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From Somerset to the Golden Gate: The Story of Joseph Sadoc Alemany, First Archbishop of San Francisco by Anthony J. Lisska, Denison University

The illustrious Dominican friar, Edward Dominic Fenwick, Apostle of Ohio and Bishop of Cincinnati, was the first of a modest string of Dominicans from Somerset who became Bishops in the fledgling Roman Catholic Church of the nineteenth century United States. Others were Richard Miles and James Whelan, the first and the second bishops respectively of the Diocese of Nashville, and Langdon Thomas Grace, the second bishop of St. Paul and the mentor of the great late nineteenth American churchman, Archbishop John Ireland. To this list belongs Joseph Alemany, who in 1850 became the first bishop of Monterey in the early days of statehood for California and who, within two years following the ecclesiastical division of the huge landmass of California, was named the first Archbishop of San Francisco. Alemany's story is rich in devotion to his newly adopted country, his energy and drive for both the infant Church and for the American Dominicans, and his genuine concern for the people entrusted to his care. Arriving in California during the heady gold-rush days of the early 1850s, Alemany served as the ecclesiastical leader for nearly thirty-five years, retiring in 1884 and returning to his native Spain, from whence he had begun his distinguished saga. He died in Valencia on



Most Rev. Joseph S. Alemany (1814-1888)

April 14, 1888. This narrative of the life of Bishop Alemany also includes vignettes on several other Dominican Friars with Somerset connections, who were central in the story of the origins of the Dominican mission in California.

In the Old World

Joseph Alemany was born in Vich, Catalonia, Spain on July 13, 1814. Catalonia is located in the northeast corner of the Iberian Peninsula. The third of twelve children, his parents were Anthony and Mary Cunis Alemany. Following a custom seemingly prevalent in early nineteenth century Europe, at the age of fifteen, the young Joseph—or José—entered the Dominican novitiate in Spain and was professed as a Dominican clerical student in 1830 during his

sixteenth year. He took for his religious name “Sadoc,” who was the Dominican Polish martyr of the thirteenth century. From his tenth to his fourteenth year, young Joseph appears to have studied in a diocesan seminary near his birthplace. Two of his brothers were ordained priests of the Diocese of Vich and two other brothers, Manual and Juan, entered the Order of Preachers.

In the 1830s, a government hostile to the religious life of its citizens took power in Spain, with the result that the religious orders were exiled from the country. As part of this mass exit from the Spanish lands, young Alemany was assigned to Rome, where he continued his studies. O’Daniel remarks that this journey to Rome took place in 1835, in which year the law of secularization was implemented.¹ Alemany was more than likely a member of the Roman Province of the Dominicans, or at least assigned to one of their houses of studies or priories. On March 27, 1837, Alemany was ordained a Dominican priest, probably in the cathedral of Viterbo near Rome by an Italian archbishop. A strong and successful student at the Dominican houses of study at the time, Alemany received the Dominican Lectorate in Theology in early 1840 at the Dominican College of the Minerva in Rome. His administrative capabilities seem to have been recognized early on, because he became the sub-master of novices shortly following his ordination and then the assistant rector of the Minerva church in Rome.

Since it was still impossible for Alemany to return to his native Spain as a member of a religious order, the young priest fostered an interest in undertaking missionary work for his Order. His first thought was to journey to the Philippine Islands for this apostolic labor. However, the Dominican Master General, Father Angelus Ancarani, thought differently and assigned him to the United States and to the Province of St. Joseph, then centered principally at St. Joseph Priory in Somerset and St. Rose Priory in Springfield, Kentucky.

The Journey to the New World: The Early Days in Ohio and Kentucky

Alemany arrived in the United States sometime in early April, 1840, whence began a ten year period of intense labor as a member of the Dominican Province of St. Joseph. For the first two years of this decade, he labored in Somerset and in Zanesville; he also used this time to improve his written and spoken English. Early on in his stay in Ohio, the Dominican provincial sent Alemany to Cuba in order to raise funds for St. Joseph’s Church. Alemany returned with the huge crucifix that has hung over the main altar of St. Joseph’s Church ever since. Alemany also secured a statue of the Blessed Virgin, which was given to the Dominican sisters in Somerset. This statue survived the disastrous fire at the Somerset convent in 1866. It now is located in an alcove of the new Motherhouse at St. Mary of the Springs.

Following his first years in Ohio, Alemany was assigned to assist his fellow Dominican, Bishop Richard Miles, in the expansive Diocese of Nashville. First assigned to the cathedral in Nashville, in 1845 we find Alemany in Memphis, and in 1846 when the Province of St. Joseph accepted Bishop Miles’s invitation to accept a church in Memphis—what became the venerable and important church of St. Peter—Alemany was named the first superior. Shortly thereafter, Alemany was named the master of novices, an important role for any religious province.² He assumed this new set of religious duties at the Priory of St. Rose in Springfield. In 1848, the Dominican Master General, Vincent Ajello, appointed Alemany to serve in the role of the provincial of St. Joseph Province, and he undertook these duties for two years. This appointment as provincial resulted from a “hung jury,” as it were, in the Dominican Provincial elective chapter in the autumn of 1847, during which time no one candidate received a majority of votes necessary and hence no one was elected to be the provincial. Hence, in a document dated May 2, 1848, Ajello appointed

Alemany as provincial. Alemany appears not to have received this letter until the middle of September of the same year. Nonetheless, we must not get ahead of our story.

Reflecting on Alemany's first decade in the United States, O'Daniel wrote the following: "During his ten years of labor in Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee he had imbibed our American ways and spirit."³

Francis Sadoc Vilarrasa

Another Spanish Dominican, who immigrated to the United States four years later than Alemany, was his neighbor, Francis Sadoc Vilarrasa.⁴ This Spanish Dominican would spend time in Somerset and would join Alemany later in the trek to California at mid-century. Vilarrasa was born about a month after Alemany in the small Spanish town of La Pobla de Lillet, in the Province of Catalonia on August 9, 1814. Vilarrasa's ecclesiastical training was similar to that undertaken by Alemany. He entered the Dominican Order in the priory of Saint Catherine in Barcelona in his early youth and professed



Rev. Francis S. Vilarrasa, O.P. (1814-1888)

his solemn vows on September 25, 1830. And like Alemany, he began his ecclesiastical studies in Spain, but he too was exiled from his native Spain and ended up studying in Rome. The Priory of St. Catherine was burned in a riot on July 25, 1835, during which time eighteen religious were killed. Vilarrasa was ordained in Rome on May 16, 1837. O'Daniel remarks

on the slight stature of Vilarrasa: "The little dark man is said to have just attained the height required by canon law for admittance into the priesthood."⁵ A story is found in the documents concerning the shortness of stature of this Spanish Dominican. It seems that he had to stand on a bench when reading from a lectern or preaching in a church. On one occasion when reading the gospel where Jesus says: "A little while and you will no longer see me, and again a little while and you will see me," he fell off the bench!⁶

Quickly following his ordination, Vilarrasa was named Assistant Novice Master, which portended his later administrative work as a Dominican in the United States. Under his spiritual direction in this role in Rome were two French Dominicans who became justly famous in the annals of nineteenth century Dominican history: Henri Dominique Lacordaire and Alexandre Vincent Jandel. While in Rome, Vilarrasa also served in the capacity of Professor of Theology.

Vilarrasa too had an abiding missionary fervor to head west and settle in the newly established United States. He accepted the invitation of the then Dominican provincial, Fr. George Augustine Wilson, who was traveling in Europe in 1844 attempting to secure a cohort of European Dominicans for work in the Province of St. Joseph. Following a forty-eight day voyage from France, Vilarrasa arrived in New York on January 3, 1845. He traveled to Somerset where almost immediately he became the Master of Novices. Shortly thereafter, he was elected Prior and appointed Professor of Philosophy. It would appear that his administrative, spiritual and teaching characteristics were perceived almost immediately.

Vilarrasa wrote wonderfully descriptive letters, many to his relatives in Spain. He once wrote the following account of missionary life in 1840s Ohio:

The hardships of the priests on the missions are very

great. They can never count on sleeping in the convent (i.e., the priory, whose Latin term is "*conventus*"). Many times it happens that one arrives tired out and thinking he can rest, when he must leave at once on horseback and go where he is called without stopping through the rain and snow.⁷

In terms of personality, both Vilarrasa and Alemany were constitutionally different—each possessing different innate and acquired character traits. Vilarrasa wanted to deepen the religious and scholarly lives of the American Dominicans. O’Daniel writes that Vilarrasa “was not of the missionary, but contemplative type.”⁸ Vilarrasa was a bookish friar with highly developed and firmly held ideals about the importance of the intellectual and spiritual lives for Dominican friars. He accumulated a wide-ranging library, which is referred to often in accounts of the fledgling days of the California Dominicans. Not alone in this spiritual and intellectual renewal project, Vilarrasa appears to have had the Dominican stalwart, Nicholas Dominic Young, in his reformation camp. Originally Vilarrasa was a strong supporter of Alemany’s appointment as provincial of the Province of St. Joseph. Nonetheless, as we shall see, he soon harbored second thoughts about this recommendation. However, two years later, when Vilarrasa was assigned by the Office of the Master General in Rome to accompany the freshly minted Bishop Alemany on the journey to his new diocese and to establish a Dominican province in the newly acquired lands of California, Vilarrasa appears to have jumped at the chance. Eventually Vilarrasa became the Vicar General of the California Dominicans, a position that Alemany assumed was his own. This turn of events, understandably, created some tension between the two Dominican brothers with the same religious name, Sadoc. Nonetheless, never let it be said that the little man in the Dominican habit was not as tough as nails. Indeed he was. During a good bit of his tenure as the major religious superior of the Western or California Dominicans, Vilarrasa had to restrain the energetic impulses of Alemany, who wanted to direct the Dominican friars to

the service of the ends of the Archdiocese of San Francisco rather than their own development as members of an exempt religious order.

More follows shortly on the work in California with the newly established Dominican province there.

A Stormy Provincialate

The records indicate that the Alemany tenure as provincial of St. Joseph’s Province, while of a short time-span, was more than a tad stormy. The principal issue in this ecclesiastical internecine firestorm appears to have been the role of an active ministry in a missionary land versus the more contemplative and studious role that the Dominican Constitutions call for. The history of the American Dominicans is replete with instances of this tension, which reverts all the way back to the original founding of St. Joseph Province by Edward Fenwick in 1805. Fenwick himself was the consummate missionary, whose energies were expended in the saddle traversing the high and by ways of Ohio, Kentucky and Michigan bringing the “good news” of the Christian message to the settlers far and wide. Fenwick once wrote about the travails of early missionary life:

Not infrequently I have to traverse vast forests in which there is no trace of a path. Often, when overtaken by nightfall in the forest, I hitch my horse to a tree, make a pillow of my saddle, recommend myself to God and fall asleep in the bear-infested wilderness. But God, in His mercy, lightens the burden and sweetens the yoke with His palpable consolations.⁹

Alemany’s first days in the New World were spent adhering to the principles of religious observance as practiced in the principal Ohio priory, St. Joseph’s. Yet his missionary days in Tennessee appear to have influenced a change of attitude on his part regarding the importance of a strict monastic observance in a predominantly missionary country. As provincial, he appears to have stressed the active missionary endeavors of the Province rather than assisting in building a stronger monastic element. On these matters,

Vilarrasa, in particular, appears to have been highly critical of the new provincial. He wrote the following rather harsh assessment of Alemany:

Fr. Alemany had been for six years on the missions, and living outside of a convent [i.e., a Dominican priory], until the last Provincial Chapter when he was assigned to St. Rose as novice master.... During the eight months that he has held these offices, he has demonstrated that he has lost both the spirit and the desire for the Regular Life, and has clearly indicated, that if he becomes Provincial, he will change everything....

The question might be asked: Why, then, did the Capitular Fathers recommend Fr. Alemany? The answer is easy. They judged him to be what he was when he first came to this country; they did not know how much he had changed on the missions. If they had known, he would not have received a single vote.¹⁰

Nonetheless, Alemany was appointed Provincial by the Master General in Rome.

Alemany, certainly an able administrator who could accomplish the goals he set for himself, began an ambitious building project for St. Joseph's in Somerset. It was under Alemany's watch that the construction of the building to house the newly established St. Joseph's College began. He also jump-started the work to finish the interior of the main church, which had been put on hold for several years because of financial pressures. Coffey notes that the new college building "was, in spite of Alemany's restrictions (cash on the barrel-head, and not too large), the most ambitious building program undertaken since Fenwick's starting splurge at St. Rose."¹¹ The fund-raisers for these projects were Father Charles Montgomery and a young priest we shall learn more about shortly, Father Peter Augustine Anderson.

The Donnybrook at the Intermediate Chapter

The Dominican Constitutions call for what is termed an "Intermediate Chapter" to be held two years following a provincial elective chapter. This was scheduled to be held in October 1849.

Alemany, however, about to depart for Rome, wished the chapter to be deferred until his return the following year. Alemany, it would seem, had the Dominican code of regulations on his side on this matter. Nonetheless, he appears to have given in to the demands for an intermediate chapter, but not without some sense of bitterness. Father Fabian Parmisano, the historian for the Dominican California Province, notes that Alemany "added a final rumble of thunder" when he wrote to his fellow friars: "beware to oppose your private judgment to the authority of your superior." Alemany was a stickler for strict obedience. This call of the intermediate chapter, Parmisano notes, brought out Alemany's "Catalan temper and stubbornness." Moreover, that Alemany had good reason to delay this chapter will soon be evident.

At this provincial council, Alemany was called before what is called the "Definitorium," which, as Coffey notes, "is the authority of the province for the duration of the Chapter."¹² Here Alemany was forced to subscribe to six conditions or else face suspension from his office as provincial. This is a hard set of conditions, to be sure. The list, as Coffey notes, goes as follows:

1. Alemany must admit that, as provincial, he does not enjoy such inspiration from the Holy Spirit as to render him infallible.
2. Alemany, as provincial, cannot act as if he were the Master General, unless there is an urgent necessity. The only exception would be the right to accept new foundations for the province without first writing to the Master General.
3. Alemany cannot remove a student from the house of studies—the *studium*—without the consent of the regent of studies.
4. Likewise, Alemany cannot transfer a newly ordained priest from the House of Studies until the home priory has paid the bills.
5. Lectors, who are needed at the studium, cannot be assigned to the missions.
6. Lectors, who are needed for teaching the clerical novices, should not be given other offices in the House of Studies except those that assist in their teaching.

This is certainly a rigorous set of restrictions put upon a rather free spirited and authoritative provincial. In addition, the report that went to Rome with these six conditions ended with a recommendation that Alemany be removed from office. Strong words, indeed! Coffey notes that Alemany, when faced with suspension, promised to meet these conditions. Of course, the sceptic might remark—what choice did he have? Nonetheless, Alemany, for the moment, accepted these conditions for his remaining in office, including the requirement that he live at St. Joseph's in Somerset. A final note concluding this list of sanctions is important in attempting to understand the battle royale that was being undertaken on this set of issues. The Definitorium fathers wrote that “by a false interpretation of the nature of your authority, you are prone to exceed its limits....”¹³

While in Rome, a miffed provincial, as O'Daniel notes, “was not above all retaliation.”¹⁴ Alemany had unwillingly convoked the intermediate chapter, which had been highly critical of his service as provincial. While in Rome, he persuaded the Vicar General of the Dominicans, Father Jerome Gigli, to annul the acts or resolutions of this chapter. This event occurred after Alemany's appointment as Bishop of Monterey. In a document dated July 18, 1850, and addressed to the newly consecrated Bishop of Monterey, the following command is found: “The Provincial Chapter of 1849 is declared null and void.”¹⁵ As Coffey notes:

(I)t was not until he was armed with the majesty of apostolic succession, that, in the full panoply of his episcopal dignity, he descended upon the Minerva to seek retribution for the humiliation which he had suffered at the hands of the Definitorium of the Provincial Chapter nine months before.¹⁶

On this same date, July 18, 1850, what would become the west coast Dominicans, the Province of the Holy Name, was formally established by Fr. Gigli with Alemany as the first provincial.

That different senses of the Dominican work in a frontier country manifested itself in this

donnybrook in Somerset is evident to even the casual reader. At rock bottom in this debate appears to be the fact that Alemany was more concerned with the active ministry of the Dominicans while Vilarrasa was more contemplative with a corresponding emphasis on prayer and the traditional monastic life. Nonetheless, as Provincial, Alemany undertook more than several important projects and actions. He brought about the reconciliation of Fr. Samuel Mazzuchelli with the Eastern Dominicans. A rift had existed for several years. As Provincial of the American Dominicans, his participation in the Seventh Provincial Council of Bishops in Baltimore in 1849 was noteworthy. It was there that the other American bishops got to know Alemany and recognize in him the traits necessary for an eventual episcopal appointment. Moreover, it was at this major council that the bishops addressed the need of a bishop for what was known as “upper” California. A petition went off to Rome requesting a bishop to be named for Monterey. It is unclear if Alemany, at this time, had any inkling that it was he who would eventually be named to this newly established episcopal see.

Peter Augustine Anderson: The First American Dominican in California

The first American Dominican to journey to California was another person with strong roots in Somerset. Born in Elizabeth, New Jersey of Protestant parents, young Peter with the rest of the Anderson family moved to Ohio. Soon thereafter, the father died and Peter as the eldest son was in charge of providing financial support for the family. In 1829, the entire family joined the Roman Catholic Church, under the guidance of the Dominican Fathers. Soon Peter became a Dominican postulant at St. Joseph Priory; in 1832, he received the Dominican habit at St. Rose Priory and was he ordained there in 1840.

A dynamic and apparently extroverted friar-preacher, Anderson chafed at the inactivity he experienced while assigned to the Priory of St. Rose. Eventually Anderson was sent out as

a nation-trotting fundraiser for the American Dominicans, journeying across the country seeking alms to fund the various Dominican activities. Anderson also appears to have been a gifted preacher and worker in the Lord's vineyard.

While he and Alemany appear to have locked horns early on, nonetheless it was Alemany who as provincial assigned Anderson to California in order to preach the gospel to the people in this newly emerging state. Anderson was highly beloved and respected in his newly adopted land. The California correspondent for *The Freeman's Journal* reported most favorably on Anderson's apostolic activities in California. Nonetheless, his apostolate was short-lived, as he succumbed to the ravages of yellow fever in Sacramento a short time before Alemany and Vilarrasa arrived from the east. *The Freeman's Journal* carried the following sad entry on January 11, 1851 with the dateline: Sacramento, November 30, 1850:

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. Augustine P. Anderson, has passed from earth.... During the late epidemic, early and late, have I seen him in the Cholera Hospital, and among the tents and miserable habitations of the poor, dispensing the consolations of religion. Forgetful of himself, he thought only of ministering to the necessities of the suffering and afflicted.... In the prosecution of these labors, his health became impaired... Although everything possible was done, and closest attention paid by his attendants, human skill was baffled. He departed this life at a quarter of Two o'clock on the 27th of November.¹⁷

Both Alemany and Vilarrasa were deeply disheartened to learn that Anderson had died so young and so soon after he had arrived in California from Ohio.

(to be concluded...)

Notes

- 1 Victor Francis O'Daniel, *The Dominican Province of Saint Joseph: Historico-Biographical Studies* (New York, 1942), p. 171. O'Daniel suggests that the young Alemany was sent to the ancient and historic priory of Santa Maria dei Gradi in Viterbo for his studies.
- 2 O'Daniel notes that the baptismal record for St. Peter's in Memphis indicates that the last baptism Alemany performed there was November 23, 1847; hence, it is safe to assume that he left Memphis for Kentucky shortly thereafter. O'Daniel, *op. cit.*, p. 169.
- 3 O'Daniel, *op. cit.*, p. 172.
- 4 His full name was Father Francis Sadoc Vilarrasa y Costa. Costa was the surname of his mother.
- 5 O'Daniel, p. 173.
- 6 This charming story is found in the account of Vilarrasa's life on the West Coast Dominican webpage, www.opwest.org.
- 7 Fabian Stan Parmisano, O.P., *Mission West* (Oakland, CA, 1995). The author's friend, West Coast Dominican Father Michael Sherwin, now at the University of Friburg, kindly gave a copy of this fascinating narrative of Dominican history to the author.
- 8 O'Daniel, p. 174.
- 9 Reginald M. Coffey, *The American Dominicans: A History of Saint Joseph's Province* (New York, 1970), p. 91. Coffey's text contains much direct quotation from the remaining letters and documents of the early Dominicans in Ohio and Kentucky.
- 10 Coffey, pp. 246-247.
- 11 Coffey, p. 250.
- 12 Coffey, p. 256. The narrative of this intermediate council as described in this essay is highly dependent upon Coffey's superb historical research and writing.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 257.
- 14 O'Daniel, *op. cit.*, p. 170.
- 15 Coffey, *op. cit.*, p. 260.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Coffey, pp. 266-267. The passage included here has been edited. The entire letter in Coffey's text is worth reading.

Distant Birthplaces Recorded at Marion, 1890-1897

by **Father James A. J. Burns**

(Continued from Vol. XXX, No. 8)

- Glathart, Christian (non-Catholic) (father of Rachel who was born in 1869), Switzerland, Mar. 24, 1894
- Goss, Josephine Cecilia (wife of Theodore Roman Ochs), West Liberty, O., Jan. 8, 1891; Sept. 19, 1895
- Goss, Margaret Amelia (wife of Stephen James Werley), Freehold, Monmouth Co., N.J., Jan. 26, 1891
- Grady, Alice Augusta (wife of James F. Prendergast), Toledo, O., June 9, 1895
- Griffin, Thomas r (husband of Catharine Agnes Tobin), Bellefontaine, O., Feb. 17, 1895
- Griffith, Almira Agnes (wife of William B. Moran), near Richwood, O., Feb. 9, 1896
- Gurley -- see Lannan
- Guthrie, William A. (non-Catholic) (husband of Ida M. Smith), Shippensburg, Pa., Nov. 30, 1890
- Hagan, Dorothy (wife of Patrick Cusack), Wexford, Co. Wexford, July 10, 1892
- Haggerty, Michael (husband of Rose Ann Doherty), Co. Roscommon, Oct. 13, 1895
- Hanegan, Ann Bridget (wife of Thomas H. Burke), Cleveland, O., Dec. 14, 1890; Dec. 3, 1893; Jan. 26, 1896
- Hanley, Patrick (husband of Margaret A. Drew), Tipperary, Co. Tipperary, Mar. 5, 1892; July 14, 1895
- Hansen, Anna Maria (wife of Jesse Shisler), Champion, Marquette Co., Mich., Feb. 25, 1896; Hausen, Jan. 31, 1894; Hensen, Sept. 1, 1896
- Hendorf, Charles (baptized himself, son of John and Christina), Wabash, Wabash Co., Ind., Oct. 20, 1893
- Hendorf, John (husband of Christina Bender, father of Charles), Newfrack near Konstanz, Bavaria, Oct. 20, 1893
- Herr, John (husband of Emma Enspach), New York, New York, June 16, 1895
- Hile, William (non-Catholic) (husband of Ann Murray), Orrville, O., May 24, 1891; William Francis Hile, Oacia (Orrville), O., Sept. 3, 1893
- Hillan, Mary (wife of David Vincent Hoy), Cincinnati, O., Nov. 20, 1891; July 1, 1894
- Hillery, Michael (husband of Mary Ann Tool), Washington C.H., O., Sept. 9, 1890
- Hocter -- see Hoster
- Hogan -- see Burke, Catharine T.
- Hogan -- see Montgomery, Mary E.
- Hogan -- see Sullivan, Mary
- Hoover, James Butler (non-Catholic) (husband of Margaret C. O'Brien), Thompson Twp., Union Co., O., July 21, 1895

to be continued...