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FATHER MICHAEL GUALCO Pioneer Priest of Chico

By Father John Dwyer, printed in the October 14, 1976 issue of the *Catholic Herald*

The Diocese of Sacramento has a long list of pioneer priests who were associated with one parish for so many years that their names became synonymous with that parish. One cannot mention Grass Valley without thinking Father Thomas Dalton, or Eureka without the name of Lawrence Kennedy or Marysville without Matthew Coleman. Likewise, one associates Father John McGarry with Downieville and Colusa; Father Patrick O'Reilly with Nevada City and Father Philip Brady with Red Bluff.

But the outstanding names in the memory of Chico are two, Father Michael Gualco and Father James Dermody. Between them they served the community of Chico for 43 years. Likewise, Father Jeremiah Gleeson devoted 26 years of his life to Ferndale, Thomas Nugent was in Arcata 40 years and Thomas Tubman in Reno for 23.

There are many others who could be enumerated in this category, but our focus today is one of the above, Father Michael Gualco. Although associated in memory with Chico, Father Gualco arrived there by a long and varied route.

He was born in Capriata d'Orba, Piemonte, Italy, not far from Genoa on February 14, 1841, the youngest of nine children. He was ordained a priest in 1864 and then continued his studies in Rome, Paris and finally London where he learned English. This prepared him for service in the United States, a career he began in Brooklyn in 1866.

In 1868 he answered a call to the Archdiocese of San Francisco, traveled by way of Panama and presented himself to Archbishop Alemany. At the beginning of 1869 the Archbishop felt it was time to create a parish in Contra Costa County and Father Gualco was appointed founding pastor of St. Paul Parish in San Pablo.

The entire county was his responsibility until 1873 when the Dominican Fathers established a parish in Martinez and in the following year in Antioch. This original assignment lasted for ten years, making Father Gualco the pioneer priest of Contra Costa County.

Then in 1879 Father Gualco was moved to Half Moon Bay, an assignment which was of only two years duration. In 1880 the bay and the ocean were exchanged for the foothills of the Sierras when Father Gualco was assigned to Placerville. This appointment prevailed for four years.

Then he was given his most unusual assignment, one which was a first among the pioneer clergy. He was assigned to Folsom Prison as the Catholic chaplain where he remained for three years.

The diocesan boundaries were changed in 1886 when Placerville and Folsom passed from the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese of San Francisco to that of the new Diocese of Sacramento. This is why this priest who had served in such places as San Pablo and Half Moon Bay could now in 1888 be transferred to Chico. This was to be his longest and most effective assignment.



Photo by John E Boll 2011

St John the Baptist Church, Chico
Built during the Pastorate of Father Michael Gualco

To his zeal is credited the building of a church in Chico. The pastorate of Father Gualco endured for 24 years. Father Gualco became ill after Christmas in 1911 and he spent the first two months of 1912 in the Sisters Hospital. Finally on March 20, 1912 this 71 year old pioneer priest went to his eternal reward as the result of pneumonia.

Thus another of the pioneer priests whose life was intimately bound up with one particular community, this time Chico, was laid to rest in the town he had grown to love and for which he had served so very long.



Photo by John E Boll, 2011

Interior of St John Church, Chico