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Goemaere, Mary of the Cross

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GOEMAERE, CATHERINE ADELAIDE (MARY OF THE CROSS)

Catherine Adelaide Goemaere, born to artisan parents (cooper and "tricoteuse") on 20 March 1809, in Warneton, a small Belgian town on the modern French-Belgian border, was the foundress of the first group of women religious in the newly created state of California. The third of nine children, Goemaere entered at the age of 40 a Dominican contemplative order, Monastère de la Croix, in Paris, France and received the name of Soeur Marie de la Croix on 10 September 1849. Normally she would have professed her vows a year later and remained in the same monastery for the rest of her life, just as the prioress of the monastery reminded her in 1855: "In our Community we make profession to live and die in the [same] house." But in late August 1850, her life changed.

In that month, the newly appointed and consecrated California bishop, Joseph Sadoc Alemany, O.P., visited the Monastère de la Croix and requested help for the missions. Soeur Marie de la Croix, a novice, volunteered for what she originally thought was a job teaching French in Somerset, Ohio. On December 7, 1850, Goemaere, Alemany, and the Dominican Francis Sadoc Vilarrasa landed in San Francisco, California, after three sea voyages (Liverpool-New York, New York-Panama, and Panama-San Francisco) and a canoe-mule trip across the isthmus of Panama.

In spring 1851, this Dominican nun settled in Monterey, the episcopal city, and opened a Catholic school for girls, Santa Catalina, with the financial help of local residents and the bishop of California. The Dominican Vilarrasa who had accompanied Goemaere to California and who became the local

Dominican authority described the early group of women who joined this pioneer in 1851 as "five sisters who speak three different languages, namely Spanish, French and English. At first it was like the tower of Babel, not being able to understand one another." Within three years, nine women (three American, one Mexican, and five Spanish) had joined Goemaere in the Congregation of the Most Holy Name.

In 1854, the sisters moved from Monterey to Benicia. The school and convent--renamed St. Catherine's--became anglicized in name and personnel. For twelve years, Goemaere was in charge. From early documents (e.g., constitutions) and the vow formulae, it appears that her intent was to establish a contemplative rather than an active, teaching congregation. Whatever her intent, it was an active community that was established. At present, this Dominican congregation numbers about 170 women who continue to work primarily in California.

Almost nothing is known about Goemaere's life before she became a Dominican or her reasons for entering a French monastery. She may have stayed at home to help raise the two younger children after her mother (Thersille Euphémie Demailly) died in 1821 or perhaps to help her father (Ignatius Joseph) by keeping the books in his business. She was an educated woman; she wrote letters, kept the California convent's account ledgers, had a beautiful, legible handwriting, and was skilled in making lace and artificial flowers.

One story about her trip across the isthmus of Panama reveals the strong character of Goemaere. Two mules carried the

three travelers; when the mule bearing Alemany and Vilarrasa refused to proceed, "a vigorous blow from Mother Mary soon conquered the mule's obstinacy, and the journey was completed without further incident." Dominican sisters who knew her reported that Mother Mary had a "commanding appearance, . . . was a strict disciplinarian, . . . [and was] adamant in her decisions."

Goemaere's last act as prioress was to open a convent and school in San Francisco in 1862. Later that year, she considered a request to begin a Dominican foundation in Canada. However, she remained in California living and working at St. Catherine's in Benicia until her death on 3 October 1891--two years after the congregational headquarters moved to San Rafael.

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Bibliography

The archives of Dominican Convent, San Rafael, California, contain congregational records and copies of over 30 letters from the Parisian monastery (1851-61) to Sister Mary Goemaere. It also contains copies of various letters to and from Goemaere and important documents from other archives concerning the foundress. There is a published history of the congregation, Dominicans of San Rafael: A Tribute by Many Hands (San Francisco: Grabhorn Press, 1941). Other sources include Sr. Mary Aloysius Boschen, O.P., "The Dominicans in California" Dominicana I (Dec. 1900), 338-346; II (Jan. 1901), 9-13; (Feb. 1901), 47-59; (Mar. 1901), 152-158; (Apr. 1901), 295-303; (May 1901), 344-354; Sr. M. Hyacinth Kilgannon, O.P., The History of Saint Catherine's Academy: 1851-1854 in Monterey and 1854-1962 in Benicia (MA Thesis, Dominican College of San Rafael, 1966); Sr. Mary Ellen Marengo, O.P., "The History of St. Rose Academy: 1862-1906," (MA Thesis, Catholic University of America, 1955); and John Bernard McGloin, S.J. California's First Archbishop: The Life of Joseph Sadoc Alemany, O.P. 1814-1888 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966).

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