

SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

Vol 2

Fr John E Boll, Archivist

No 3

FATHER PETER MAGAGNOTTO, CP FOUNDER OF SAINT JOSEPH CHURCH, MARYSVILLE “To Build and not to Count the Cost”

By Fr John Dwyer, printed in the *Catholic Herald*, January 8, 1976

The next priest to make a deep imprint in the early life of the church in Northern California was an Italian. Born in Ala in the Tyrol, in the Diocese of Trent on February 22, 1806, Peter Magagnotto joined the Passionists when he was twenty-five. After ordination he became a professor of theology, and in 1840 was appointed superior of a monastery at Tournay in Belgium. In 1845 he was sent to Sydney, Australia to attempt to establish the Passionist Fathers in that area, a venture which failed. On his return he came by way of the United States and landed in San Francisco right at the time of the boom caused by the gold rush.

In the summer of 1852, Bishop Alemany, concerned about the booming supply port town of Marysville, sent Father Magagnotto there to establish the church. By August 1852 he had the first St Joseph Church in Marysville under construction, a single frame building 32 feet by 48 feet on the north side of Seventh Street between C and D. This little church was dedicated by Archbishop Alemany on May 20, 1853.

But this simple structure did not meet either the needs of the growing community or the ambitions of Father Magagnotto. Therefore two years later, the cornerstone of a much larger brick church was laid by the same archbishop on September 16, 1855 and when completed, the small church was converted into a rectory. Neither did this satisfy the ambitions of Father Peter, as he was known. The following year saw the completion of a brick school 51 feet by 35 feet on the southeast corner of 8th and C Streets and on October 26, 1856, the arrival of three Notre Dame Sisters to teach in the school which opened on November 10, 1856.

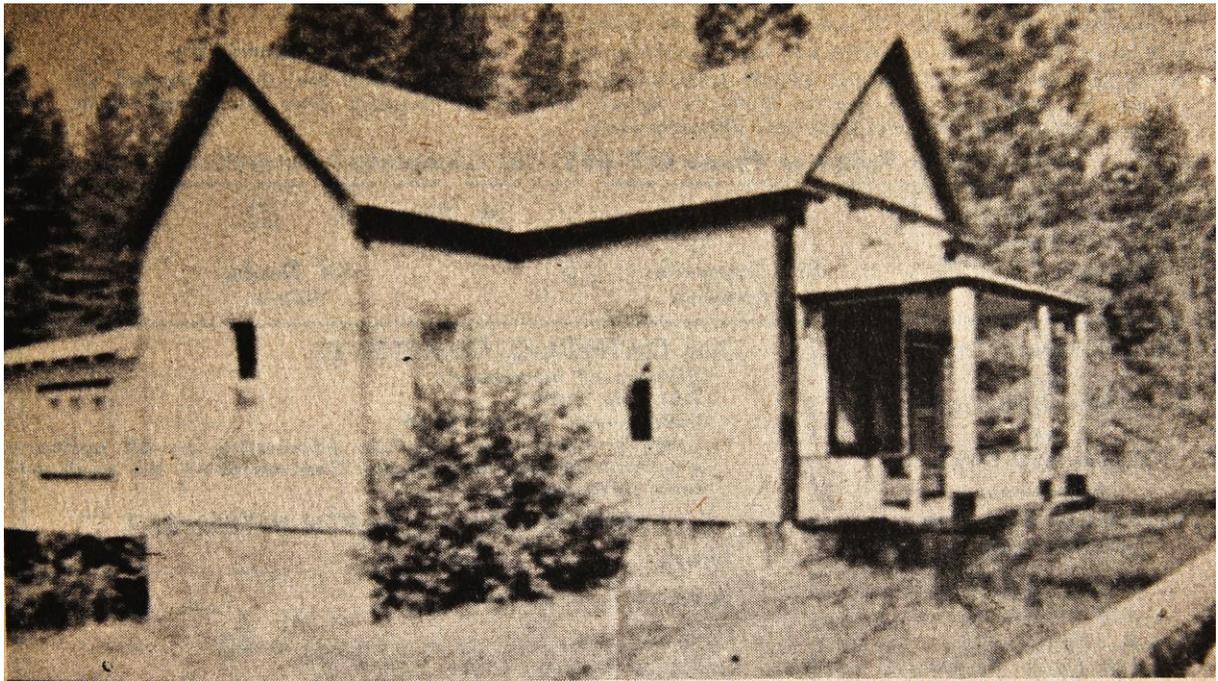
“To build and not to count the cost” was one of Father Peter’s weaknesses. When he was transferred from Marysville in March 1857, he left a huge indebtedness on the church, a debt which was to plague the new Vicar Apostolic of Marysville when he arrived there in March 1861.

Father Peter next became pastor of St Francis Church in San Francisco in 1857 and the Vicar General of the Archdiocese of San Francisco. While at St Francis he built the new

church there. When the archdiocese was divided in 1861 and the Vicariate Apostolic was set up for the northern part of California and Nevada, with headquarters in Marysville, Father Peter approached the new bishop, Eugene O'Connell, who was hard pressed for priests with the idea of founding a monastery of Passionist priests in the new Vicariate. Anxious to get priests at any price, the plan was approved. Father Peter left San Francisco and sailed for Italy in August 1862. The following year he arrived back with seven Italian Passionists, half of whom knew no English.

Father Peter and Father Angelo were sent to Virginia City to establish their monastery in September 1863; Father Guido Matassi and Father Hyacinth who spoke English were given assignments by Bishop O'Connell, and the other four were sent to Benicia to the Dominican Fathers to learn English.

Meanwhile with the consent of Bishop O'Connell, Father Peter bought property on the Divide between Gold Hill and Virginia City and proceeded to build a wooden building which was a church in front and a three story monastery in the rear. The parish of the Immaculate Conception at Divide was formally established in December 1863 and Bishop O'Connell came to Divide for confirmation on July 31, 1864.



Monastery at Divide, established about 1864

The venture however was not to succeed. There were already established parishes in Virginia City and Gold Hill. Eventually in September 1863, the Superior General transferred the monastery to Mexico and the heavily indebted property was sold. By

1867 Father Peter was back in Rome and while giving a mission at Castel Perziano on November 17, 1868 he died.

To this remarkable energetic priest then, credit must be given for establishing the church in Marysville, for bringing the Notre Dame Sisters to Marysville, and for establishing the first monastery of men in the State of Nevada and the Diocese of Grass Valley.



Photo by John E Boll 2010

Saint Joseph Church, Marysville
Built by Father Peter Magagnotto, CP in 1855