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FATHER PATRICK O'KANE: AN ACTOR ON THE STAGE OF LIFE Church in the Gold Mines

By Father John Dwyer, printed July 1, 1976 in the *Catholic Herald*



Father Patrick O'Kane
Pastor of Saint James Parish, Georgetown for 25 years

Certainly the distinction of having lived the longest and having served in the most places in the old Grass Valley Diocese belongs to Father Patrick O'Kane.

Known in All Hallows Seminary as Patrick Keane from Listowel, County Kerry, he was one of 13 children. He attended All Hallows from 1860-1864. When he arrived in San Francisco at the end of 1865, arrangements were made with Bishop O'Connell that the handsome young deacon would be ordained in (Old) St Mary's Cathedral. The priesthood was conferred on him on

February 24, 1866 by the Bishop of Monterey, Thaddeus Amat. Two days later, the young priest arrived at the Cathedral in Marysville, but within a couple of months Bishop O'Connell was complaining about him: "He is no acquisition; he is too absent minded." Without a doubt the description of him written by Father Henry Walsh, SJ in his "*Hallowed Were the Gold Dust Trails*" is a classic:

"He was one of those actors on the stage of life whose every word and movement intrigues, being flavored with the spice of the dramatic. To all outward appearances he was the antithesis of Bishop O'Connell, the latter being an individual of the nervous, wiry and ascetic type, while to Father O'Kane life was one long sweet summer's day, and neither hurry or worry nor the opinions and the arguments of his fellow men could cause him to deviate one bit from the even tenor of his ways. To his credit though be it said that much as he might differ from the views of the Bishop, he never faltered in submitting to his commands with simple childlike obedience."

So absent minded and forgetful did Bishop O'Connell find him that he soon gave up trying to make Father O'Kane responsible for a parish. After a year as an assistant at the Marysville Cathedral, Bishop O'Connell appointed Father O'Kane to the parish of Weaverville, which at that time covered the counties of Trinity, Shasta and Tehama. When the new priests arrived from All Hallows in 1867, the Bishop decided after some months to break up this enormous parish and communicated the decision to Father O'Kane, who promptly answered that the parish was adequate for one priest. Bishop O'Connell responded in a letter to All Hallows:

"He couldn't convince the old bishop who lost no time in sending the first two available workmen to that expansive vineyard whilst O'Kane is translated to a section of country near Marysville. This good-enough-parish-for-one gentleman is now pastor of Oroville."

The Oroville assignment was also of short duration, the bishop then sending Father O'Kane to Red Bluff where he became its second pastor. This assignment lasted two years. Then Bishop O'Connell decided to try this strapping young man in the Missions of Nevada State. Father O'Kane moved successfully to Hamilton, then to Gold Hill and then to Treasure City in the White Pine County Missions.

Then Bishop O'Connell gave up. He decided that he would ask every pastor who had an assistant (himself included) to accept Father O'Kane as an assistant each in turn. So for the next twenty years we find a succession of assignments in Yreka, Nevada City, Grass Valley, Marysville, Gold Hill, Mendocino and Eureka.

Bishop O'Connell's successor, Bishop Manogue, appointed Father O'Kane pastor of Downieville where he stayed three years. But it was Bishop Grace who gave him an assignment destined to endure for 25 years, the parish of Georgetown between Auburn and Placerville.

It was while here that we get some glimpse into Father O'Kane's eccentricities. For example the schedule of Masses was listed: Mass at Coloma at 8 o'clock. Mass at Georgetown, generally speaking, at 10 o'clock.

Generally speaking usually meant 10:30 and often 11 o'clock. A former parishioner is quoted in Father Walsh's book who describes the implications: "By ten o'clock one Sunday morning we were all assembled for Mass in goodly numbers. I generally waited outside until I saw Father nearing the church before I went in. On this particular occasion ten thirty rolled around and still no Father O'Kane. About twenty minutes to eleven he drove up in his buggy, having said Mass over in Coloma. While helping tie up his horse, he engaged me in conversation and it was eleven o'clock before he made any movement to enter the sacristy. By eleven fifteen he appeared in the sanctuary with his server. Whilst he was arranging the Missal, he seemed to be disturbed a bit, and calling the altar boy, whispered to him to get the window pole out of the sacristy. Bidding the boy to go ahead of him, he strode solemnly down the aisle, wielding the pole in his right hand, much after the manner of a bishop. The reason for this maneuver was the presence of a woodpecker, which had chosen that particular time to peck a hole in the corner of the church.



Photo from Diocesan Archives

Original Saint James Church, Georgetown

Having successfully accomplished his mission without saying a word, and assuming an episcopal air again, the priest proceeded slowly up to the altar, put away his crozier and at last commenced the Mass. But Father O’Kane was not satisfied to begin the Mass according to the Latin rite. There were first some preparatory prayers in English which it had been the custom to recite in his old parish church in County Kerry, and these must first be said. Finally, the Mass was safely on its way, and after a half hour sermon on the Gospel of the day, the Mass was eventually brought to its conclusion about half past twelve.”

Father O’Kane used every opportunity to give a sermon: funerals, weddings, anytime he had a gathering of the people, and since he had no sense of time, such events were leisurely ones. What we of a century later may easily forget is the tremendous sacrifice of self involved in all this. After all, he had to rise early in order to hitch up his horse and buggy and drive to Coloma for the 8 o’clock Mass and this was without breakfast, not even a cup of water.

Then, after the Coloma Mass and the drive back to Georgetown there was the “generally speaking ten o’clock Mass.” He was lucky to be able to break his fast by one o’clock in the afternoon.

His life style was also extremely simple. From all his movings over the years he had few possessions and was content to live in a room at the rear of the church which served as his bedroom, office, kitchen and living room all in one.

One day when he was away in Sacramento some of the women of the parish in all good faith decided to make things more comfortable for him. They invaded his sanctuary of privacy, cleaned, scrubbed, polished and gave it a first class going over. New blankets and pillows, clean sheets were added and the whole place left in apple pie order. The next day around six o’clock in the evening Father O’Kane returned home, took one look, opened the window, took the pillows, ripped them open and spilled their feathery contents to the winds announcing in his clear voice – “that will teach the busy bodies not to interfere in a man’s private affairs.”

Yet in spite of his eccentricities this very good simple priest touched the lives of thousands in the 60 years of priesthood he gave in the old Grass Valley and Sacramento Dioceses. When he died on July 22, 1926 at the age of 85, few priests have left behind them as many memories and did as much good for souls as the absent minded Father Patrick O’Kane.



Photos by John E Boll 2013

Saint James Church, Georgetown Today

