

## CHAPTER 12

### On to California [\[1\]](#)

San Francisco was a genteel, "laid-back" sort of town from its early Spanish beginnings in the 1700s (then called Yerba Buena) to the drifting in of pioneering Europeans and U.S. citizens. But shortly after the cry "Gold!" was heard from Sutter's Mill in January 1848, even the most sober and settled of its citizens caught the fever and joined in the rush.

Overnight carpenters dropped their hammers, masons their trowels, bakers their loaves, clerks their pens, to rush to the American River. Schools were closed as both teachers and pupils deserted; shopkeepers hung signs on their doors -- 'Gone to the Diggings,' 'Off to the Mines' --and disappeared. By June 15 [1849] San Francisco was a ghost town, with houses and shops empty, and all who could walk, ride, run, or crawl rushing toward the Sierras.[\[2\]](#)

A ghost town, yes, but not for long. A year later San Francisco was alive again with those returning from the mines, rich or as poor as ever, and with latecomers from near and far stopping off to cash in. The town soon became "the City," percentage-wise as cosmopolitan as we find it today. So a wide-eyed seminarian, later ordained by the city's first archbishop, wrote to the Society of the Propagation of the faith on September 18, 1851:

What a port! What a town! What a population! French, English, Germans, Italians, Mexicans, Americans, Indians, Canacs, and even Chinese; white, black, yellow, brown, Christians, pagans, Protestants, atheists, brigands, thieves, convicts, firebrands, assassins; little good, much bad; behold the population of San Francisco, the new Babylon teeming with crime, confusion and frightful vice.[\[3\]](#)

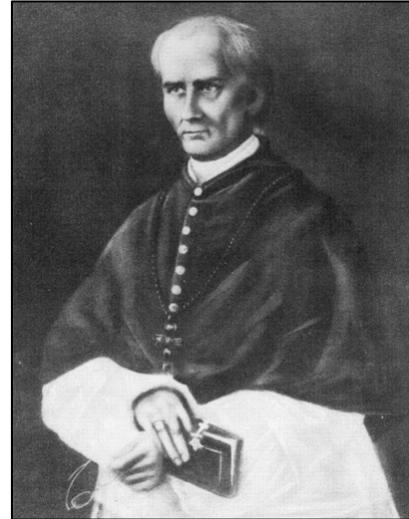
The archbishop who ordained this young enthusiast was Joseph Sadoc Alemany, a Dominican friar, appointed in 1850 expressly to serve in the wilds of the Californias, namely Alta and Baja, as well as Nevada, Utah and Arizona territory. His episcopal see was in Monterey. When Alemany arrived in the port city of San Francisco in December of 1850 he was accompanied by another Dominican friar, Francis Sadoc Vilarrasa, and a Dominican sister, Mary Goemaere, herself a Belgian immigrant. After a formal welcome on December 7, the bishop waited until December 8 to preside at the Mass of the Immaculate Conception in the small wooden church of St. Francis, the only Catholic church in San Francisco built since Mission Dolores was established. After the Mass he was presented with a gift of \$1400 to cover the expenses projected for the visitation of his vast diocese.

Such was the modest ceremony, prayerful and practical, that began a new era in the history of the Catholic Church in California and inaugurated the ministry of the American Dominicans on the west coast. Alemany had come not just to oversee the California Church but also to establish a new province of the Dominican Order. Before his departure from Rome, Alemany had spoken

to Jerome Gigli, the Vicar General of the Order, about his intentions to found a new province and had been given official permission.

**Joseph Sadoc Alemany, O.P.,  
Missionary named Bishop of California, 1850**

Alemany's hope for a second province dated back to the days when he was provincial of the St. Joseph Province of Dominicans. At that time a young member of the Order, Peter Augustine Anderson, had come to him asking to be missioned to California. Alemany immediately granted the request, hoping Anderson would lay the ground for such a new province. The provincial was not disappointed.

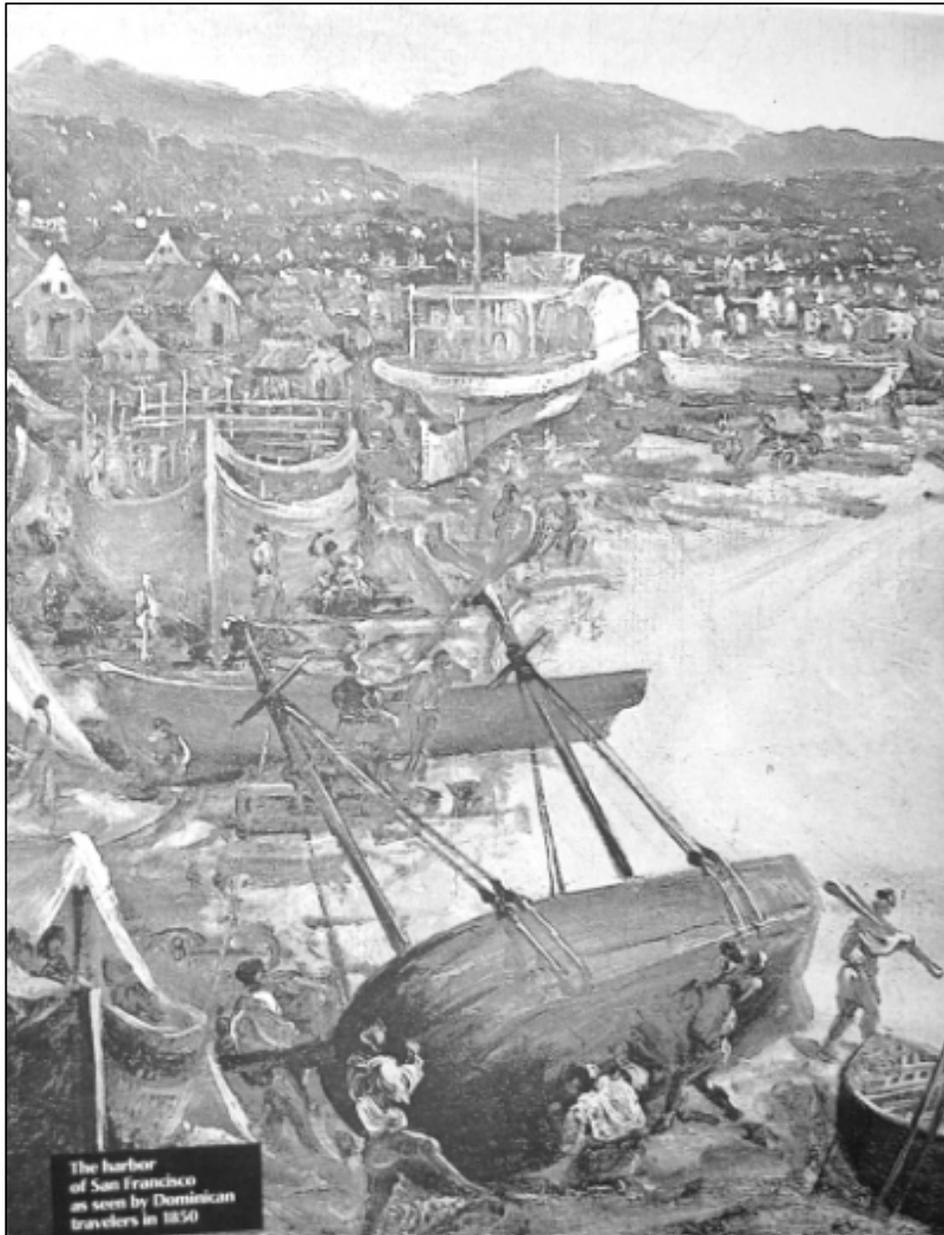


Peter Anderson was born of Protestant parents in Elizabeth, New Jersey, on January 8, 1812. In 1827, when he was fifteen, his family immigrated to Ohio. Soon after this move west, his father died, leaving him the sole support of his widowed mother and younger brothers and sisters. Under the inspiration and guidance of the Dominicans serving in Ohio, Peter with his whole family entered the Catholic Church. His new-found faith ran deep. Almost immediately upon his conversion — and presumably because his younger brothers were now able to provide for the family — Peter entered the Dominican Order at St. Joseph's Priory at Somerset. In 1831 he was sent to St. Rose Priory in Kentucky where he received the habit, taking Augustine as his religious name. His year of novitiate completed, Peter made his solemn profession on August 4, 1833, at the hands of his prior, Richard Pius Miles. That year a severe plague of Asiatic cholera broke out in the Springfield, Kentucky area. The friars of St. Rose and most likely the newly-professed Anderson, and the Dominican sisters of St. Magdalen convent, risked their own lives to minister day and night to the sick and dying.

On April 4, 1840, Peter was ordained a priest at St. Rose by the same Richard Miles who had received his vows, but who was now Bishop Miles of Nashville, Tennessee. Anderson spent his first years as a priest at St. Rose, leading the contemplative life that was his as a Dominican, but he was restricted in his ministry by a stern, "hard-fisted" prior and former provincial, Nicholas Dominic Young. Beginning in 1845, Anderson took on several different responsibilities in the Order. He filled the roles of procurator, secretary of St. Joseph convent in Somerset and sacristan. Provincial George A. T. Wilson sent him in 1847 and 1848 on begging tours throughout the United States. On these expeditions he experienced mixed results, but mostly refusals. Sometimes along the way he would say Mass and preach in private homes. He traveled by steamer, train, and horseback, or by whatever means were available.

When Anderson began to dream of going on mission to California is impossible to state. By the beginning of 1849, he had talked the matter over with his new provincial, Joseph Alemany. In the light of subsequent events, we may imagine each firing the imagination of the other and together laying plans for the new foundation of the Dominican Order in the Far West. In February of 1849, Anderson was officially missioned to the Californias. His plans as they took shape centered on Alta California, by then a territory of the United States and soon to be admitted to statehood (September 9, 1850).

**The harbor of San Francisco as seen by Dominican travelers in 1850**



Preparations for his departure began at once. James Whelan, the subprior in charge of St. Joseph's, wrote to Samuel Eccleston, Archbishop of Baltimore, testifying that Peter Anderson "has obtained all necessary faculties and permission from the Provincial . . . for the purpose of going on missionary duties to California."[\[4\]](#) Nicholas D. Young, Anderson's vigilant and restrictive prior when at St. Rose but now enthusiastically supportive of the young priest's missionary plans, added to Whelan's letter his own recommendation. He specified to Eccleston that Peter was going to California for the purpose of rendering assistance to those of our American Catholics who have already started ... to that country, and if he shall find the country such as we expect, it is then our design with the approbation of the Ecclesiastical authority to establish a Community of our Order in California.[\[5\]](#)

Young asked Eccleston for a letter to the Bishop of California and to the Archbishop of Mexico. He also inquired if he knew of any other people going to California that he might arrange to accompany Anderson, but nothing materialized. On his own, Anderson traveled to New York to book any ship headed for the Isthmus of Panama, the first leg of his journey to California. It was almost a year before he could embark upon the many legs of the journey: first to the Isthmus, then by small boat and mule back to Panama City, and finally on June 17, 1850, he boarded the SS *Panama* arriving eighteen days later at the Golden Gate.

In a letter to N. D. Young, Anderson described his first days in San Francisco and the prospects for the Order:

My reception by the Rev. Mr. Langlois, who is the presiding priest here. . .has been most kind and encouraging. My arrival was on Saturday morning; in the afternoon I presented my credentials. On Sunday morning I said Mass, and did the honors of the pulpit at ten o'clock service and at Vespers. Monday morning I moved my baggage to the priest's house, adjoining the church where I have a comfortable room.... Would to God, dear Father, you were here![\[6\]](#)

Anderson was captivated by the city, its life, its energy, its beauty, but mainly because of what his Order could offer it:

This young giant of a city grows beyond the widest stretch of the imagination in spite of fire, wind, and dust. The tracks of the two recent conflagrations on the 18 May, the other 14th June, which totally consumed the major and best part of the city are scarcely traceable except by the newest of the buildings that have taken the place of those swept off by the two mighty elements, wind and fire combined. There is here, according to the best information I caught, a resident population of about 20 thousand. . . In every part of the city can be heard the carpenter's hammer, the mason's trowel & blacksmith's anvil, whilst the Bay presents the astonishing spectacle of a forest of masts and steamboat pipes. . . San Francisco, in my humble opinion, will rival New York in commercial importance.

In that same long letter to Young, Anderson expressed his conviction that the Dominicans should take advantage of California's fertile field of ministry, "It is my full conviction that the Order could be advantageously established here, no matter who becomes Bishop." [The young missionary did not yet know that Alemany had been appointed Bishop of California.] "But to accomplish this no time should be lost, prompt action on the part of the members and friends of the Order is absolutely necessary. Too much delay has already been made."[\[7\]](#)

Anderson spent some days in San Francisco before going to Sacramento, his assigned field of ministry. On August 6, Antoine Langlois, the Vicar General for the northern part of the state, wrote a letter to the Catholics of Sacramento introducing their new pastor and authorizing him to collect funds and procure property for the building of a church. That same day, Anderson took a steamer and arrived in Sacramento on August 7. He immediately announced his priestly intentions in the *Sacramento Transcript*. But his ministry was short-lived.

In October cholera broke out in northern California, and on the 26th of the month Anderson, who had been in San Francisco, returned to Sacramento to tend the sick and dying. The Sacramento correspondent for the *Freeman's Journal* wrote on Nov. 14, 1850: "Father Anderson has been very active in the performance of his laborious duties. He visits the hospital several times a day and also seeks out the sick and distressed in tents and other exposed situations." Sorrow was added to admiration when two weeks later on November 30, the *Journal* reported, "We are called upon to mourn the loss of one who was a father to his people, a benefactor of the poor; our esteemed and beloved pastor, Rev. P. Augustus [sic] Anderson has passed from earth, I trust to Heaven. . ."

According to the correspondent, it was on November 14 that Anderson finally realized he was seriously sick and allowed a doctor to examine him, but it was too late. He had contracted typhoid fever. Anderson died at 1:45 p.m. on Wednesday, November 27, 1850, at the age of thirty-eight, a martyr to charity. That was just eight days before Alemany and companions arrived in San Francisco.

Peter Augustine Anderson was the first to plant the seed of the Dominican mission in the western United States. The seed was his own life and death. But its nourishing and growth were in and through Joseph Alemany, Sadoc Vilarrasa and Mary Goemaere in firming up whatever beginning Anderson had made.

While still grieving the loss of Anderson, Alemany realized that work leading to a new province had to proceed. Within a few days of his arrival, he wrote to the new Vicar General, Alexander Vincent Jandel, requesting more explicit directions with regard to the province. Jandel responded graciously but also rather sharply,

It is entirely forbidden to any Dominican religious elevated to the episcopacy to retain any jurisdiction in the Order itself: this is clear in our Constitutions and confirmed, if I mistake not, by a bull of Benedict XIII. Since I am unable to give you the authority to establish our Order in California, I send with this answer letters patent to Father Vilarrasa to do so.[\[8\]](#)

Jandel's letter, however, did not reach Alemany until some weeks after its writing, thus permitting the bishop in good faith to take some initial steps in the establishment of the western Dominicans, both men and women. While Vilarrasa legally became the founder, the idea and inspiration for a province really belonged to Alemany.

In addition, when he was made bishop of the Californias, one of his first acts was to enlist Vilarrasa as companion to help in the new foundation. He further indicated his initiative and seriousness in this regard by inviting both Dominican men and women to participate in the work. This was St. Dominic's way, Edward Fenwick would say namely "to share in the mission of the Order."

The landing of the three Dominicans in the port of San Francisco was certainly significant. Still it must not be forgotten that they were not the first of their Order in California since Spanish

Dominicans had ministered there in South and Central America in the 16th and 17th centuries and had gradually made their way farther and farther north finally reaching Alta California. But these friars acted with little thought of establishing a province there.

One Spanish Dominican, however, made his home in Alta, California: his name was Ignacio Ramirez de Arellano. Throughout the years of conflict between Mexico and the United States(1846-1848), Ramirez sympathized with the Americans. At the war's end he emigrated to Monterey where he eventually became pastor of the Church of San Carlos. His liking for the United States was climaxed with the entrance of Alta California into the Union in 1850. He was actively present at the state's constitutional convention that met in Colton Hall, Monterey in 1849.

As pastor of San Carlos, Ramirez had greeted Alemany when he first arrived in Monterey, January 28, 1851, with Vilarrasa. He was often by the side of Alemany at the various ceremonies and masses of welcome once his church was named a cathedral. He continued as pastor, with the assistance of Vilarrasa. Ramirez was a minister at the Solemn Mass celebrated on August 4, 1851, the feast of St. Dominic, in the chapel of the Sisters' convent of Santa Catalina, which Alemany, in his assumed role as provincial, had established on March 13. He also participated in the establishment of the men's convent of St. Dominic in Monterey on February 4, 1852. Vilarrasa's Chronicle stated: ". . . we all gathered in choir, where certain regulations made by me for the orderly administration of the convent and for regular observance were made public by Fr. Ignatius Ramirez de Arellano of the Mexican Province."[\[9\]](#) Ramirez remained in Monterey at least until February 2, 1853, when he entered his last baptismal date at San Carlos. When Ramirez returned to Mexico, Vilarrasa succeeded him as pastor of the cathedral church.

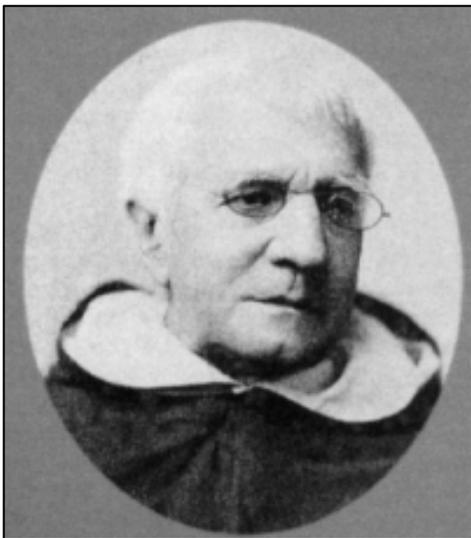
The surviving records and histories based upon their stories reveal that Joseph Sadoc Alemany was a holy and persistently creative churchman. He was born in Vich on July 13, 1814, in the province of Catalonia some thirty miles from Barcelona, Spain. His father was a blacksmith and his mother the daughter of a local chocolate-maker. Both parents were devout, strict Catholics. The third of twelve children, Joseph entered the Dominican Order at the age of sixteen, receiving the habit in September 1830. A year later he made his solemn profession and took the religious name of Sadoc after the Polish Dominican martyr of the 13th century. Because of the closing of all religious houses by the anti-clerical government in power, the Master General of the Order, Jacinto Cipolletti, invited him and other Spanish Dominican students to Italy for the completion of their studies. On March 11, 1837, he was ordained a priest in San Lorenzo Cathedral in Viterbo.

Shortly after ordination, at the age of only 23, Alemany was appointed assistant master of novices. Before completing his theology, he expressed his desire to go to the Philippines, but instead his superiors commissioned him to the United States. The plea of Dominican Bishop Richard Miles who told the Master General of his desperate need for priests in his extremely poor diocese had influenced the change. Accordingly, Alemany, along with two others, set sail for America on February 12, 1840.

After a long, rough voyage, Alemany and companions arrived in the United States at the beginning of April, 1840. He found that Miles in the meantime had procured some priests, so the

bishop advised the young missionary to study English at St. Joseph convent in Somerset. For about two years Alemany continued his labors in Ohio, but was then called to Tennessee by Miles. From 1842 to 1845, he performed parochial duties at the cathedral in Nashville, then was sent to St. Peter's Church in Memphis. The 1847 provincial chapter at St. Rose appointed Alemany as novice master at St. Joseph in Somerset. From that time forward, changes occurred rapidly in his life. On May 2, 1848, Rome appointed him head of St. Joseph province. In that capacity, Alemany granted permission to Anderson to go to California. It was as provincial that he was to attend the chapter in Rome. Because of political unrest in Italy this chapter was cancelled. When he returned to America in 1850, he carried the heavy responsibility of a bishop in a frontier land.

**Francis Sadoc Villarosa, O.P.,  
Founder of Holy Name Province**



Alemany and Vilarrasa had known each other before the 1847 chapter of the province because of their association in Spain and Italy as students and young priests. Vilarrasa's background was much the same as that of Alemany. His town of birth was La Pobla de Lillet, a few miles from Alemany's Vich, and his date of birth, August 9, 1814. He entered the Dominican Order at the Convent of St. Catherine at Barcelona, of the same province, Aragon, as was Alemany, when he was fifteen years old and chose the name Sadoc as his religious name. A year later, September 23, 1830, he pronounced his solemn vows in Spain.

Vilarrasa's theological studies were also interrupted by the religious persecution begun in Spain in 1834. In July of that year the Dominican convent in Madrid was attacked and several religious were killed while praying the Divine Office. By spring of the following year the persecution was widespread in the provinces. Faced with more violence, Vilarrasa and other members of the Aragon Province, Alemany included, accepted the invitation of the Master General to study in Italy. With courses completed, he was permitted to be ordained a priest in May of 1837. Vilarrasa spent the next two years at La Quercia near Viterbo where he served as assistant to the master of novices. In 1839 he studied further at the Minerva in Rome, and in 1841 he received the degree of lector in Sacred Theology. Fresh from his formal studies he was appointed to teach theology to the Dominican students at the la Quercia house of studies. In the fall of 1844, when George Wilson, provincial of St. Joseph's Province was in Europe, Vilarrasa volunteered for the American mission. He embarked at Le Havre on November 17, 1844, having as his traveling companions fellow Dominicans from Italy, Mannes D'Arco, Aloysius Orengo, and Americans Langdon Thomas Grace and Nicholas Raymond Young, members of St. Joseph Province who had been sent to Italy to receive their theological degrees.

In a letter to his family written in January 1845, Vilarrasa reported that, after forty-eight days of sailing and without encountering any danger, they had finally landed in New York. They disembarked on January 3, 1845, and after nine days of travel arrived at Somerset which he

described as "built in the middle of the woods." In his next letter home he described a few aspects of life at St. Joseph's:

Our convent of Saint Joseph's is as yet unfinished. The church is new, but consists only of walls and a roof with a single altar, as our funds failed His before it was completed. The altar is sun mounted by a large crucifix which Father Alemany brought from the island of Cuba. . . The labors of the Fathers on the missions are very great and they can never count on sleeping in the convent. It often happens, too, that when one returns worn out by his labors he has to go off again on horseback to attend to the wants of some other member of the flock, in spite of the rains and the snow.[\[10\]](#)

Two weeks after his arrival at St. Joseph's, Vilarrasa was again in the novitiate having been put in charge of eight novices. He did not remain long as novice master, however, for before the end of 1845, Joseph Jarboe resigned as prior of St. Joseph and Vilarrasa consented to take his place. As prior, Vilarrasa attended the provincial chapter held at St. Rose, Kentucky, in the fall of 1847. At the chapter Alemany was chosen to be master of novices at St. Rose. Accordingly, at the end of November he left Memphis, Tennessee, and came to St. Rose to take up his new position. However, unexpected things began to happen which soon ended his tenure as novice master. At this same chapter a deadlock had been reached with regard to the election of a prior provincial. George Wilson, writing to the newly elected Master of the Order, Vincent Aiello, reported from the chapter that the friars, not being able to elect a provincial, had agreed to send to the Generalate a list of those they considered eligible for the office. Three names were sent; among them was that of Joseph Alemany.

Evidently Alemany had become very popular among most of his brothers. But some were not so impressed. The most vocal of those who disapproved was Vilarrasa. In one letter to the Master of the Order he claimed to voice the mind of almost the whole province. The province was "unanimous" in the opinion, he wrote, that were either Thomas Grace (Alemany's pastor in Memphis) or Joseph Alemany named, "it will be the ruin of the province." To bolster his point of view he added, "For six years, Alemany has lived outside his convent on the missions until his recent assignment to St. Rose. . . . In these last eight months he has shown he has lost all spirit of and desire for regularity and has clearly indicated that, if he becomes Provincial, he will change everything."[\[11\]](#)

One wonders if Vilarrasa made his criticisms known to Alemany directly. The question remains whether Alemany knew of this particular letter or ever learned of it. Certainly there appears to have been no animosity on the part of Alemany toward Vilarrasa. Quite the contrary, the fact that Vilarrasa was Alemany's choice as companion in establishing the Western Dominican Province argues friendship and trust on the part of Alemany rather than hostility. As for Vilarrasa's feelings, all along he seems to have had some misgivings about Alemany, but he also admired him as religious, missionary and bishop, and through many years in California seemed to cooperate with him.

The California relationship between Alemany and Vilarrasa began in 1850. Both journeyed to Rome to attend a Dominican General Chapter, Alemany as provincial and Vilarrasa as

definitior. It was in Europe that Alemany, now Bishop of Monterey, invited Vilarrasa to help him establish the Dominican Order in California.

Mary Goemaere, the third member of the Dominican trio to arrive in California, was to have the distinction of founding the first religious congregation of women in the new state of California and of establishing schools for the education of girls in Monterey, Benicia, and San Francisco. Catherine Adelaide Goemaere was born to artisan parents on March 20, 1809, in Warneton, a small Belgian town on the modern French-Belgian border. Almost nothing is known about Mary's early life, but later documents and accounts indicate that she had received a solid education. Her letters reveal a beautiful, legible handwriting, a skill she displayed as she administered schools, and kept account ledgers. She was also talented in the art of making lace and artificial flowers.

**Sister Mary Goemaere, O.P.,  
pioneer Dominican of San Rafael**

At the age of forty, Goemaere entered a Dominican contemplative monastery in Paris, France, and on September 10, 1849, received the Dominican habit and the name of Soeur Marie de la Croix. Normally she would have professed her vows a year later and remained in the same monastery, the Monastere de la Croix, for the rest of her life. But in late August, 1850, near the end of her canonical year as a novice, her life changed. In that month, the newly appointed and consecrated California bishop, the thirty-six-year-old Joseph Alemany visited the monastery and requested help for the missions. Soeur Marie, a forty-one-year-old novice, volunteered to fulfill what she believed to be a divine call. Her acceptance of the bishop's appeal to undertake an arduous journey to a strange land began an adventure which placed her in the position of founding mother among Dominican women religious. Three weeks after answering the bishop's plea, Mary Goemaere made profession and was aboard the sailing vessel *Columbus* for the month-long sea voyage from Liverpool to New York.



Alemany, Vilarrasa and Goemaere were not the only ones to undertake the transatlantic voyage to America. Joining them in Toulouse were two novices, Rose Corbattieu and Catherine Coppe, from a French congregation headed by Mother Gerine Fabre.<sup>[12]</sup> On board the ship, Alemany wrote, "The sisters are very well and very happy; they have just finished singing several religious hymns .. The sisters have their English spelling books, grammars and dictionaries and we have begun our first lesson."<sup>[13]</sup> The trip was busy but uneventful. The two priests were able to offer Mass and on Sundays the bishop preached to some five hundred passengers and crew.

The group disembarked at New York on October 11. There the plans for Mary Goemaere changed. Mary would go to California instead of Ohio. Vilarrasa had accompanied the sisters from Toulouse to Somerset and there he spent some time at St. Joseph's priory preparing for the trip. The two novices remained in Somerset, and arrangements were finalized for the exchange of the two novices with two sisters from St. Mary's who were more comfortable with English and

American ways, and who could go to California the following summer. They were Sisters Francis Stafford and Aloysia O'Neill. These two sisters awaited the conclusion of the younger one's canonical year. Tradition says that as Aloysia pronounced her first vows in May, 1851, the carriage waited outside to take the two sisters on the first leg of their long journey to California.

Meanwhile, Alemany, Vilarrasa and Mary Goemaere on October 28, 1850 continued on their westward trek, setting sail for the Isthmus of Panama. The journey was exhausting and inconvenient. They arrived at Chagres, Panama, during the night of November 6; the following morning they set out on the river in a small boat guided and worked by three Indians. They were three and a half days on the river, traveling by day and then debarking to spend the nights in Indian huts or small inns. From Las Cruces they went by mule to Panama City. One story about that segment of the trip reveals the practical and forceful nature of Mary Goemaere. Two mules carried the three travelers. When the mule bearing the two priests refused to proceed, Mary dealt "a vigorous blow [that] soon conquered the mule's obstinacy, and the journey was completed." [14] Taking charge came naturally to Mary Goemaere as related by sisters who knew her later. She had a "commanding appearance, and she was a strict disciplinarian, . . . adamant in her decisions." [15]

The bone-weary travelers arrived in Panama City on the twelfth of November. Four days later they sailed on the steamer *Columbus*, reaching Acapulco on November 24. The end of that long journey at San Francisco Bay on December 6, 1850, must have been an occasion of joy and delight. Their happiness, however, was diminished by the sorrowful news of Peter Anderson's death. It may be imagined how much Alemany and Vilarrasa were counting on their precursor for counsel and for future work in setting up the fledgling Western Dominican congregation of women and the province for the men. The requirements for a province (three priories) were not yet in place, hence the founding group remained the Congregation of the Holy Name of Jesus. It was not until 1912 that the congregation of men became the Province of the Holy Name of Jesus. The sisters remained the Congregation of the Most Holy Name of Jesus.

**Monument to the "Dancing Saint,"  
Sister Dominica Arguello**

Even while, Alemany engaged himself in his duties as bishop, Vilarrasa and Goemaere made plans of their own. The three regrouped in San Francisco at the beginning of March. They left the city by steamer on March 5, 1851, and arrived in Monterey the following morning. The day after their arrival, March 7, the feast of Thomas Aquinas, the bishop celebrated the Mass. It was to be one of the most significant events in the history of the western Dominicans and of the whole western U.S. Church. It was the opening of the convent under the title of Santa Catalina, the first convent ever in California. Through the arrangement of Alemany, the "school house" had been deeded by William Hartnell to the Dominican sisters for a period of twelve months. Just as at the beginning of the Order St. Dominic established a convent of nuns before organizing and housing his friars, so at the beginning of the Western Dominican Province it was the women who came first. However, the



occasion must have been a modest affair for only Mary Goemaere was present.

The groundwork for this early opening of Santa Catalina was laid by Alemany in 1851. The bishop submitted a petition signed by over thirty-five men to the city Council of Monterey requesting that Colton Hall be sold or leased to him for "an academy for young ladies in this City."[\[16\]](#) His purpose was elaborated in a report to the committee which considered the proposed use of the city building.

The proposal clearly demonstrates what Alemany thought was important for education:

1. Desiring to have in California one or more institutions of learning for the literary and moral good of the community, I [Alemany] brought to the States from Europe several sisters, obtained a promise of more sisters from a female academy in the State of Ohio... in order that they all united would conduct a female Academy under certain regulations, for the order of the House.

2. The ladies shall teach reading, writing, Grammar, Geography, Arithmetic, ancient and modern history, fine needle work & music, on which various branches the pupils shall sustain a yearly examination before the public...

3. Rich families will pay a moderate sum for the education of their daughters...

4. The poor of the City shall be educated in all the branches free of all charges.

5. The orphan girls shall be fed, clothed and taught in as great a number as the circumstances of the establishment will permit. [Further on, Alemany indicated that #4 and #5 would be repayment to the city for the use of Colton Hall]

6. All shall have equal Rights, without any regard to religious distinction and no religious distinction shall be allowed, though for the sake of conformity, all shall attend religious service on the Sabath [sic] and daily morning and evening prayer. Catholic pupils shall be taught Catechism separately.[\[17\]](#)

Vilarrasa formally opened the convent on April 1, 1851, because Alemany had received Jandel's letter forbidding him, as bishop, to have any jurisdiction in the Order. Vilarrasa had received his appointment dated February 25 as "Commissary General" of the new congregation. On April 11, Vilarrasa received the first novice, Concepcion Arguello, the sixty-year-old daughter of a former Spanish governor of California, who received the name of Dominica. Another novice of Spanish descent, Jacinta Castro, joined the Dominican women in August 1851. In the meantime, the long-awaited sisters from Somerset, Ohio, arrived in July of that same year.

Santa Catalina school for girls opened on April 28 with eight girls. By August 1851, the school had twelve resident and sixty day students with tuition costing two dollars monthly for day pupils. Tuition charges for regular offerings and board amounted to \$400. The faculty consisted of five sisters who spoke three different languages, French, English, and Spanish. Vilarrasa commented, "At first it was like the tower of Babel, not being able to understand one another."[\[18\]](#) Besides languages, moreover, the sisters could offer basic studies.

Within the first three years of the school's existence, nine women (three American, one Mexican, and five Spanish) joined Mary Goemaere in the Congregation of the Most Holy Name.

With these additions, the school grew rapidly so that by 1852 larger quarters were needed. Alemany purchased a two-story unfinished adobe building originally meant for a hotel. Although few in number, the sisters assumed the debt of almost \$3000 for finishing the building. Yet they continued to prosper. The boys' school, San Domingo, set up by Vilarrasa, struggled to survive and fared less well than that of the girls; Alemany reported in 1853 that the Dominican sisters had sixty and Vilarrasa thirty-five students.[\[19\]](#)

In August, 1851, Vilarrasa was appointed the sisters' spiritual director and probably lived for some time in quarters set aside for him in their convent. In addition to being chaplain, he traveled to other places in need of his ministry. In a letter to his family, he told about his work in Monterey but also in nearby Carmel where he journeyed to attend the spiritual needs of parishioners:

Monterey is one of the most delightful places that I have ever seen. A bay lies to one side and on the other beautiful oaks and pines, the leaves of which are evergreen, cover the surrounding hills. The country is very beautiful... It would be like an earthly paradise were it not for the frequent fogs. There is only one church which was erected by the Spanish... The population of Monterey consists of natives and of Mexicans. Nevertheless, there are people of nearly every nation here, particularly North Americans.[\[20\]](#)

His account of Carmel was distinctly different from that of Monterey.

Carmel is four miles from Monterey. A few ruins of the Mission buildings of the same name are left. Not many years ago more than five hundred Indians lived at the Mission. The church is very well preserved. There are many bears in that part. I have seen their tracks many times on the highway... The mission of Carmel was founded by Father Junipero Serra, a Franciscan in 1790.

Establishing a house of Dominican friars in Monterey at last became possible with the arrival of six young men from Catalonia on December 26, 1851. The first of the postulants clothed on February 4, 1852, was Francisco Macario Juan Vinas, or Vinyes, who some years later would succeed Vilarrasa as head of the province. Others in the order of their acceptance were Pedro Juan Francisco Fosas, Ramon Antonio Domingo Costa, Ramon Caietano Cerver, Andres Enrique Jose Berenguer, and Alberto Ramon Pedro Romeu. Now that there were more members in the community a Dominican priory could be established and so Alemany provided property and buildings for the first Dominican house of friars in the western United States. The convent served both as novitiate and house of studies.

Strict observance began as soon as the candidates were formally clothed in the habit of the order. Vilarrasa pictured for his family the nature of their life in Monterey:

In our convent, through observance, we do not know the taste of meat, but we have good fish and eggs. Everyday at three in the morning we say Matins; at six we have meditation, Prime, Conventual Mass, and at seven we take coffee and then have recreation for half hour. At eleven thirty we say the rosary, then Terce and Sext... Dinner

follows. At two in the afternoon we have Vespers, and at six fifteen Compline, Salve, meditation, spiritual reading, supper and recreation.

This monastic regimen was approved by Jandel, the Master of the Order, with only a few minor changes. But the satisfaction felt from having a regular regimen could not override other needs that pressed upon the pioneers in the nascent congregation. Vilarrasa lamented the lack of funds and insufficiency of alms and other offerings needed for building a real convent. The shortage of priests was a nagging concern. Both Vilarrasa and Alemany persisted in petitioning Rome for clergy and religious. Vilarrasa wrote the Master of the Order that he was alone with no one to take his place; that when the bishop was away from Monterey the sisters did not have Mass. Clearly he was pleading for more missionaries, but nothing came of his request.

During the novitiate year 1852-1853, two brothers left: Thomas Fosas and Hyacinth Soler. The others made their solemn profession on March 7, 1853. The novitiate was not left barren for long. On August 28, 1853, Antoine Langlois, age forty-five, received the habit. It was Langlois who, as vicar General for Northern California, had welcomed the three pioneer Dominicans to San Francisco in December of 1850. Born in the province of Quebec on March 9, 1812, he was ordained a priest in 1838. He volunteered in 1841 for missionary work in the Oregon Territory. A fellow missionary there persuaded him to work with the Forty-niners, the term used to describe gold miners who were flocking into San Francisco. Perhaps it was Anderson at whose side Langlois sat when the pioneer Dominican died who inspired him to join the Dominicans. Whole-heartedly he entered into the new life of a friar.

Life was austere. The ranchos surrounding Monterey were mainly for cattle, and most food stuffs had to be imported. The Annals of the sisters indicate that sugar came from Chile and butter from Ireland. In 1852, imported flour cost \$80 a sack. There was constant danger of famine if the ships were prevented by storms from arriving on time.

By 1853, Vilarrasa began contemplating a change of venue for the little community. Monterey was beautiful and serene, but unreliable for support. Besides, the population and prospects for future development lay in the north, in and around San Francisco. During the First Plenary Council of the American Hierarchy held in 1852, prospects regarding the future of California came under discussion. Some thought that the California diocese was to be divided into Monterey stretching southward to the Mexican border and San Francisco embracing all north to the Oregon border. Alemany was sure to become Archbishop and Ordinary of the northern diocese.

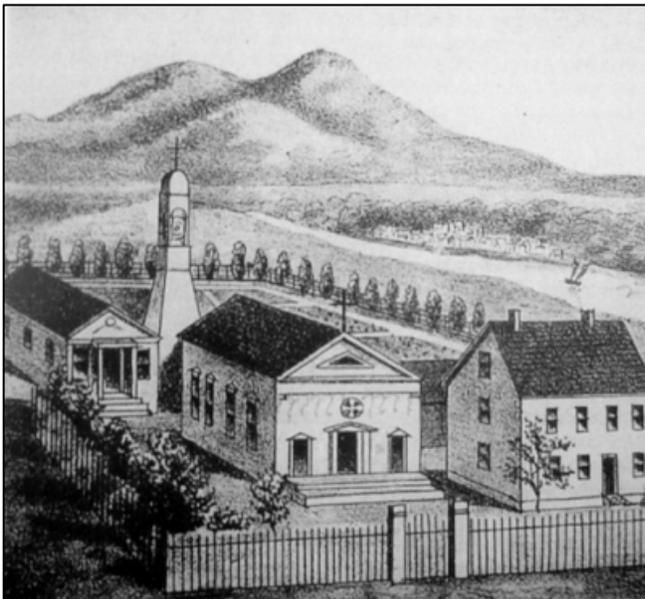
In anticipation of that move by the Sacred Congregation, Vilarrasa requested and received all necessary permissions from the Master of the Order. The rumor proved true. The anticipated division of the diocese was decreed in July of 1853. Alemany became archbishop of the metropolitan see of San Francisco and Thaddeus Amat, a Vincentian, took his place as bishop of the diocese of Monterey.

Until early January, 1854, Vilarrasa puzzled over where to move the novitiate. Finally his choice fell on Benicia where he moved his small community in March of 1854. Alemany gave the Dominicans the parishes of Benicia and Martinez with their churches. The sisters, now

comprising seven professed sisters, three novices, along with some fifty students moved to Benicia. The prioress, Mary Goemaere, had chartered a schooner to take the sisters, the furniture and the students there; the cost was a total of \$500. Soon after their arrival in August 1854, their convent school for young women was set up and functioning. There were four other schools in Benicia at the time, all of good reputation, but the sisters' school, now named St. Catherine's, quickly became a worthy rival.

From the time of their arrival in California, the Dominican men and women had forged a close working relationship. Now this was confirmed at Benicia. Both the men and women were part of the Holy Name Congregation and Vilarrasa, as Commissary, was the Dominican superior in California; it was he who wrote the first constitution for the sisters. Both opened schools in Monterey and in Benicia, but only the girls' school remained successful. In fact a building program was launched by Mary Goemaere for St. Catherine's school. Goemaere continued to guide her young group and instill in them a sense of Dominican life and apostolate.

#### Early convent of the Friars in Benicia



In retrospect, one can question Vilarrasa's choice of Benicia. It was just a small lazy town founded in 1847. But it blossomed during the 1850s. With the presence of the military and their families and the continual influx of Forty-niners, the city continued to expand. It even became for a few months the state capital. By 1860, the gold fields were depleted and the city became a sleepy town again with a dwindling population. Vilarrasa wrote that the church at Benicia, intended as a parish remained unfinished with a debt of two thousand dollars. Because there was also no dwelling nearby the church site for the friars, Vilarrasa built "a very humble house without cells, such as we had in Monterey,

and for this purpose the Archbishop assisted us with a sum of five hundred dollars."[\[22\]](#) Still by 1859, thanks to donations of the faithful, the debt on the church was completely liquidated. The initial convent for the friars built in 1855, however, had to be enlarged the following year at a cost of seventeen thousand dollars. That debt took fourteen years to pay off. Hammer and nails, together with full conventual religious life, daily ministry required by the parish and its mission in Martinez, and teaching and priestly duties at the sisters' convent and their school must have weighed heavily upon the shoulders of the only two priests, Vilarrasa and Langlois.

The burden shared by those two priests was lightened in a few years. Vilarrasa recorded in his chronicle, "On December 19, 1857, Brothers Vincent Vinyes and Dominic Costa received the Order of Priesthood at the hands of the Most Reverend Archbishop Alemany in the church of Benicia.

They were the first priests of the Order to be ordained in California."[\[23\]](#) Of the original six Catalan novices, two had left before profession, and of the four who made solemn profession, one had died and one had returned to his native Spain. Vinyes and Costa, while helping in the priestly ministry, continued their studies in Benicia under Vilarrasa, and on May 21, 1860, Vinyes received the degree of Lector of Theology and Philosophy. Vinyes was appointed vicar of the convent of Benicia and began to share with Vilarrasa in the intellectual formation of the novices and students. But Costa left California in 1863 to join the Province of St. Lawrence in Chile. In the same year, Dominica Arguello, the first candidate the sisters had received, died. Although advanced in age upon entrance, Dominica had spent twelve years in the young congregation.

Life for the friars in Benicia was much the same as it had been in Monterey. The daily horarium was in force which meant some three hours in choir in common prayer, one of these hours at two or three o'clock in the morning. There was daily parish liturgy, and, when possible, Mass for the sisters at nearby St. Catherine's. There were baptisms and marriages, instructions for converts, some teaching at St. Catherine's and religious instruction for children. Because of the heavy load of duties, Vilarrasa persisted in begging the master of the Order for reinforcements from Europe, but to no avail.

Mother Mary also had her periods of loneliness and frustration as she wrote to the head of the Order, Jandel:

My very Reverend Father, in order to explain everything to you without tiring you, I want only to tell you that I have been poor, alone and abandoned during the eight years we have been in California. I came from Paris in 1850 with Monsignor Alemany and our good little Father Vilarrasa. The Monsignor's intention, when I left Paris with him, was that I should go to Somerset to our Dominican Sisters' Convent in order to teach French there, and upon arriving in New York he changed his mind and told me to follow him to California. This I did willingly thinking that by doing all that he told me I could not fail to do the will of God... I came there and began a community out of obedience, knowing neither English or Spanish and not being able to speak to anyone because I met no French people during these eight years that we have been here. The good God blessed our work and He alone knows what I have to suffer and what I still suffer now; ...We are in all twelve professed sisters, two novices and two postulants... Our boarders are 70 in number and we have in addition a dozen day students. There is here... much good to be done but there are no workers; what can we do without a priest? Monsignor is occupied with his diocese and the good little Father Vilarrasa with his community; and the poor sisters with their boarding school are abandoned. We could do so much if you would be so good as to send us a few more priests, if only for a few years. Oh! If you would come to California and see for yourself our situation, I am sure that you would consider doing more than you do. . .[\[24\]](#)

Apparently Mother Mary's letter failed to convince the Master General to send more friars.

Despite the lack of clergy, the convent and school continued to flourish. One source reported, "The school in Benicia soon acquired such widespread popularity that there were not accommodations for all the pupils who applied."[\[25\]](#) That same account indicated that a new

building constructed at a better location became a reality when the cornerstone was laid in 1859. Alemany assisted at the ceremony directed by the friars of St. Dominic's Priory. The new structure was completed in 1860 when additional members entered the novitiate and the school's enrollment increased.

Besides the new building, the sisters experienced other changes at the close of the decade of the 1850s. The constitutions of the English Dominicans of Stone replaced the original Rule written by Vilarrasa. This was done by order of the Master of the Order. Beginning in February of 1859, the sisters in California followed a rule meant for Third Order religious women. The sisters continued to recite the Office of the Blessed Virgin, and consider the daily Mass as not obligatory. Jandel ordered that those constitutions be printed and each sister receive a copy.[\[26\]](#)

However few friars there were, regular observance was not neglected in Benicia, thanks to the vigilance and example of the commissary general. In addition, Vilarrasa also shared in missionary work, offering parish missions in and around San Francisco and at one point, giving an archdiocesan retreat for priests. But most of the traveling was left to the other priests stationed at St. Dominic's. For the most part, Vilarrasa tended to the parish, and most especially, to the important work of formation and the maintenance of regular observance. Throughout his lifetime there is not the slightest hint that he ever let up on his love for and insistence upon the monastic, communal aspect of the Dominican vocation, no matter how unreal or impractical it might often seem. As major superior, moreover, he planned for an expanding ministry for the congregation. In the fifties and sixties, there were, besides Benicia, Martinez, and Vallejo, three parishes begun in San Francisco: St. Bridget's, St. Francis, and Notre Dame des Victoires. He was the one responsible for enabling these parishes to be begun and for sending friars to preach the Word.

Thus the life of the Dominican priests in California revolved around their own community life and parish duties. This included serving mission churches assigned to the parish. In one instance it resulted in initiating the erection of a new mission.

In 1864 Vincent Vinyes was called to the Empire Mine in Martinez to tend to a seriously injured miner. He took the opportunity to call together the Catholics of the area and celebrated Mass with them in the home of John Mulhare, whose home was a short distance from Antioch. This led to the building of Holy Rosary Church, another Dominican parish. Today the friars continue to serve there.

St. Vincent Ferrer's in Vallejo also evolved from a mission to a thriving parish. It was in 1855, the year following the transfer of their novitiate and studium to Benicia, that the Dominicans began to minister on a regular basis in Vallejo. Like other small northern California settlements in the forties, Vallejo, named after its founder, General Mariano Vallejo, grew in population and size with the gold rush and the establishment in 1852 of the naval base on Mare Island. By the time the Dominicans arrived in Benicia, it had become a fair-sized town requiring the Church's attention. Accordingly, each weekend one of the friars would either walk or ride a horse from St. Dominic's to Vallejo some eight miles distant. An old time resident of Benicia, James Bolton, recalled seeing Vilarrasa making the trek from Benicia to Vallejo and back again on foot. Finally some generous neighbors presented him with a donkey. It was not until ten years later that St. Dominic's in Benicia was able to supply St. Vincent's with its first resident pastor.

There was ambiguity with regard to parish ministry. By ministering in parishes the friars could satisfy an urgent need in the diocese at large; they could expand the Order by using the parishes as a source of vocations. But by so doing, they found themselves unable to live the monastic life to its fullest. The Dominican women, on the other hand, suffered no such ambiguity as the friars. The life of the sisters revolved around education, both for themselves and for their pupils. They were able to live conventual life and teach.

It was obvious in those early years of the Congregation that in order to subsist, the friars needed the income that parishes could provide. Vilarrasa's solution was the building of a priory with a conventual church attached. That arrangement became a reality in October of 1863 when Alemany granted permission to the province to build a house of the Order with a public church in a western area of San Francisco near the squares called Lafayette, Hamilton and Alta. These squares bound the area that later occupied St. Dominic's church which was to be conventual, not parochial, in status and function. That church continued to exemplify the work of the Dominican friars.

The sisters and friars maintained their close relationship in carrying on the mission of the Order even after Mary Goemaere no longer was in charge. Sister Mary ended her term as prioress after eleven years, resigning in 1862. Under her leadership, the convent and school had been moved from Monterey to Benicia, the school's name was anglicized to St. Catherine's Academy, and the language of instruction became English. Many supplies for the school and convent were sent by her Parisian monastery. Mother Mary's last official act as superior general of the California Dominican women was to open St. Rose Academy in San Francisco in 1862. Shortly after its foundation St. Rose was moved onto the property of St. Dominic's Church and rectory in San Francisco. The sisters and friars were once again ministering together.

Mother Mary continued to live and work at St. Catherine's in Benicia, teaching, keeping the books and making lace and artificial flowers for the chapel. She was succeeded by Sister Louisa O'Neill, once a member of the Somerset, Ohio, community. Louisa carried on the good work begun by her predecessor, helping the sisters to bring the spirit of the Dominican Order to all their endeavors.

---

## NOTES

1. This chapter was adapted by Loretta Petit, O.P., from **Mission West** by Fabian Stan Parmissano, O.P, with the author's permission. It was supplemented by Patricia Dougherty, O.P, of San Rafael.
2. Ray Allen Billington, **The Far Western Frontier, 1830-1860** (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956) 219-220.
3. Joseph Venisse, **Annales** XXIV (November 1852)412. Adapted from John Tracy Ellis in McGloin's life of Alemany.
4. Whelan to Eccleston, Somerset, Mar. 7, 1849 , Archives, Archdiocese of Baltimore (MB) 26 R 3.
5. Young to Eccleston, Somerset, Mar. 7, 1849, MB 26 R 3.
6. Anderson to Young, San Francisco, July 12, 1850, St. Joseph Province Archives (SJP).250
7. Anderson to Young, July 12, 1850.
8. Alemany File, Western Dominican Archives (WDA) XIII: 3.
9. Vilarrasa File, WDA XIII, 4.
10. Vilarrasa to his parents, Somerset, Apr. 5, 1845, SJP.
11. Vilarrasa to Alberti, Somerset, July 5, 1848, Archives General, Order of Preachers (AGOP) XIII, 03150, 252.

12. Maria Pia Quoci, O.P., to Mary Nona McGreal, Rome, May 31, 1992, Project OPUS files. Rose and Catherine completed their novitiate and made profession in 1851 in St. Mary's Congregation in Somerset. Catherine served in Ohio and Kentucky where she died in Louisville at the age of 51. "French Rose," as she was called, taught French in Ohio and ministered in various capacities in Tennessee. She nursed the sick in the yellow fever epidemic of 1876 in Memphis and died a victim of the disease.
13. Alemany to Rev. Mother Superior (Toulouse), Aboard the Columbus, Sept. 11, 1850, Archives of Dominican Sisters of Albi, France.
14. M. Aloysius Boschen, "Dominicans in California," Part I, **Dominicana**, 1 (Dec., 1900): 340.
15. Mary Hyacinth Kilgannon, O.P., "The History of Saint Catherine's Academy: 1851-1854 in Monterey, California; 1854-1862 in Benicia, California," Unpublished master's thesis, Dominican College, San Rafael, 1967, 12.
16. Alemany Folder 2, Archives of San Rafael Sisters(SRA).
17. "Communication to the Committee by Hon. Council of the City of Monterey in reference to a female academy in Colton Hall," signed by Alemany, Feb. 7, 1851, SRA.
18. Villarrasa to Parents, Brothers and Sisters, Oct. 2, 1851, **Revista Catolica** XX (Jan., 1852) 93-96, SRA.
19. "Report submitted to the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1853" cited in Francis J. Weber, **Joseph Sadoc Alemany: Harbinger of a New Era** (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1973) chart opposite p. 34.
20. Villarrasa to his family, Monterey, Oct. 2, 1851, WDA XIII, 4.
22. Villarrasa Journal, WDA XIII, 4 (1854).
23. Villarrasa Chronicle, WDA, XIII, 4, 1857.
24. Goemaere to Jandel, Benicia, Oct. 19, 1858, AGOP, XIII, 41.
25. Ligouri Ash and Agnes Cahill, "Memoirs of Mother Mary," ms., (1925) 13, SRA.
26. Cf. "Memoirs" 14.