

THE PASTORS AT AGUA MANSA

By R. Bruce Harley

IT WAS THE ERA of the French Revolution. The second stage of it, marked by a Reign of Terror, had ended when its leader, Maximilien Robespierre, was executed on the guillotine in July, 1794. French politics thereafter drifted until Napoleon Bonaparte assumed dictatorial powers toward the end of the decade. During this period of upheaval, a farmer and his wife living in the village of Pre-en-Pial, located in northwest France, became the parents of a son on December 20, 1796. He was shortly baptized as Francois Germain Petithomme, a baby destined to become the first resident priest over 50 years later in what is now the Diocese of San Bernardino.

How did an obscure farm child in revolution-torn France make such a transition to the American territory of California in the mid-nineteenth century? Little is known about his early life, but young Francois entered the missionary congregation of the Sacred Hearts (called Picpus) on September 16, 1827, taking the name of Amable. He studied at the principal house of the Order, located on 33 Rue de Picpus in Paris since its founding in 1800. His first missionary assignment was to the Diocese of Boston, where he worked mostly among the Indians. Difficulties with the government over tribal support and other frustrations led to this new assignment to the Congregation headquarters in Chile in 1840. After a couple of years, he was next transferred to the French-owned Marquesas Islands in the South Pacific. In 1847, he was recalled to Chile. Finally, early in 1851 he was dispatched to Los Angeles to teach in a newly-opened college. He landed at San Pedro and in the Padre Serra tradition, walked to his new destination. Evidently his services were not needed there, so he was appointed to the Diocesan seminary of San Isidro located near Mission Santa Ines.

Within a few months he was reassigned to San Fernando Mission. His last signature in the baptismal register of that mission church is dated September 3, 1852, while his first signature at Agua Mansa's newly-established San Salvador Parish is dated August 14, 1852. This overlap of dates apparently meant that Padre Amable traveled the general area east of Los Angeles, replacing the ministrations of Mission San Gabriel's Franciscans, who left earlier in 1852. It can be conjectured on at least one of these sojourns that he ventured as far as Agua Mansa, talked to its leader, Lorenzo Trujillo and learned of the New Mexican settlement's desire to build a church and have its own parish priest. Ever since the first colonists had arrived from Santa Fe in 1842, a young priest from Mission San Gabriel had ministered to the group. But, as noted, Padre Francisco Sanchez had departed with his Order in 1852.

In 1850, California had become an American state. The former Diocese of Upper and Lower California answerable to the Archbishop of Mexico City thus became the Diocese of Monterey, answerable to the Archbishop of Baltimore and soon to the new Archdiocese of San Francisco. When the Ordinary for the southern half of the state arrived in California, Bishop Thaddeus Amat found that he had inherited only 16 mission churches from the Franciscan era; five of them already ruined structures. He quickly determined that new parishes at some population centers were needed outside of former mission territories. The first church given official authorization was the one at Agua Mansa, a structure which had to be relocated and rebuilt in 1853 because of a quicksand collapse.

The next task was to select a priest. Since there was a shortage of clergy and Padre Amable had already been serving Agua Mansa during his missionary journeys, his assignment at Mission San Fernando was terminated and he was transferred to Agua Mansa as the first resident priest. His transfer was dated November 8, 1852, but the sacramental