

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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JOSEPH M. CATALDO, S.J. - 1837-1928

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Joseph M. Cataldo, S.J. was often called the "Last of the Black Robes" as the result of his service as Jesuit Superior of the Rocky Mountain Missions. He served the Coeur d'Alene Indians at the Rocky Mountain Mission and established the first church for white settlers, St. Stanislaus, in northern Idaho, and the Mission of St. Joseph at Culdesac for the Nez Perce Indians.

Cataldo was born in Terrasini, Sicily, March 17, 1837. He endured many childhood illnesses, nearly dying at the ages of two and fifteen. Cataldo entered the Jesuit society on December 22, 1852 in Palermo, Sicily and was ordained a priest at Leige, Belgium on September 8, 1862 at the age of twenty-five, an unusual achievement for one so young.

A student of languages, Cataldo requested an assignment in America to help him master the English language at the same time America urgently requested missionary priests. Cataldo worked toward the completion of his Jesuit training at the Jesuit House in Boston. Due to his frail health, Cataldo was sent to California where he passed his final examinations in 1864 at Santa Clara, California. In 1865 Father Cataldo was sent to the Rocky Mountain Mission in northern Idaho to live with the Coeur d'Alene Indians, and transferred to Lewiston in 1866 where he established St. Stanislaus and the Mission of St. Joseph at Culdesac.

In 1877 he was appointed the superior of the Rocky Mountain Mission. During this appointment he made headquarters in the Old Mission of the Sacred Heart, located a few miles east of Coeur d'Alene, just off today's I-90. The church is now named after Father Cataldo, and is the oldest existing building in Idaho, built in 1846. The Mission grounds are designated as an Idaho State Park.

During his lifetime as a Jesuit priest, Father Cataldo studied over twenty languages, including nearly all the European languages, and the Native American languages of the Pacific Northwest. He became proficient in the Nez Perce language, eventually writing one of the first books in the Nez Perce language. His bilingual capabilities made him instrumental in the peace talks between Chief Joseph and General Howard following the Nez Perce Indian War of 1877.

In 1881 Cataldo founded Gonzaga University, and is considered one of the founders of Spokane, Washington. In 1891 Cataldo established a novitiate at DeSmet, Idaho. After

completion of literacy requirements at Gonzaga University, those aspiring to the priesthood in the Jesuit Order would be trained in the principles of religious life by American born and trained priests. This achievement was what Father Cataldo believed was the "crowning point of his administration, as it secured success and permanency to the Order in the Northwest." [From Weibel, Rev. Joseph M. Cataldo, S.J.: A Short Sketch of a Wonderful Career, published by Gonzaga University, 1928.]

Though he struggled with illness in his childhood and endured frail health as an adult, Cataldo eventually lived to the age of ninety-two. He died April 9, 1928 at Pendleton, Oregon and is buried at Mt. St. Michael's in Spokane, Washington.

By Guila Ford and Elizabeth Jacox

(This information has not been edited.)