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FATHER JOHN JOSEPH GRACE Pastor Emeritus of St Theresa Parish, South Lake Tahoe

Interview by Father John E Boll, Diocesan Archivist



Father John Joseph Grace

John Joseph Grace was born on September 18, 1920 in Tipperery, Ireland. He is the middle of three child born to John and Cecilia Grace. His two sisters are Catherine "Rina" and Maureen. John grew up in Tipperary and attended the Commons School where his parents were teachers. Since the nearest high school was in Thurles, John's parents decided to send him to the Cistercian College at Rosecrea as a boarding student for his secondary education.

Seminary Days and Ordination

After graduating from secondary school, John entered Saint Patrick Seminary in Thurles, County Tipperary, in 1942. For the next six years he did his studies in philosophy and theology at Thurles. In 1946, Father Thomas Kirby, an Irish born priest from Sacramento, came to Thurles looking for volunteers to serve the Diocese of Sacramento. It was at that time that seminarians Richard Doheny and John Grace signed up for service in the Diocese of Sacramento.



Photo from St Theresa Parish Silver Jubilee Program

Father John Grace's Family at his Ordination in 1948 John Grace, Sr, Cecilia Grace and Sisters Rena and Maureen

After his ordination in the Thurles Cathedral on June 13, 1948 by Bishop Kinane, Bishop of Cashel, Father Grace, together with Father Richard Doheny, were scheduled to leave for the American missions in Sacramento in August on the Queen Mary ship but because neither had received his American visa, they were unable to leave Ireland.

Father Grace received his American visa on December 3 and within three days was booked on a Pan Am flight to New York. After arriving in New York on Monday, December 6, he spent two weeks visiting an aunt who lived in Long Island. He met Father Doheny in New York and the two flew on United Airways to Chicago and then to San Francisco. They caught a flight to

Sacramento where Father William Sorato, diocesan director of the Catholic Youth Organization, met them at the airport.

First Appointment in the Diocese

Father Sorato chauffeured the two newly arrived priests to Saint Patrick's Home in Sacramento and two days later, Father Grace was given a temporary assignment at Saint Joseph Church in North Sacramento. Father Michael O'Connell was the pastor and the assistant was Father Hugh McTague. Father McTague was appointed pastor of Westwood and Father Grace succeeded him as the assistant priest at Saint Joseph Church where he ministered for the next seven and a half years. Father Grace says this first appointment was a good experience for him since he was forced to pick up the slack in ministry due to Father O'Connell's failing health.

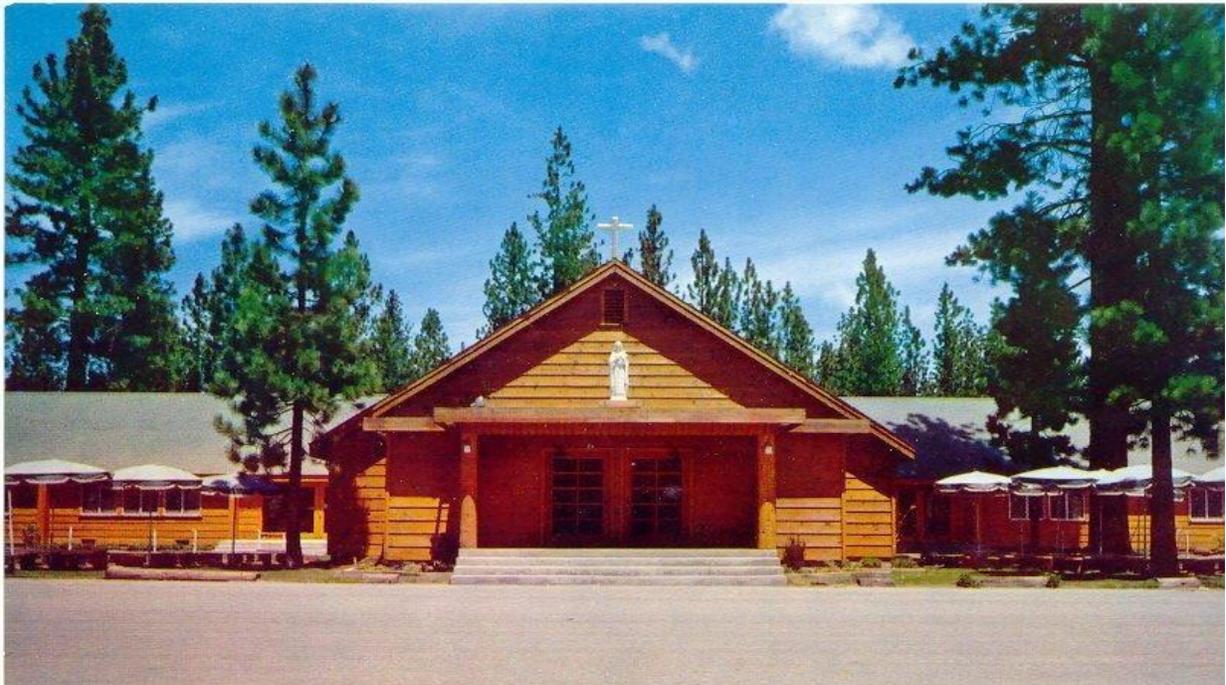


Photo from Diocesan Archives

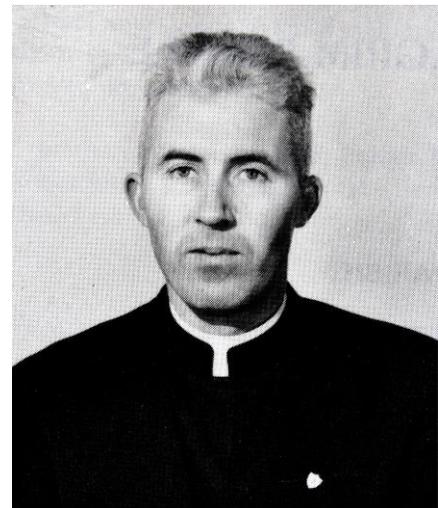
The Original St Theresa Church with Added Side Wings

Appointment to South Lake Tahoe as Pastor

Father Patrick Lyons, founding pastor of Saint Theresa Parish in South Lake Tahoe, died on February 29, 1956 at the age of 38. His uncle, Father Michael Lyons, was pastor of Sacred Heart parish in Sacramento so a Funeral Mass was celebrated for Father Patrick both at Saint Theresa Church in South Lake Tahoe and Sacred Heart Church, Sacramento. At the funeral, Bishop Joseph McGucken asked Father Grace to be his chaplain which was a sign that the bishop was planning to appoint him pastor of Saint Theresa Parish.

A month later, just as predicted, Father Grace received a letter from the bishop appointing him pastor of Saint Theresa Parish, effective April 18, 1956. That is how the bishop made appointments in the 1950's.

Father Patrick Lyons



When Father Grace arrived at his new parish, he found South Lake Tahoe to be a small town with some 300 permanent residents. The parish facilities were likewise quite meager. When Father Lyons arrived at South Lake Tahoe in 1951, he received permission from the Forest Service to build a small church on Forest Service land where the present church is located. There was a small house nearby used by priests from Truckee when they came to celebrate Mass in South Lake Tahoe during the summer months. The house had only one bedroom. In the five years Father Lyons served as pastor, he added two rooms to the house to accommodate extra priests who came to help in the summers.

Father Grace focused on getting to know the small number of Catholic families that made up the parish. He began a CCD program and taught catechism classes. He had about ten children for catechism in Marla Bay, ten at the parish site and four or five at Kyburz including the famed skier, Spider Sabich, who attended catechism classes and served as an altar boy.



The Original Rectory after Being Enlarged

Watch Out for Elephants!

Father Grace tells the story of his first Sunday in South Lake Tahoe when he drove to Camp Sacramento to celebrate Mass. Since there was a small ski lift at Camp Sacramento, Mass was held at the Chapel of Our Lady of the Sierras for the skiers. As Father Grace was driving home after Mass he met two large elephants charging up the highway. He thought to himself, "No one told me there were elephants in the area." He wondered if he was seeing things or was suddenly transported to some strange and exotic place.

As the elephants thundered passed his car, both sides of his car were damaged. As he reached the bottom of the hill he saw a man with a truck loaded with circus equipment from the Barnum and Bailey Circus. He asked Father Grace if he had seen two elephants going up the highway. Father Grace responded: "Yes, but they are long gone by now." The driver was using the elephants to pull the circus truck up the hill but the chain broke and the elephants, sensing their new-found freedom, took off like lightning up the road. Father Grace decided not to tell anyone about the incident for some time for fear people would think he was either drunk or hallucinating.

Growth of the Parish

Little by little, the parish began to grow and Father Grace realized that the church was too small to accommodate the growing crowds, especially during the summer months. He found during the first two summers that more people were sitting outside the church than inside. The church

seated only 200 but there were 400 outside. He installed large sliding doors on the sides of the church that could be opened during Mass in the summer so people could see and hear.

Around 1955, Heavenly Valley began to develop its ski facilities and at the same time the casinos were being established. This created a great growth boom during the next 10-15 years in South Lake Tahoe. Father Grace approached the Forest Service about building a new church and the Service denied his request but allowed him to add two wings to the existing church. These wings increased the seating capacity from 200 to 600 and outside there was seating for another 400 during the summer months. This was a creative way to deal with the growing weekend crowds until a new church was built in 2000.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

The New Saint Theresa Church Built in 2000

A Memorable Wedding

In his first year in South Lake Tahoe, Father Grace had only one wedding. As time passed, Catholics from all over California and the nation wanted to be married at Lake Tahoe and in Saint Theresa Church. Father Grace allowed Catholics from other places to celebrate their wedding in the parish if the marriage preparation and pre-marital documents were completed in the parish of the couple. When Father Grace presided at these weddings, the first time he met the couple was usually at the wedding rehearsal the night before the wedding.

Father John recalls the wedding of an out of town couple from Orange County that he was scheduled to celebrate. About 10 pm that night after the rehearsal there was a knock on the rectory door. It was an FBI agent. The agent asked Father Grace if he knew the groom and Father Grace said no. The agent told him that the groom was the Mafia boss of the west coast. He informed Father Grace that the next morning the FBI would have a camper parked across the street from the church so surveillance photographs

could be taken of the wedding guests as they arrived for the wedding. Later, Father Grace was informed that attending the wedding were Mafia leaders from California, Hawaii, Canada and other places in the US.

After the wedding, the parish organist commented to Father Grace that the people attending the wedding looked like a gathering of the Mafia. Father Grace simply replied: "Well, you may be right." Word spread quickly in South Lake Tahoe that Father Grace was friendly with the Mafia. The next few weeks were a bit difficult for him so he had to lie low until the rumor mill had died down.

The Challenge of Assistant Priests

Father Grace stated that over the years he had a number of assistant priests sent to him by the bishop but the bishop never informed him what kind of assistants he was sending. At times this proved to be a hardship for him, since he needed priests who wanted to help build up the parish.

The first parochial vicar was Father Henry Frasinetti who was a good worker. Father Frasinetti served the parish for 5 years and at the end of his term he had to decide if he wanted to be incardinate in the Sacramento diocese or return to his order. Father Frasinetti had served in China most of his priesthood and did not want to leave his religious community so he decided to return to Italy where he continued his ministry until he died some years later.

After Father Frasinetti, Father Grace says the quality of his parochial vicars began to drop except for Father Martin Moroney who was a very positive asset to the parish. Father Moroney remained at the parish for seven years and worked with Father Grace to build up the parish community.

The High and Low Points of Father Grace's Priestly Ministry



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Saint Theresa School

As Father Grace reviews his 60 years in South Lake Tahoe, the building of the parish school was a high point for him. The school was built in 1959 and it took only three months to complete. Construction began on May 1 and the school opened its doors for the fall semester in September. On opening day, the school had full enrollment and the teaching staff consisted of

three religious sisters from the Immaculate Heart of Mary community in Los Angeles. These sisters taught in the school until 1970.



Photo from Parish Jubilee Booklet

Father Grace with Sisters Cathlene and Carmen who Staffed the Parish School

Growing Conflict in the Parish School

In 1970 a conflict developed between the Immaculate Heart Sisters and Cardinal James McIntyre, Archbishop of Los Angeles. The year before the Immaculate Heart Sisters withdrew from South Lake Tahoe, the sisters decided to change their way of operation. Students no longer had to wear uniforms and the sisters did not discipline students as they had done previously. Father Grace says that the Immaculate Heart Sisters changed their focus and became very independent, refusing to have anything to do with the parish or the pastor. This situation was painful and intolerable for Father Grace.

Attendance in the school began to drop dramatically since parents were not happy with the change of direction. Some parents wrote letters of complaint to Bishop Alden Bell expressing their dissatisfaction with the school. Monsignor Edmond O'Neill, Diocesan Superintendent of Catholic Schools, made a visit to Saint Theresa School to speak with the parents but ultimately nothing was resolved.

Bishop Bell did not want the Immaculate Heart Sisters to leave the school and in Father Grace's opinion, the bishop failed to understand the gravity of what was happening in the school. Bishop Bell asked the sisters if they would combine grades since there were only 2 children in first grade and 1 in second. The sisters refused and on August 15, 1970 the sisters called Father Grace and asked him to come to the convent. When he arrived, they handed him the keys of the convent, got into their car and drove off, leaving the parish for good. This was two weeks before school was to open for the fall term. There were three lay teachers who would have

kept the school operating but Bishop Bell would not allow that since he wanted the Immaculate Heart Sisters in the school. Father Grace had no choice but to close the school two weeks before the fall term was to begin.

The Public School District Rents Saint Theresa School

Because of the sudden growth in the region, public schools in South Lake Tahoe were overcrowded and had to begin double sessions, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. Saint Theresa School had given some relief to the overcrowding in the public schools but with its closure, the overcrowding in public schools only increased.

Since the parish school was now closed, the South Lake Tahoe School District rented Saint Theresa School to help relieve its shortage of classroom space.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

The Parish Hall Built During the Pastorate of Father Grace

The Change of the Helm

In 1998, Monsignor Murrrough Wallace succeeded Father Grace as pastor. A year later, Monsignor Wallace decided to reopen the parish school. He hired Doctor Jeannette Holmes of Oakland to be the principal. She did excellent work to pull the school and parish communities back together. However, after she stepped down as principal, the school experienced a drop in enrollment and finally was forced to close a second time.

Father Grace's Hospital Ministry

One of Father Grace's impressive legacies is his ministry to the local hospital. Originally, South Lake Tahoe had only a clinic but no hospital. The Hill Barton Foundation was prepared to give a grant to South Lake Tahoe if the city could raise two hundred thousand dollars to match their grant. Father Grace attended a meeting of doctors and leaders of the community about creating a non-profit corporation in order to apply for the Hill Barton grant. Since he was deeply involved in building the parish school, he had no time to participate in the hospital effort. However, after the hospital was built, Father Grace made the time to visit the patients. For over

fifty years, he made daily rounds at the hospital to see the Catholic patients and anyone else who needed his pastoral care. Through this ministry, he has met almost everyone in the community because of his daily care of the sick.



Photo by John E Boll2012

Interior of the Saint Theresa Church built during the Pastorate of Msgr Wallace

Retirement

Father Grace served as pastor of Saint Theresa Parish for 42 years, from 1956 to 1998. This was his only pastorate during his many years of ministry as a priest of the Diocese of Sacramento. Before his retirement he purchased a home about a mile away from the parish church where he continues to live now.

Father Grace says he has lived a happy life in California. The cold weather of the High Sierras never bothered him. Over the many years of his pastorate, he could be seen early in the morning driving the parish tractor clearing away the snow in the parking lot so people coming to Mass would have a place to park. He says he cleared the parking lot in the winter by himself because there was no one else available to do the job. Over the decades, Father Grace did a lot of manual labor just to keep the parish operating.

Because his parents and his two unmarried sisters have died, Father Grace no longer visits Ireland. Now, he is content to remain in his home in South Lake Tahoe, play a little golf with friends, go out with parishioners for breakfast, lunch or dinner, and visit his many friends in the Tahoe area.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Parish Priests' Residence built during Father Grace's Pastorate

Because of his failing eyesight, Father Grace decided to give up driving and he can no longer celebrate public Masses in the parish because he cannot read the liturgical texts. But he has a wealth of knowledge and experience of South Lake Tahoe and the parish which makes him a valuable resource to his successors at Saint Theresa Parish.

Grateful Thanks to Father Grace

The Church of Sacramento has been blessed by Father John Grace because he decided to give his life to the mission of the Church of Sacramento these past six decades. At 95, Father Grace is the oldest living priest in the diocese and lives happily on his own in his home in South Lake Tahoe.

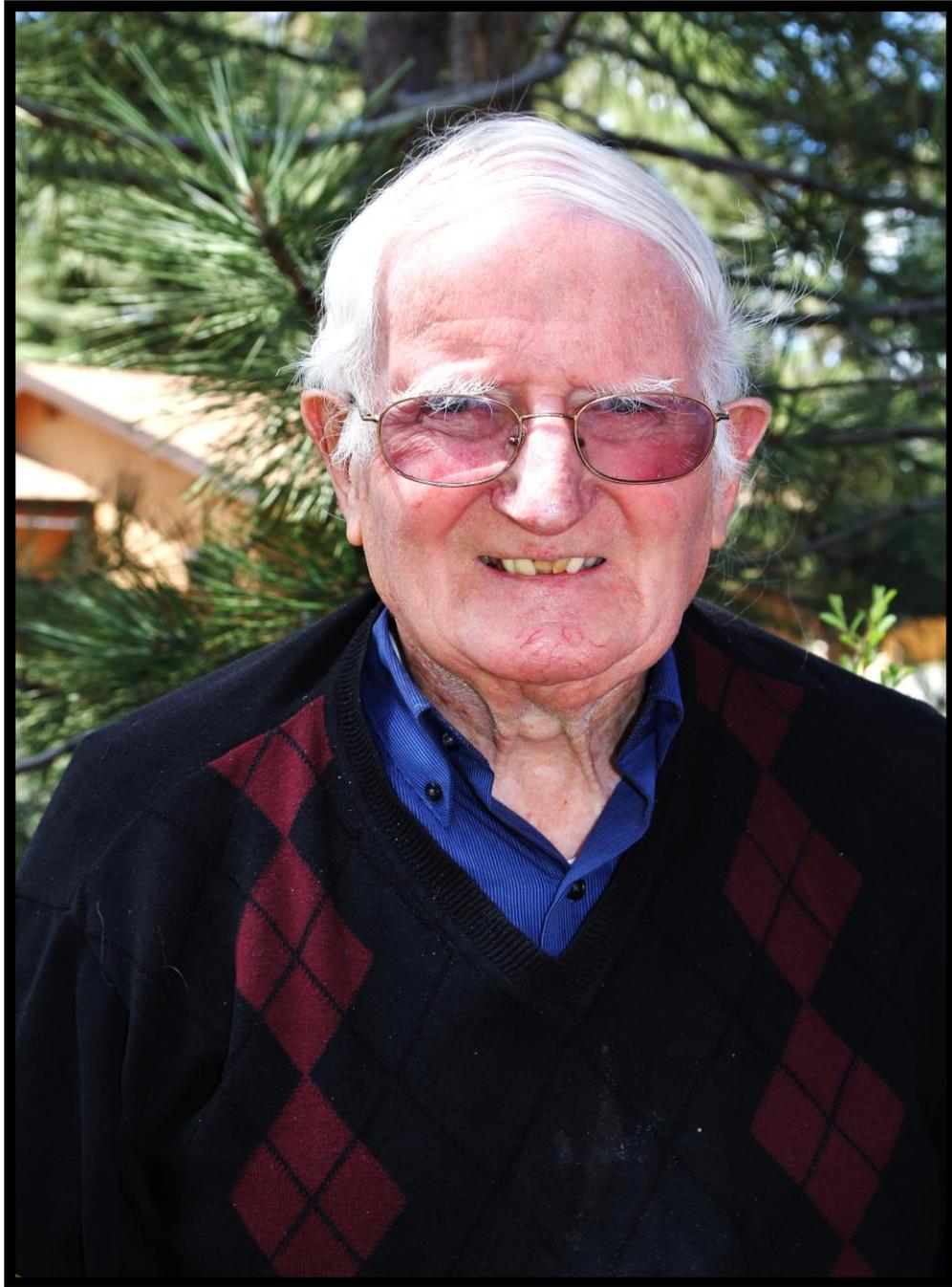
Thank you, Father John, for your faithful ministry to God's people in the Church of Sacramento, especially to the people of Saint Theresa Parish in South Lake Tahoe. May these days of your retirement bring you satisfaction and happiness because of all the good you have done for so many people!

Ad Multos Annos!



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Statue of St Theresa at the Entrance of Saint Theresa Church



Father John Joseph Grace
Most Senior Priest of the Diocese of Sacramento

Published with the permission of Father John Grace