

SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

Vol 2

Fr John E Boll, Diocesan Archivist

No 45

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION CHURCH A 'Granddaddy' Parish in Sacramento

By Eleanor Doyle, printed in the November 18, 1976 issue of the *Catholic Herald*

If parishes were people it would be possible to credit Immaculate Conception parish with being the parent – or the grandparent – or even the great-grandparent of a flock of offspring in the Sacramento area.

This venerable institution which is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary on Sunday, once stretched from 28th and Y Streets as far south as Elk Grove. Little wonder that a favorite clerical joke used to refer to the late Monsignor Patrick O'Sullivan as the "Metropolitan" since so many modern parishes were once a part of the Immaculate Conception territory.

The history of the diocese's newest addition to the 50 Year Club started back in 1909 when the Right Reverend Thomas Grace served as Ordinary of the Sacramento Diocese. Bishop Grace called on Father William Ellis, then serving as an assistant in Eureka, to be founding pastor of the parish which would serve the Oak Park District. In those days, when Broadway was called Y Street, a levee there marked the end of the city limits. So actually the newly named parish was not yet a part of Sacramento; that was to come later with population growth.

The present pastor, Monsignor Thomas A. Kirby, has unearthed some yellowed parish records which show that Mr. and Mrs. James Coyle, parents of Cyril Coyle, now a Knight of St. Gregory, were guarantors for the first \$1,000 loan obtained by Father Ellis to build a temporary church. At that time the pastor resided with the Coyles while awaiting the building of the original rectory, which still stands.

A 1910 issue of the Sacramento Bee tells that on Trinity Sunday of that year a Solemn Mass was offered at the bandstand in Oak Park to launch the start of the Immaculate Conception parish. For the first years of its existence, a wooden building, located along Broadway where the present school yard now is situated, served as the parish church. Where the present church stands, there was a Chinese laundry.

For many years the area was rural in nature, with the flat landscape broken at infrequent intervals by scattered homes. The street cars, principal mode of transportation for those without horse and buggy, ran from town, out 28th Street, jogged at the Y Street levee, and then continued on to the Oak Park District.

On December 8, 1915, Feast of the Immaculate Conception, Bishop Grace dedicated the ground where the present church is now located and blessed the completed structure on May 6, 1916.

The total cost was \$21,000. Old timers of the parish still reminisce about Irish-born Father Ellis, the first pastor. He was a man of boundless energy, particularly beloved by the Irish of the area who flocked to his church in such great numbers that for years IC was unofficially considered the Irish National Church.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Immaculate Conception Church, Sacramento Founded in 1910 by Father William Ellis

Under his direction, the first Holy Name Society in the diocese was organized during the first year of the parish. Since his territory sprawled for a distance of some 20 miles, Father Ellis soon directed the building of a church in Elk Grove, which survived as a parish mission for a number of years.

During World War I he was the chaplain for Mather Field: then along came the “black plague,” the deadly influenza epidemic in the winter of 1918. Over-taxed and over-burdened in tending to the spiritual needs of his growing flock, Father Ellis’ health started to fail at that time. In September of 1922, following a long hospital confinement, he died at the age of 42. During his pastorate he was assisted by another young priest from Ireland, Father Patrick O’Sullivan, who many years later would become third pastor of IC.

The Ellis tradition was to continue, in spite of the founding pastor's death, for another 11 years. His brother, Father John Ellis, succeeded him and served until his own death in October 1933. During Father John Ellis' tenure, in 1930, the parish school was built, staffed by the Holy Cross Nuns, who continue to instruct the youngsters.

Monsignor O'Sullivan, who died last January, succeeded Father John Ellis in 1933. When failing health occasioned his being appointed pastor emeritus in 1958, Monsignor Kirby, then diocesan Chancellor, was appointed fourth pastor.

Through the years a host of parishes have been erected, stemming out of territory once claimed by Immaculate Conception. To name a few, there are Sacred Heart, St Rose, All Hallows, Holy Spirit; in more recent years, St Mary, St Peter and St Robert. Little wonder the priests used the term "Metropolitan."



Photo by John E Boll 2011

The Interior of Immaculate Conception Church, Sacramento