

# Rev. Henry Joseph Soenneker (1907-1987)

By Jerry Long  
c.2024



Rev. Henry Joseph Soenneker  
(27 May 1907 – 24 September 1987)  
Second Bishop of the Owensboro Diocese





**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday,  
15 March 1961, pp.1A & 10A:**

## **Bishop Named To Head Owensboro Catholic Diocese**

**Minnesota Monsignor To Be Installed**

The Rt. Rev. Msgr. Henry Joseph Soenneker, spiritual director of St. John's Seminary, Collegeville, Minn., was named today to be the new Roman Catholic bishop of the Owensboro Diocese.

The appointment by Pope John XXIII was announced in Vatican City. The new bishop-designate will succeed Bishop Francis R. Cotton who died last September 25.

Msgr. Soenneker was notified of the appointment March 6.

The administrative duties of the late bishop are presently being fulfilled by an administrator, the Rt. Rev. Msgr. Gilbert Henninger. The latter will continue in his present capacity until the new bishop takes over.

No date for the installation of the new bishop was announced immediately. The diocese, which comprises 32 counties of Western Kentucky, including Breckinridge, Grayson, Edmonson, Warren and Allen counties, has some 36,000 Catholics.

Reached by the Associated Press at Collegeville, Msgr. Soenneker said of his new appoint:

"It is a great responsibility and presents a great missionary effort. I understand there are about 650,000 persons in (the area of) the diocese and less than 37,000 are Catholics. The appointment is a great honor."

Msgr. Soenneker was born at Melrose, Minn., May 27, 1907, attended local schools there and the Pontifical College Josephinum, Worthington, Ohio. He was ordained for the St. Cloud, Minn., diocese May 26, 1934, and served during the next six years as assistant pastor of St. Anthony's Church, St. Cloud; taught at Cathedral High School and was chaplain of the U.S. Veterans Hospital.

He was named chaplain at the mother house of the Franciscan Sisters, at Little Falls, Minn., in July, 1940, leaving in 1948 to attend Catholic University where he received the Licentiate in Canon Law. He was named spiritual director of St. John's Diocesan Seminary in 1950, and received the title of monsignor, the rank of domestic prelate and appointed officialis of the diocese in March, 1959.

Msgr. Soenneker represented Bishop Peter W. Bartholome, in St. Cloud, France, for the occasion of the 1,400th anniversary of the death of St. Cloud in May of 1960. St. Cloud, Minn., was named for the saint.

His family includes two brothers and four sisters, three of whom are members of the Franciscan Sisters. The brothers are Theodore, of Sauk Center, Minn., and Joseph, Melrose, Minn.,

and the sisters are Mrs. Mary Pohlmann, Melrose, and Sisters Valeria and Agnes, of Dodgeville, Wis., and Elizabeth, of Milwaukee. Their parents are deceased.

The time of the consecration of the new bishop is not presently known. However, there is a three-month period within which this can be done. New bishops are generally consecrated within their old diocese.

After the consecration the new bishop is given a month in which to take over his new administrative responsibilities.

To assist him in Owensboro he will have 82 priests, seven brothers and 482 sisters. The diocese has 66 parishes, though only 40 have resident pastors.

The school system includes St. Maur's Major Seminary at South Union, Brescia College in Owensboro, and 22 high schools and 51 elementary schools. Including students in religious instruction classes, there are 13,500 students under Catholic instruction.

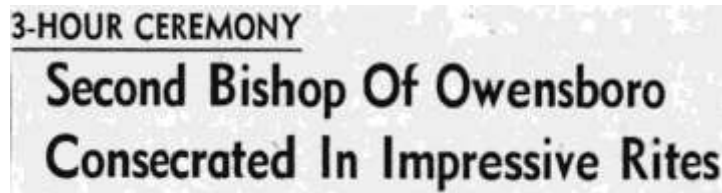
There are also three Catholic hospitals and one home for the invalid and aged in the diocese.

When the new bishop is consecrated, all sees in the United States will have a spiritual head for the first time in many months.

Owensboro is one of three Kentucky sees, the other being the Louisville archdiocese and the Covington diocese.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Wednesday,**  
**26 April 1961, pp.1A & 8A:**



By Ed Shannon, Messenger-Inquirer

St. Cloud, Minn.--The second Bishop of Owensboro was consecrated here yesterday in a beautiful and impressive three-hour ceremony at St. Mary's Cathedral.

With the "laying on of hands" by the consecrating prelate, the Most Rev. Peter W. Bartholome, Bishop of St. Cloud diocese, the Rt. Rev. Msgr. Henry J. Soenneker was elevated to bishop. He will succeed the late Bishop Francis R. Cotton, who had headed the Owensboro diocese from its creation in December, 1937, until his death last September.

The Most Rev. Soenneker thus became the first priest from the 72-year old St. Cloud diocese to be elevated to bishop. He had been spiritual director at St. John's Diocesan Seminary at nearby Collegeville, Minn., until appointed Bishop of Owensboro on March 15 by Pope John XXIII.

Installation of the new bishop is scheduled for May 9 at St. Stephen's Cathedral in Owensboro, when Bishop Soenneker will take over administration of the Western Kentucky diocese.

Bishop Soenneker was elevated to the episcopacy in one of the most impressive rituals of the Catholic church.

Assisting Bishop Bartholome were the co-consecrators, the Most Rev. Francis J. Schenk, D.D., J.C.D., Bishop of Duluth, Minn., and the Most Rev, Joseph M. Mueller, D.D., Bishop of Sioux City, Iowa.

The climax of the consecration ceremonies, which included a most solemn high Mass, came when Bishop Bartholome lay his hands on the new bishop and sang the great prayer of consecration, which concluded with the solemn words:

"Complete in Thy priest the full power of Thy ministry, and sanctify him who has been provided with the ornaments of full dignity, with the dew of the Divine Anointing."

A combined total of 180 voices sang the impressive "Come Holy Spirit" as the new bishop's head was anointed by the consecrating prelate.

A unique feature of the rite of consecration was the presentation by Bishop Bartholome of gifts to the new bishop. The six gifts, presented by six priests, were two lighted torches, two loaves of bread and two small barrels of wine. The latter were decorated with the coats-of-arms of both the consecrator and the new bishop.

As the ceremony neared its end, Bishop Bartholome took the new bishop by the right hand, and senior co-consecrator, Bishop Schenck, took him by the left hand.

The two bishops placed Bishop Soenneker on the throne that Bishop Bartholome had used. Once seated, he was handed his pastoral staff, or crozier. The rite symbolized the authority that the new bishop now possesses as a successor to the Apostles.

As the new Bishop was enthroned, Bishop Bartholome intoned the "Te Deum," a hymn of thanksgiving, in which he was joined by the choir and the hundreds of visiting prelates, priests and guests present for the ceremony.

Archbishop William O. Brady of St. Paul delivered the consecration sermon.

In his sermon, Archbishop Brady said: "In the nomination of a priest to be a bishop, the Holy Ghost has chief part, following the estimation of the people, weighed and known, following the judgment of the clergy sought and measured."

The Archbishop spoke on the ministry of a bishop as one of reconciliation." That ministry means that a "bishop can never be content with the demonstrated goodness of however so many really loved God. He must prime the goodness of the ever so many who are unaware of God."

The Archbishop asked the question: "What really is a bishop's life?" He then described it as a succession of concerns and decisions of problems and opportunities, of plans and projects, of grace and spiritual improvement, of failure and success, of human efforts that seem wasted and of unexplained accomplishments that can be credited only to God.

"A bishop's life," he continued, "is one of dedication to the truth, searching it out, sustaining it, defending it, explaining it, often without expectation that the bishop's expression of the truth will be understood, welcomed or accepted.

"In a bishop's life, there can be no blind spots. He must be fearless to distinguish and to determine, nor may he ever let himself be misled by dissimulation nor influenced by the flattery he will surely and often hear. No man takes such a life as this for himself. He could not stand alone at it."

Other members of the hierarchy present in the sanctuary during the ceremony were: Archbishop John A. Floersch of Louisville, Archbishop Edward J. Hunkeler of Kansas City, Kan., Bishop Edward A. Fitzgerald of Winona, Minn., Bishop Alphonse J. Schiadweiler of New Ulm, Minn., Bishop Lambert Hoch of Sioux Falls, S. D., Bishop Leo Dworschak of Fargo, N. D., Bishop Laurence Glenn of Crookston, Minn.

Bishop John R. Treacy of LaCrosse, Wis., Bishop George A. Hammes of Superior, Wis, Bishop John W. Comber, M.M., of the Maryknoll Fathers, Bishop Leonard Haggerty, O.S.B., of the Bahama Islands, Bishop Thomas L. Noa of Marquette, Mich., Bishop B. Grelliner, Auxiliary of Green Bay, Wis.

Bishop Roman R. Atkielski, Auxiliary of Milwaukee, Bishop James W. Malone, Auxiliary of Youngstown, Ohio, Bishop Leonard Cowley, Auxiliary of St. Paul, Bishop Charles G. Maloney, Auxiliary of Louisville, Bishop Aloysius J. Wycislo, Auxiliary of Chicago.

Also, the Rt. Rev. Abbot Baldwin Dworschak, O.S.B., of St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minn., and the Rt. Rev. Abbot Ignatius Hunkler, O.S.B., of Assumption Abbey, Richardton, N. D.

The procession of prelates and priests left St. Mary's Cathedral School promptly at 9:45 a.m. and proceeded along the south side of the Cathedral church as the Cathedral's Flemish bells played hymns which were heard throughout the city. The ministers of the consecration Mass joined the procession in front of the Cathedral convent.

It was a bright, sunshiny day, one of the few such days enjoyed here this spring, according to local residents. However, it was a chilly 39, with a brisk wind blowing. This didn't seem to bother the hundreds who lined the street to watch the prelates and priests march into the cathedral between two columns of members of Knights of Columbus, 4th Degree, in full regalia, with drawn swords. The uniformed men were members of Father Xavier Pierz' Council, named after a pioneer priest of this area who had purchased land from the city's founder in 1855 for the present site of the cathedral.

Included in the crowd outside of the cathedral were many of the 15,000 children of the diocese who were given a holiday from school today in celebration of the bishop's consecration.

Representing Owensboro Laity at the ceremony were Mr. and Mrs. John Medley and Mr. and Mrs. V. J. Steele.

As the members of the hierarchy entered the church, a fanfare of trumpets blared forth and the St. John's Seminary choir sang the jubilant strains of "Ecce Sacerdos Magnus" (Behold the Great High Priest).

Members of Bishop Soenneker's family occupied a place of honor in the Cathedral Church. Present were his three sisters in religion, Sister M. Elizabeth, Sister M. Agnes, and Sister M. Valeria, all members of the Franciscan Order; another sister, Mrs. Mary Pohlmann, and members of her family, and his two brothers, Theodore Soenneker and Joseph Soenneker and their wives and families.

The Rt. Rev. Msgr. Gilbert Henninger, V.G., administrator of the Owensboro diocese and more than a dozen other priests of the diocese also were present.

After the religious ceremony, visiting prelates, priests, relatives and friends of the new Bishop were guests at a banquet in the Cathedral High School cafeteria. Since there were over 1,000 guests, those unable to be seated in the cafeteria were served at a smorgasbord luncheon in an adjoining room.

Following the banquet, the Rt. Rev. Msgr. Peter A. Lorsung, V.G., extended greetings and congratulations on behalf of the clergy and people of the St. Cloud diocese. Monsignor Henninger extended the same for the priests and people of the Owensboro diocese.

Bishop Bartholome also spoke, in the form of a toast to Pope John XXIII. He said: "In choosing a bishop from our midst, the Holy Father (Pope) gives each of us cause for rejoicing throughout the St. Cloud diocese. Our joy finds its expression in assuring the new bishop that our good wishes and prayers accompany him in the new task our Holy Father Pope John has given him as the second bishop of the diocese of Owensboro."

Bishop Soenneker was the final speaker at the banquet. The bishop expressed his gratitude to God for all his blessings. He then thanked Bishop Bartholome and all who had helped in preparing for his episcopal consecration. He repeated publicly his filial loyalty and devotion to the Holy Father and the Holy See.

The Bishop said: "I ask of all of you that you will not forget me; that you will keep me in your prayers; that you will ask our Heavenly Father to make me a worthy instrument of His work in this new portion of His vineyard that he has assigned me as Bishop of Owensboro. You may be sure that I shall never forget you and that I shall keep you in my prayers constantly."



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY, Tuesday,  
9 May 1961, pp. 1A & 16A:**

## **New Catholic Bishop Is Installed Today**

Owensboro Welcomes Prelate

The Most Rev. Henry J. Soenneker today became Owensboro's second Catholic bishop in a 90-minute installation ceremony at St. Stephen's Cathedral here.

Bishop Soenneker was installed as bishop of the 32-county western Kentucky diocese by the Most Rev. John A. Floersh, D. D., archbishop of Louisville.

An overflow crowd jammed the cathedral for the 25-minute installation ceremony, following which Bishop Soenneker celebrated his first mass in his new diocese.

Bishop Soenneker, a native of Melrose, Minn., who was consecrated to the high Catholic post in his native diocese of St. Cloud two weeks ago, spoke briefly following the mass today.

The new bishop expressed thankfulness for having had a wonderful predecessor here, the late Bishop Francis R. Cotton, who died last September.

More than one-fourth of the seats of the cathedral were reserved for visiting prelates, clergymen and nuns. Seated in front were a number of visiting bishops, including the Most Rev. Peter W. Bartholome, D. D., bishop of St. Cloud, who had presided at the consecration of Bishop Soenneker.

On the opposite side of the main aisle sat a number of visitors, including relatives of the new bishop, state, county and city officials, led by Lt. Gov. Wilson Wyatt, representing the state, Mayor Ben Hawes of Owensboro, and County Judge T. B. Birkhead.

The ceremony, second only to the consecration in solemnity and beauty among the rituals of the Catholic Church, started promptly at 10:30 a.m.

The procession into the church of all prelates and clergymen, who preceded the new bishop and Archbishop Floersh, was lead by a unit of 4th degree Knights of Columbus from the Louisville diocese.

At the opening of the installation ceremony, Archbishop Floersh took his place at the throne of the diocesan bishop at the left of the main altar of the cathedral.

This remained his station until he had performed the installation of Bishop Soenneker. This ceremony completed, he moved to the altar where Bishop Soenneker had been seated during the rites.

Taking Bishop Soenneker by the hand, he lead him to the throne and helped seat him, signifying by action that Bishop Soenneker hereafter would retain that position as the bishop of the Owensboro diocese. Archbishop Floersh then moved to a throne at the right side of the altar.

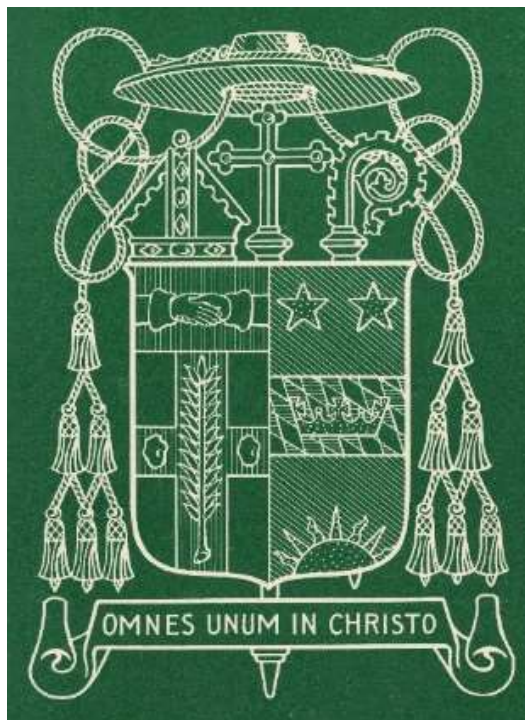
In his sermon, Archbishop Floersh pointed that bishops of the Catholic Church are the successors to the Apostles, and that their duties and powers are the same as those conferred on the Apostles by Jesus. He pointed out that to no other group did Christ confer such unlimited powers as to the Apostles, and their successors, the bishops.

A banquet honoring the new bishop and visiting clergymen, relatives and friends of the bishop was held following the ceremony, at the Owensboro Country Club.

Tonight, a public reception is scheduled at the Sportscenter, starting at 8 o'clock, to which the public is invited. State, city and county officials will speak at this meeting.



**Souvenir booklet issued on the occasion of the installation of  
the Most Reverend Henry Joseph Soenneker, D.D., as bishop  
of the Diocese of Owensboro at St. Stephen's Cathedral in  
Owensboro, KY on 9 May 1961:**



Coat of arms of Bishop Henry J. Soenneker

"There is no priest in the Saint Cloud Diocese that is so loved and respected by all the priests, religious and laity as Monsignor Soenneker." With these words Bishop Peter W. Bartholome summarized the sentiments of all those present at the silver sacerdotal jubilee of Bishop Henry J. Soenneker on April 6, 1959. At the same time the Ordinary of the Saint Cloud Diocese invested Bishop Soenneker in the robes of a Domestic Prelate, making him a member of the Pope's own household.

It was, then, more of a fulfillment of a diocesan-wide desire than a surprise when the Apostolic Delegate to the United States announced on March 15, 1961 that Monsignor Henry J. Soenneker was appointed by our Holy Father Pope John XXIII as the second Bishop of the Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky. It was the consummation of a desire on the part of both the clergy and people of the Saint Cloud Diocese that one from their ranks would be elevated to the dignity of the episcopal office. Such a one would be the first in the seventy-two year history of the Diocese.

On the very day of the announcement the Most Reverend Peter W. Bartholome issued a statement that expressed the sentiments of everyone in the Saint Cloud Diocese. Said Bishop Bartholome: "This is an honor not only to the Bishop-elect of Owensboro but also to the Diocese of Saint Cloud that Pope John XXIII appointed him to this high office in the Church. It is the first time in the history of the St. Cloud Diocese that a priest of the diocese has been selected for this high office and all of us are deeply grateful. We offer the new Bishop our congratulations and wish to express to him our confidence in his ability to carry on successfully in his new work in Owensboro. We will miss his presence in our diocese, but the work of the Church will gain through his efforts in the Diocese of Owensboro. To the priests, religious and laity of the Diocese of Owensboro, we wish to give every assurance that they will love their new Bishop and that he will sacrifice himself unreservedly for their spiritual and material welfare. We give full assurance to the Bishop-elect that he will be constantly in our prayers and that we will petition God to bless his work in his new field."

Later that same day Bishop Soenneker was found in his room at Saint John's Seminary of the Diocese of Saint Cloud, a reporter then asked the Bishop about his new diocese. "All I know now," he replied, "is that it is located in the western part of Kentucky. It has about thirty-seven thousand Catholics in a total population of about six hundred and fifty thousand. But you can be sure that I will study more about it and come to know it a lot better in the coming months."

At the same time the Bishop revealed his own feelings when he received the notification of his appointment. A letter came from the Apostolic Delegation in Washington, D.C. addressed to him and marked confidential. The Bishop received the letter and, as he remarked, "immediately knelt down by my desk, fearing that perhaps I had made some mistake. When I opened it and read its contents, informing me that the Holy Father had chosen me to be the Bishop of Owensboro, I knelt down again and knew then that I needed to pray as I never did before."

Both remarks typify the character of Bishop Soenneker. His determination to come to know more about his diocese reflects the spirit of zealous determination that has marked every thought, word and deed of his priestly life. His impulse to kneel in prayer beside his desk expresses the spirit of prayer that has marked him as the man of prayer even among his confreres who are by their vocation called to be men of prayer.

## FAMILY LIFE

Bishop Soenneker was born on May 27, 1907 in Melrose, Minnesota. He was the seventh child of Henry and Mary (Wessel) Soenneker. His father was born in Neuenkirchen, near Muenster, Germany. As a young man his father came to America and first settled in Cincinnati. In 1889 he came to Minnesota with a group of other German colonists and settled on a farm north of Melrose. There he met Mary Wessel who also came as an immigrant from the same area of Germany. The two were married in Saint Boniface Church on November 22, 1892. Father Laurentius Steinkogler, O.S.B., officiated at the ceremony and Mary Hinnenkamp and Bernard Wessel were the witnesses.





Bishop Soenneker is shown on the day of his First Holy Communion which he received in Saint Boniface Church, Melrose, MN. On right - Family home of Bishop Soenneker is located on a 160 acre farm near Melrose.



This photo of the Soenneker family was taken on the occasion of the First Mass of the newly-ordained Father Soenneker in 1934. Members of the family (parents & siblings) are, seated left to right: Mr. Henry Soenneker, Mrs. Joseph (Mary) Pohlmann, Mrs. Soenneker, and standing left to right: Sister Valaria, O.S.F., (Bernadine), Theodore, Sister Elizabeth, O.S.F. (Agnes), Sister M. Agnes, O.S.F. (Anna), Father Henry Soenneker, Joseph Soenneker.

This Bishop's father was typical of the many German Catholic colonists who settled in Stearns County at the time. A tall, stalwart man, he was conspicuous for his industry in clearing his fields and making his farm one of the best in the area. He was a loyal, devoted member of his parish. As a truly Catholic father, he provided as much spiritual wisdom and doctrine as material care and concern for his wife and children. The father died on August 9, 1935 at the age of seventy-four and was buried in Saint Boniface parish cemetery.

The Bishop's mother was the modern counterpart of Holy Scripture's "valiant woman." She, too, was conspicuous for her piety and her devotion to her husband and family. She died on August 23, 1952 at the age of eighty-two and was also buried in Saint Boniface parish cemetery.

One member of the family described her parents in these words: "Needless to say, Dad and Mother were the most wonderful parents that God could ever give to anyone."

Another member of the family described them in these words: "My parents, like their neighbors, were hard-working, simple folk with a very deep spirit of faith who looked to their pastor for guidance and leadership in all the affairs of life. Home, church, school and neighborhood seemed to be the places of influence in such simple ways of life – our way of life on the farm."

"It seems," said another member of the family, "that our family and family life was so ordinary that it is hard to write or find words to describe the secure, peaceful simplicity of our life on the farm."

The Soennekers were the parents of nine children. The oldest, Elizabeth, and the youngest, August, both died in infancy. The second oldest, Mary, married the late Joseph Pohlmann and now lives with her youngest son on a farm not far from the home place north of Melrose. She has a family of six children, five of whom are married and one daughter, Rita, is now Sister M. Paula, O.S.F., stationed at Saint Mary Corwin Hospital, Pueblo, Colorado.

The Bishop's older brother, Theodore lives on a farm near Sauk Centre. He has a family of seven children. Agnes, one of his daughters, is now Sister M. DeAngeles, O.S.F., stationed at St. Gabriel's Hospital, Little Falls. The younger brother, Joseph, lives on the home farm north of Melrose with his wife and seven children. Two of his five boys are students at Crosier Preparatory Seminary, Onamia, Minnesota.

Three other sisters of the Bishop entered the community of the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls. Bernadine, the second oldest in the family, who entered religious life in 1916 is now Sister M. Valeria, O.S.F., and has been stationed for the past twelve years at St. Joseph's Hospital, Dodgeville, Wisconsin. Agnes, now Sister M. Elizabeth, O.S.F., entered religious life in 1922. She graduated from the Marquette University College of Nursing and spent most of her religious life as director of Schools of Nursing at Saint Francis Hospital, Breckenridge, Minnesota, and Saint Gabriel's Hospital, Little Falls. Last year Sister was appointed administrator and superior of Trinity Memorial Hospital, Cudahy, Wisconsin. Anna, the youngest of the girls, is now Sister M. Agnes, O.S.F. She entered the community in 1928 and is a registered nurse anesthetist. Last August she was appointed to Saint Joseph's Hospital, Dodgeville, Wisconsin.

## EARLY EDUCATION

Bishop Soenneker attended a small country school, District #164, for seven years and the last year of his elementary education was taken at Saint Boniface Parochial School. In the country school he was taught by Clara Sandbrink, Lucy Wyman, Mary Mitchell and Olivia Walters. Sister Ursula, O.S.B., was his teacher at Saint Boniface Grade School.

Those who can recall the Bishop's boyhood remember his love of simple things best of all. "He was just an ordinary farm boy," said one of his former neighbors. He could sleep through an awful thunderstorm. He did not like to milk cows. He loved to go swimming in the creek near the farm with his brothers and cousins. He had the best running sled at the district school and was generous in giving others a ride. He always liked to be the first one at school. He disliked milk very much and would drink it down fast when mother insisted.

Bishop Soenneker himself often attributed his own vocation to the example of his parents. This example prompted him to leave his home in the fall of 1921 to enroll as a minor seminarian

at the Pontifical College Josephinum. At the seminary he followed the rigorous schedule that set the Pontifical College Josephinum even in those days apart from other seminaries. Founded by German immigrants to be an institution to help young men of German ancestry pursue their studies for the priesthood. The Josephinum offered an excellent education to the young levites.

For twelve years the life of Bishop Soenneker resembled the hidden life of Christ. He was behind the seminary walls. He was a levite before the altar of the Most High. He was a student set on being enlightened by the Divine Light that we call Eternal Truth. The rector of the Pontifical College Josephinum at the time of Bishop Soenneker's ordination to the priesthood was the present Bishop of the Diocese of Evansville, Indiana, the Most Reverend Henry J. Grimmelman.

Upon hearing the news of Monsignor Soenneker's appointment to the episcopate, Bishop Grimmelman wrote: "It is with great joy that memory goes back to the years Bishop-elect Henry J. Soenneker spent at the Pontifical College Josephinum. He was a sturdy, serious student of ability who always devoted himself to earnest fervent preparation of mind and heart for the vocation of a priest. That the promise he then gave of persevering fidelity to the ideals of his holy calling has now been fulfilled in eminent degree is a cause of satisfaction and the best reason for gratitude to the Lord for calling him to the fullness of the priesthood."

Father William Lammers, a classmate, sums up the character of Bishop Soenneker as he observed him during their seminary days in these words: "Now that I start looking back I begin to think that he is in many ways a paradox – deep but simple, 'devilish' yet without real faults, unsophisticated yet wise beyond his years. In short, he was about the last person in the world anyone would ever have imagined to become a bishop, but now that he is, he is the first person everybody would agree ought to be!"

On May 26, 1934, Bishop Soenneker was ordained a priest by the late Bishop James Hartley, D.D., in the Josephinum Seminary Chapel. The six other men ordained in his class were: Reverend Fathers Victor A. Gerleman, Frank M. Dismachek, William Lammers, Alphonse Gesing, Edmund Sense and John R. Schmidt.

The following June 5 Bishop Soenneker returned to his father's home and the parish of his boyhood to offer his First Solemn High Mass.

#### ASSISTANT PASTOR

One month after his ordination he was appointed assistant pastor of Saint Anthony's parish, Saint Cloud. There he came to assist his friend and the man who can best be described as his "Father in Christ," Father Frederic Hinnenkamp. In his sermon at the Bishop's First Mass, Father Hinnenkamp pointed out that the newly-ordained priest was an *Alter Christus* both in his mission and in his powers.

The pastor and the new assistant were already good friends. In that first year when Father Soenneker labored side by side with Father Hinnenkamp, a relationship developed into one that was both an envy and an admiration of every other rectory in the Diocese. The two remained intimate friends until death called Father Hinnenkamp to his reward on March 4, 1959.

In 1935 Father Bernard Wildenborg was appointed the successor of Father Hinnenkamp as pastor of Saint Anthony's parish. The assistant priest continued to labor in the parish and tendered his new pastor the same spirit of loyalty and respect that he had previously shown to Father Hinnenkamp.

The people of Saint Anthony's parish remember Bishop Soenneker as a patient listener to them in time of trouble, as an ardent advocate of Our Lady's Sodality, as a zealous teacher both in the parish grade school and the Cathedral High School. They recall his kindness and gentleness as

a confessor, his studied and well-prepared sermons, his interest in every parishioner, from the youngest to the oldest, but especially those who were in need or in sorrow.

Said Monsignor Wildenborg upon hearing the news of Bishop Soenneker's appointment, "During those hard years of the thirties Father Soenneker never complained, never shirked from any duty, and literally gave himself completely in the service of the people of Saint Anthony's parish. He was the finest assistant and it was with deep regret that we at Saint Anthony's heard the news of his appointment as chaplain of the Franciscan Motherhouse."

#### CHAPLAIN TO SISTERS

Six years after coming to Saint Anthony's parish, Bishop Soenneker was asked by his superiors to take on a task that was so important that one would have normally expected that an older and more experienced priest would have been given the assignment. The fact that his superiors chose him was already a recognition of his wisdom and spiritual maturity. Thus in the middle of the summer of 1940 he was named the chaplain of the Motherhouse of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception in Little Falls, Minnesota. The title of his office belied the variety of duties that his assignment included. The schedule of those duties would in itself have been enough to dampen the spirits of many a man. Bishop Soenneker accepted those duties and, as the Sisters themselves recall, carried them out with a spirit of dedication and joyful serenity that made him a model to all the members of the community.

For eight years he labored at the Franciscan Motherhouse. Every morning he offered Holy Mass, long before most people rose from their slumbers. Each week he gave a conference on the spiritual life to the professed members of the community. Every Sunday he delivered a sermon to the entire community which included at that time approximately 91 professed Sisters, 23 novices, 11 postulants, 226 students in Saint Francis High School, 105 guests of Saint Otto's Home for the Aged, an average of 58 patients in Saint Gabriel's Hospital and 65 student nurses attending Saint Gabriel's School of Nursing.

Twice a week he offered a class for the novices which in the course of a two year period included lectures on Church history, Christian doctrine and the spiritual life. Once a week he held a class for the postulants on Christian doctrine, taught religion courses eight, hours a week in Saint Francis High School and courses in ethics, religion and medical-moral problems to the student nurses at the hospital five hours every week.

Mother M. Thomasine, O.S.F., present Mother General, spoke for every member of the community when she said: "As a community we rejoiced when we heard that Monsignor was chosen a Bishop of the Church and none of us was really surprised. While I did not have the privilege of living on this campus when the Bishop-elect was chaplain here, his influence is felt throughout our Sisterhood so I do feel that I know him quite well.

"The Sisters were edified by the simplicity of his personal life. He accepted every service gratefully, was never demanding and always very appreciative. He was deeply spiritual. He said, 'If I must teach the Sisters how to live the spiritual life, I must first practice it myself.' And he certainly did just that. He was punctual. He was an excellent confessor and spiritual director and an ideal motherhouse chaplain. Our Sisterhood gained because of his presence here. We will always gratefully remember Bishop Soenneker and our prayers go with him into the new diocese."

#### SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR

With deep regret on the part of every member of the Franciscan community and the neighboring priests who made the chaplain's home a center of priestly gatherings, Bishop

Soenneker left in the autumn of 1948 to take up studies in Canon Law at the Catholic University of America. There he remained for the following two years pursuing studies that earned for him a licentiate degree in Canon Law. In the final months of his stay at the University he received his appointment to Saint John's Seminary of the Diocese of Saint Cloud. The appointment was effective as of July 1, 1950.

At that time the new diocesan seminary building was in the process of construction. On April 4, 1949, an arrangement was completed between the Bishop of the Saint Cloud Diocese and the Abbot of Saint John's Abbey to construct a diocesan seminary building on the campus of Saint John's University. The seminary administration would be in the care of diocesan priests; the seminary faculty would be composed largely of members of the Benedictine community. Here Bishop Soenneker came in the summer of 1950 to take up his duties as spiritual director to the one hundred seminarians who would be under his spiritual guidance and solicitude. His time would be spent in personal interviews and direction, in giving four weekly conferences to the seminarians in the chapel, in reading and criticising the sermons the seminarians would deliver in the refectory in the course of the year.

Following the announcement of Bishop Soenneker being named Bishop of the Owensboro Diocese, Right Reverend Monsignor William A. Renner, rector of Saint John's Diocesan Seminary, spoke the sentiments of the entire faculty and student body when he said, "We, who have been so closely associated with the Bishop-elect in the daily routine of labor in the formation of worthy and zealous priests for holy Mother Church, respect his admirable qualities and endowments of nature and grace. His total dedication to duty, his deliberate approach to problems with calm and objective decisions and his unassuming manner which bespeaks true humility, have been a constant inspiration to us priests and to our seminarians. His leaving us is our loss. Our prayers will accompany him as he assumes the arduous duties of the episcopate. We are confident that he will command the respect and, as they learn to know him, will gain the love and loyalty of the priests and people of the Diocese of Owensboro."

#### DIOCESAN OFFICIAL

At the time he was appointed spiritual director of the Seminary he also was appointed director of the diocesan Matrimonial Relations Office. This task entailed many hours of consultation and direction with married couples who were in need of the spiritual works of mercy. In 1956 his superior appointed him to a task which was of the greatest importance in the life of the diocese. This assignment made him Diocesan Director of Vocations. In this office, Bishop Soenneker inaugurated a new policy which entailed a great deal of time and work. All young men who wished to study for the diocesan priesthood were to be interviewed by the director. At the same time, the director called on the young man's parents at their home so that he could personally come to understand and know the seminarian better.

He was appointed *officialis* of the Diocesan Court by Bishop Bartholome in 1959. As *officialis* of the Diocese, Bishop Soenneker was responsible to the Ordinary of the Diocese for the activities of the Diocesan Court. He was the presiding judge of the Diocesan Court and his was the duty to see that the law was properly administered as outlined in the Code of Canon Law. Almost all the cases handled by the Diocesan Court pertain to marriage.

In a given year the Saint Cloud Diocesan Court deals with approximately twenty-five cases. For the *officialis* this entails many hours of paper work, many hours of travel throughout the diocese making examinations and investigations and many hours of serious study, thought and judging.

In 1959 Bishop Soenneker was appointed Diocesan Director for the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. The appointment was a public tribute to the Bishop's well-known filial devotion to the Blessed Mother of God. Everyone who came under his charge immediately sensed this deep love and devotion that the Bishop tendered our Blessed Lady.

#### A WAY OF LIFE

Nothing, perhaps, better exemplifies the spirit of Bishop Soenneker than his own telling of why he chose *Omnes Unum in Christo* (All Are One In Christ) as his episcopal motto. When a reporter asked the Bishop why this was to be his motto the Bishop took out his New Testament and read the following verse from Saint Paul's letter to the Galatians: "*There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.*"

"I felt," said the Bishop, "that those words and the idea they express should be my guiding rule when I take over my new duties in the Owensboro diocese. It should tell our non-Catholic friends that we are all united as one, at least in being followers of Christ. It should show our Negro friends that in Christ's Church there is no distinction made because of color or race. It should, finally, point out to all of us that unity in faith and love is one of the marks of the Church."

That spirit, joined with zealous determination and devotion to prayer, has marked the twenty-seven years of Bishop Soenneker's priestly life. Whatever Bishop Soenneker does or says in the future, you can be sure, will be characterized by his episcopal motto: *Omnes Unum in Christo*.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY,  
Tuesday, 18 May 1982, p.1B:**

**Soenneker submits  
his resignation**

The Most Rev. Henry J. Soenneker, bishop of the Diocese of Owensboro, will celebrate his 75th birthday on May 27 reaching the mandatory retirement age for bishops.

But that doesn't mean he'll be stepping down immediately as spiritual head of the 50,000 Roman Catholics in western Kentucky.

Soenneker said Monday that he submitted his resignation to Pope John Paul II on April 26 but it hasn't been accepted yet.

The likely scenario will see Soenneker's resignation accepted on the same day that a successor is named by the pope, he said. And that, Soenneker said, will probably be in late July because of the time necessary to investigate the background of potential successors.

Soenneker, a native of Melrose, Minn., was appointed Bishop of Owensboro in March 1961 – six months after the death of Bishop Francis R. Cotton. Soenneker was installed as bishop of the western Kentucky diocese on May 9, 1961.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY,**

**Friday, 25 September 1987, pp.1A & 8A:**

## **Ex-Bishop Soenneker dies**

By Karen Owen Messenger-Inquirer

The Most Rev. Henry J. Soenneker, retired bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Owensboro, died of an apparent stroke Thursday at 9:16 a.m. He was 80.

Soenneker became ill at his home on Old Hartford Road and was taken by ambulance to Mercy Hospital, where efforts to revive him were unsuccessful.

Soenneker was appointed the second bishop of the diocese by Pope John XXIII in 1961. He retired as bishop in 1982 at the age of 75.

Those who knew him described him as a gentle person with a talent for dealing with people.

"He was always open to the priests of the diocese, and a holy man," said the Rev. Henry O'Bryan, pastor of St. Mary Magdalene Church at Sorgho and a former superintendent of the diocesan school system.

Soenneker was able to accept people as they were, said Monsignor George Hancock. Hancock worked with Soenneker from the beginning of his administration. Hancock was first head of the marriage tribunal and then chancellor.

Soenneker "was one of those people who could turn the other cheek," Hancock said. "He never met a stranger," and everyone, from children to the elderly, felt comfortable with him, he said. Soenneker was a native of Melrose, Minn., and the seventh of nine children of German immigrants.

He left home at age 14 to study at the Pontifical College Josephinum, an institution started by German immigrants to help young men of German ancestry study for the priesthood.

After he was ordained a priest in 1934, he served as a parish priest, seminary instructor, convent chaplain, and served in various diocesan positions and as auxiliary chaplain in the U.S. Army during World War II. He had a master's degree in canon law.

Soenneker was spiritual director of St. John Seminary in Collegeville, Minn., when he was appointed bishop here.

In 1966 he was elected president of the national Catholic Rural Life Conference and during the late 1960s he served on the board of trustees of the Catholic Mutual Relief Society of America.

But one of the highlights of his administration was participating in the Second Vatican Council from 1961 to 1965. However, in the upheaval that followed, he had second thoughts, Hancock said.

"Those were tough times," said the Rev. John Vaughan, vicar general of the diocese. Vaughan was confirmed and ordained by Soenneker. In spite of the difficult changes taking place in the Catholic church, Soenneker did a remarkable job of guiding western Kentucky's Catholics, Vaughan said.

Hancock said Soenneker found it difficult to accept priests' and nuns leaving the church in the years following the council.

"He had a great interest in getting young boys to study for the priesthood," Hancock said. "He was very good at that."

During his years as bishop, Soenneker ordained nearly 50 priests to serve in the diocese.

The bishop also was interested in expanding the church in western Kentucky and started several new churches, O'Bryan said.

In his free time, Soenneker relaxed by raising flowers and vegetables, Hancock said.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY,  
Friday, 25 September 1987, p.7A:**

## **Soenneker cared about all people**

Editorial: All Henry Soenneker wanted to do with his life was serve God and man to the best of his abilities. As a young priest leaving the seminary, he expected to do that in a rural pastorate, perhaps near his Minnesota home, serving farmers and their families. Instead, he became the second bishop of Owensboro, attended four ecumenical councils at the Vatican and concelebrated mass with Pope John Paul II in Chicago in 1979.

But while he was gaining a reputation as a "priest's bishop," he also became known as a bishop who cared about his people, about all people.

He offered counseling and advice to troubled parishioners and visited the sick. He made a practice of visiting all the counties in his diocese, not just those with substantial Catholic populations, and took the time to worry about his flock. He led his diocese through troubling times of change, helping its members as the laity was offered an increasingly large role in the church, counseling them when the questions came.

In 1982, at the time of his retirement, he was described as a man with an ecumenical mind, one who was admired as widely by Protestants as Catholics.

Thursday morning, Bishop Soenneker died quietly.

He will be remembered for his devotion, his compassion, his concern and he will be missed by all who knew him.



**Messenger-Inquirer, Owensboro, KY,  
Friday, 25 September 1987, p.2C:**

The Most Rev. Henry J. Soenneker, 80, of the Carmel Home, 2501 Old Hartford Road, Owensboro, died Thursday, Sept. 24, 1987, at Mercy Hospital. He was born in Melrose, Minn.; was bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Owensboro from 1961 until his retirement in 1982; and had previously served as an associate parish pastor, a chaplain for nuns and as spiritual director of a seminary, all in the diocese of St. Cloud, Minn.

Survivors include a brother, Joseph Soenneker, and a sister, Sister Elizabeth Soenneker, both of Minnesota.

Services are at 2 p.m. Monday at St. Stephen Cathedral. Burial in Resurrection Cemetery. Visitation from 1 to 5:30 p.m. Sunday at the cathedral. A wake service will be held at 7:30 p.m. Sunday at the cathedral. The Diocese of Owensboro is in charge of arrangements. Expressions of sympathy may take the form of donations to the seminarian fund of the Diocese of Owensboro.





**This Far By Faith: The Story of Catholicity in Western Kentucky**  
**Julia Hayden (editor), Diocese of Owensboro, Owensboro, KY,**  
**1987, pp.104-109:**

**Bishop Henry Joseph Soenneker**

by Mel Howard  
editor of the Western Kentucky Catholic,  
the Owensboro Diocesan newspaper

Henry Joseph Soenneker was born in Melrose, Minnesota, on May 27, 1907, the seventh child of Henry and Mary Soenneker, immigrants from Neuenkirchen, Germany. The Soennekers were hardworking, simple people with a very deep spirit of faith who looked to their pastor for guidance and leadership in all the affairs of life.

Henry Soenneker was an ordinary farm boy who could sleep through an awful thunderstorm, didn't like to milk cows much, loved to swim in the creek, had the best running sled at his school and was generous in giving others rides. And he always liked to be the first one at school in the morning.

People who knew him from his school days and early seminary time remember Henry Soenneker as deep but simple, devilish yet without real faults, unsophisticated yet wise beyond his years. A classmate, Father William Lammers, said of him, "He was about the last person in the world anyone would ever have imagined to become a bishop, but now that he is, he is the first person everybody would agree ought to be!"

Henry Soenneker attended the Pontifical College Josephinum as a freshman in high school in 1921. He continued his college and seminary education at the Josephinum where he was ordained in 1934 by the late Bishop James Hartlet, D.D.

From his first days as an assistant pastor, people in the parishes where Bishop Soenneker served remembered him as a patient listener in time of trouble, an ardent advocate of devotions to Mary, and a zealous teacher in the schools. His kindness and gentleness as a confessor, his well-prepared sermons, his interest in every person -- from the youngest to the oldest -especially those in need or in sorrow, endeared this tall simple priest to all his parishioners.

Six years after ordination, Bishop Soenneker was assigned as the chaplain of the Motherhouse of the Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception in Little Falls, Minnesota. One of those sisters said of him, "The Sisters were edified by the simplicity of his personal life. He accepted every service gratefully. He was deeply spiritual, punctual, an excellent confessor who practiced the spiritual life which he taught."

In 1948 Bishop Soenneker left the Motherhouse to take up studies in Canon Law at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., where he earned a licentiate degree in Canon Law two years later.

In 1950 Bishop Soenneker was appointed as the spiritual director of 100 seminarians in the newly constructed St. John's Seminary in the Diocese of St. Cloud. Seminarians from that time remembered Bishop Soenneker's total dedication to duty, his deliberate approach to problems with calm and objective decisions and his unassuming manner.

While serving as the spiritual director of the diocesan seminary of St. Cloud, Bishop Soenneker also served as the diocesan director of Matrimonial Relations. In 1956, he was appointed as the Diocesan Director of Vocations. In 1959, Bishop Soenneker was appointed to serve as the presiding judge of the Diocesan Court, making it his duty to see that the law was

properly administered as outlined in the Code of Canon Law. Also in that year, he was appointed Diocesan Director for the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.

When Henry Soenneker was consecrated as a Bishop on April 26, 1961, in St. Mary's Cathedral in St. Cloud, he took as his motto, "All Are One In Christ." He felt that there are no distinctions between people in Christ, that unity in faith and love is one of the marks of the Church. He wanted his episcopacy to communicate this to all people.

The Most Reverend Henry Joseph Soenneker was installed as Bishop of the Owensboro Diocese at St. Stephen Cathedral on May 9, 1961. His predecessor, Bishop Francis Cotton, died from a heart attack September 25, 1960.

In 1961, the Owensboro diocese had a total of 37,845 Catholics. There were 13,343 students under Catholic instruction in one college, 22 high schools, 47 parochial schools and two private schools. Twenty priests taught full time, as did 317 sisters and 61 lay people. The diocese sent 58 young men to the seminary in 1961. Its 79 priests served the 67 parishes of the diocese.

The next decade brought changes to the Catholic Church in western Kentucky. The total Catholic population in the diocese grew to 47,843 in 1971. 14,065 students were under Catholic instruction in one college, five high schools and 31 elementary schools throughout the diocese. Four priests taught full time in the schools; the number of lay people teaching in schools in the diocese tripled to 180, while the number of sisters decreased to 168. We had 36 seminarians. The number of parishes grew to 72; the number of priests serving the diocese increased to 90.

In 1982 -- the twenty first and last year of Bishop Soenneker's episcopate -- the population of Catholics in the diocese had grown to 50,076. 11,061 students studied in one college, five high schools and 28 elementary schools in the diocese. Eight priests taught full time in the schools as were 63 sisters and 270 lay people. 96 priests served the 76 parishes of the diocese and 22 young men were studying for the priesthood in 1982 in the Owensboro diocese.

As the '60s and the '70s elapsed, as the Second Vatican Council documents began to be taught in the diocese, the experience of being church in western Kentucky changed with the times. Altars were turned around in churches, communion rails were taken out. Lay people were present on the altar in new roles for parts of the Mass -- as lectors, as ministers of the Eucharist, as gift bearers, as commentators and as musicians.

During Bishop Soenneker's episcopate, the diocese saw many new priests serving in schools and parishes, but some left the priesthood around the time of the Viet Nam War and afterwards.

Schools were increasingly taught by lay people as sisters retired, went into parish ministries -- even public life.

It was for many a time of upheaval and uncertainty as people saw changes in their church buildings, heard changes in their pastors' homilies and the Mass language which was now in English.

Some people left this new church, if not physically, then spiritually. Some thought it had not changed enough; some felt it had changed too much.

Through it all, Bishop Soenneker stood tall. His office was approachable to the people of the diocese, ever open to priests, sisters and lay people. Pleasing answers weren't always forthcoming from the Bishop's office, but the response from Bishop Soenneker was certain, fair, and what he felt was best for all the people concerned. Petitioners knew their requests received prayerful thought from the Bishop.

As one of the shapers of the documents of Vatican II, Bishop Henry Soenneker brought back from the Ecumenical Council a certainty that more needed to be done to open dialogue with

people from other denominations. He is still remembered in the western Kentucky area for his willingness to communicate with other ministers, to befriend them, to share prayer services with other faiths. Bishop Soenneker also initiated some of the changes that would bring more involvement of the laity in the Catholic Church, one of the more controversial developments following Vatican II.

In his time as the Bishop of Owensboro, The Christian Family Movement, the Cursillo Movement, the Catholic Student Mission Crusade, Marriage Encounter, the Couple to Couple League, Teens Encounter Christ and many other programs were actively helping Catholics to learn more about their faith, about the Bible, about living community and being Church with one another.

People in the diocese think of Bishop Soenneker as a man of prayer, a firm guardian of the Church's deposit of faith, a faithful defender of Catholic education in a turbulent time in diocesan history, and a gentle teacher who guided the Owensboro Diocese securely into the '80s.

Bishop Henry Soenneker retired from the Office of the Bishop of Owensboro when he reached the mandatory retirement age of 75, on May 27, 1982. He remained in service to the diocese until his successor, Bishop John McRaith, the present Bishop, was installed on December 15 of that year.

In that installation ceremony, 6,000 people gave a thunderous applause when Bishop McRaith asked retiring-bishop Soenneker if he would stay in Owensboro where he is so loved.

That's how people in the diocese feel about Bishop Henry Joseph Soenneker -- grateful for his life among us and thankful for his willingness to teach us about the God whom he always served with everything he had.

The Most Reverend Henry Soenneker died September 24, 1987 of a heart attack, at the age of 80. This humble man's memory will last with us forever.



**The Roman Catholic Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky, Roman Catholic Diocese of Owensboro, Turner Publishing Company, Paducah, KY, 1995:**

[p.331] SOENNEKER, HENRY JOSEPH, was born in Melrose, MN, on May 27, 1907 to Henry and Mary Soenneker, immigrants from Neuenkirchen, Germany. He attended the Pontifical College Josephinum from 1921 until his ordination in 1934. From his earliest days as a priest, people remembered him as a patient listener in time of trouble, an ardent advocate of devotions to Mary and a zealous teacher in the schools. His kindness and gentleness as a confessor, his well-prepared sermons, his interest in every person especially those in need or in sorrow, endeared this tall simple priest to all his parishioners. Father Soenneker filled many positions during his priestly career.

He was chaplain, spiritual director, vocation director, presiding judge of the Diocesan Court all of this while at the same time serving as pastor. Henry J. Soenneker was consecrated bishop on April 26, 1961 and installed as the second bishop of the Diocese of Owensboro on May 9, 1961 at the St. Stephen Cathedral. He served the Diocese as Bishop from 1961-1982, when he reached the mandatory retirement age. He remained in Owensboro until his death from a heart attack on Sept. 24, 1987. His memory will last with us forever.

[p.57] The story is told that when fifty-six year old Rev. Henry J. Soenneker, the spiritual director for St. John's seminary in Collegeville, Minnesota, received a letter marked "Confidential"

from the Apostolic Delegate in Washington, D.C., he dropped to his knees fearing that he had done something wrong. After reading the contents of that March 15, 1961 letter he knelt down by his desk again. This second time he was asking for the grace to be a willing servant. The letter told him that he had been chosen by Pope John XXIII to be the second Bishop of the Diocese of Owensboro. Bishop Soenneker, in telling this story on himself, added that he knew then that "I needed to pray as never had before."

His prayer must have been heard. In 1981, when Bishop Soenneker celebrated his Twentieth Anniversary as the episcopal leader of the Diocese of Owensboro, he would be complimented by Protestants throughout the Owensboro Diocese for his advancement in ecumenical understanding among the various denominational churches and Catholics would describe him as a "people's bishop" who listened to the concerns of his priests and people. His own chief administrator, Rt. Rev. Gilbert Henniger, the Vicar-General for the Owensboro Diocese, would add that he was also a "priest's bishop".

*Birth:* May 27, 1907, Melrose, Minnesota. Family: Seventh of nine children of Henry and Mary (Wessel) Soenneker

*Education:* Small country school, District # 164 (Grades 1-7); St. Boniface Elementary School (Grade 8); Pontifical College Josephinum, Preparatory School; Pontifical College Josephinum College; Pontifical College Josephinum; School of Theology; Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.; Canon Law School, 1948-1950.

*Ordination:* May 26, 1934

*Ministry:* St. Anthony's Church, St. Cloud, Minnesota and Chaplain at St. Cloud Veterans Hospital; Chaplain of the Motherhouse of the Franciscans of Immaculate Conception, Little Falls, Minnesota (1940-1948); Spiritual Director at St. John's Seminary, Collegeville, Minnesota (1950-1961); Director of Diocesan Matrimonial Relations Office, 1950; Director of Vocations, Diocese of St. Cloud, Minnesota, 1956; Officialis of the Diocesan Court, dealing with approx. 25 Marriage Cases per year - 1959

*Consecration as Bishop:* April 2, 1961, St. Mary's Cathedral, St. Cloud, Minnesota, Most Rev. Peter W. Bartholome, Presider

*Installaton as Bishop:* May 9, 1961, St. Stephen's Cathedral, Owensboro, Archbishop John A. Floresh, Presider

*Death:* September 24, 1982

*Burial:* Resurrection Cemetery, Owensboro, KY

[pp.58-59] Bishop Soenneker was right in thinking that he needed to pray like he never had before.

Installed as Bishop of Owensboro on May 9, 1961, Bishop Soenneker spent the next busy months meeting the priests and people of the Diocese. There were plenty with whom to get acquainted. In 1961 the Owensboro Diocese consisted of 37,845 Catholics who were served by 79 priests in its 67 parishes and missions. Some of these priests he already knew were those on his Diocesan staff and he retained them in their current positions: Rt. Rev. Gilbert, Henniger, the Vicar-General; Rev. Robert Connor, the Diocesan Chancellor; Rev. George Boemiche, Director of the Propagation of the Faith and Rt. Rev. Raymond Hill, Vicar of Education, to name a few.

Besides learning the people of the Diocese, Bishop Soenneker also quickly became acquainted with the variety of concerns with which an administrator of a diocese has to deal. There were celebrative occasions such as the jubilee celebration of St. William's parish in Knottsville, KY. There were listening sessions with pastors and parish trustees of St. Francis de Sales parish as they presented the pros and cons for the purchase of the old Moose Hall that they hoped to convert into a convent for the Sisters and a parish hall. And there were tough decisions like the closing of the mission Church of St. Francis at Smith Mills, Ky. It was reasoned there that the small number of parishioners could be served better by using the good roads and modern means of travel to reach Catholic churches in neighboring towns where parish services were held more frequently than in the little mission church.

But while he was getting acquainted with the Diocese Bishop Soenneker was also making plans to leave to attend the first session of Vatican Council II, called by Pope John XXIII. Bishop Soenneker had been bishop scarcely a year and a half when this first Council session took place.

The Council had been proposed by Pope John XXIII on August 9, 1959. He called it in order to update the church. When Bishop Soenneker spoke to the Owensboro Rotary Club on August 13, 1964, he explained the manner in which the church would be updated: "The Council will not invoke basic doctrines of the Church but will change the methods of presenting these to the priests and to the world...One of the purposes of the Council is to get rid of provincialism... Matters of church law are to be examined... Many such laws were used more than 500 years ago when there was a need for them. These laws were incidental to the basic doctrines of the Church."

Actually Pope John XXIII named "aggiornamento" as the general theme of the Council. Translated, "aggiornamento" meant "getting up to today". The Pope wanted the Church to enter the technological age. Pope John XXIII thought that was the only way the Church was going to be effective in the future. The church needed to Secure ways to respond to its present day needs and to refocus its apostolate for the future.

Bishop Soenneker found the first session of the Council to be mostly administrative. It was the session during which the composition of various commissions was studied to try to see that each commission had representatives of both the conservative and the liberal viewpoints present at the Council. When Bishop Soenneker came home from this session he recounted how for the first time members of the Protestant Clergy had been invited as observers at the Council and that work was begun on the first document of the Council. This document, incidentally turned out to be the most significant document of the entire Council. This was the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church.

The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church would be viewed as significant because it was the document that encouraged Catholics to develop a new theological concept, the theology of the marketplace. This was the document that issued the universal call to holiness. What this would mean to the Catholics of the Diocese of Owensboro, as well as those everywhere in the world, was that everyone was encouraged to become evangelizers by living and witnessing their own faith stories. It called for everyone to become minister to each other. It would take some years for the people of the Church to conceptualize how radical the marketplace theology really was.

When the second session of the Council met from September to December, 1963 the familiar joyful, smiling figure of Pope John XXIII was missing. He had died on June 3, 1963. In his place was the former Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Giovanni Montini or Pope Paul VI, who had been elected Pope on June 21, 1963.

Bishop Soenneker recalled that at this session of the Council the spirit of ecumenism and reconciliation was particularly evident when Pope Paul VI publicly asked the pardon of non-

Catholics for any division that Catholics may have caused and asked Catholics to grant forgiveness for any hurt "real or imagined" that they may have suffered in the years since the separation of the churches.

Given his own devotion to the Blessed Mother, Bishop Soenneker must have been particularly happy at this Council session when the Council bishops reaffirmed the importance of the Blessed Mother to the Church. It may have been the study of this woman's role in the history of salvation that made the Council bishops also correct an oversight they had made at the first session of the Council. At the end of this session an invitation was issued to women to come as observers at the future Council sessions.

Due to the death of Father Robert Connor, the chancellor of the Diocese, Bishop Soenneker returned to Owensboro before the closing of the second session of the Council. Father George Hancock was named to replace Father Connor as chancellor.

The work at the second session of the Council that was to have the most immediate impact on the people of the Diocese of Owensboro was the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. With the approval of this document the changes in the Church began to be personally experienced back home in the parishes.

On April 2, 1964 the first regularly scheduled afternoon Mass was announced. It was to be held at Our Lady of Lourdes and was "for the convenience of the Catholics who on account of Sunday work schedules [found] it, practically speaking, impossible to attend Mass in the morning."

As with each change that was announced concerning the Sacred Liturgy, a note of caution was also announced by Bishop Soenneker. Regarding the afternoon Mass he noted: "Sunday is the Lord's day and it is not proper to spend the preceding night in recreation extending to the early hours of Sunday and then sleep most of Sunday and get up in time for the afternoon Mass."

Also, since people might be crossing parish boundaries to go the afternoon Mass, the instruction was included that "any parish envelopes dropped into the collection during the evening Mass should be given to the proper parish. The loose collection will naturally be for the benefit of the parish [in which the evening Mass was held]."

In April of 1964, the Sacred Congregation of Rites also decreed the change in the form for the distribution of Holy Communion. Now the priest was to hold the host before each Communicant and say the words "Corpus Christi"; to which each person receiving Communion was to audibly profess his/her belief in the presence of Christ by responding, "Amen." Bishop Soenneker called for this practice to be explained to the parishioners and then for it to begin to be used in all the parishes in the entire diocese on May 3, 1964. He cautioned that it was not to be used in any Church prior to that day.

This caution would be typically given each time a new change was introduced into the Sacred Liturgy. Bishop Soenneker was very aware that pastors might get anxious and jump ahead in updating their parishes. But Bishop Soenneker was also very aware that by doing so, pastors might not be sensitive enough to how changes were affecting people throughout the parishes. He thought that symbols could lose their meaning if proper explanation did not precede the introduction of liturgical changes.

In at least one instance, the cautionary approach was also a practical move. In one of the letters to his priests Bishop Soenneker reminded the priests not to buy new Altar Manuals at this time. The changes in the liturgy would be so numerous that it would be difficult for publishers to keep up with them and continual purchasing of updated or revised manuals would run into considerable expense.

Little by little other changes were made in the Liturgy. At first there were changes in the wording of some of the prayers. In August and September of 1964, the words "Holy Ghost" were changed to "Holy Spirit" and were to be changed in all the prayers in which Holy Ghost was commonly used. Prayers such as the Sign of the Cross, the Doxology and the Creed and countless other prayers were affected by this change.

Then finally, on November 5, 1964 the change for which many had been waiting was announced. The Liturgy should be prayed in the vernacular. For the people in the United States that meant that the Liturgy would be celebrated in English.

In writing to the priests about the use of the vernacular, the Bishop noted that "Prayers rattled off in English would be a source of disedification to the laity and such an approach to prayer would give the impression of prayer that lacked sincerity, depth and thoughtfulness." It was decided that the use of the vernacular would be introduced into all the parishes on the First Sunday of Advent. In anticipation of the other changes that would be coming in liturgical celebrations and in order to have guidelines by which those changes could be implemented within the diocese, the first Liturgical Commission was established in the Diocese in September, 1964. The following priests made up that first commission: Rev. George Hancock, Chairman; Rt. Rev. Gilbert Henninger; Very Rev. Charles Henry, OSB (Rector of St. Maur's Seminary); Rev. C. P. Bowling; Rev. Eugene E. Ryan; Rev. Bernard Powers; Rev. Joseph Mills; Rev. Joseph Saffer; Rev. Joseph Rhodes and Rev. Lucian Hayden.

The fact that there would be plenty of questions for a liturgical commission to address was illustrated by the example of how the vernacular could be used at funeral Masses. In the fall of 1964 there was no funeral music available in the vernacular. It was decided that at funeral Masses the Latin music could be used until adequate vernacular music began to be published. That sounds like the obvious solution, yet when organists and choirs had previously been schooled to use only approved music in the celebration of liturgies, one can appreciate the quandary in which they found themselves.

The liturgical commission met for much discussion when the next phase of liturgical change took place. This change called for the priests to face the people during the celebration of Mass. The date for this change was March 7, 1965. But the sanctuaries of the churches had to be arranged to accommodate this change. The liturgical commission advised pastors to go the route of placing a temporary altar somewhere between the main altar and the communion rail. This, of course, assumed that later there would have to be renovations within the church buildings to accommodate altars from which the priest would offer Mass facing the people. But major renovations should wait until other liturgical concepts had been assimilated by the congregations.

The liturgical commission was also to prepare ways of teaching the parishioners the reasons for the future changes such as the rituals such as offertory processions, the kiss of peace, and parishioner's placing of a host in a ciborium prior to the beginning of Mass.

Bishop Soenneker wanted to make sure that when these changes were introduced the new symbolism was understood. So he sent a letter in 1964 again instructing parish priests not to begin these practices until the liturgical commission had established clear guidelines as to how the new rituals were to be implemented. The same caution applied to Bible vigils or prayer services. They were not to be introduced without standard procedures that could be followed by all. In fact, demonstration Bible vigils were held in some parts of the diocese in order to teach how they were to be conducted.

In November of 1964 another change was introduced. This one turned out to be a help to parishioners but a great time consumer for the priests of the parishes. Priests were given permission

to celebrate more than one Mass daily They could celebrate two on weekdays and even three on weekends if the size of the congregations indicated a need for that many. The priest were permitted to take liquids between the Masses. (This was before the fasting rules for the receiving of Communion had changed.)

Priests were also given permission to dis tribute Holy Communion at evening Communion services and to celebrate Mass in social gathering places as long as they had a portable altar stone or Greek antemensis to use in this setting.

Almost all the changes mentioned above am the ones that would come later, particularly those that encouraged the participation of the laity in the role of Eucharistic Minister, Lector and Cantor in the celebration of the Liturgy stemmed from the definition of the Church as it was given by the Second Vatican Council. The Church was the people of God.

For most parishioners these changes, and the teaching that went along with them, made for wonderful renewal of the liturgical life of the parish with an increased participation on the part of the whole parish. For some individuals however, the process of coping with the change was either too stressful or offered an already sought for excuse to drop out of participation Some parishes began to experience a slight decline in membership. That decline, however. was not reflected in the Diocesan-wide membership. Between 1961 and 1971 membership in the Diocese of Owensboro increased from 37,845 to 47,843. It continued to climb throughout the next decade also. In 1982 the Diocese of Owensboro numbered 50,076.

[p.66] Then in May, 1982 in an almost parenthetical phrase in his monthly letter to the people of the Diocese, Bishop Soenneker also announced his resignation as Bishop of Owensboro. "My resignation as bishop of this diocese will be in the hands of the Holy Father during these days of prayer in preparation for Pentecost." This announcement coincided with Bishop Soenneker's 75th birthday. What were his plans for his retirement? He was going to grow roses.

It should not have been surprising to the people of the Diocese that this Bishop who had grown up on a farm and who, as Bishop, had served on the National Catholic Rural Life Commission would want to go back to gardening upon his retirement.

In one sense of the word "gardening" describes this term of office as Bishop of Owensboro. Bishop Soenneker came in 1961 and found ,a diocesan church, a garden, all plowed and ready for planting. He got the seed to plant at the Vatican Council, sowed some of the seeds himself and gave some to others but cautioned them to be careful how they planted them. He stayed in close touch with other gardeners to make sure the processes being used in the tending of the plants were good ones. He prayed as the seeds began to take root and to grow. He worried when the young plants were threatened by storms. When he felt confident he had done all he could for the plants, he rested.

[p.76] On September 25,1987 Most Rev. Henry J. Soenneker died as a result of a stroke. He was 80 years old. Archbishop Kelley from the Archdiocese of Louisville presided at his funeral liturgy on Monday, September 29. Eight other bishops co-celebrated this Mass of Resurrection and more than 700 people in the congregation joined their prayers with those of the clergy. Bishop McRaith would eugulogize Bishop Soenneker as a "gentle person, who, though frugal with himself, had always been generous with others." Perhaps it was the best of both of those characteristics that had helped Bishop Soenneker leave the Diocese of Owensboro financially sound when he retired in 1982.

Bishop Soenneker was also remembered as an effective leader, one who had to deal with the changes of both the Church and American society of the 60s.





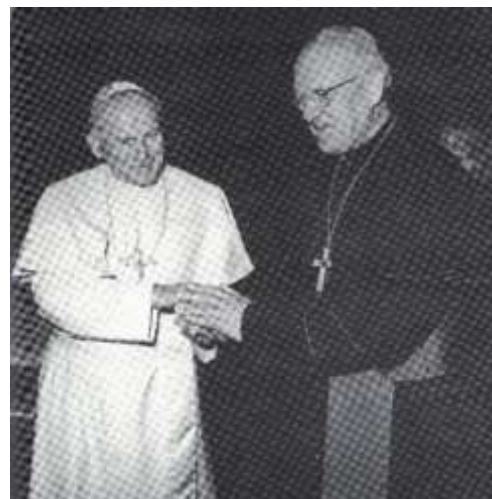
**A Pictorial History of Owensboro-Daviess County, 1950-1970.**  
**Owensboro Publishing Company, Owensboro, KY, 1995, p.33:**



The Most Rev. Henry J. Soenneker, Bishop of the Diocese of Owensboro, is shown as he prepared to depart from the Owensboro-Daviess County Airport enroute to Rome, Italy, and the Ecumenical Council at the Vatican which was held October 11, 1962.



**Diocese of Owensboro: a Celebration of the Catholic Church in**  
**Western Kentucky** Messenger-Inquirer, 2010, pp.11, 46, 55:



Henry Soenneker was born on May 27, 1907 and ordained to the priesthood on May 26, 1934. He was appointed the second bishop of the Diocese of Owensboro on March 15, 1961, his Episcopal Ordination was April 26, 1961, and he was installed as Bishop on May 9, 1961. Bishop Soenneker retired in 1982 and passed away on Sept. 24, 1987. Submitted by Diocesan Archives, Left: Young Seminarian – Father Henry Joseph Soenneker at the time of his ordination to the priesthood. He studied at Ponifical College Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio, from 1921 until his ordination to the priesthood on May 26, 1934. Right: Quinquennial Visit – Bishop Henry J. Soenneker's ad limina visit with Pope John Paul II in Rome in 1979. These required visits to the Pope and the tombs of the apostles occur every five years, and are properly called "quinquennial visita ad limina apostolorum." Pictures submitted by Diocesan Archives



**The Diocese of Owensboro – 74 Years of the Diocese of Owensboro, Kentucky,**  
**Sarah L. Patterson, 2012, pp.28-29:**



Father Soenneker at his first Mass as a newly ordained priest in May 1934



Bishop Soenneker at his installation as the new bishop of Owensboro, 1961



Grave of Bishop Soenneker at Resurrection Cemetery, Philpot, Daviess County, KY





Residence of Bishop Soenneker at 1535 Frederica St., in Owensboro during 1961-1985. The house was built in 1913 and was purchased by the Owensboro Diocese in June 1948. The Diocese sold the property in 1986.

