

SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

Vol 5

Father John E Boll

No 76

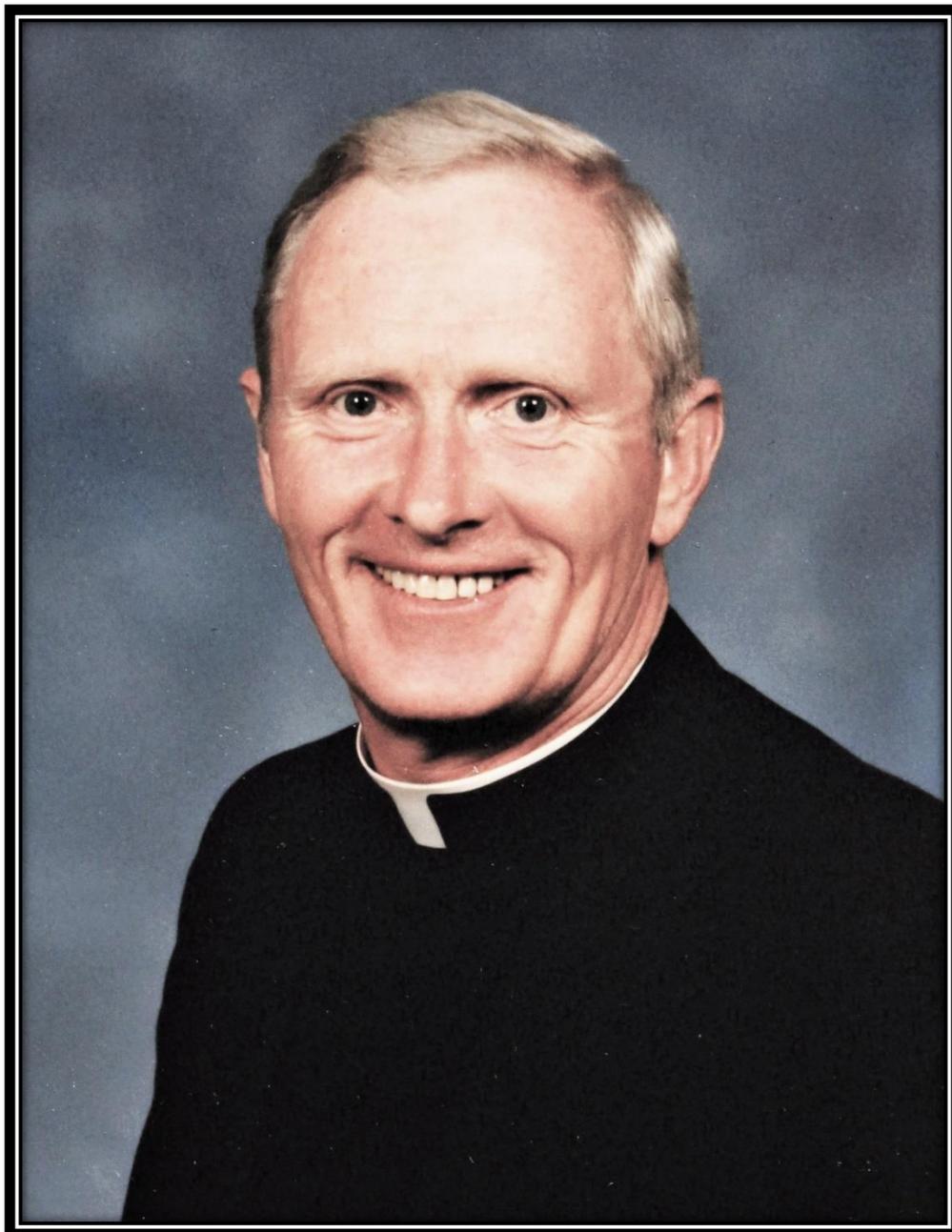
Father Denis Patrick Keaney

Native of Manorhamilton, County Leitrim, Ireland

Priest of the Diocese of Sacramento

Chaplain, Folsom State Prison, Folsom, California

January 2, 1934 – December 30, 2001



Denis Patrick Keaney, son of Patrick Keaney and Mary Mawn, was born on January 2, 1934 in Manorhamilton, County Leitrim, Ireland. Two days after his birth, he was baptized in the parish church of Manorhamilton. Denis was the second of six children born in the Keaney family. The children are, in order of birth, Larry, Denis, Jim, Mary Philomena, Tom and Bridie.

BEGINS HIS EDUCATION

In 1940 at the age of six, Denis began his primary education at Cornamon Elementary School for three years until 1943 when he transferred to Cullentra Elementary School from 1943 to 1948. He then began high school at Saint Patrick College in Cavan from 1948 to 1954.

SAINT JOHN COLLEGE, WATERFORD

In 1954, Denis transferred to Saint John College Seminary in Waterford to begin his theological training. He spent the next six years in Waterford where he completed his theological studies in 1961. The Diocese of Sacramento incardinated Denis in 1957 in preparation for his ordination.



Photo from the Web

Saint John Seminary, Waterford, Ireland

ORDAINED A PRIEST

Denis Patrick Keaney was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Sacramento on June 18, 1961 in the Cathedral of the Most Holy Trinity, Waterford, by Bishop Daniel Coholan. After spending

some time with his family, Father Denis began his journey westward from Ireland to his new home in the Diocese of Sacramento in Northern California.



Photo from the Web

**Cathedral of the Most Holy Trinity, Waterford, Ireland
Where Father Denis P Keaney was ordained a Priest**

FATHER KEANEY RECEIVES HIS FIRST ASSIGNMENT

When Father Keaney arrived in Sacramento at the beginning of October 1961, Bishop Joseph T McGucken, Bishop of Sacramento, assigned him as assistant pastor of Saint Rose Parish in Sacramento on October 7, 1961. The pastor of Saint Rose Parish was Father Carroll Lawsen who died eight months later on June 21, 1962. Succeeding Father Lawsen as pastor of Saint Rose Parish was Father Edward Kavanagh. Father Keaney served Saint Rose Parish for 18 months until April 19, 1963.



Saint Rose Church, Sacramento

SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST PARISH, SACRAMENTO

On April 4, 1963, Father Dennis was given a new assignment as assistant pastor of Saint John the Evangelist Church in Carmichael. This parish had been established only three years before in 1960 by Father James Kenny as the founding pastor. Father Denis served this parish for four years until September 15, 1967.

APPOINTED CHAPLAIN OF THE CALIFORNIA CONSERVATION CENTER

Father Denis was next appointed to the California Conservation Center (CCC) in Susanville on September 15, 1967.

The mission of the Conservation Center was to receive, house and train minimum-security inmates for placement into one of the institution's 18 Northern California Conservation Camps which worked collaboratively with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. These camps were strategically located throughout the north state to provide fire suppression hand crews, as well as an organized labor force for public conservation.

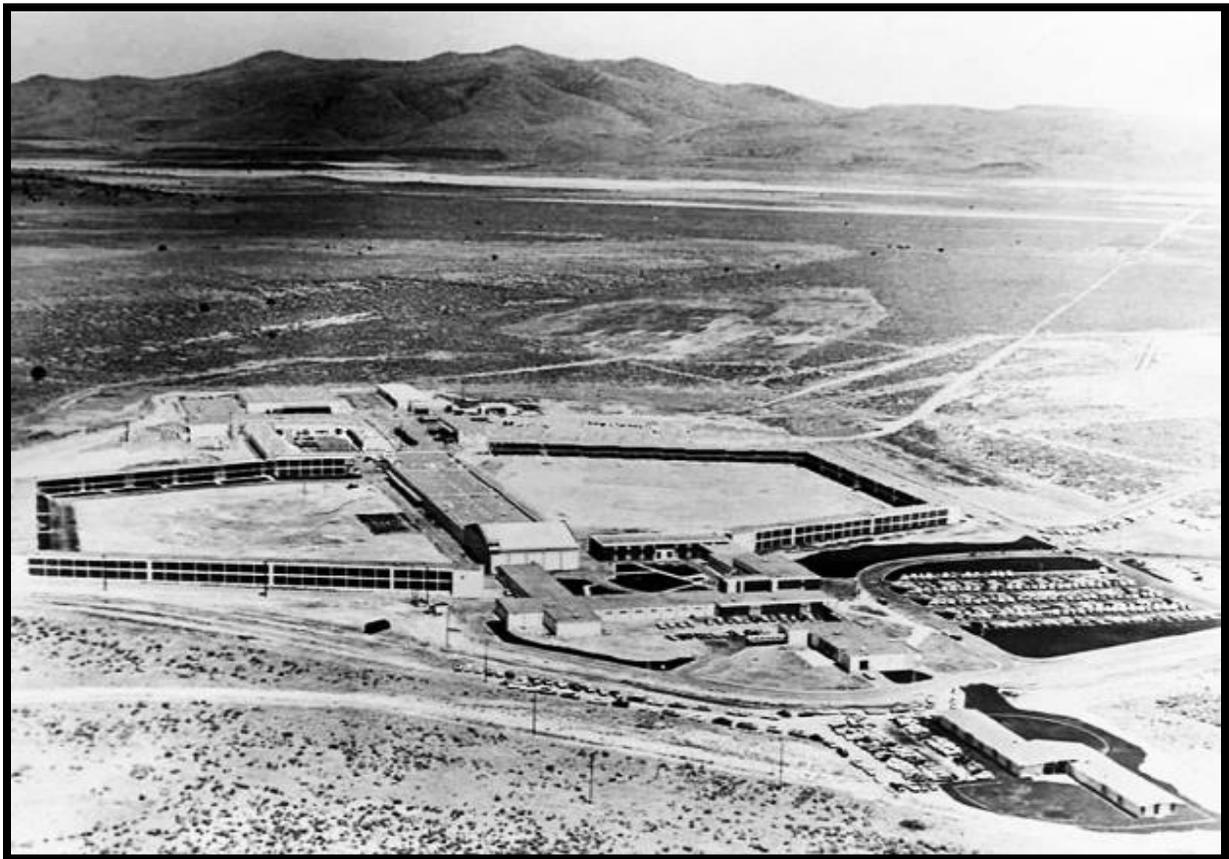


Photo from the CCC Website

California Conservation Center, Susanville, in 1963

Father Denis was a strong, good looking, outgoing and popular priest in this prison ministry. He enjoyed his ministry in the prison but his first love would have been to serve as a military chaplain. He served the CCC ministry in Susanville for four years until October 28, 1971.

APPOINTED CATHOLIC CHAPLAIN AT FOLSOM STATE PRISON

On October 28, 1971, Father Denis began his ministry as Catholic chaplain at Folsom State Prison. He served as the Catholic Chaplain of Folsom State Prison for the next 26 years until he retired from prison ministry on February 28, 1997.

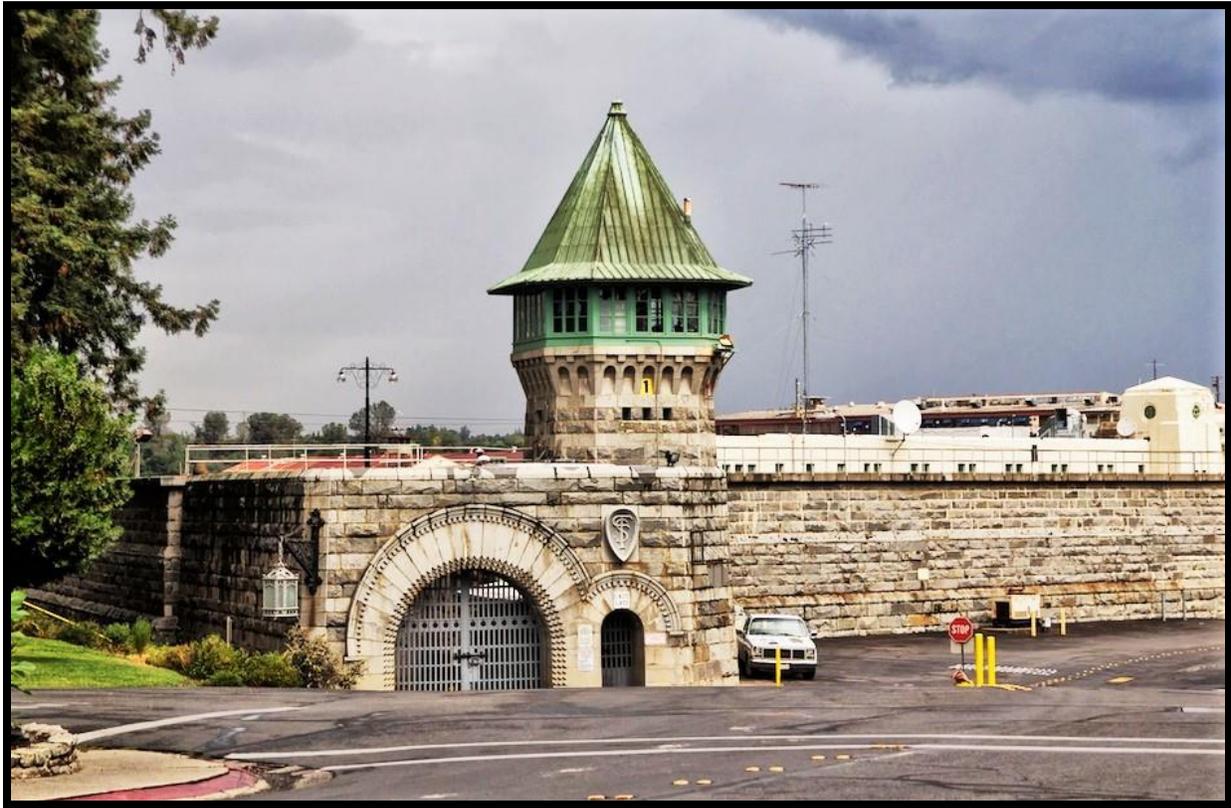


Photo from Folsom State Prison Website

Folsom State Prison where Fr Denis Keaney worked for 26 years as Catholic Chaplain

During his working career at the Folsom State Prison, Father Denis purchased a piece of land in the El Dorado Hills area, and with the help of a friend, he built himself a house on that land which would become his permanent residence for the rest of his life. Since he built the house himself, Father Denis knew where every board had been fitted and every nail pounded into place.

MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL GUARD

In his free time, Father Denis served in the California Army National Guard and trained for long-distance marathon runs. In the 1985 California International Marathon, he finished with a very respectable time of 3:07:29. He served as a chaplain with the National Guard for many years and retired as a lieutenant colonel.

RETIREMENT FOLLOWED BY A NEW MINISTRY

After Father Denis retired from his prison ministry chaplaincy, he wanted to return to parish ministry after being away from it for thirty years. After a year's retirement, Bishop William

Weigand appointed him Parish Administrator Pro-Tem of Saint Patrick Parish in Jackson. Father Denis loved being back in a parish and was thriving as administrator of the parish.

When the pastorate of the Jackson Saint Patrick Parish was advertised for priests to apply for the position, Father Denis applied for the pastorate, hoping that he would be appointed pastor. When the diocese announced the new pastor of Jackson, it was not Father Denis and he was greatly disappointed.

DEATH OF FATHER KEANEY

Father Denis returned to his home in El Dorado Hills and pretty much stayed at home. He was not feeling well and went to his doctor who was a friend and fellow marathon runner. The doctor gave him some medication for his stomach but he was later diagnosed with stage four cancer of the colon.

During the period between 1956 to 1965, the members of the Keaney family began to leave Ireland one by one and settled in the Boston area. The family eventually sold all the animals they owned in Ireland but kept the family home. When the family was informed about Father Denis' medical condition, his younger brother Thomas flew from Boston to Sacramento to take care of his brother Denis. Father Denis very much enjoyed and appreciated his brother's company and help.

Father Denis' mother, Mary Keaney, who also lived in Boston, made the trip to California to be with her son as well. Denis already knew his death was not far off. He decided to fly to Boston for Christmas to be with his whole family. Five days after Christmas on December 30, 2001, Father Denis died in Boston just two days before his 68th birthday on January 2.

W.J. Estelle, Jr, a former associate warden of Folsom Prison, spoke with the Sacramento Bee about Father Denis and said this about him: "Father Keaney was everybody's favorite. He did as much counseling with staff as he did with inmates, but he never neglected his inmate parish. The work he did went way beyond the job description." From these remarks, it is clear that Father Keaney was a dedicated priest who put all his energy into helping anyone who came to him for help.

FUNERAL FOR FATHER KEANEY

Since Father Denis died in Boston, Father Thomas Maguire who succeeded Father Keaney as chaplain at Folsom Prison and was a close friend of Father Denis, flew to Boston to celebrate the Funeral Mass for Father Denis in Saint Brendan Church in Dorchester with burial at Cedar Grove Cemetery in Boston.

A Memorial Mass was also celebrated for Father Denis at Saint John the Baptist Church in Folsom on January 15, 2002. Bishop Weigand presided at this Mass with the priests of the diocese concelebrating. Father Thomas Maguire was the homilist at this Mass as well.

Father Keaney was survived by his mother, Mary Keaney, his three brothers Larry, Jim and Tom and his two sisters, Mary Philomena and Bridie, as well as many nieces and nephews.



Photo taken from the Web

Saint Brendan Catholic Church, Dorchester, MA
Where the Funeral Mass for Father Keaney was celebrated by Father Thomas Maguire



Photo by John E Boll

Saint John the Baptist Church, Folsom

CONCLUDING REMARKS

When Father Denis Keaney arrived in Sacramento in October 1961, this was almost a year to the day before the beginning of the Second Vatican Council which began on October 11, 1962. As a newly ordained priest, he too had to change the way he celebrated Mass by becoming comfortable celebrating Mass facing the people, using English instead of Latin, encouraging parishioners to become more involved in the life of the church and to bear their responsibility of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus to the world.

Father Denis settled into a ministry of serving the spiritual needs of those imprisoned in the California Prison system. Because of his kind, compassionate and understanding manner and personality, he became a favorite among both the prison staff and the prisoners. He counseled both staff and inmates at Folsom Prison. The prison became his parish and he ministered to all who were part of that system. To become “everyone’s favorite” happened only because Father Denis accepted everyone as they were, with compassion and humility. He was a good shepherd to his spiritual family by accompanying them on their journey of life.

Thank you, Father Denis, for being the gentle, compassionate and merciful priest you were to your parishioners. They beheld the compassionate eyes of Jesus when they looked into your eyes of mercy. May you abide now in the joy of the Lord!

