

# Sacred Heart pastor preaches in two tongues

by Justin Nobel

The Sacred Heart Church in Olema looks like a downed spacecraft. On a recent Sunday morning, mist clung like balls of cotton to the hills and inside several dozen mostly grey-haired members gathered on worn wooden pews. A handful of men wore flannels tucked into jeans held up by large Western belt buckles. A six-person choir recited: "Let us walk to the altar of God."

Father John O'Neil entered the church wearing a large green robe and began giving salutations.

"Where you from?" he asked a young couple as he leaned over a pew to get their attention. The man responded quietly.

"Czech Republic Mike!" boomed O'Neil as he walked towards the altar.

## An interesting cha-cha

Listening to O'Neil speak is like fast-forwarding through an NPR news hour. That Sunday he touched on 1950s footwear, his time in the coast guard, a missed opportunity to buy land, Latin music, pediatric oncology and Paraguay, and ended with a story from his time as a

chaplain at San Quentin.

"I was walking down the upper yard the day before a riot—64 guys shot or stabbed. You could cut the tension with a knife. If you put that book up it would stay up," he said as he held up a bible.

When mass ended the congregation tramped across the wet grass to a small building behind the church for hot coffee and donuts. The Czechs, who were camped in the campground, stood in the back speaking with Gus Kovats, a 95-year-old Point Reyes Station resident. They were on a tour of western National Parks and had been hitting Sunday services along their way. "Is he some famous priest?" asked the Czech man.

O'Neil leads a mass in Olema and Bolinas on Sunday morning and two in Olema on Saturday evening, one in English and one in Spanish. He does communions and *quinceaneras* and often performs weddings and funerals in the same weekend. "My favorite thing to do is a funeral," he said. "It's an interesting cha-cha."

He came to the West Marin parish six years ago and has been a priest in the San Francisco archdiocese his whole life, first

in Tiburon, then in San Francisco's Mission district, at San Quentin and most recently in Novato. He spent two decades in the Navy reserves and for the last three has spent vacations traveling the world. In August he was in Azerbaijan. He can "get by" in seven languages including Tagalog, a dialect of the Philippines. If you ripped the world map from his study wall the pins denoting places been would still vaguely outline the continents.

## High life

O'Neil grew up in the Mission District in San Francisco in the 1940s. Both of his parents were from Ireland. His dad was a plumber and went to church every Sunday, "but never in an ostentatious way," said O'Neil.

The priest in the Mission church was Father Dan Sullivan, a man respected by the Irish and the Italians, and by the Black community in Fillmore. "I admired him," said O'Neil. "I thought, hey, this is such a good thing going on, I wanna be a part of this effort."

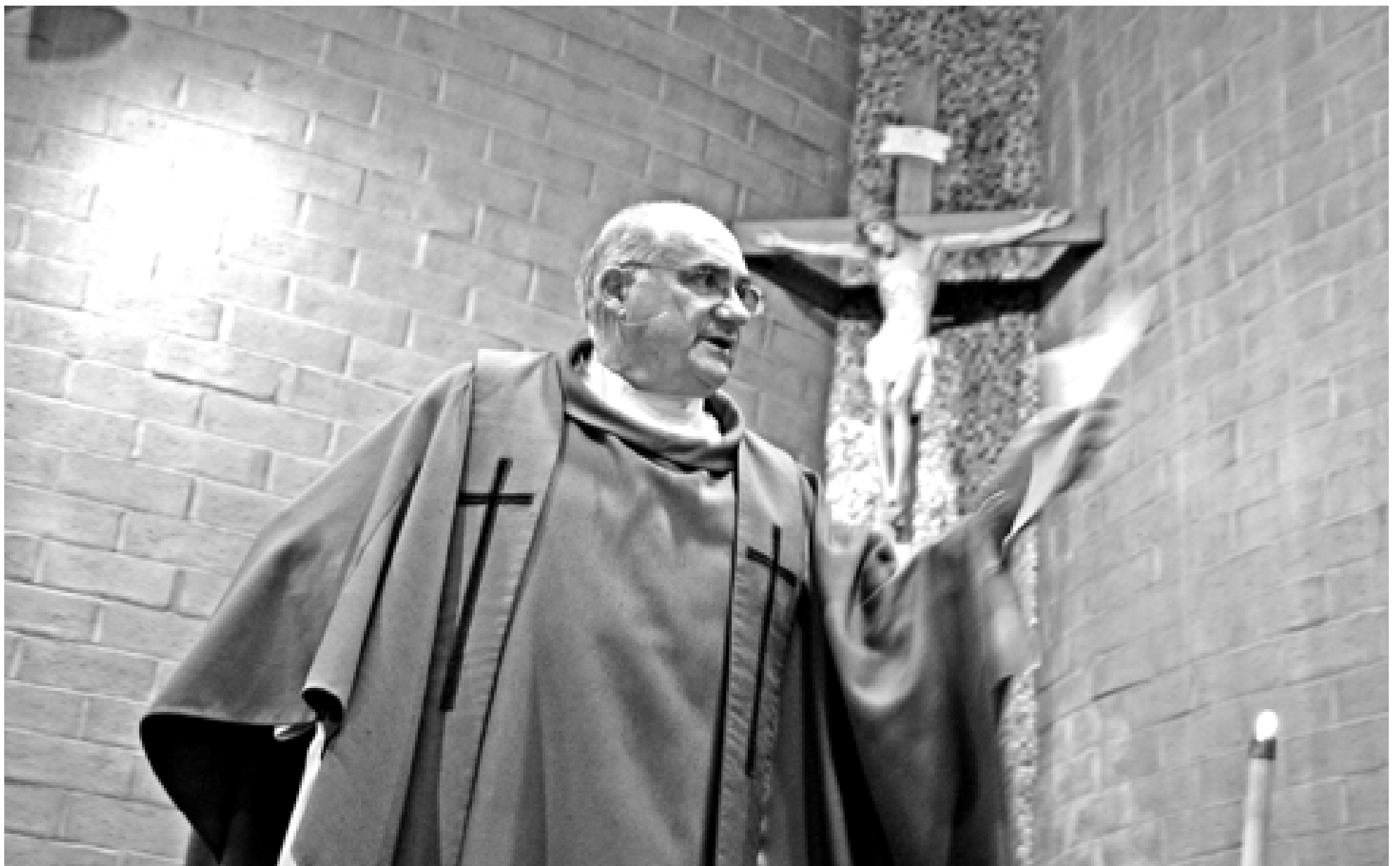
O'Neil spent eight years at St. Patrick's in Menlo Park and was ordained

as a priest in 1967 at the age of 26. In the Mission, he took mothers, wives and girlfriends to visit locked-up loved ones at San Quentin. He got to know the priests who worked at the prison and when they needed a new chaplain they recommended him. He refused twice but finally agreed and remained there for 19 years.

"My first ten years there it was a dangerous neighborhood," said O'Neil. He once questioned Charles Manson why he never left his cell to get some air—"because they'll kill me," Manson had answered—and on many occasions he counseled members of the Black Gorilla Family, a feared prison gang.

"You gotta say hello to everyone," explained O'Neil, "if I had pies or lasagnas, I always made sure I had five; one for the whites, one for the blacks, one for the Asians and one for the Mexicans."

O'Neil joined the Navy Reserves in 1978—"I thought, well, I've always been interested in going to sea and all that jazz"—where he spent time on a navy submarine and a coast guard cutter. He had stints in Guantanamo and at 29



Pastor John O'Neil delivers a sermon at the Sacred Heart Church in Olema and, later, a funeral - "an interesting cha-cha." Photo by Justin Nobel.

# Celebrations



Whitney Lawson, an 11-year-old sixth grader at Tomales Elementary School, won third place in the Marin County West Regional Elementary Spelling Bee on Thursday, October 11 at the Tomales school. She and four other finalists will represent West Marin at the spelling bee championship on Saturday, November 3 at Miller Creek School in San Rafael. A couple of the hard words, said Whitney, were "impede and anonymous." She worries about encountering "delicatessen." She poses here by her home at Lawson's Landing.



There's been some signs of a rebirth at Manka's. Volunteer vines appeared in the otherwise-dead pit about three months ago. What was assumed to be the beginnings of summer squash, undeniably revealed themselves last week as pumpkin vines. Apparently pumpkins thrive on ash. Which only makes perfect sense. They become the faces that shed light on a celebration of the dead: Halloween. Imagine how wonderful it would be if they were surrounded by carved up cousins on the thirty-first. Please bring a jack-o-lantern to the lodge.

Please send Celebrations to [celebrations@ptreyeslight.com](mailto:celebrations@ptreyeslight.com) or call 663-8404

Palms, a marine base in the Mojave Desert where daytime temperatures broach 120° Fahrenheit and McMurdo Station in Antarctica. When the crisis in the Balkans arose he got called up again.

"They wanted to send one guy to Belgrade and the other to Naples. I won the toss of the coin," he said. "They had to get the highway patrol to get me out, I didn't wanna leave Naples."

O'Neil strongly believes that Catholic priests should be able to marry and that woman should be allowed to join the clergy.

"If Sofia Loren would agree to meet me in Paris," he once told his congregation, "you'd have to find a new priest."

His six year stay at the Olema parish is up this year, but O'Neil doesn't plan on leaving.

"I'll take care of this place and try to stay something about life that is helpful," he said.

Preaching can also be a source of wisdom and inspiration for O'Neil. "Any time you give a talk you're preaching to yourself first and then to the people," he said.

## Far flung

The people have been coming less and less. During the 1960s and 1970s congregations were "packed to the brim with children," remembered Jackie Campigli, who grew up in Inverness and remembers going to CCD classes taught by nuns in the small church near the Dance Palace.

"Years ago this was dairy country and people were having seven and eight children at a time," said Campigli who now works at Sacred Heart. "It's amazing how

people change and the years change. I think our children are more outgoing. We taught them to go out and travel."

Back when I was younger, O'Neil explained, the valedictorian and the captain of the football team would both go to the seminary. "This is a different world," he said.

And God is still needed in this world, he explained. "When things are going real well you forget about God. When things are screwed up you pray to God," he said. "You watch: if something big jumps off then they'll start showing up again."

One group that still does show up is the Hispanic community. Of the 52 kids currently enrolled in CCD, said Campigli, 48 are Hispanic. Unlike the Sunday services, the one on Saturday night, which O'Neil leads in Spanish, is filled with children.

On a recent Saturday, more than one hundred people packed the church. A choir of seven belted out hymns with a distinctly Mexican rhythm. The service was alive with coughs and crying babies. A father in the front helped his child practice walking while he held him on top of the pew. Three elementary-aged girls sat patiently in front. One had white stockings, red nail polish and sparkling silver shoes. Towards the end of the service her friend, wearing pink, was called up to hold a large red bible as the O'Neil addressed the congregation. After mass ended everyone followed him out of church as the choir continued to play. Outside, children chased each other around the grass under a half-full moon. The church glowed red, like a rocket ready for take off.

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