

Pioneers:

The Brothers Come West

The District of San Francisco was founded 135 years ago. Here is the story of how the De La Salle Christian Brothers began their educational mission on the West Coast.

When the Brothers embarked on their journey to the West Coast, they knew that the challenge was enormous and the outcome far from certain. Their funds were meager and their numbers were few, but they were fortified by their faith in god and their confidence in the tradition of their founder, Saint John Baptist de La Salle, who himself had surmounted great obstacles in creating a revolutionary system of Christian education.

The Brothers were coming to San Francisco in response to the insistent pleadings of Archbishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany. By the time he was named head of the newly formed, sprawling frontier Archdiocese of San Francisco in 1853, Alemany had already been busy as Bishop of the area for three years, slowly expanding the small system of Catholic education that existed at the time. The majority of successful schools were staffed by women religious who provided classes for girls and young women. As Archbishop, Alemany hoped to provide the same opportunities for boys by establishing a school for young men of

secondary school and college age. This institution would train them in their faith and would also, he hoped, foster vocations and become a source of priests and religious to carry on the work of the Church in the far west. Long before the cornerstone was laid for his new Saint Mary's College, Alemany had begun a campaign to bring the Brothers of the Christian Schools to San Francisco to take on the management of this project.

At the time of the Archbishop's first plea in 1856, the De La Salle Christian Brothers had been teaching in the United States for only 11 years and numbered about 200. The United States Province

Very Res. Serv.

As it is a long time since I have deposed to have a colony of your good Brothers for the good education of our young men. Some obstacles have been in the way, but I have never lost sight of the original design. And now when already considerable preparation has been made to secure the good education of our youth, I would with very much to secure the constant assistance of good Brothers for the young men.

In this view I would have some months ago to the Board of (Catholic) upon that subject, and by letter of July last informed you, that I should

Above: Archbishop Alemany's letter of 1857 to the Superior General of the Christian Brothers (see the complete letter on page 6).
Below: Saint Mary's College of California in 1868, on Mission Road in San Francisco.



was having difficulty enough meeting demands on its burgeoning schools on the East Coast, so the thought of sending precious staff across the continent seemed impossible. However, Archbishop Alemany was persistent. After several polite refusals from both the North American Provincial and the Superior General of the Institute, he made the difficult journey to the Vatican in 1867 and put his request directly to the Pope. This effort finally succeeded: Brother Patrick Murphy, Visitor of the United States District, was directed to provide the needed personnel. Selecting eight Brothers, he placed them under the direction of Brother Justin McMahon who, at the age of 34, would become the first Visitor of the District of San Francisco. Apart from \$800 provided by the San Francisco Archdiocese for their passage, the group received no other financial backing, leaving to Brother Justin the challenge of managing the growth and survival of the venture.

A Bittersweet Farewell

On July 16, 1868, the Brothers boarded the *Ocean Queen* in New York. Of these, only one was a born American; the others were immigrants from Ireland, Germany, and Switzerland. An article in the *New York Tablet* for that date records the event:

“The departure of these eight Brothers, while a gain for the West, is certainly a loss to the East. As a tribute of appreciation to those who were leaving them, the Brothers of Manhattan College prepared a surprise for the travelers at the time of their departure. On the eve of sailing, Brother Jasper, Prefect of the college, got in readiness the college boats. Next morning... at nine o'clock the little yacht slipped her moorings and sailed down the Hudson to the foot of Canal Street where the *Ocean Queen* lay at anchor.

“The stirring notes of the college band soon attracted the passengers on the steamship, but it was some time before the Brothers made their appearance, as they scarcely felt in any mood to listen to the merry music of some excursion barge, which they most likely deemed the college yacht to be. The stalwart figure of Brother Jasper attired in the religious garb of the Brotherhood soon caught

Brother Justin's eye, upon which all the Brothers on board quickly went to the ship's side. Though it was difficult to distinguish the expressions of surprise and gratification they uttered, there was no mistaking their



Brother Justin McMahon, FSC

emotions when the sweet, sad notes of 'Home, Sweet Home' reached their ears. The cheers and waving of hats and handkerchiefs on board the college boats fully attested the cordial love the escorting party entertained for the departing Brothers.... At one o'clock the *Ocean Queen* steamed majestically from the wharf and was accompanied by the yacht to the Narrows. The trip down the bay was enlivened by the strains of the band as it played the popular airs of the day.

“The powerful engines of the larger vessel soon widened the distance between her and her tiny convoys. And a final adieu was waved to Brother Justin and his companions who waved back again and again, no doubt with widely mingled emotions.”

The first leg of the voyage on the *Ocean Queen* lasted eight days, delivering the group at Aspinwall (now Colon) on the morning of June 26. The following afternoon, the Brothers used train and wagon to cross the Isthmus of Panama. They encountered no difficulties, enjoying the tropical sights of monkeys playing in the trees. Two days later, they boarded the *Montana*, a wooden, side-wheeler steamship. Along with 618 other passengers, bags of mail, and a small herd of livestock, they began the 13-day voyage up the coast. Late in the evening of August 10, 1868, the *Montana* sailed into San Francisco Bay. The very next day, the pioneers met the persistent Archbishop who had brought about their assignment.

With little delay, the group loaded its baggage into carriages and made the five-mile journey along Old Mission Road to the grounds of Saint Mary's College, where Brother Justin accepted the keys and the responsibility for the school.

Hardships, Faith, Dedication, Success

The Brothers soon discovered that they had assumed control of an institution beset by financial problems caused by debt and over-estimation of donations. Enrollments rose and fell like the tides, and tuition payments were often made in goods and produce rather than cash, providing no cure for the perilous financial situation.

When the academic semester opened that August of 1868, the college was \$75,000 in debt and of the 49 students who had enrolled the previous June, only 34 appeared for the first day. It was providential that Brother Justin had been chosen to lead the project; a man of energy, vision, and practicality, he possessed the talents needed to resuscitate the floundering institution. With characteristic action, he took advantage of every opportunity to advertise the change in school administration, enlisting the Archbishop in writing letters to parishes and working with the press to his advantage. An article in the *San Francisco Alta Californian* reported:

"We learn from these gentlemen that their object is to give a thoroughly practical education to those confided to their care. They appear to understand in what education really consists and how important it is to train our youth in such a manner that they will be able on leaving college to take their place with credit in the counting house, the mining district, in law or medicine."

Brother Justin was also diligent in publishing the college prospectus in local papers every day for an entire month to broadcast Saint Mary's offerings in commercial, classical and scientific studies. More importantly, he clarified the close guidance that distinguished the Brothers' program: "Living in the same house, sitting at the same table, presiding at the recreations, and, as far as possible, forming a family circle with their pupils, it is reasonable to suppose that the Brother can easily gain their confidence, and thus be in a position to direct them more successfully

in their studies. The discipline, though mild, is sufficiently energetic to maintain good order."

The first year was often discouraging for the Brothers: difficult teaching conditions, an outbreak of smallpox, and, in October 1868, an earthquake that badly shook the college community, the younger high school boys and older, college-age students alike.

"The boys were at breakfast when the shock came. Immediately there was a mad rush for the doors and windows to escape into the yard where they were further endangered by falling rocks from the chimneys and dormer windows. This experience naturally rendered the students susceptible to the least strange happening, for later when a terrific wind and storm howled about the gables, the boys were frightened so that they knelt in their beds and prayed for the chance to go to confession." (From Brother V. Cyril's manuscript, *The Christian Brothers in the District of San Francisco*.)

Some of the Brothers talked of leaving the fledgling enterprise, but Brother Justin never flagged. Later, Brothers recalled his determination: "He informed them that if they gave up the work, he would carry it on alone, and with the help and blessing of God, succeed. This had the desired effect, and they soon took heart again. The spirit of self-sacrifice and zeal for Christian education made them forget present hardships and hope for better time."

Building a Foundation for Lasallian Education

Brother Justin continued his efforts at public relations. Within a few months, he arranged for the press to be brought to Saint Mary's in carriages for campus tours and an introduction to the school's aims. At graduation time, the San Francisco community was invited to the college to observe the public examination of matriculating students, enjoy musical recitals, and listen to essay recitations. These efforts brought results. By the second year of the Brothers' administration, the size of the student body had tripled.

To ensure future enrollments, Brother Justin carefully tended to the development of feeder schools, establishing Saint Joseph's Academy in Oakland (1870), Sacred Heart College in downtown San

**Transcription of Archbishop Alemany's Letter of 1857 to
Frère Philippe Bransiet, FSC, Superior General**

Very Rev. Dear Sir,

It is a long time since I have desired to have a colony of your good Brothers for the good education of our young men. Some obstacles have been in the way, but I have never lost sight of the original desire. And now when already considerable preparation has been made to secure the good education of our girls, I would wish very much to secure the Christian assistance of good teachers for the young men.

For this reason I wrote some months ago to Frere Facile of Montreal (Canada) upon that subject, and he by letter of Feb. 7 last informs me that probably a province should be established in this distant country, and that if you consented, he might have some Brothers prepared for this purpose.

I therefore beg of you to have the kindness of giving the necessary faculties for such an institution, which in time might not only be of very great benefit to the many new churches in this beautiful and healthy country, but also to many other countries that are daily becoming more in contact with California.

*With much respect, I have the honor to be
Your M. Obt. Servant
+Joseph S. Alemany, Arch. S. Fra*

Francisco (1874), and Saint Patrick's Institute in Sacramento (1876). To enhance Saint Mary's academic standing, he worked toward obtaining a charter; in 1872, one was awarded by the State Board of Education, allowing Saint Mary's to grant degrees. By 1875, Brother Justin could rightfully boast that "The college is big, far the largest of any in the state or on the coast."

Just four years later, he was called to the East Coast to assume the position of Visitor of the New York District. Named as his successor in San Francisco was his sibling, Brother Bettelin McMahon, who served as Visitor from 1879 to 1900.

The District of San Francisco thus entered its second decade with four schools

under its care. Not only had the pioneer Brothers met the expectations of Archbishop Alemany, they had also laid a solid foundation for the ministry of education in the tradition of Saint John Baptist de La Salle on the western shores of the United States.

The founding Brothers also left their mark on the map of San Francisco. In the area bordered by Alemany Boulevard and Mission Street are Saint Mary's Park, Justin Drive, College Avenue, St. Mary's Street, College Terrace, and Genebern Way.

The next issue will explore the training of novices, the work of the young Brothers, and the increasing role of lay partners in the District. ■

Joseph Sadoc Alemany (1814-1888)

The first Archbishop of San Francisco was born in Spain in 1814. Soon after being ordained a Dominican priest, Alemany volunteered for the missions in the United States. From 1840 to 1849, he ministered to congregations in Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee, and served as president of St. Athanasius College in Nashville. During this time, he



gained fluency in English and became a citizen of the United States. In 1850, he was chosen Prior Provincial of Dominican friars in the United States, and was named Bishop of the Diocese of Monterey. His fluency in English, Italian, French, and Spanish, as well as his familiarity with America, had brought him to the attention of the Vatican as an ideal shepherd for the diverse, multi-lingual flock that made up the Catholic Church in California.

The heart of the diocese, San Francisco, was a booming and wild gold rush port. Its large numbers of Catholics – Irish, French-Canadian, German, and Spanish-speaking *Californios* – were in great need of pastoral care.

Bishop Alemany began an ambitious program of providing for the education of young Catholics, pleading with religious orders to send teachers, and supporting new schools. His task was somewhat lightened in 1853 when Baja California was removed from his jurisdiction and he was appointed as Archbishop of the newly created Archdiocese of San Francisco.

For 34 years, the Archbishop worked tirelessly to lay the foundation of the Church on the West Coast. He remained a devoutly simple man, living

frugally and going about his business in a patched brown habit. When his successor, Archbishop Riordan, assumed the miter and staff of the aging priest in 1884, he spoke of Alemany's kindness and courtesy: "No one ever saw him angry; he was gentle but firm." The following year, Joseph Alemany returned to Spain, where he died in 1888.

Father James Croke (1827-1888)

Any history of Catholic schools in the Far West would be incomplete without mention of Father James Croke. As a young priest, the Irishman ministered to miners in the hills and mountains of Oregon. When he later moved to California, he continued serving the rough and remote areas of his parishes. Traveling on horseback or by wagon, he took care of gold seekers, farmers, and townspeople, earning their loyalties with his down-to-earth manner and frequent kindnesses, often turning over Sunday collections to needy souls. With Archbishop Alemany's decision to build a college, Father Croke took on for his archbishop the task of canvassing the Mother Lode to collect funds for the project. He asked Catholics and Protestants alike for donations. From leather-faced miners who contributed gold dust and successful storekeepers who often paid in cash, he was able to raise over \$37,000 in two years, enough to start construction on Saint Mary's College.



District Pioneers



Brother Cianan Griffin, FSC

Four of the founding Brothers were natives of Ireland. **Brother Cianan Griffin** had emigrated to Canada as a young man, where he worked as a surveyor before joining the order. His expertise was in teaching mathematics, and his heart was always with the youngest students in his care. A student of Saint Mary's College in its early years told the story of being led to his primary grade classroom by Brother Cianan who promised, "Now, I'm going to give you a very nice Brother, but if he spansks you, you tell me, and I'll spank him." **Brother Gustavus Fitzpatrick** had served as head of schools in St. Louis and New Jersey, and brought with him to San Francisco years of administrative experi-



Brother Gustavus Fitzpatrick, FSC

ence, a reputation as an excellent teacher, and a strong personality that often clashed with Brother Justin's. He instituted the commercial courses at Saint Mary's College and helped found feeder high schools, before being called back to the East Coast province after a few years. Brother Gustavus was the last member of the founding San Francisco Brothers to die. **Brother Sabinian Downey** also taught in the commercial/business department at Saint Mary's, became the college's first treasurer and the young District's third Director of Novices. Only **Brother Dimidrian Higgins** never had the opportunity to teach out West after volunteering to make the journey; he became ill during the trip from New York and was an invalid on his arrival in San Francisco, dying the year after the founding of the new District. Three of the pioneer Brothers were immigrants from Germany or Switzerland. **Brother Pirmian Moller**, a very pious man, had served at



Brother Sabinian Downey, FSC

schools in the Brothers' Midwest District before joining the group coming west. He became the first Novice Master for the new District and also designed the gardens at the Novitiate in Martinez. Several histories report his practice of annoying his Irish novices by making St. Patrick's Day a period of fast in preparation for the Feast of St. Joseph on March 19. From 1890 until his death in 1902, Brother Pirmian taught German at Saint Mary's College. **Brother Genebern Steiner** joined the Brothers in Montreal at age 13 after his family emigrated to Canada from Swit



Brother Dimidrian Higgins, FSC



Brother Emilian Petermann, FSC

zerland. Eleven years later, he was in California serving as the Prefect of Discipline at Saint Mary's College. Brother Geneburn also directed a Brothers' feeder school in Oakland, was administrator of Sacred Heart High School in San Francisco, and in 1883, became principal of what is now Christian Brothers High School in Sacramento. Another young pioneer was **Brother Emilian Petermann**. Although he suffered from consumption, he was known for his kind disposition. He brought with him from New York to the new enterprise in California many books, adding greatly to the college library, and was assigned to teaching Latin and Greek. Finally, there was the lone American-born Brother, a 20-year-old novice named **Brother Adrian Denys**. Having a change of heart about his vocation during the journey west from New York, he left the group before they landed in San Francisco and returned east to study law. He resumed his secular name, William Jay Gaynor, and in 1909 became Mayor of New York City, having served as justice of the New York Supreme Court from 1893-1909. "His strong and unconventional personality made him a spectacular figure of his time" (*Columbia Encyclopedia*). Gaynor was mayor when the *Carpathia* brought *Titanic* survivors into New York Harbor on April 18, 1912. News reports of the day say that New Yorkers rallied, with Mayor William Gaynor spearheading a massive relief effort.

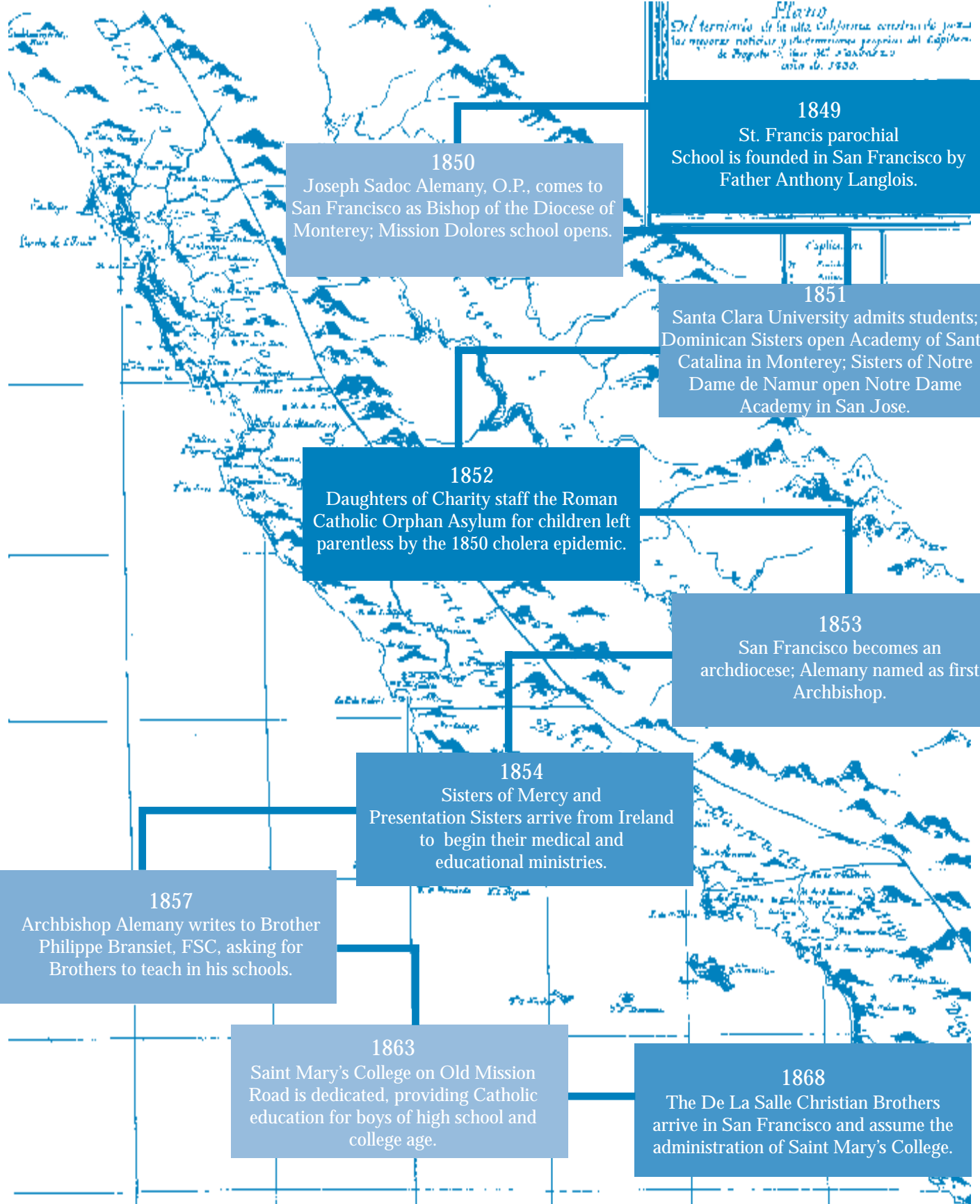


Brother Geneburn Steiner, FSC

Eight Pioneer Brothers or Nine?

Historical documents present conflicting information about the number of Brothers involved in the pioneering adventure. Some news articles and recollections of the early Brothers list eight names, while other manuscripts mention nine. The confusion is likely due to the departure of a young novice in the group, Brother Adrian Denys, immediately upon his arrival in California. The record is unclear whether Brother Pirmian Moeller followed shortly afterwards as a replacement or whether he was part of the original group. Rosters of founding Brothers often include all nine: Brothers Justin McMahon, Cianan Griffin, Gustavus Fitzpatrick, Sabinian Downey, Dimidrian Higgins, Pirmian Moller, Geneburn Steiner, Emilian Petermann, and Adrian Denys (the novice).

The Bay Area's Early Catholic Educators



Planito
Del terminio de la villa Californica contermina de jurisdiccion de Mexico noticia y descripcion topografica del Capitan de Popocatepetl año de 1530.

1849
St. Francis parochial School is founded in San Francisco by Father Anthony Langlois.

1850
Joseph Sadoc Alemany, O.P., comes to San Francisco as Bishop of the Diocese of Monterey; Mission Dolores school opens.

1851
Santa Clara University admits students; Dominican Sisters open Academy of Santa Catalina in Monterey; Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur open Notre Dame Academy in San Jose.

1852
Daughters of Charity staff the Roman Catholic Orphan Asylum for children left parentless by the 1850 cholera epidemic.

1853
San Francisco becomes an archdiocese; Alemany named as first Archbishop.

1854
Sisters of Mercy and Presentation Sisters arrive from Ireland to begin their medical and educational ministries.

1857
Archbishop Alemany writes to Brother Philippe Bransiet, FSC, asking for Brothers to teach in his schools.

1863
Saint Mary's College on Old Mission Road is dedicated, providing Catholic education for boys of high school and college age.

1868
The De La Salle Christian Brothers arrive in San Francisco and assume the administration of Saint Mary's College.