

PIONEER CONGREGATIONS—8

Fake bishop was exposed by St. Francis' pastor

By DAN BORSUK

San Francisco was just a sleepy, village of 450 inhabitants in 1847. But on Jan 24, 1848, the discovery of gold at Colma was to bring about a new awakening for the quiet village by the Bay.

Thousands of optimistic fortune-seekers headed West to California's gold country and many settled in San Francisco.

Due to the rapid transformation of San Francisco, the outcry for a Catholic priest was heard by Father John Brouillet who sailed from Oregon to San Francisco with the mission to establish what is now

known as St. Francis of Assisi Church. Father Brouillet arrived here in December, 1848.

Mass was initially celebrated in the home of Presidio army officer, Maj. James A. Hardie, who lived near the present church site, 610 Vallejo St.

In spring, 1849, the Rev. Anthony Langlois traveled from Oregon to assist Fr. Brouillet. Largely due to the work of Fr. Brouillet, though, his congregation collected funds to build its first building on Vallejo Street. It was a small wooden building which was dedicated on June 17, 1849.

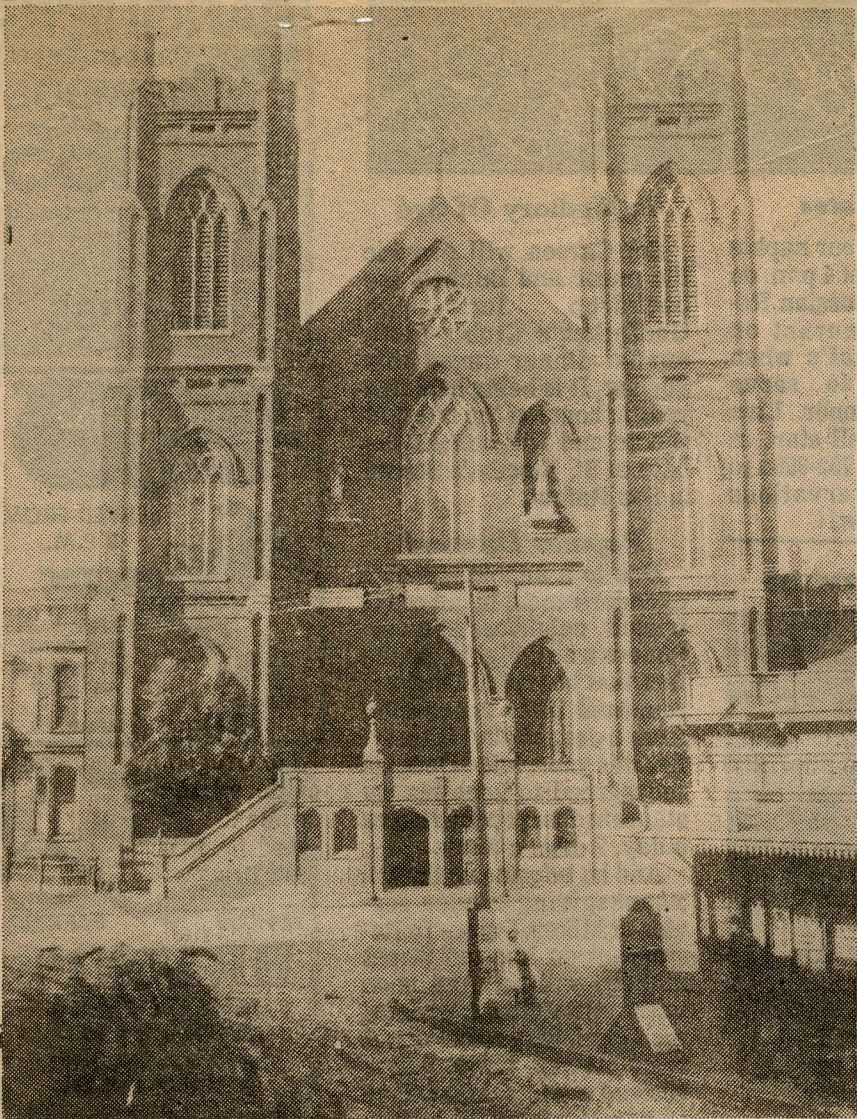
Late in 1849 Fr. Brouillet left San Francisco and returned to Oregon. He is, however, considered the founder of St. Francis while the Fr. Langlois, who succeeded him, is considered as the church's first pastor.

Fr. Langlois, a French Canadian, remained at St. Francis until 1853. He died in Martinez, Calif. in 1892.

During Fr. Langlois' tenure at St. Francis the first Catholic bishop of California, Joseph Sadoc Alemany, arrived in San Francisco. Interestingly enough, the pastor had his doubts about Bishop Alemany for he had already unmasked one im-



St. Francis, at Vallejo Street and Columbus Avenue, is distinguished by its twin spires. (Photo by Don Ivers)



The 1860 - constructed church as it appeared before the earthquake.



The shell of the burned out St. Francis of Assisi after the 1906 earthquake.

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poster who called himself a bishop and wore the typical regalia of a bishop.

But Bishop Alemany was able to present the papal documents certifying his claim.

A larger St. Francis Church was erected at California and Grant Avenue and replaced the first wooden building on July 6, 1851. It was dedicated by Bishop Alemany. This building served as the bishop's pro-cathedral, although the official cathedral was the Royal Presidio Chapel in Monterey.

When Bishop Alemany became Archbishop of San Francisco in 1853, St. Francis served as his permanent residence.

Even in its infant years, St. Francis conducted a parish school and Fr. Langlois was largely responsible for it. The school was established in 1850 and by 1851 its enrollment numbered 100. English, French and Spanish were taught.

Taking over the reins in 1853 as St. Francis' pastor, was the Rev. John Francis Llebaria.

Fr. Llebaria, a Spaniard, was the former pastor for the Marysville church prior to accepting Bishop Alemany's appointment. He served as pastor until 1857.

During his tenure of service however, San Francisco was hit by post-Gold Rush economic slump. Two leading California banks failed stemming from inflation, nevertheless, St. Francis still managed to open the Sisters of the Presentation convent on Powell Street.

As an interesting sidelight to St

Francis' parochial school, the State Legislature in 1853 provided funds to the school as long as it remained open three months each year and the money be used solely for paying the teachers. Two years later, however, the legislation was repealed.

In 1857, Father Peter Maganotto became pastor of St. Francis. Fr. Maganotto is credited with the construction of the present church edifice.

Prior to his installation as pastor, he built the church, school and convent in Marysville.

The new building at the corner of Columbus Avenue and Vallejo Street was erected with impressive twin spires. After its completion in 1859 and dedication on March 17, 1860, St. Francis quickly earned the title, "Queen of the Avenue," because of its dignity and beauty.

Several days before the new St. Francis was dedicated, two 53-inch diameter bells were hung. The bells formerly were used in California missions.

The building cost \$100,000 to construct. It was designed after the 14th century Gothic. Originally built of stone, steel frame girders were installed with concrete after the 1906 earthquake.

When the city was shaken by the 1906 catastrophe, St. Francis was in the path of the flames that charred much of downtown San Francisco.

Fortunately, the fire destroyed only the building's innards. The roof, interior and sanctuary were damaged, but twin towers and brick walls were undamaged.

After the 1860 - built edifice was completed, the congregation incur-

red a debt amounting to \$40,000. By 1866, Archbishop Alemany decided to place St. Francis in the charge of the Dominican Fathers.

Archbishop Alemany's decision was prompted by a shortage of priests and the mere fact that he was a Dominican.

In order to wipe out the debt created by Father Maganotto's administration, the archbishop made a city-wide appeal for funds to help bail the church out of its financial difficulties.

The appeal produced an unsatisfactory response primarily because the funds that did come in were offset by Father James Aerden's authorization to plaster the church's walls.

A parish fair in 1867, however, managed to bring in enough proceeds to permit the church to hire an architect to complete the interior decoration.

During Father Aerden's administration, one of the most significant events in the history of San Francisco Catholicism occurred. The City observed the 25th anniversary of the pontificate of Pope Pius IX on July 2, 1871. Special masses were conducted in each Catholic church and a downtown parade was held.

The Dominican Fathers carried on the work of St. Francis parish until 1872 when the Rev. John Harrington, a diocesan priest, took over the pastorate. He served until his death in 1893.

Fr. Harrington is credited for improving St. Francis' building by adding two side galleries, hanging oil paintings in the sanctuary and replacing the old organ with a new one built by San Francisco organ builder, Joseph Mayes.

He also built a new two-story parochial residence on the west side of the church.

Following Fr. Harrington was the

pastorate of Fr. John Conlon, 1893 to 1896.

Succeeding Fr. Conlon was Fr. Terence Caraher who served from 1896 to 1914. He waged an anti-vice campaign in the City. He was an avowed foe of all sorts of vices including gambling and drunkenness. He severely criticized the Barbary Coast, which was inside his parish's boundaries.

Father Caraher was also an influential force in saving Telegraph Hill from quarry operations. He fought for the preservation of homeowners' property that was subject to destruction from the quarry work.

When Fr. Caraher watched his church burn in 1906, he immediately set down plans to rebuild St. Francis. For a while his congregation met in a Telegraph Hill house.

In 1907, he helped erect a temporary building where the Marini Gymnasium now stands. The church cost \$10,000 to construct.

The work of rebuilding the permanent structure continued after Fr. Caraher's death in 1914. Fr. Patrick Collopy and Archbishop Edward J. Hanna rededicated St. Francis in 1918.

St. Francis had one other brush with disaster when in November, 1945, a fire broke out in the building's basement and burned part of the church. This time the church was not extensively damaged and was covered by insurance.

The church was reopened within a week after the blaze.

Today, St. Francis is a standing tribute to its dedicated pastors and congregants for it has withstood the disasters and financial problems that have plagued the great institution the past 125 years.

It is no wonder that the "Queen of the Avenue" is also respected as "the Mother of Parish Churches in San Francisco."