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Rev. Msgr. John McCracken dies, longest-serving priest in diocese

By Carrie McClish
Staff writer

Two years ago, when he had marked 66 years in the priesthood, Rev. Msgr. John McCracken shared his vocation story with The Voice. It began, not surprisingly, while he was at church.



Rev. Msgr. John McCracken

On that day he had been serving at Mass and, he noted, there were "only three of us — the priest, myself and the Good Lord." "When the celebrant elevated the host after the consecration I remember awesomely saying to myself, 'I'd like to do that.'"

But first the future monsignor had some convincing to do. When he went to his pastor to seek permission to apply to the seminary he was caught off guard when the priest insisted that he go to high school first.

The young man wouldn't have it. "We argued about it. (I could be difficult in those days, too.)" Eventually the two reached a compromise — the young McCracken would go to Sacred Heart High School for one year and then he could go to St. Joseph's College Seminary.

The young McCracken could go to St. Joseph's only after he attended high school for one year. True to his word he did just that and the rest is diocesan history.

Msgr. McCracken, 93, died peacefully in the rectory at St. Isidore Church in Danville on Feb. 1. At the time of his death he was the oldest and longest serving priest of the Oakland Diocese.

He was born in Palo Alto to Thomas and Margaret McCracken. After leaving St. Joseph's College High, he completed four years of theological studies at St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park. Ordination to the priesthood followed on Sept. 23, 1944 by Archbishop John Mitty.

Eager to be a parish priest Msgr. McCracken served at St. Augustine Church in Oakland only four years before he was sent to Catholic University in Washington, D.C., where he was graduated with a master's degree in social work. He spent 25 years in social work. During those years he helped support a summer ministry for children from west Oakland at Sunshine Camp in Mendocino County, and he also taught ethics to nurses at the former Providence Hospital in Oakland.

He was one of the first priests, assigned to the newly established Oakland diocese in 1962 and he became the first director of Catholic Charities (now of the Catholic Charities of the East Bay). Bishop Floyd Begin, the diocese's founding bishop, also charged Msgr. McCracken with developing the Catholic Charities Appeal to finance it.

In recognition of his work he was named a monsignor in 1967. He was named a Knight of the Holy Sepulcher in 1979.

While Msgr. McCracken earned the title of career priest, his "heart was in parish life," said Bishop Emeritus John Cummins. After leaving Catholic Charities Msgr. McCracken went on to serve as pastor at St. Benedict Parish in Oakland, Queen of All Saints Parish in Concord, St. Mary Parish in Walnut Creek and for some 20 years at St. Anne Parish, also in Walnut Creek (Rossmoor).

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Msgr. McCracken spent his final years at St. Isidore Parish in Danville where, in his retirement, he was active in parish life.

"An intense professional ... he was a quality pastor," Bishop Cummins said. "He could lead in many directions but always had the whole team with him. His accomplishments were as lengthy as his years."

Survivors include his nieces and nephews.

The funeral Mass took place Feb. 6 at St. Isidore Church.

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