

The Rt. Rev. Msgr. Joseph Valdambriini 1876-1945

"Father Val left a record of devotion to his adopted city and country and to the ideals of democracy and of dedication to the interest of his parishioners and of all his fellow citizens without discrimination."

- John S. Monagan, Former Waterbury mayor and former U.S. Congressman

The Rt. Rev. Msgr. Joseph Valdambriini was born on January 3, 1876, in Rome, Italy in the Valdambriini Palace, the seat of the family for two hundred years. The son of Marquis Pio Valdambriini and Countessa Elvira Giannuzzi-Savelli, he held the title of marchese. Ancestors on both sides of his lineage had served the papal state since the early 19th century.

The family palace was later razed when Benito Mussolini felt it impeded the view of the Mausoleum of Emperor Augustus.

Young Valdambriini pursued his classical and philosophical studies at the Roman Seminary, studied theology for three years in France and returned to the Roman Seminary for his last year. His classmates and friends included future popes Benedict XV, Pius XI and Pius XII.

He joined the congregation of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in 1891 and was ordained a priest at the Basilica of St. John Lateran in Rome on May 27, 1899. In 1900 he co-founded the St. Jerome Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, of which the future Pope Benedict XV became president. Father Valdambriini served as secretary from 1902 to 1906 when he was transferred to Florence. He served in England from 1908 to 1910 when he immigrated to the United States, where he performed parish work in Wisconsin and eastern Connecticut.

In 1912 he was appointed administrator of Our Lady of Lourdes Church, Waterbury's first Italian Catholic Church. He became pastor in 1922 and served as such until his death in 1945. He was considered the spiritual leader of Connecticut's 200,000 Italian Americans. He was instrumental in the establishment of two more Italian churches in Waterbury, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel and St. Lucy.

He was decorated with the Cross of the Crown of Italy and was awarded the title of cavaliere for his work among the Italians of Waterbury.

Father Valdambriini returned to Rome four times. During a visit in 1939 he was elevated to the rank of papal domestic prelate with the title of monsignor conferred by Pope Pius XII. The investiture of the purple robes was held in Waterbury the following November. A testimonial dinner celebrating the occasion was attended by more than six hundred people, including those of various faiths and backgrounds. Msgr. Valdambriini was the second domestic prelate to serve in Waterbury. The monsignor's papal connections prompted other Catholic clergy to dub the Our Lady of Lourdes Rectory "The Vatican".

Although he was of noble birth, Msgr. Valdambriini was dedicated to both the secular as well as spiritual well-being of his immigrant parishioners, many of whom were of humble origins, some with little or no education, speaking dialects from various parts of Italy. "Father Val" as he was affectionately called even after his elevation to monsignor, served as their advocate, helping them navigate the challenges of living in a new country.

The *Waterbury Republican*, on the occasion of monsignor's



twenty-fifth anniversary of service in Waterbury, noted "The problems of his people are his problems . . . His work made him a conspicuous figure in the city." He made daily rounds visiting the hospital, local merchants and City Hall. He helped to organize and coordinate the various Italian Aid Societies.

Msgr. Valdambriini was not only a leader in the Italian community, but in the community as a whole, embracing his new home town by serving on the boards of the Community Chest (now the United Way), the Lincoln House Association, Anti-

Tuberculosis League, the Visiting Nurses Association, the Waterbury Art School, Waterbury Catholic High School, the local chapter of the American Red Cross, the Italian Aid Committee and the Silas Bronson Library.

When Italians were not welcome in local service organizations, Msgr. Valdambriini assisted in the founding of Unico, which grew to a national service organization. He was also a member of the Rotary Club, the Knights of Columbus, Foresters of America and the Sons of Italy.

Msgr. Valdambriini inspired Italian Americans to pursue civic duty, encouraging one of his parishioners to become the first Italian woman to serve on the Board of Education. With two Protestant clergymen, he successfully campaigned for a weekly one-hour voluntary release-time program enabling public school students to voluntarily attend religious education classes during regular school hours.

A great lover of music, Msgr. Valdambriini patronized concerts and operas and enjoyed conducting the church choir. He was a personal friend of famous opera stars and hosted Metropolitan Opera tenor Giovanni Martinelli at the rectory when he appeared in Waterbury.

Msgr. Valdambriini died on April 18, 1945. The Most Rev. Henry J. O'Brien, bishop of Hartford, presided at the Pontifical Mass, attended by a capacity congregation, including seventy priests. The library was closed the day of the funeral until 1:00 p.m. A local paper noted that the library's flag was at half-staff "in memory of Msgr. Valdambriini, as well as for President Roosevelt."

A shrine to Our Lady of Lourdes located below the main altar of the church is dedicated "In Reverent Memory of Msgr. Valdambriini".

A Fiftieth Anniversary Mass was held in his memory on April 18, 1995.