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CULTURAL MOMENT FOR JANUARY 26, 2026 CELEBRATES FATHER B.J. O'CONNELL – THE MAN BURIED BENEATH HIS CHURCH

One of the most unusual burials in Mount Forest is that of the beloved Catholic priest, Father Bartholomew Joseph O'Connell.

Born on February 2, 1844, in Cork, Ireland, Father O'Connell served as priest at St. Mary's during two separate periods—first from 1876 to 1886, and again from 1892 until his death in 1908 at age 64.

On the morning of February 2, 1908, he had planned to say an early mass. When he did not appear at his usual time, his housekeeper, Miss Crowe, went to check on him.

The Mount Forest *Confederate* published the following account in its February 6, 1908 edition, written by Mary Feehan:

"He retired about 10 o'clock in his usual good health, and not being about in the morning, Miss Crowe, the housekeeper, went to call him, but found the cold remains of the devoted priest, hushed in death.

"The shock to her and to his parishioners who gathered as they were wont to do for the last 30 years that Sunday morning to assist at divine service, listen to his wise counsel and participate in his blessing, can only be fancied... Not an aged man, being but 64, and from outward appearances apparently well-preserved, he gave promise of an active, useful life."

He was discovered lying peacefully in bed, hands folded across his chest, with every indication that he had passed away quietly and without pain. A doctor later confirmed the cause of death as a stroke.

That February, Mount Forest was struck by a prolonged winter storm during the days leading up to his funeral. With the weather making burial impossible, it was decided that Father O'Connell would be laid to rest beneath the church he had served so faithfully. A section of the sacristy floor was cut open so that his casket could be lowered into the small crawl space below.

Today, his tombstone hangs on a wall inside St. Mary's Catholic Church, a lasting reminder of his life and service.



Father Bartholomew Joseph (B.J.) O'Connell. Photo from the Mount Forest Museum and Archives

Submitted by the Wellington North Cultural Roundtable