

# Bishop William H. Gross, C.Ss.R., Papers

Baltimore Province of the Redemptorists Archives  
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The scope of the papers of Archbishop William H. Gross, C.Ss.R., a member of the Baltimore Province of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, encompasses letters, master's theses, news clippings, and photographs. The materials date from 1858 to 1982. The collection is especially important—however partial—for research on the history of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Savannah and the metropolitan See of Oregon City (Portland). The entirety of the collection is open to qualified researchers. Consultation of these materials will be at the discretion of the Province Archivist.

## Biography:

William Hickley Gross was born in Baltimore, June 10 or 12, 1837, the son of Jacob W. and Rachel Haslett (néé Weiss) Gross. Young William was joined by six other siblings: Cordella, Joseph, Alfred, Louis, Mark (a future priest serving in the Vicariate of Wilmington, North Carolina), and James III. The Gross family was Alsatian by origin and had been in the United States in Pennsylvania at least since 1776. William's grandfather, Jacob Sr., together with the boy's uncle, John Gross, took part in the defense of the City of Baltimore during the War of 1812. William's father, Jacob Jr., was a Baltimore merchant and an official at the Port of Baltimore. His mother was born to an Irishman, in exile in the United States since 1798. According to his own admission, it was his mother that instilled a vocation to religious life. He grew up in St. Vincent's Parish, where he made his first communion. At age 13, in 1849, he entered St. Charles College, Ellicott City, Maryland. In October of that year, his mother died at age 39. His father Jacob Gross, Jr., lived until 1873. He had remarried and produced several more children. It was in Ellicott City where William began to pursue his vocation, discussing the matter with his spiritual director, Father Francis Seelos, then rector at St. Alphonsus in Baltimore. William eventually entered the novitiate of the Redemptorists at Annapolis, Maryland. He progressed to the Redemptorist major seminary in that city, joining the community on March 25, 1857 and making his first profession on April 4, 1858. Novices were removed by Father Seelos to the community at Cumberland, Maryland in June 1862. Gross underwent the sub-diaconate and diaconate beginning on the Feast of St. Joseph (March 19) and, with nineteen other Redemptorists, Gross was ordained to the priesthood March 21, 1863, at Annapolis by Archbishop Francis Patrick Kenrick of Baltimore. Though it was the first time in Annapolitan history that the people witnessed an ordination rite, it was to be Kenrick's last ministration of the sacrament. He died July 8, 1863.

There are conflicting reports of his second novitiate, perhaps owing to the press of the Civil War. A commemorative book printed for his silver jubilee of ordination suggests that he made his second novitiate "for special training in things pertaining to the pulpit and the confessional." More recent authors suggest that he never undertook the second novitiate—prescribed by the Rule—and was immediately engaged in pastoral work in the Archdioceses of Baltimore, New York, and Boston. This missionary work, it is suggested, extended throughout the eastern part of the United States from 1863-1873. But the Annals for the Annapolis community show that he began his second novitiate in September 1863 and this was ongoing for the next several months, at least through January. This also corresponds to the appointment of Father Joseph Helmprecht, C.Ss.R., as rector and prefect of the second novitiate, when Father Seelos was relieved of this duty. The delay in the second novitiate may

have resulted from Seelos' absence from Annapolis while on the mission. As it was, many in the Annapolis community were assigned to military chaplaincy, including Gross, who administered the sacraments on the battlefield, often at his own peril, and in makeshift hospitals, which were rife with the wounded and diseased. In 1865, he was assigned to the Novitiate at Cumberland, Maryland, serving in the office of "Minister" (procurator). In November of the following year, a new house was opened in New York, St. Alphonsus, and Gross was sent there as rector. In 1868 he toured the southern states with several confreres, preaching missions as far as Florida. It was while he was on this trip that he first encountered Savannah's charms and went through Atlanta and Columbus, Georgia. In 1869 he was found preaching in Ohio and in January of 1870, following a mission in Charlestown, Massachusetts, he and several confreres gave missions in and around Key West, Florida. In 1871, his superiors sent him to the nascent Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the "Mission Church" in the Roxbury section of Boston. He arrived there March 20. He succeeded the first rector, Father Wissel, on July 20. In September 1872, Gross was transferred back to St. Mary's Church, Annapolis, and appointed master of the second novitiate.

On February 14, 1873, he was elected to the See of Savannah, replacing Bishop Ignatius Persico, the former Vicar Apostolic of India, who later became the apostolic delegate to Canada. Gross met Persico while preaching in his diocese, and renewed the acquaintance when, during July of 1872, the bishop was invited to preach at the Mission Church. Persico suggested to Rome that Gross would be a good replacement. He left Boston for a two week retreat at Ilchester, Maryland, before being consecrated on April 17, 1873 in the Cathedral of the Assumption by Archbishop James Roosevelt Bayley. Bishops Thomas Albert Andrew Becker of Wilmington and Bishop James Gibbons of Richmond assisted as co-consecrators. At age 36, Gross was the youngest bishop in the United States. Savannah needed an energetic bishop, not merely to build up the church there, but to cover its vast expanse—the whole of the State of Georgia. By the end of his tenure, he could count 27 priests serving 30 churches and chapels for some 25,000 Catholics in the Diocese, as well as fourteen social service institutions under Catholic auspices. Over two dozen Catholic schools flourished, too, though "Pio Nono College" was a short-lived experiment in higher education that eventually became a secondary school. During this time he built his cathedral—largely with the \$50,000 Bishop Persico had left in a building fund. In May and June 1876, he scoured Europe for ornaments to this house of worship, securing for it in Munich the stained glass. While in Europe he toured Rome, Lourdes, and Malines. Gross laid the cornerstone in November 1873 and placed the building under the patronage of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, a title it held for about a decade whereupon it reverted back to the original parish name of St. John the Baptist. The Cathedral was dedicated by Archbishop Bayley in 1876, but Gross' successor in the See of Savannah, Bishop Becker, later discovered that the Cathedral was never formally approved by the Holy See to have its name changed. Becker changed the name back and completed the structure in 1896 under the present title. Within two years, it burned to the ground. Gross attended the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884. It was at the Council that Gross delivered an address entitled "The Missions for the Colored People," a subject that was dear to him for most of his career.

He was promoted to the metropolitan see of Oregon City on March 31, 1885. He arrived in Oregon in May of that year. At the time he took possession of the Archdiocese it was estimated that he served between 10,000-20,000 souls. He invited the Dominican friars, Christian Brothers, and priests of the Divine Savior to work in the Archdiocese, along with eight other communities of men and women religious. He needed the manpower, for though the archbishopric held fewer Catholics, they were scattered about a much larger territory than Georgia. He opened Mount Angel Seminary and put it under the care of the Benedictines, who had arrived in Oregon in 1882 and whose foundation, despite several disastrous fires, has remained to this day. He added six new orders of women religious to

supplement the work begun under his predecessor, Archbishop Charles Seghers. Schools, homes for the aged, asylums, and hospitals grew accordingly. Jesuits were asked to minister to the Umatilla Indian reservation, where in 1898 there were about 1,000 Catholic Indians. The Cathedral of Mary Immaculate went up in Portland, despite considerable setbacks—and was dedicated by Gross on August 15, 1885. That same year he acquired *The Catholic Sentinel*, a diocesan newspaper, and saved it from extinction.

The pallium was conferred by Pope Leo XIII on October 1, 1887, and presented October 9, 1887, by Cardinal Gibbons of Baltimore in a ceremony in the Cathedral in Portland. Among his accomplishments in the time he served the archbishopric, he grew the clergy from 29 in 1885 to 55 in 1898. A score of churches and chapels existed in 188, but in 1898 there were 37 with resident priests, over two dozen missions with churches, 83 stations, and 13 chapels. The number of parochial schools leapt from 2 to 27. During his tenure, the number of Catholics grew by over a third, adding another 13,000. Archbishop Gross convened and presided over the Third Provincial Council of Oregon City in 1891. He celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of his episcopal consecration April 27, 1898. As a gift, the priests and people of the Oregon City Archdiocese presented him with a private residence on Southwest Sixteenth Avenue and Davis Street, which no longer stands. He did not have long to enjoy it. Later that year, Gross went back East and gave a retreat for Redemptorist students in Annapolis. He became ill and died shortly afterwards at St. Joseph Hospital in Baltimore on November 14, 1898, at the age of 61. The body lay in state at St. James Church, Baltimore, until Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore celebrated the funeral liturgy in the Cathedral. Gross was buried on November 18 in the Most Holy Redeemer Cemetery in Baltimore.

#### Acquisition and Processing Information:

The Archbishop William H. Gross, C.Ss.R., Papers were given as a permanent legacy to the Baltimore Province Archives, where they are maintained. The collection was accessioned upon his death in 1898 for processing by the Archives. Much of the material trickled in over the next several decades, especially the photostatic copies from various archives in the United States and in Rome. It was not until September 2009, however, that Patrick Hayes, Ph.D., began to process the materials. This finding aid was begun by Dr. Hayes in September 2009 in Microsoft Word.

#### Languages:

Materials are in English and German.

#### Bibliography:

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Brandt, Patricia and Lillian A. Pereyra. *Adapting to Eden: Oregon's Catholic Minority, 1838-1986* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 2002).

McKenna, Stephen. "Historical Miscellanies: Our Ladies Bishop," *Central-Blatt and Social Justice* 24:3-10 (May 1931-January 1932): 53-55, 88-89, 129-132, 176-178, 212-214, 249-251, 286-287, 322-323.

n.a., "Zum Jubilfeste der Erdiöcese Oregon," *Der Armen Seelon Freund* 10:8 (May 1898): 341-364.

Ryan, Chloe M. "Archbishop William H. Gross, Missionary Archbishop/Archbishop of Oregon City, 1885-1898," paper given at Marylhurst College, Marylhurst, Oregon, January 31, 1932.

Skeabeck, Andrew, C.Ss.R. "Most Rev. William Gross: Missionary Bishop of the North," *The Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 65 (1954): 11-23; 102-115; 142-157; 216-229; idem, volume 66 (1956): 35-52; 78-94; 131-155.

#### Scope and Contents:

The Gross Papers comprise several file folders in one cabinet drawer (54A). After one file folder of biographical information, subsequent subject file folders are listed alphabetically by title in the order of appearance in the collection. The collection itself is concentrated mainly on his episcopacy, though some items, such as his autobiographical statement on his vocation may be dated to the 1850s. The files relate personal and public information relative to his ministries and include many letters to confreres and notable ecclesiastics such as Cardinal Gibbons. The yeoman work of Fathers Stephen McKenna, C.Ss.R., and Andrew Skeabeck, C.Ss.R., forms a large portion of the collection, in that they were responsible for gathering so many disparate documents between the Baltimore Province archives, diocesan archives, and archives of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome.

#### Detailed Finding Aid

##### Cabinet 54A

Folder 1: Biographical Material / Finding aid / Bound theses

Folder 2: Articles about

Folder 3: Correspondence

Folder 4: Episcopal souvenirs

Folder 5: Photographs

Folder 6: Skeabeck notes

Last updated: September 30, 2009/pjh