

# SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

Vol 3

Father John E Boll, Diocesan Archives

No 33

## *Father James McKnight*

Native of Newry, County Armagh, Ireland

Priest of the Diocese of Sacramento

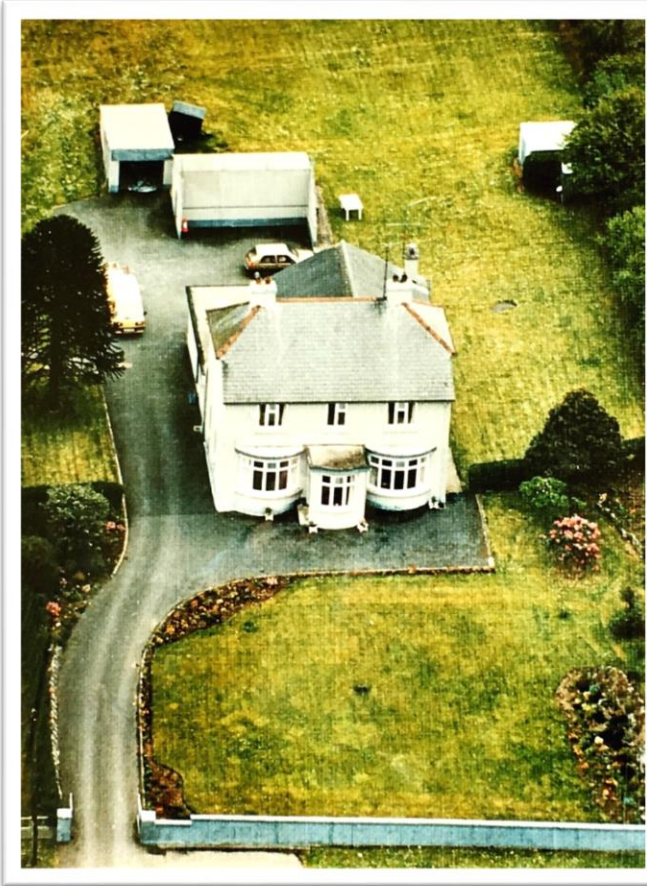
Pastor Emeritus of Saint Canice Parish, Nevada City, CA

April 2017



**James McKnight was born on June 15, 1934** in Newry, County Armagh, Ireland, the third of six children born to George McKnight and Ellen Brady. The McKnight children are Michael, John, James, Bridie, Felix and Mary.

## GROWING UP DURING WORLD WAR II



Jim grew up during World War II and remembers having to wear a gas mask when he walked to school. There was rationing of food staples in those days and the McKnight family lived on the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The Irish Republic was neutral and the north, because it was part of the United Kingdom, had the same rationing as England.

Jim remembers the British Army going around the area looking for any kind of iron to confiscate for the war effort. Jim's father dug a large hole in the back field and buried the driveway metal gate so the British Army would not take it.

### The McKnight Family Home in Newry

Because of rationing in the north, food staples like sugar, tea, flour and butter were hard to get. Almost everyone who lived along the border would cross into the Republic of Ireland to buy food staples and then smuggle them across the border for use by the family or for selling on the black market.

Photo courtesy of Fr James McKnight



**George and Ellen McKnight, Father Jim's Parents**

## **THE AMERICAN ARMY**

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, the United States entered the European theater of battle and came to Newry in 1942. The US military established a large base in the area. Jim served Mass for the US Catholic chaplain at the local parish church. The chaplain liked to smoke an Irish brand of cigarettes called *Sweet Afton* and asked Jim and other young boys to cycle across the border to buy him some of these cigarettes. Jim cycled the backroads to avoid the police and customs officers, crossed the border, purchased the cigarettes and cycled back across the border. For him this was an exciting adventure and great fun even though he did not grasp the possible consequences if he were caught smuggling cigarettes across the border.

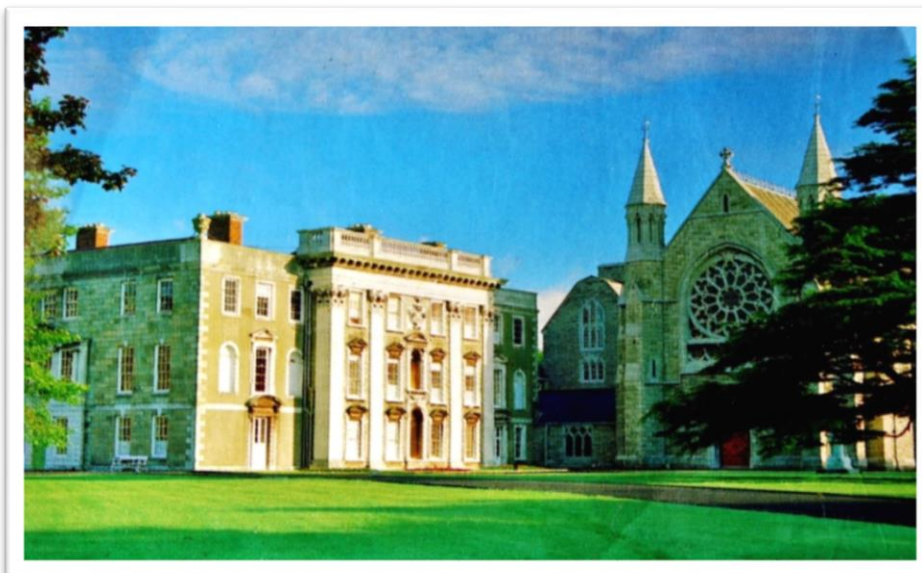
American soldiers threw a party for all the Irish children of the area in a local hall. In the middle of the hall was a large vat of boiling cooking oil where the soldiers made donuts for the children. Jim thought the donuts were gravy rings.

## **JIM BEGINS SCHOOL**

As he began primary school, Jim attended classes at the Christian Brothers School in Newry. When he advanced to high school, he continued with the Christian Brothers for three years. His parents then decided to send him to Saint Patrick boarding school in Armagh for the last 3 years.

## **FIRST STIRINGS OF A VOCATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD**

Jim had no intention of being a priest until his last year of high school when he began to think about priesthood seriously. To be accepted into Saint Patrick Seminary, Maynooth, the seminary for all the dioceses in Ireland, a student had to have studied and passed Greek in his leaving certificate. Since Jim had never studied Greek, Maynooth would not accept him as a student. The Vincentian president of his college in Armagh suggested that he write a letter to the Vincentian president of All Hallows College, Dublin about entering the seminary there. Jim wrote to All Hallows and was accepted for studies. In his first year, the president asked Jim if he would be willing to sign up for the diocese of Sacramento which he did.



**All Hallows College, Dublin, Ireland**

### **SEMINARY LIFE AT ALL HALLOWS**

In those years, seminaries taught their courses in Latin and at the first class of Jim's logic course the professor gave an example of a syllogism from the textbook written by a man named Hickey. The example was "Hickey is difficult because it is in Latin." Jim thought to himself, "What am I doing here in this place?" The president asked Jim if he wanted to take classes at University College, Dublin. He began his studies there and received a bachelor's degree in English. This enabled him to escape classes taught in Latin at the seminary. While at University College, Jim continued living at All Hallows College but took classes at the University College campus.

### **ORDINATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD**

Jim did four years of theological studies at All Hallows College and was ordained a priest for the diocese of Sacramento on June 14, 1959 in All Hallows Seminary Chapel. There were 42 men ordained that year in All Hallows for English speaking dioceses all over the world.

### **SAILING TO AMERICA**

Father McKnight left Ireland from the port of Cobh on a Sunday evening in September 1959 and arrived in New York the following Friday. He stayed with an aunt and cousins for a week in New York and then joined his classmates for the flight to San Francisco where they were met by Fathers Cornelius Higgins and Arnold Meagher. Upon arrival in Sacramento, Father McKnight was dropped off at the Cathedral, Father Ignatius Haran at Saint Joseph rectory in North Sacramento, Father Mick Culligan at Immaculate Conception rectory with Father Thomas Kirby and Father Enda Maguire at Sacred Heart rectory, Sacramento.

In 1962, just before the creation of three new dioceses, Father Culligan was sent to Saint Bernard Church in Eureka and became part of the new Santa Rosa Diocese. Father McGuire was sent to Sonora and became part of the Stockton diocese.

### **FIRST ASSIGNMENT, CATHEDRAL**



Father McKnight's first assignment was to the Cathedral to assist Monsignor Raymond Renwald who was pastor. Father Jim says that Monsignor Renwald was a great pastor. In those days, the cathedral was a skid-row area. During his first month at the cathedral he had no car. One night he received a sick call at about 11 pm and had to walk to 2<sup>nd</sup> and J Streets. As he walked along, a large homeless man told Father Jim he should not be out at that hour of the night by himself. This man accompanied him to the address. As it happened, the address Jim jotted down was the wrong house. He rang the doorbell and was met by a lady of the night. She said to him, "Father, this is a 'sporting house' so you must have the wrong address." Father McKnight had no idea what either 'a lady of the night' or a "sporting house" was. He had to grow up fast because the seminary never taught him anything about these sorts of things.

### **TRANSFER TO AUBURN**

Father McKnight's next assignment was to Saint Joseph Parish in Auburn from 1964 to 1966. This was another learning experience for him. The other assistant was Father Andy O'Donnell whose appointment included a part-time teaching assignment to the novices at the Auburn Convent of Mercy Sisters. Father Jim said that Father O'Donnell was witty and funny and they had great fun together.



Photo by John E Boll

**Saint Joseph Church, Auburn**

### **NEXT ASSIGNMENT, PLACERVILLE**

In 1966 Father Jim was transferred to Saint Patrick Parish in Placerville to assist Father Cornelius F O'Connor. It was in Placerville that he first met John Boll who had just transferred to Saint Patrick Seminary in Menlo Park. These years in Placerville were happy ones for Father McKnight.



Photo by John E Boll

**Saint Patrick Church, Hall and Rectory, Placerville**

While in Placerville, Father Jim happened to meet two parishioners who were part of the Mattachine Society. An article was featured in the San Francisco Chronicle about this society and

stated that a couple living in Placerville were the leaders of the group in San Francisco. Father Jim soon found out that this was one of the first homophile groups in the United States. Once again, another one of those surprise moments for Jim McKnight.

He enjoyed the Placerville community and attended all the home games of football and basketball at the local El Dorado County High School.

### **ASSIGNED TO YUBA CITY**



Photo by John E Boll

### **Saint Isidore Church, Yuba City**

Father McKnight's next assignment to Saint Isidore Parish in Yuba City was a short two years. His new pastor was Father Bernard McElwee and he enjoyed being with Father Barney because he embraced the changes of the Second Vatican Council and put them into effect in the parish. Both Fathers McElwee and Joseph Bishop worked together on social justice issues in the parish. When César Chávez came to Yuba City, he stayed at the rectory, thanks to the hospitality of Fathers McElwee and Bishop.

Father McKnight came to know parishioner Juan Corona who attended daily Mass during Lent at Saint Isidore Church. In 1971, a number of Mexican farm workers were murdered in the Yuba City area and Juan Corona was accused of the murders and later convicted.

### **SAINT CHARLES PARISH, SACRAMENTO**

Father Jim's final assignment before becoming a pastor was his 18 months at Saint Charles Parish in Sacramento. This too was an interesting time for him. He learned a lot from Monsignor James Poole about overseeing a modern parish. He learned how to conduct well organized meetings, work with parish councils, school boards and the other boards and groups in a parish. Monsignor Poole taught him that when dealing with a difficult situation in the parish, the pastor must not

lose his temper or demeanor. These were important lessons to learn and helped Father Jim when he became a pastor.



Photo by John E Boll

### **Saint Charles Church, Sacramento**

#### **FIRST PASTORATE - SACRED HEART PARISH, ANDERSON**

Father McKnight was appointed pastor of Sacred Heart Parish in Anderson and he says it was a great community, thanks in part, to Father Walter Albrecht who was the founding pastor. When building the Anderson church, Father Albrecht enlisted the help of everyone in the parish. It was the volunteer labor of the men, women and children of the parish that literally built the church with the gift of their time and talent.



Photo by John E Boll

### **Sacred Heart Church, Anderson**

During his eight years as pastor, Father McKnight built a new rectory and a parish hall. A lot of the labor was donated by the professionals of the community. Weekly bingo became the main financial support for the parish school and helped keep it going for many years. When the local lumber company in Anderson closed leaving a lot of unemployment in the town, the parishioners were generous in giving of their time and talent to the parish.

#### **NEXT PARISH, SAINT MONICA, WILLOWS**



Photo by John E Boll

#### **Saint Monica Church, Willows**

Saint Monica parish in Willows was Father Jim's next pastorate for ten years. The parish was a farming community and the people were close to the land and to their parish. He enjoyed his ministry with the people of Willows.

#### **FINAL PARISH ASSIGNMENT, SAINT CANICE PARISH, NEVADA CITY**

Father McKnight's final pastorate was Saint Canice Parish in Nevada City where he served for ten years. Nevada City is a lovely town nestled in the Sierra foothills. In the days when mining was the main employer in the Grass Valley and Nevada City areas, the miners lived primarily in Grass Valley while the owners of the mines lived in Nevada City. There are many beautiful Victorian homes sprinkled throughout the Nevada City area.

Saint Canice Church was built in 1864 by Father John Griffin during the pastorate of Father Thomas Dalton. While Father Dalton was in Ireland, the original church burned to the ground. Father Griffin built the church that stands today and serves as the parish church for Nevada City. Father McKnight says that his ten years at Saint Canice Church were happy ones for him.





Photo by John E Boll

### **Saint Canice Church, Nevada City**

Father McKnight says that Nevada City is a great community to live in. There are many interesting people in the community, retired professionals, artists and poets, and some old hippies from the 1960s who were lapsed Catholics. Father Jim came to know them all. Nevada City is a cross-section of people who make up American society. He had to prepare well for his Sunday homily because he was speaking to professors, business owners, gold miners and old hippies.

#### **A TIME TO RETIRE**

Having reached the age of 70, Father McKnight decided it was time for him to retire. He stepped down as pastor of Saint Canice parish in 2004 and moved to his own home which he purchased before his retirement. Having the freedom to come and go as he chooses, Father Jim lives part of the year at his home in Grass Valley and the other part of the year in Newry, Ireland close to his brothers and sisters who live in Ireland.

#### **ARCHIVIST'S COMMENT**

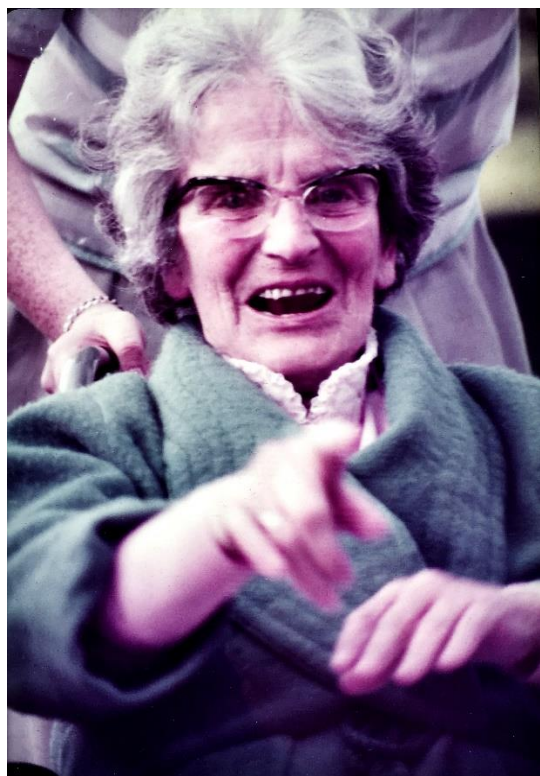
Father Jim McKnight came as a 25 year old newly ordained priest from Ireland to serve the Church of Sacramento. During his nearly six decades of ministry in the diocese, Father Jim became a wise and faithful priest, pastor and friend to many people. He has served as a priest in large cities, rural farming communities and towns nestled in the Sierra foothills.

He served as an assistant to various pastors who had different visions and styles of ministry but these experiences helped Father McKnight minister to all kinds of people from different backgrounds, mentalities, spiritual heritages and ideas. He understands and appreciates the complexity of human life and the struggles that are part of family life. Through his life-long adventure of being a priest in the gold rush area of California, Father Jim learned to accept people as they are and always strives to be open, compassionate and patient with all.

We thank Father Jim McKnight for his half century of service to the Church of Sacramento and we wish him good health, continued adventures and many happy years in retirement.

## *Ad Multos Annos*

### **Photos of Father Jim McKnight's Family**



**Ellen McKnight**  
**Two years before her death**



**George McKnight**



**Father Jim McKnight on his Ordination Day  
With his family  
June 14, 1959**



At the Port of Cobh, Father McKnight is ready to board the *Mauritania* to America  
With Classmates Fathers Haran, Culligan and Maguire



Jim with his brother Michael seated in the middle and friends in Ireland

FATHER MCKNIGHT'S RETIREMENT CELEBRATION IN NEVADA CITY



Photos courtesy of Fr James McKnight



# All Hallows College, Dublin Young Priests

1959



REV. J. MCKNIGHT (SACRAMENTO)



REV. E. FULLEN (SALFORD)



REV. E. MAGUIRE (SACRAMENTO)



REV. M. TWOMEY (SALFORD)



REV. M. O'CONNELL (SALFORD)



REV. J. DEANE (SAN ANTONIO)



REV. P. SHEAHAN (SALFORD)



REV. F. MCLAUGHLIN (NOTTINGHAM)



REV. T. O'CONNOR (LEEDS)



REV. M. McALARY (SYDNEY)



REV. M. CULLIGAN (SACRAMENTO)



REV. J. FOLEY (LOS ANGELES)



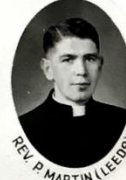
REV. W. BRADLEY (SOUTHPARK)



REV. J.K. BOLAND (SAVANNAH)



REV. F. CASSIDY (LOS ANGELES)



REV. P. MARTIN (LEEDS)



REV. J. A. CORRIGAN (ST. JOHNS NEWFOUNDLAND)



REV. D. GEARTY (LOS ANGELES)



REV. J. BURKE (ATLANTA)



REV. N. STRETTON (DULUTH)



REV. J. J. DALY (GOU. BURN)



REV. C. STAPLETON (WELLINGTON)



REV. J. KANE (BATHURST)



REV. R. McDONAGH (CARDIFF)



REV. D. HANRAHAN (OKLAHOMA)



REV. T. HARAN (SACRAMENTO)



REV. H. WHELAN (ST. JOHNS NEWFOUNDLAND)



REV. F. EGAN (SYDNEY)



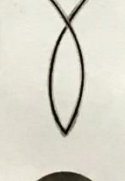
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REV. A. G. STEEN (NOTTINGHAM)



REV. B. LONG (CAPE TOWN)



REV. P. O'CONNOR (SALFORD)



REV. W. J. MAGUIRE (HARBOUR GRACE GRAND FALLS)



REV. M. CULLIGAN (MELBOURNE)



REV. F. M. GRABAU (MELBOURNE)



REV. W. F. DONEGAN (MELBOURNE)



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REV. M. CULLIGAN (MELBOURNE)



REV. D. REDDEN (GALLOWAY)



REV. J. GORMAN (CAPE TOWN)



REV. J. BARRY (PORT ELIZABETH)



REV. G. FITZGERALD (MELBOURNE)



REV. K. JOHNSTON (BUNBURY)



REV. L. CLOSE (DUNEDIN)



REV. E. DOWD (GRAND ISLAND)

EUNTES DOCETE OMNES GENTES

Ordination class photo courtesy of Fr James McKnight

All Hallows College Ordination Class of 1959



Photo by John E Boll

**Father Jim McKnight, retired and at home in Grass Valley 2017**