HISTORY OF SACRED HEART PARISH, FORT JONES

Material for this article came from the Diocesan Archives for the Fort Jones Parish

In order to appreciate the history of Sacred Heart Church in Fort Jones, one must take into consideration the sequence of missionary activity that occurred in this vast wilderness before Fort Jones became the center of the parish in Scott Valley and outlying regions.

In early 1853, Father Florian Schwenninger, OSB, better known as just Father Florian, pastor of Shasta and Trinity Counties, is said to have been the first priest to visit and celebrate Masses at Sawyer’s Bar and other Salmon River mining camps.

On July 18, 1855, Fathers James Cassin and Thomas Cody were appointed pastor and assistant pastor respectively of Siskiyou County and the Crescent City area. They celebrated their first Masses in the home of Mathias Callahan for the Catholics of the area after which they made their way to Rough and Ready (Etna), Fort Jones and Yreka. Saints John and Paul Catholic Church was built at Callaghan in 1858 as a mission with Father James Croke officiating.

Saint Joseph Church, Sawyer’s Bar, Built by Father Florian in 1855
The first church in the area was Saint Joseph Church at Sawyer’s Bar built in 1855 when Father Florian was pastor there. This modest house of worship is the most valuable relic left to us from that pioneer missionary era. It is the oldest in point of time and retains more of its original form than any of the other churches yet standing in the northern most counties of California.

In June of 1921, six months before the death of Bishop Grace, Sacred Heart Church in Fort Jones became a parish with a resident pastor, and the other churches in Callahan, Etna, Happy Camp, and Sawyer’s Bar became missions of this new parish. The church in Callahan was dismantled in 1971 during the pastorate of Father Anthony Gurnell.

Sketch taken from the Diocesan Archives

Sketch of the Original Callahan Catholic Church circa 1858

The first Sacred Heart Church in Fort Jones was apparently built before 1881. In 1914 the church was destroyed by fire and a new building was erected in 1915. The new and present church is located in front of the former church’s location, closer to the main street of Fort Jones.

Saint Mary Church in Etna was constructed around 1883 and remodeled by Father John McDonnell in 1965.

Masses in the early days of Happy Camp were offered in residents’ homes until a church was built in 1967. This structure burned and a new church replaced it in 1997.
1971 Forward

We pick up the story of Sacred Heart Parish in 1971 with the appointment of Father Anthony Gurnell as pastor. Father Gurnell was Irish born and trained. Before entering the seminary he worked as a banker in the city of Cork, Ireland. His appointment to Fort Jones was his first pastorate. For us who knew him, Father Tony could be intense and tough minded and when he made up his mind, there was no changing it.
A Memorable Father Gurnell Story

Father John Sullivan who succeeded Father Gurnell as pastor of Fort Jones recalls a story told to him by Father Ed Mello who was then pastor of Weed. A parishioner from Etna died during the winter and the family made arrangements with Father Tony to do the committal service at Saint Joseph Cemetery in Sawyer’s Bar. Because a winter storm was passing through the area at the time, the funeral director in Yreka told Father Tony that the burial would have to be postponed until after the storm passed.

Father Tony had made arrangements with the family and he intended to keep his commitment. When the funeral director refused to take the body to Sawyer’s Bar for burial until the storm had passed, Father Tony borrowed a pickup, went to the funeral home and loaded the casket into the back of the truck and headed off to Sawyer’s Bar for the burial.

As he reached the six thousand foot summit the snow began to pile up and the pickup bogged down and became stuck in the snow. Undeterred by this challenge, Father Tony walked a half mile to a roadside emergency phone on the road to Sawyer’s Bar and called for a tow truck.

When the tow truck arrived, the pickup was pulled out of the snow and towed over the summit to a lower level where the snow turned to rain. Father Tony jumped into the pickup and headed on to Sawyer’s Bar for the burial. Needless to say, word of this incident spread far and wide throughout Siskiyou County. No winter storm could deter this priest from burying the dead. Once he made up his mind, there was no turning back!

Father John Sullivan Appointed Pastor of Fort Jones Parish

In 1974, Father John Sullivan was appointed pastor of Sacred Heart Parish in Fort Jones. This was his first pastorate and he fell in love with the Siskiyou country and the people of this rural part of the diocese.

Father John served as pastor of the Fort Jones Parish for twelve years until Bishop Quinn appointed him pastor of Saint Patrick Parish, Placerville in 1986. For the second time, Father Sullivan succeeding Father Gurnell.

After Father John arrived in Placerville, he told the parishioners that this was his second time to succeed Father Gurnell as pastor. One parishioner remarked: “What are you, a slow learner?”
Pastorate of Father Roy Doner

With the leadership of Father Roy Doner who served Fort Jones as pastor for ten years (1986-1996), the parishioners of Sacred Heart Parish were able to realize their dream of building a parish hall. The new hall was built across the street from the parish church on Main Street in Fort Jones. At that time, the parish had 180 families spread over an area of 2,700 square miles in Siskiyou County. Father Roy knew it was time to build a hall so parishioners could gather to socialize as a parish community.

The estimated cost of the hall was $327,000 of which $250,000 had already been raised through a successful Valentine dinner-dance, several bequests from estates, many individual donations and a loan from the diocese. Father Roy donated all his stipends for Masses and funerals to the building fund as part of his commitment to the project.

Bishop William Weigand challenged Fort Jones parishioners by committing to match the amount the community raised during construction up to $20,000. Surprising even themselves, the parishioners raised $13,500.

Father Roy Doner Stands in Front of the new Parish Hall under Construction in Fort Jones
The hall has a large meeting room of 2,800 square feet. The walls are of cedar paneling which Father Roy sawed from cedar trees on his parents’ property in Challenge. The hall has a commercial kitchen and four meeting rooms which give the building a total size of 5,164 square feet. This hall is the largest gathering place in Scott Valley.

**Interior of the Fort Jones Parish Hall**

**Next Pastors and Parochial Vicars**
After serving the Fort Jones parish for ten years, Father Doner was named pastor of Divine Savior Parish in Chico, and Father John Lawrence succeeded Father Roy as Fort Jones parish administrator in 1996.

**Sister Anne Chester, RSM Appointed Parish Steward**
In 2002, Bishop Weigand made a change in staffing when he appointed Sister Anne Chester, RSM as parish steward and administrator of both Yreka and Fort Jones parishes with residence at Saint Joseph Church, Yreka.

Father Lawrence provided sacramental ministry to both parishes and their mission churches. He continued to reside at the Sacred Heart priest’s residence in Fort Jones.
Sister Anne Chester, RSM served as parish steward for two years when the Sisters of Mercy elected her to the leadership team of the Mercy community. She had to step down from her parish steward post. Father John Lawrence was named administrator of Fort Jones once again where he continued to minister until 2007.

In 2007, Father Bernard Tape was appointed pastor of Yreka and Fort Jones and Father Felipe Paraguya served as parochial vicar with residence in Fort Jones. Both priests served these two parishes until 2009.

In 2009, Father Aldrin Basarte was appointed administrator of Yreka and Fort Jones and served in that role until 2012. Serving with him during this time as parochial vicars were Fathers Felipe Paraguya, Dariusz Malczuk, and Glenn Jaron, MSP, who resided in Fort Jones.

In 2012, because of the growing lack of priests in the diocese, Bishop Jaime Soto assigned Father Jaron to the Weaverville parish and asked the pastor of Yreka to cover both Yreka and Fort Jones on his own. For the first time since 1854, there was no longer a resident priest in Fort Jones. The parishioners of the Fort Jones parish were quite unhappy with this decision.

In 2013, Father Julito Orpilla was appointed parish administrator of both Yreka and Fort Jones. His weekend Mass schedule is a challenge with Mass in Happy Camp on Saturday morning at 10 AM three Saturdays a month followed by a 4 PM Mass in Yreka and 6 PM Mass in Etna.

On Sundays, Mass in Fort Jones is celebrated at 9 AM followed by Mass in Yreka at 11 AM. The first Sunday of the month, there is a Mass in Spanish at 1 PM in Yreka. In addition to celebrating five Masses every weekend, Father Julito must drive 240 miles to celebrate Mass at the four churches. For him, the hardest part of his ministry is driving those long distances between churches, especially in the winter season when black ice forms on the mountain roads.
SUCCESSION OF PASTORS
Sacred Heart Parish, Fort Jones

Before Fort Jones became a parish in 1921, all of Siskiyou County was part of Saint Joseph Parish, Yreka since 1855. The following were pastors of Yreka which included Fort Jones, Etna, Sawyer’s Bar and Happy Camp --

Father Florian Schwenninger, OSB 1854-1855
Father James Cassin 1855
Father Thomas Cody 1855-1856
Father James Croke 1856-1857
Father L Snyder 1857-1859
Father John Handy 1859-1860
Father Hugh Gallagher 1860
Father Thomas Crinnian 1860-1864
Father Guido Malassi 1864-1865
Father Patrick Farrelly 1865-1872
Father Stephen Kearney 1872
Father Patrick O’Kane 1872-1874
Father James J Callan 1874-1875
Father J Claire 1875-1879
Father W J Walsh 1879
Father Leon Haupts 1879-1887
Father Cornelius C McGrath 1887-1889
Father Patrick Guerin 1889-1891
Father P Fernandez 1891-1894
Father John F Quinn 1884-1897
Father Seraphin Soares 1897-1899
Father James O’Meara 1899-1902
Father Jerome J Enright 1902-1905
Father John Azevedo 1905-1908
Father James O’Flanagan 1908-1910
Father Michael Cahir 1910-1914
Father J P McCarthy 1914-1919
Father P J O’Sullivan 1919
Father Martin Sears 1919-1921
Father James Grealy 1921
Fort Jones Becomes a Parish in 1921
Following are the Pastors and Parochial Vicars who Have served Sacred Heart Parish, Fort Jones

Father Patrick J Sullivan 1921-1927
Father Francis J McEnaney 1927-1931
Father James O’Flanagan 1931-1932
Father Stephen Stack 1932-1942
Father Jeremiah Boland 1942-1946
Father James Kenny 1946-1949
Father John J Healy 1949-1953
Father J.P. Farrell 1953-1957
Father Francis Sullivan 1957-1959
Father William Broderick 1959-1964
Father John T McDonnell 1964-1966
Father Leo Scheibel, C.P., Administrator 1966
Father Vincent O'Shaughnessy 1966-1969
Father Hugh J Bannon 1969-1971
Father Anthony Gurnell 1971-1974
Father John P Sullivan 1974-1986
Father Roy R Doner 1986-1996
Father John Lawrence, Administrator 1996-2002
Sister Anne Chester, RSM, Parish Steward 2002-2004
Father Aiden O’Reilly, Supervising Priest 2002-2004
Father John Lawrence, Administrator 2004-2007
Father Bernard Tape, Pastor 2007-2009
Father Felipe H Paraguya, Parochial Vicar 2007-2009
Father Aldrin G Basarte, Administrator 2009-2012
Father Dariusz T Malczuk, Parochial Vicar 2009-2010
Father Glenn Jaron, MSP, Parochial Vicar 2010-2012
Father Julito R Orpilla, PA and Pastor 2013-
All Saints Mission Church, Happy Camp

Interior of All Saints Church, Happy Camp