

**Most Reverend Sebastian Gebhard Messmer  
(1892-1903)**

Sebastian Gebhard Messmer, the fourth Bishop of the Diocese of Green Bay (1892-1903), exhibited a great penchant for teaching and scholarship. A Franciscan Tertiary, he modelled a spirit of humility and simplicity. He was seen as having been so self-effacing that even with his striking full beard, he frequently remained unrecognized when he appeared in public; whenever possible, he shunned any special attention. Yet, when it was his duty to make his presence felt, he quickly did so.

This humble bishop-- and later Archbishop of Milwaukee from 1903-1930-- was a man who also lived the real spirit of poverty. In fact, according to his Chancellor, he never accepted a salary during his more than 25 years as archbishop. If he ever showed any attachment to worldly possessions, it was probably only for his books which he treasured greatly.

His exceptional humility came through loud and clear when, in his will, he ordered that his name not even be mentioned by whichever prelate might be chosen to deliver his funeral sermon. Throughout his long life he listened as readily to a poor old woman who might approach him as he did to the learned people. He was a man described as genial and happy who could enjoy a holiday when he was away from his many responsibilities.

Throughout his eleven years as Bishop of Green Bay, Bishop Messmer still kept a special place in his heart for his birthplace he loved so dearly. He was born in the small village of Goldach, located near Lake Constance in northern Switzerland on August 29, 1847. Sebastian was the oldest of five children whose mother, the former Rosa Baumgartner died when he was only ten years old. His father was a financially secure, self-made independent farmer and innkeeper who also had a great thirst for education. Sebastian Messmer, Sr. served his community in positions of trust and influence until he died in the prime of his life.

The burgeoning scholar, Sebastian Jr., distinguished himself throughout his studies in Switzerland, culminating in his education at the Austrian University of Innsbruck where he studied philosophy and theology. It was during these years that he gave serious thought to dedicating his life to the service of the foreign missions; the same missionary zeal was true for his three predecessors who were Bishops of the Diocese of Green Bay.

In all probability, Sebastian Messmer's eventual decision to turn to his youthful apostolic ambition toward serving in the American missions was prompted by the visit of Bishop James Bayley of Newark, New Jersey, to the students at the University of Innsbruck in 1869.

On July 23, 1871, Sebastian Messmer was ordained a priest in Austria by Bishop Zuber, a Capuchin missionary bishop of India. At the time, Bishop Bayley was recruiting priests

for the Diocese of Newark, New Jersey. It was in this diocese that Father Messmer would be formally incardinated as a priest.

Shortly after arriving in America in 1871, Father Messmer was appointed to teach Sacred Scripture, Canon Law and other subjects at Seton Hall College, the diocesan seminary. He taught there for the next 18 years. He was also awarded the title “Doctor of Divinity” by Pope Leo XIII in recognition of his teaching and publishing work in canon law.

In 1884, Father Messmer became secretary to the Council of Baltimore. At the same time, however, he became an academic specialist and a pastor with other pastoral activities.

In 1889, this scholarly professor and pastor of St. Peter Parish in Newark was selected for the faculty in canon law of what was then the new Catholic University in Washington, D.C. To prepare for what he assumed would continue for some years, Father Messmer went to Rome for eight months of study at the Apollinaris College and received his licentiate in Canon Law in 1890. In September of that year he began his teaching at Catholic University.

To the great shock of Father Messmer, he was appointed the Fifth Bishop of the Diocese of Green Bay in December 1891. He very much wanted to continue teaching, and is quoted as having said: *“I think it would be an easy matter to find a Bishop for Green Bay.”* Resonating a similar response, Archbishop John Ireland would have preferred a bishop of another nationality and told Bishop John Keane, Rector of Catholic University, *“you must educate your professors and then hold on to them---making Bishops only of those who are not worth keeping as professors.”*

The newly appointed Bishop of Green Bay was somewhat acquainted with Wisconsin since his Capuchin brother, Father Gabriel (Joseph), had been stationed at Mount Calvary and later became Provincial of the Order. Without any success in trying to avert his promotion to the episcopacy, he was consecrated Bishop Sebastian Messmer on March 27, 1892 in his former parish church of St. Peter in Newark where he had earlier been pastor. Bishop Otto Zardetti, a life-long friend and then Bishop of St. Cloud, Minnesota, was the consecrator with Bishop Keane and Bishop Winand Wigger.

Shortly after on April 7, 1892, Bishop Messmer took charge of the Diocese of Green Bay. His train to Green Bay stopped in Chilton, Wisconsin to receive a large delegation of local Appleton and Green Bay people. Father Leo Ricklin had been a student at Catholic University in 1891 where he came to know the new bishop who had taught canon law. He came with Bishop Messmer to Green Bay as Chancellor and secretary to the Bishop from 1892-1894. However, some priests felt that these responsibilities should be given to a native priest of the diocese. So it happened that Father Joseph Fox (Bishop Messmer’s successor) assumed the duties of Chancellor and Vicar General in 1894.

During more than a decade as chief shepherd of the diocese, Bishop Messmer gave strong evidence of his unusual abilities as an administrator, teacher and builder. Education of

the young remained an intense interest of the bishop. The need for a Center of Religious Education for Catholic children north of Sturgeon Bay, for example, was achieved by the construction of the St. Aloysius Institute in 1892, built at the expense of this Bishop. That same year, Bishop Messmer began raising funds for what would become St. Joseph Orphanage. Construction got underway in the spring of 1894. During his time a dozen parochial schools were also opened. As a strong defender of Catholic schools, Bishop Messmer vociferously opposed any compromise school plan.

Perhaps it was his professional background that influenced him to make such active use of his pen. Among Bishop Messmer's pastoral writing was a small pamphlet of 26 pages entitled "Pastoral Instruction on Christian Marriage" which was available in English, French and German.

Before Bishop Messmer became the Archbishop of Milwaukee on November 28, 1903, he also edited two works which were translated by others: Spirago's *Method of Christian Doctrine for Priests, Teachers and Parents* (1901) and Devier's *Christian Apologetics: A Defense of the Catholic Faith* (1903). He likewise contributed a few brief items to the *Catholic Encyclopedia* and wrote for the *Catholic Historical Review*, *Ecclesiastical Review* and *Pastoral Blatt*. Scholarly and pastoral biblical writings continued while for 28 years Bishop Messmer was the Archbishop of Milwaukee until his death in 1930.

History was also a penchant for Bishop Messmer; he was very active in the Wisconsin Historical Society and even at one time served on its board of curators. He studied and produced written accounts of the history of the Catholic Northwest, while also encouraging others to follow his example.

A major doctrinal conflict presented a huge challenge to Bishop Messmer shortly after he arrived in Green Bay. The destructive work of the schismatic self-styled "Archbishop" Joseph Vilatte presented a real threat to Catholicism in the Door County Peninsula (Kewaunee and Door Counties) in the early 1890s. Vilatte was establishing churches in the peninsula area where many Belgian Walloon immigrants had been settling with their many needs to be addressed in their own language since many could not speak English.

Bishop Messmer preserved the true Catholic faith of the Belgian people by asking the Premonstratensian Fathers of Holland to settle in the Door County Peninsula to work against the perniciousness of Vilatte's influence.

Under the revered leadership of the revered Father (Abbot) Bernard Pennings, O. Praem., the first of the Premonstratensian (Norbertine) Fathers and Brothers arrived in Green Bay in 1893. St. Norbert College in De Pere (founded in 1898) continues to be one of the fruits of their coming to enrich the Diocese of Green Bay. At the same time, their spiritual work led to the eventual defeat of Vilatte's influence in the area.

Beyond the boundaries of the Diocese of Green Bay, Bishop Messmer gained recognition as co-founder (with Bishop James McFaul of Trenton, New Jersey) of the Federation of Catholic Societies. This organization was founded to combat discrimination and intolerance against Catholics in America and to fortify the Catholic laborer against the

growing influence of socialism. He was the first president of the Catholic Columbian Summer School, Madison, Wisconsin.

During Prohibition, Bishop Messmer sided with the promoters of temperance rather than total abstinence. In the spirit of true patriotism, he asked both Catholics and Protestants to unite on all public questions for the common good.

Bishop Messmer's July 23, 1896 Silver Jubilee as a priest, included civic leaders. Priests gifted him with \$2,500.

A heart condition ultimately forced the aging Archbishop of Milwaukee to limit his activities during the last five years of his life. In June 1930, however, he decided to travel to Europe. He had an audience with Pope Pius XI in Vatican City on June 29 and then he visited his native village of Goldach, Switzerland. He died there on August 4, 1930.

The Pontifical Requiem Mass was celebrated by his nephew, the Benedictine Abbot of Engleberg. As he always wished, Archbishop Messmer was buried next to his father in the small parish cemetery in Goldach.

Because his pallium as Archbishop of Milwaukee—only worn in his own archdiocese—was not with him when he died, it is still in the St. John Cathedral in Milwaukee.

A Catholic high school named after him still serves many students in the Milwaukee area. After his death in Switzerland, a Newark, New Jersey newspaper possibly captured his whole life best when it wrote of him: "Bishop Messmer spoke seven languages fluently and spoke kindly in all of them."

*Father James P. Massart*