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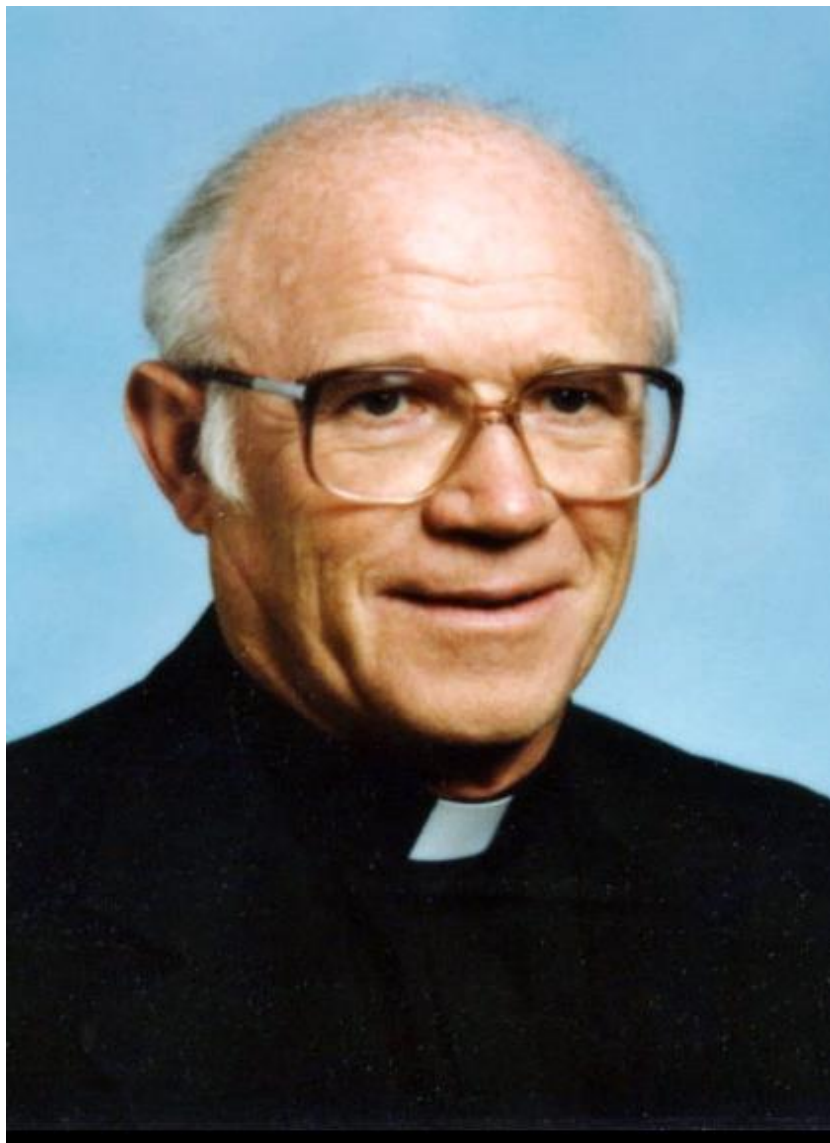
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FATHER MICHAEL CORMACK Placer Priests Fights to Put Faith into Practice

By Dan McGrath, printed in the November 18, 1992 issue of *The Sacramento Bee*



Father Michael Cormack

An unlikely looking radical is the Reverend Michael Cormack. The Roseville cleric's pixie features, quick smile and ear-teasing brogue call to mind the benevolent Irish priest of a dozen Mickey Rooney movies – given a chance, Father Cormack could probably charm the most hopeless miscreant into mending his ways...or at least considering it.

But Father Cormack can't seem to convince part of his flock that its Christian faith is meant to be lived as well as preached. The result is a lively church versus state debate that might well bounce from the pulpit to the courtroom and could go "all the way in the U.S. Supreme Court," one lawyer said.

"Sometimes you have to practice the Gospel with deeds and not just preach it with words," Father Cormack said. "It's not always a soothing balm. Sometimes it's a disquieting challenge."



Photo by John E Boll 2013

Saint Rose Church, Roseville

In June, the cash strapped Placer County Board of Supervisors voted against making Roseville's National Guard armory available as a homeless shelter this winter. Sherry Schiele, who works with the poor and the homeless through the St. Vincent DePaul Society, then approached the town's churches with the idea of making their facilities available on an emergency basis, and several indicated that they'd go along, pending approval of their various boards.

As pastor of St. Rose Catholic Church, Father Cormack does not answer to a board. Beginning Friday, the parish hall was to have been available three nights a week to the

Interfaith Shelter Co-op, whose volunteers would handle security, sanitation and other details.

“There’s no decision to make. It’s the right thing to do,” Father Cormack said. Some of his neighbors don’t see it that way. The quiet, upper-middle-class neighborhood in which St. Rose sits is the type of community to which people flee to escape urban “problems” such as homeless people. The sprawling Southern Pacific railroad yard have always made transients part of the Roseville landscape, the town is not alone in seeing their number soar in recent years as a consequence of hard economic times.



Photo by John E Boll 2013

St Rose Parish School

The prospect of a stream of down-and-outers trooping through the neighborhood for a meal and a nap at the church is anathema to some residents, including Councilman Harry Crabb, who lives across the street from St. Rose and is a church member. A meeting to “discuss” the shelter issue was held on his front lawn Sunday, and Father Cormack and Deacon Bill Boudier were shouted down when they tried to explain the church’s position.

“I guess because there’s no shelter in Roseville now, the homeless shouldn’t be here. But that’s not reality,” Father Cormack said. “There are a thousand reasons not to do anything, and one overriding reason to do nothing: These people need help”

Father Cormack finds it mildly ironic that the council last winter commended Fran Burman for making her backyard available as a homeless campsite after the armory shut down. But she lived across the tracks, on the “other” side of town.

“We realize the church is not the ideal spot, and we’d prefer that a shelter be located elsewhere.” Father Cormack said. “But if nothing else is available, if our elected officials turn their backs on these people, are we to let them stay out all winter and freeze or starve to death? My God, we bring the horses and the cows in – don’t we owe the same to our people?”

Despite assurances that the hall would be vacated and cleaned before their children arrive for class, some St. Rose grammar school parents have raised health and safety issues. One cited “a big disease factor with some of these people.”

Another neighbor, brandishing the chief’s report of increased police activity in the armory area when it was so used, said word of the church’s availability on the hobo grapevine would make it “a magnet, drawing people here of an element we don’t want.”

That’s the attitude behind a City Council threat to seek an injunction barring St. Rose from sheltering the homeless. The legal basis is a zoning ordinance prohibiting boarding, lodging or dormitory living in a residential area. A meeting today between council members and church leaders is an attempt to head off a court case.

Though he has no stomach for a court battle, Father Cormack says he won’t back down. He and his pastoral staff do not believe the Roseville City Council or any other government body has the authority to tell them how to administer their faith, a basic tenet of which is assisting the disadvantaged.

“That’s the fundamental issue,” he said, “St. Paul tells us that the poor will always be with us, and we have a duty to them, an obligation. This is a defining moment for us, a chance to demonstrate what we stand for.

“Ninety-five percent of the people who attend St Rose are behind us and support what we’re doing. As it progresses. I’m more and more convinced we’re doing the right thing.”

Archivist Update 22 Years Later

In 1992 the State of California was about to withdraw its shelter grants from the City of Roseville. Community member Sherry Schiele suggested that the promised \$300,000 in grants be redirected to expand the Home Start program which was operating under the St Vincent de Paul umbrella. At the same time she began organizing the churches of the city to form a shelter co-op to provide shelter for homeless adults that winter. Congregations were asked to take turns hosting the homeless during the winter months in church halls. The City Council approved the Home Start project, with a serious warning was leveled by Councilman Charlie Crabb who said, “No transients.”

To help fund this effort, the St Vincent de Paul Society sold the Grape Street duplex it had purchased in 1990. Schiele and Father Michael Cormack were ready to open the St Rose parish hall as part of the emergency winter shelter project when on November 10

Roseville Planning Director Patty Dunn warned them that using the parish hall as an emergency shelter violated city ordinances. No specific ordinance was cited – because the city didn't have one governing emergency shelters. Father Mike never forgot his meeting with Sherry after receiving the city's letter. She bluntly reminded him that he had to do the right thing -- open the parish hall as an emergency shelter. With that, Father Mike affirmed his commitment to open the hall for as long as the Armory remained closed, irrespective of the city's reaction to his decision.

The news that the parish hall was going to be used as a homeless shelter spread like wildfire. The day after Patty Dunn mailed her letter, some of the St Rose School parents had been informed and immediately brought the issue to the school board meeting. The parents had regarded the parish hall primarily as part of the school – as a gym, rather than as a parish asset for the benefit of the larger community. They thought they had first claim on it and other groups should only be allowed to use it when it wasn't needed by the school. The thought of homeless people using the facility overnight was like sounding the fire alarm.

In response to the outcry from school parents local residents, Father Mike postponed the November 14 opening of the shelter to see how things would played out. The following Monday, he and his staff met with school parents and local neighbors to face their ire. This was an unpleasant and contentious meeting.

Father Mike and attorney Jack Willoughby met with Mayor Santucci and Councilman Fred Jackson on how best to proceed. Santucci suggested the Armory as the solution for winter shelter for the homeless. An agreement was hammered out and on November 24, Council member Pauline Rocucci, Fr Mike and Jack Willoughby asked the County Board of Supervisors to add the Armory issue to the agenda. The Supervisors voted to open the Armory as a shelter for the fifth season and the Roseville Ministerial Association asked its members to take up a special collection in their churches to support the shelter.

On December 2, the City Council allocated \$15,000 for the winter shelter at the Armory as St Rose Parish matched the amount given by the city. The Armory operated as a winter shelter for the homeless on December 15, 1992 as scheduled and the immediate crisis was averted. The homeless had a place to stay during the winter of 1992-93.