

SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

Vol 2

Fr John E Boll, Diocesan Archivist

No 21

FATHER CHARLES LYNCH

Vicar General at the Turn of the Century

By Father John Dwyer, printed May 20, 1976 in the *Catholic Herald*

When Father Charles Lynch arrived in Downieville after New Year's in 1865 to take over as its third pastor he was only 24 years of age. Whether the parishioners were aware of his youth or not, there began a relationship between priest and people which endured for 12 years, a most unusual length of time in one place during Bishop O'Connell's administration.

Charles Lynch, a native of County Cavan, had come out to California in the company of Father Dalton when he had gone to Ireland to recruit Sisters for the Grass Valley Convent in 1864. When he returned he brought not only three sisters but the young Deacon Lynch who was only 23 at the time. Bishop O'Connell had obtained a dispensation from Rome to ordain the youthful deacon a priest. The exiled Bishop of Sonora, Mexico, Bishop Pedro Losa, ordained Charles Lynch a priest of the Marysville Vicariate at Old St Mary Church in San Francisco on November 13, 1864.

As was the custom of Bishop O'Connell, all newly ordained priests spent the first few months in the Marysville Cathedral. But when Father Morris left Downieville after Christmas in 1864, the bishop replaced him with Father Lynch.

The territory which had to be covered by this zealous young priest was not only immense but extremely rugged. His mode of travel was by horse over the impossible wagon roads, across mountains and river beds in order to bring him to the remote mining camps scattered throughout Sierra County and southern Plumas County. At times he was forced to abandon his horse and to continue his journey on snow shoes.

His first visitor in the summer of 1865 was Father Dalton who stayed with him 10 days. His next was Bishop O'Connell who came for confirmation in July 1866. The bishop confirmed nine in Downieville on July 19, eight in Howland Flat on July 22, and two in La Porte on July 29, 1866. The bishop returned again in September 1868. By the time the bishop was ready to leave for the Vatican Council in 1869, Father Lynch had developed such severe rheumatism that the bishop felt it was necessary to bring him from the mountains down to Marysville where he could get medical attention – Father William Moloney was sent to fill in during Father Lynch's absence.

It is from Father Moloney that we get some idea of what area Father Lynch's missionary trips covered. He records his own journeys as follows in 1869:

“St Louis (Oct 8); Whiskey Diggins (Oct 10); St Louis (Oct 16); McMahons Ranch (Oct 21); Whiskey Diggins (Oct 31) Horse Valley Creek (Nov 2); Clear Creek (Nov 2); Eureka (Nov 8); Forest City (Dec 28); Alleghany (Jan 10); Celestial Valley (Jan 14); Horse Valley Creek (Jan 17); Brandy City (Jan 18); Fosters Bar (Jan 21); LaPorte (Jan 30).”

When Bishop O’Connell returned from Rome in the fall of 1870 he found Father Lynch’s health improved enough to permit him to return to Downieville. The bishop visited him in 1871 and 1873. The confirmation tour of 1873 is recorded as follows:

“September 26, at Peter Yore’s Stughville House near Camptonville – 8 children; September 28 at Downieville – 12 children; September 30, St Charles Borromeo, Howland Flat – 3 children; October 1, St Patrick’s Port Wine – 9 children; October 2, LaPorte – 19 children.”

After this visitation the bishop changed his visitation and confirmation schedule to a three year cycle, returning in 1876 and 1879.

However, Father Lynch was transferred from Downieville in 1877 to Eureka, California where he remained for five years. In 1883, when the Grass Valley Diocese had both Bishop O’Connell and the coadjutor bishop making the decisions, he was transferred as pastor of Virginia City and was appointed the Vicar General for Nevada.

When Father Dalton’s successor in Grass Valley, the young Father Peter McDonnell, died unexpectedly at the age of 32, Bishop Manogue transferred Father Lynch to the parish of Grass Valley in 1894. As the old Grass Valley Church approached its golden jubilee in 1908 Father Lynch felt it needed remodeling and under his leadership extensive renovations were made. He also took great care of and attended to the needs of the Sisters of Mercy and their orphanage and schools.

Great was their grief on the evening of September 26, 1911 when a massive stroke hit Father Lynch as he was descending the stairs for supper. He lingered for three days and died in the early morning hours of September 29, 1911. When he was buried on October 3, 1911 St Patrick Church was filled to overflowing by the parishioners, the orphans and a gathering of 40 priests who came from faraway places to pay tribute to a priest who had served the diocese for 47 years.

He was described as rugged of frame and blunt of speech with an outward brusqueness of manner that covered a tender and sympathetic heart. His death at age 71 was an early one for his family as his father had lived to the age of 103 and his mother to age 100. But they had not been victims of 13 years traveling through the snows of Sierra and Plumas Counties. The Vicar General of the Sacramento Diocese during the two decades at the turn of the century indeed was one of its great pioneer priests.



Photo from the Diocesan Archives

Saint Patrick Church, Grass Valley
Where Monsignor Charles Lynch served as Pastor



Picture from the Diocesan Archives

Father Charles Lynch Served as Vicar General of the Diocese of Sacramento