

# SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

Vol 5

Father John E Boll

No 65

## *Father Thomas B Bracken*

Native of Saint Louis, Missouri  
Priest of the Diocese of Sacramento

February 23, 1905 – August 15, 1970



**Thomas B Bracken**, son of John Henry Bracken and Kathryn Hart, was born on February 23, 1905 in Saint Louis, Missouri.

### BEGINS HIS EDUCATION



**Phillips Academy in Andover**

In 1910 at the age of 5, Thomas began his primary education in La Grange, Illinois until graduation in 1917. During his grammar school years, it became clear that Tom had a brilliant mind and his parents wanted him to have every opportunity to develop his mind.

For high school, Thomas attended two different schools, Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts and then Chicago Latin School. These two high schools were prestigious and enabled its students to advance to and compete in the best colleges of the nation.

The Chicago Latin High School was designed to provide students with a rigorous college preparatory education in the classical tradition which included the study of the Greek and Latin languages.

Because Tom had academic potential, his parents gave him every opportunity to excel in life.



**Chicago Latin School**

### UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA



Photo from the University of Virginia Website

**University of Virginia**



After graduating from high school, Tom was accepted by the University of Virginia in Charlottesville in 1927. This university was founded in 1819 by Thomas Jefferson and is the only University in America designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. He spent his first two years of college at the University of Virginia and then decided to enter the seminary to begin studies for the priesthood.

### **SAINT THOMAS SEMINARY, DENVER**

In 1929, Tom entered Saint Thomas Seminary in Denver, Colorado to begin his studies for the priesthood. He spent his last two years of college at Saint Thomas Seminary and completed his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1931.



Photo from St Thomas Website

### **Saint Thomas Seminary, Denver**

#### **STUDIES IN ROME**

Since Tom had a keen mind, he became a candidate for studies in Rome where he would do his theological training at the University of the Propagation of the Faith and the Jesuit *Universita Gregoriana* from 1931 to 1935 where he earned his Bachelor Degree in Sacred Theology.

#### **ORDAINED A PRIEST FOR THE DIOCESE OF SACRAMENTO**

Thomas B Bracken was ordained a priest in Rome on December 8, 1934 by Archbishop Palicca for the Diocese of Sacramento.

### **FATHER BRACKEN BEGINS HIS LIFE OF MINISTRY**

Father Bracken arrived in Sacramento in the summer of 1935 to begin his ministry in the Diocese of Sacramento. Bishop Robert Armstrong assigned him to Saint Patrick Church in Angels Camp as assistant pastor in July 1935. This appointment was for only one year.



Photo from St Patrick Parish Website

### **Saint Patrick Church, Angels Camp, CA**

In 1936, he was assigned to Holy Rosary Parish in Woodland where he worked for two years with Father Michael Gaffney, pastor, until November 1938.



Photo from Diocesan Archives

### **Holy Rosary Church, Woodland**



### **APPOINTED SECRETARY TO THE BISHOP**

In 1938, Bishop Armstrong chose Father Bracken to be his secretary in the Bishop's Office. He resided with the bishop at the bishop's residence which was a Victorian house located on Capital Avenue in Sacramento.

According to diocesan records, Father Bracken served as Secretary to the Bishop for two years, 1938 to 1940. He was then appointed assistant pastor of Saint Joseph Parish in Auburn for one year.



**Bishop Robert Armstrong**

### **ARMY CHAPLAIN DURING WORLD WAR II**

In 1941, Father Bracken received permission from Bishop Armstrong to serve as a Catholic chaplain in the US Army during World War II. He served as Army chaplain from March 1941 to February 1946. It appears that these five years in the US Army during WWII were his most productive years of ministry since this was his longest assignment in his priestly life.

Serving as Army chaplain during the height of WWII must have taken a great toll on Father Bracken. Father James McKnight who was assigned to the Cathedral from 1959 to 1962, knew Father Bracken well and he says Father Bracken never spoke about his war experiences. Perhaps the traumas of the war caused Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Father Bracken long before anyone knew about this condition.



Photo from the Diocesan Archives

**Father Bracken with the American Army in Winnemucca, NV**



Photo from the Diocesan Archives

### **Father Bracken Celebrates Mass in Alaska for the US Troops**

#### **RETURNS TO SACRAMENTO**

After serving in the Army for five years during WWII, Father Bracken returned to Sacramento in 1946. Bishop Armstrong appointed him pastor of Saint Paul Parish in Knights Landing where he served for just one year.



**Saint Paul Church, Knights Landing**



### **NAMED PASTOR OF CRESCENT CITY**

After a year in Knights Landing, Bishop Armstrong appointed Father Bracken pastor of Saint Joseph Parish in Crescent City, Del Norte County, one of the most remote parishes in the Diocese of Sacramento. Father Bracken served the Crescent City parish from 1947 to 1950.



Photo by John E Boll

### **Saint Joseph Church, Crescent City, CA**

### **FINAL PARISH, COLFAX**

In 1950, Father Bracken was appointed to his last pastorate, Saint Dominic Parish in Colfax. He served as pastor of this parish for only two years and in 1952, at the age of 47, he retired from ministry and returned to the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament where he lived in residence for the rest of his life.

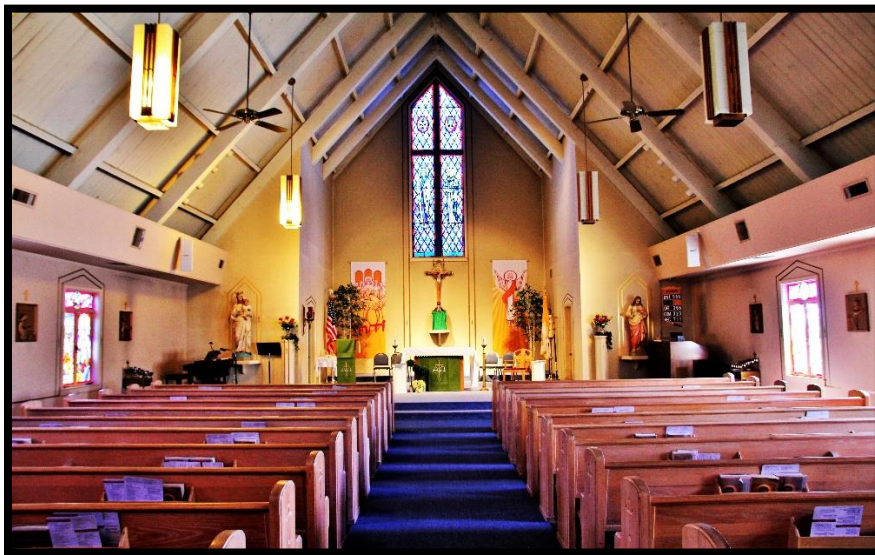


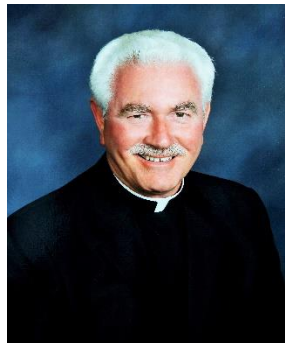
Photo by John E Boll

### **Saint Dominic Church, Colfax**

## **LIFE IN RETIREMENT**

Father Bracken lived in retirement at the Cathedral rectory for 18 years. For most of those years, Monsignor Raymond Renwald was pastor of the Cathedral.

## **PERSONAL REFLECTION**



I first met Father Bracken in 1969 when I was assigned to the Cathedral for my pastoral year which was also my diaconate year. I would visit Father Tom often during that year. After my ordination on May 23, 1970, I was appointed parochial vicar of the Cathedral for the next three years.

On the evening of August 14, 1970, during the evening dinner in the Cathedral rectory, Father Tom called from his quarters on the second floor to the kitchen on the lower level of the rectory asking to speak to me. I went to the kitchen to talk to him by phone and he asked me to come and help him get to his bed because he was unable to walk that night. After dinner I went to his room and had to pick him up and carry him to his bed and help him prepare for his night's rest.

The next morning was the Feast of the Assumption and I celebrated the 8 AM Mass in the basement of the Cathedral where Masses were celebrated during the renovation. After Mass, I spoke with Father Rolf, Rector of the Cathedral, about Father Bracken's condition and he immediately went to check on Father Tom and found him dead in his bed. Father Rolf and I offered the Church's prayers for the dead, commending the soul of Father Bracken to the loving mercy of God.

## **FUNERAL MASS FOR FATHER BRACKEN**

Because the Cathedral was in the middle of a major renovation at the time of Father Bracken's death, his Funeral Mass was celebrated at Sacred Heart Church in Sacramento. Bishop Alden J Bell was the principal celebrant assisted by vested concelebrants Monsignors Raymond Renwald, Cornelius P Higgins, James D Poole, Fathers Raymond C Rolf, Leo McAllister, and James McKnight.

Monsignor Renwald was the homilist at the Funeral Mass and shared some humorous stories about Father Bracken in the light of our Christian hope that through the resurrection of Jesus, the Anointed One of the Father, He who draws all things to Himself, may present Father Tom to His Heavenly Father.





Photo by John E Boll

### **Priests' Section, Saint Mary Cemetery, Sacramento**

After the Funeral Mass, the body of Father Bracken was taken in procession for burial by W F Gormley Funeral Home to the Priests' Section of Saint Mary Cemetery to await the resurrection of the dead and eternal life in the Trinitarian life of God forever.

#### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

One of the memorable lines of Saint Augustine is this: "O Lord, our hearts will not rest until they rest in you." All human beings are hard-wired by God Himself to be in union with God and the fulfillment of this longing for Divine Communion is what human life is all about. Father Bracken who had his share of personal struggles in life is now free of all earthly cares as he comes into the joyful presence of God who has loved him from all eternity.

Perhaps Father Tom's life did not unfold as he had hoped or expected, but the Lord is kind and merciful and writes straight with crooked lines. Our task is to surrender ourselves to the loving will of our Father in Heaven who wants only what is best for us. With faith and confidence in the loving mercy of God, let us lift our voices and sing:

*Saints of God, come to his aid, come to meet him  
Angels of the Lord. Receive his soul and present him to  
God the Most High."*





Photo by John E Boll

**Father Bracken's Headstone, Saint Mary Cemetery, Sacramento**

*Lord God, Father of the living and the dead,  
Bring your servant and priest Thomas into the  
Light and joy of your Glorious Presence where he may be embraced  
In Your Love for all eternity.*

*Cleanse him and fill him with Your Eternal Joy and Peace  
As he enters the Holy of Holies of your Divine Love.  
May he rest now from all his labors and be at peace.*

*May his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed,  
Through the Mercy of God, rest in peace.*

*Amen*