

# Retiring priest returning to Ireland

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CHICO — Thirty-nine years ago, in Chico, the Rev. Simon Twomey started his career as a Catholic priest. In a few days, he'll go home to Ireland to begin his retirement.

Twomey is heading for an idyllic-sounding place, Killarney in County Kerry in the south of Ireland.

It's a picturesque land of mountains and lakes, he said, adding he plans to enjoy life there among friends and family, going for hikes and bicycle rides.

Although it burgeons in the tourist season, Killarney is a small town most of the year, Twomey said. It has about 10,000 people and resembles Gridley in size.

It's a very tight-knit community, he said. "If someone gets a cold, everyone knows about it."

Over his career, Twomey has maintained ties with home, going back for a visit each year and making an annual pilgrimage with people from his town to Lourdes in France, where the Virgin Mary is said to have appeared.

A decade or so ago, Twomey built himself a small house on an acre in Killarney, "somewhere to lay my head," he said. He plans to indulge a favorite pastime — growing flowers.

Twomey, who turns 65 this month, was 26 when he left Ireland. He'd just been ordained as a priest and came to work for the Diocese of Sacramento.

He recalls the culture shock he got on leaving "laid-back" Ireland and flying to bustling New York. The weather was a shock, too. When he left home, the temperature was 52. In New York, it was 108. And it was even hotter in Sacramento, where he went next.

His first assignment was at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Chico.

Twomey said he grew up in a close family. His father was a butcher, and he worked as a butcher, too, when he was growing up.

He chose to become a priest, he said, mostly because of the examples set by some family friends who were priests. These included Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty, who became a hero in World War II by helping to rescue many Jews and other refugees threatened by the Nazis.

As a priest, Twomey worked in churches in a number of places around the north state, including Paradise, Sacramento, and Citrus Heights. He is winding up his career in Chico, at Our Divine Savior Catholic Church, where he has been pastor for more than five years.

"I've always loved being a priest," he said. "I love celebrating Eucharist. That is a great joy."

He added, "I was blessed with great people at every parish."

Twomey said he advocates a “gentle kind of religion,” in which “you gently share what you have with people.”

“I think religion is so necessary today,” he said. “God asks us to love one another. We’re so quick to point out as enemies people who aren’t like us. That’s the great tragedy.”

Mimi Atkins, parish secretary at Our Divine Savior, said the church has flourished under Twomey’s leadership.

The building has been renovated, parking lots were paved, landscaping was put in, and the congregation has grown significantly.

“Boy, are we going to miss him,” she said.

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