

# The origins of the Catholic church in Solano

**By Nancy Dingler**

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The story of the Catholic church in Solano County starts with a missionary, Joseph Sadoc Alemany, a Dominican priest.

Alemany was born July 13, 1814, in Vich, Spain. He was sent by Pope Pius IX in 1850 to California. Gold had been discovered in 1848 and word of the find started a mass migration from around the world and across America in 1849.

Most gold seekers were not successful, but they did not want to leave California. Rather than return home, they established small communities and began farming the land or opening up businesses to serve the farmers, ranchers and miners.

What was needed was the establishment of the Catholic church for these people who were putting down roots and raising families. Alemany's mission was to eventually, over six years, establish 57 churches, nine chapels and ordain 60 priests.

Alemany would be named California's first archbishop in 1853 after San Francisco became an archdiocese.

The pioneering Archbishop, was a slender, modest man who spoke many languages. He visited goldfields in the remote areas of the Sierra Nevada, which fell within the boundaries of the vast diocese. Alemany spent his early years in America as a missionary in Ohio and Kentucky and had conditioned himself to the harsh winters and wilderness to the north. In 1861 Alemany established a mission at Suisun. This was more of a district, because no building was actually in existence. He sent Father Peter Deyaert, resident pastor of St. John the Baptist Church in Napa, to be in charge of the Suisun mission.

When Father Deyaert arrived in the area, the Catholic families offered their parlors for the celebration of the Mass. According to the history of St. John the Baptist Church in Napa; Father Deyaert "was fond of walking. The trip over the hills to Suisun was just a little jaunt to him.

"Lake County, the Oat Hill Mine, the region of Rio Vista, and for a time the district of Sonoma, found him a constant visitor. And all these districts, except in emergencies, he visited on foot; stopping at ranch houses to renew old acquaintances and to make new friends".

Father Deyaert was born in Belgium in 1820. He resigned his commission in the French Army to study for the ministry. Deyaert spent his early years as a missionary on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, working to convert the Cowichan Indians. In 1854, he traveled to Nevada City where he was appointed to serve the northern mines. Later he was transferred to St. Rose in Sacramento before being sent to Napa.

As the population continued to increase, the need for a permanent church was recognized. In 1862, local rancher, Henry Russell donated land for a church in a formal ceremony with Archbishop Alemany. The property was located on Line Street between Washington and Suisun Streets.

However, it was not until 1865 that enough money was raised to build a church. Described only as a "small frame building," the little church served the congregation when Suisun became an official parish in 1867. Suisun had become independent, it was time for its first resident pastor.

Father Lucovicus Alphonsus Auger was appointed the first resident pastor of the church in Suisun. He was ordained in 1856 by Archbishop Alemany. Auger's earliest priesthood days were spent in Petaluma as the first pastor of St. Vincent de Paul church from 1857 to 1859. At the same time, he was head of the St. Vincent Orphanage in Marin County, where he lived. No stranger to early day hardships, he traveled by pack-horse and boat to Petaluma to serve his parishioners.

The parishioners were prepared to receive Father Auger on Christmas Day in 1867. A brief notice appeared in the Solano Press, Dec. 18, announcing; "On Christmas morning, the Reverend Father Auger will celebrate Mass at the Catholic church in Suisun", but it was not to be.

The little frame church was destroyed by a storm the Sunday before Christmas. On Dec. 25, the Solano Press reported the sad news; "A terrible gale and rain storm commenced on Saturday night and continued with unabated violence until Sunday evening . . . by Tuesday afternoon, a large portion of water fell, and part of the town was flooded. . . On Sunday the Catholic church on Line Street was blown down and is a mass of ruins involving a great loss to the denomination of about 120."

With Father Auger as their spiritual guide, this denomination of about 120 began to plan for another church. The generosity of the parishioners enabled Father Auger to build another church less than a year after the destruction of the first one. The new building, named St. Alphonsus Turbius Church, completed in 1868, cost \$6,000 and stood proudly for the next 82 years.

Father Henry Lande was pastor when the fire of unknown origin partially destroyed the

historic church. The blaze discovered on the afternoon of Jan. 17, 1950, was believed to have started from a defective floor heater or from a short circuit in the wiring. The blaze destroyed the roof and portions of the old church and the entire interior was damaged by fire and water. Many valuables were carried out by neighbors before the fire had done much damage.

In trying to reach a decision on the fate of the church, another disaster would befall the community. On Feb. 3, while in the company of Catholic dignitaries who were surveying the ruins, Father Lande apparently stopped his car on the railroad tracks in front of an oncoming freight train at the Main Street crossing. Father Lande died almost immediately and his passenger, Bishop O'Dowd, died two days later.

Witnesses to the accident were the clergy in the second car driven by Rev. Maher, secretary to Archbishop John Mitty, Monsignor William Burke of San Rafael and the Very Reverend Thomas F. Byrne of St. Basil's, Vallejo.

Archbishop Mitty decided not to rebuild the historic pioneer church. All parish activities now centered around the new Catholic church in Fairfield.

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