The California Catholic Church in Transition, 1846-1850

By John Bernard McGloin, S.J.

On Monday, May 3, 1535, Hernán Cortés landed on the shores of a bay in Lower California which is now known as that of La Paz. Following immemorial Spanish custom, the Conqueror named the land after the feast day in his liturgical calendar and, since May third is the feast of the Finding of the Holy Cross, he called his find La Tierra de Santa Cruz—The Land of the Holy Cross. It appears undoubtedly true that this earliest of names antedated that of California itself and that with it began the religious history of what we now call California.

The present study is an attempt to spotlight a less-known period of that history. Few will contest the assertion that there is an abundance of things written concerning the California mission system in general and about many of the missions in particular; however not nearly enough has been written concerning those iron years, 1846-1850, when, bereft of her first bishop, Francisco García Diego y Moreno, O.S.F., California Catholicism suffered near eclipse after the proud days of Junípero Serra, Fermín Francisco de Lasuén, and other notables of the mission age. Here I shall try, with the help of primary materials now available, to present an overall picture of the religious scene, especially as viewed by some of the Americans who came here in 1848-1849. Next I will be concerned with the important arrival in San Francisco Harbor, on the evening of Friday, December 6, 1850, of José Sadoc Alemany, O.P., who was destined to serve for three years, 1850-1853, as bishop of Monterey (his diocese included all of California) and as the distin-

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guished first archbishop of San Francisco, 1853-1884. Finally, I shall draw some conclusions from this interesting transitional period in the California Catholic story.

**General Picture of Devastation**

Edwin Bryant's *What I Saw in California* is well known to all students of California's past. The observations contained therein concerned his journey to El Dorado in 1846 and 1847, and they were first published in 1848. His brief comments on religion are of interest here:

The religion of the Californians is Roman Catholic and, like people of all Roman Catholic countries, they appear to be devotedly attached to the forms of their religion. The females, I noticed, were nearly all devoutly attached to their religious institutions. There are but a few of the Jesuit [sic] Fathers who established the missions now remaining in the country.²

It seems to have been the destiny of some of the on-coming Americans to have nicely recorded the anemic state of California Catholicism both from inside the household as well as from the outside.³ Even a slight sampling of the available evidence will abundantly prove that during 1846-1850 the fabric of Catholicism in California was in sad need of repair. Not only had secularization done its work, as already indicated, but the onrush of people to the territory found Catholicism almost completely unprepared to operate efficiently. Such testimony is to be found in a letter dated “San Francisco, Upper California, March 16, 1848,” which was written by Edward H. Harrison, employed in the Quartermaster Department there. His letter, which was published in Baltimore, was addressed to Mr. Lucas, a prominent Catholic.

Dear Sir: As the only person of my acquaintance to whom I could apply for the information I require, I have taken the liberty of addressing a few lines to you.

At this time, Sir, there is in our little town upwards of 200 or more who worship after the Roman Catholic faith—all speaking the same tongue and very few families with the Spanish language and, in consequence of this, I have repeatedly been desired to write that a priest [sic] might be appointed to this place; and how to accomplish a task this required of me, I must confess I was quite ignorant; several have spoken to me today relative to it, which induces me to apply to you for your aid in this good cause, and one, sir, which I am sure will not be objectionable on your part.

The Mission Dolores, the only place of worship near to this town, is distant 3 miles, and under the direction of a Deacon [probably the Sacristan is meant] and he an Indian who is very illiterate, reads badly, and commands little or no respect
from the Californians or Foreigners. This alone is to be regretted particularly at this time when, of all others, it is required.

I would ask for the information of those that are interested. Is it possible for us to have a preast [sic] from the United States? If so, what course is it necessary to pursue? These, dear Sir, are questions that I am unable to answer with satisfaction to myself or those who ask them, from being ignorant of the relative position of the Church in the United States and that in Mexico. In former times, each of the missions were under the control of a preast [sic] sent from Mexico. These good men were forced by native Californians to leave their lands and cattle and return to Mexico. It is now some years since this took place [the Franciscan missions of California were secularized in 1834] and those buildings, once so clean and pretty in their simplicity, are fast becoming a mass of ruins; those beautiful plains once under cultivation, have now become a barren waste and the Indian who looked up to his Padre with reverence has again returned to his native wilds and become the terror of the Californians and of those who reside upon the frontier and it will be a long time before the situation can be alleviated.

There has been [sic] many offers made to me to contribute towards the erection of a suitable place of worship in this town, and I have no hesitation in saying that a sufficient amount of money could be obtained for such a purpose here readily, but I would not undertake such a work without some authority or direction to guide me, and the knowledge that the wishes of the people would be complied with.

Will you therefore allow me to trouble you by placing this matter before the Archbishop [Eccleston of Baltimore] at as early a date as possible in order that we may be relieved from the difficulties we are now laboring under?*

Other such evidence is to be had from the pen of Frederick Chatard, a native of Maryland who entered the United States Navy in 1824 and rose to the rank of commander in 1855. His letter was sent to Archbishop Samuel Eccleston of Baltimore under date of November 29, 1848, from the U. S. Ship Lexington, San Francisco.

Sir:

It is with much diffidence and only from a sense of duty that I obtrude upon your precious moments to speak of matters of which, perhaps, you are already sufficiently informed, but their importance induce me to hazard repetition. . .

From the discovery of the gold mines and its natural position, San Francisco is destined soon to become a commercial town of much importance—it now exhibits much prosperity and wealth; if one of your clergymen were here at this moment, I believe he could raize [sic] any amount to build a church.

The people are a wild, motley set of all nations and creeds, and no-one to guide them. Protestant ministers can't be kept here, preferring to gather their flocks at the mines. The people have induced one to remain to preach morality (they say) on Sundays, to whom they give by subscription about $3,000 a year. I heard a Catholic say that he gave $500 rather than have no-one. As to the morals of San
Francisco, you can imagine what they must be when the Golden Calf alone is worshipped. The lots here are very high already, indeed, I believe, not far below the prices of New York—yet one might be obtained for a church if a clergyman was here; two or three merchants have spoken to me, and a Mr. Wm. A. Richardson told me he would not hesitate to give a lot if a clergyman would come out and, at his house he would be sure to have every comfort until properly situated. I speak of one clergyman for San Francisco, but how many are required for Upper California! There are only thirteen in the whole territory, some very old, others very ignorant and others again, I am sorry to say it but it is true, very bad; none of them, I expect, suitable for the present population emigrating to Upper California.

Another word about the church property, and I will close. Influence will have to be used, when the territorial government is formed, to secure the small portion of ground which still remains around the churches and missions. Emigrants have taken possession (and squatted) wherever the site pleased them, not infrequently on church lands; Californians themselves have seized them and hold large portions. At Monterey the priest told me that against his remonstrance, the Alcalde, the Reverend Walter Colton (Chaplain of Congress Frigate) sold church lots quite near to the edifice. So you see, Sir, the importance of being warned in time so that proper measures may be taken when a new Governor comes out. With these few remarks, . . .

I remain, Sir, Very Respectfully,
Fredk. Chatard
Lieut. Comdr. U.S. Ship Lexington

In 1848, when James Marshall discovered gold in California, the entire Catholic clergy of the region consisted of seven Franciscan friars and five secular priests, all of them either Spaniards or Mexican. What could so few do in the face of the onrushing tide of humanity which invaded El Dorado a century ago during the Gold Rush?

The previously mentioned Franciscan administrator of the diocese of California, José María González Rúbio, determined to recruit the ranks of his clergy. His efforts were valiant and, to a degree, successful. He invited the Jesuits to California, and in December, 1849, two came from Oregon. He also wrote the following informative lines on February 1, 1849, to the superior general of the Picpus Fathers (Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary), the Most Reverend J. Bonamie, archbishop of Chalcedon:

Most Illustrious and Reverend Sir:

This new [American] California has many persons of different religious opinions, is deprived of a bishop, is destitute both as regards priests and that temporal support which it formerly enjoyed so abundantly; hence it may be said that Cali-
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California is in grave danger of losing its Catholic faith. In this land, for the last two years occupied by alien armies, we are now, because of a treaty entered into between the Mexican and the North American republics, made subject to Protestant rule. [Evidently Father Rubio considered all Americans as Protestants until the contrary was proven!] In the midst of so many evils, as soon as I was chosen, though quite unworthy, as the administrator of this diocese by the chapter of Mexico City, I have unceasingly endeavored to obtain help from both God and man. Indeed, my spirit was strengthened and some light afforded by the arrival on our shores of the estimable Fathers Lebret and Holbein of your congregation; I was heartened, too, by the encouraging letters of their prelate, Bishop Maigret [also a Picpus member and then Vicar Apostolic of the Sandwich Islands—now called the Hawaiian Islands]. I have had some discussions with Father Lebret, since he appears empowered to do something for us; and we have discussed the question of transporting here five or even more priests of your congregation who should be acquainted with either the English or the Spanish languages. I earnestly ask for your approval of this project and that you may approve of it by your authority; to this end, I enclose a draft for $2,000.

It is true, of course, that these few men will not measure up to all our necessities, but I am certain, though, that when we have had their help and looked over the whole situation, still more of their brethren will come here both to preserve the Catholics in their faith and to convert the native infidels and, most of all, to train our youth in knowledge and virtue. A very great harvest of souls is waiting here, both as regards Protestants and infidels as well as Catholics; I believe, too, that money will not be lacking to bring priests here, if the piety of the faithful be excited and thus help be afforded our necessities. Savage Indian tribes already inhabit this land, and here daily great numbers of Protestants and Catholics are arriving, with no one to whom they can entrust the education of their children; meanwhile the mines are offering riches to these newcomers. Inasmuch as you are most desirous of widening the circle of the missions of your congregation, and, as I hear, an abundance of men is not wanting to you, do protect Divine Worship among us lest it perish, and restore it to its former splendor. Love for humanity and the charity of Christ ask this of you. Otherwise the infidels will yet remain in the shadow of paganism, Christian piety will grow cold and disappear, and the Protestants will occupy our churches, deserted now for the most part.6

These above-cited testimonies all establish the travail which California Catholicism suffered during the transition years of 1846-1850, before the coming of Bishop José Sadoc Alemany to California in 1850.

Bishop José Sadoc Alemany

José Sadoc Alemany was born in Vich in Spain in 1814 and died in Valencia in his native land in 1888.7 When only fifteen, Alemany entered upon life in the Dominican Order and, on the suppression of religious orders in Spain in 1835, went to Viterbo, Italy, where on
March 27, 1837, at twenty-three, he was ordained by Bishop Gaspar Pianetti. After receiving the Lectorate in Sacred Theology in 1840, Father Alemany shortly journeyed to Ohio as a missionary of his order. That he really wished to identify himself with the American scene is easily evidenced by the fact that on April 15, 1841, he filed his declaration of intention to become a citizen in the court of Muskingum County, Ohio, and was subsequently naturalized in Memphis, Tennessee, on October 27, 1845. In 1842 he was sent to Nashville, Tennessee, and then to Memphis in 1845. In 1847 he was made master of novices in Kentucky and, finally, provincial of the Dominicans of the Midwest in 1849. Early 1850 saw Father Alemany’s return to Rome where a general chapter of his order was to be held. Already he had been considered fit material for the episcopal office in the United States, for Archbishop Eccleston of Baltimore had confided to Spalding of Louisville, under date of April 18, 1850, that the Fathers of the last plenary council had placed Alemany first in a list of episcopabiles. The later utterances of Alemany on the subject amply justify the assertion that Friar Joseph Sadoc had no episcopal desires, either overt or covert, in his entire mentality; however he could not plead ill health and, after telling Pius IX, to whose side he had been called for conference, that he had no desire for the episcopal office, he heard the pontiff gently insist that God would help him in the execution of a difficult task. Sunday, June 30, 1850, saw his consecration as a bishop in Rome. His consecrator was Cardinal Franzoni; and, while officially announced as bishop of Monterey in California, contemporary press accounts frequently refer to him simply as “Bishop of California”—and such indeed he was; for, although the see was placed at Monterey, both Upper and Lower California were at first included in his territory. As such, Alemany was the second bishop of the diocese of both Californias, which now had its name officially changed to Monterey. And so, from June 30, 1850, California had its pioneer American prelate which augured well for the future of Catholicism by the western sea.

Bishop Alemany did not long delay in Rome. His European journey included stops in Paris, London, and, notably, Dublin, where he obtained promises of sacerdotal assistance. Bishop Alemany arrived in New York City on October 12, 1850. A short visit to Baltimore, Washington, and to Philadelphia found him preaching in St. Peter’s Church
in the latter city on Sunday, November 3, and his appeal in behalf of his diocese was followed the next day by his departure from New York for Chagres as a passenger on the steamer Crescent City. Previous to his departure, he diplomatically let it be known that he was grateful to Messrs. Howland and Aspinwall for "special and valuable courtesies extended to him in the matter of his passage to Chagres."

Details as to the Isthmian journey of Bishop Alemany and his party are lacking; but we know that his companions included Father Sadoc Vilarassa, on his way to make a Dominican foundation in California, and Mother Mary Goemere, intent on the same purpose for the Dominican sisterhood. However, since the celebrated and costly Panama Railroad was not yet finished, I may hazard the guess that the Isthmus crossing was not replete with comfort. The journey from Panama City to San Francisco ordinarily took from ten days to two weeks, and the Columbus with Alemany on board put in through the Golden Gate late on the evening of Friday, December 6, 1850. His arrival in El Dorado was officially chronicled by Father Anthony Langlois, one of the Canadian priests who had come to California from the Northwest in the preceding year and who was now acting as first pastor of San Francisco's patronal and first Gold Rush parish, St. Francis of Assisi. The pastor thus entered the fact of Alemany's arrival: "December 6, 1850, at 11 o'clock at night, the steamship Columbus brought us the Rev. Joseph Alemany, O.P., Bishop of Monterey and California [sic] ..."88

Bishop Alemany's first task was to establish his status as episcopal successor to Bishop García Diego, now dead four and a half years. Although at least two imposters had bothered Father Langlois before Alemany's coming—Langlois had been appointed by the Governor of the Mitre as Vicar General for Northern California—the pastor of St. Francis quickly satisfied himself as to Alemany's legitimacy as successor to the bishopric of California or, more precisely, his accession to the see of Monterey. It was true that no news of Alemany's selection, consecration, or coming had reached anyone in San Francisco, but the Dominican prelate was amply fortified with the properly authenticated documents. It was with real joy, then, that Father Langlois knelt to receive the blessing of the second prelate accorded by Rome to California Catholicism. On December 10, the following Sunday, a public reception was accorded to him by the Catholic citizenry of San Francisco, felici-
tations and the warmest sentiments were exchanged between the pastor and his flock, and a purse of about $1,400 was given to the bishop to care for necessary and current expenses. Addresses were made in English, Spanish, and French; the prelate responded in all three tongues.

On December 14, he departed by steamer for Santa Barbara to present his credentials to Father González Rúbio. Alemany arrived at Santa Barbara on Christmas Day in time to offer Mass there. The near-end of a long journey (he had yet to take up residence in Monterey) is thus recorded by the methodical bishop: "Show my Bulls to the Vicar Capitular who, with Father José Jimeno and Father Francisco Sánchez, recognize their genuineness and acknowledge me as the long expected Bishop of Monterey, and as such I take possession of the Diocese of Monterey, formerly called the Diocese of Both Californias, and I preach to the assembled people at the Old Mission." January 9, 1851, was an important day in the history of the diocese for, on that date, notes Alemany, "Father Gonzales hands me the documents of the Archives of the Diocese, including important papers, history, correspondence, etc., on the Pious Fund, all the Pontificals and articles belonging to my predecessor, with some pieces of gold, the alms and offerings of past years, belonging to the Diocese. Continuing there for several days, he gave me much explanation on the state of the diocese . . . ." After some other necessary preliminaries, Bishop Alemany went to his see city from Santa Barbara and arrived there in early February, for the next entry in his "Libro" reads: "February 4—I establish myself at Monterey, receiving board and lodging from the kind hospitality of the González family and of Don Manuel Jimeno and others . . . ." He soon found that his clerical resources consisted of twelve secular priests, seven Picpus Fathers, one Dominican, and one Jesuit, who were in charge of twenty-six churches and one seminary. In his first report prepared for the Catholic Directory for 1851, Alemany estimated that there were forty thousand Catholics in the total estimated California population of one hundred and fifty thousand.

It is beyond the scope of this story to endeavor to fully assess the distinguished years which marked the long service of Alemany in California. Indeed, until a full length treatment of the man appears, it would seem that there will be a lamentable gap in the religious history of California. Suffice it to say here that, both as bishop of Monterey, 1850-
1853, as well as first archbishop of San Francisco, 1853-1884, José Sadoc Alemany of the Order of Preachers was in the midst of the issues which make California history so interesting during this period. The Civil War saw him espousing the cause of loyalty to his adopted country, even though he was opposed to the "flagging" of his churches—an issue which divided religious leaders and their congregations during those troublous times. When the sand-lot agitator, Denis Kearney, had succeeded in attracting large numbers of workingmen, including obviously many Catholic unemployed, to his rabble rousing demonstrations, it was the diminutive but courageous Alemany who in a pastoral letter of April 5, 1878, wrote these stern words to his numerous flock: "We, therefore, admonish and even require everyone to stay away from such seditious, anti-social and anti-Christian meetings." Thus the record reveals itself: In all of the major issues which formed part of his long episcopate, Archbishop Alemany proved not only the competent servant of his church but also an enlightened and respected citizen and leader.

It is hoped that enough information has been presented here to outline the near extinction which California Catholicism suffered in the interim years which followed secularization and the death of Bishop García Diego in 1846. It is hoped, too, that the brief sampling here offered of the testimonies of various persons have effectively demonstrated that same sad state of Catholicism which only began to improve with the arrival of Bishop Alemany in 1850.

NOTES

1. Francis J. Weber has done the only life of this important Franciscan prelate up to the present time. His monograph is called A Biographical Sketch of Right Reverend Francisco García Diego y Moreno, First Bishop of the Californias, 1785-1846 (Los Angeles, 1961).


3. The present writer has quoted several other of these testimonies concerning the weakened state of California Catholicism in his Eloquent Indian: The Life of James Bouchard, California Jesuit (Stanford, 1949). See c.1, "The California Catholic Church: a Report on Religion."

4. Original letter was consulted by the writer in the Archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Chancery Office, Baltimore, Maryland.

5. This letter is similarly preserved in the above-mentioned archives.
6. A copy of this letter is in the Franciscan Archives, Santa Barbara, California. The present writer has translated it from the original Latin.

7. The present writer is now engaged in writing the life of Archbishop Alemany; up to now, the pioneer archbishop of San Francisco has received too little attention from biographers. There is, however, an unpublished master's thesis of real worth: *A Preliminary Survey of the Life of the Most Reverend Joseph Sadoc Alemany, First Archbishop of San Francisco* by Sister Gertrude Mary Gray (San Rafael, California, 1942). Sketches of Alemany's earlier years in America are to be found in Victor O'Daniel, o.p., *The Father of the Church in Tennessee, or the Life, Times and Character of the Right Reverend Richard Pius Miles, O.P., The First Bishop of Nashville* (Washington, D. C., 1926) and in the same author's *The Dominican Province of St. Joseph: Historico-Biographical Studies* (New York, 1942).

8. Father Langlois' Journal (later destroyed in the San Francisco fire in 1906) is quoted in Joseph Riordan, s.j., *The First Half Century of St. Ignatius Church and College* (San Francisco, 1905), p. 35.

9. Zephyrin Engelhardt, o. F. M., *Missions and Missionaries of California* (San Francisco, 1915), IV. 683. Alemany's original notation is in his "Libro de Borra dores" which is preserved in the Archives of the Archdiocese of San Francisco.

10. Ibid.