

# SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

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No 24

## *Father Bernard Joseph Burns*

Native Son of Coronea, County Cavan, Ireland

Priest of the Diocese of Sacramento

Pastor Emeritus of Holy Family Parish, Portola, California

August 8, 1929 -- October 20, 2006



***Bernard Joseph Burns was born on August 8, 1929***, Coronea, Arva, County Cavan, Ireland, the eldest of five children born to John Burns and Jane Ann Sorohan who were farmers. In the seventh grade he chose a life in ministry because he was always interested in helping people. “Coming from a Catholic family,” he said, “I always had an interest in the missions.”

### **BEGINS SCHOOL**

Benny graduated from Arva National School in County Cavan in 1943. He then entered Saint Mary College in Moyne, County Longford, and graduated from there in 1947. He transferred from Moyne to All Hallows College, Dublin where he did his studies in philosophy and theology.

### **ORDAINED A PRIEST FOR SACRAMENTO**

Scheduled to be ordained to the priesthood at All Hallows College in Dublin on June 21, 1953 for the Diocese of Sacramento, Benny was only 23 years of age, two months short of the canonical age of 24 for ordination. Bishop Robert Armstrong of Sacramento had to write to the Sacred Congregation of the Sacraments in Rome asking for a dispensation for Benny so he could be ordained with his classmates on June 21. The Congregation granted the dispensation.

### **ARRIVAL TO SACRAMENTO**

After his arrival in Sacramento, Father Burns began his priestly ministry serving as an assistant at Saint John the Baptist Parish in Chico. His next assignment was to Saint Mary Parish in Arcata which today is part of the Diocese of Santa Rosa. His next appointments were to Presentation Parish and Saint Philomene Parish in Sacramento. His last parish as an assistant was Saint Basil Parish in Vallejo.



Photo by John E Boll

**Saint Basil the Great Church, Vallejo**

### **APPOINTED PASTOR OF PORTOLA**

It was in Holy Family Parish, Portola where Father Benny put down roots when he was appointed pastor there in 1967. Not only did he become shepherd of the Catholic community in Portola but also one of its most popular citizens. He minister to the parish community in Portola as well as the people living in Loyalton at Holy Rosary mission church.

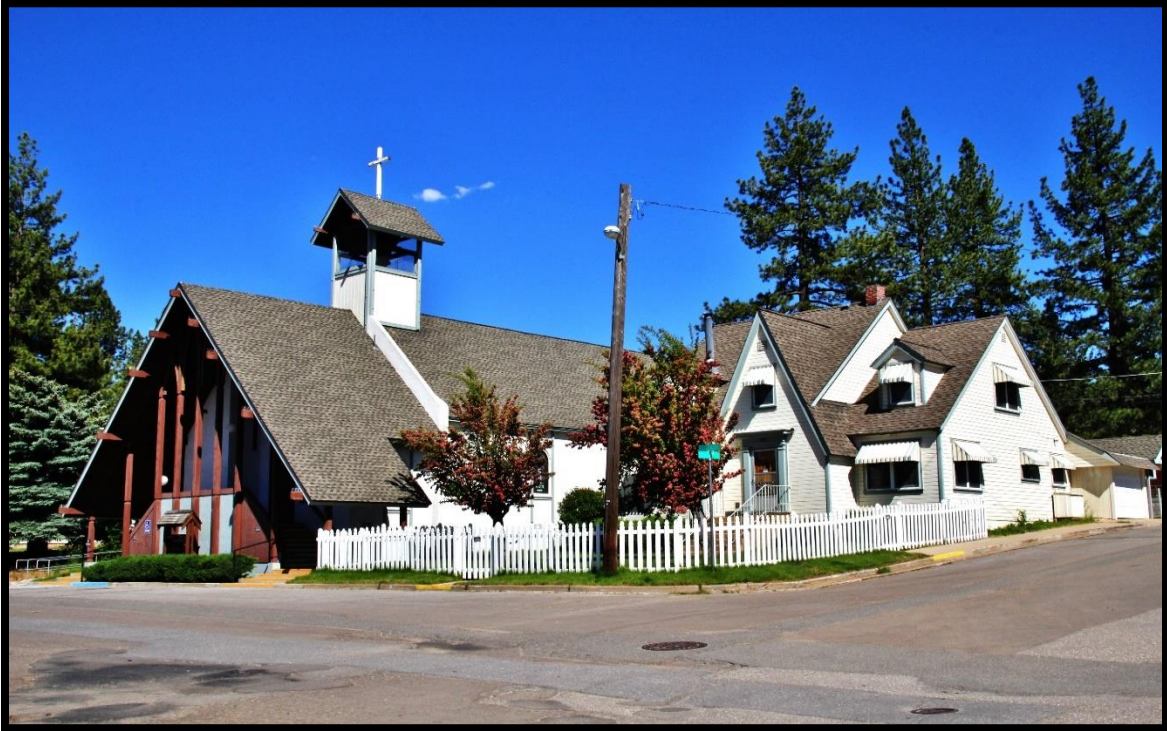


Photo by John E Boll

**Holy Family Church, Portola**



Photo by John E Boll

**Holy Rosary Mission Church, Loyalton**

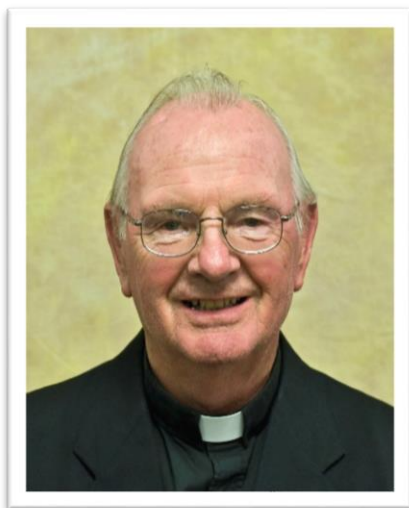
## **LOVED BY ALL**

The people admired Father Burns' leadership as he set out to raise funds to build a new social center in Portola and a parish hall in Loyalton. He accomplished both parish goals.

Agnes Gervais said it was Father Burns' natural connection with people that enriched people's lives spiritually in a very personal way. "Everyone loved him. He made everyone feel at home," she said. She spoke on the telephone to Father Burns when he called from Ireland just three weeks before. "Every time the firemen or Elks or anyone had a dinner, he would be there."

Bonnie White president of Holy Family's parish council and music coordinator at Holy Rosary Mission, said Father Burns truly enriched the lives of people he worked with in church ministry. "He always wanted us to grow spiritually and in our understanding of the liturgy," she said.

## **A GREAT NEIGHBOR**



**Father Anthony Traynor**

Father Anthony Traynor who was pastor of Saint John Parish in Quincy, the neighboring parish to Portola, knew Father Burns since 1971. For him, Father Burns was a great neighbor and an exemplary priest. "He loved his people and they loved him. Someone in Portola once told me that when people saw a light in his house, they knew everything was fine. He brought people a sense of security."

Father Traynor went on to say that Father Burns was an avid golfer who was known in the Ridge Deanery as "a great host" who frequently invited fellow priests into his home for dinner. He enjoyed life and took care of business at the same time.

## **RETIREMENT**

Father Burns retired from active ministry in 1998 and returned to his native Ireland to live. He would make annual trips from Ireland to California to visit friends and former parishioners in the diocese. His last visit to Portola was in 2005.

## **DEATH COMES TO FATHER BURNS**

Father Burns died suddenly of a heart attack in his own home in Cavan, Ireland on October 20, 2006 at the age of 77. Bishop William K Weigand, together with the priests of the diocese, celebrated a Memorial Mass for him at the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament in Sacramento on October 30. On November 8, Bishop Richard J Garcia celebrated a Memorial Mass for Father Burns at Holy Family Church in Portola.

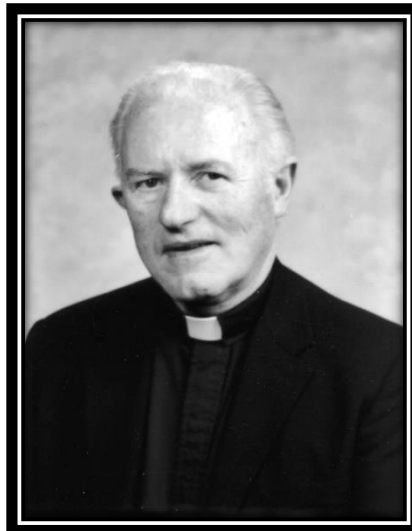
Among Father Burns' survivors were his brother, Father Edward Burns, who served as a priest in Ireland.

## IN MEMORIAM

Father Benny Burns was a fine human being and an excellent pastor. He was pastor of just one parish since he spent the next 30 years at Holy Family Parish, Portola and Holy Rosary Mission in Loyalton. He retired in 1998 as pastor emeritus of Holy Family Parish.

One of the unexpected moments in Father Benny's life was the time he was stricken with cancer of the jaw. He was lucky to have known Doctor Bob Prosser who had been a student at Saint Pius X Seminary in Galt as a youth. Doctor Bob had a medical practice in Reno and became Father Benny's surgeon. Father Benny had major jaw surgery that would leave him somewhat disfigured for the rest of his life. But he survived, returned to his ministry in Portola, and carried on in his usual friendly and welcoming way.

Father Benny was always a gracious host to the priests living and ministering in the Ridge Deanery. He was happy to welcome brother priests to his table in his rectory home in Portola. For all who knew him, he was an ideal pastor who journeyed with his people in the model of the Good Shepherd. The Church of Sacramento was blessed to have the presence and ministry of this fine priest. Like many who left their native Ireland to give their lives to the American missions, Father Benny spent his whole life of active ministry in the Diocese of Sacramento. After he retired, he was able to spend his last years back home in Cavan, Ireland. Thank you, Father Benny, for your life of ministry with us in the Gold Country of Northern California. We are better people because you journeyed with us and shared your life with us.



*May the God and Father of all  
Bring you, Father Benny, to His joyful  
Presence. He now says to you:  
Well Done, Good and Faithful Servant;  
Come and Rest from your Labors!*