

# SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

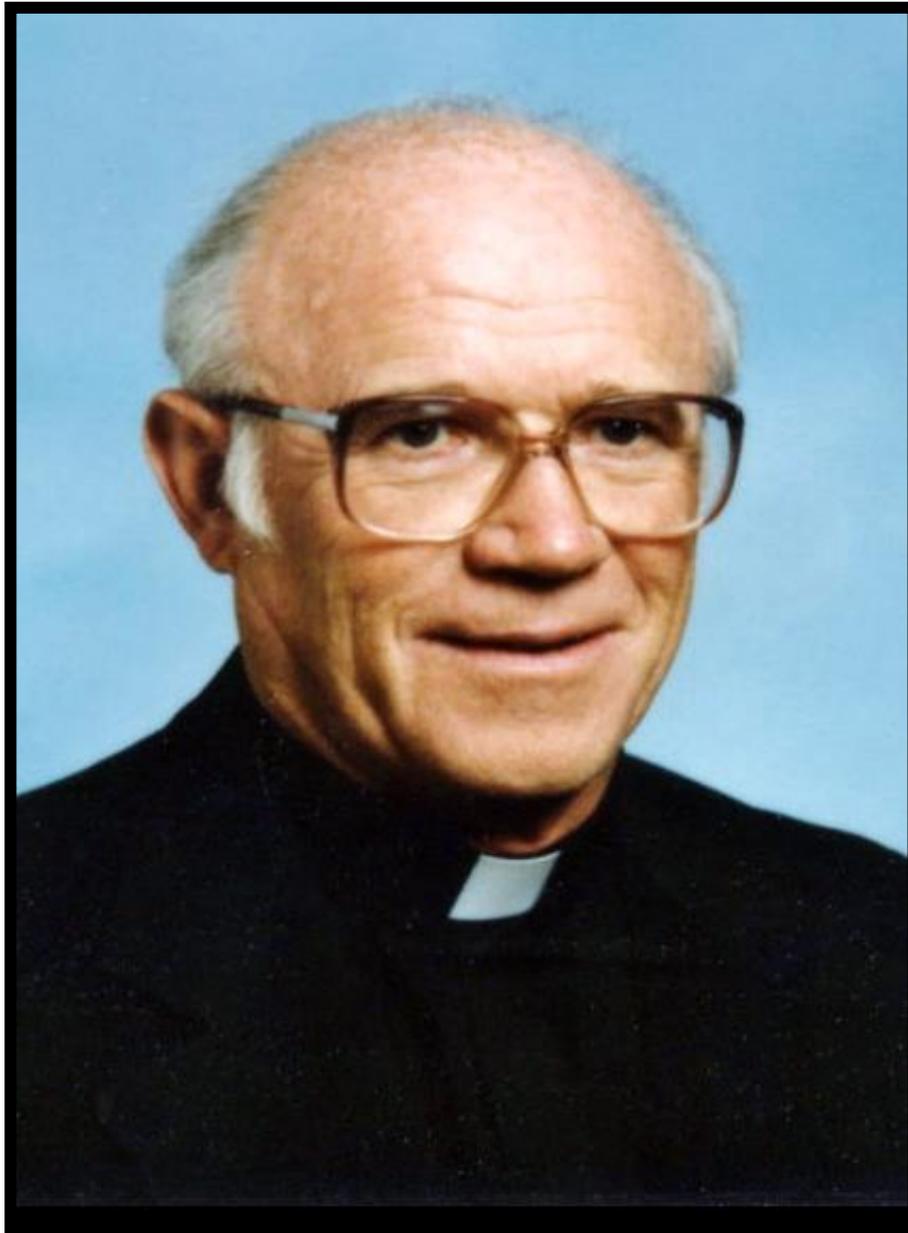
Vol 3

August 2013

No 3

## FATHER MICHAEL JOSEPH CORMACK Pastor Emeritus of St Rose Parish, Roseville

Interview by Father John E Boll, Diocesan Archivist



Father Michael Joseph Cormack

**Michael Joseph Cormack** was born in the family home in Dallyerk, Moyne, Thurles, County Tipperary, Ireland on November 10, 1927, the third child of William Cormack and Sarah Kennedy. His two brothers are James and William and his three sisters are Mary, Margaret and Stasia.

### **Growing up in Ireland**

Michael grew up on the family farm in the countryside of Moyne where his father did mixed farming growing vegetables and raising dairy cows and swine. The family was able to produce enough food on their land to care for their own needs but at the same time they considered themselves poor.

### **Ireland becomes a Free Nation in 1921**

In 1921 Ireland became a free nation when 26 of the counties were freed from British rule. The Republic of Ireland was established when Michael was 6 years old. The British Parliament would not allow all the counties of Ireland to become part of the Republic and a civil war broke out in Ireland over this issue.

Eamon de Valera was elected Prime Minister of the Republic of Ireland and he was very pro-Irish. He wanted Ireland to be an independent country and did not want the Irish to have any business dealings with England. Many Irish farmers refused to support De Valera over this issue because Irish farmers wanted to sell their agricultural products to Great Britain.

In his pro-Irish stance, De Valera insisted that Gaelic, the ancient language of Ireland, was to be spoken by every Irish person. Michael knew very little Gaelic in grammar school so when he began high school in Thurles seven miles away from his home, the school had two different class tracks, A and B. In track A, classes were taught in Gaelic and Latin and Greek were part of the curriculum. In track B, all subjects were taught in English with Gaelic and Latin as additional subjects. When it came time for exams, if an Irish student failed his Gaelic test, he automatically failed all his subjects, even if he did well in them. Michael was able to pass all his classes in high school even though his Gaelic skills were weak. In his view, this was a cruel system that worked against the students.

### **Seminary Studies Begin at Saint Patrick Seminary, Thurles**

Michael entered Saint Patrick Seminary in Thurles and after completing high school he began his first year of philosophy. He did well in his classes and the president of the seminary spoke to Mike one day telling him not to apply for any diocese because the archbishop was considering whether to accept him for ministry in the Archdiocese of Cashel. At the end of the second year of philosophy, the seminary president once again spoke with Michael and told him that the archbishop had changed his mind about accepting him because he did not want to start a precedent in his archdiocese. Michael was therefore free to choose any diocese in the English speaking world and he informed the seminary president that he had chosen Sacramento because there were a few other seminarians studying for Sacramento as well. At the time he signed up for service in Sacramento he knew nothing about the diocese.

For the next six years, Michael studied at Thurles and was ordained a priest for Sacramento on June 15, 1953 in the Cathedral of Thurles by Archbishop Jeremiah Kinane who had decided not

to accept him for service in the Archdiocese of Cashel. Father Michael is happy that the archbishop decided not to keep him in Ireland because he has loved his sixty year ministry in Sacramento.

### **Leaving Ireland for Sacramento**

After ordination, Father Mike was free for the summer. He was scheduled to set sail for America on September 10 or 11 from Cobh to New York together with Fathers Patrick O'Rafferty, Michael Clearly, Vincent O'Shaughnessy and Bernard Burns who were also heading to Sacramento.

It took a week to sail from Ireland to New York and after arrival Michael went by train from New York to Boston to visit his cousin who was a priest in Boston. After the week's visit, Michael returned to New York where he met Patrick O'Rafferty and the two set off by train for Sacramento. Arriving at the Sacramento train depot, they were met by Father Ed Kavanagh who drove them to Saint Patrick Home on Fruitridge Avenue in Sacramento where they stayed the night. The next morning, Monsignor Michael Lyons picked up Michael and took him to Sacred Heart Church on 39<sup>th</sup> and J Streets.

### **First Assignment, Sacred Heart Parish, Sacramento**



Photo by John E Boll 2014

### **Sacred Heart Church, Sacramento**

Father John Grace was the assistant at Saint Joseph Parish in North Sacramento. He drove Father Michael to Saint Joseph Church in North Sacramento where he remained until November 1953.

Father Michael's first official assignment was Sacred Heart Parish in Sacramento. He had to be on deck for confessions on the first Friday of November. He states that Monsignor Lyons was an excellent pastor and a lovely

man to live with. Father Michael served Sacred Heart parish for ten years as an assistant. In those days, the length of time an assistant remained in a parish depended on whether the pastor liked him. Obviously, Monsignor Lyons really liked Father Cormack since he stayed a decade at this parish.

For Father Michael, Monsignor Lyons was a perfect gentleman who was always fair with his assistant priests. The priests rotated celebrating the Masses and funerals and Monsignor Lyons shared everything with his assistants. Everyone at Sacred Heart Church loved Monsignor Lyons. Monsignor Lyons who oversaw the building of Sacred Heart Church died suddenly in 1958 from an aneurism.

Succeeding Monsignor Lyons as pastor was Monsignor Gerald O'Driscoll and Father Cormack remained as an assistant at Sacred Heart Church with Monsignor O'Driscoll for another five years from 1958 to 1963. In 1963 Father Michael was appointed chaplain to Mercy Hospital and held that position until 1970. He says these were the exciting years of the Second Vatican Council.

### **Hospital Ministry**

Father Cormack's hospital ministry was very rewarding. He thought he might stay on as chaplain at Mercy Hospital. During this time Monsignor Maurice O'Connor came to live with Father Cormack in the hospital chaplain's house on 41<sup>st</sup> Street. One of the major daily events in that era was reading the newspaper to see what was happening at the Council. Monsignor O'Connor was very conservative and did not agree with what the bishops were saying in Rome. While Father Michael worked at the hospital, he also served as a judge at the Diocesan Marriage Tribunal.

It was during his time as hospital chaplain that the liturgical changes initiated by the Second Vatican Council went into effect. The Mercy sisters had a temporary altar made so Father Mike could celebrate Mass facing the people for the first time. For him, the changes of Vatican II were great and he loved what the Council did to open up the church.

### **Yearly Clergy Exams**

During the first five years of priesthood, all the young priests had to take a yearly exam on canon law and church history. Monsignor Raymond Renwald gave the young priests a book to read on church history and he tested them on the book. Monsignor Maurice O'Connor tested the young priests on their knowledge of canon law.

During the time when Bishop Joseph McGucken was bishop of Sacramento, the priests had regular clergy conferences and all priests had to attend. During the conference, the names of all the priests present were put in a hat and the priests whose names were pulled out of the hat had to answer a question in front of the bishop and the priests. Everyone was fearful that he would be called on to answer a theological, historical or moral question in front of his peers.

Bishop Mc Gucken was a strict rubricist and no priest wanted to be on ceremonies with him. Father Michael concluded that the bishop was probably nervous and insecure himself and took it out on everyone around him.

### **Named Pastor of Walnut Grove in 1970**

In May 1970, Father Cormack was appointed pastor of Walnut Grove. When he arrived at the parish he found that it had been neglected and he had a mess to deal with. But soon he had the parish up and running smoothly again. He served as pastor of Walnut Grove for 10 years and when the opening for a new pastor in Roseville was published, he decided to apply for Saint Rose Parish. Bishop Francis Quinn appointed Father Mike administrator of Saint Rose Parish while Father James Corcoran retained the title of pastor. Bishop Quinn eventually had to approach Father Corcoran to ask him to retire as pastor.

### **Pastorate at Saint Rose Parish, Roseville**

Bishop Quinn appointed Father Cormack pastor of Saint Rose Parish where he served as pastor until his retirement in 1993 at the age of 65.

When Father Mike arrived in Roseville in August 1980, he quickly learned that the parish needed a new parish center, a building with a large parish hall plus several rooms where different parish organizations could hold their meetings. Such a building would complete the parish plant which already had a church and a



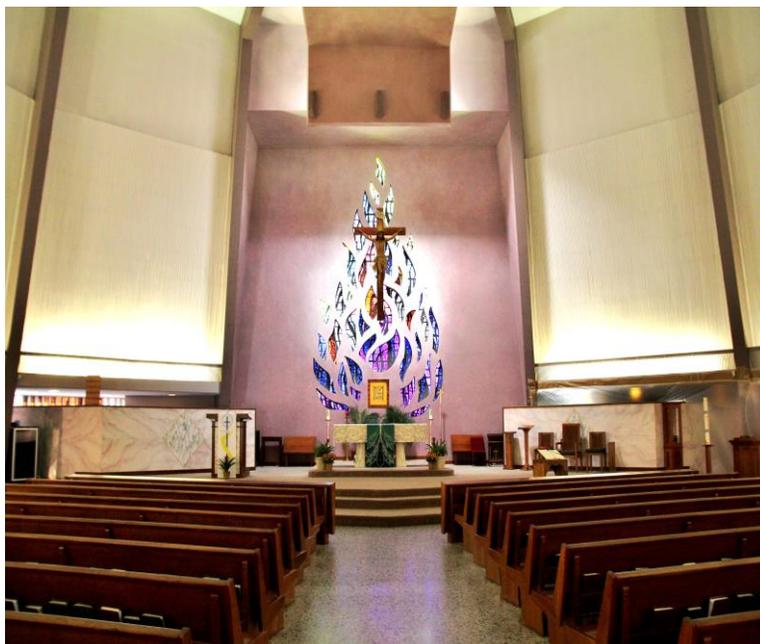
Photo by John E Boll 2010

### **St Anthony Church, Walnut Grove**

parish school. Father Mike initiated a successful campaign to raise the funds needed to build and furnish a new parish center. The building was dedicated by Bishop Francis Quinn in 1982.

Doctor Tom Stanko, a parishioner deeply interested in the Social Gospel, asked Father Mike to establish some kind of parish organization to do social outreach ministry. His idea led to the founding of a Saint Vincent de Paul Conference by Father Mike, Doctor Tom and Bill Boudier. This ministry started out in Boudier's garage. But thanks to the generosity of Bill and Anne Boudier, a building was purchased on Vernon Street where meals were served on a daily basis to homeless people. From this humble beginning, a variety of other social services were begun to help the homeless and needy of the community.

### **Interior of Saint Rose Church**



One winter when the Roseville City Council decided not to open the local Armory as a homeless shelter, Sherry Schiele urged Father Mike to open the parish hall to serve the poor that winter. She said to Father Mike: "You have to lead the way because you have the biggest church facility in the city." Father Mike said yes and that yes created quite a controversy among some local people and parishioners as well as the City Council. Some members of the City Council tried to stop the parish from opening the church hall for the homeless but failed in their effort

thanks to Council members Mayor Bill Stucci and Council member Pauline Roccucci. Father Mike considers doing the work of the Social Gospel was the highlight of his priestly ministry in Roseville. This ministry brought together members of different churches, all working together to make the Social Gospel real and concrete in Roseville.

During his years of priestly ministry, Father Mike served on many different diocesan boards like the Priests' Personnel Board, the Diocesan School Board, the Diocesan Finance Committee and the Permanent Diaconate Board.

### **Retirement was Hardly Retirement for Father Mike**

After retiring, Father Cormack went to Ireland for a few months. When he returned Bishop Quinn asked if he would be willing to go to Red Bluff for a short time to fill in. As it turned out, Father Michael stayed in Red Bluff a year while the pastor, Father Sean O'Leary, studied Spanish in Mexico. He found the experience in Red Bluff to be a very positive one and enjoyed his time there. He was by himself in the parish during the week but had weekend help when a Spanish speaking priest came to celebrate the Spanish Mass.

After Father Michael returned home from Red Bluff, the bishop asked him once again to fill in at Saint Catherine of Siena Parish in Vallejo. This assignment was for the best part of a year. After Bishop Weigand appointed Father Abraham as pastor of Saint Catherine Parish, the parish experienced conflict and division and Father Michael was asked to return to Vallejo once again to fill in until a new pastor was appointed.

The next request to Father Mike was to fill in at Good Shepard Parish in Elk Grove in between the pastorates of Father Tom Bland and Father Phil Wells. He then moved on to Saint Teresa Parish in Auburn for about five months to cover the parish until the new pastor was appointed. When asked once again to help in another parish, Father Mike decided he had done enough coverage of parishes for the bishop and said no. He no longer accepted any assignment as a fill in priest after that.

### **Life in Sun City, Roseville**

Father Michael purchased a home in Del Webb's Sun City, Roseville where he lived for seven years. He continued to celebrate some Masses at Saint Rose Parish as needed until 2012 when he decided to finally withdraw from regular public ministry. It was time for him to relax from the pressures of active ministry.

### **A Final Move to the Vianney Priests' Retirement Village in Citrus Heights**

After the diocese built the Priests' Retirement Village in Citrus Heights, Father Mike decided to give up his own house and move to the Village. He says it was a good decision because at the Retirement Village he has the camaraderie of fellow priests he has known all of his priestly life. He is now content to work a bit around the property at the Village, read, pray and enjoy each day as it comes.

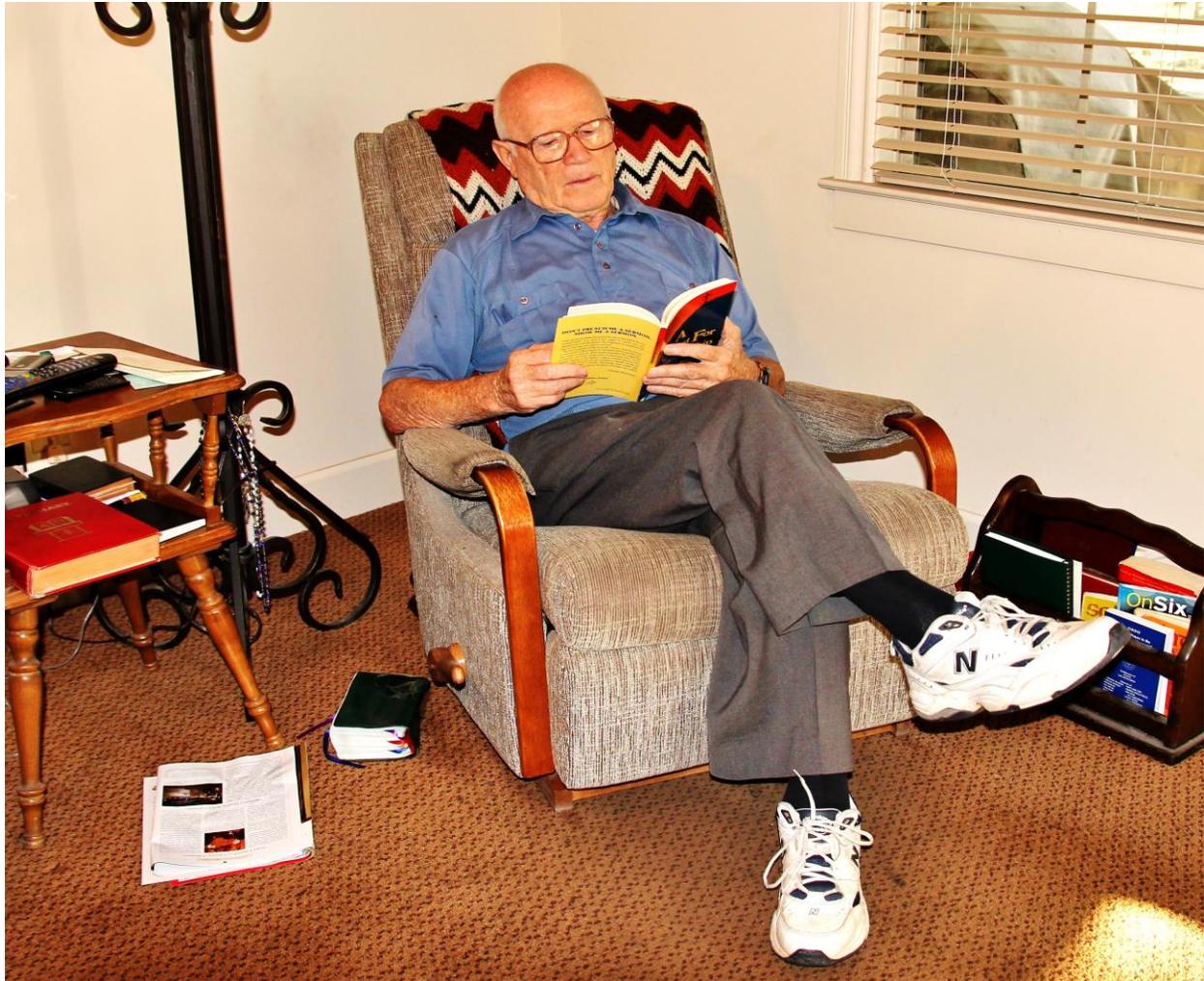


Photo by John E Boll, 2013

### **Father Mike Relaxing at Home in the Priests' Village in Citrus Heights**

#### **A Priest of Sacramento for Sixty Years!**

Father Michael Cormack has served the Church of Sacramento for sixty years. Wherever he has served, as an assistant, a hospital chaplain, an administrator, a pastor or an auxiliary pastor during retirement, he has done an excellent job ministering to the needs of the People of God. We thank God that Archbishop Jeremiah Kinane of Cashel decided not to accept Father Michael as a seminarian for that Archdiocese of Cashel sixty-five years ago. Had that happened, Sacramento would have missed the good fortune of having Father Michael Cormack as one of its fine priests for the past sixty years.

***Thank you, Father Mike, for your dedication, service and life of ministry to the Catholic community in the Church of Sacramento!***

**AD MULTOS ANNOS!**



Photo by John E Boll 2011

## **Springtime at the Priests' Retirement Village**

Published with the approval of Father Michael Cormack