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FATHER THOMAS JOSEPH RELIHAN Pastor Emeritus of Sacred Heart Parish, Ione

By Fr John E Boll, Diocesan Archivist



Father Thomas Joseph Relihan

THOMAS JOSEPH RELIHAN was born on May 11, 1923 in the family home on the farm in Kilcara, County Kerry, Ireland, the firstborn son of Michael Relihan and Mary Brosnan. Tom's brothers and sisters are Donald, James, Michael, Eileen, Mary, Philomena and Ann.

Thomas Relihan's Family of Origin

Tom's grandfather, also named Thomas Relihan, came to America in the 1870's. He brought his two sisters Margaret and Ann to Los Angeles. Margaret had married Mr Power in Ireland before coming to America but her husband immigrated to Los Angeles ahead her. Margaret had two sons and her grandson was Tyrone Power, the movie star in the late 1940's and 1950's.

Tom's grandfather left his two sisters in Los Angeles and headed for San Francisco to look for his friend Mr Carr. He found out that Carr had gone to Nevada to mine for silver so Tom set out for Nevada and worked in the silver mines for a couple of years. He returned to Ireland with a wad of cash and with that money purchased a dairy farm in Kilcara where he started to farm. Tom's father Michael was born in the family home on the farm in Kilcara.

Tom had an uncle whose name was also Thomas. This uncle was a priest of the Archdiocese of San Francisco and after only ten years of ministry died in 1937 of cancer. He had been pastor of Saint Patrick Parish in San Francisco.

Growing Up in Ireland

Growing up on the farm in Ireland, Tom found that life was good even though Ireland was going through a difficult time economically. His father Michael had been a member of the IRA and was arrested and imprisoned in England from 1918 to 1921. After Michael's release from prison he returned to Ireland and married Mary Brosnan in 1922. While Michael was in prison, his father Thomas died. Upon Michael's return to Ireland, he took over the running of the family farm.

School Days, Seminary Life and Ordination

Tom Relihan attended the local National School from 1928-1935 and then went on to high school from 1935 to 1941. He entered the junior seminary with the Jesuits in Mungret, County Limerick, where he did two years of philosophical studies.

While Tom was finishing the junior seminary in 1943, he decided to study for the Diocese of Sacramento since Sacramento was recruiting seminarians and Tom had two priest relatives working in San Francisco. He was also a friend of Father Jerry O'Driscoll in Sacramento and with Jerry's help, Tom was accepted by the Diocese of Sacramento.

The next four years, 1943-47, Tom studied theology at All Hallows College, Dublin and was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Sacramento on June 22, 1947 in All Hallows Seminary Chapel.

Goodbye to Ireland and Hello to Sacramento

Father Relihan set off from Ireland bound for Sacramento and arrived on the first or second of September 1947. He spent his first night at Saint Patrick's Orphanage in Sacramento and was assigned to Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Parish in Broderick. His first assignment with Father

James O'Shea was four years. The only memorable recollection Father Tom has of those years was the establishment of Our Lady of Grace Church in West Sacramento. This new church was constructed stick by stick from a barracks that was brought from Camp Beale which later was called Beale Air Force Base in Yuba County.

Assignment to Grass Valley and on to DeWitt State Hospital



Photo from the DeWitt Hospital Website

DeWitt State Hospital, Auburn-Weimar

From Broderick, Father Relihan was assigned to Grass Valley in July 1951 where he served for only one year. He then was assigned to Immaculate Conception Parish in Sacramento to succeed Father Hugh Bannon. These two did a lateral transfer because the bishop thought it would be helpful if Father Bannon had a change of scene.

The next year, June 1953, Father Relihan was sent to DeWitt State Hospital as chaplain. He had a long ministry there from 1953-72 and he loved his hospital work be-

cause he was able to see people improve from their physical and mental illnesses. During his years a chaplain at DeWitt he lived in an apartment on the hospital grounds.

DeWitt State Hospital had a population of 3300 patients who were either mentally ill or suffering from Tuberculosis. Two years after his arrival, the drug *Aureomycin* was discovered and TB was eradicated. Consequently, because DeWitt no longer had to serve TB patients, the hospital began accepting mentally ill patients from all over Northern California. DeWitt became a hospital for the mentally ill. The drug *Serpasil*, developed in India, was used to calm patients so there was no longer any need to use shock treatment. Before the use of *Serpasil*, one intern said that the only two things that happened in DeWitt were hot baths and last rites.

Closure of DeWitt State Hospital

In 1972 Governor Ronald Reagan decided to close the state mental hospitals and send the patients to their home counties. Reagan made this decision on the advice given to him by an English doctor who told the governor that the best way to deal with mentally ill patients was to have them live close to their families. This might have worked for large metropolitan areas but in rural counties there were no hospitals available to help the mentally ill. As a result, many mentally ill patients ended up on the streets just as they are today. The State of California closed DeWitt, Modesto and Mendocino hospitals while keeping open the state mental hospitals in Southern California.

Catholic Chaplain of Susanville State Prison

From DeWitt, Father Tom became the Catholic chaplain at the State Prison in Susanville. He served there as chaplain from 1972-83. In the beginning he lived in the local parish rectory but

later decided to move to an apartment closer to his work. Prison ministry was very different from his work at the DeWitt mental hospital. When Father Tom left the Susanville prison in 1982 there were only 2000 prisoners. At one point the prison population was as low as a thousand. After 1982 the numbers increased dramatically when the California three strikes law went into effect. While Father Tom was in Susanville, most inmates were low level prisoners.

Ione, Father Tom's Ministry for Thirty Years

In May 1883, Father Relihan was appointed pastor of Sacred Heart Parish in Ione. His predecessor, Father Chris Neary, had served both as pastor of Ione and chaplain to Preston Detention Center. As Father Relihan began his term as pastor of Ione, Father Neary continued as chaplain of Preston School of Industry. Three years later, Father Neary died of cancer and Bishop Quinn asked Father Tom if, besides being pastor of Ione, he would be willing to also serve as chaplain to Preston School of Industry? Father Tom declined the offer.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Original Catholic Church in Ione Blessed by Archbishop Alemany

For the next 30 years, Father Relihan served as pastor of Lone. He says he loved the Lone Sacred Heart community because the parish was rural and he knew everyone. As part of the Lone community, Father Tom grew together with the community and enjoyed his life in Lone.

Why Lone was Slow to Grow

What prevented Lone from growing was the lack of water. The town could not grow until the prison built a large water storage tank. This enabled more homes to be built and the town began to grow because of the access to water. The prison became the largest employer in Amador County but this distinction has now passed to the Jackson Rancheria Casino.

Retirement as Pastor Emeritus of Lone

Father Relihan retired in 2009 as pastor emeritus of Sacred Heart Parish and has continued to live in the Lone rectory. He still plays some golf but no longer goes skiing in the winter. On December 7, 2012 while skiing in the Sierras he did not feel comfortable on skis anymore so decided to make that day his last time to ski.

Memories

During the epic time of the Second Vatican Council, Father Relihan was working in the DeWitt mental hospital so for him the change in the church's fasting law was a happy one. Priests no longer had to fast from midnight until the last Mass on Sunday and that was a great relief for all priests. He believes the fast was a great hardship for priests and no doubt the cause of many stomach problems for them.

Father Tom remembers well one Halloween at Sacramento's Immaculate Conception Parish when Father Bill Broderick put on a Halloween mask and surprised Helen O'Sullivan, the pastor's sister who was the cook-housekeeper. She was so frightened she dropped the dinner plates on the floor, smashing them to bits. Two days later, Father Broderick was on his way to Crescent City on a new assignment. Needless to say, Helen O'Sullivan had great power of persuasion over her brother, the pastor.

He also recalls that Helen did not allow the priests of the parish to come into the kitchen. One night, Father Dunstan who was filling in at the parish went to the kitchen to get a nightcap. The next morning the assistant priests had hell to pay from Helen for allowing the visiting priest to come into the kitchen the night before. She was queen of the kitchen and no priest had permission to enter her domain.

Of course, pastors in those days treated assistants with less regard. Assistants had many rules to follow and few rights. If the pastor was displeased with an assistant, he could cause great grief for the assistant and even pressure the bishop to remove the assistant priest from the parish.

A Happy Priestly Life

As Father Tom reviews the past 65 years of priestly ministry in the Diocese of Sacramento, he says he has had a happy life. He enjoyed his years as chaplain at DeWitt Hospital and his ministry to the prisoners at the state prison in Susanville. For 30 years he served the people of Lone and knew almost everyone in town. At 94, he still plays a little golf, drives his car and takes

care of himself as he continues living in the parish rectory. Father Tom has only 9 years to go to live as long as his mother who lived to the age of 103.

The Church of Sacramento is grateful for the faithful service that Father Thomas Relihan has given for 68 years. We wish him continued good health and much cheer in the years to come.

Ad Multos Annos



Photo by John Boll 2013

Sacred Heart Church, Lone



Photo by John Boll 2013

Interior of Sacred Heart Church, Lone

Published with Father Relihan's permission.