

SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

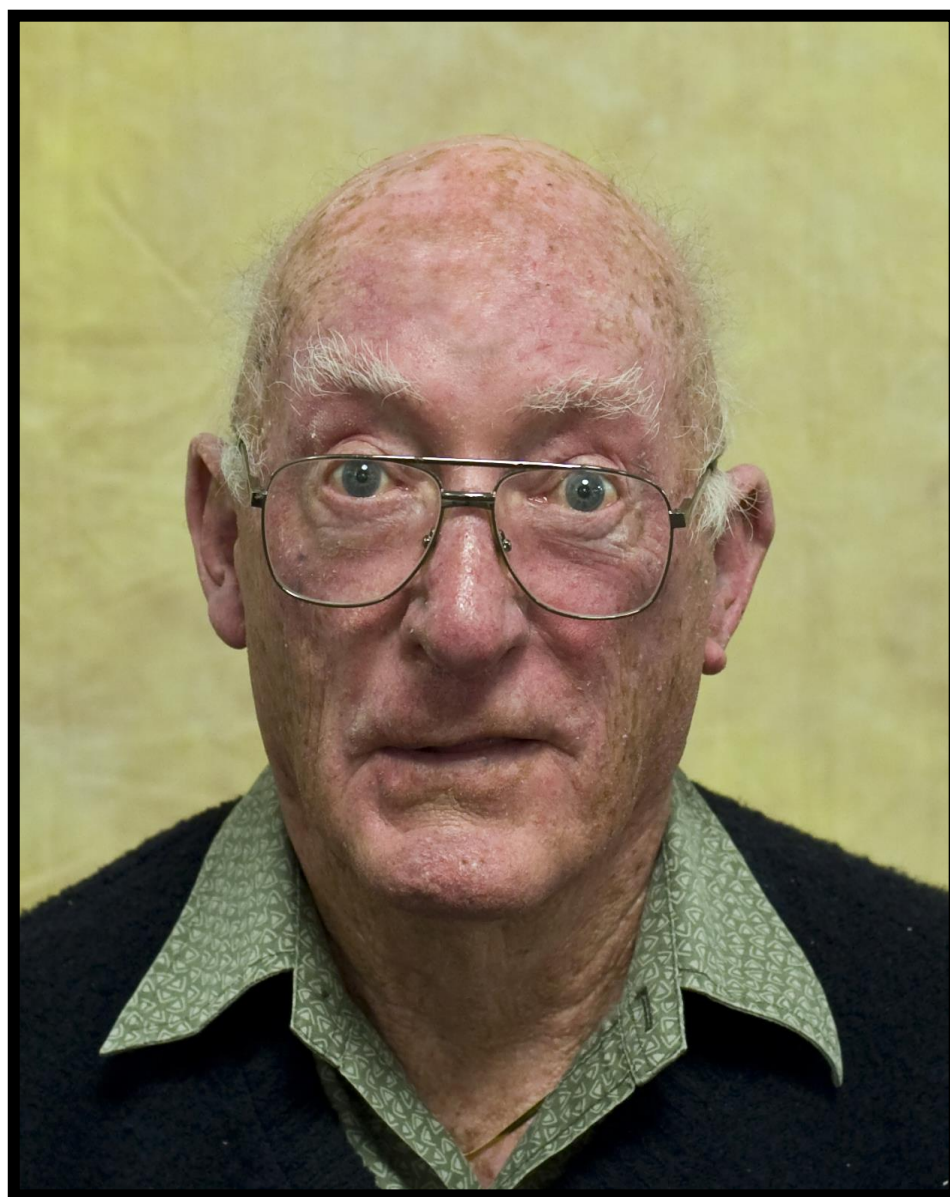
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FATHER RONAN BRENNAN **Pastor Emeritus of Immaculate Conception Parish** **Sutter Creek**

Interview by Father John E Boll, Diocesan Archivist



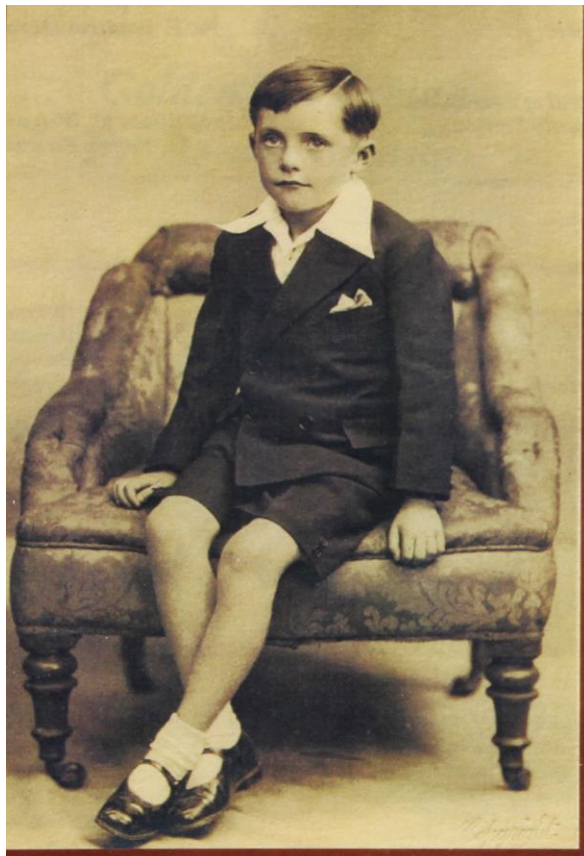
Father Ronan Brennan

Ronan Brennan was born on August 23, 1926 in the village of Duleek, County Meath, Ireland, the third of the five children born to Michael Brennan and Mary Clarke. Ronan's sister Maura had died prior to his birth. His other brothers and sisters are Nuala, Declan and Manus.



Photo from Fr Ronan Brennan

The Brennan Family Home in Duleek, County Meath, Ireland



*First Holy Communion
Ireland*

Growing up in Duleek was great fun for Ronan. Although it was a small community, he liked the openness of the area and he and his friends could walk in the fields all day if they liked and no one worried about them. Duleek was a farming community and Ronan's father was a teacher and principal of the same school for 47 years. For Ronan, there was lots of freedom which he liked very much.

The Beginning of Ronan's Education

Ronan began his primary education at the local national school and then in 1939 transferred to Saint Finian College in Mullingar for the five years of his secondary education.

During his high school years, visiting priests from different missionary congregations came to Saint Finian College to speak to the students about priesthood and the missions. Ronan had an uncle and four cousins who were priests so he heard a lot about the priesthood in his early years. As he began high school, the idea of priesthood was on his mind as a possibility but a

question mark at the same time. Ronan says that 27 out of the 40 students in his graduating class at Saint Finian College entered the seminary and about two thirds of those were ordained priests.

His high school years from 1939-1944 were years of war in Europe and Ireland suffered all kinds of shortages of food and fuel, especially during the winter months. It was a very difficult time for everyone. Although Ireland was a neutral country during the World War II, it was not spared bombings by the Nazi air force. Belfast in Northern Ireland and even Dublin in the south were bombed on occasion.

Ronan Enters All Hallows College, Dublin

In 1944, Ronan entered All Hallows College, Dublin. For him, All Hallows was a wonderful experience and the college from its founding in 1842 had a long tradition of preparing men for the Catholic missions of the world. The college was run by the Vincentians and in Ronan's view, these Vincentian priests were great and holy men.

All Hallows was a liberal seminary for its day. The students were allowed to leave campus for volunteer work with the Legion of Mary, the Seamen's Institute in Dublin, and Saint Vincent de Paul ministry in the slums of Dublin. The seminary students were also allowed to visit the many historic churches of Dublin and to watch the construction of new churches in the area.

Ronan's All Hallows class began with about 43 students and 27 persevered in their studies and were ordained priests. All Hallows College was the only exclusively foreign mission seminary in all of Ireland. All the newly ordained All Hallows priests left Ireland to serve the missions of the English speaking world.

Ronan signed up for service with the Diocese of Auckland, New Zealand but one evening while he and Dan Cullinan were leaving the dining hall the president of the college took them aside and told them that Bishop Armstrong of Sacramento was looking for a couple of good men to serve in his diocese. The president asked Dan and Ronan if they were willing to switch to Sacramento and both agreed to make the change. This switch of dioceses happened in Ronan's first year of divinity, or first theology.

Just ahead of Ronan at All Hallows College were Tom Relihan, Dan Cullinan, Charlie Fagan, Vincent Lyons, Dan Manogue and Hugh Bannon. All these men were ordained for the Diocese of Sacramento.

Father Ronan Brennan Ordained a Priest for Sacramento

Ronan was ordained a priest on June 18, 1950 in All Hallows College Chapel by Bishop O'Reilly, a bishop from Newfoundland and an alumnus of the college. It was the All Hallows' tradition to invite an alumnus bishop to ordain the ordination class of All Hallows each year. In the All Hallows ordination class of 1950, four men were ordained for the Diocese of Sacramento: Fathers Edmond O'Neill, Joseph Manion, Patrick Nolan and Ronan Brennan.

After ordination, Father Ronan spent the summer with his family. On September 18, 1950, he set sail from Ireland for America from the Port of Cobh. There were 72 priests on board the *Mauretania*, all heading west to America. The voyage across the Atlantic to New York Harbor

took a week. Father Ronan spent a couple weeks visiting family members who lived in Washington, DC and then boarded a train for the trip across America to Sacramento. Since no one met him at the Sacramento train station, he took a cab to the cathedral. He was driven to Saint Patrick Orphanage on Fruitridge Boulevard where he stayed for a few days awaiting his first appointment.

First Assignment, Saint Joseph Parish, Auburn



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Saint Joseph Church, Auburn

Father Patrick Sheehy, pastor of Saint Joseph Parish in Auburn, came to Sacramento looking for an assistant. Father Ronan says in a joking way that he was abducted to Auburn. He liked Auburn very much and enjoyed his year and a half assignment there until he moved in March 1952.

In February 1952, the mission church in Forest Hill burned down and Father Ronan says, with

a twinkle in his eye, he was not responsible for the fire that burned down the church! A new church was never built in Forest Hill but Saint Joseph Parish rents the Lutheran Church there for Sunday Mass.

Assigned to the Truckee Parish

Days before his move to Truckee, a big snow storm pounded the Sierras and closed Highway 40 for two weeks. That highway was later renamed Interstate 80.

Father Brennan was assigned to Assumption Parish in Truckee and upon arriving there he had to enter the rectory through the top window of the house since the snow was so deep. On that first day, Father Ronan and his new pastor, Father Patrick O'Neill, drove to Tahoe City to shovel the snow off the roof of the mission church of Corpus Christi. They had to dig down to the church since it was buried in snow. This was Father Ronan's introduction to Truckee and he remembers hanging his coat on a telephone line because the snow was that high.

Father Ronan served the Truckee parish four years. His primary duties were visiting homes to take a parish census and teaching catechism. He says he taught catechism every day. As assistant, he had to help with the Masses in Truckee, Tahoe City, and Kings Beach. He was the first priest to celebrate Mass in Squaw Valley in 1954. He says the Mass was held in the bar of

the Squaw Valley Lodge. During his four years in Truckee, he visited almost every house in the parish making pastoral visits and taking the census.

Ministry at Folsom Prison

On April 18, 1956, Father Brennan was appointed Catholic chaplain at Folsom Prison. His residence was Holy Family Parish rectory in Citrus Heights with Father Vito Mistretta who was the pastor. Although Father Ronan's main ministry was the prison, he also helped with one Sunday Mass at Holy Family Church and served as chaplain to the parish Mr and Mrs Club.



Photo Provided by Father Bennis

Father Brennan Celebrates Mass for Inmates at Folsom Prison

According to Father Brennan, the ministry at Folsom Prison was exciting and enjoyable. He served the Folsom prison community for nearly 12 years from 1956 to 1967. He says he got along well with staff and inmates although it was not always an easy ministry. He was busy with lots of counseling and other pastoral duties. As in all prisons, some inmates tried to play games with him by asking him to mail letters for them outside the prison system but he took all this in stride and always respected the rules of the prison.

During the years of his prison ministry, the bishops of the world met in Rome for the Second Vatican Council. Father Brennan says he went along with the changes of the Council but the changes never affected his personal vision of priesthood. He continued his ministry as usual.

Pastor of Tahoe City

Corpus Christi Church in Tahoe City was made a parish in 1960 when the World Winter Olympics was held at Squaw Valley. Father Brennan was appointed pastor in September 1967, succeeding Father Tony Maio, and served as pastor until 1972. Tahoe City was a beautiful parish in the summertime but the winter was difficult. He got tired of dealing with the snow and today he cannot stand snow. In the winter he had to plow the parish parking lot early in the morning so parishioners would have a place to park their cars when attending Mass.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Corpus Christi Parish in Tahoe City

In the summer time Father Ronan was invited to have a meal with parishioners and visitors. He could be invited for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Lots of wealthy people had summer homes at Lake Tahoe and they were very hospitable to him.

Pastor of Saint Joseph Parish, Auburn

Father Patrick Sheehy died around Saint Patrick's Day in 1972. Father Ronan succeeded Father Sheehy as pastor of Auburn that year. He found the Auburn community to be very friendly and welcoming. He purchased 15 acres of land in north Auburn as the future site of a second church in the parish. The old parish school built in 1947 next to Saint Joseph Church in the center of Auburn was filled to capacity. Father Brennan believed it was time to relocate the school to the new parish property in north Auburn. Under his leadership, the new school was completed in 1981. For a short time the parish school was located on two campuses. Part of the students remained at the old school and the other half attended classes at the new school site. It was

Father Tony Traynor who built the second phase of the new school and consolidated the school in one place.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Saint Joseph School, North Auburn

The main fundraiser of Saint Joseph Parish was the annual Mardi Gras celebration. It started as a school fundraiser but developed into a major Auburn community event. This celebration eventually ran its course and ended during the pastorate of Father Vincent O'Reilly.

A Move to Sutter Creek

The City of Auburn was becoming too large for Father Ronan and he felt he was spending too much time at his desk administering the parish. He wanted to be closer to the people and freed from the burden of administration of a growing parish. After the death of Father Niall Harrington, pastor of Sutter Creek, Father Brennan applied for that pastorate and Bishop Francis Quinn appointed him pastor of Sutter Creek in 1980.

The Pastorate of Sutter Creek

In November 1980, Father Brennan became pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish in Sutter Creek including the missions of Saint Mary of the Mountains Church, Plymouth and Saint Bernard Church, Volcano. He found life in the parish easy going which provided a slower place for him to get to know the people of the community. Sutter Creek is close to Jackson and Lone and Father Ignatius Haran, pastor of Jackson, and Father Thomas Relihan, pastor of Lone, became good friends of Father Ronan. Every Saturday evening, these three pastors had dinner together after their evening Masses, rotating the hosting of the Saturday evening dinner among the three of them.



Photo by John E Boll 2011

Immaculate Conception Church, Sutter Creek

During his tenure as pastor of Sutter Creek, Father Ronan renovated and expanded the parish hall in Sutter Creek as well as the church in Plymouth. He served as pastor for 12 years until September 1992 when he retired. It was during Father Brennan's pastorate that parishioner Terry Fulton entered the permanent diaconate program and was ordained a permanent deacon for the Sutter Creek parish. A couple years later, Terry entered the seminary and was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Sacramento. He died suddenly of lung cancer in the fall of 2013.

Retirement

In 1992, at the age of 66, Father Brennan stepped down as pastor and retired from active ministry. His long-time friend Father Leo McAlister invited him to live at Assumption Parish in Carmichael. Father Ronan moved to Assumption Parish and lived there for a couple of years but felt a desire to return to the Auburn area to live. With the help of friends, he found an apartment in Auburn he liked and moved there. He lived in Auburn until 2005 when the Priests' Retirement Village in Citrus Heights opened its doors to welcome retired diocesan priests.

The Final Move to the Priests' Retirement Village in Citrus Heights

In 2005, the Diocese of Sacramento constructed the first phase of the Priests Retirement Village and Father Ronan was the first priest to move to the Village. He chose apartment 12A and continues to live there today. Soon after he moved to the Village, Father Mike Cormack sold his home in Roseville and moved across the street from Father Ronan in apartment 2B. Then

Father Nick Duggan arrived and moved into apartment 2A. After about six months, other retired priests began to move to the Village as well.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Priests' Retirement Village in Citrus Heights

Living at the Priests' Village has been a wonderful experience for Father Brennan. He enjoys the privacy the village provides and the beautiful surroundings. He also enjoys the company of his fellow priests whom he has known and worked with for the six decades of his priestly life in the diocese.

As Father Brennan ponders his 66 years as a priest in the Diocese of Sacramento, he says he has enjoyed his life of ministry in Sacramento and feels he was somewhat successful in sharing the Good News of Jesus. He likes our new Pope Francis and is hopeful the Pope will bring about a new chapter of life and growth for the Catholic faith throughout the world.

Father Ronan Brennan says he has always liked being a priest and is grateful for the many opportunities and wonderful experiences he has had with the people of God in the Church of Sacramento.

Thank you, Father Ronan, for the sacrifice you made by leaving family and friends in Ireland to come to Sacramento in order to give your life in ministry to this local church over the past six decades.

Thanks too for continuing to minister in local parishes when help is needed for liturgies.

Ad Multos Annos!



*June 2000
Auburn, California*

Published with the approval of Father Ronan Brennan.