane, the pastor of St. Barbara's in Powell, Wyoming, said Mass on three days during the week at Mammoth Chapel. In 1925 Mass was said regularly on Sundays during the summer months at Mammoth Chapel. This condition lasted until 1933 when arrangements were made for a Sunday Mass to be celebrated at Old Canyon Lodge, which no longer exists. Then in 1938 a schedule was made and followed whereby Mass was celebrated each Sunday at the four principal points in the Park: Old Faithful Lodge, Lake Lodge, Canyon Lodge, and Mammoth Chapel. Masses in Yellowstone National Park were discontinued during World War II.

Before World War II, St. Anthony's of Cody, Wyoming, was made a parish on October 23, 1940, with Yellowstone National Park as a mission. However, due to World War II, the first Pastor, Father Francis T. Penny did not arrive in Cody until January 14, 1944.

Right after World War II, Masses in Yellowstone National Park were resumed. Over the years the Mass schedule was expanded. In 1963 an additional Mass was begun at Lake Lodge raising the number of Masses there to two. In the summer of 1969 two Saturday evening Masses for the Sunday obligation were started, one at Mammoth Chapel and the other at the new Canyon Lodge. In 1972 a noon Mass on Sunday was instituted at Grant's Village in the southern part of Yellowstone National Park, bringing the total number of Masses said in the Park on weekends during the summer to seven.

Although the Christian Ministry in National Parks was begun in 1951, it was not until 1968 that the first Catholic seminarians were included in their program. In that year seminarians from St. Meinrad's Seminary in Indiana, Ronald Knott and Patrick Murphy, took part in the religious schedule of the Parks. Patrick Murphy was assigned to Yellowstone National Park to serve at Mammoth Chapel. Since then we have expanded the service of Catholic Seminarians in Yellowstone National Park so that today we have eight Seminarians working in the Park during the summer months.

The priests serving in Yellowstone National Park reside at St. Anthony's rectory in Cody, Wyoming, during the week. On Saturday mornings the two priests leave for the Park by car. One

priest stays at Canyon Lodge and the other priest drives on to Mammoth Hot Springs in the northern sector of Yellowstone Park. Both of these places have Saturday evening Masses for the Sunday obligation. On Sunday morning the priest at Canyon Lodge has a seven o'clock Mass and is then driven to Lake Lodge by volunteer tourists where he has two Masses. The priest at Mammoth drives to the Old Faithful area where he has one Mass in the Old Faithful Recreation Hall. After this Mass he drives to Grant Village on the shores of Yellowstone Lake where he has a 12 o'clock Mass. He then drives back up the lakeshore to Lake Lodge where he picks up the other priest and both return to Cody. Portable Mass kits are used at all Masses in Yellowstone National Park.

The priests who served in Yellowstone National Park are recruited from various religious Orders in the United States. Since World War II these priests have come from various places such as St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota; St. Benedict's Abbey, Atchison, Kansas; St. Meinrad's Abbey, St. Meinrad's, Indiana; Canisius College, Buffalo, New York; Fordham University, Bronx, New York; St. Elizabeth's High School, New York City, New York; Fairfield University, Fairfield, Connecticut; Weston College, Weston, Massachusetts; and the Servite Fathers in Denver, Colorado.

Respectfully submitted by  
Msgr. Francis T. Penny  
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ST. ANTHONY'S CHURCH  
P.O BOX 620  
CODY, WYOMING 82414  
Masses in Yellowstone Park during the Summer Months at Old Faithful Canyon Lodge Lake Lodge Grant Village and Mammoth Chapel