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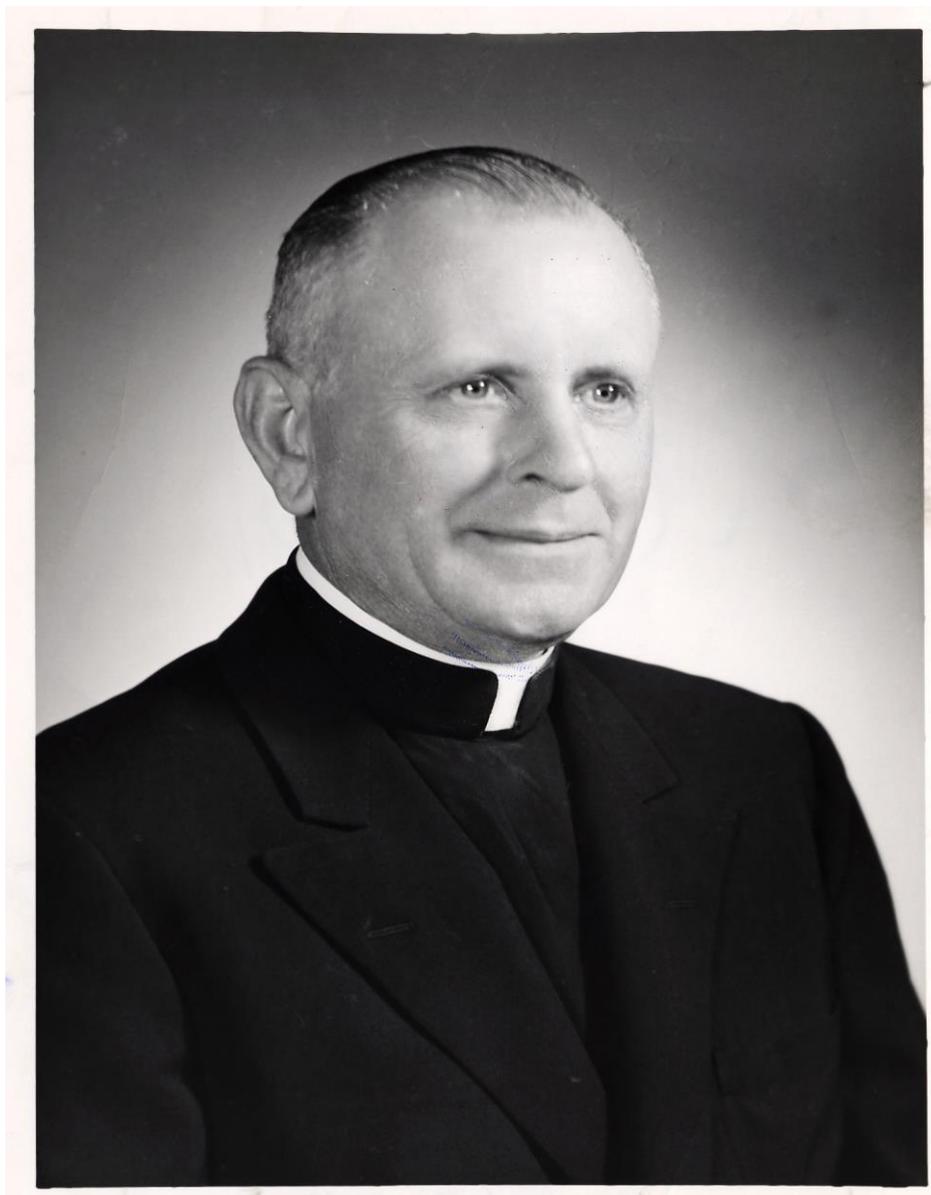
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MONSIGNOR JAMES CASEY: 'PERSISTENCE' Profile of an Irish Priest

By Rebekah Aronson, printed in the May 1, 1980 issue of the *Catholic Herald*



Monsignor James Casey
Pastor Emeritus of Sacred Heart Parish, Red Bluff

Persistence has been the key to survival for Monsignor James Casey, born to a peasant farm family in County Kerry, Ireland, 71 years ago. A childhood of strict schooling, never-ending farm chores, hostility to the British then in control, and firm religious indoctrination (under the Jansenistic and Puritanical influence then strong in the Irish church), could have toppled this strong-minded lad.

During his high school education, he cycled 15 miles each Monday morning – rain, sleet or snow – to spend the week at his aunt's, who lived closer to the school than his parents. Every day he biked three miles to and from school and on weekends, 15 miles home. It was a tiring jaunt, but he did it without complaint.

Even a sadistic teacher who beat up Casey and others habitually for simple test errors, or who had over-indulged the night before and was in a bad mood, could not stop him. But it hurt. And he never told his aunt or parents. He kept it deep inside.

And though he and others cried for days from homesickness after arriving in Carlow for seminary at 18, he stuck out the six years. At the last minute, he decided to become a priest.

Coming to the Sacramento Diocese in 1933, Casey continued his test of persistence. His first appointment was in Angels Camp. After two and a half years, he was assigned to Alturas. Then 27, he was to spend four years in a town far away from civilization and in the throes of depression. Delving through history books, he learned and wrote about life. It took five priests to replace him over the next four years. They could not endure the isolation and loneliness of the Alturas area.

Even when he was named editor of the Superior Catholic Register (now the Catholic Herald), and found himself equipped with nothing more than two broken-down typewriters, a secretary of sorts, and a person to help with the advertising, he forged ahead. With his "hunt-and-peck typing, and one-man operation for literally all make-up procedures of the newspaper, he proved to be a success. The circulation rose to over 12,000 in his seven years as editor, with his columns quoted in many northern California newspapers, including the Sacramento Bee.

Bishop Robert Armstrong was perceptive enough to recognize greatness, and named Casey "Monsignor" at the early age of 45. Casey was in Dunsmuir at the time, and had already made his mark there.

Local Catholic children had no religious classes, so he brought the Sisters of Mercy up from Redding to teach summer school, and later initiated a permanent religious education program. No "resting on laurels" for this "Monsignor." Later, in Red Bluff, he was to establish the town's first parochial elementary school with the construction of Sacred Heart School. He disagreed with Bishop Alden J Bell's instructions for building plans and used his own, which he believed, best suited the climate and conditions of the area.

The first priest in the northern area to hire a lay principal (Richard Bourne), and one of the first in the northern area to establish a parish council, was Monsignor Casey.

He welcomed the transition from Latin to English in the Canon of the Mass, professing that “fresh air flowing through windows opened by the late Pope John blew away unhealthy dust and accumulated debris.” He felt it was an important transition of the Mass from a “magical” ceremonial procedure to a comprehensible involvement of actual reliving of the Last Supper.

One of the forerunners initiating greater participation by the people in liturgy, Casey involved musicians, lectors, and commentators whenever possible.



Photo by John E Boll, 2012

Sacred Heart Church, Red Bluff

Yes, Monsignor Casey is a man of persistence. He is also a sensitive, shy and quiet individual born in a generation of inhibited, frustrated, dogmatic and emotion-fearing Irish. At 40, full of frustration and fear caused by an inferiority complex, he revisited Ireland. He and a sister discussed their childhoods, both expressing astonishment at the open display of affection shown especially among Jewish and Latin families.

For the first time in their lives, they both had the courage to discuss openly that they could not remember ever having been hugged, picked up, or even touched at all by their parents. It was a painful but healthy discussion.

Even emotional obstacles have not stopped James Casey, who says “there is just no easy answer for emotional problems, but one must learn to cope with them as best one can.”

Monsignor is a priest...but he is also a human. And one of the most frustrating experiences of his life has been to feel isolated by a society that sometimes separates priests from humans. “Some think that priests fall down from heaven. They don’t realize that priests are humans with human emotions.”



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Interior of Sacred Heart Church, Red Bluff

And so this youthful and handsome gentleman begins another chapter of his life – retirement – in Red Bluff, his “base of operations.” He lives with Father Michael Dillon and Father Michael Canny, and putters in the yard shaping up the flowers and citrus trees. An avid hunter and fisherman, Casey spends time in Siskiyou County, fly-casting for trout. He also enjoys the hunt of deer and waterfowl.

Occasionally, he writes about the past in such a way as only he so eloquently can express: “Natives are wont to recall youthful days in rural towns or farms. Details float vividly in memory; farmhouse chimneys venting smoke from potbellied stoves; planting and harvesting; the richness of plowed earth; the breath of new-mown hay; migrations of birds; readin’ and writin’ at the red schoolhouse...”

In his persistence to discover life, Monsignor Casey has found that “the study of history has opened my mind to my own existence and shortcomings, and has given me an insight into myself as well as people around me. It has helped me grow and develop. More of these studies in seminaries may help a better breed of priests to better understand life”

A great human – James Casey!

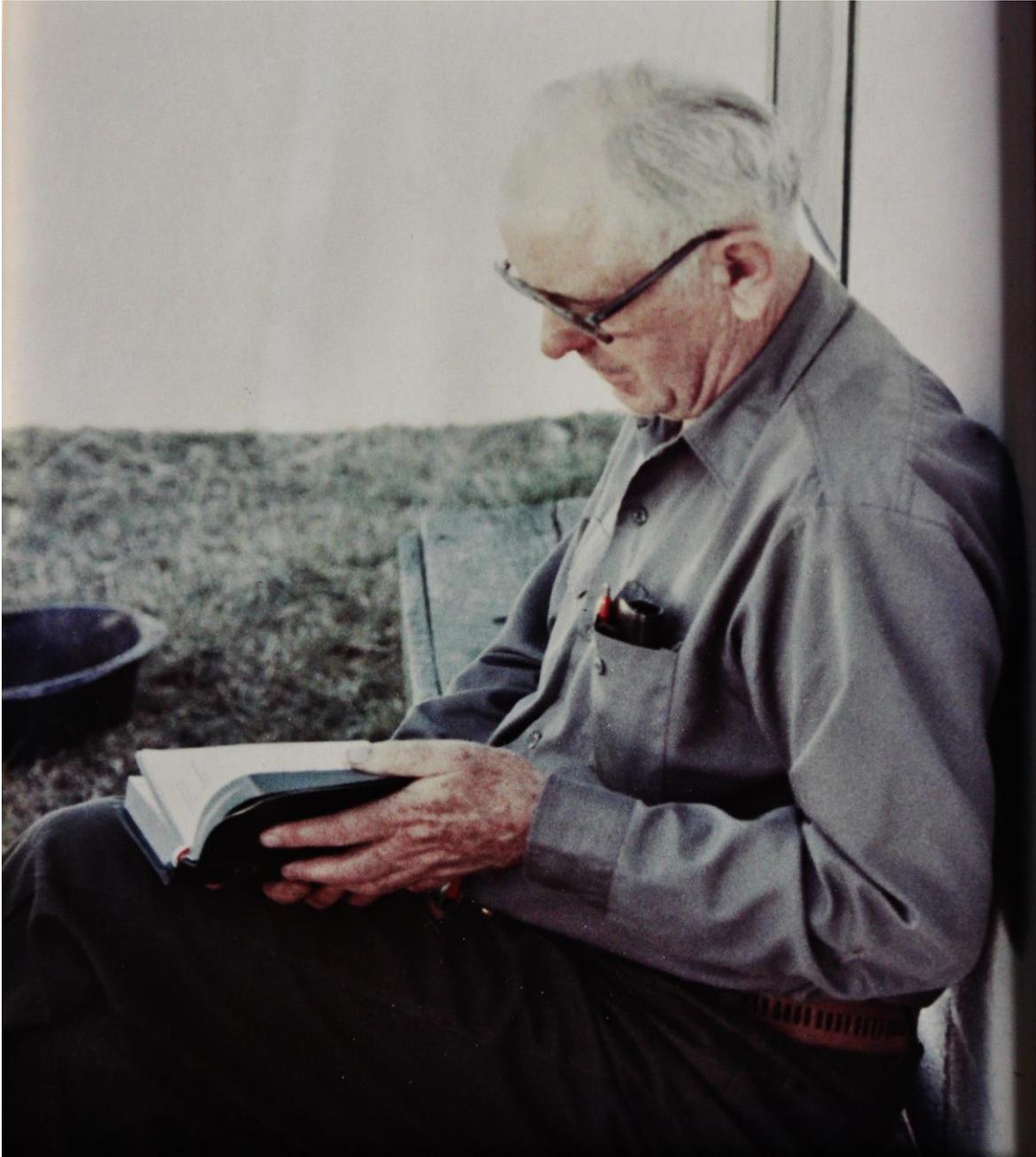


Photo taken at the Ellis Louie Ranch near Weed

Monsignor James Casey