

SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

Vol 5

Father John E Boll

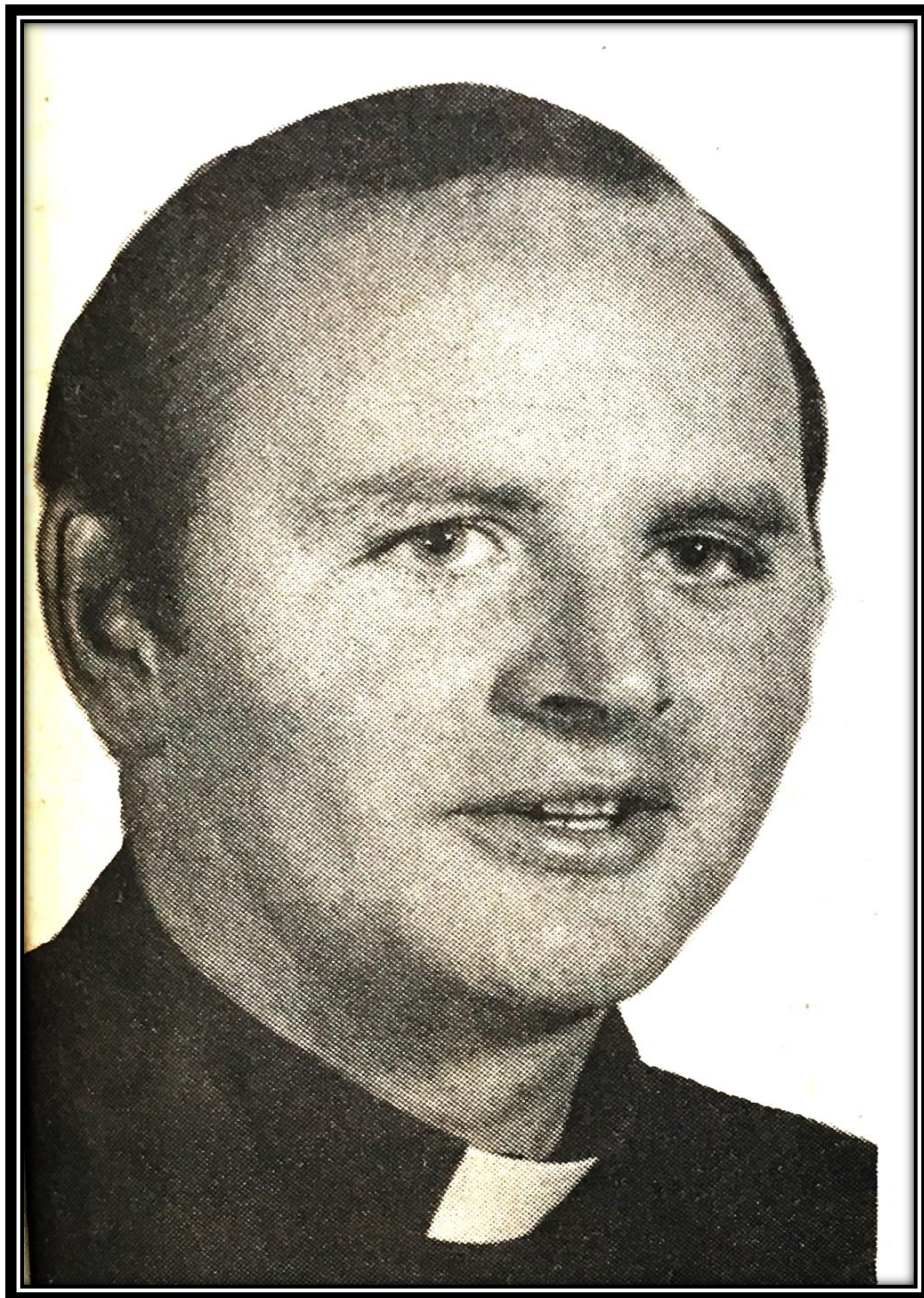
No 30

Father John Gabriel Cuffe

Native of Navan, County Meath, Ireland

Priest of the Diocese of Sacramento

January 20, 1946 – January 3, 1978



John Gabriel Cuffe was born on January 20, 1946, in Navan, County Meath, Ireland, the son of Michael Dermot Cuffe and Mary Halpin. Both Michael and Mary were school teachers. John was part of a large family of ten children with three brothers and six sisters. Two of his sisters became religious sisters. The ages of his brothers and sisters in 1965 were 26, 24, 22, 21, 17, 16, 15, 12 and 11.

JOHN BEGINS HIS EDUCATION

He began his schooling at Saint Mary's School, Robinstown, graduating from there in 1959. For high school, he attended Saint Finian's College in Mullingar, County Westmeath, from 1959 to 1964, completing his intermediate and leaving courses.

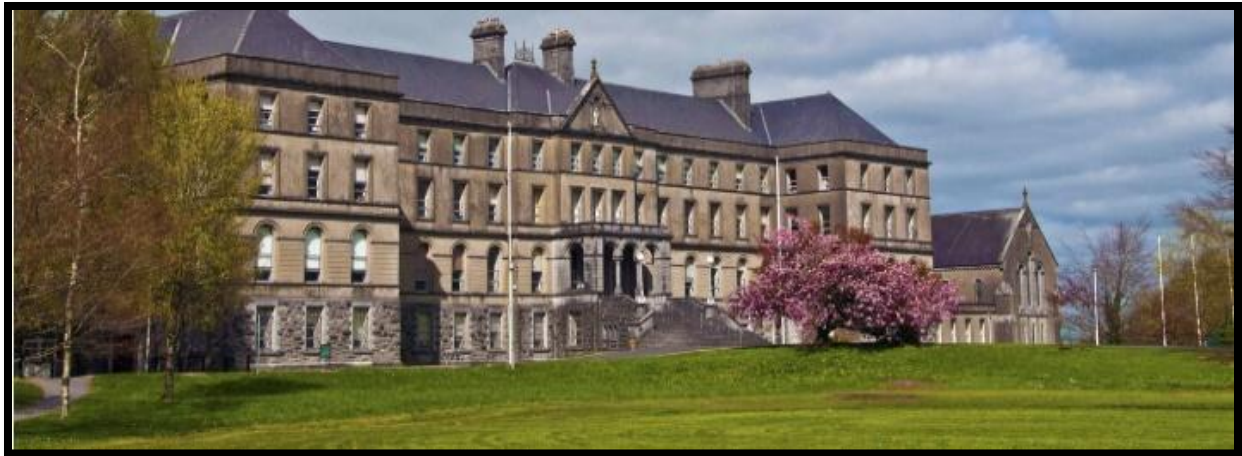


Photo from St Finian's College Website

Saint Finian's College, Mullingar, Ireland

John began his theological studies at All Hallows College, Dublin in 1964 and had one relative living in the Diocese of Sacramento, his first cousin Father Ronan Brennan who is 91 years of age and living in Sacramento.



All Hallows College, Dublin, Ireland

ORDAINED A PRIEST FOR THE DIOCESE OF SACRAMENTO

After his four years of theological studies at All Hallows, John was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Sacramento on June 14, 1970 at the age of 24 by Bishop Myles McKeon in All Hallows Seminary chapel.

BEGINNING HIS LIFE OF MINISTRY

After spending some time with his family after ordination, Father Cuffe left Ireland and arrived in Sacramento in the fall of 1970. His first assignment was as assistant pastor of Saint Joseph Parish in Marysville. He served in Marysville only six months, from September 4, 1970 to March 18, 1971, because of the priest shortage at that time.

Father John was then assigned to Saint Robert's Parish in Sacramento as assistant pastor for nearly three years from March 18, 1971 to October 2, 1973.



Photo by John E Boll

Saint Robert Church, Sacramento

ASSIGNED TO SAINT ROSE PARISH, ROSEVILLE

Father John was next assigned to Saint Rose Parish in Roseville to assist Father James Corcoran who was pastor. During his time in Roseville, he was also assigned as chaplain to the Newman Club at Sierra College and was Bishop Bell's appointee to the Priests' Personnel Board in the diocese.

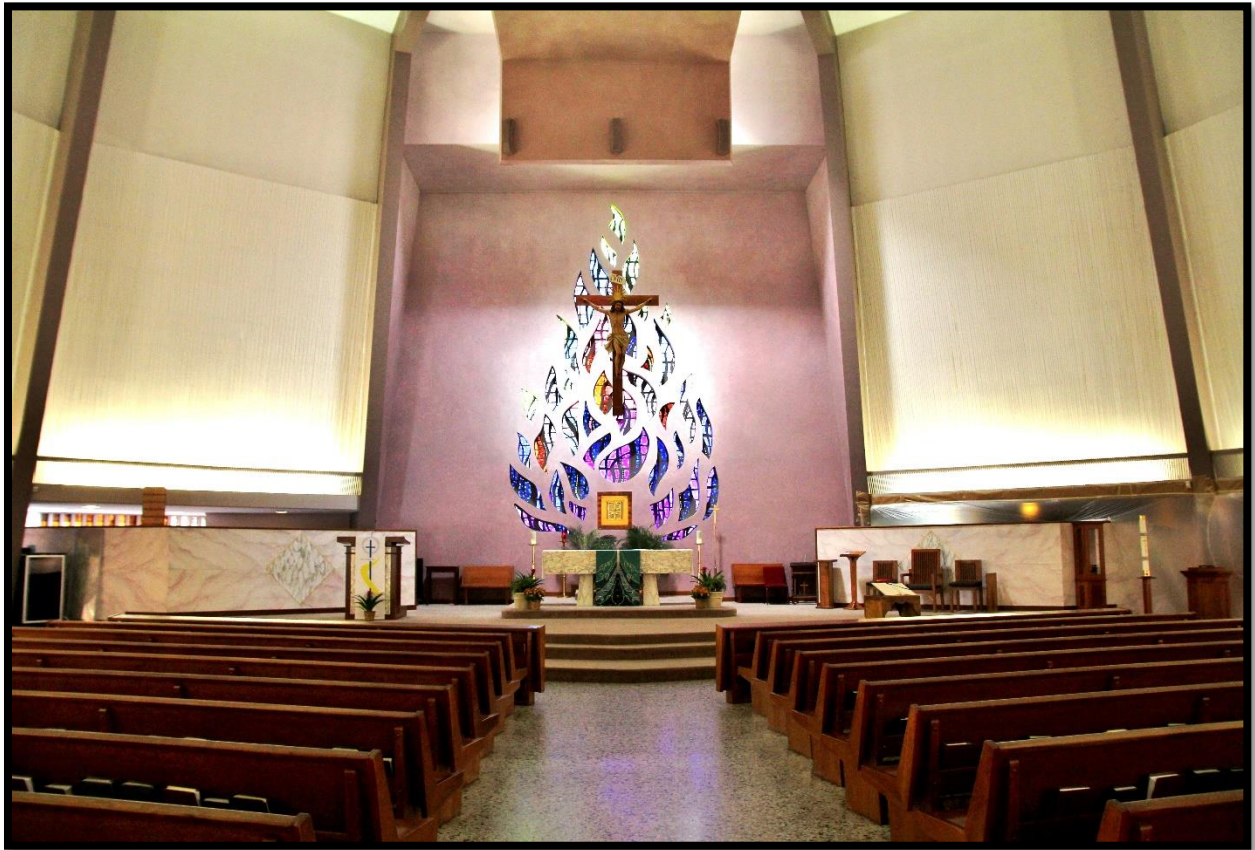


Photo by John E Boll

Saint Rose Church, Roseville

DESIRE TO SERVE AS A CHAPLAIN IN THE UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

Father John had a desire to serve as a chaplain in the United States Air Force and approached Bishop Bell about the possibility of serving in the military. Bishop Bell as a young priest had served as a chaplain in the US Air Force and had an openness to Father Cuffe's request.

On June 6, 1977, Bishop Bell wrote a letter to Bishop Joseph T Ryan at the Military Ordinariate in New York City stating: "Fr Cuffe has shown ability in his pastoral assignments and served the Diocese of Sacramento well. I recommend him for consideration as chaplain in the United States Air Force."

FATHER CUFFE DIAGNOSED WITH TERMINAL CANCER

Father John went through the physical tests for entry into the United States Air Force and he passed them all. During his vacation in Ireland in summer of 1977 he began to feel that something was wrong in his body. After returning to Roseville, he began to limp so he went back to the doctors for more tests to find out what was wrong. This time, the doctors discovered that John had a large cancerous tumor. The diagnosis was that the cancer had advanced too far for anything to be done medically. Father John had less than six months to live and he was only 31 years of age.

John's diagnosis of terminal cancer was a shock to him, his family in Ireland, his close priest friends, the people of Roseville and the Diocese of Sacramento. Medical science had no cures to stop this cancer so it was time for John to prepare for his death.

Father John was a competitive person and loved to play golf with his foursome of priest friends, Fathers Pat Leslie, John Cantwell and Vincent Brady. After his diagnosis, he continued to play golf with his foursome as long as he could even though he could use only one arm.

As John's condition rapidly worsened, he was forced to return to the hospital. On Christmas Eve, John called Father Vincent Brady and asked him to come and take him home; he wanted to die in his own bed at Saint Rose rectory. The doctors expected that John would die within the next 24 hours so Father Vincent drove to Roseville after his Christmas Eve Mass in Vallejo and brought John home to Saint Rose rectory. He celebrated Christmas Eve Mass for John and his parents in John's room.

Father John's parents had come from Ireland to be with their son. His sister who was a nun in Los Angeles came to Roseville to be with him as he neared death. John died on January 3, 1978, 17 days short of his 32nd birthday. He lived only three months after his diagnosis of cancer.

FATHER JOHN'S REFLECTION AS HE NEARED DEATH

Shortly before his death, Father John dictated the following reflection to his sister about his painful disease of cancer:



Photo by John E Boll

Church of the Transfiguration, Mount Tabor, Galilee

“We can’t call ourselves Christians if we’ve never experienced the Cross . . . Time in the hospital gives one the opportunity to think about the meaning of Christianity. We tend to see things from our limited perspective, but in the eyes of God, ten hours, ten days, ten weeks or ten times the number of sands on the seashore are all the same. We see God’s overwhelming greatness in our smallness, and we see that only One matters.

“We have to be consistent in keeping a proper relationship with God and to be grateful for the experience of suffering. Through it I believe I have come closer to God, and so many persons tell me that I have brought others closer too, just by bearing the suffering.

“My greatest suffering is to have two legs and not be able to use them, to be part of a family and not be able to live that. For my parent’s sake, I appreciate that they were able to join me in my last hours of suffering. I thank them, and I think they can appreciate the reality of my suffering and dying all the better by coming out to be with me. . .”

A MAN NAMED JOHN

Mary Beth Moody, a former parishioner of Saint Rose Parish, wrote the following editorial in John’s memory, printed in the January 19, 1978 issue of the *Catholic Herald*:



Photo by John E Boll

A Chapel at Rocamadour, France

“As the rain softly falls around me, I think of a gentle person so much like the precious rain. He showered hope, faith and happiness to all those whose lives he touched. He was truly a Christ-like man, a fine priest, and a dear friend, Father John Cuffe.

“I feel I want to add my own personal tribute to this man: In the midst of the terrifying experience of depression, I faced not a life but a dragging, crippling existence. One miserable day followed another. I was paralyzed mentally and physically drained of all my energy. Getting out of bed was an effort. I felt unable to care for the needs of my five children. I faced one guilt-ridden day after another. I was unable to make the smallest of decisions. Enormous problems overwhelmed me. Hiding in a shadow of fear, I felt I was losing the grip of the hand of God.

“I went to this man called John. He showed me patience and understanding. He gave me the courage to face the fact I was sick. He explained to me how desperately I needed professional psychiatric help. He contacted a doctor for me, helped me to face the fear of that first visit. He encouraged me to stick with it. He was always available to give me moral support, sometimes reassuring me over and over again. He was truly an inspiration to try to fight self-pity.

Under the expert care of my doctor, another man called John, I am seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, finding my way back with the support of excellent care. After three years and several hospitalizations I am conquering the darkness of depression. I still stumble and fall but I know how to get up and face my problems. I am learning about myself and the joy of finding each day a gift from God.

“I attended Father Cuffe’s rosary and funeral Mass. I was apprehensive about breaking down in front of all those unknowing people. I came away with a mixture of sorrow and joy. I shall miss the presence of the one who showed me the way and the light, but even by his death, I felt a personal message of strength. I can embrace my faith and feel the hands of God on my shoulder. I have a special friend in Heaven, a man called John.”

EDITORIAL IN THE *CATHOLIC HERALD* ENTITLED “*FATHER CUFFE*”

The following editorial was published by the *Catholic Herald* about Father John Cuffe on Thursday, January 5, 1978:

Death is a mystery at any age. But when it strikes someone young and active the mystery seems to deepen and grow more difficult to accept.

Father John Cuffe, who died of cancer Tuesday, was only 31 years old. Three months ago he was as active and busy with the things of God and Church as any young priest. In that short time the tumor that was suddenly discovered by the doctors paralyzed his young body, and finally killed him. It seemed unthinkable that a life so young and active could be suddenly cut off, and indeed many prayed for a miracle to save this young priest for the Church.

As it turned out, the real miracle of John Cuffe's terminal cancer was in the way he accepted it. From the first day he knew the fatal news he showed a remarkable determination to face reality and accept the will of Almighty God. Self-pity will do no good, he told a friend. I have the gift of faith, he said, and I intend to get through this in whatever way God has planned.

It was this calm acceptance that so deeply touched those close to him over the past three months, and gave a meaning to the tragedy that went far beyond the life of one young priest. So many times people went to see him feeling nervous and anxious about what to talk about, and went away with a new understanding of the Cross. Father Cuffe himself became aware of this at the end, and confided to his sister that his death was a mission to the diocese, especially to the priests. With this in mind, he planned his own funeral liturgy down to the smallest detail.

There is no more difficult mystery in the Christian faith than that of the Cross. To one without faith – a lot of faith – the idea that suffering is a special gift from God can sound like insanity. Father Cuffe penetrated beneath that insane surface, as his dying message makes very clear. His words will leave a lasting impression on many.



Photo by John E Boll

Lighted Candles on the Altar of the Church of the Transfiguration, Mount Tabor, Galilee

Not surprisingly, in his efforts to fully understand what was happening to him he drew comfort and inspiration from another who experienced a similar death. The priest, a Benedictine, lived through a prolonged period of excruciating pain and finally died with the conviction that his

cross was a very special sign of God's love. His "open letter," which was given to Father Cuffe by friends, is worth quoting for the light it sheds on this kind of tragedy.

"I understand that the worst thing that can happen to a Christian is to be without a cross, or to stand before Christ at the judgement with uncrucified hands and feet. The worst thing God can do to a man or woman is to let him or her stagnate in cozy security and comfort without the redemptive touch of the cross. The worst thing that can happen to one is for God to let him alone, to leave him untouched by the stigmata of pain, with a heart unbroken by life's trials, and a stranger to the cross; for, to be left alone by God – to be left entirely alone and comfortable and untouched – is to be lost indeed!"

FUNERAL MASS AND BURIAL OF FATHER JOHN CUFFE

Bishop Alden J Bell, Bishop of Sacramento, together with the priests of the diocese and the family, friends and parishioners joined together for the Funeral Mass for Father John Cuffe on January 5, 1978 at Saint Rose Church in Roseville where Father John served as assistant pastor. Father John asked his good friend, Father Vincent Brady, to be the homilist at his funeral. Father John Cantwell remembers well what John said when he asked Vincent to preach: "Please Vince, just a few kind words." Father Cantwell says: "Those words have haunted me and brought me to tears every time I remember them."

After the Funeral, Father John's family accompanied his body back to Navan, County Meath, Ireland for burial in the land of his birth. Father Patrick Leslie, representing the Diocese of Sacramento, flew to Ireland with the Cuffe family for the burial.

IN MEMORIAM

After serving as a priest of the Diocese of Sacramento for seven years, Father John was preparing to enter the United States Air Force as a Catholic chaplain. Everything looked hopeful for a military career as a chaplain. But then a cancerous tumor was discovered that was invading his young body and extinguished his life.

Although his life of ministry was cut very short, in those seven years of priestly service in our diocese, Father John touched the lives of countless people and brought them a joy and hope borne from his life of faith in God. In spite of his three months of intense suffering from the invading enemy in his body, John was a shining example of a Christian facing the martyrdom of immanent death with a faith, hope and joy of one about to behold the glorious face of God.

Thank you John, for your valiant faith and courage in the face of death, our final enemy. In and through and with Christ Jesus, you have overcome the world and have taken your place with the martyrs who have overcome death in Christ forever. Enjoy your rest in God.

*Saints of God, come to his aid, come to meet him
Angels of the Lord. Receive his soul and present him
to God the Most High.*



Photo by John E Boll

As Morning Breaks, I Look to You O Lord