

# SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

Vol 3

Father John E Boll, Diocesan Archives

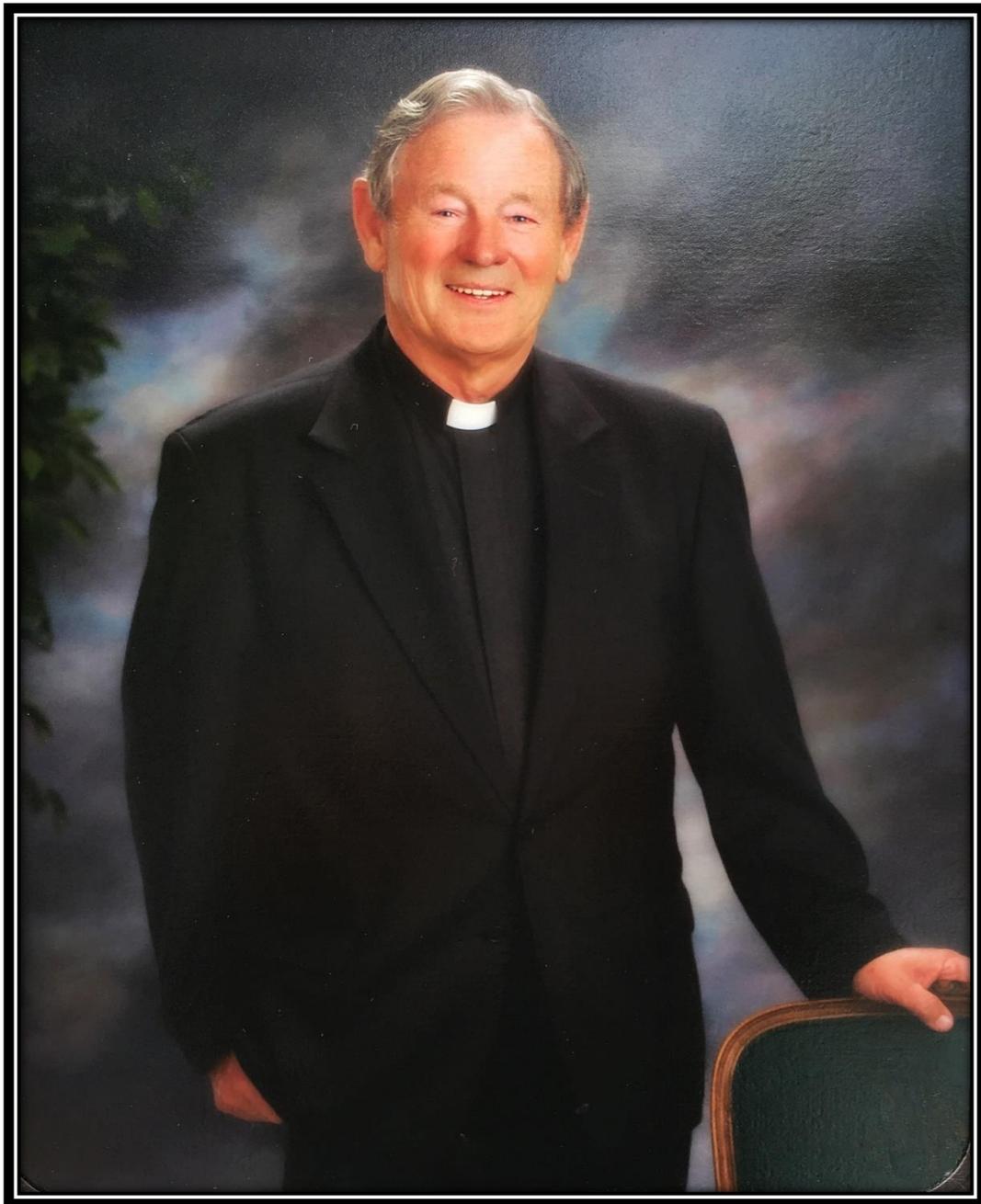
No 32

## *Father Michael Joseph Dilson*

Native Son of Limerick, Ireland

Priest of the Diocese of Sacramento

Pastor Emeritus of SS Peter and Paul Parish, Rocklin, California



**Michael Joseph Dillon was born on July 16, 1936** in Bedford Row Hospital, Limerick, Ireland, the fourth of five children born to Thomas Dillon and Mary Hannon. Michael's sisters and brothers are Carmel, Joan, Paddy and Thomas.

### Thomas and Mary Dillon



### MICHAEL'S EARLY YEARS

Michael grew up on the dairy farm four miles outside Limerick City. From the beginning, he was always fascinated by nature and the changing of seasons. Nature spoke to him of the beauty of creation and how it reflected the beauty of God.

Everyone in the family together with the hired hands were involved in farming.

### THE WAR YEARS IN THE 1940s

Michael grew up during the 1940s when World War II had a dramatic impact on Ireland even though it was neutral during the war. One of the big effects was the lack of gasoline or oil because

ships transporting oil were endangered of being torpedoed by the Germans. Consequently, the only means of transport were bus, bike or horse.

Many foods purchased from stores were rationed and very limited - butter, sugar, flour, oil. Growing up on the farm enabled the family to grow vegetables and with the surplus they could share it with the workers. In the inner cities, many people experienced serious shortages of food. Those who had extra food shared it with the less fortunate.

Many Irishmen joined the British Army and received a salary even if they did not understand what the war was about. If an Irishman who joined the Army was killed in action, his wife would receive a pension from the British Government.



Father Dillon's  
First Holy Eucharist Day

The Dillon family lived 600 yards from the parish church of Monaleen, Castletroy, Limerick. During Michael's youth, everyone, yes everyone, walked to Mass on Sundays. The Irish attended all the

devotions during the liturgical year and always identified themselves with their parish and the county in which they were born.

### **MICHAEL'S SCHOOL YEARS**



Michael attend grammar school at Monaleen just up the road from the family farm. The school was public but run by the parish. At the age of 14, he began secondary school at **Saint Munchin College**. All secondary schools in Ireland were called colleges. The college was staffed by diocesan priests.

This was an enjoyable time for him. He played handball and hurling with his friends. School was held six days a week with class ending at 1 pm on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

### **THE IDEA OF PRIESTHOOD**

The idea of priesthood did not enter Michael's mind until he was about 17. When he was 16, his mother asked him if he would attend daily Mass during Advent. Daily Mass was held at 8 am and school began at 9:30. Michael attended Mass that Advent and after Christmas he continued going to daily Mass. It was during this time that the idea of priesthood began to grow in his mind. He had the idea that he would go on mission to Africa. That seed, he says, was planted by magazine articles about priests working in Africa. Priesthood was held in high regarded by family and society at that time. The priestly life was considered a meaningful and worthwhile profession.

### **MICHAEL ENTERS THE SEMINARY**

At the end of secondary school, Father O'Brien, the school principal, met with each graduating student. When Michael mentioned to the principal that he was planning to join either the Kiltegan or Columban Fathers, Father O'Brien paused for a while and suggested to Michael - why not consider the Diocese of Limerick, his own diocese. Michael's desire was to go foreign and Father O'Brien suggested the English speaking missions rather than Africa. As a consequence, he entered Saint Patrick College, Thurles which prepared priests for the English-speaking world.

### **SAINT PATRICK COLLEGE, THURLES**



Initially, Michael's experience of seminary life was the loss of freedom, especially weekends. For him, there was very little difference between the weekdays and the weekends. Adjusting to the fact that Saturday was no different than Friday was difficult for him.

Photo from the web

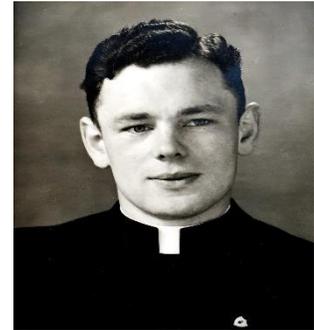
**St Patrick Seminary, Thurles**

## MEMORIES OF THE SEMINARY ARE FADING

Michael's memories of his time in the seminary are fading. He spent six years at Thurles. In his first year in the seminary he was to decide what diocese he would apply for but in reality the rector of the seminary more or less made the decision. On the day of final reckoning, the rector gave Michael a choice of Camden, New Jersey or Sacramento, California. Michael chose Sacramento and has never regretted that decision.

## SEMINARY LIFE

In Irish seminaries of that time, there was very little contact between seminarians and professors. If a seminarian met a professor in the hallway, no greeting was given nor acknowledgment made. In class, the professor would always address each student formally, like Mister Dillon. The form of instruction was lecture and no student ever dared to question the professor about what was said.



Young Michael Dillon

## A HIERARCHY FEARFUL OF CHANGE

After the Pope was declared to be infallible in the area of faith and morals by the Council Fathers of the First Vatican Council in 1870, the common belief held by the hierarchy, clergy and people was that since the Pope was infallible, there would never again be a need for an Ecumenical Council. What a shock it was when in January 1959 Pope John XXIII declared his intention to call an Ecumenical Council and open the windows of the church to let in some fresh air. As a consequence, there were bishops and priests who never embraced the teachings of Vatican II nor the idea of theological growth or praxis.



White-clad prelates walk into St. Peter's Basilica on Oct. 11, 1962, to open the Second Vatican Council.

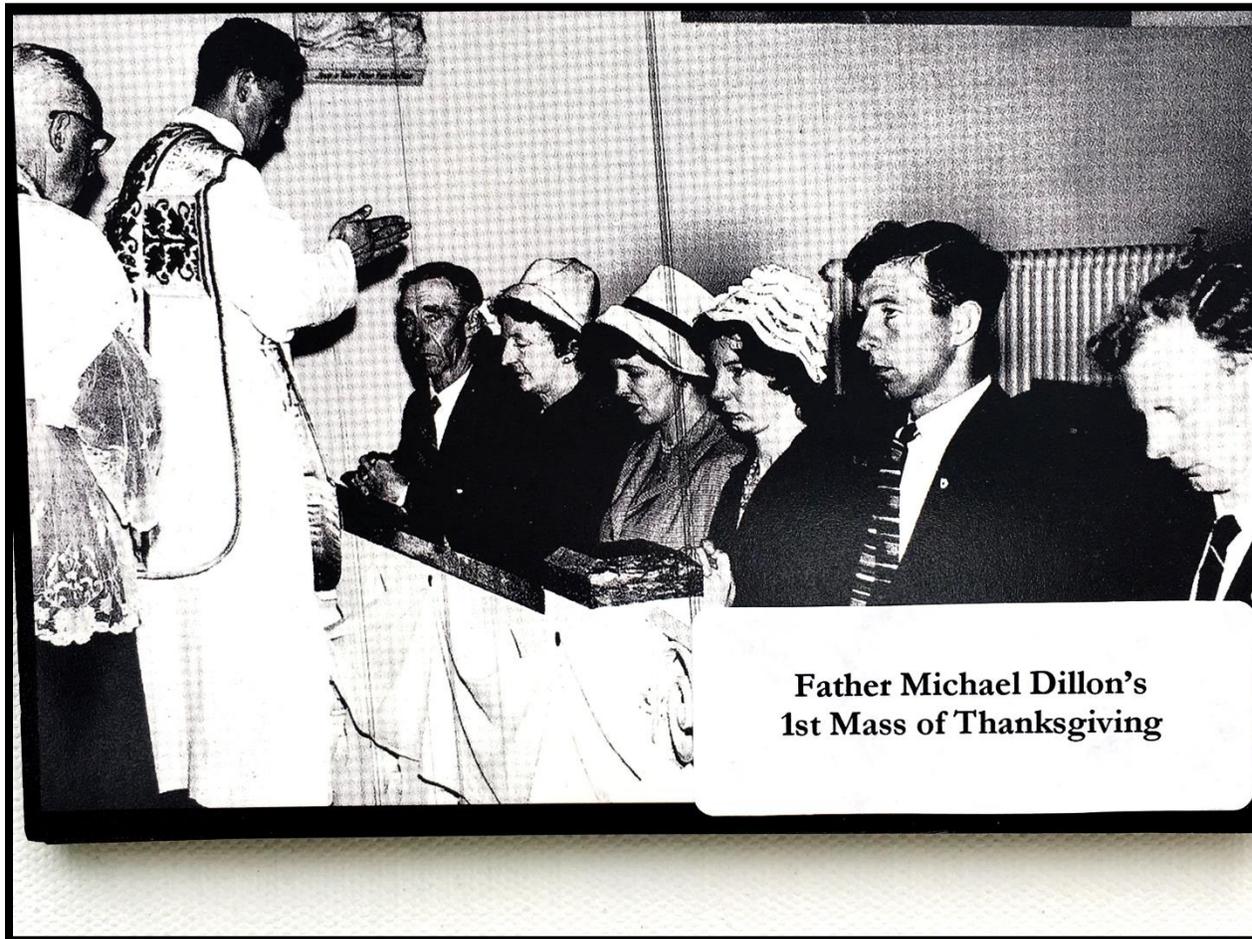
—AP/Cooyright Bettmann/Corbis

## The Beginning of the Second Vatican Council, October 11, 1962

Change was almost impossible for many because they longed for a stable and static church. Today we find in the church a struggle between progressive and conservative mindsets which causes

conflict and division. This is evident in the Vatican itself as Pope Francis calls for reform and the Curia resists with all its might. After Vatican II, the newly established National Conferences of bishops were given the freedom and responsibility to make decisions for their own countries but the powerful Curia quickly revoked that power and responsibility.

### **MICHAEL DILLON ORDAINED A PRIEST**



Michael Dillon was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Sacramento on June 11, 1961 in Our Lady of the Assumption Cathedral in Thurles, County Tipperary, Ireland. On September 11, he boarded the *SS America* and sailed from Ireland to New York. There were 7 priests who sailed on that ship for ministry in the Diocese of Sacramento. He arrived at the San Francisco Airport in late September and was met by Father John Hannan and Father John Burke.

### **FIRST ASSIGNMENTS**

Ten days after his arrival in Sacramento, Father Michael was given his first appointment to Sacred Heart Church, 39<sup>th</sup> and J Street, as assistant to Monsignor Gerald O'Driscoll where he served for the next five years.

In 1966, he was appointed assistant to Father Andrew Coffey at Saint James Parish in Davis where he served until 1971.

From 1971 to 1974, Bishop Alden Bell assigned Father Michael to Saint Joseph Parish in North Sacramento as assistant to Monsignor Patrick McTague.

### **NAMED PASTOR OF RED BLUFF**

In 1974, Father Dillon was appointed pastor of Sacred Heart Parish in Red Bluff where he served for seven years until 1981. He loved his first pastorate and the people of Red Bluff.

In 1981, Bishop Francis Quinn appointed Father Michael as founding pastor of Saints Peter and Paul Parish in Rocklin where he served for 28 years until his retirement in 2009.

### **REFLECTING ON HIS ASSIGNMENTS**

Reflecting on his various appointments, Father Dillon says that every parish is different and each parish has a character of its own. Very often, that sense of identity can be tied to the pastor and the priests serving that parish. It is only in retirement that he has become so aware of the importance of the relationship of the pastor to his people.

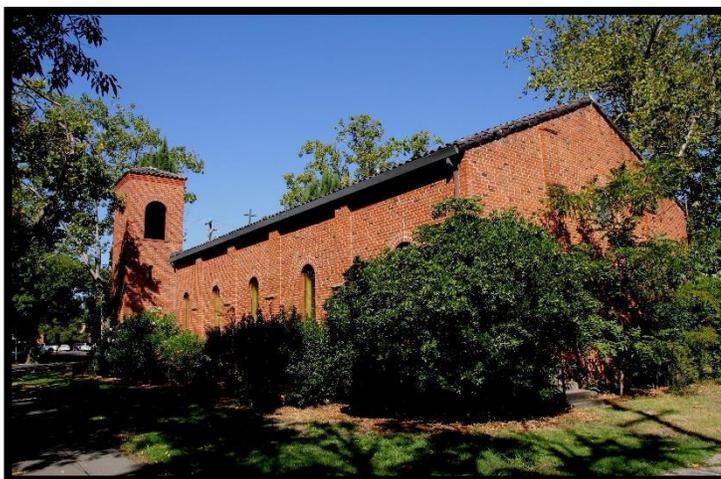
### **SACRED HEART CHURCH**



For him, Sacred Heart parish was like a halfway house between the seminary and actual parish life. It facilitated his transition from a structured seminary life to parish life. Sacred Heart Parish was a very stable and structured parish. He knew what was expected of him and the way of life there was very settled. This was, of course, prior to the Second Vatican Council.

### **SAINT JAMES PARISH**

Saint James Parish in Davis was a very different parish when he went there in 1966. The Vietnam War was very controversial. The changes called for by Vatican II, especially in liturgy, caused a lot of struggle and controversy. This was the beginning of parish councils, liturgy committees, school boards and finance committees. It was a time of rediscovery of the call and mission of all the baptized to share in the ministry of Christ, priest, prophet and shepherd.



Michael found the Davis years to be a time of great personal growth for himself. He left Davis with more questions than answers and began to believe then as he does now that faith is a personal journey for each person. He says he was a very different person leaving Davis than when he arrived.

### **SAINT JOSEPH PARISH, SACRAMENTO**

His three years at Saint Joseph Parish were very enjoyable and happy. The people of the parish were welcoming and appreciative of everything the priests did for them. The pastor, Monsignor Patrick McTague, was dedicated but all the changes in the church were quite a challenge for him. Father Pat Leslie was the fellow assistant and he devoted much of his time to youth and soccer.



### **NAMED PASTOR OF SACRED HEART PARISH, RED BLUFF**



### **Sacred Heart Church, Red Bluff**

Father Healy transferred to Mercy Hospital as chaplain and succeeding him in Red Bluff was Father Michael Canny, just arrived from Ireland. Father Dillon enjoyed the challenge of being the pastor of Red Bluff and believes the age of 38 to 45 is probably the best years in one's life. A person at that age has gained some wisdom from past experiences and has sufficient energy to accomplish things. Being pastor for the first time granted him a great sense of responsibility and without responsibility one does not grow.

Monsignor James Casey retired as pastor of Red Bluff and Father Dillon was named his successor. After six months, Monsignor Casey moved to Dunsmuir to serve as parochial administrator for the next five years after the sudden death of his good friend Father James Vaughn.

Father John Healy was the assistant pastor at the Red Bluff parish at the time. Father Dillon's first impression of Sacred Heart parish was the beauty of the parish liturgy. Monsignor Casey and Father Healy embraced the liturgical changes of Vatican II. All things considered, it was a very active parish. There was a Catholic grammar school, high school, hospital and retirement center. For a town of 15,000, the Red Bluff community had a very strong Catholic presence and influence.

## **FOUNDING PASTOR OF SS PETER AND PAUL PARISH**

On May 1, 1981, Father Dillon was appointed pastor of the newly established parish in Rocklin. In the parish was Saint Mary's Church, dedicated in 1883 by Archbishop Alemany of San Francisco, which seated approximately 80 people. That became the place where the Catholic community gathered for the liturgy. When he arrived in Rocklin, Father Michael lived at Saint Rose Parish rectory in Roseville and enjoyed the hospitality of Monsignor James Corcoran and his successor, Father Michael Cormack and parochial vicar Father Desmond McGlade.



Photo by John E Boll

**Saint Mary's Church, Rocklin**

## **THE WORK OF ESTABLISHING THE PARISH BEGINS**

After four months, Father Dillon moved to a rented house in Rocklin and began the serious search for property. By February 1982, the parish purchased land on Granite Drive for \$370,000. A month later, the parish hired the Reynolds Johnson firm to oversee a capital campaign. The parish council decided that what the parish built first depended on the amount of money raised. The parish was grateful to Saint Rose parish for its financial contribution to the new parish.

The policy of the diocese at that time was a parish could only borrow as much money as the parish possessed or had in pledges. The parish borrowed one million dollars from the diocese and on Christmas Eve 1983, Mass was celebrated for the first time in the new church.

The total cost of the church was \$1,750,000. The church itself cost one million dollars and the infrastructure cost \$750,000.



Photo by John E Boll

### SS Peter and Paul Church

As the parish community grew, the site for Sunday Mass was moved from Saint Mary Church to Parker-Whitney School in Rocklin. It was a lot of work setting up for the liturgy every weekend. By the time the community moved into the new church, everyone knew one another.



### THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PARISH CONTINUED

In subsequent years, the rectory was built in 1985, mostly with volunteer help, at a cost of \$85,000. The parish added the religious education center and library in 1991 at a cost \$800,000.



Photo by John E Boll

### **Parish Priest's Residence**

Around 2001, the parish added other buildings, classrooms and youth center, a multipurpose room, storage facility and parish offices. The cost of those buildings was a couple of million dollars.



Photo by John E Boll

### **Parish Education Center**

#### **THE SS PETER AND PAUL EXPERIENCE**

Father Mike says that from the beginning the parish supported the notion of stewardship but circumstances demanded that the parish begin with a capital fund drive to build the first building.

“After borrowing one million dollars in 1981, we never again borrowed a single dollar. As we added each new building, we always had the cash on hand to pay for it,” said Father Michael. He is forever grateful for the generosity of the people of the parish. He never preached about money, only expressed his gratitude to the people for their generosity at the end of each year. For him personally, it was an extraordinary experience that the parish was able to build all its buildings without him having to request money from the parishioners. The people accepted the notion of stewardship, the willingness to share their time, talent and treasure.

### **ADULT EDUCATION WAS A CENTRAL FOCUS**

As pastor of a new parish, Father Mike’s greatest ambition was to devote time and energy to adult education. One of the responsibilities he enjoyed most as a priest was teaching classes for youth, adults and parents. He always enjoyed teaching and preaching. Parish adult education classes would bring 250 people to the parish regularly. As the years passed, the parish hired a director of adult education.

### **WHY THE PARISH DID NOT BUILD A SCHOOL**

Due to the closeness of a lumber mill, the Environmental Protection Agency forbade a school to be built within a thousand yards of the mill. Because of that regulation, a parish school could not be considered at that time. Since then, all industry in the area of the parish ceased.



Photo by John E Boll

**Parish Education Center**

### **RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OF PARISH CHILDREN**

The number of children attending religious formation in the parish reached 1000 students. The number of registered parish families in 2009 reached 3000. At Christmas and Easter liturgies, the congregation swelled to 6000 people.

### **MOST IMPORTANT AREAS FOR FATHER DILLON**

What is most important for Father Michael is the Sunday liturgy. Every aspect of the liturgy is so important - the facilities, the parking lot, welcoming at the door, the grounds, the ushers, the music, the sound system in the church, the readers, the homilist, the presider and the whole environment. He says that for 90% of people, this is their one hour of contact with their church and their faith. He always tried to make it the best hour of the week for them.

Father Mike says that as Catholics, we have very little educational opportunities apart from the Sunday homily. We find in American society that politics has more influence on one's values than the church. As a result, we do not have Catholic Republicans and Catholic Democrats but rather Republican Catholic and Democrat Catholics.

### **PAROCHIAL VICARS**

During Father Michael's three decades of ministry in Rocklin, it was only after 25 years of ministry was he assigned a parochial vicar, Father Joel Genabia, for two year and Father Glenn Jaron for one year.



**Newly Ordained Priests Fathers David O'Shea, Michael Dillon, Christy O'Connor & Liam Storan**

# St. Patrick's College, Thurles Ordination Class 1961



REV. EAMONN PURCELL  
CASHEL



REV. JAMES COSTELLO  
SOUTHWARK



REV. NEIL O'DWYER  
LOS ANGELES



REV. JOHN C. O'CONNOR  
LOS ANGELES



REV. MICHAEL DILLON  
SACRAMENTO



REV. PATRICK KEANE  
AUCKLAND



REV. THOMAS O'GARA  
DULUTH



REV. LIAM STORAN  
SACRAMENTO



REV. GERARD SMYTH  
MIDDLESBROUGH



REV. LIAM HOULIHAN  
SALFORD



REV. DAVID O'SHEA  
ST. AUGUSTINE



REV. DAVID REA  
SOUTHWARK



REV. FRANCIS DUANE  
NORTHAMPTON



REV. MAURICE MORAN  
SALT LAKE CITY



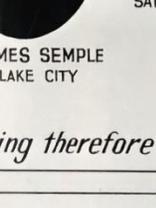
REV. DAVID O'SHEA  
ST. AUGUSTINE



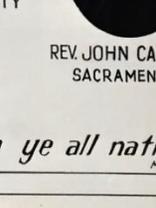
REV. DENIS BURKE  
S. C. A.



REV. MICHAEL O'DWYER  
S. C. A.



REV. JAMES SEMPLE  
SALT LAKE CITY



REV. JOHN CARROLL  
SACRAMENTO

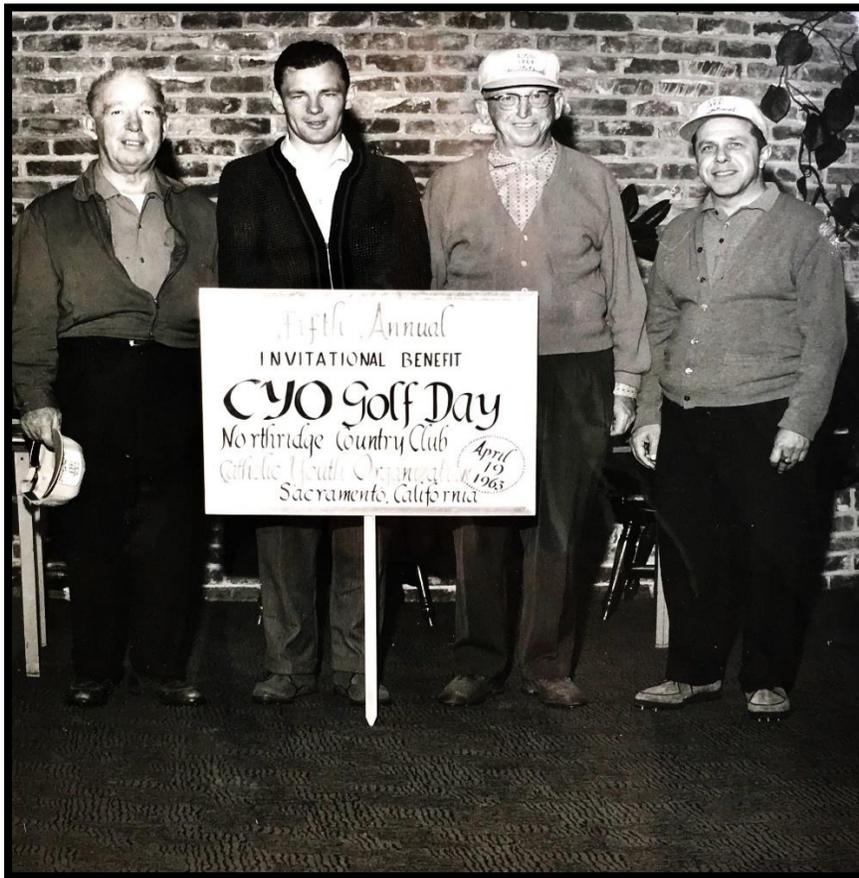


REV. MICHAEL COEN  
S. C. A.

*"Going therefore teach ye all nations"*  
Math. 28-19

*Lafayette Dublin*

**Father Dillon's 1961 Ordination Class  
Saint Patrick College, Thurles, Ireland**



**CYO Golf Day, Father Mike with Monsignor McTague, Roger Slakey and a friend**

#### **ARCHIVIST'S COMMENT**

Father Michael Dillon, born into a farming family outside Limerick City in Ireland, grew up to become a priest imbued with the spirit of Vatican II. His original desire was to be a missionary priest in Africa but his destiny was to be a priest of the Diocese of Sacramento in California.

His first three parish assignments in the Sacramento diocese challenged him to go deeper in his vision of the Christian faith. Each assignment and experience enabled him to refine his vision of what kind of pastor he would be. He developed the same vision as our present Pope Francis, namely, that a priest must journey with his people, sharing in their grief and pain, their joy and hope.

Father Mike was blessed with an outgoing personality, a gift of gab, a keen mind and a fearless spirit. He saw that education of the people was the key for them to understand and live their faith. He realized that the Sunday liturgy was the moment of the week when his community came together to be nourished by God's word and sacrament. He did all he could to make their liturgical experience prayerful, thoughtful, hopeful and joyful. That is why the parish developed into a spiritual center for the Rocklin community.

It was a joy for me to spend time with Father Mike to hear his story of ministry and growth. Although he is 80 years of age, his spirit is still young and vigorous. The Diocese of Sacramento

has been blessed to have the presence and ministry of Father Dillon for over a half century. Thank you, Michael, for the good you have done for so many of God's people in the Church of Sacramento. We wish you every blessing as together we continue the journey toward the joy and peace of the Kingdom of God.

## *Ad Multos Annos!*



**Painting of Saint Mary Magdalene Church  
Where Father Michael Dillon was baptized**



*Father Michael J Dillon*  
*2017*



Father Dillon has given permission for his biography to be published by the Sacramento Diocesan Archives.