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FIRST CATHOLIC CHURCH IN VALLEJO

Opened in 1885

By Father Thomas J Hayes, OP, printed June 17, 1976 in the *Catholic Herald*

Father Francis Vilarassa and the Dominicans arriving in Benicia from Monterey in March, 1854 could follow only one freeway: the vast inland waterway system that brings the Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers through Carquinez Strait to the Pacific. Looking upon the lonely expanse of land, that apostolic band could not foresee the phenomenal growth that a mere century would bring. From the pioneer establishment in Benicia the Dominicans established many parishes and missions. Saint Vincent Ferrer, Vallejo, was one of the first.

Unlike its neighbor, Benicia, which was the first American planned community in California, Vallejo had roots more akin to the native California culture. The first Catholic Church, a small white frame structure on the corner of Capitol and Marin Streets, was built on land donated by General John Frisbie, son-in-law of the town's founder, General Mariano G Vallejo. Little more than a year after his arrival in Benicia, Father Vilarassa came to Vallejo on a hot August day in 1855 for the dedication of the new church. Archbishop Alemany was present for the occasion and for ten years Saint Vincent Ferrer was served as a mission from Benicia.

In 1865 a parish house was built and the first resident priest, Father Louis Daniel, OP, began a pastorate which was to continue for 31 years. Already in 1864 plans had been made for a new church. Again on land donated by the Vallejo and Frisbie families the work began.

The history of Saint Vincent's and the city of Vallejo are closely interwoven. The Fagan and Toomey families were among the many generous contributors to the new church which rose on a beautiful hilltop site overlooking the City of Mare Island. In 1868 the old church was moved to a site near the new establishment, and after the new church was finished it was used as a convent for girls.

In September 1870, five nuns from Saint Catherine's Benicia came to establish the first free parochial school in Vallejo. The school grew rapidly from its original 50 students. Additions were made to the sisters' convent, originally the priest's house, and in 1893 a new two story brick building was constructed. The enrollment of the school had then increased to 400 boys and 300 girls. Today that building, impressively remodeled in 1952, is the sisters' convent for Saint Vincent's elementary and high school.

It is evident that the education of youth has been a major contribution of Saint Vincent Parish. The present high school was planned and construction started under Father C. V. Lamb, OP (1913-1915). But before the school could be completed World War I intervened and then the dreaded influenza epidemic struck. A strange sight it must have been to witness Mass offered in

Father J. D. O'Brien, OP, then pastor, offered the unfinished high school building to the Mare Island Navy Yard commandant, Captain Harry George, USN, as a hospital. Dominican Sisters, US Marines and sailors worked together ministering to the influenza victims. The high school continued to educate many Vallejoans, boys and girls, until the new St Patrick High School for boys was opened in 1967. The girls' high school remained at Saint Vincent's. During the late 1930's the present rectory was built and the altar and sanctuary in the church were redesigned under the guidance of Father J.J. Butler, OP.



Photo from Diocesan Archives

Another World War affected the parish in 1941. Again the high school was put to the service of the country. In December 1941, Colonel Stuart Hall, US Army, and his 211th Coast Artillery Anti-Aircraft Division, Hdq. Battery arrived and made use of the high school. Vallejoans still remember the guns set on the roof of the school. A number of this army unit settled and established their families in the Vallejo area after the war. The Saint Vincent Guild was also active in war relief work and service. Father J.J. Walsh, OP wartime pastor, received a commendation from the government for Saint Vincent's cooperation with the Armed Services in that time of crisis.

The post war period brought growth and development even further. Father E L Sanguinetti, OP, guided the parish in efforts to renovate the church and the school. A new grammar school was built and the old brick grammar school reconstructed as the present sisters' convent. Many activities, especially for youth, marked the work of the dedicated priests in these booming post-war years. As Vallejo grew, so also two new parishes were established: St Basil Parish in 1941 and later Saint Catherine of Siena Parish in 1964.

In 1966 the Dominican Fathers turned over the care of Saint Vincent Parish to the diocesan priests of the Diocese of Sacramento. Today Saint Vincent Ferrer Parish stands not only as an historical landmark but a living witness to the faith and dedication of those pioneers of the past who built well, both materially and spiritually.

Father Hayes, OP was the pastor of St Dominic Parish when he wrote this article in 1976.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

St Vincent Ferrer Church, Vallejo
Established in 1855 as a Mission of Benicia