History of Lutherans and Catholics in Montana

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Source: Religion in Montana: Pathways to the Present Vol II, edited by Lawrence Small

Chapter 2: The Roman Catholic Dioceses of Montana: An Abbreviated History, by Rev. William Greytak, Ph.D.

Chapter 3: Lutherans in Montana: From Immigrant to American Church, by Rev. Paul Everett.

By way of introductory remarks, I can say that Dr. Small’s book was invaluable. Perhaps I could have done additional research, especially by using Paladino’s monumental book, Indian and White in the Northwest, but this is a brief overview.

I might also remark that studying these two stories is like comparing work done on an Excell spread sheet and work done on a Word document. The Catholic story unfolds with the simplicity of arithmetic and the Lutheran story is a woven narrative.

So, let’s start with what I learned about the Lutheran Church in Montana. As Paul Everett’s title suggests, it is largely rooted in immigrants from Europe, especially Scandinavia. However, the first remarkable thing about the Lutherans began in 1857. Two German Missionaries based in Detroit and belonging to the Iowa Synod were met by Crow Indian Agents who asked them to come to catechize the tribe in what is now the area of Custer, Montana. Rev. J. J. Schmidt and Rev. Moritz Brauninger spent time there and in Wyoming over a couple of years, evangelizing the Crow Indians, until 1861, when they were overtaken by a party of Sioux Indians, and Brauninger was killed and mutilated, maybe the first Christian martyr in Montana. There was no more Lutheran Church activity until the immigrants arrived.

The two salient features of Lutheran history are the nationality-based synods, and the Homestead Act.

Norwegians were the first and largest, group, having built the first Church in Melville in 1885, and organized as a “United Church Synod” in 1890. It was a combination of the Norwegian-Danish Conference, the Norwegian-Danish Augustana Synod, and the Anti-Missouri Brotherhood. The Norwegian influence was very strong in providing identity in this act of unifying. There was also the Lutheran Free Church, which remained autonomous until 1993. And then there was the pietist and anti-hierarchical Hauge Synod, with heavy emphasis on lay evangelization. In 1917, the Hauge Synod merged into the United Church.

The next major Lutheran groups were the Germans. The Missouri Synod established itself in St. Louis in 1845 out of the earlier Saxon Germans who formed back in 1839. Missouri Synod, known for its loyalty to the Lutheran Confessions experienced no mergers or divisions. The Iowa Synod (remember the missionaries?) was influenced by the direction of Wilhelm Loehe, starting in 1854. Finally, the United Lutheran Church in America was primarily active in the Eastern part of the United States and not much in the Montana scene.

The Danish Lutherans came from two groups: the 1872 Danish Lutheran Church in America, and the 1896 United Danish Lutheran Church in America.

The last national Church were the Swedes in Wisconsin, forming in 1860 as the Augustana Synod.

As of 1995, through a series of mergers, all but one of these churches became part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

As further background, keep in mind the influence of the Homestead Act, and the large populations fleeing Europe. The late 1890s and the early 1900s saw an accelerated influx of farmers who worked with favorable land-ownership laws, better dry-land farming techniques, promotional campaigns to settle the west, and the all-important means of transportation, the new railroad.

From this point, the story of the Lutherans in Montana is a movement from the east to the west, generally speaking. It is a story of tireless efforts of early pastors who served their congregations, large, small, and tiny, over the vast area of the state. Not only were agricultural settlements the focus of their attention, but mining towns also became an important field of endeavor. During the early years especially, there was a kind of inherent division. For example, two energetic pastors from the closing years of the 19th Century were L. A. K. Carlson from Helena and Great Falls, and J. E. Madsen, of Melville and Absarokee. Both pastors did extensive work in founding new congregations and setting up what were called “preaching places.” As you can imagine, their areas of ministry were extremely vast. There was a multiplicity of Norwegian Lutheran synods, and work was commonly duplicated. One town might have three Norwegian Lutheran churches – an unfortunate testimony – but this situation was alleviated in large part by the 1917 merger that formed the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America.

Merging of Scandinavian groups, rapid growth as homesteaders and mining opened up, railroad promotionals, energetic pastors, all of these factors influenced the early development of Lutherans in Montana. Challenges included difficult weather and poor transportation, periods of draught, and conflicts between ideals of pastors and realities of the local community – sometimes the members liked dancing, theatre, and belonging to masonic orders, much to the chagrin of the pastor.

Between 1900 and 1917, there developed 193 Norwegian Lutheran churches alone, and so the time was ripe for the merger. After WWI, there was a process of dissolving, consolidating and reforming congregations in many regions as the needs arose and fortunes shifted. US law prohibited the speaking of German, so that was an impetus for many churches to switch to English, even – eventually- the Scandinavians. During this early period, there were even a few parochial Lutheran schools in bigger cities, but they all closed for financial reasons and population shifts, not to arise again until the 1950s. There were also disputes here and there over liturgical practices that came to a head in 1924, when efforts to reach greater orthodoxy were put in place. Also during this period Lutheran pastors in Butte bemoaned the moral laxity of the place and a prevailing lack of spirituality. As a Montana Catholic learning this about Butte, I feel shocked, shocked!

The Great Depression had its negative effect on the Lutherans throughout Montana. As the nation regained its economic stability after WWII, it is safe to say that there was a broad era of growth and improvement. The Missouri Synod remained separate, nearly all congregations had men’s and women’s groups, libraries, Sunday schools, confirmation classes, young people’s groups and church choirs. But populations shifted, and the church witnessed closing, merging, and opening churches across the state. Another consequence of maturing, nearly every congregation was English-speaking, and the European roots held less and less as the church was Americanized.

The major part of history at this point is national mergers of synods. In 1960, the American Lutheran Church Synod was the result of the merger of four groups:

* The Norwegian-based Evangelical Lutheran Church
* The German-based American Lutheran Church
* The Danish-based United Evangelical Lutheran Church
* And, a short time later, many (but not all) Lutheran Free Church congregations joined the ALC Synod

In 1962, the Lutheran Church in America Synod formed as a result of the merger of another four groups:

* The German-based United Lutheran Church of America
* The Swedish-based Augustana Synod
* The Danish-based Evangelical Lutheran Church of America
* And the Finish-based Suomi Synod

Finally, in 1988, we witness the merger of the ALC and the LCA to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

At the time of Paul Everett’s writing, nearly all Lutheran congregations in Montana belong either to the ELCA or the Missouri Synod. Generally speaking, these two groups are in the liberal and conservative camps, respectively. There is a more recent fracture I am aware of that goes by the initials LCMC, but I leave details about that to my colleagues. And what about my cousins here who are members of the Wisconsin Synod? Again, I will leave that to my ecumenical colleagues.

Lutherans in Montana commemorating with us today are known recently for their concern for social justice, something that became more prominent in the 1950s. Some features are:

* Care for elders (Faith Lutheran Home in Wolf Point, a long-time home for Father Bob Fox, one of our deceased historians), St. John’s in Billings (where my mother is happily living), Good Shepherd in Havre, Immanuel in Kalispell, and Valley in Glasgow.
* Bible Camps, notably Christikon outside of Livingston, and a camp in Flathead
* Parochial Schools by the Missouri Synod in Billings, Libbey and Kalispell, since closed.
* Lutheran Social Services to address adoption of children
* Assigning hospital chaplains in Billings and Great Falls
* And a general concern, despite divergent opinions, for women’s rights, social justice, and ecumenical outreach. My main introduction to Lutheranism was through the now-defunct Montana Association of Churches.

To end this section of my presentation, I would like to quote my source, Paul Everett, with these lines:

While remembering their heritage as Lutherans, and striving to remain faithful to that theology centered on the Grace of God, Montana Lutherans have formed a diverse, American church that reaches out to people in many ways.

So now we come to a very different story of the spread of Christianity in Montana, the Catholics. While the story of Lutherans unfolds in a narrative created by a Word document, the Catholic story is more like an Excell document, with columns and rows in a strict order. While Lutherans concern themselves primarily as synods of congregations, the Catholic Church counts territories, the bishops in charge, and by association, the people living there. Catholics have vicariates and dioceses, with borders and authorities built in. Generally speaking, Lutherans historically emerged into Montana from the east, and Catholics came in from the west. Every square inch of land in the world is considered, in the view of the Catholic Church an archdiocese, a diocese, or an apostolic vicariate. Far-flung places like Montana in the early days was an apostolic vicariate, first under the Bishop of New Orleans, having been declared so by the Pope in 1803. As the Church in America grew, Montana fell under the auspices of the apostolic vicariate of St. Louis in 1826. In 1834, Pope Gregory 16th assigned the spiritual care of the Indians to the Jesuits. Six years later they began to serve in what is now Montana; the Jesuits are still active today in Western Montana. In 1843 area of Montana that provides drainage for the Columbia River came under the auspices of the apostolic vicariate of Portland, that is to say Western Montana. In 1850, eastern Montana, namely the Missouri River drainage, was under the apostolic vicariate of Kansas, and in 1860, the apostolic vicariate of Nebraska. So the bishops in charge were always at a great distance and never were personally present to the people, mostly Native Americans and trappers, and later miners and homesteaders, but the Jesuits came as the first missionaries.

Finally, in 1884, the Diocese of Helena was established, and it covered the entire state. In 1904, the Diocese of Great Falls was divided off, creating an eastern and western diocese as we know them today. In 1981 the eastern diocese was hyphenated to Great Falls-Billings as a way to recognize the population growth along the Yellowstone valley.

That is a run-through strictly on a territorial basis – not very interesting, perhaps, but foundational to the Catholic understanding of the existence of the church.

Backing up to the early developments, we can look at the first Jesuit efforts. Catholic Iroquois Indians in Canada told the Flatheads Indians in western Montana about the Black Robes, as they called the Jesuits on account of their long cassocks. A delegation of Flatheads visited St. Louis several times, starting in 1830, asking for the priests to come to Montana. It was reported that they wanted the Jesuits to “lead them to heaven and give them power to overcome their enemy,” namely the Blackfeet Indians. I would say they were a little unclear on the concept of Christianity, but, hey, you have to start somewhere.

In the 1830s, Belgian Jesuit Pierre de Smet and a small group made their way west to Montana, and the Black Robes went to work. In 1841, St. Mary’s Mission was established near Stevensville, and in 1854, St. Ignatius was founded. They gradually moved east, starting St. Peter’s Mission near Ulm outside of Great Falls. Up until the 1860s, the Natives were the primary members of Montana Catholic churches, and things really changed when gold was discovered, marking the arrival of a sizeable white population.

The first priests were all Jesuits, many from Belgium, but once the Diocese of Montana was established, the need for secular clergy expanded. They came mostly from the mid-West, and something interesting happened under the territorial governorship of General Thomas Francis Meagher. Being an Irishman, he made heroic efforts to bring Irish secular priests to work alongside the Jesuits to grow the Catholic Church in Montana. Meagher was a true visionary. He knew very well of the region of the country known as New England. He had every intention of turning Montana into New Ireland, but that is another story.

Another early group of Catholics that came to Montana – this time from east to west – were the Metis. They have a long and colorful and difficult story, but the European side of their formation had deep Catholic roots. Lewistown had a fairly large part of their somewhat nomadic population. Jesuits came from St. Peter’s mission to establish St. Mary’s Church in 1888, which later was relocated and renamed as St. Leo’s. It is interesting to note that the first public school in Lewistown was French-speaking, thanks to the Metis from the far corners of Canada.

Let’s turn our attention briefly to the women religious and their contribution to this subject. In 1869, the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth came from Kansas to deal with healthcare and education, establishing St. John’s Hospital in Helena in 1884 and Holy Rosary Hospital in Miles City. The first Sisters of Providence came from Seattle in 1873, creating academies for boys and girls. The women of the Order of St. Ursula not only staffed St. Peter’s Mission near Great Falls, but also served the Northern Cheyenne Indians in Ashland. Of course, they were also responsible for the Ursuline Academy’s construction in Great Falls. To sum up very succinctly, these pioneer women worked with great faith under extreme hardship, especially in the early days, and the Catholic Church in Montana owes them a great debt in their ministry in education and healthcare.

As mentioned before, the polity of the Catholic Church centers on the role of the bishop in care of the territory, and then pastors, under the direction of the bishop, take care of the parishes in the territory. So here is some information about bishops.

In 1884, when Montana became its own diocese under Bishop John Baptiste Brondel, a Belgian, there were 16 priests (12 Jesuit) and 16 churches, with a Catholic population of about 15,000 scattered over 146 square miles, the entire state. As the Lutherans in Montana were growing, a very similar thing was happening in the Catholic Church; it was a time of great expansion. By the time he died in 1903, and as the Diocese of Great Falls was being formed, there were a total of 53 priests and 65 churches serving a population of about 50,000 Catholics.

In these early days, Bishop Brondel tried to get more priests, especially from Belgium, and he did. There were similar language problems experienced by European Lutherans, but the Catholic priests added in the challenge of learning Native American tongues. Things were somewhat alleviated in this regard by the common use of Latin in the liturgy. As you might guess, there were fundraisers back east to establish Catholic centers and schools to civilize the Native Americans, but while diverting attention today, I do not want to minimize the importance and the long-term effect of this effort.

In 1904, as mentioned earlier, the Diocese of Great Falls was ready to stand on its own, and Bishop Mathias Lenihan was named by the Holy See. Following the lead of Meagher and Brondel, he sought priests from Ireland and Belgium. He built St. Ann’s Cathedral in Great Falls, the first permanent completed and dedicated Catholic Cathedral in the Northwest in 1907.

Nearly simultaneously with Lenihan, Bishop John Patrick Carroll was named bishop of Helena in 1904. In 1909 he began the building of Capital Hill College, and it was later renamed Mount St. Charles College, and eventually, Carroll College. The first native Montanan to be ordained a priest, Patrick McVeigh, was a 1920 graduate of Carroll. Helena’s first cathedral was called Cathedral of the Sacred Hearts, but Carroll undertook the construction of the new one, St. Helena’s, which was completed in 1924. Just looking at this structure and taking in its significance is a lesson about Catholic history in Montana itself.

How can I finish this story without getting bogged down in bishops’ biographies? I will just mention them:

In Helena, Carroll was succeeded by Bishop George Finnegan, 1927 to 1932, Bishop Ralph Hayes, 1933 to 1935, Bishop Joseph Gilmore, 1936 to 1962 (a remarkably long stint), Bishop Raymond Hunthausen, 1962 to 1975 (a Montana native and a remarkable man in many ways, who went on to become the Archbishop of Seattle and who, today, is the last living bishop in the whole world to have attended all four sessions of Vatican Council II), Bishop Elden Curtis 1976 to 1993 (who went on to become Archbishop of Omaha), Bishop Alexander Brunett 1994 to 1999, Bishop Robert Morlino 1999-2003, and finally Bishop George Leo Thomas, the present Bishop of Helena.

In Great Falls, Bishop Lenihan, who served until 1930, was succeeded by Bishop Edwin O’Hara 1930 to 1939 (a remarkably energetic young bishop whose influence reached the entire United States through the establishment of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine), Bishop William Condon 1939 to 1967 (another long term), Bishop Elden Schuster 1967 to 1977 (a native Montanan), Bishop Thomas Murphy 1978 to 1987 (dubbed the white tornado who also went on to become Archbishop of Seattle), Bishop Anthony Milone 1988 to 2006, and Bishop Michael Warfel, 2007 to present.

What can be said to compare and contrast the histories of the Lutherans and Catholics in Montana? They are very different in terms of polity and governance. There are some major ecclesiological differences that separate and divide these two major denomination in the state. But in every church basement, coffee is served with cookies, the children are taught the basics of the faith, funerals, marriages and confirmations are celebrated. Over the decades, Lutherans had to overcome the theological nuances that kept them apart. Catholics had the blessing and burden of the Second Vatican Council, with Montana Catholics being as effected as all of them in the rest of the world as we switched from Latin to vernacular languages, and the role of laity was profoundly enhanced. The possibility of ecumenism was a very popular outgrowth, as exemplified in the establishment of the Montana Association of Churches.

For Catholics, the recent lawsuits over abusive priests and subsequent bankruptcies in both dioceses are, objectively speaking, more than just a black eye – and in GF-B, things are yet to be settled. But for the vast majority of parishioners, life goes on.

Lutheran Montanans have experienced upheavals of their own, but in both Catholic and Lutheran congregations, there is strength and faith that projects us into the future together.