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FIRST JESUIT SCHOOL IN NEW MEXICO

By E. R. VOLLMAR, S.J.*

THE PROBLEM of providing adequate educational facilities was one of the fundamental tasks that faced Archbishop Lamy. After the first survey of his diocese he was convinced that the answer could be found only in a group of missionaries who could not only administer parishes, give missions, but also were equipped with the manpower and training to open a college, or even eventually open a seminary to train a native clergy. The solution seemed to lie in obtaining the services of the members of the Society of Jesus.

A few months after the Archbishop arrived in Santa Fe he wrote to Father DeSmet at St. Louis asking that he be sent some Jesuits from the Missouri Province.¹ But not a single man could be spared at that time. Later Archbishop Lamy wrote to Rome asking that some province of the Jesuits be assigned to a mission in New Mexico. He did succeed in obtaining a loan of two Jesuits from the California Mission for a few months in 1864, but they came with the understanding that they were to stay only a short time. Finally, when in Rome in 1866, he requested Father Beckx, then General of the Society of Jesus, to give him some missionaries.²

The members of the Province of Naples had been driven into exile by Garibaldi in 1860, and were looking for a foreign mission. At first there was some hesitancy about accepting a mission in the "wild and woolly" west of the United States, but when ordered to take over the work, Father Francis Ferrante, Provincial of the Neapolitan Province immediately began looking for men capable of doing the job.

Father Donato Maria Gasparri, who was preaching at

* St. Louis University.

1. Letter of Father DeSmet, St. Louis University, Feb. 6, 1853, *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi*, p. 322. Lyon, 1853.

2. F. M. Troy, S. J., *Historia Societatis Jesu in Novo Mexico et Colorado*, Ms., n.d., 140pp. Regis College Archives, Denver, VII.

Valencia, and Father Rafael Bianchi, professor of philosophy at Tortosa, Spain, were chosen along with two lay brothers. In New York they were joined by Father Livio Vigilante, who had been teaching at Holy Cross College. Father Vigilante, the only member who could speak English, was appointed first superior.

After an interesting journey across the plains³ they founded the first Jesuit mission in New Mexico at Bernalillo August 20, 1867.⁴ Many reasons have been given for the assignment of the missionaries to Bernalillo. There is one story to the effect that it was given because the parish was considered the richest in New Mexico. The story is without foundation. The real reason why the Jesuits were given Bernalillo was that there was a garden there connected with the residence and it was considered a possible location for a college.⁵

On December 8, 1867, Fathers Gasparri and Bianchi began a mission in Santa Fe. At the close of the mission some of the leading citizens of the capital asked the Jesuits to open a college there. The petition was given serious consideration, but as the Christian Brothers were already conducting a school there, and were having considerable difficulty obtaining financial support, it was thought best for the Jesuits to open their school in some different part of the diocese.

The parish of Albuquerque was without a pastor at that time and it was arranged for the Jesuits to take over the old church of San Felipe. In order to reach a satisfactory settlement with the former pastor it was necessary to assume the \$3,000 debt on the parish.⁶

Father Truchard, who preceded the Jesuits in Albuquerque, had invited the Sisters of Loretto to found a school in his parish. They came in 1866 and remained until 1869.⁷ The

3. Two good accounts of this journey may be found in Sister M. Lilliana Owens, *Jesuit Beginnings in New Mexico, 1867-1882*. Revista Catolica Press, El Paso, Texas, 1951.

4. Troy, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

6. Troy, *op. cit.*, p. 19-22.

7. Sister M. Lilliana Owens, *History of the Sisters of Loretto in the Transmississippi West*, p. 325. Saint Louis University, 1935.

Sisters were forced to abandon the school because of the lack of financial support. At first the Jesuits were blamed because the closing of the school took place shortly after the arrival of the Fathers in Albuquerque. As a matter of fact it was only because of the help the Jesuits gave that the Sisters were able to live. Father Gasparri wrote a lengthy letter to the Albuquerque paper describing the conditions under which the Sisters had been living and silenced all criticism.⁸

The people of Albuquerque did not wish to be without a school. At their insistence the Jesuits opened a school near their residence in November, 1870. The school is referred to in the Jesuit records as an "escuela parroquial."

Father Gasparri invited the leading citizens of Albuquerque to a meeting Oct. 10, 1871, to discuss the founding of a college in Albuquerque. The plan of Father Gasparri was praised very highly, the work of the Jesuits lauded, but when the reporter for the newspaper asked to see the minutes of the meeting the secretary ingeniously confessed he had not written a single line.

In 1872 a state law was passed requiring a board of education in each county. The board for the county of which Albuquerque was the county seat asked Father Gasparri to be county superintendent of schools and to have the Jesuits open a public school in Albuquerque.⁹ Father Gasparri very prudently refused the offer. The same men had promised to help him found a college—not a public grammar school. After much negotiating, during which the board of education changed the offer of financial support several times, Father Gasparri finally agreed to take over the public school for a short time. Father Tromby started teaching about sixty boys on December 17, 1872. The house of Ambrosio Armijo served as the first school house.¹⁰

Father Gasparri did not give up his plans for a college. In 1873 he opened a school in the Jesuit residence, and dignified it with the title of "collegium inchoatum." The new

8. *Diario de la Misión S. J. desde su fundación en Abril 1867 hasta el año 1872*, Ms., San Felipe Church, Old Albuquerque, Nov. 7, 1870.

9. Troy, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

10. *Diario de la Misión, op. cit.*, Dec. 17, 1872.

school was named Holy Family College. Father Francis Ferrante, the Neapolitan Provincial, had originally placed the new mission of New Mexico-Colorado under the protection of the Holy Family and had intended to call the mission by that name.¹¹ Fathers Tromby, Carrozzini, and Senese were assigned to the new school.

The *Litterae Annuae* for San Felipe Church contain the following description of this endeavour:

Division of residences—to begin with, the residence of Holy Family began to be gradually separated from the parish at the beginning of this year; a complete division cannot be made (for the present the buying for both houses must be in common), but only in such things as pertain to domestic order.—The principal work and office of the residence Holy Family is: the public school. . . . In it is taught English (which is of great importance here), arithmetic, geography, and some exercises in writing Spanish. There are about 80 boys in the school, they are talented, studious, and well behaved.¹²

From this quotation it is evident that, though the location of the school had been moved and given a new name, there was really very little distinction between Holy Family College and the public school.

The institution was not so successful as the writer of the *Litterae Annuae* would have one believe. It is not even mentioned in the *Litterae* for the next year, nor is it listed in the *Catalogus Provinciae Neapolitanae* after 1874. Father Troy has characterized the school as,

. . . nothing but an attempt poorly executed of a school for the Albuquerqueans. It had a big title to interest superiors and the population. The superiors had too many other problems to solve and the inhabitants after the first flare did not care much for the institution.¹³

Interest in a college in Albuquerque soon died after the Jesuits opened Las Vegas College in 1877. The pupils at Holy Family College never advanced beyond the elementary subjects, and so the school was given over to the Sisters of Charity in 1885.¹⁴

11. *Diario de San Felipe en Old Albuquerque, Noticias*, 1873.

12. *Litterae Annuae Missionis Novi Mexici et Quarum Domorum Albuquerque 1873-74*, Ms., San Felipe Church, Old Albuquerque.

13. Letter of F. M. Troy to Edward R. Vollmar, S. J., Old Albuquerque, Dec. 18, 1936.

14. Troy, *Historia Societatis*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.