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THE HISTORY OF HOLY ROSARY PARISH, WOODLAND

Part I

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The author is indebted to *The Catholic Herald*, *The Woodland Democrat* and other historical sources as background for this article.

In the Footprints of the Padres, 1870 – 1949

Although the first Catholic Church was built in 1870, the history of Catholic services offered to the residents of Yolo County actually began in 1821.

According to William O Russell in **“The History of Yolo County,”** the first known Catholic services were performed by a priest on October 26, 1821 when a Franciscan friar, Father Fray Blas Ordiz, baptized an Indian in the region around Knights Landing. After this event, the spiritual needs of the people were met by priests from Mission San Francisco de Solano.

Following the American occupation, priests from Sacramento and Folsom served the needs of this community. The first Catholic Mass in the county was offered in John O’Keefe’s home in Knights Landing in 1858.

The first Mass in Woodland was held in the house of Peter Fitzgerald in 1869 and was said by Reverend P. Kelly from Folsom in Sacramento County. In that year, prominent men were appointed to secure a suitable location for a church. The committee bought two lots, 120 X 90’, on Main Street between Elm and Walnut for \$420. Gustave Cox was selected as the architect and the cost of the building was not to exceed \$7,000.

On the first Sunday in October in 1870, the church was dedicated by the Very Reverend Jacob Croke in memory of the Holy Rosary. Father Laurence Scanlon was the first resident priest. The following winter, however, following heavy rains, the foundation gave way. The front and the steeple settled and cracked. The building was declared unsafe and plans were made for a new church.

In 1874, the Reverend Patrick Gallagher bought three lots on the corner of Main and Walnut Streets—180’ fronting Main, and 190’ on Walnut.

Father Gallagher left shortly thereafter and Reverend Peter Kaiser succeeded in building a church 30’ by 60’. He also built churches in Davisville (Davis) and Knights Landing. These three churches were the only ones around for 30 year and the priests would travel offering Masses on pre-determined Sundays.

In 1883, the Reverend John McGinty arrived and bought land for a Catholic cemetery and dedicated it to Saint Joseph. In May 1884, he purchased five acres on Main Street for \$250 and built Holy Rosary Academy which he staffed with Holy Cross Sisters from Notre Dame, Indiana. Two years later, a new diocese was formed and Woodland was added to the Sacramento Diocese, severing its ties with the Archdiocese of San Francisco.



Photo from the Diocesan Archives

Holy Rosary Academy Built in 1884

Time has passed and many good priests left their mark in the parish, but the next priest of importance was the Reverend Michael Wallrath who arrived on May 4, 1911. Having been left \$7000 from Reverend Patrick Greely and also a lot on the corner of Court and Walnut Streets (180' X 190'), he proceeded to move the old church to the north corner to make room for a new edifice on Main Street.

He converted the old church into the parish hall. On Friday, March 1, 1912 at 4 pm, ground was broken for the new church on the corner of Main and Walnut Streets. Fedele Costa, an Italian artisan, was the contractor and fashioned the church in the traditional Italian architectural style.

Tom Gregory in **“The History of Yolo County”** states: “It is a thoroughly modern structure of reinforced concrete buttresses and moldings, the whole strengthened with a riveted steel frame.”



Father Michael Wallrath

Such was the pattern of construction!

The cost of the edifice was \$25,000 and another \$1,000 was paid for steeples and other extras. “The Daily Democrat” also praised Father Wallrath by saying that “he is truly the church builder of the Sacramento Diocese. Not fewer than 14 churches owe their existence to his energy and enterprise, but this one is by far the best of them all.”

But building a church was not that easy for Father Wallrath, for he was continually at odds with Mr Costa and his crew. Seeing the construction workers loafing on the job was something that the priest could not tolerate. He would order them to begin work, they would refuse and then he would fire them. They would then complain to Costa who in turn would talk to Father Wallrath who would then fire Costa! A few days later, Costa and his crew would be back on the job as if nothing had happened.

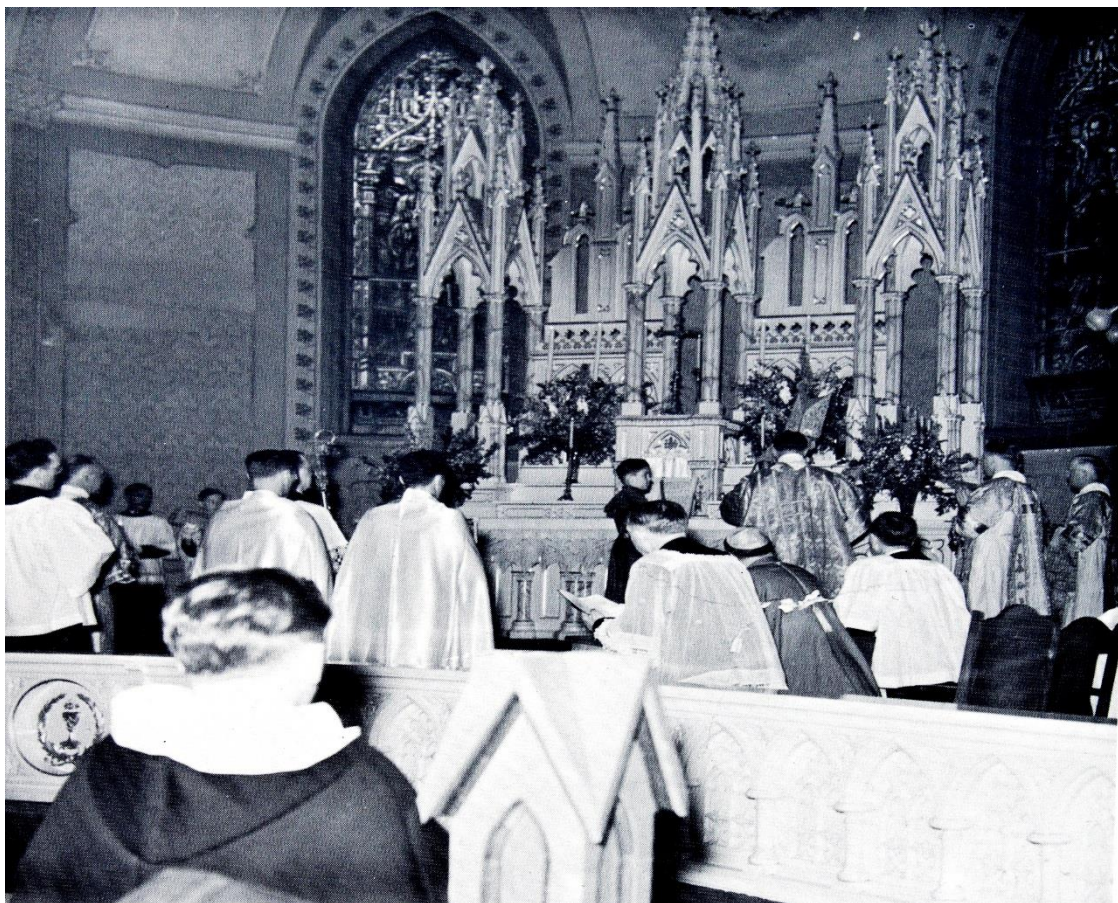


Photo from Diocesan Archives

Dedication of Holy Rosary Church 1913

Father Wallrath also employed an Irish artist from Oakland to decorate the interior arch of the main altar with scenes from the sorrowful mysteries. The stained glass window scenes were created by United Glass Works in San Francisco and Dumbiring firm of Oakland at a great savings to the parish. Previously, all stained glass came from Europe and was very costly.

On Sunday, June 1, 1913, the church was dedicated by the Right Reverend Thomas Grace, Bishop of Sacramento, in honor of the Queen of the Holy Rosary. Many people came from all over California. The organist and choir came from Saint Anthony Church in San Francisco to help celebrate the dedication. The railroad companies operating at that time (Southern Pacific and Northern Electric) cooperated in this event by offering reduced fare rates to those traveling to Woodland to witness the dedication ceremony.

The ladies of the parish served chicken dinners at 50 cents per plate after the event. By the time the church was dedicated in 1913, Father Wallrath had collected \$14,000 for the new edifice. The Yolo Democrat again praised him by saying: "He is a man of such tireless energy that he is likely to have a fine edifice and a congregation out of debt in three or four years." Father Wallrath was a dynamic, strict but kind priest. He employed various means for reducing the church debt. One of the methods involved the selling of bricks to parishioners for \$1,000 each. These were inscribed and used to decorate the inside of the church.

The stained glass windows were also donated by members of the parish and Liberty Bonds were used to help reduce the debt. Although Father Wallrath was a dynamic, overpowering personality, he had a loving concern for the children in the parish who could not attend regular catechism.

During the summer months, he would bring the children from the country to town and board them with Catholic families. He would then proceed to teach them their catechism. After they learned their doctrine, he would then send them back home to their farms.

All the painstaking concern over the construction of the church could not stop it from once again showing signs of stress and forcing the parishioners to again think of re-building. This decision came after Father Wallrath died.

A combination of the soil structure and faulty building calculations resulted in stress cracks on the ceiling. The building was declared unsafe and plans were made for the destruction of the church

There was much dissension over demolition of this church. Apparently, it was quite beautiful and well-loved by all the parishioners. Members of the Catholic community today still look back with fondness of their old church. They even tell of the difficulty that the destruction crew encountered in the work of knocking down their old church.



Photo from the Diocesan Archives

Holy Rosary Church, Built by Father Michael Wallrath, Dedicated in 1913

After Father Wallrath's death in 1917, he was succeeded by Father Thomas Horgan. In 1925, he built the parish hall and a new church in Knights Landing. For many years, Mass was celebrated in the parish hall. Father Michael Gaffney was pastor during the Depression and then was succeeded by Father John Tumulty who oversaw the erection of the present-day structure.

On Sunday, October 2, 1949, the Most Reverend Robert J Armstrong dedicated the present church at the Solemn Mass *Coram Pontifice* at 12 noon. The architect was Harry Devine and the cost of the building was \$215,735.06. The style is a modern Romanesque design with a tile roof.

The tower is 108' high and the floor plan completes the design of the cross with the cross facing east.



Photo by John E Boll

Holy Rosary Church, Built by Monsignor John Tumulty, Dedicated October 2, 1949

Various types of marble were used to decorate the church and bronze gates complete the communion rail. The heating is accomplished by hot water being piped under the flooring and sometimes during the winter one can hear the noise of the heating units. The Stations of the Cross are from Holy Rosary Academy and were removed when the building burned. The white statue of Our Lady of Fatima was created by Father McGlynn, OP and executed by the Daprato Studios. The confessionals are of carved oak.

A few Woodlanders remember Father Tumulty and have characterized this church as being as "big as a barn". But Father Tumulty wanted the tallest church in Woodland and he succeeded because Holy Rosary is a distinctive landmark in this community.

DEDICATION OF THE NEW HOLY ROSARY CHURCH *To the Honor and Glory of God*

Sunday, October 2, 1949, Feast of the Holy Rosary, was a most important day in the history not only of the Catholics of Woodland but of the entire community as well.



Photo from the Diocesan Archives

Entrance of Bishop Armstrong for the Dedication of Holy Rosary Church in 1949

On that day there headed to the City of Woodland one of the most impressive gatherings of Catholic clergy in Northern California which ever assembled in the Yolo county seat. Headed by the Most Reverend Robert J Armstrong, bishop of Sacramento, the monsignori and priests came to take part in the dedication of a new \$215,734 religious edifice, the fifth church to be constructed by the Catholics of Woodland and its outlying environs.

The new church of Our Lady of the Rosary, regarded at the time of its construction more than a quarter of a century ago as one of the most imposing and beautiful church structures in Northern California, was designed by Sacramento architect Harry Devine.

A momentous, and for many, a heartbreaking decision was made prior to the start of construction of the new church. Following numerous tests and investigations, the Reverend John E Tumulty, pastor of Holy Rosary parish, decided that the graceful and stately fourth of Woodland's Catholic churches was structurally dangerous and should be demolished rather than expend large sums of money in efforts to restore it to a safe condition.

The 1913 church had not been used for several years prior to the erection of the new edifice.

Taking part in the solemn dedication ceremonies on October 2 for the new church was a priest who soon was destined to play an important role as pastor in the administration of Holy Rosary parish. The later Right Reverend Monsignor Thomas H Markham was subdeacon and cross bearer for the dedication ceremonies.

The solemn blessing and dedication of the new church took place at 11:30 am with an overflow gathering of the faithful present. The bishop administered the blessing and presided at the Solemn Mass *Coram Pontifice* which followed.



Photo from the Diocesan Archives

Interior of the New Holy Rosary Church in 1949

Father Tumulty delivered the sermon. Celebrant for the Solemn Mass was Father Cornelius O'Conner, pastor of Saint Mary Church, Arcata. Father Joseph I Manning, pastor of Saint Leo Church, San Jose, was the deacon; Monsignor Markham the subdeacon. The music of the Mass and the blessing was sung by the parish choir.

Assisting the bishop in the blessing of the church were Father Raymond Renwald, Superintendent of Catholic Schools, and Father James O'Shea, pastor of Our Lady of the Blessed Sacrament Church in West Sacramento. The Reverend Thomas A Kirby, secretary to the bishop, was the master of ceremonies for the blessing.

The ancient and solemn ceremony of dedication of the church recalls the fact that every Catholic Church is a model of the City of God and the heavenly Jerusalem.

Few changes have been made either to the exterior or interior of Holy Rosary Church during the quarter of a century that it has served the Catholics of Woodland and its environs.

Of modern Romanesque design, the church is constructed of reinforced concrete with a tile roof. With its single graceful bell tower reaching 108 feet high, this church is still one of the major landmarks for the entire area.

From its lofty tower, there have sounded over the years the melodious chimes which were a gift from the children of the late Mr and Mrs John McAravy.

The color scheme of the interior of the church has been changed somewhat over the years, the most notable of its newer color scheme being the rear wall in back of the high altar.

Untouched over the years is the quite plain, marble liturgical high altar covered by its gilded ciborium, 25 feet in height. The traditional floor plan of the edifice is in the form of the cross typical of the vast majority of the pre-Vatican II period churches.

The main aisle of the church and the vestibule are covered with varied colored terrazzo marble set in design. The aisle leads to the Italian red Verona marble communion rail which is closed by cast iron gates.

The ciborium over the altar is supported by four Vert Issorie marble columns and the design on the ciborium depicts the coming of the Holy Spirit.

At one time, the figure of the dove, depicting the Holy Spirit, was repainted in a bright red but it soon was redone in more subdued tone.

Blue, the color of Our Lady, has predominated over the years on the side altar. An unfortunate defect in the design of the church has resulted over the years in a roof leak difficult to control, and large sums have had to be expended over the decades to repair the roof and redecorate the side altar.

On what once was termed the Gospel side of the altar is the baptistery, a separate room 16.5 feet by 12.5 feet. Some consideration has been given to converting the baptistery into a small chapel for weekday Masses.



Photo from the Diocesan Archives

Bishop Armstrong during the Dedication of Holy Rosary Church 1949

The confessionals in the rear of the church, constructed of carved oak, recently have been modernized to serve the dual purpose of the Rite of Reconciliation, either by curtained confession or face to face. Members of the Woodland Council of the Knights of Columbus handled most of the work on the conversion of the confessionals as well as construction of a new reconciliation room.

Dear to the hearts of the Mexican ancestry members of the parish is the shrine in the front of the baptistery which pays honor and veneration to Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Focal point for the liturgical services of the church is the attractive marble Altar upon which the Mass now is celebrated.

Marble podiums of plain, flat design serve the priests when they deliver homilies, the lay lectors when they assist with the Liturgy of the Word.

For the last 30 years, the church which was dedicated and blessed by the late beloved Bishop Armstrong, has served well and staunchly the Catholics of the Woodland area. During its comparatively brief span of years it has witnessed some of the most profound and far reaching changes to take place in the two millennium history of the Roman Catholic Church.

Today, in many respects, it preserves numerous aspects of the best and most pleasing features of the churches of the past to blend with relative harmony the innovations which the current liturgy requires.



Photo from Holy Rosary Archives

Holy Rosary Parish Men's Retreat at Christ the King Retreat Center in the 1950s