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“You have just given this church, an ornament to this hospitable city in which you live and to which you owe so much, and a joy and satisfaction to your parents who live on the other side of the broad Atlantic, and an inestimable inheritance for your children,” he said. “This is one of the best buildings of its size in this part of the country, an honor to the Basques and a glory to the congregation, a splendid monument which will show to the generations to come what a few Basques of good will can do.”
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This spiritual cornerstone, the only Basque church ever built in the United States, was symbolic of how far the Basques had come since the late 19th century when they first arrived in the Boise area. The old Basque expression Euskaldun Pedeñur—“those who have the Basque language and those who have faith”—perfectly described its congregation.

The church’s evolution began in April 1885 when Bishop Alphonse Glorieux, Boise’s first bishop, arrived to lead the faithful after serving in western Oregon for 18 years. Boise was a missionary diocese that relied on foreign priests, the majority of whom were Irish. Ethnic Catholic enclaves in Idaho had an advocate in Bishop Glorieux. He was raised and educated in Belgium by strict Catholic parents who directed him toward a life in service to a church. Bishop Glorieux was concerned that Basque immigrants might lose their faith because they were away from home in a place where they did not speak the language. He made arrangements with the Bishop of Vitoria in Spain for the services of Rev. Bernardo Arregui, a priest from Tolosa in the Basque Country, to serve in Idaho. Father Arregui arrived on July 11, 1911. His original appointment was to St. John’s Cathedral in Boise, but he administered Catholic sacraments throughout southern Idaho. The Rt. Rev. Daniel Mary Gorman replaced Bishop Glorieux in 1918. Gradually, momentum built to establish a separate parish for the Basques.

The February 28, 1919, Idaho Statesman headlined, “New Catholic Church Will Be Dedicated by Rt. Rev. Bishop Gorman—Spanish citizens of Boise Have Acquired Beautiful Little House of Worship.” The article reported that the single Sunday service held at St. John’s “was insufficient to provide adequately for the special needs of these people.” Bishop Glorieux recommended to Father Arregui “the immediate purchase of some suitable property and the erection of a church and parochial residence.” Prominent Boise architect Charles F. Hummel drew up plans to remodel the two brick buildings on Fifth and Idaho streets. The property was purchased from local contractor and city councilman Thomas Finnegan and his wife for $18,000 ($243,243 in today’s currency), which included funds to remodel and equip the buildings. To pay for the purchase, “subscriptions were solicited amongst the Spanish people.”
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The Statesman monitored the conversion of the former two-story family dwelling into the Church of the Good Shepherd, named to honor the Basques’ connection with the sheep industry. In weekly updates, the newspaper reported that the building was “in course of construction” and later commented, “The building is nearing completion and the church will be dedicated for Christian worship at an early date.” In its February 9, 1919, issue, the Statesman updated the anxious new parishioners: “Practically all work on the church is finished and it is ready for the placing of pews and altars, which are expected to arrive at an early date.”

The chapel featured a brick exterior with a bell tower that rose above the entry. Instead of stained glass, windows were painted gold. One of the bay windows held a shrine to the Virgin Mary. Nothing about the space was ostentatious; after parishioners walked through the door, they passed through the vestibule and into the small chapel that seated up to 100. A choir loft, small apse, communion rail and altar were within the chapel. The altar was ordered from a company in the Midwest that specialized in manufacturing religious furniture. Designed to look like marble, it was actually enameled wood.

Good Shepherd congregated about 100 parishioners. Opposite: church building without its steeple, 2014; St. Ignatius of Loyola.
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The church also began to mark the events, joyous and sad, in the lives of Basque families not only in Boise, but also throughout the area. In early November 1919, the Statesman reported the wedding of Luis Garmentia and Josefa Ygnacia Baringa-Rementeria. The bride, who “was pledged to Mr. Garmendia for some time, just came from Spain.” The couple planned to “make their home in Oreana, where Mr. Garmendia is engaged in the sheep business.” Parishioners also observed solemn occasions. Mr. and Mrs. Vicente Mendiola lost their eight-day-old baby, who died at Vale, Oregon. The remains were brought to Boise and Father Arregui held funeral services and the baby was later buried in Morris Hill Cemetery.

The local paper also recorded connections of the church to the broader American community. On November 27, 1919, the paper noted the daily Mass at the Good Shepherd to recognize Thanksgiving and in May 1921 listed the church among those that emphasized participation in music in conjunction with Boise’s third annual Music Week celebration. The church appeared to have both community connections and an enthusiastic beginning.

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At the first service in March 1919, Bishop Gorman blessed the church and Father Arregui gave the first sermon—in Basque. “What is the reason for this splendid and solemn service? Why the presence of the Right Reverend Bishop, the clergy and the sisters? Why so many people congregated here? And why, lastly, these beautiful decorations?” Father Arregui asked. “I understand it, religious and pious brethren: you wanted to celebrate in a fitting way the solemn dedication of this beautiful church which you have just built for the Lord of the Universe,” he answered. The Good Shepherd Choir, with members of the St. John’s Choir, led by Narciso Aramburu, sang Ecce Sacerdos Magnus (Behold a Great Priest) and Missa Tertia (Third Mass).

After its dedication, the new parish established the rhythms of the Catholic prayer and sacramental life. Father Arregui celebrated Mass on Sundays at 8 and 10:30 a.m. and held Sunday School at 2 p.m., with benediction following. Mass on weekdays was celebrated at 8 a.m. and confessions were heard on Saturdays from 4-5 and 7-9 p.m. Choir practice for adults was held at 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays and Thursdays, and for children Monday and Friday afternoons after school. Special Lenten services were scheduled for Friday evenings.

Father Arregui and the parishioners also founded Catholic associations to support the church. They established an Altar Society comprised of more than 30 women who elected a slate of officers and took responsibility for cleaning the church and priest’s vestments along with arranging the flowers and other decorations to mark the liturgical calendar. The group planned to hold baked food sales “to swell the church funds.”

On Tuesday evening, April 27, 1919, the Statesman reported that congregants from the church met at Father Arregui’s residence and organized the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception for young women and girls. The group elected a slate of officers and planned to sing at 8 a.m. Mass on Sundays. The next afternoon, young men and boys of the church gathered at Father Arregui’s residence and organized the St. Aloysius Society. They
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An anthropologist once described the three Eastlake-style coat tree. Opposite: rosary beads with beating heart oval. From the Jacobs-Uberuaga collection at the Basque Museum & Cultural Center.
most important symbols for a Basque community: a handball court as evidence of a vibrant outdoor life; a cemetery, representing tradition; and the church, representing faith. The Basques in Boise had all three.

But the Church of the Good Shepherd continued as a Basque parish for less than 10 years. In 1921, two years after the dedication, Father Arregui was reassigned to Twin Falls to minister to Basques throughout southern Idaho. From 1921 to 1928, a weekly Mass continued to be celebrated at Good Shepherd by an assistant from St. John’s Cathedral. When the new prelate arrived in 1928, Bishop Edward J. Kelly discontinued this arrangement and instead made the church his private chapel and the rectory his residence. The Basque congregation once again became a part of St. John’s Cathedral.

Why were these actions taken? Were these merely practical decisions based on finances or were they made adhering to a particular ideology? The little Basque chapel in Boise was not immune from anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant forces that took their toll. Anti-Catholic sentiment came to the United States with the Pilgrims, who brought with them deep-seated Protestant (primarily from Northern and Western Europe) prejudices against what was viewed as a corrupted faith. In theory, this New World where one could practice his or her faith without fear of persecution also included Catholics. But they were not trusted. They were dogged by old presumptions that an unflagging allegiance to Rome and the pope would preclude any loyalty to the United States and to democracy. The Protestant socio-economic and political-class control would be vulnerable and the same religious battles left behind in Europe would be fought on American shores. Thus, it was implied that in the U.S. it would be very difficult, if not impossible, for one to be a good Catholic and a loyal U.S. citizen.

During Bishop Glorieux’s tenure the American Protective Association, an anti-Catholic group that originated in Iowa in 1887, looked to gain an Idaho foothold in 1893. They preached antagonistic sermons about the social chaos that would ensue if the Catholics were not kept in check. When the APA made its way to both Boise and Pocatello, Bishop Glorieux countered by sending two of his Dominican Fathers, James Newell and J.B. O’Connor, to those communities, where they gave sermons with a more decidedly charitable tone. Boiseans did not forget the bishop’s work in the community during “the upbringing,” as it was called. Local residents did not agree that Bishop Glorieux and his parishioners were disloyal to their country...
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The emphasis on Americanization pressured Catholic bishops to make decisions regarding the ethnic parishes. A review of the background of the bishops in Idaho provides context for their decisions. Born in Belgium, Bishop Glorieux brought with him the training and traditions from that country. Bishop Gorman came from Iowa; he focused on education and building schools. Gorman allowed for ethnic parishes not only in Boise but also in
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Bishop Kelly, a native Oregonian with an Irish background, was the youngest Catholic bishop in the country at that time. Under the guise of bringing the diocese into solvency, Kelly closed the Church of the Good Shepherd. His action and those of other Irish prelates who enjoyed disproportionate influence in the Catholic hierarchy, often drew the ire of Italian, German, French and other Catholic European immigrant groups. Bishop Kelly outlined his reasoning in his co-authored work, History of the Diocese of Boise. The arrangement with the Good Shepherd “was not destined to succeed,” according to Kelly. “The Basques were becoming Americanized so quickly that they found they could attend services at the Cathedral the same as others.” Also Kelly claimed that income was not sufficient to warrant the maintenance of a separate parish. Consequently, in September 1921, Father Arregui “was moved to Twin Falls to become an assistant pastor with the duties of ministering from this new headquarters to the Basque people.
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What effect did the closing of the Good Shepherd have on the Basque community? It is difficult to generalize. One interviewee claimed his grandmother who lived in the neighborhood was more nostalgic than anything else about it, but had no outward anger toward the closing. Others remained bitter about the closing until the day they died. Boise architect Charles Hummel, whose father worked on the Good Shepherd design, stated that Bishop Kelly alienated many in the Basque community when he closed the church. One of the chapel’s primary supporters, prominent sheep rancher John Archabal, stated that he would never set foot in a Catholic Church again. And he didn’t—until his funeral, Basques continue to celebrate Catholic Mass, but currently only two annual services are held specifically for Basques, and those take place within larger, non-ethnic-specific parishes in Boise. The diocese owned the property of the Church of the Good Shepherd until 1982, when Bishop Sylvester Treinen sold it to a law firm. Today, the former church is an administrative office space for St. Luke’s Boise Medical Center. Currently, only two of the three essential symbols of a Basque community remain: the handball court and Basque section of the cemetery. The third, the Church of the Good Shepherd, is gone. Many make their way past this building in downtown Boise, possibly not knowing that this utilitarian and functional looking structure once was a place where friends and family gathered for Mass, weddings, baptisms, communions and funerals, to listen to their faith being spoken in their language that tied them to their home.

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