

5-9-2003

Dominican Sisters of San Rafael: Early Years of Hardship and Growth

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Recommended Citation

Dougherty, M. Patricia, "Dominican Sisters of San Rafael: Early Years of Hardship and Growth" (2003). *History | Faculty Scholarship*. 3.

<https://scholar.dominican.edu/history-faculty-scholarship/3>

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The Dominican Sisters of San Rafael celebrated their sesquicentennial in the millennial year of 2000—the 150th anniversary of the arrival in San Francisco of their Franco-Belgian founder, Mother Mary Goemaere. This Dominican congregation has ministered in the diocese since its foundation. Although called San Rafael Dominicans, the first implantation was a convent and school in Monterey. With the creation of the archdiocese of San Francisco, the young congregation relocated to Benicia. Only in 1889 was the motherhouse situated in San Rafael. The first fifty years saw rapid growth and expansion and financial problems.

Mother Mary Goemaere had been 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 raised her two younger sisters, ages 2 and 6—undoubtedly, the reason for her late entrance into a Dominican contemplative monastery. We can surmise that she received some education as a young person, based on her later activities and extant documents. She spoke French and Flemish and later in life learned Spanish and English. She read, recited, and sang the prayers of the church in Latin, maintained correspondence in a beautiful and legible handwriting, administered schools, kept account ledgers, and was skilled in making lace and artificial flowers. Her reasons for choosing the six hundred-year-old Dominican Order with its emphasis on common life, common prayer, study and service are unknown, but had to have been powerful, inspiring her to leave home, family and eventually country as an expression of her vocation. Catherine was orderly, gracious, precise, punctual, and a risk-taker--characteristics developed in her first forty years which served as a vital foundation for her last forty.

During the late summer of 1850, Bishop Sadoc Alemany, who spoke Spanish, Italian, English, French and, of course, Latin, appealed to Dominican groups in Europe for money and personnel for his new mission territory on the west coast of North America. Tradition has it that Mother Mary heard the appeal and that the next morning she told the bishop of her willingness to become a missionary to teach in the new world. Three weeks later, and not speaking a word of English, Mother Mary set sail for the new world in the company of two Dominican men, Bishop Alemany and Fr. Francis Sadoc Vilarrasa, and two French Dominican novices, Sr. Rose Courbattieu and Sr. Catherine Coppé. Aboard the Columbus, Joseph Alemany wrote that they were comfortably settled on the ship: "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, Mother Mary revealed that the voyage had been "happy" and that "we had suffered very little."

Eight years after the fact, she explained in a letter to Fr. Alexander Vincent Jandel, the Master General of the Dominican Order in Rome, that she had originally volunteered for a job teaching French in Somerset, Ohio. Only upon arrival in New York had the bishop changed his plans and asked her to accompany him and Fr. Vilarrasa to California. She accepted the change of plans "very willingly" in order to follow the will of God.

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—Mother Mary, Bishop Alemany, and Fr. Vilarrasa landed in San Francisco. One story provides some insight into the character of Mother Mary. Two mules carried the three travelers across the isthmus. When the one carrying Bishop Alemany and Fr. Vilarrasa refused to proceed, "a vigorous blow from Mother Mary soon

conquered the mule's obstinacy, and the journey was completed without further incident."

Though small of stature, she was strong and forceful and could endure much hardship. That was useful, because the journey to and subsequent sojourn in California was extremely difficult and Mother Mary experienced great isolation. She later wrote: "I came and began a community under obedience knowing neither English nor Spanish and not being able to speak with anyone because I met no French people."

Bishop Alemany traveled to Monterey (population 3,738) at the end of January 1851 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 Colton Hall and then borrowed an adobe from William Hartnell for a year. In March 1851, Mother Mary, who had remained in San Francisco and taught Sunday school at St. Francis, traveled to Monterey with Fr. Vilarrasa by steamboat. A month later she welcomed into community Concepcion Arguello, the sixty year old daughter of a former Spanish governor of California. (Bret Harte wrote about the romantic story of Concepcion Arguello and a Russian count who became engaged in 1806. Unfortunately the count died the following year in Russia, and Concepcion never married. Her religious name was Sr. Dominica.) Just two weeks later in April the boarding school opened and that summer arrived two English speaking Dominicans from Ohio who had been "exchanged" for the two French novices who had sailed with Mother Mary. In August, Jacinta Castro, of a prominent local Spanish family, received the Dominican habit. Thus the simple "yes" of a Dominican novice in a Parisian monastery led to the establishment of the first group of women religious in California.

The school, Santa Catalina, had twelve residents and sixty day students who paid \$2 per month. Instruction included reading, writing, religion, ancient and modern history, grammar,

mathematics, French, English, Spanish, music, and sewing. Both the sisters and Fr. Vilarrasa taught in the school.

The convent was now home to five sisters who spoke three different languages (French, English, and Spanish). Fr. Vilarrasa commented: "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.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the educational system of the new state of California was rudimentary while the population exploding. Official statistics show that in 1851 there were 5,906 school age children (4-15 years old) of whom 1,846 were enrolled in schools. The following year, of 17,821 children, 3,314 students were enrolled in 35 public schools and 579 students in 12 Catholic schools. Two of these Catholic schools and nearly 100 of the children were in the schools established by Mother Mary (Santa Catalina) and Fr. Vilarrasa (Santo Domingo) in Monterey. Because the convent and school soon outgrew their temporary quarters, Bishop Alemany purchased a new, two-story adobe building on the corner of Calle Principale and Franklin for \$5000 in February 1852. He resold it in January 1853 to Mother Mary, Sr. Louisa, and Sr. Rose for \$5--with the understanding that the sisters would repay the bishop over time. This debt was the first in a series of financial challenges during the first half-century as the sisters expanded their teaching ministry.

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 Benicia in the archdiocese of San Francisco. Unfortunately, prosperity did not materialize in the new location; it became neither a county seat nor a railroad city. A

contemporary remarked in 1862: "Benicia is a very dull place--scarcely any business, although once the rival of San Francisco."

In August of 1854, Mother Mary chartered a schooner for \$500 to take the seven professed sisters, two novices, the furniture, and presumably some of the 50 boarding students to Benicia. There she embarked on a building program for the new school, taking on a \$32,000 debt in 1860 that grew to \$50,000 by 1872. Her school and convent--renamed St. Catherine's--became anglicized in name and personnel. Mother Mary valued education and intended "to people California with good Christians and with good mothers of families." A prospectus (1854) for the new school in Benicia announced: "Pupils of any religious denomination will be received, but for the sake of uniformity all are required to be present at the regular religious services of the institution." Among her students were Protestants, daughters of the gold miners and later a survivor of the Donner Party.

English served as the language of instruction, and of the next five entrants into the convent, four were English speakers and only one a Spanish speaker--reversing the trend of the first years in Monterey. Still, the numbers of sisters continued to grow. Within the first decade (1851-61), thirty-five women had become Dominican novices in California. While not all made their final vows of profession, there were twenty-seven professed sisters and two novices in the congregation when Mother Mary resigned as prioress because of "serious indisposition" in 1862. The sisters operated two schools for young women: St. Catherine's Academy in Benicia and St. Rose Academy in San Francisco. Relying on school fees for their income, financial difficulties plagued them but did not daunt them from expanding.

Mother Mary wrote in 1858: "I have been poor, alone, and abandoned for the eight years since we have been in California." She even considered leaving California to establish a

Dominican monastery in Canada. What she yearned to do was to be useful. Ultimately, she remained; she wrote: “God alone knows what I have had to suffer, but we must suffer before going to heaven.” During these years, she kept in contact with the Parisian monastery and obtained items from them unavailable in California—for example, a statue of the Virgin Mary sculpted in Nantes, a tapestry, holy pictures, cross and candelabra for the chapel, a reliquary of St. Catherine of Siena, prayer and spiritual books, and a pump organ. Many of these items, packed in zinc-lined containers to protect them from salt water, were shipped by sailing vessel (steam ships were more expensive) around the Cape Horn. Mother Mary sent money to cover the items and the shipping when she could.

Mother Mary remained at St. Catherine’s in Benicia until her death in 1891, and she watched the congregation continue to grow. In 1889, the sixth major superior, Mother Louis O’Donnell, moved the motherhouse and novitiate to San Rafael and opened a school because of the need to be closer the growing city of San Francisco. The school opened in August 1889 with sixty boarders and some day students—ranging in age from 5 to 23. At that time, the sisters numbered sixty-seven, and they operated and/or taught in seven schools: St Catherine’s in Benicia, St. Rose in San Francisco, St. Vincent’s Orphanage in San Rafael, St. Vincent’s in Vallejo, St. Agnes in Stockton, St. Mary’s in San Leandro, St. Joseph’s in Stockton. The congregation also entered the health care field in Stockton, California (St. Joseph's Home and Hospital, 1899) and in Reno, Nevada (St. Mary's Hospital, 1912).

The Dominican women, consistent with the practice of the times, had a man as their local authority. In the beginning, it was Fr. Vilarrasa. As superior, he gave the new community its first constitutions in 1852--probably modeled on those of the Dominican men or on those of the Dominican sisters in Ohio and Kentucky with whom he had labored as a missionary from 1845-

1850. The Master General, through Fr. Vilarrasa, replaced these constitutions with those of the English Dominican Sisters of Stone in 1858—with some adaptations to the local conditions. In 1889, Pius IX, at the request of the Dominican Master General, placed the women under the authority of the ordinary of the diocese in which they lived. In 1925, the congregation became a papal institute with a cardinal protector.

Even with the male overseers, the prioress had authority to make decisions in her own name. She supervised the sisters' life of prayer and of work; she owned property and contracted debts; she made decisions regarding the life and work of the sisters. Archbishop Riordan wrote in 1885: "It is not my place to interfere in such matters when the authority of the Mother Superior is sufficient to settle them. In case of an obstinate disregard of her commands, my authority may be invoked." Governing the growing community, the Mother Superior was aided by a council of Dominican women who oversaw the development of the congregation and the spread of the teaching ministry. The minutes of their meetings (the earliest dates to 1860) record instances when the sisters' governing council declined to accept the bishop's directions. One instance is when Bishop Alemany suggested in 1872 that they give St Catherine's in Benicia to any religious group who would shoulder the heavy debt. The sisters firmly refused and undertook sacrifices and begging expeditions to pay off at least some of the debt. The difficulty for the sisters was that payment for many students' education at St. Catherine's was irregular or in kind (e.g., bale of hay, timber, 5000 pounds of flour). Further they had responded to a request to minister at St. Vincent's Orphanage in Marin County in 1868 with no remuneration because the archbishop said he could not pay them. (Salary/stipends were paid later.)

Since Vatican II, the work of the sisters has extended beyond education and health care. San Rafael Dominicans teach, administer schools, care for the sick, work with the materially

poor, do social service, and are engaged in a variety of other church ministries. Today Sr. Patricia Simpson, the fourteenth prioress general, leads a congregation of 140 Dominican women.