

SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

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THE DIOCESE OF SACRAMENTO Establishes its Own Minor Seminary

By Father John E. Boll

From the first days of the creation of the Vicariate of Marysville in 1860 and the appointment of Father Eugene O'Connell of Ireland as bishop, Irish born priests had a natural connection to California through Bishop O'Connell. O'Connell had been a professor of theology at All Hallows Seminary, Dublin, Ireland, when Pope Pius IX named him bishop of the Vicariate and through his connection to All Hallows College and other seminaries in Ireland, he was able to tap seminarians and newly ordained priests to come to Marysville to join him in this new California adventure. For one hundred years, almost all the priests who served the Vicariate of Marysville, the Diocese of Grass Valley and the Diocese of Sacramento were native Irish. San Francisco began the first permanent seminary program for native vocations in California only in the 1890s.

The Church of Sacramento owes a great debt of thanks to the hundreds of Irish priests who have faithfully served the People of God living in the great Sacramento Valley and the towns and hamlets in the California Sierra Mountains. Early bishops, Patrick Manogue (1881-1895) and Thomas Grace (1896-1921) relied on a steady stream of priests from Ireland and did not develop a native clergy in Sacramento. However, this would change.

By the end of World War I, an aging Bishop Grace came under greater pressure from the



Bishop Thomas Grace

Archbishop of San Francisco to recruit native priests. Occasional visitors from Rome also suggested that he ordain American-born men. Grace always insisted that he had "all the priests he needed." A penurious and old fashioned man (he once had phones taken out of his residence) he regularly pointed to the meager financial resources of the diocese as an excuse. Few diocesan parishes, he insisted, could actually support a priest.



Bishop Patrick Keane

In 1919 Pope Benedict XV issued the Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* which outlined his vision for mission territories. He urged missionaries to phase themselves out by raising up a native clergy to replace them. Apostolic Delegates to the United States promoted this vision, and when Grace was compelled to accept Father Patrick Keane as an auxiliary, the new bishop had orders from both Archbishop Edward Hanna of San Francisco and the Apostolic Delegate to press for native clergy.

Bishop Keane succeeded Grace in 1922 and moved forward to build up the local school system as a feeder for vocations. He gave his permission for Christian Brothers School to expand and improve their facilities by relocating from 12th and L Streets to 21st and Broadway. He sold his own home and used the proceeds to help build Holy Angels School on 7th and S Street. His hopes to advance the cause of a native clergy were cut short by his premature death in September 1928.

Bishop Robert Armstrong



Bishop Robert Armstrong (1929-1957) was the first American-born bishop to serve in Sacramento. He was sympathetic to the cause of native clergy, but was stymied by the bad economic conditions of the 1930s and then the onset of World War II. Nonetheless, he welcomed priests who applied to the diocese from other parts of the country. Stephen Keating, Raymond Renwald, Vito Mistretta, Anthony Mayo, and Eugene Lucas were welcomed from outside California. Other native Californians like Richard Dwyer (whose family had deep Catholic roots in the area), Thomas “Harry”

Markham, Walter Albrecht and John Terwilliger were also added to the presbyterate. Irish priests like Cornelius Higgins continued to come into the diocese, but not in great numbers—at least until World War II was over.

Fathers Richard Dwyer and Harry Markham did a lot to raise the concern for local vocations. These two native priests formed a Saint John Vianney League to which American priests donated money from their meager monthly salaries in order to recruit and pay for American boys to go to the seminary. Dwyer and Father John Terwilliger edited the Catholic newspaper and shared their enthusiasm for vocations.

Father Thomas Kirby, a native of County Kerry, Ireland, also played an important role in the administration of Bishop Armstrong. He wore many hats of leadership in the 1940s and 1950s. After World War II the growth of Catholicism in California was so fast-paced and intense that with Bishop Armstrong’s permission, Kirby began regular visits to Irish seminaries (Wexford, Waterford, Kilkenny, Thurles, All Hallows, and Maynooth). He was quite successful in recruiting Irish seminarians to commit to Sacramento and a steady stream of Irish priests once again arrived in Sacramento until the early 1970s.

In the days of the great vocation boom after World War II, many local young men expressed interest in becoming priests. However, they met with a mixed response from Irish pastors. Some priests, like Monsignor Michael Lyons of Sacred Heart Parish in Sacramento, were positive and encouraging. Others told American aspirants to the priesthood, “We have enough priests from Ireland so we do not need you.” Young men were told to contact the Franciscans, Dominicans or Jesuits. Other boys were urged to go to the minor seminary in San Francisco.

Toward the end of his administration in Sacramento, Bishop Armstrong made a decisive move to begin cultivating local vocations to the priesthood for service in the diocese of Sacramento and established a minor seminary named St Pius X Seminary in 1955.

Father Steven Avella writes in his history of the Diocese of Sacramento, "The immediate cause of Bishop Armstrong's resolve was the decision of seminary officials in San Francisco in the 1950s to limit the number of Sacramento boys they would take into their over-crowded minor seminary in Mountain View. If a Sacramento lad wanted to test a vocation to the priesthood, he either had to enter a religious order or abandon the plan until he finished high school. At just this time (1954) an offer to staff a new seminary came from the Midwestern-based Society of the Divine Savior (Salvatorian Fathers and Brothers) which already operated successful minor seminaries in New Jersey, Wisconsin, and Iowa.

"The Salvatorian emissary, Father Timothy Lickteig (who bore an uncanny resemblance to Bishop Armstrong in physical features and temperament) presented himself to local church officials pledging faculty and staff for a minor seminary. 'Armstrong,' Lickteig wrote to his superior, 'acted as though I were the answer to a prayer.' Despite opposition from all but two of his consultors (Michael Lyons and John E. Tumulty) and skepticism from many Irish priests who favored Catholic high schools instead of a minor seminary, Bishop Armstrong plowed ahead. He moved Lickteig into the episcopal mansion, and the two men, with the help of Father Thomas Kirby, secured temporary quarters for the new seminary in an old lumberjack hotel owned by the Catholic Bertain family in the small village of Metropolitan in Humboldt County.

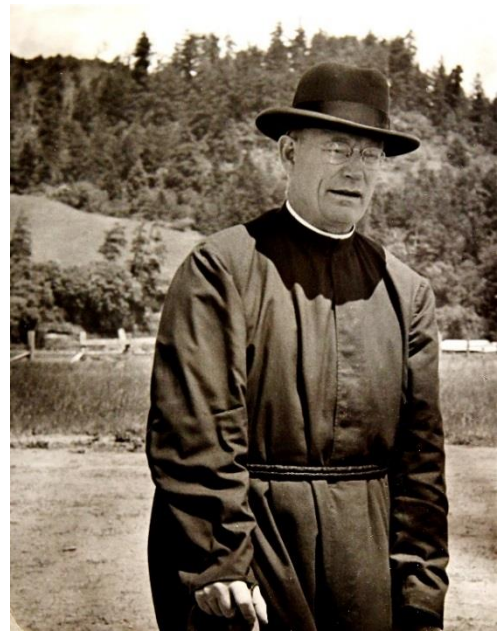


Photo by John E Boll 1958

Father Timothy Lickteig, S.D.S.

Saint Pius X Minor Seminary, Rio Dell, California



Photo by John E Boll 1959

Saint Pius X Seminary, Rio Dell

"The seminary, named for the recently canonized Saint Pius X, had its mail delivered at nearby Rio Dell. Eventually, Salvatorian Father Cletus LeMere became the diocesan director of vocations, patiently traveling to parochial schools to interest eighth graders in the seminary. The first classes at Pius X began in September 1955 with 23 students, and among those in the first classes were future diocesan priests James Kidder, John Folmer, Gerald Ryle, and John Boll. The former hotel survived floods from the Eel River and needed constant renovation. It soon became so crowded that an old mansion on Folsom Blvd. owned by local furniture mogul Robert Breuner was rented as an annex for Sacramento-based seminarians."

I entered Saint Pius X Seminary, Rio Dell, in September 1958, and was part of that year's freshman class of 28 students. The seminary was located about a quarter mile from the Eel River and the seminarians often went to the river after classes in the afternoon to hike, explore, swim and just have fun.

Brother Quentin and Seminarians Plow the Fields



Photo by John E Boll 1959

Brother Quentin Novinska SDS raised cows and pigs on the seminary farm and slaughtered them, with the help of some of the seminarians. He was also a skilled carpenter and landscaper.

Delicious meals were prepared daily for the seminary staff and students by Brother Bonfilio Armijo SDS with the help of Dick Deaner, a layman from Los Angeles, who worked at the seminary until it closed in Rio Dell in 1961.

The seminary was located in a beautiful valley along the Eel River surrounded by giant redwoods which towered skyward along the north coast of California. It was a beautiful setting and we were privileged to have lived in that beautiful redwood valley in the mid to late 1950s.



Photo by John E Boll 1959

Saint Pius X Seminary, Rio Dell, by the Eel River in Humboldt County

In 1955, with Bishop Armstrong's health failing, Pope Pius XII appointed Bishop Joseph McGucken, auxiliary of Los Angeles, as co-adjutor of Sacramento (1955-1962). When he arrived in the diocese, Saint Pius X Seminary was up and running in the northwest corner of the diocese. Bishop McGucken visited the seminary as often as he could. However, it was a seven hour car ride from Sacramento to Rio Dell. As the enrollment of seminarians grew, it was obvious that the Rio Dell facility was inadequate to meet the needs of an ever increasing number of seminarians.



After Armstrong's death in 1957, Bishop McGucken began a major fund drive to build a new minor seminary closer to Sacramento. Henry Need, a farmer in the Galt area, donated a large section of land as a site for the new seminary. The Galt site met with opposition from some clergy because they believed Galt was too far from Sacramento. Other sites were considered for the seminary as well like land near Calvary Cemetery in Citrus Heights. Forty acres in the Orangevale area were offered by Leo Gunther but Bishop McGucken decided to locate the new seminary on the Need property near Galt.

Bishop Joseph T. McGucken

McGucken spared no expense in building and adorning the seminary. The architect chosen to design the new minor seminary was Harry J. Devine of Sacramento. Construction began and the new seminary rose up from the pastureland along Twin Cities Road and Midway Avenue north of the city of Galt. The centerpiece of the seminary was the chapel with its beautiful stained glass window designed by artist Max Ingrand of Paris.



Photo by John E Boll 2014

The Seminary Chapel Window designed by Max Ingrand of Paris

The window depicts Christ sending out disciples into the California missions to spread the Gospel message. This stained glass window is now located in Divine Savior Church in Orangevale. Behind the seminary chapel's main altar was a beautiful mural of Christ and the saints designed and painted by artist John DeRosen. He was the artist who painted the icon of Christ in the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC as well as the sanctuary murals in the churches of Saint Philomene, Sacramento and Saint Basil, Vallejo. He also designed large Stations of the Cross for the seminary chapel that are now located in Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, Sacramento. Bishop McGucken also purchased a pipe organ for the seminary chapel which was the largest instrument of its kind in northern California at that time. After the seminary closed, it was moved to a new Saint Lawrence Church in North Highlands by Father Vincent O'Reilly.

The seminary had a residential wing for the priests and brothers, a large dining room for the students, classrooms, library, and office space. There were two residential wings for the seminarians - one wing for older students had individual rooms and the other wing was divided into large dormitories for freshmen and sophomores. There was also a full size gymnasium with a large stage on which the seminarians performed an annual Passion Play. It had spacious playing fields, a rifle range, and an Olympic sized outdoor swimming pool. Additions were made to these structures in 1965.



Photo by John E Boll 1962

Saint Pius X Seminary Chapel, Galt, California

Moving to the new Galt seminary took place during Easter vacation in 1961. We who were living in the Rio Dell facility bid a fond and sad goodbye to Rio Dell that Easter. As we left for

Sacramento, we took all our belongings with us because during the Octave of Easter, trucks descended on the Rio Dell facility to load up everything and head south to Galt. At the end of our Easter break, we returned to the new seminary facility north of Galt. We had to unpack our things and settle in quickly as we resumed seminary life in a totally different environment in the Sacramento Valley.



Photo by John E Boll, 1959

**Seminarians Traveling on Chartered Buses from Rio Dell to Sacramento
On their way Home for Christmas Vacation in 1959**



Saint Pius X Senior Class 1959

Photo by John E Boll 1958

L-R, Ken Kelzer, Arnold Kuntz, James Kidder & John Osness



Brother Bonfilio, S.D.S. 1959 (Bonfilios)

Photo courtesy of Fr Michael Cloney

**Brother Bonfilio Armijo, SDS
Seminary Chef**



Photo by John E Boll 1959

Seminary CCD Executive Council

L-R, Joe Robillard, John Boll, Kevin Daley, Fr David Christel, SDS, Bob Solar,
Ed Krol, Mike Zellany & Paul Ryan



Photo by John Boll 1959

**Seminarian Basil Kehoe from
Tahoe City, tends to a calf at
the Seminary farm in Rio Dell**



Photo by Joh E Boll 1962

Main Entrance to St Pius X Seminary, Galt



St Pius X Seminary Salvatorian Priest Faculty

Photo by John E Boll 1962

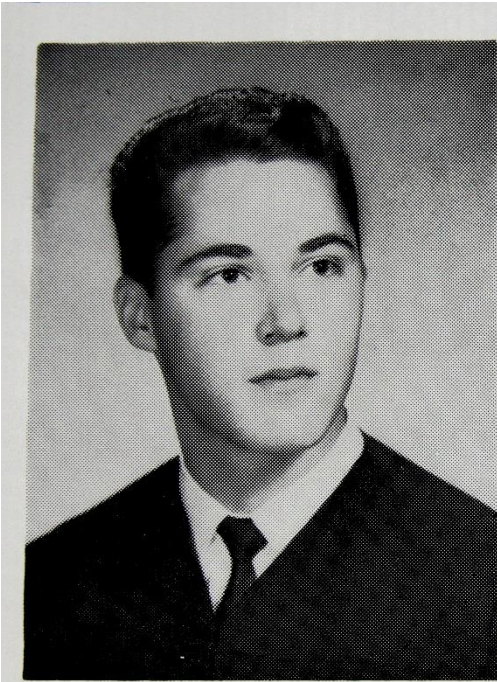
Front Row, L-R Fr Timothy Lickteig, SDS; Fr Cletus LeMere, SDS; Fr George Schuster, SDS; Fr David Christel, SDS; Fr Robert Casper, SDS
 Back Row, L-R Fr Richard Birdsall, SDS; Fr Nicholas Freund, SDS; Fr Daniel Carroll, SDS; Fr Regis Kleene, SDS



Salvatorian Brothers

Photo by John E Boll 1962

L-R Br Borromeo Pelky, SDS; Br Robert Dilley, SDS; Br Damian Meaney, SDS; Br Michael Kumhera, SDS;
 Br Leo Shay, SDS – Br Leo was ordained a priest and is now Father Michael Shay, SDS, living at Divine Savior Parish in Orangevale, CA



Dennis Michael Ruzir

December 15, 1942 - August 20, 1963



'May the Angels lead you into paradise'



Dear Lord Jesus, help me to spread Thy fragrance everywhere I go; flood my soul with Thy spirit and life; penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may be but a radiance of Thine; shine through me and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with may feel Thy presence within me and may they who look upon me see not me, but only Jesus. Amen.

For the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, do all the good you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can. Amen.

Dennis Michael Ruzir, son of Peter and Alice Ruzir of Holy Spirit Parish, Sacramento, graduated from Holy Spirit grammar school in 1957 and in the fall of that year began his studies for the priesthood at Saint Pius X Seminary, Rio Dell. He attended four years of seminary high school and two years of college at Saint Pius X. He was looking forward to entering Saint Patrick Seminary, Menlo Park, in September when, in early August 1963, he took a quick ride on a neighbor's motorcycle on the street in front of his family home. A novice to motorcycle riding, he lost control of the bike at the bend in the road and hit a tree in the Whites' yard. He broke both legs and must have hit his head as well. After surgery to set and cast his broken legs, a clot lodged in his brain and Dennis was in a coma for about three weeks when he died at Mercy General Hospital, Sacramento on August 20, 1963.

Dennis Ruzir's death was a huge loss to his family and to the the Church of Sacramento. He was handsome, talented, outgoing and dedicated to his dream of being a priest. His Funeral Mass was celebrated in his parish church, Holy Spirit in Sacramento, and the cortege to Saint Mary Cemetery was about five miles long. He was buried in an outside mausoleum crypt along 65th Street at Saint Mary Cemetery. His family donated a beautiful chalice to St Pius X Seminary in Dennis' memory which was used daily at seminary Masses.

Dennis was my cousin and a good friend. I still think of him often and miss his presence. He died much too young! He would have been a great priest and a valuable asset to the Church of Sacramento. I look forward to seeing you again, Dennis. Until then, rest in peace.

Father John E Boll