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## NATIVE CATHOLIC PRIESTS: Is a Shortage Likely Again in the Years to Come? An Interview with Father James Kidder, Diocesan Vocation Director

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Northern California Catholic churches, dependent upon the importation of Irish priests for more than 100 years, face the prospect of meeting their ministerial needs from the ranks of their own men. "We are not suffering from a shortage of priests right now," explained Monsignor Cornelius P Higgins, chancellor of the far-flung Catholic Diocese of Sacramento, "but we may be faced with a shortage in the years to come. This diocese has always leaned heavily on vocations from Ireland from the time it was founded. We would like to encourage local young men to come along into the priesthood."

Father Higgins came to Sacramento from Ireland. The Reverend James C Kidder, in charge of the diocesan vocations program, said 10 years ago 30 young men in Irish seminaries were preparing themselves to work in churches in the 20 county region of the Sacramento diocese. But this year, he pointed out, only six seminarians in Ireland are destined for this diocese after they are ordained. "They are going to other places now," said Father Kidder, "Florida, England, and Australia."

During an interview in his office in the chancery, Father Kidder pointed out Catholic churches in the diocese have been using Irish priests since 1860 when the Vicariate Apostolic of Marysville was established under the direction of the Right Reverend Eugene O'Connell, a native of Ireland.

The vicariate, which included all of Northern California and Nevada, became the Grass Valley Diocese in 1868 and Bishop O'Connell was appointed bishop. The Diocese of Sacramento was established in 1886 with Bishop Patrick Manogue as the first bishop. He also was a native of Ireland.

"This was a pioneer area in those days," said Father Kidder, "and there were no seminaries. They brought priests in from Ireland to take care of the people's spiritual needs. In more than 100 years we have never become self-sustaining in producing our own priests."



Photo from the Catholic Herald

## **Father James Kidder, Diocesan Vocation Director**

### **Establishment of a Minor Seminary**

Father Kidder said the diocese began a program of educating young men for the priesthood in 1955 when Bishop Robert Armstrong started St Pius X Seminary in Rio Dell, Humboldt County. Five years later the seminary was moved to new facilities in Galt which included not only the high school but also two years of college. Now the college program has been dropped and graduates who want to become priests continue their education at St Patrick College in Mountain View and then to St Patrick Seminary in Menlo Park, both four year institutions.

“They have broadened the scope of St Pius X from a school for just those who wanted to be priests to a school for those who want to become more involved in Christian leadership,” explained Father Kidder. “We have found that there are fewer boys expressing an interest in the priesthood while in high school and more young men expressing interest at the college level.”

### **First in Capital**

Father Kidder was the first local boy to become a priest under the new program. He enrolled in the seminary's first class in 1955 from Woodland and 12 years later he was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Sacramento. "We are going to have six local boys go to St Patrick College this year," he said. "We've never had more than one or two from Sacramento going into the college."

He said there are at present 14 young men from this area studying for the priesthood in the seminary at Menlo Park while there were only four 10 years ago. "We just ordained four deacons from this area at the seminary and next year they will be ordained as priests," he said. "We've never had that many before from Sacramento."

### **Part of Trend**

He believes the interest in Jesus Christ among the youth of the nation crosses all denominations. "And I have great hope that with this interest more Catholic youth will go into a life of service to others. It takes a strong commitment to Christ to go into the priesthood in this day. In the past there was more of a social status connected with the priesthood. Priests and ministers were put on a pedestal and this motivated young men toward ministry. Today there is a new interest in Christ, a new interest in prayer and meditation among the youth and a great desire to think in terms of the welfare of their fellow man. There are more college age men going into the priesthood now. The number has doubled."

### **Mostly Irish**

Father Kidder pointed out that 75 percent of the priests in the diocese are from Ireland. But the number of priests coming in from Ireland is dwindling. "Five years ago nine priests were brought in from Ireland but this year only three are coming from Irish seminaries. Next year only one will come to us from Ireland and the following year none," he said. This situation might be a good thing for us. It might force us to become more self-reliant."

### **Aging Problem**

Turning to the records on his desk, the young priest said about 25 of the 175 priests in the diocese are more than 60 years of age. "They will be retiring soon, or dying, and they will have to be replaced. But we don't have 25 men in our seminaries to take their places." He urged Catholic families to encourage their boys and young men to go into the priesthood. "If a life of service in the priesthood is presented by the adults as a meaningful way of life, then I think the religious life will be attractive to young people," he said.