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A DOMINICAN HERITAGE 1850 – 1979

The Dominican Fathers and Brothers came to California in 1850. Their first foundation was in Monterey which survived only four years. It was completely abandoned and the community moved to Benicia in 1854 and put down roots there. Throughout the intervening years, Benicia served as the source of the Dominican heritage in California. Benicia became one of the most important centers of the Church in the West and a source of great influence especially along the river. On March 17, 1979, Saint Dominic Parish in Benicia celebrated its 125th anniversary. In preparation for this anniversary, LeNoir Miller compiled and wrote a short history of the journey of the Dominicans from Spain to Monterey and then to Benicia. This and the next two articles are taken from LeNoir's short history called *A Dominican Heritage, 1850 – 1979*. The Archivist

A Dominican Heritage, Part I

By LeNoir Miller
Saint Dominic Parish,
Benicia, California
March 17, 1979

Answering God's Call to Serve Him

The languid days of the early Californian were swept aside in the wake of the '49er's wild scramble to reach the "promised land" of gold. In that teeming exodus to the Pacific shore were many Catholics for whom the Holy Father felt a great concern. There had been no bishop in California since the death of the Franciscan Bishop Francisco Garcia Diego y Moreno in 1846 whose See was San Diego. Father Joseph Alemany, a Dominican, whose See was at Monterey, was appointed in 1850 to succeed him. The new bishop invited Father Francis Sadoc Vilarrasa to accompany him to California where they established the first Dominican Monastery in the western United States.

From that humble beginning in Monterey in 1850, parishes, churches and schools were founded. The work of those early Dominicans bore fruit and the results are quite visible but their early history is not so well known; however, they did play an important part in the first years of the new state.

A record of self-sacrificing zeal and labor on the part of the men who wore Saint Dominic's honored habit should be mentioned if only as a reminder of things done for religion by pioneers, men who sought not the wealth of gold in California but the glory of God in the salvation of souls.

To understand more fully the character of those men, one must go back centuries to the Old World when Dominican houses were established. Both great and lowly entered those portals away from the sins and temptations of the world. Inside, they studied, prayed and worshiped God with true humility.



Bishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany

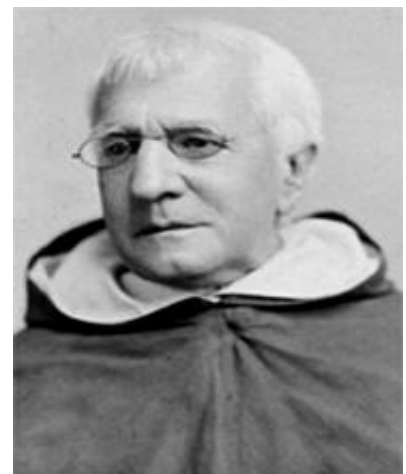
Two 15 year old Spanish boys, Joseph Alemany and Francis Vilarrasa entered that environment when they said goodbye to family and friends and dedicated their lives to the service of God as long as they should live. Joseph was born in Vich, Spain, July 13, 1814 and Francis was born a month later the same year in the province of Catalonia.

When the religious orders were exiled from Spain, the young men went to Italy to continue their studies. In due time they were ordained priests and Father Alemany was sent to America to work in the pioneer mission fields. Father Alemany had superior intelligence; he was practical, industrious and always considerate of his fellow man.

In March of 1840, he arrived in New York and continued his journey by rail and stagecoach to Ohio. Father's destination was Saint Joseph Convent near Somerset, a little village in a clearing surrounded by forests where rabbits, squirrels, red fox and deer found a haven.

A few Catholic families, mostly Irish and German who had settled in that primitive area, were loyal and devoted to their priests and sisters. Previously, in 1818, men of the settlement had built a small log church and a convent named in honor of Saint Joseph; later, Dominican Sisters founded Saint Mary's Convent in Somerset.

Five years after Father Alemany's arrival he was joined by Father Francis Vilarrasa who had sailed from Europe and arrived in New York January 3, 1845. He traveled westward by train until the end of the line where he changed to a stagecoach which took him to his destination, Saint Joseph's. He arrived there in the afternoon on the 9th of January.



Sadoc Vilarrasa, OP

He found his new home very different from the convents and imposing cathedrals of the Old World. Life was austere in the little religious community and the two young priests suffered many hardships and privations. They rode horseback through rain, sleet and snow, and cold winter winds to reach the Catholics in that sparsely settled country.

The fact that Father Vilarrasa was a small man was the cause of some embarrassment to him. He used to tell the following stories about himself: When he arrived on horseback to say Mass at one of the farmhouses, the good natured Irish mother of the house lifted him in her arms in spite of his protests and carried him into the house. She told him to sit by the fire and get warm until the priest arrived, thinking he was the small boy who had come to serve Mass. On a certain Sunday, when he was to preach, the pulpit was high, so he placed a bench in it on which to stand during the sermon. He announced the text: "A little while and you shall not see me and again a little while and you will see me," at the conclusion of which the bench slipped from under him and he disappeared completely from the view of his congregation. Although he was small of stature what he lacked in size he more than made up for in kindness and a sunny disposition.

Among those early settlers was the Thomas Ewing family who lived twenty miles from Somerset. Mr. and Mrs. Ewing were the foster parents of winsome little Fannie O'Neil and Billy Sherman. Fannie became Sister Mary Aloysia, O.P., the first American Sister to dedicate her life to serving in the California Mission field. Billy was later known as the famous Civil War General, William T. Sherman.

In 1850, Father Alemany and Father Vilarrasa were called to Italy to attend a general chapter of their order. The two priests sailed together and arrived without mishap. After several years spent in the remote American mission fields, Rome's beautiful gardens, palaces and Saint Peter's grandeur were even more breath-taking than they remembered from their student days.

Before Father Alemany arrived in Europe he did not know he had been appointed to fill the See at Monterey to care for the Catholics and the affairs of the Church in California. Previous to the Gold Rush, California had been a Catholic domain. The greedy, plundering episodes that followed the tranquil days of the Padres' California Mission era were alarming to the Holy Father.

Father Alemany soon learned that he would be sent to California and on June 30, 1850, Joseph Sadoc Alemany was consecrated Bishop of Monterey. While still in Europe he decided to establish religious houses and schools in his new diocese. Father Vilarrasa accepted his invitation to accompany him to the new mission field.

On his way to the new assignment the Bishop stopped in Paris at the venerable Monastery of the Cross amidst the plane and chestnut trees. He told the nuns of his plans to establish convents and schools, and asked for volunteers to aid him. Only one, Souer Marie de la Croix Goemaere who was born in Warneton, Belgium on March 20, 1809, but who had not yet made her cloistered profession, accepted his invitation. Sister Mary was well educated and deeply religious. Although the Belgian sister was past 40, she was active and as vigorous as a much younger person. Before the month had past Sister Mary made her profession to Bishop Alemany as a Sister of the Third Order of Saint Dominic.

Father Vilarrasa, Sister Mary and two sisters from Toulouse who were going to Saint Mary's Convent in Ohio, sailed for London. In Liverpool the old city on the Mersey estuary, they met Bishop Alemany who bought cabin passage for them on the beautiful ship *Columbus*.

Water gently lapped the hulls of ships with masts tall and straight, and proud figureheads at the bow pointing the way. The ship's hawsers were cast off and smoke puffing little tugs guided the ship from the dock, the city fading from view as the 1037 ton ship with Captain Robert McCerran in command, passed through Saint George's Channel. With her sails unfurled to the wind he pointed her bow toward the open sea.

The little band of religious, five in number, armed with their breviaries, rosaries and the blessings of the Holy Father, set sail for the New World on September 11, 1850. Everyone on board was kind to them. Bishop Alemany and Father Vilarrasa said Mass frequently and on Sundays the bishop preached a sermon. The *Columbus* sailed safely across the Atlantic, and docked in New York harbor on the 11th of October, exactly one month after leaving Liverpool.

After the little band disembarked, Bishop Alemany went to Baltimore while Father Vilarrasa, Sister Mary and the two young sisters journeyed overland to Saint Mary's Convent in Somerset, Ohio, the destination of Sister Rose and Sister Catherine. The latter part of the trip was made by stagecoach which jerked and rattled over the rough roads. Through the covered bridge and up the hill the horses ran, until they stopped at the gate of Saint Mary's on the afternoon of Thursday, October 17th.

The four travelers were given a cordial welcome by the Dominican Sisters. Father Vilarrasa and Sister Mary told them of their plans for schools in the Bishop's new diocese and of the need of volunteers to assist them. Two sisters of Saint Mary's community promised to join Sister Mary in the following year.

Father Vilarrasa and Sister Mary said their good byes and returned to New York where Bishop Alemany joined them on October 28th to continue their journey to California. Hundreds of impatient passengers were waiting at the dock to embark. As news of the California gold discovery was still ringing in the ears of the world, relatives, friends and spectators lined the piers to bid farewell to the gold seekers.

Mining equipment was scattered about the ship's deck where husky seamen were shouting orders to make ready for sailing. Paddle-wheels turned, the steamer *Crescent City* glided from the dock, bound for Chagres.

Among the passengers were many Catholics. Everyone was especially kind to the Dominicans on the crowded boat. The steamer passed through rough seas until it sailed down the Florida coast into quiet waters where winter temperatures gave way to summer heat. "From the time we left New York," said Father Vilarrasa, "the heat increased each day, so that it was almost suffocating...I never have felt so much heat as then. Since on the first of November we had to

dress in summer clothes.” The stokers were often overcome by the sweltering heat as they pitched shovel after shovel of coal into the blazing furnace.

On the third of November, the *Crescent City* passed between the islands of Cuba and Santo Domingo, both clearly visible. The following day the ship stopped at Jamaica to pick up passengers and on the sixth, during the night, it dropped anchor off shore from Chagres. An old castle with its fortress stood on the bluff.



Photo by John E Boll 2013

Panama Canal Zone where the Dominicans Crossed to the Pacific Ocean

On the morning of the seventh, the Dominicans disembarked and entered one of the dugout canoes which the boatmen had rowed out for the passengers. The canoes were made from hallowed out logs and could carry several persons and their luggage. The boatmen were hired to make the trip up the Chagres River, through the jungle to Gorgona and Cruces where the pack roads began. The three boatmen hired by Bishop Alemany went directly to the river instead of going into the village which was almost hidden by the dense foliage. Even in the morning hours the heat was intense.

The Chagres River with the bright green foliage growing down to the edge of the bank was a refreshing sight even with alligators slithering among the water lilies; bolder alligators climbed upon the banks to sun themselves. Palm trees waved their long fronds in the breeze as screeching parrots with brightly colored feathers kept up their incessant noise. Chattering monkeys leaped from branches with butterflies and birds of brilliant hues everywhere.

The river was filled with canoes loaded with California bound travelers. The first stop-over after leaving Chagres was Gatun on the right bank of the river where travelers found lodgings. "At night we slept in an Indian's hut, made of clay and trunks of trees. It was very comfortable in spite of the great heat as the air penetrated through all parts of the hut," said Father Vilarrasa.

Word spread quickly that a sister and two priests were in the village and in the morning with several Indians assembled, the Bishop gave them a talk in Spanish. After a hasty breakfast, the travelers continued up the river which became narrower and more winding. "The trip on the river was very delightful," said Father Vilarrasa, "it was the month of November, nevertheless both banks were green with trees and grass, so that it resembled spring. There are parrots that fly everywhere and monkeys of all kinds. There is one kind larger than a man and can throw enormous stones; we heard its cries."

On Friday afternoon, November 8, the three Dominicans arrived in Gorgona. They made their way up the steep embankment from the boat landing to the town. "We remained in the Inn for the night; here I met a young Catalán . . . he treated us very well and did not want to accept any payment for our meals and lodging," said Father Vilarrasa. At Gorgona were several houses open all around with high pitched palm-leaf roofs to shed the torrential rains. Hundreds of over-night travelers crowded the few stores, saloons and gambling houses.

Saturday night, the three religious stopped at a little Indian village where they stayed all night in an Indian's small hut. Sunday morning Bishop Alemany and Father Vilarrasa offered the sacrifice of the Mass which was well attended by several travelers and Indians.

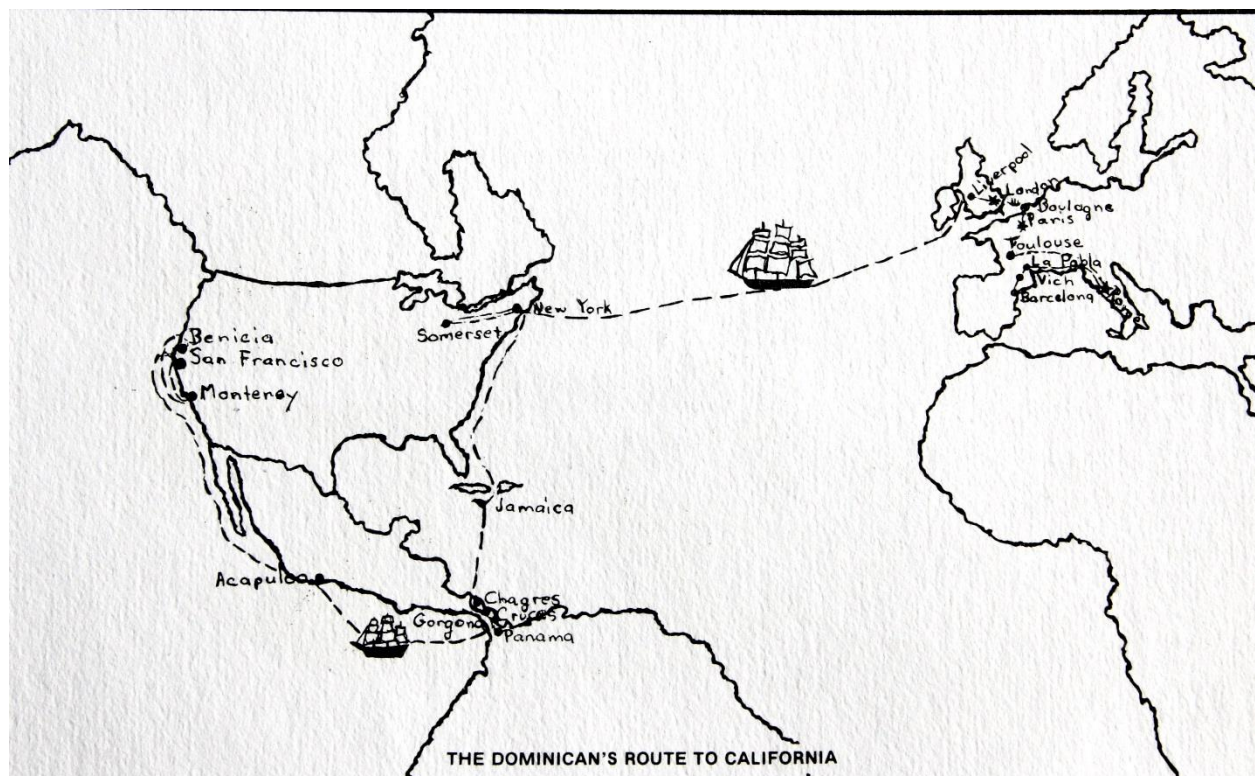
After the customary breakfast of dark bread, black coffee and beans, the journey continued up the river to Cruces where they arrived before dinner. They stayed overnight in Cruces where next morning Bishop Alemany secured the only two mules available because of the urgent demand for them by the gold seekers. On November 10, at ten o'clock in the morning, they mounted their mules and started for Panama over the ancient Spanish trail which was a dangerous one, only a foot wide in some places, and often filled with soft mud. The heavily laden mules were often reluctant to continue their journey. The one that carried Bishop Alemany and Father Vilarrasa balked in his tracks and no amount of coaxing could budge the beast but when everyone's patience had been exhausted, Sister Mary gave him a sound whack with a stick which brought him out of his stubborn stance. At nightfall they stopped along the trail and found lodging in one of the bamboo huts, their sleep disturbed by eerie cries of the jungle beasts.

On the morning of November 12, they saw Panama and the towers of the great Cathedral as they descended the trail. "In Panama we went to the seminary," said Father Vilarrasa, "there they wished us to celebrate a High Mass in the Chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary which is the only one left of our convents . . . the walls and arches of the old church are still preserved. I sang High Mass with the assistance of the deacon and sub-deacon, and the bishop preached."

The Panamanian nuns were surprised to learn that Sister Mary had crossed the Isthmus and was on her way to California to open a school. She could speak only French and Flemish while the Spanish language was used exclusively in Panama. She was admired by the entire community for courage and faith in God.

The three travelers remained two days in Panama which was once a rich city with many monasteries, convents and churches but the dingy old town appeared as though “no improvements whatever have been made, nor have any buildings been erected since the Spaniards abandoned New Grenada,” said Father Vilarrasa, “. . . it is a most unhappy region; and if it were not for the climate which keeps the fields green and cheerful, it would seem that one would die of melancholy. The heat is excessive. The cathedral is a beautiful and magnificent building, but it appears not to have been touched since it was built.”

On November 16, Bishop Alemany, Father Vilarrasa and Sister Mary embarked on the small steamer *Columbus* bound for California. The clanking chain and windlass raised the anchor and the ship’s gun boomed her parting salute. “The boat was not very large, less than 150 feet long, the rooms were small and the fire increased the heat. We were obliged to sleep in the middle of a room the greater part of the trip.” Said Father Vilarrasa. The stokers worked in temperatures of more than 100 degrees.”



Drawing by LeNoir Miller

On November 24, the steamer dropped anchor in Acapulco Bay and Mexican boatmen rowed out to take passengers ashore. “The city is very clean, and the church, although not very large nor very rich, is well preserved. We ate in the rectory, the priests treated us like princes,” said Father Vilarrasa, “We spoke with an old Spanish Andalusian who gave us a great deal of information

about California. The people of this city seemed to me much better than those of Panama, and in church they appeared very pious.”

The parish priest accompanied the bishop and Father Vilarrasa to the steamer which sailed at five o'clock that evening; each new day on board brought more trying conditions to the weary passengers but it also brought them nearer their goal. Although the storms on the Pacific Ocean are said to be milder than those of the Atlantic, they too can put fear into a strong heart and many of the passengers suffered sea-sickness. Farther up the coast the cooler weather brought some comfort to the hot and exhausted travelers crammed in the little ship.

Twelve days out of Acapulco, on December 6, 1850, at 11 o'clock that night, the captain brought the *Columbus* through what is now known as the Golden Gate. Passengers on the steamer disembarked on the morning of the 7th.

Since no news of Bishop Alemany's consecration or his arrival had reached California no one was at the dock to meet him and his co-workers. They went to the rectory at the church of Saint Francis where Father Anthony Langlois gave them a hearty welcome and a few days later the Catholics of San Francisco gathered in the church to welcome the Dominicans.

Men of all nationalities were in the city as thousands had come by ship on their way to the gold fields. The streets were filled with mud and rubbish; “Rats of all descriptions were everywhere; in the bay, on the streets, and in the lodging houses.”



Photo by John E Boll

Mission Santa Barbara

On December 14, the bishop left for Santa Barbara where he arrived on Christmas Day at the Mission about a mile from town; Father González Rubio, Franciscan Administrator of California, and Fathers José Jimeno and Francisco Sánchez welcomed him. Father Rubio accepted his credentials as genuine and proclaimed him to be the new Bishop of Monterey.

Bishop Joseph Alemany said Mass and preached to a large crowd in the elaborately decorated chapel, the finest of the California Missions. Music was furnished by an organ, several instruments and a choir.

Concepción Arguello was at the Mass and when she learned that a convent would be opened in Monterey, she asked permission to enter. Although she was almost 60 years of age the bishop granted her request. Concepción in her youth, was the 15 year old señorita who fell in love with the Russian, Nikolai Rezanov. They were betrothed in 1806 and he, with a promise to return, sailed to Russia to get his Czar's permission for the wedding. The days passed into years as Concepción continued to wait but it was not until 1841 that she learned he had died in the year 1807 without reaching the Czar. Sir George Simpson gave her the tragic news while he was visiting in the home of Mrs. Ramona Wilson, a sister of Señora Benicia Vallejo after whom the City of Benicia was named.

On his return to San Francisco, Bishop Alemany stopped at Monterey to attend to business concerning his vast diocese. In San Francisco, he was joined by Father Vilarrasa and Sister Mary who had awaited his return before leaving by steamer for Monterey.



Photo by John E Boll 2015

Monterey-Carmel Area Pacific Coast