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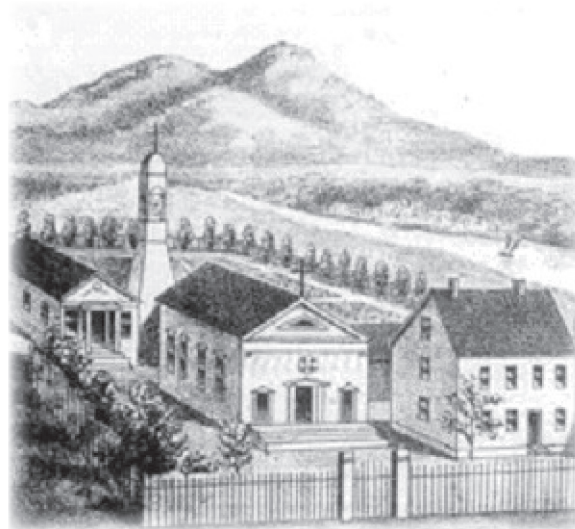
## From Somerset to the Golden Gate: The Story of Joseph Sadoc Alemany, First Archbishop of San Francisco

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(Concluded, from Vol. XXX, No. 9)

### Alemany Named to the American Hierarchy

In Rome in 1850, Alemany was named the founding bishop of the Diocese of Monterey in northern California, from which he began his illustrious career as the pre-eminent Roman Catholic leader in the western states during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. On May 31, 1850, in a Papal Brief entitled *Apostolatus officium*, Alemany was named the Bishop of "the Church in Monterey in Upper California, United States of America." He was consecrated in Rome a month later, June 20, 1850, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. His appointment to the California see was appropriate in several ways. O'Daniel notes that "his knowledge of the Spanish language and character adjusted him for directing the strong Mexican element still existing in California."<sup>18</sup> Patrick Carey remarks in a similar fashion about Alemany's suitability for the California appointment:

His knowledge of Spanish, French, and English as well as his American administrative experience within a religious order made him a likely episcopal candidate to help resolve some of the problems associated with the erection of the first diocesan see in former Mexican territory, where the Franciscan Indian missions had been operating since 1769 and where the gold rush of 1849 had begun to transform the territory.<sup>19</sup>



Benicia Priory

Carey also notes that there was some "opposition from the Mexican government to his appointment,"<sup>20</sup> but fails to inform his readers of what that opposition consisted.

Alemany was in Rome in 1850 in his role as provincial of the Province of St. Joseph in order to attend the meetings of a General Chapter of the Dominican Order, which, in effect, were never held. While there, Pius IX saw fit to appoint Alemany to the bishopric of Monterey. The records indicate that another Dominican of the Province of St. Joseph, Charles P. Montgomery, had been the first person appointed to be bishop of the newly

established diocese in California. In the official Registrum of the Province of St. Joseph, one finds the following note in Alemany's handwriting: "February 25, 1850: Father Charles Montgomery has received a bull from the Holy See naming him as Bishop of Monterey in California...."<sup>21</sup> However, Montgomery turned down the appointment and would not budge under pressure to accept this position. With Montgomery's refusal to accept the miter, Baltimore's Archbishop Eccleston sent his second nomination to Rome, while urging his fellow American bishops to do likewise. Eccleston wrote about Alemany with the following words:

Joseph Alemany, a Spaniard, Dominican Provincial, of sufficient age and adorned with both piety and learning—he has just gone to Naples to assist in electing a general of his Order). Therefore, if it please the Holy See, he could receive episcopal consecration before his return to the United States.<sup>22</sup>

O'Daniel echoes the judgment that Alemany was the better choice in the long run for this episcopal position: "Alemany's knowledge of the Spanish ways and language as well as those of the Americans there probably better fitted him for the place."<sup>23</sup>

On June 11, 1850, Alemany was informed of his selection as the new bishop of Monterey. He appears to have been "shocked at the news." Also he appears to have offered a "humble and modest resignation" directly to Pius IX. Yet Pius, a strict obedience cleric himself, would not hear of any rejection of his directive. Later Alemany would write about his audience with Pius IX in these words:

Before allowing me to refuse, he said that it is necessary that I go to Monterey. "You must go to California; there is no alternative; where others are drawn by gold, you must go to carry the cross. God will assist you."<sup>24</sup>

Father Vilarrasa had been elected at the chapter in Ohio to accompany Alemany to Rome. While there, he was appointed as the Dominican friar to accompany the new bishop and to establish a

Dominican foundation on the West Coast. It is unclear if Alemany knew of Vilarrasa's concerns about his leadership of St. Joseph's Province; these two Dominican friars worked closely and mostly amicably for the next thirty-five years in California. Reflecting later on his joining Alemany on the voyage to California, Vilarrasa once wrote: "I freely gave my consent to this invitation, with, however, this express condition, that I should not go there for any other reason than this I might provide for the spread of the Order there."<sup>25</sup>

### **Sister Mary Goemaere: The First Dominican Woman Religious in California**

An important Dominican woman who journeyed to California with Alemany and Vilarrasa was a Belgian born religious then completing her novitiate in Paris at the convent of the Holy Cross, Sister Mary Goemaere. One source suggests that following his appointment as Bishop, Alemany journeyed to Paris and there had gone to a Dominican convent in order to ask for volunteers for his new diocese of Monterey. Sadly, in the chapter room where he made his appeal, Alemany found only a profound silence. The next morning, however, a novice asked to see Alemany, which was the first meeting of these two Dominicans who would have a significant impact on Catholicism in California. Sister Mary Goemaere was a niece of Mother Julie Billiart, the founder of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.<sup>26</sup> Given her missionary aspirations, upon completing her novitiate, Sister Mary first agreed to travel to Somerset in order to teach French at the Academy of St. Mary's. In Paris, two other Dominican sisters from Toulouse, Sisters Rose and Catherine, also signed on for the trip to the United States with a specific intention of going to California in order to establish an academy for young women there. The final arrangements for the Dominican women religious to journey to the New World appear to have been worked out by Vilarrasa, presumably in discussions with Alemany. As it turned out, however, Alemany asked Sister Mary to alter her plans and to travel to California.

Aboard the ship to the United States, Alemany wrote: "The sisters are very well and very happy;

they have just finished singing several religious hymns . . . the sisters have their . . . English grammars and dictionaries and we have begun the first lesson.” In a later letter, Sister Mary remarked that the long voyage had been “happy” and that the sisters “had suffered very little.” Nonetheless, eight years after leaving France, Sister Mary explained in a letter to Father Alexander Vincent Jandel, the then Master General of the Dominicans, that she had originally volunteered for a job teaching French in Somerset, Ohio. But upon arrival in New York, Alemany had a change in plans and requested that she accompany him and Vilarrasa to California. She remarked that she accepted the change of plans “very willingly” in order to follow the will of God.

### **On to California**

Alemany, the newly consecrated bishop, Vilarrasa, and Sister Mary Goemaere left Europe in early August 1850 with the full authority to establish the Dominicans on the West Coast. This, of course, was one of their overriding ambitions. The first stop from Rome was Paris and then on to Ireland before embarking from Liverpool for the United States aboard the ocean going sailing vessel, the Columbus, arriving in New York City a month later on September 11. Alemany remained on the East Coast, meeting the other American bishops and also undertaking a begging mission for his newly created diocese. One important stop was Baltimore to visit Archbishop Eccleston. Vilarrasa returned to Somerset and Springfield, according to O’Daniel, “to get their few belongings.”<sup>27</sup>

While in Somerset, moreover, Vilarrasa cut a deal with the Dominican Sisters there. The two French sisters from Europe would be “exchanged” for two American members of the Somerset community. In effect, Sisters Francis Stafford and Aloysia O’Neil agreed to venture to California. These two Ohio Dominican women from Somerset, along with Sister Mary, would establish the Dominican Sisters in California, from which eventually emerged the Dominican Congregation of the Holy Name of San Rafael. This would become the second foundation of Dominican sisters emerging from the original Somerset congregation.

Sister Patricia Dougherty, O.P. of the San Rafael Dominicans recently wrote the following about the foundress of her congregation:

Mother Mary Goemaere was a forty year old novice in a Parisian monastery, Monastere de la Croix, when she volunteered to accompany the newly consecrated Bishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany to the new world. Of the little information available about her early life, we know that Catherine Adelaide Goemaere’s parents were artisans, a knitter and a barrel-maker. She was the third of nine children and one of only three who survived childhood. Upon the death of her mother in 1821 she took over the raising of her two sisters, ages 2 and 6. That, undoubtedly, was the reason for her late entrance into a Dominican contemplative monastery.<sup>28</sup>

Sister Mary was an accomplished linguist. She spoke French and Flemish and later in California became proficient in Spanish and English. Also a talented wordsmith, she maintained correspondence in a beautiful and legible handwriting; in addition, later on she kept records for the academic institutions of her congregation and maintained the account ledgers. A skilled craftsperson, she was adept in making lace and artificial flowers. Why at her age she joined the Dominican Order is unknown; nonetheless historians suggest that her vocation was one of deep commitment, inspiring her to leave home, family and eventually country for Dominican missionary work in the new world. Her character traits included being orderly and punctual, and while at the same time being an eminent risk-taker. These character traits served her well in her long years of missionary work in California.

Vilarrasa then appears to have journeyed back to the East Coast, meeting up with Alemany and, with Sister Mary Goemaere, prepared for the arduous trip to California. All three European Dominicans boarded the steamer Crescent City and headed for the Isthmus of Panama on the first leg of their thirty-nine day trip. After crossing the Isthmus and reaching the Pacific Ocean, Alemany, Vilarrasa, and Sister Mary boarded another vessel,

this time a steamship also named Columbus, and headed northward. In early December 1850—after nearly three months of travel including three ocean voyages (Liverpool to New York, New York to Panama, Panama to San Francisco) and an overland canoe/mule trip across the Isthmus of Panama—Sister Mary, Bishop Alemany, and Father Vilarrasa landed in San Francisco.

One story provides a remarkable insight into the character of Sister Mary. Two mules carried the three Dominicans across the Isthmus of Panama. When the one carrying Alemany and Vilarrasa refused to move forward, “a vigorous blow from Sister Mary soon conquered the mule’s obstinacy, and the journey was completed without further incident.” After arriving in California, Sister Mary wrote somewhat sadly in 1858: “I have been poor, alone, and abandoned for the eight years since we have been in California.” Once she even considered leaving California in order to establish a Dominican monastery in Canada. Nonetheless, what appears to have driven her was to be useful as a religious woman. She did remain in California, and reflectively once wrote: “God alone knows what I have had to suffer, but we must suffer before going to heaven.” Sister Mary remained on the west coast until her death in 1891. It is unclear if she ever had the opportunity to return to France or Belgium.

A European visitor to California in the middle 1860s, Herbert Cardinal Vaughan, evaluated the new American state and its people in the following way:

Of the Californians it may be said, that they are bold and independent adventurers.... Their belief in the possibility of living for an invisible and supernatural end is quickened by their experience of the country they have come to.... In no part of the world is the individual more free from restraint.... The great spiritual dangers in California are rank infidelity and unblushing naturalism.<sup>29</sup>

The northern California to which Alemany arrived in 1850 was but two and a half years from the resounding cry of “Gold! Gold has

been discovered in California!” that reverberated across the entire area of what would become the contiguous forty-eight states. Once the news of the discovery of gold at the mill site of John Sutter leaked out, general pandemonium set in, resulting in chaotic conditions for the coastal cities of northern California. Kay Alexander, the author of *Californian Catholicism*, once reflected upon the set of conditions that Alemany faced upon his arrival in San Francisco in the early winter of 1850.

The race to the foothills of the Sierra Nevada range was on. San Francisco, San Jose, and other towns began to lose their male populations to prospecting, as buildings remained half-built, crops went unharvested, and sailing ships lay stranded in the San Francisco Bay with no crews to sail them.<sup>30</sup>

Vilarrasa noted that there was only one church in San Francisco, appropriately called the Church of St. Francis, where high mass was offered each Sunday with sermons in Spanish, French and English. Immediately Alemany was writing letters to European clerics requesting priests for his newly founded diocese. One such letter went to the eminent English churchman, John Henry Newman, whom Alemany had met earlier in the year in England. He also wrote to the Dominican Master General seeking clerical assistance both for his diocese and for the newly established Dominican province in California.

### **On to Monterey**

In January 1851, Alemany traveled to Monterey, then with a population of nearly four thousand, and prepared for the opening of a school. Writing that he desired “one or more institutions of learning for the literary and moral good of the Community,” he first tried to buy a building called Colton Hall and then borrowed an adobe building from one William Hartnell for a year. On March 5, 1851, it appears that Vilarrasa and Sister Mary left San Francisco by steamship for Monterey, arriving twelve hours later. On March 7, the feast day of St. Thomas Aquinas, the new Dominican bishop already in Monterey sang his



first high mass in the Cathedral of San Carlos Borromeo.

In March 1851, Sister Mary, who until then had remained in San Francisco and taught Sunday school at St. Francis of Assisi parish, journeyed to Monterey with Father Vilarrasa. A month later, Sister Mary welcomed into the community a novice, Concepcion Arguello, who was the sixty-year-old daughter of a former Spanish governor of California. Interestingly enough, Bret Harte wrote about the romance of Concepcion Arguello and a Russian count to whom she was engaged in 1806. Unfortunately the count died the following year. Concepcion never married. Her Dominican religious name was Sister Dominica.

Once in Monterey, Sister Mary wasted little time in establishing an academy there for young women; two weeks following the arrival, the boarding school opened. In the summer, the two American Dominican sisters from Somerset arrived. In August, Jacinta Castro, a member of a prominent local Spanish family, received the Dominican habit. Sister Patricia Dougherty writes eloquently that “the simple ‘yes’ of a Dominican novice in a Parisian monastery led to the establishment of the first group of women religious in California.”<sup>31</sup>

The school in Monterey, Santa Catalina or St. Catherine, had twelve resident and sixty day students. Tuition was two dollars a month. Like many mid-nineteenth century academies for young women, instruction included reading, writing, religion, ancient and modern history, grammar, mathematics, French, English, Spanish, music, and sewing. The faculty included the sisters and Father Vilarrasa. The convent was now home to five sisters who spoke three languages: French, English, and Spanish. Father Vilarrasa once commented wryly: “At first it was like the tower of Babel, not being able to understand one another.” The following year, three more Spanish-speaking women joined Santa Catalina convent.

### **First Archbishop of San Francisco**

In July 1853, Pius IX divided Alemany’s diocese. He was assigned to San Francisco, with his



Statue of Our Lady and her Infant Son, brought by Father Alemany from Rome and given to the Dominican Sisters at Somerset in 1840, still kept at the St. Mary of the Springs motherhouse

diocese being the northern part of California. The Monterey diocese would then encompass the lower part of California; eventually, this diocese moved to Los Angeles.

When Alemany was appointed Archbishop of San Francisco, he wanted his Dominican brothers and sisters in his diocese, and so the friars and sisters moved to the new and potentially prosperous city of Benicia, northeast of San Francisco. Prosperity, however, was not realized in this city, and it became neither a county seat nor a railroad city. A contemporary citizen once remarked in 1862: “Benicia is a very dull place – scarcely any business, although once the rival of San Francisco.”

In San Francisco, Alemany lived most modestly, maybe even below what today we would call the poverty level. Cardinal Vaughn described Alemany’s episcopal residence, which was a tiny two-room cottage adjacent to St. Mary’s Cathedral on California Street near Chinatown, as a “miserable, dingy little house.”<sup>32</sup> The first cathedral itself is a handsome structure, which from the exterior strikingly resembles the present

St. Joseph Church near Somerset. The interior of the old cathedral has a different architectural arrangement from the Perry County church, but the exterior offers a marked and significant resemblance.<sup>33</sup>

How much Somerset's St. Joseph Church influenced Alemany is not clear. Historical documents suggest that St. Mary's Cathedral was designed by architects William Craine and Thomas England. Alemany wished to replicate the cathedral in his hometown of Vich. The new cathedral, constructed mostly with Chinese labor, had parapets on either flank, surmounted with embrasures, and buttresses with finished cut-stone pinnacles. Inside, a vaulted ceiling with groin arches rises above a Carrara marble altar, which was imported from Rome. The original design included a steeple, but fear that an earthquake would send it toppling onto the streets of San Francisco led the architects to alter their sketches, leaving only the bell tower. Nonetheless, the outside appearances of both churches suggest striking similarities.

### **Alemany's Apostolic work in California**

In his *A History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (Volume IV), John Gilmary Shea discusses the important apostolic work undertaken by Alemany as the spiritual leader of Northern California. James Hennessey echoes these sentiments in his *American Catholics*. Alemany returned to the eternal city in order to participate in the First Vatican Council, which was held in 1869-1870. Alemany served as a member of one of the commissions that explored the concept of papal infallibility, a concept that he appears to have favored and promoted. In this regard, he would have been in opposition to more than a few American bishops who were much concerned about the historical inappropriateness of the definition. Archbishop John Purcell was one of the dissenters, as was an early pastor of St. Patrick Parish in Columbus, then Bishop of Little Rock, Edward Fitzgerald. Another ecclesiastical task to which he was assigned centered on his chairing the commission for the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884, charged with the writing and

promotion of a uniform catechism for America. Following the Plenary Council, because of failing health and advanced age, Alemany began to think seriously about his retirement from his position as Archbishop of San Francisco.

### **The Final Days in San Francisco**

In 1884, reaching the age of seventy, Archbishop Alemany resigned from the Archdiocese of San Francisco and returned to Spain. In May 1885, Alemany prepared to leave San Francisco. His final address to the people of San Francisco contains the following touching words:

I am naught but a frail human being. If I remain among you to receive your honors and your adulations, I shall forget that I am a humble disciple and shall learn to value the comforts and luxuries of life. It is best that I go back to the simple Order where I came, and to which I have given my vows, that I may continue to the end in lowly submission to the will of the Great Master.<sup>34</sup>

Alemany was feted often during late spring of 1885. He appears to have been particularly touched by a reception given him by the Chinese converts to Catholicism in the area. On the afternoon of his departure from San Francisco, Sunday, May 24, 1885, the old ferry building was crowded to capacity. He left the golden gate area by train from Oakland, where some three hundred people requested his final blessing. When his train arrived in Washington, D.C., his friend from California, Ohio native General William Starke Rosecrans, arranged for a meeting of Alemany with President Grover Cleveland and with members of the State Department.

Back in Spain, Alemany went about his days undertaking the routine activities of an ordinary parish priest. While hearing confessions on the feast of St. Joseph, March 19, 1888, he appears to have suffered a severe cerebral stroke. He lingered for nearly a month, when he died on April 14, 1888. He was buried appropriately in the Church of St. Dominic in his birthplace of Vich. Canon Vilarrasa, who was a relative of his

life-long Dominican religious brother, Father Vilarrasa, preached the funeral sermon. In 1965, the remains of Bishop Alemany were returned to California and laid to rest at Holy Cross Cemetery in San Francisco.<sup>35</sup>

### **Reflections on the Character of Joseph Alemany**

In several ways, Archbishop Alemany was a complicated individual. O'Daniel once wrote the following

To the simplicity of a child and the humility of a Saint Francis of Assisi he added the courage of a true Spaniard. He was an example of all the virtues, and commonly considered a saint. Though somewhat low of stature and slight of build, the swarthy bishop had a strong constitution and an energy that seemed never to tire.<sup>36</sup>

Parmisano wrote that the “surviving records... reveal Alemany to be a holy and persistently creative churchman.”<sup>37</sup> The documents available also suggest, however, that Alemany was a strong-willed and determined person who did not appreciate serious questioning of his edicts. Nonetheless, he must have tempered this tendency in his nearly thirty-five year tenure as the principal ecclesiastical leader in an area teeming with the spirit of democracy and the freedom of the individual. He exemplified a serious streak of genuine humility along with a sense of poverty. That he would frown on the early twentieth century extravagance of several east coast prelates is not to be doubted. At times there were tensions between Vilarrasa as leader of the West Coast Dominicans and Alemany as the archbishop. This is not unusual in the history of American churchmen. In fact, Reginald Coffey suggests that such a tension contributed to the ill feelings between Fenwick as Bishop of Cincinnati and the Dominicans in Kentucky. A Dominican as a bishop always wears two hats—as the leader of a diocese and as a member of an exempt religious order. The balance between these two competing tendencies often is difficult to achieve. How well Alemany achieved this balance is another story for another time.

### **A Note on Sources**

Any study of the Dominican activity in the nineteenth century begins with the important work of Victor F. O'Daniel. This is always complemented with the studies of another American Dominican, Reginald Coffey, whose *The American Dominicans: A History of Saint Joseph's Province*, is indispensable. The pioneering work of these two Dominicans is now augmented with the extensive study of American Dominican men and women undertaken by Project OPUS, whose first volume in their important work, *The Order of Preachers in the United States: A Family History is Dominicans at Home in a Young Nation: 1786-1865*, edited by Mary Nona McGreal, O.P. (Strasbourg, 2001). The history of the American Dominicans on the west coast, *Mission West*, written by Fabian Stan Parmisano, O.P. is particularly useful for understanding the important work undertaken by both Alemany and Vilarrasa in California. The webpage for the west coast Dominicans, [www.opwest.org](http://www.opwest.org), also is particularly useful. Katherine Burton's *Make the Way Known* (1959) contains useful fragments of information on the Dominicans and their movement to California. *Californian Catholics* by Kay Alexander (1993) is a fascinating account of the development of the Roman Catholic Church in California. An extended biography of Alemany is John McGloin, S. J.'s *California's First Archbishop: The Life of Joseph Sadoc Alemany: 1814-1888* (St. Louis: Herder and Herder, 1966). The older account by John Gilmary Shea, *History of the Catholic Church in the United States, Volume IV* (New York, 1892), is a bit stiff and short on detail. James Hennessey, S.J.'s *American Catholics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) provides an informative account of the nature of the California culture and society in 1850 when Alemany, Vilarrasa and Sister Mary Goemaere arrived in the Golden Gate area.

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#### Notes

- 18 O'Daniel, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-173.  
19 Patrick W. Carey, *The Roman Catholics* (Westport, CT, 1993), p. 174.  
20 *Ibid.*  
21 Coffey, p. 250. The same reference is found in Parmisano's *Mission West*, but with the note that Montgomery refused the appointment as bishop.  
22 Parmisano, p. 44.  
23 O'Daniel, *op. cit.*, p. 169.  
24 Parmisano, p. 47.  
25 This informative reflection by Vilarrasa is found on the West Coast Dominican webpage.  
26 Katherine Burton, *Make the Way Known: The History of the Dominican Congregation of St. Mary of the Springs* (New York: 1959), p. 66. Burton provides the only information found in the research for this essay noting the familial relationship of Sister Mary with Mother Julie Billiart.  
27 O'Daniel, *op. cit.*, p. 173.  
28 Sister Patricia Dougherty, O.P. Webpage on West Coast Dominicans. This is the most thorough account of Sister Mary Goemaere

found in the research undertaken in preparation for writing this essay.

- 29 Herbert Cardinal Vaughn, in *The Dublin Review* (1866), found in Kay Alexander, *Californian Catholicism* (Santa Barbara, CA: 1993), p. 37.  
30 Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 38.  
31 Sister Patricia Dougherty, O.P., *op. cit.*  
32 Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 45.  
33 Several years ago while visiting the old Saint Mary's Cathedral, Marianne Lisska noted in a display case a photograph of General William Rosecrans's son who was serving there near the turn of the century as a Paulist priest.  
34 This classic statement from Alemany is found in an essay on the archbishop by Fr. Sebastian Bohan, O.P., which appeared in *Dominicana* (1916). It is found on the west coast Dominican webpage. One should note that there appears to be two different publications with the same name, *Dominicana*. The California Dominicans published this short-lived journal early in the twentieth century; another journal began later in the House of Studies of St. Joseph Province in Washington and continued publication until the 1960s.  
35 This information was kindly provided by Fr. Richard Ambrose McAlister, O.P., a Columbus native and alumnus of Aquinas College High School now a professor *emeritus* at Providence College.  
36 O'Daniel, *op. cit.*, p. 173.  
37 Parmisano, p. 29.