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MONSIGNOR THOMAS E HORGAN A Temporary Loan That Turned Into 65 Years of Service

By Eleanor Doyle, printed in the January 1962 issue of the *Catholic Herald*

Monsignor Thomas Horgan was a prelate who served the Sacramento Diocese since it was a sprawling, gangling teenager. He came only on a five year loan basis from his native County Kerry and stayed on for 53 more years. His imprint on the warp and woof of his adopted land is legend and indelible. This priest now retires from active pastoral duty.



Monsignor Thomas E Horgan, Vicar General

Monsignor Thomas E Horgan, Vicar General for four bishops, Marysville pastor since 1944, only priest of the diocese to be given the distinguished honor from a Pontiff of Protonotary Apostolic, is qualified to measure the todays against the yesterdays.

Unlike those who cannot see the forest for the trees, he remembers when the trees, in this instance diocesan structure, were spindling shoots. He was on the spot to see them mature into the forest which is the diocesan fabric today.

Via Horse and Buggy

Hard as it is to imagine, this urbane, patrician gentleman once braved the rugged mountain regions for weeks on end, reining his team of horses along mere whispers of buggy paths as he brought the sacraments to his scattered Catholic families in undeveloped Northern California counties. "Yes, I am something like the 'Man Who Came to Dinner'," Monsignor Horgan admits when remarking that he originally came here on a five year loan because his own diocese in Ireland had an overflow of priests.

He was ordained at the Irish College in Paris, France, on June 7, 1903, at a time in history when the penal laws forbade seminaries in Ireland. When his bishop allowed him to go to the mission country for a limited time, his first choice was the Sacramento diocese where his cousin, Father Thomas W. Horgan, was assigned. Seven years later he requested and received permission to remain in Sacramento.



Photo from the Ford Car Collection

Model T Ford

The diocesan archives are replete with the accomplishments which have sprung from the administration capabilities of Monsignor Horgan, long noted for his erudition and speaking eloquence. But a singular achievement, surely never placed in the record books, which obviously delights him most, is the fact he was the first clergyman “on the other side of the mountains” (while Truckee pastor) to own an automobile.

“It was in 1915 that I bought a Model-T Ford”, he reminisced. “It cost \$497.10 delivered to Truckee and it was the best purchase I ever made. I would have to stable my team of horses in the winter when roads were impassable, and those animals ate their heads off. But the Ford, through the winter months when it couldn’t be used, never cost a cent.”

Monsignor Horgan remembers the night he stepped off the Chicago train in Sacramento at two in the morning. “It was no hour to present myself at the Cathedral rectory,” he explained, “so I went to the Western Hotel, then the finest in the town, and checked into one of its best rooms for 50 cents.”

His first assignment in the diocese was as assistant pastor in Jackson, then a territory of dwindling mining activity. “When I first went there,” said Monsignor Horgan, “the sound of the mills at night would keep me awake. After a short time, if for some reason they broke down, the quiet would awaken me from a sound sleep. In those days, with mine safety measures nonexistent, the biggest part of my priestly duties was to help bury the dead.”

In 1906, Bishop Thomas Grace sent the young assistant to Truckee as pastor. For the next few years he was to know the actual meaning of the word “pioneer” as he traveled by horse and buggy (until the Model-T) from Tahoe on the south, Nevada on the east, crest of the High Sierra on the west, and the Oregon border to the north.



Photo by John E Boll 2011

The Old Parish Facilities in Truckee Where Father Horgan Once Lived

This large area was his parish territory, including mission churches in Sierra Valley, Greenville and Alturas. In this latter place when he arrived in 1906, only the walls of the church had been constructed. For many decades they stood as gaunt sentinels, a casualty of a severe Modoc winter which killed off all the cattle and left financial ruin in its wake. Ultimately, during young Father Horgan's pastorate, a roof was set on the building and the church serves the Alturas Catholic flock to this day.



Photo by John E Boll 2011

Sacred Heart Church, Alturas

Language Barrier

In retrospect, Monsignor Horgan chuckled as he recalled a night when he became lost in an unexpected snow storm en route to Susanville from Alturas. "In the blizzard, I made a wrong turn," he explained, "but fortunately came to a large farm where I was hospitably received and my horses stabled for the night. The people proved to be North Irishmen, Orangemen, but they were gracious. After dinner, when the mother had explained to the young son that I was a priest, he went into the kitchen and told their Chinese cook that a 'priest' was out there." The prelate, who on Monday officially becomes pastor emeritus of St Joseph Parish, Marysville, explained that later in the evening it was discovered that all the dinner dishes were still on the

sink and the cook nowhere in sight. A check of the house and his room failed to locate him. However, upon perusing the outdoor area, they found his apron flung over a woodpile.



Photo by John E Boll 2011

Interior of Sacred Heart Church, Alturas

Nagging Conscience

“Apparently the Chinese cook had understood the small boy to say ‘police’ instead of ‘priest’; he must have had a troubled conscience because I later learned he was never seen or heard of again,” he laughed. For years afterwards, Monsignor’s host that night would kid him and say: “You’re alright, Father, but you sure lost me a darn good cook.”

Those early years were a lesson in the hospitality of the west to Monsignor Horgan. Twice each year he would make a visitation trip throughout the parish which took six weeks of travel each time. He was always welcomed and boarded at the homes of his parishioners where he would offer Mass if there was no church in the immediate area.

He vividly recalls when springtime would arrive in the High Sierra, people would take teams of horses up to Donner summit and help pack down the road so it could be reopened again to traffic.

In 1917, Father Horgan was assigned as pastor of Carson City, Nevada, then part of the diocesan territory, and in his words this was tantamount to “living in the lap of luxury.” “I not only had a house but also a housekeeper and was able to celebrate public Mass every Sunday.”



Archives of the Diocese of Reno

The Present St Teresa of Avila Parish, Carson City, Nevada

In October 1922, Father Horgan was named rector of Sacramento’s Cathedral by the second bishop he was to serve, Bishop Patrick J Keane, who also named him vicar general.

Administered Diocese

“However, I was a VG in pectore,” he explained, “as the Monsignor, who had served under Bishop Grace who was still living. So my appointment was never publicly proclaimed until after his death, which occurred several years later.”

In 1929, after Bishop Armstrong was installed fourth bishop of Sacramento, Monsignor Horgan, who had been invested as a domestic prelate in 1925, was again appointed vicar general. By virtue of his previous appointment, he had administered the diocese between the death of Bishop Keane in September of 1928 and the arrival of Bishop Armstrong the following spring.

During his tenure at the Cathedral where he helped with the early formation of many diocesan priests assigned to him, he was responsible for the building of the new St Joseph School buildings, an addition on Grace Day Home, Holy Angels School, and the present Cathedral rectory.

Those were the years when he was the foremost representative of the Catholic Church in the eyes of the community. One of his former assistants says it best: "He evoked a feeling of pride in you for his representation of the Church, both to Catholics and non-Catholics alike."

His sense of justice and fairness are legend to those who served with him, as well as his selfless devotion to the priesthood. Although his illness in recent years has kept him from mounting the pulpit to speak to his flock, he is remembered for his arresting approach to sermon topics in bygone times. Monsignor Horgan practiced the art of brevity. To quote a local pastor: "He said all that had to be said and incomparably better than anyone had ever said it."

Monsignor Horgan represents the diocese's clerical link with the past. Since the Sacramento Diocese was formally erected in 1886, he has given it his priestly services for all but 17 years of its existence. Only one bishop preceded his tenure here, Bishop Patrick Manogue, who died eight years before Monsignor Horgan was ordained.

Monsignor Thomas Horgan, V.G., P.A. died in Mercy Hospital in Sacramento on September 27, 1968, just short of his 89th birthday on October 21. He was the longest living priest of the diocese at that time. His priestly ministry spanned 65 years and he served five bishops of the Diocese of Sacramento, Bishops Grace, Keane, Armstrong, McGucken and Bell, and served four of those bishops as Vicar General of the Diocese of Sacramento. He served as the vicar general until his death even though he retired from his final pastorate at St Joseph Church in Marysville in 1962.

At the Funeral Mass held in the Cathedral, Bishop Alden J Bell was the principal celebrant and Archbishop Joseph T McGucken of San Francisco did the final commendation. Monsignor Thomas H Markham who was director of the Catholic Welfare Bureau and pastor of Holy Rosary Parish in Woodland, gave the homily. He told the community gathered at the Mass that Monsignor Horgan "was the initiator of most of the social welfare programs the Church is operating in the diocese today. He was a unique and important figure in this community. He was the adviser of civic and business leaders, yet characteristically, he seldom appeared in public affairs over which he exerted such tremendous influence. In fact, he shunned publicity entirely. He had such moral power of persuasion that he did not have to be seen. He was an educator, an organizer of projects, a marshaller of human energies – but he was any and all of these things only in so far as they served his major commitment: to engage in the ministry that sanctified the people of God. In all the magnificence of his mind and soul, he exemplified extreme courtesy and reverence, and complete obedience to his bishops, all of his bishops."

Upon hearing of the death of Monsignor Horgan, Bishop Bell summed up the sense of loss felt by clergy and laity alike when he said: "It is like having the cedars of Lebanon topple over."

Besides Bishop Bell and Archbishop McGucken, concelebrants at the Funeral Mass were Monsignors Gerald O'Driscoll, Patrick McHugh, Raymond Renwald, Thomas Markham, Cornelius Higgins and Fathers Cornelius S O'Connor, Raymond Rolf, John Terwilliger, Vito Mistretta and William Horgan, a distant cousin.

Monsignor Horgan had been honored twice by Pontiffs, in 1925 by Pope Pius XI who named him a Domestic Prelate, and in 1948 by Pope Pius XII who appointed him a Protonotary Apostolic.

Thomas Horgan was the son of the late Mr and Mrs Edmond Horgan. He was preceded in death by two brothers, Jack of Reno and Patrick of Oakland. Surviving him were his sister, Mother Mary Clement, SM, of St John's Convent, Tralee, Ireland; brothers Father Joseph Horgan and Dr William Horgan of Cartref, Wales.

Monsignor Horgan was buried in the Priests' Plot at St Mary Cemetery in Sacramento. He was a servant of God who gave his life in wise and caring ministry to the people of this Church of Sacramento. We trust that he is now fully alive in the Kingdom of God. May his memory be held in great esteem and gratitude by the generations yet to be born.



Photo from the Catholic Herald

**Monsignor Horgan speaks at the Funeral Mass for Bishop Robert Armstrong
January 1957**