

A Brief History of the Diocese of Wilmington

The Diocese of Wilmington was established in March of 1868 by Pope Pius IX under the leadership of its first Bishop, the Right Reverend **Thomas Andrew Becker**, D.D. It comprised at the time the entire State of Delaware, the nine counties of Maryland, and the two counties of Virginia east of the Chesapeake Bay. These areas constitute the geographic area known as the Delmarva Peninsula. In 1974, Pope Paul VI transferred the Virginia territory of the Diocese of Wilmington to the Diocese of Richmond after the construction of the Chesapeake Bridge-Tunnel improved convenient travel between the Eastern Shore counties of Virginia and the mainland.

When Richmond, Virginia native Bishop Becker was consecrated in August of 1868 as the first Bishop of the Diocese of Wilmington, he had a somewhat discouraging list of resources: eight priests, 18 churches, an orphanage, an academy for girls, and a parochial school, all conducted by the Daughters of Charity at St. Peter, Wilmington; parochial schools at St. Mary, Wilmington, and St. Joseph, Brandywine Banks, conducted by the Sisters of St. Joseph, who were immediately recalled to Philadelphia by Bishop James Wood upon learning of the establishment of the new diocese.

During his 18-year stay, Bishop Becker witnessed an increase in the number of priests almost three-fold and he doubled the number of churches, concentrating on rural areas. He also established an orphanage and academy for boys, an academy for girls, and two additional parochial schools.

In March of 1886, Bishop Becker was transferred to the Diocese of Savannah, Georgia. It was then that Delmarva Peninsula native, **Alfred Allen Curtis**, a priest of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, was appointed the second Bishop of the Diocese of Wilmington. Among his achievements during his 10 years as Bishop of Wilmington, Bishop Curtis brought the Josephite Fathers to minister to the African-American community, built for them St. Joseph Church in Wilmington, an orphanage, and parochial school. He also, with the help of St. Katherine Drexel, established St. Joseph Industrial School in Clayton, Delaware. He also brought the Benedictine fathers and sisters and the Ursuline sisters to the diocese.

When Bishop Curtis resigned due to health reasons in 1896, he left the diocese well established with 30 priests, 22 churches and 18 missions, 12 seminarians, eight religious communities, three academies, nine parochial schools, three orphanages, and a cloistered convent.

In 1897, **John J. Monaghan** of Charleston, South Carolina was named the third Bishop of Wilmington. He established seven new parishes, seven new missions and eight new schools. In 1903 the Little Sisters of the Poor opened a home for the aged and the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales opened Salesianum School, a secondary school for boys, in Wilmington. Bishop Monaghan also established St. Francis Hospital, operated by the Sisters of St. Francis of Glen Riddle.

Poor health caused Bishop Monaghan to resign in 1925 and **Edmond John Fitzmaurice** of Philadelphia was chosen to succeed him. During his 35-year episcopate, the Catholic population grew from 34,000 to 85,000. All but one of the 17 new parishes and eight missions he founded were outside the City of Wilmington. He founded 19 elementary and nine secondary schools, and for the first time four were outside New Castle County, Delaware, at Dover and Rehoboth, Delaware and Easton and Salisbury, Maryland. Among the many initiatives he encouraged were such conventional structures as Catholic Charities, founded as the Catholic Welfare Guild, Catholic Youth Organization, Society for the Propagation of the Faith, and Knights of Columbus, as well as innovations like the Catholic Interracial Council, Catholic Forum of the Air, Catholic Television Guild, Diocesan Book Forum, Catholic Education Guild, and Young Christian Workers.

Upon Bishop FitzMaurice's retirement in 1960, **Michael William Hyle** of Baltimore became Wilmington's fifth bishop. His tenure was dominated by the Second Vatican Council, all of the sessions of which he attended. Bishop Hyle began the implementation of the Council's early reforms. He sought the formation of councils in every parish, established the *Dialog* newspaper and was in the forefront of the ecumenical movement. Under his leadership, funds were raised to build Saint Mark's High School in Wilmington and a Newman Center at the University of Delaware in Newark. Bishop Hyle died on December 26, 1967.

In March of 1968, Auxiliary Bishop of Baltimore, **Thomas Joseph Mardaga** was named the sixth Bishop of the Diocese of Wilmington. Bishop Mardaga continued the implementation of the Vatican Council reforms, established a Council of the Laity, continued the ecumenical work of his predecessor, joining with other Christian denomination leaders to form the Delmarva Ecumenical Agency, and worked with Christian and Non-Christian clergy in regular interfaith consultations. He is remembered also for stepping up public relations and media efforts, reorganizing the diocesan curia, setting up a financial department separate from the Chancery, and establishing a Ministry for Migrant Workers.

When Bishop Mardaga passed away in 1984, Bishop **Robert E. Mulvee**, Auxiliary Bishop of Manchester, New Hampshire was selected as Wilmington's seventh Bishop and began his administration emphasizing collegiality. He advanced the stature and image of the Roman Catholic Bishop. He helped restructure the Delmarva Ecumenical Agency into the Christian Council of Delaware and Maryland's Eastern Shore, as a more responsive vehicle for Christian interaction. As the diocese grew to 165,000 strong out of a total population of just over 1 million, he founded three new missions and raised a fourth to parish status. In 1995, he was appointed Coadjutor Bishop of Providence, RI.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century the Catholic population was concentrated in the Wilmington area due to successive waves of immigration – Irish, French, German, Polish, Italian, and more recently Latin American, Filipino, Korean, and Vietnamese. Recent population growth in the Glasgow area of New Castle County, Delaware and in the beach/resort areas of Delaware and Maryland's Eastern Shore triggered a need for even more services outside metro Wilmington.

Bishop **Michael A. Saltarelli** was appointed eighth Bishop of Wilmington on November 21, 1995. Before coming to Wilmington, Bishop Saltarelli served the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey as priest, pastor, and Auxiliary Bishop. Upon his arrival on Delmarva, Bishop Saltarelli established his seven priorities. Bishop Saltarelli presided over an era of expansion and growth in the Diocese of Wilmington. A three-year capital campaign, *Bringing the Vision to Life*, addressed the needs of a growing diocesan family to build, renovate and expand churches, schools and other facilities throughout the diocese. With Bishop Saltarelli's leadership, new schools and parishes were established, existing schools were expanded, and numerous capital projects were completed in parishes throughout the diocese.

Under Bishop Saltarelli's leadership, the Global Solidarity Partnership between the Diocese of Wilmington and the Diocese of San Marcos, Guatemala and *For the Sake of God's Children*, the diocesan safe environment program to educate on sexual abuse prevention and detection, were used as examples for other dioceses in the United States. As Bishop of the Diocese of Wilmington, Bishop Saltarelli ordained 23 men to the diocesan priesthood and 47 men to the permanent diaconate.

In accordance with Church law, Bishop Saltarelli offered his resignation as Bishop of Wilmington to the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, when he turned 75 years of age. On July 7, 2008, the Pope accepted Bishop Saltarelli's resignation and appointed Bishop **W. Francis Malooly** as his successor. Bishop Saltarelli then served as administrator of the diocese until Bishop Malooly's installation.

Bishop W. Francis Malooly was installed as the ninth bishop of the diocese on September 8, 2008 at St. Elizabeth Church in Wilmington, Delaware. A Maryland native, he served as Auxiliary Bishop of Baltimore, Moderator of the Curia, Vicar General, and Western Vicar (for Garrett, Allegany, Washington, Frederick, Carroll and Howard counties) He was born on January 18, 1944 in Baltimore, Maryland. He was ordained to the priesthood on May 9, 1970 and was ordained a Bishop on March 1, 2001.