

SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

Vol 5

Father John E Boll, Diocesan Archivist

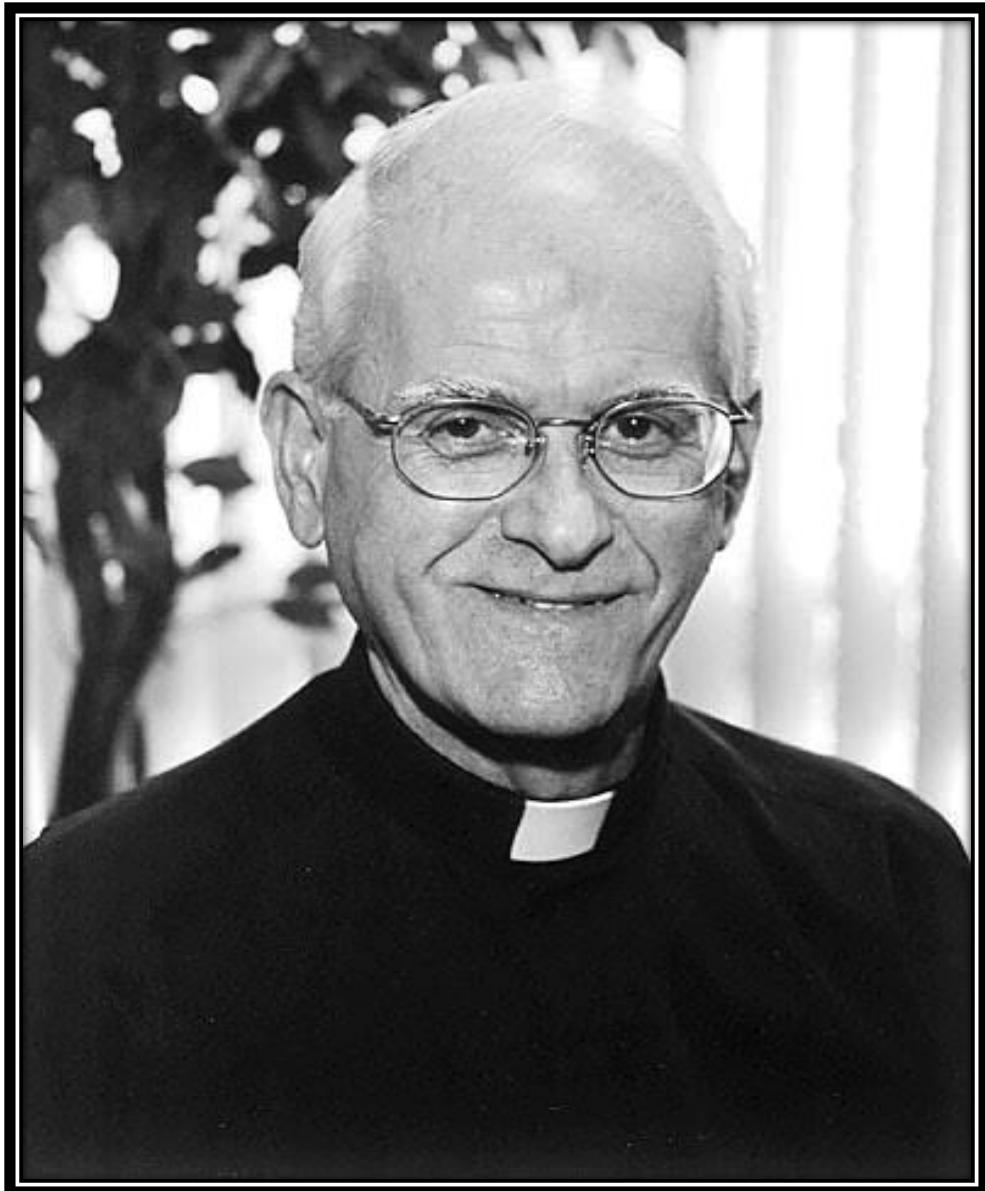
No 1

FATHER CHARLES SYLVESTER McDERMOTT

Native Son of Derry, Ireland; Priest of the Diocese of Sacramento

Vicar for Theological and Canonical Affairs

1935 - 2008

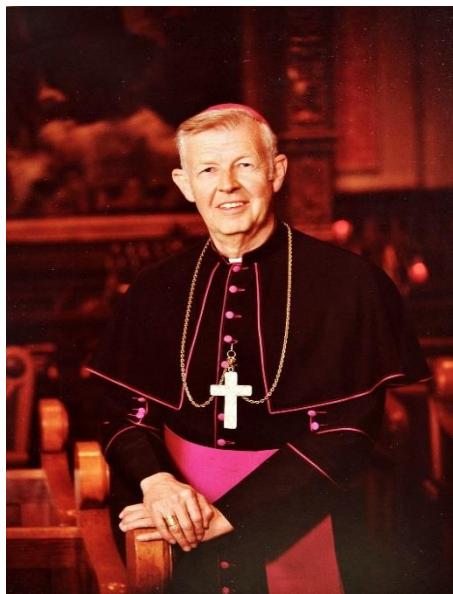


Father Charles Sylvester McDermott

After the death of Father McDermott, Julie Sly, Editor of the Catholic Herald, wrote the following article about the life of Father McDermott which was printed in the June 21, 2008 issue of the diocesan newspaper.

Father Charles “Sylvester” McDermott, a longtime advisor on theological and canonical issues to Bishop William K Weigand and Bishop Emeritus Francis A Quinn and a priest of the Sacramento Diocese for 48 years, has died at age 72.

He died June 9, 2008 at Sherwood Convalescent Hospital in Sacramento after a lengthy illness, having previously resided for the past two years at Mercy McMahon Terrace.



Bishop-Emeritus Francis A Quinn

Bishops, fellow clergy, religious and laity who worked closely with the Irish priest said they won’t soon forget his vast knowledge of theology, the law and ecumenical issues, as well as his moral clarity.

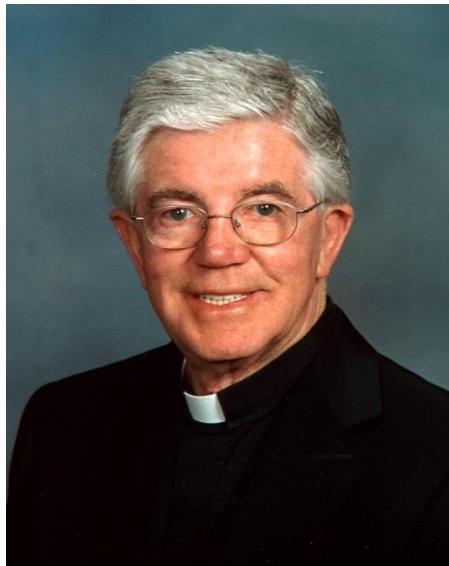
“Everyone was very much aware of his brilliance – he was far, far above the average person in intelligence and knowledge,” said Bishop Emeritus Francis A Quinn, who first met Father McDermott in 1979 when he came to Sacramento to head the diocese.

“He had an encyclopedic knowledge of church teaching, he spoke the truth, and he called things as he saw them,” the bishop said. “He was very forthright, very honest, and very transparent. He was a real churchman with a great sense of humor who was loyal in his friendships.”

Monsignor Brendan O’Sullivan, who was pastor of Saint Anthony Parish in Sacramento for 31 years and knew Father McDermott for 48 years, said “you could count on his friendship for life.”

“He was an extraordinary intellect and a fine scholar in several disciplines. His research skills were legendary. He was, above all, an honorable man whose word was his bond. He had a refined pastoral sensitivity that came into play in his quiet and unassuming personality.”

Father McDermott lived at Saint Anthony Parish in Sacramento for 12 years. “Meals with Father Sylvester in the rectory were a taste of dining in the kingdom,” Monsignor O’Sullivan recalled. “We looked forward to great discussions on the events of the day: literature, theology and politics. In settling a disputed question, he would bounce up from the table and return with a stack of references. He had just



about committed to memory the Second Vatican Council documents – chapter and verse. He loved to win but never at anyone's expense."

Father McDermott received his early education at the Irish "Christian Brothers School and Saint Columba's College in his hometown of Derry, Ireland. He attended University College in Dublin from 1953 to 1956. He studied for the priesthood at All Hallows College in Dublin from 1953 to 1960 and was ordained to the priesthood for service in the Diocese of Sacramento on June 19, 1960 at All Hallows College.



All Hallows College, Dublin, Ireland

Following his ordination, he served as assistant pastor of All Hallows Parish in Sacramento from 1960 to 1965 and at Saint Joseph Parish in Auburn from 1965 to 1968. While in Auburn he also was a philosophy teacher at the Sisters of Mercy of Auburn novitiate.

From 1968 to 1970 he was in residence at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, while serving as vice *officialis* of the diocesan tribunal. In October 1970, Father McDermott went to Rome to study at the Pontifical Gregorian University, where he received a Licentiate of Sacred Theology in 1973 and later a Doctorate of Sacred Theology



Photo by John E Boll 2013

Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, Rome

Upon his return to the diocese, he served in several diocesan capacities: *officialis* of the tribunal; member of the office of arbitration; vicar for theological and canonical affairs from 1983 to 2001; and vicar episcopal for theological affairs. He served as chancellor of the diocese from 2003 to 2007. His most recent assignment was as theological consultant to Bishop Weigand.



Photo by Cathy Joyce, Catholic Herald

Father McDermott Witnesses Bishop Weigand Signing the Documents of the 2004 Diocesan Synod at Saint Isidore Church, Yuba City

Father McDermott served on the preparatory committee for the Diocesan Synod and on the board of moderators during the synod in October 2004.

Over the years, Father McDermott “advised me with excellent opinions on many and various matters of canonical law, theology and ethics,” Bishop Weigand noted. “These opinions were based on the finest doctrinal research, which was thorough and often included resources in Italian, French, Latin, Spanish and sometimes German – all languages which he knew well. The result of Father’s study was never hasty but always indisputable and completely reliable.”

As many who knew him could testify, Father McDermott “was not given to speedy or glib answers or advice,” the bishop added. “He was generous with his time and energy in addressing a variety of questions from staff members or parishioners. “His command of languages was, to say the least, extraordinary and often a source of inspiration, and sometimes amusement. I remember him once telling me of someone else who was ‘intoxicated with the exuberance of his own verbosity!’ Father could, himself, be both exuberant and verbose! He definitely had a flair for the dramatic and well known to lighten a burden or two with a spontaneous recital of prose or poetry committed to memory long ago.”

The priest “was always quite approachable and down-to-earth, ready to lend an ear or engage in conversation on many topics,” Bishop Weigand said. “He was never hesitant to speak up for and defend the rights and the well-being of the laity. I am deeply grateful for the many years of service which Father McDermott gave to this diocese and for the enlightened and sound advice and counsel he provided to me.”

Bishop Quinn said he relied on Father McDermott’s clear perception and advice when clergy sexual abuse of minors became a concern in the late 1980s. “It was a new experience for just about everybody in the church, but he saw what was needed in the way of serving the victims and saw the role of officialdom in the situation, both from the view of canon law and civil law,” the bishop said. “He was able to advise us on just the steps the church should take in a situation that was new to us and what the proper procedures should be.

“I realized more and more as the years went by what a valuable treasure he was to the diocese in those matters,” Bishop Quinn added. “There was nothing selfish about it – his only consideration was the right thing to do for the church. He didn’t look for headlines or applause. He just gave you advice and left it to that person as to what their role should be.

“He gave his full and lengthy attention to anything that needed attention and was thorough in everything he did,” he said. “For those who knew him, we assume at this time he’s probably advising God on how heaven should be conducted.”

Jean McEvoy, a Sacramento attorney who worked on legal issues with Father McDermott beginning in the 1990s and later became a close friend, will remember his “amazing scholarly mind, incredible vocabulary and ability to articulate issues.”

In dealing with sexual abuse issues, he was “concerned about the well-being of everyone involved – victims, laity, religious and clergy – and tried to ensure that everyone was heard and treated with fairness and justice,” she said.

For 20 years, Father McDermott served as spiritual advisor and liaison to the St Thomas More Society, an association of Catholic attorneys and legal professionals in the Sacramento area. Many attorneys considered him their chaplain and came to rely on his counsel, said Herb Bolz, president of the organization, who knew the priest since 1985. “I found him to be a remarkable man – strong but very compassionate,” he said. “He never put himself in the self-important category, but was very down to earth and direct. He had a great ability to listen and to be diplomatic.”



Photo by Cathy Joyce, *Catholic Herald*

Ron Bolz of the Saint Thomas More Society Honors Father McDermott

Father McDermott also served for two decades as the diocesan liaison officer with the Eastern Catholic churches, a role in which he “raised awareness of the unique contributions of the Eastern churches to the Western church,” said Father Mark Melone, pastor of Saint George Melkite-Greek Catholic Church in Sacramento and chairman of the Eastern Catholic Pastoral Association of Northern California.

“He was a great friend to all of us,” he said. “He realized that if the Western churches got to know the Eastern churches better, they would know themselves better. He was aware of the Eastern influence reflected in Irish Christianity.”

Sister of Mercy Clare Marie Dalton, vice president of mission integration at Mercy General Hospital in Sacramento, said Father McDermott was a valued consultant to Mercy hospitals and Catholic Healthcare West on moral and medical ethics issues for more than 25 years. "He had a keen ability to make fine distinctions in moral analysis, and an ability to instruct physicians and others in health care who did not necessarily know Catholic morality," she said. "He made a tremendous contribution to our understanding of medical ethics and guided us in finding solutions to complicated problems. Our leadership will always be deeply grateful to him."

A vigil service for Father McDermott will be held June 24, at 7 p.m. in the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in Sacramento. Bishop Weigand will be the principal celebrant of the funeral Mass in the cathedral on June 25 at 10 a.m.

Father McDermott is survived by one sister, Salome Ewen of Germany, and five brothers who reside in Ireland: Jerome McDermott, Tom Daly, Fabian Daly, Julian Daly and Michael Daly. He is also survived by several nieces and nephews. Burial will be in Ireland.

Archivist's Concluding Thoughts

For nearly five decades, Father McDermott was a valuable gift to the Church of Sacramento. He said he wanted to die with his boots on. As his health weakened, he had to accept the reality that he could no longer do his ministry as before but he remained a faithful servant and priest of Christ Jesus until the day he took his last breath. Now, his is in the joyful bliss of the Kingdom of God. Enjoy your new life in God, Sylvester! Be our intercessor as we continue our earthly sojourn until the day we join you in the joyful embrace of our Loving God.



Phot by John E Boll 2013

Behold, the Beginning of a New Day is Dawning!