

# SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

Vol 5

Father John E Boll

No 85

## *Father Joseph Mary Huong Xuan Nguyen*

Native of Lúu Phúóng, Phát Diêm, Ninh Bình, North Vietnam

Priest of the Diocese of Sacramento

Pastor of Saint Anne Parish, South Sacramento

October 22, 1946 – July 17, 2021



**Joseph Mary Huong Xuan Nguyen**, son of Nguyen Van Quy and Pham Thi Ngoan, was born in Lúu Phúống, Phát Diêm, Ninh Bình, North Vietnam on October 22, 1946, the firstborn child of seven children born in the Nguyen family.

### **BEGINS SCHOOL IN NORTH VIETNAM**

Joseph began his primary education in North Vietnam in 1953. Then in 1954, the Communist forces in the north of Vietnam took over the region that included Hanoi and the nearly all-Catholic village where Joe and his family lived. His family, along with about a million other North Vietnamese, headed south to Saigon where the family settled. He continued his education in grammar school and high school in Saigon.



Photo from the website for Vietnam

**Rice Fields in North Vietnam**

The Nguyen family enjoyed less than a decade of peace in Saigon before the Communist forces began to invade the southern provinces of Vietnam.



Photo from the Vietnam Website

### Saigon, Vietnam in 2018

#### ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT DIEM



President Ngo Dinh Diem

In 1963, South Vietnam President Ngo Dinh Diem was assassinated in Saigon and this tragic event set into motion a time of chaos throughout Vietnam.

Within a few years after the assassination of President Diem, Joe and thousands of his countrymen joined the US backed Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces fighting against the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese Army.

#### JOE BECOMES A PILOT OF THE ARVN

Joe became a pilot in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam and delivered supplies to ARVN troops, often having to fly low above the dangerous Ho Chi Minh Trail. By the time of the Tet Offensive – a massive onslaught by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army in 1968

– death had become a familiar sight to this young airman, Joseph Huang. “This really broke my heart,” Joe recalled. “I lost many relatives. Every week I had to bury a friend of mine.”

A desire to overcome a sense of powerlessness, Joe said, helped fuel his aspiration to become a priest. One day in the midst of the bloody days of TET, he said, he encountered a South Vietnamese soldier whose foot had been blown off by a land mine. The young man had been left to die. “I wanted to console this soldier and give him hope for the life to come. I said to myself, “Someday, I want to give Communion.”



Photo from Photos of the Vietnam Website

**The TET Offensive shocked Americans into questioning if the Vietnam War could be won**

#### **ESCAPE FROM VIETNAM IN 1975**

As the American Government decided to end its costly involvement in the Vietnam War and as the Viet Cong battled for the defeat of the South, the day of no return came on April 29, 1975, when Joe’s life and the lives of his 37 fellow airmen would change for ever.

Joe and his fellow Army soldiers of the Republic of Vietnam stayed in an underground tunnel through the early hours of what became the fall of Saigon. He convinced the others to join him as they fled through a hail of rocket fire to an EC-47 plane so they could escape from Vietnam to a place of safety.



Photo from EC-47 air plane from the web

### **Joseph Huang Nguyen and Crew Escape from Saigon in an EC-47 Airplane**

As the plane started down the runway, the Viet Cong attempted to shoot the plane down, but by the sheer grace of God, no rockets hit the plane as they soared into the air and headed for Laos without any maps to guide them. Joe safely landed the plane in Laos where he and his crew were ready to begin the next chapter of their lives.

#### **JOE ARRIVES IN CALIFORNIA**

After Joe arrived in California as a refugee from Vietnam, he was sent to the former state-owned DeWitt medical facility at Weimar until he could be resettled. Father James Kidder, Vocations Director of the Diocese of Sacramento, was told that there was a Vietnamese refugee in Weimar who was interested in becoming a priest.

Father Kidder drove to Weimar to meet Joe Huang and was impressed with Joe because of his leadership qualities as well as his keen desire to become a priest. At Father Kidder's recommendation and Bishop Bell's approval, Joseph Huang Nguyen was accepted as a candidate for the seminary to begin his studies in the fall of 1975 as a seminarian for the Diocese of Sacramento.

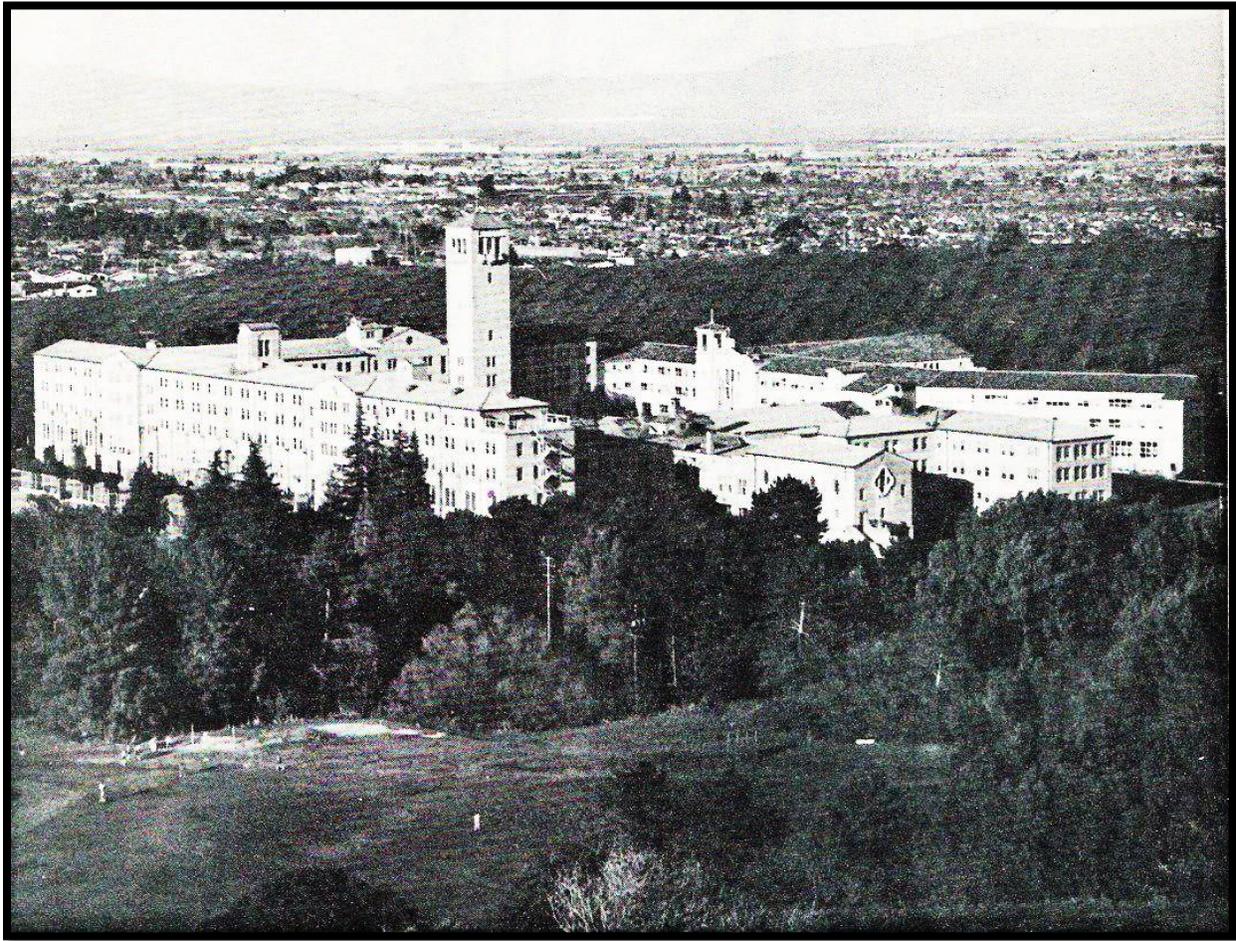


Photo from the Diocesan Archives

### **Saint Joseph College, Mountain View**

#### **JOE BEGINS HIS STUDIES FOR THE PRIESTHOOD**

Joseph began his studies at Saint Joseph College in Mountain View as a seminarian for the Diocese of Sacramento. He attended the seminary college from 1975 to 1981 when he received his Bachelor of Arts Degree in Philosophy on June 13, 1981 from the Mountain View seminary.

#### **A MOVE TO SAINT PATRICK THEOLOGATE IN MENLO PARK**

In the fall of 1981, Joseph transferred to Saint Patrick Theologate in Menlo Park to begin his theological studies for the next four years. He was ordained a transitional deacon in the chapel of Saint Patrick Seminary, Menlo Park on October 6, 1984. He served as a transitional deacon at Saint John Vianney Parish in Rancho Cordova from April 14 to October 5, 1985.

*Always Forward!*



Photo by John E Boll

### **Saint Patrick Major Seminary, Menlo Park, CA**

Deacon Joseph Mary Huong Xuan Nguyen was ordained a priest by Bishop Francis Quinn in the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in Sacramento on October 5, 1985 for priestly service to the people of the Church of Sacramento. He was 17 days shy of his 39<sup>th</sup> birthday. After his priestly ordination, he continued at Saint John Vianney Parish as a parochial vicar until December 9, 1985.

#### **FIRST ASSIGNMENT, SAINT JOSEPH PARISH, AUBURN**

On December 9, 1985, Bishop Quinn appointed Father Joe as parochial vicar to Saint Joseph Parish in Auburn to assist Father Anthony Traynor who was the pastor. Father Joe served the Auburn parish for a year and a half until April 1, 1987. The working relationship between Father Trainor and Father Huong was not as positive as Bishop Quinn had hoped, so he decided it was best to give Father Joe a new assignment.

#### **SECOND ASSIGNMENT, SAINT JOSEPH PARISH, LINCOLN**

Bishop Quinn contacted Father John Boll, pastor of Saint Joseph Parish, Lincoln, to see if he was willing to take Father Joe as a parochial vicar. Since the Lincoln parish had two missions, Saint Daniel Church in Wheatland and Saint Boniface Church in Nicolaus, and Father John was the only priest assigned in the parish, he was happy to welcome Father Joe to the Lincoln parish.

Father Joe's appointment as parochial vicar of Saint Joseph Parish, Lincoln, began on April 1, 1987. As a recently ordained priest with a lot of energy, Father Joe wanted to do a lot of things to help the Lincoln parish grow. He loved to preach and celebrate Mass and gave a lot of energy to that ministry. He taped every Sunday homily he gave so he could listen to his homily in order to improve his homiletic skills.

Father Joe made friends with the recently established Knights of Columbus Council in the parish and encouraged the Knights to take on various projects to improve the facilities of the parish. He asked them to build a large cross outside the Lincoln church so it would be easily identified as a church. That cross is still standing at the old church which has been sold to another Christian church when Saint Joseph Parish relocated to its new facilities on Oak Tree Lane, on land donated to the parish by Paul and Alice Ferrari.



Photo by John E Boll

### **The Original Saint Joseph Church with outside Cross designed by Father Joseph Huong**

Father Joe served as parochial vicar of Saint Joseph Parish, Lincoln, until January 1993, having served the Lincoln parish for nearly six years. He made many friends during his years serving the three churches of Saint Joseph Parish in Lincoln, Wheatland and Nicolaus.

### **FATHER JOE REASSIGNED TO THE AUBURN PARISH**

On December 12, 1993, Father Joe was reassigned to Saint Joseph Parish in Auburn as parochial vicar. There was a change in pastors in Auburn when Father John Molumby was appointed pastor there in 1992. Father Joe served the Auburn parish for nearly two years more until August 31, 1995.

Father Joe would serve as parochial vicar in one more parish until he was appointed parish administrator and then pastor.



Photo by John E Boll

### **Saint Joseph Parish, Auburn**

#### **NEXT ASSIGNMENT, SAINT ISIDORE PARISH, YUBA CITY**

Father Joe's fourth assignment as parochial vicar was to Yuba City. The pastor of the parish was Father Manuel Soria who had never met Father Joe before. When Bishop Quinn asked Father Soria if he would accept Father Joe as his parochial vicar, Father Soria first wanted to talk with Father Joe.

Father Joe paid a visit to Father Manuel in Yuba City. Father Manuel asked Father Joe if he wanted to work with him in a team ministry in the parish because the people of the parish would expect the two priests to work as a team. Father Joe said he wanted to work as a team and was delighted to know that Father Manuel wanted that as well. So, Father Manuel accepted Father Joe as his parochial vicar in Yuba City.

As it turned out, Fathers Manuel and Joe, who were very different in personality, worked exceedingly well together and became a team with the other members of the staff and became good friends as well. Father Joe served as parochial vicar in Yuba City for five years, from September 1, 1995 to January 4, 2000. It was a positive experience for both Father Manuel Soria and Father Joe Huong.



Photo by John E Boll

### Saint Isidore Church, Yuba City

#### TIME TO BECOME A PASTOR

As the twenty-first century was about to begin, Bishop William Weigand and the Personnel Board contacted Father Soria to ask him if he thought Father Joe was ready to become a pastor of a parish. Father Soria told the bishop and the Personnel Board that Father Joe was a good team member of the parish staff and in his opinion, was ready to become a pastor.

On January 5, 2000, Bishop Weigand appointed Father Joe Huong administrator of Saint Paul Parish in Knights Landing and a year later, on February 1, 2001, Bishop Weigand appointed Father Joe pastor of the same parish. He served as pastor of Knights Landing and its mission, Saint Agnes Church in Zamora, for three years until August 20, 2004.

When a couple members of the Priests' Personnel Board came to Knights Landing to meet with the parish community to discuss the needs of the parish in preparation for the appointment of a new pastor, the people had nothing but the highest admiration and love for Father Joe who had served this small parish community exceedingly well. Father Dan Looney who represented the Personnel Board that evening was deeply moved and gratified to know how much Father Joe was loved by this bi-lingual parish community.



Photo by John E Boll

### **Saint Paul Parish, Knights Landing**

#### **NAMED PASTOR OF SAINT PETER PARISH, DIXON**

On August 20, 2004, Bishop Weigand appointed Father Joe Huong, pastor of Saint Peter Parish in Dixon. This pastorate was relatively short in duration, only two years and a month, ending on September 26, 2006.

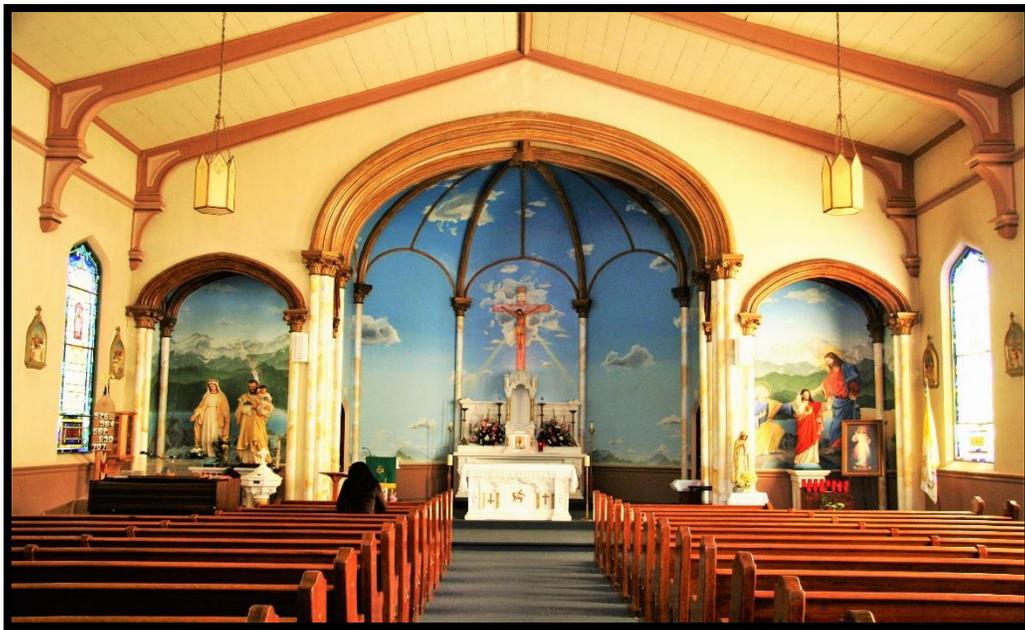


Photo by John E Boll

### **Saint Peter Church, Dixon**

### **APPOINTED PASTOR OF SAINT JOSEPH PARISH, MARYSVILLE**

It was Bishop Weigand who next appointed Father Joe to the pastorate of Saint Joseph Parish in Marysville on September 27, 2006. Soon after his arrival in the Marysville parish, Father Joe began an ambitious project to renovate the basement of the church building which had been unused for fifty years. He converted the basement into a parish food pantry and youth center.

Father Joe loved working on these kinds of projects because it challenged him to transform a rundown building into a beautiful and useful space once again. He converted the basement of the church into an attractive place where parish groups could meet together for both apostolic and spiritual purposes.

Father Joe was also appointed temporary dean of the Sutter Buttes Deanery on March 1, 2008 by Bishop Weigand and he served in this role until February 17, 2010 when he was given his final parish assignment in Sacramento.

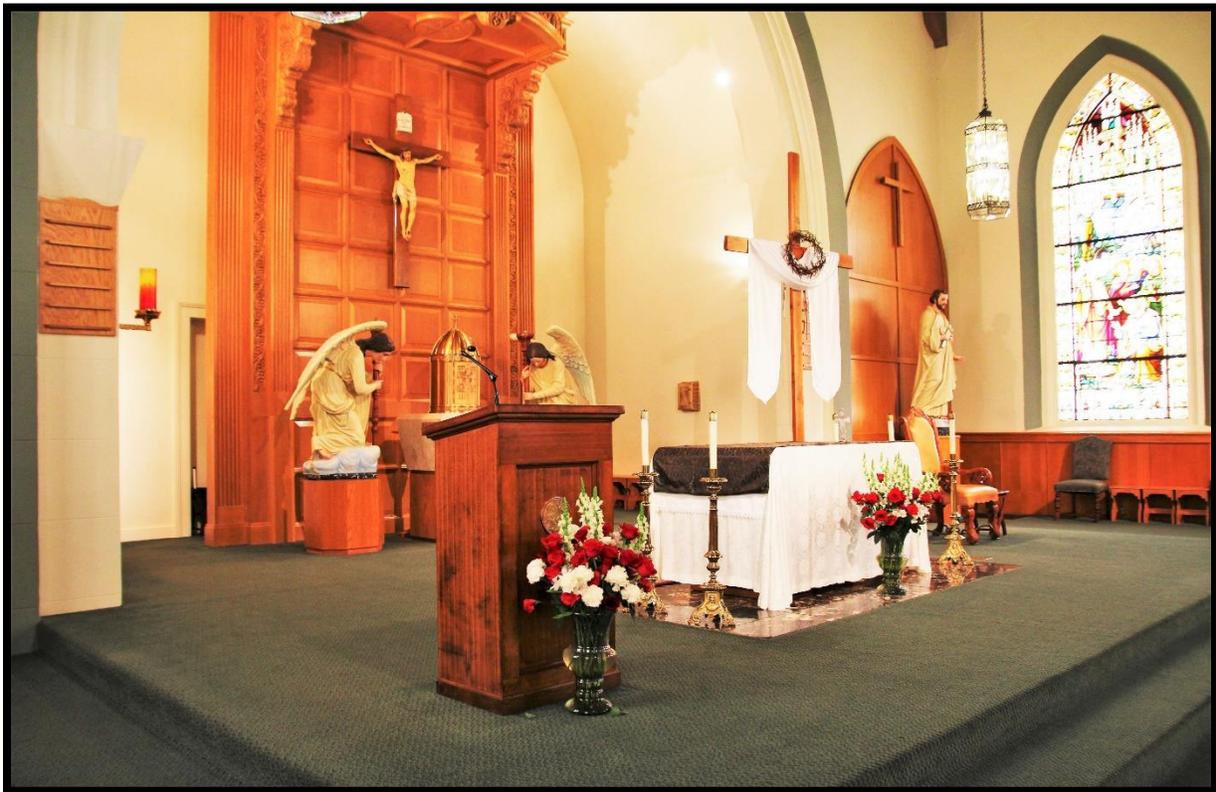


Photo by John E Boll

### **The Sanctuary of Saint Joseph Church, Marysville**

#### **FINAL APPOINTMENT**

On January 1, 2010, Bishop Jaime Soto, who succeeded Bishop Weigand as bishop of the Diocese of Sacramento on November 29, 2008, appointed Father Joe pastor of Saint Anne Parish in South Sacramento. The church was in need of repair so Father Joe set to work to address that situation. He had the personality and keen ability to pull together people who had the skills and resources to get the job done. When he finished the church renovation, there was a beautiful church fully

renovated with a new marble altar, ambo and presider's chair that was quarried from the marble quarries of his native land of Vietnam.



Photo by John E Boll

### **The Renovated Saint Anne Church**

Father Joe grew up speaking the Vietnamese language but he learned English and Spanish which enabled him to serve the major language groups in the Diocese of Sacramento. He served Saint Anne Parish just months shy of two complete six-year terms as pastor. He was planning to retire when he reached 75 years of age on October 22, 2021.

### **FATHER JOE BECOMES AFFLICTED WITH CANCER**

Father Joe was stricken with cancer before it became a known reality. He was experiencing some pain but ignored it. Determined to celebrate confirmation with the parish candidates even though he was not feeling well, during that Mass he collapsed and was taken by ambulance to UC Davis Hospital in Sacramento. He was diagnosed with stage four cancer.

Father Joe returned to Saint Anne rectory and his two nieces stayed with him 24 hours a day to take care of him. His niece Thuy, a medical doctor serving in Columbus, Ohio, flew to Sacramento to oversee the care of her beloved uncle, Father Joe.

Father Joe grew weaker as the cancer continued its vicious attack on his body. Bishop Soto asked Father Mieczyslaw “Mitch” Maleszyk, pastor of the neighboring Saint Anthony Parish in the Pocket Area, to temporarily take over the administration of the parish during Father Joe’s illness. Father Soane Kaniseli, a former pastor of Saint Anne Parish who is now retired, agreed to celebrate the parish Masses until the new parish administrator, Father Lawrence Kithinji, arrived in the parish on July 1, 2021 to take over the pastoral leadership of the parish.

#### **DEATH COMES TO FATHER JOSEPH MARY HUONG XIAN NGUYEN**

Father Joe had purchased a home for himself in the area not far from Saint Anne Parish where he had planned to retire when he reached his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. His extended family took him to his home and were with him day and night until Father Joe quietly breathed his last breath around 4 AM on Saturday, July 17, 2021.

#### **FUNERAL LITURGY CELEBRATED FOR FATHER JOSEPH HUONG NGUYEN**

A Vigil was held for Father Joe at Saint Anne Parish Church on Tuesday evening, August 3, 2021. The celebrant of the Vigil was Father Tuan Quoc Nguyen, SDB, pastor of the Vietnamese Martyrs Parish in Sacramento and homilist at the Vigil was Monsignor David C Quitugua from the Archdiocese of Agana, Guam, a classmate of Father Joe at Saint Patrick Seminary in Menlo Park. Saint Anne Church was filled with Father Joe’s family members, parishioners of Saint Anne Parish, and friends from near and far. The liturgy and the homily were very moving for all who attended the Vigil.

#### **FUNERAL MASS AT THE CATHEDRAL**



Funeral Photo by Louella Garcia

**Arrival of the hearse at the Cathedral for the Funeral Mass**

The following day, Wednesday, August 4, 2021, the Funeral Mass for Father Joseph Huong Nguyen was celebrated by Bishop Jaime Soto, Bishop of the Diocese of Sacramento, Bishop William K Weigand, retired bishop of the diocese, and many brother priests from the Dioceses of Sacramento, Stockton and San Jose, as well as Father Joe's extended family, parishioners and friends from the parishes he had served during his 36 years of priestly ministry in the diocese.



Photos by Louella Garcia

### **Entrance Rite with Bishops Soto and Weigand**

The homilist at the Funeral Mass was Monsignor James Kidder who was the Sacramento Diocesan Vocations Director when Father Joe made initial contact with the diocese. Even though California and the world was still in the grip of the Covid-19 virus, the Cathedral was filled with those who knew and loved Father Joe.



**Monsignor James C Kidder was the homilist**

After the Rite of Communion, Bishop Soto offered the prayers of Final Commendation, praying, "Trusting in God, we have prayed together for Father Joseph and now we come to the last farewell..." He then incensed the body of Father Joe while the community sang, "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."



**Bishop Soto Incenses Father Joe's Body**

At the conclusion of the Funeral Liturgy, the body of Father Joe was taken out of the Cathedral to begin the final journey to Saint Mary Cemetery for the Rite of Committal and burial.



**Procession out of the Cathedral**

#### **FINAL FAREWELL TO FATHER JOE**

As the casket was brought to the hearse in front of the Cathedral, the priests of the diocese sang together the *Salve Regina* in Gregorian Chant, commending Father Joe to the special care of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the Christ.



The Bishops and Priests sing the *Salve Regina* as a final farewell to Father Joe

#### **FATHER JOE'S FINAL PROCESSION TO SAINT MARY CEMETERY**

The body of Father Joe was taken in procession to the Priests' Section of Saint Mary Cemetery in Sacramento for the Rite of Committal and burial. After the lowering of the casket into the grave, the family and friends of Father Joe slowly departed, knowing they will see him again in the glorious Kingdom of God on the final day.

#### **FATHER JOE'S SURVIVING FAMILY MEMBERS**

Father Joe is survived by his sisters Kinh Tran, Khiem Nguyen, brothers Chinh, Minh, and An Nguyen; 5 nieces, Thuy, Ha, Hanh, Vi, Thao; 9 nephews, Dat, Nguyen, Vu, Chuong, Bao, Huy, Hoang, Toan, Phuc; 3 great nephews; 2 great nieces; and many other loving relatives and friends.

#### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Father Joe Huong was not typical in any sense of that word. He was not quiet and reserved but outgoing, friendly and vocal. He loved to engage people in conversation, and when it came to clergy gatherings, he always had something to say about the topic at hand. Father Joe was often

funny and engaging. He liked a neat and clean home and did his part to keep his living quarters looking good.

When Saigon was being attacked by the Viet Cong in 1975 and South Vietnam was about to fall to the Communists, Joe sprang into action and convinced his fellow airmen to get into the EC-47 airplane that was ready for takeoff because this was their last chance to escape the onslaught of their country by the attacking Viet Cong. He was a natural leader who was willing to take risks when the world around him was collapsing. Had he and his fellow airmen not flown out of South Vietnam that day, they may have not survived the day.

Once he arrived in America, he saw his chance to fulfill his dream of being a Catholic priest. He took action and let his interest be known that he would like to become a priest. Someone contacted the Diocese of Sacramento for Joe and Father Kidder followed up. Luckily, the diocese took a chance and accepted Joe to begin his studies for the priesthood.

Father Joe was unique, one of a kind. Not only did he learn English but also Spanish so he could minister in three languages, Vietnamese, English and Spanish. He was about to retire when he discovered he was suffering from stage four cancer. He worked until he collapsed celebrating Mass at Saint Anne Church.

Father Joe's earthly journey is completed and the glorious Kingdom of God lies before him as Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Father Joe's parents and his deceased brother, and all the saints welcome him home, to his final home in the Kingdom of God.



Photo by John E Boll

**Temporary Cemetery Marker for Father Joseph Huong Nguyen**  
**Father Joe was laid to rest next to his friend Father Benedict S DeLeon**  
**Saint Mary Cemetery, Sacramento**



*Father Joseph Mary Huong Xuan Nguyen*



*The Natural Beauties of Vietnam*

