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Fr. Owen A. McGrath, CSP: Star Athlete Who Gave His Life to the Priesthood

By James Penrice

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Fr. Owen McGrath, CSP drew crowds to a higher arena

While athletes accepting religious vocations continue to make headlines, it really is nothing new. Consider the life of this Paulist priest who was ordained in 1908. The article reports on the ordination two days earlier of Fr. Owen A. McGrath, CSP, at New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral. It reports that Fr. McGrath was a "former quarterback on the Dartmouth football team, and also pitcher of the base-ball nine of the same institution."



We remember Fr. Owen McGrath, CSP in our prayers, along with all priests who have given their lives in service to Christ and his Church. We pray that many more men from all walks of life will follow in their footsteps.

GRAND RAPIDS, MI (Catholic Online) - Sports are fertile ground for cultivating religious vocations. In the last few months alone, Catholic Athletes for Christ has reported through Catholic Online on a bishop who played college basketball, a Franciscan sister who was an Olympic speed skater, a Franciscan friar who is a life-long skateboarder, and a professional baseball player who left a promising career to enter the seminary. We have more stories to share in the months to come.

Yet this is not at all a new development. While athletes accepting religious vocations continue to make headlines, it is really old news.

Consider this headline from the Pittsburgh Press sports section of June 15, 1908: "Former Athlete a Catholic Priest." The article reports on the ordination two days earlier of Fr. Owen A. McGrath, CSP, at New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral. It reports that Fr. McGrath was a "former quarterback on the Dartmouth football team, and also pitcher of the base-ball nine of the same institution."

In the ornamented journalistic style of the day, the reporter writes that "during his four years in Dartmouth he was the means of carrying the colors of his college to victory many times in the contests of the gridiron and diamond."

With the help of Fr. Gilbert Martinez, CSP, Catholic Online was able to learn some details of Fr. McGrath's life and priestly service with the Paulist Fathers. It is fitting that as we profile priests and religious with athletic backgrounds, we remember and honor those who have completed their earthly mission and have gone before us to the heavenly banquet.

Owen Augustine McGrath was born on December 27, 1881, in South Boston. He attended the Boston Latin School, where he garnered a number of athletic awards. At Dartmouth he excelled at football and baseball, and was a member of the Theta Delta Chi fraternity. After beginning theological studies he continued to play baseball at St.

Thomas College, the Paulists' home for studies in Washington, DC. He professed first vows on December 8, 1907, and was ordained a priest on June 13, 1908.

Fr. McGrath spent most of his priestly life preaching missions, during which he encouraged devotion to the Cure of Ars and St. Therese of Lisieux. He served as a military chaplain during World War I. Afterwards he was sent to New York City, where he served as Prefect of the Paulist Choir School and also served at St. Paul the Apostle Church.

During Lent of 1935 Fr. McGrath traveled to Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, to preach a mission at the Cathedral. During the mission he was stricken with appendicitis, and died soon after surgery on March 30 at the age of 53. He is buried at St. Paul the Apostle, the Paulists' Mother Church, in New York City.

In the Paulist archives Fr. McGrath is remembered as being "well known for his joyful disposition, combined with a devotional spirit. His manner of preaching was strenuous and rapid-fire." He fulfilled the prediction made about his ministry in the Pittsburgh Press article: "Although he has not yet received any appointment from the Superior of the order, he will probably engage in aggressive mission work. He is an eloquent and forceful preacher, and has the gift of winning the interest and support of boys and young men."

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James Penrice is the author of eight books, a correspondent for [Catholic Athletes for Christ](#), and a contributor to Catholic Online.

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