

# The Founding of the Diocese of Oakland

By Gerald Korson

A Catholic presence in what is now the Diocese of Oakland can be traced to March 27, 1772, when Franciscan Father Juan Crespi, traveling with a party of Spanish explorers, celebrated Mass near a swamp that would one day become Lake Merritt in Oakland.

A quarter-century later, Franciscan Father Fermin Francisco de Lasuen founded Mission San Jose as the 14th of California's eventual 21 missions. The friars of the mission sought to catechize and educate the Chochenyo, a division of the indigenous Ohlone people who lived throughout the region prior to the arrival of the Spaniards.

Mission San Jose would remain the only Catholic parish on the *contra costa*, the "opposite coast" from San Francisco, for the next 64 years. Meanwhile, first Spain and then Mexico, which won independence from Spain in 1821, issued land grants to retired soldiers, some of whom built chapels on their ranchos where mission priests would sometimes venture to say Mass. By 1836, Mexico had secularized the California missions and parceled out most of their once-vast grazing lands.

In 1840, the Holy See established the Diocese of the Two Californias, comprising both Baja California and Alta California. Eight years later, just as the gold rush was beginning to draw thousands of fortune-seekers to the West, Mexico ceded California to the United States.

In 1850, California achieved statehood, and the Holy See established the new Diocese of Monterey, which encompassed the entire state, with Bishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany as founding bishop. In 1853, the 13 northern counties were split off to form the Archdiocese of San Francisco, with Bishop Joseph Alemany serving as its first archbishop.

In 1861, St. Mary of the Immaculate Conception Church in Oakland became the second parish of the diocese. Eight years later, St. Paul Church in San Pablo was named the first parish in the present Contra Costa County.

The area remained part of the San Francisco Archdiocese until the population growth throughout northern California began to complicate archdiocesan pastoral ministry. So on January 13, 1962, the Holy See carved three new dioceses — Oakland, Santa Rosa, and Stockton — from the Archdiocese of San Francisco.

A Cleveland auxiliary, Bishop Floyd Begin, was appointed the first bishop of Oakland on February 21 and was installed on April 28 of that year. St. Francis de Sales Church, built in 1893, was designated the cathedral.

The new Diocese of Oakland comprised Alameda and Contra Costa counties, an area of 1,467 square miles. At the time of its creation, there were an estimated 329,040 Catholics among the total two-county population of more than 1.3 million people. Serving the needs of the faithful

were 74 parishes, 51 elementary schools, eight high schools, two Catholic colleges and several schools of religious formation, along with a range of service ministries assisting the elderly, the young, the poor, and the oppressed.

Each of the four shepherds of the diocese — Bishop Begin (1962-77), East Bay native Bishop John Cummins (1977-2003), Bishop Allen Vigneron (2003-09), and Bishop Salvatore Cordileone (2009-present) — has tirelessly advanced the mission of Christ in the East Bay and has left his mark on the young diocese.

Because the Second Vatican Council convened just five months after Bishop Begin's installation, the new bishop was able to participate in all its sessions. The Diocese of Oakland would become a proving ground for implementing the changes called for by the Council in liturgy, lay involvement, and ecumenism.

St. Francis de Sales Cathedral became the first cathedral in the country to be remodeled to reflect the Council's directives for liturgical space. Its exquisite liturgies and pastoral music, using an ensemble of musicians, drew national attention and praise. Throughout the diocese, the transition to the new Mass in the vernacular was approached with great sensitivity and sound catechesis.

The role of lay men and women in the diocese expanded significantly in the wake of Vatican II. By the year 2000 nearly every parish had an active pastoral council.

Bishop Cummins was particularly committed to consultation and lay involvement during his administration, a mode of operation that has been continued by his successors.

The first Diocesan Pastoral Convention, with 350 delegates from 87 parishes, convened in 1984, and out of this gathering came the first 14-member Diocesan Pastoral Council and a list of diocesan priorities.

In the 1990s, laypersons participated in a diocesan strategic planning process, and both male and female lay ecclesial ministers increasingly were appointed to key posts within the diocesan administration and in individual parishes.

The Oakland Diocese from its start has supported ecumenism. Within months of his installation, Bishop Begin hosted a cordial dinner gathering for 150 Protestant, Jewish and Catholic ministers that set a fraternal tone in the diocese for years to come. He supported the participation of Catholic theologates in the new Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. In 1967, a Diocesan Ecumenical Commission issued guidelines for ecumenical efforts in the parish. Since those early days, the diocese has lived out its spirit of ecumenical cooperation within a wide variety of dialogues and ministries.

The diocese was birthed in the turbulent 1960s, and its bishops, pastoral leaders and laity alike have advocated for social justice. Wherever human rights were violated, priests and lay Catholics collaborated for change — for racial minorities, for farmworkers, for striking union members, for conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War, for life, and for peace.

Priests serving in Oakland's inner city banded together as the so-called "Flatland Fathers," immersing themselves in community affairs by reaching out to the disadvantaged in an unprecedented way.

After the U.S. Supreme Court legalized abortion in its tragic 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade*, the diocese exerted strong efforts in educating the public about the humanity of the unborn and expanded its services for women facing crisis pregnancies.

Catholic-sponsored service ministries and apostolates have assisted tens of thousands of people in need. Catholic Charities was established in 1934 in the East Bay with the merger of 36 existing Catholic aid agencies.

Since the founding of the Oakland Diocese, Catholic Charities of the East Bay has addressed key social concerns including refugee resettlement, housing discrimination, counseling, job training, school violence, senior citizens, troubled youth, and emergency services.

The St. Vincent de Paul Society and other parish and ecumenical efforts have extended a lifeline to homeless families and others in need through soup kitchens, food pantries and shelters.

Despite challenging demographic shifts and financial realities, the Diocese of Oakland maintains a vibrant presence in education. Today its 46 elementary schools and nine high schools serve thousands of students, and its colleges and schools of formation boast proud histories of quality education.

By 2009, the Oakland Diocese comprised some 550,000 Catholics amid a total population of 2.5 million people.

As the Catholic population of the East Bay has grown, so has its diversity. Immigration and new opportunities have drawn Catholics from all parts of the world. Today the Diocese of Oakland sponsors 15 cultural centers, and Masses are celebrated regularly in more than a dozen languages, including Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, Khmu, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, and Tagalog.

This cultural diversity was very much in evidence at the diocese's 25th Jubilee celebration in 1987 and again as it welcomed the third millennium of Christianity in 2000 at the Oakland Coliseum.

The history of the Diocese of Oakland is not without its dark notes. After the sexual abuse of minors by some priests became known, diocesan officials responded to the crisis by creating procedures for handling allegations, dealing with accused priests, supporting victims, and reporting charges to local law enforcement.

A survivors' support group began in the late 1990s, and Bishop Cummins celebrated a healing prayer service at which he apologized to victims and to the community as a whole.

In 2004, Bishop Vigneron conducted a series of reconciliation services, offering personal apologies in every parish in the diocese where abuse was known to have taken place.

The 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake that killed 57 people and caused thousands of injuries also damaged St. Francis de Sales Cathedral and Sacred Heart Parish beyond repair, and both churches were razed in 1993.

As was his style, Bishop Cummins began a broad consultation process that led to a decision to purchase land and build a new cathedral in downtown Oakland. Craig Hartman of the architectural firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill designed an edifice that uses natural elements of wood and light along with ancient construction elements of glass and concrete to produce a cathedral that fuses Catholic tradition with 21st-century technology.

Dedicated by Bishop Vigneron in 2008, the majestic new Cathedral of Christ the Light, its public plaza and complex of conference rooms and offices stand directly across Lake Merritt from the site where Father Crespi celebrated that first area Mass more than two centuries ago.

Also in 2008, a new diocesan pastoral plan set forth goals, objectives, and action steps in five areas of pastoral life — sacramental renewal, faith formation and catechesis, pastoral leadership, youth and young adults, and stewardship

Now under the leadership of Bishop Cordileone, the diocese continues to implement the plan and its overarching mission “To Know Christ Better and Make Him Better Known.”