

California Centennial

*The Jesuits' California Province celebrates
100 years of service to the Church*

by Paul Totah



The Jesuits' California Province has a lot to celebrate this year, its 100th. Among its recent ministries is Our Lady of Grace Nativity School in San Jose, where vice principal Bridgit McGarry and student Stefhanie Blancas swap high-fives. Sponsored by the California Jesuits, the diocese, and a parish, Our Lady of Grace and its "brother" middle school, Sacred Heart Nativity for boys, prepare students from low-income families for high school success.

ADMIT IT. You hear the word "California" and stereotypes start swirling. Even now, as you read this story about the centennial of the California Province of the Society of Jesus, you can't help it. You think grizzled prospector, flower-adorned hippie, Steve Jobs holding an iPod, some Napa Valley locals sipping wine, a platinum-blond movie star in a convertible, or a gang member slowing down for a drive-by.

Oddly enough, you aren't too far off the mark. The nearly 390 Jesuits in the California Province, which comprises California, Nevada, Arizona, and

New Mexico, have a strange connection with each of these iconic, stereotypical figures.

The province's Jesuits, along with more than 200 lay colleagues, recalled their past and looked to the future at an August celebration at Santa Clara University. Titled "Responding to the Call of Christ, 100 Years and Beyond," the gathering addressed three questions first posed by the Spiritual Exercises: What have we done for Christ? What are we doing for Christ? What ought we do for Christ?

Those gathered were heirs to a Jesuit tradition and caretakers of Jesuit ministries that stretch back many years.

Gold Rush beginnings

The province marks its start at 1909, when it ended its status as a mission of the Jesuits' Turin Province in Italy, but its true origins date to 1849, after gold was discovered in the south fork of the American River. Two Jesuits, Michael Accolti and John Nobili, sailed on the lumber ship *O.C. Raymond* from Oregon to San Francisco, disembarking December 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception. They came not in search of gold but of a chance, as Accolti wrote, "to do a little good."



Michael Accolti, SJ

What they found, however, was Barbary Coast San Francisco awash with sinners. Accolti later wrote: “We were able to set foot on the longed-for shores of what goes under the name of San Francisco, but which, whether it should be called a villa, a brothel, or Babylon, I am at a loss to determine, so great in those days was the disorder, the brawling, the open immorality, the reign of crime which brazen-faced triumphed on a soil not yet brought under the sway of human laws.”

Early innovations in Silicon Valley

Despite this inauspicious start, the Jesuits persevered. When Accolti left for Rome to gather new recruits, Nobili founded Santa Clara College in 1851 in the heart of what is now Silicon Valley, and fellow Turinese Jesuit Anthony Maraschi, SJ, founded St. Ignatius College in 1855 amid the sand dunes of San Francisco’s Market Street.

Thanks to resentment against Jesuits in Italy during the *Risorgimento*, the Italian unification movement, both colleges drew the best and brightest Jesu-

its from the Turin Province, many of whom were in exile or in hiding and in need of refuge.

One of these men, Joseph Neri, SJ, an early experimenter in electricity, built and perfected his own electrical lighting system. He shed the first electric light on San Francisco from the window of his classroom in 1871 and lit Market Street five years later for the nation’s centennial celebration.

Hippies vs. the establishment

Allen Ginsberg and Ronald Reagan weren’t the first to highlight the weird schizophrenic liberal/conservative dividing lines in California. Shortly after the Italians founded their schools, disputes broke out between conservative Italians, who wanted their students to study Latin and Greek and live like seminarians, and the more liberal American elements (which also included some Italian Jesuits, including the charismatic Aloysius Varsi), who wanted to draw students by offering practical classes such as bookkeeping and mineralogy.

Santa Clara University historian Gerald McKeivitt, SJ, documents this split

in his book *Brokers of Culture*, in which he writes of Henry Imoda, SJ, the president of St. Ignatius College in the late 1800s who “forbade card playing, smoking, boxing and similar breaches of discipline. When the Americanizing Varsi allowed the boys to be taught round dances at Santa Clara—‘we must adapt ourselves to the ideas of the country,’ he said—the Jesuit rigorists were scandalized.”



Aloysius Varsi, SJ

That tension eventually led to the appointment of John Frieden, SJ, the former provincial of the Missouri Province, to head the California Mission. (Later, as president of St. Ignatius College, he helped rebuild the school after it was destroyed by the 1906 fire and earthquake.)

Frieden was so worried about the split between these two factions that he advised Rome to free California from Turin by making it an independent province and joining it with the Jesuits’ Rocky Mountain and Alaska missions. On September 8, 1909, “the good news of the creation of the California Province [was] promulgated.” This was a natural progression of the growing American independence and power evidenced in 1908 when Pope Pius X ended the missionary status of the Catholic Church in America.

In vino veritas

This is not to say that the Italians were all sticks in the mud. One of the first things the Jesuits did at Santa Clara College, which they built around an abandoned Franciscan mission, was to resurrect a two-acre vineyard and, later, grow grapes near their Los Gatos novitiate to make wine for use in liturgies, for their own consumption, and for sale to support their work.

From 1889 to well into the twentieth century, Jesuit novices were given the task of harvesting grapes for the Novitiate Winery. Many older Jesuits still tell stories of returning exhausted from the vineyards where swarms of bees would coat their arms. The winery continued production even during Prohibition but



Turn-of-the-nineteenth-century students display their school colors; the 1855 founding date for St. Ignatius College in San Francisco (today’s University of San Francisco and St. Ignatius College Prep), gives witness to the long history of Jesuits in California just in the field of education.

closed in 1986 due to increased competition. (Testarossa Vineyards resurrected the winery in 1997 and in 2003 began selling wine once again bearing the Novitiate label.)

The bright lights of Hollywood

The Jesuits started their southward migration in 1909 with their work at Our Lady of Sorrows Church in Santa Barbara. Two years later, the Jesuits took over St. Vincent's College for boys and later renamed it Loyola College of Los Angeles, a name that changed again to Loyola Marymount University in 1973 after it merged with Marymount College.

Other Jesuit ventures included Brophy College Preparatory in Phoenix (1928), which closed in 1935 due to the Depression but reopened in 1952, and Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in San Diego (1941).

In 1914 the Jesuits assumed administration of Blessed Sacrament Church in Hollywood, which eventually included parishioners such as Bing Crosby, Irene Dunne, John Wayne, and Loretta Young.

These parishioners weren't the only celebrities associated with the Jesuits, who boasted two stars of their own. James Bouchard, the son of a French woman and a Delaware chief, gained fame in 1860s San Francisco, where he was known as "The Eloquent Indian" for his skill as a homilist.



James Bouchard, SJ

Later, Bernard Hubbard, SJ, who graduated from St. Ignatius College (1906) and taught at Santa Clara College, became known as the Glacier Priest for his explorations of the glaciers near Innsbruck. He later wrote of his work surveying and filming the gla-

ciers and volcanoes of Alaska for *National Geographic* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. He lectured to enormous crowds across the United States, earning him the reputation as the highest paid speaker in the world.

Ganglands and social outreach

The radical changes brought on by the Second Vatican Council also shaped the Jesuits in the California Province.

Before the 1960s, the Jesuits kept their seminarians sequestered in the redwoods at Alma College in the hills above Los Gatos. In 1969, two years after the Summer of Love, the Society moved its theology school to a place synonymous with the times. At the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, the Jesuits aligned themselves with the Graduate Theological Union, which comprised two additional Catholic seminaries (Franciscan and Dominican) and six

Protestant seminaries in a nod towards ecumenism.

The Jesuits responded to the call to be contemplatives in action throughout the West. In the barrios of Los Angeles, Greg Boyle, SJ, founded Jobs For A Future in 1988 in Boyle Heights. Now called Homeboy Industries, Boyle and his staff offer job training for former gang members and a way out of the more than a thousand gangs that turn



The Jesuits' superior general, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, was on hand to help the California Province celebrate its centennial this year.



When Fr. Stephen Barber, SJ, Catholic chaplain at San Quentin State Prison, talks with members of the pastoral council in the prison chapel, he's engaging in a Jesuit ministry with a history in California: Fr. Michael Accolti, SJ, was chaplain at San Quentin in 1867.

A short web-based film, *Responding to the Call of Christ: 100 Years and Beyond* celebrates the centennial of the Jesuits' California Province. The film is available at: www.jesuitscalifornia.blip.tv



On a hot day in Los Angeles, Loyola High School students distribute water to the homeless. Their participation in the project is part of the school's Urban Plunge immersion program.

the streets of L.A. into a war zone.

Jesuit and lay teachers at the state's two Cristo Rey high schools (in Sacramento and Los Angeles) and two Nativity middle schools in San Jose also carry on the work of offering a preferential option for the poor.

Coming full circle

The Ignatian commitment to working with and for the poor has its most recent incarnation in the Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Arizona, and just across the border in Nogales, Mexico, where the California Province has partnered with four other groups to provide aid to deportees. This project is named for Eusebio Kino, the "Padre on Horseback," who established twenty missions in Arizona and Mexico in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Even before Accolti and Nobili arrived in San Francisco, he gave the Jesuits their first toehold in the West.

The present


Just how healthy is the California Province? Even though its numbers are down from a historic high of nearly one thousand, its commitment to the sponsorship process and to partnership with the laity has led to unprecedented growth: the province has helped lay people to open two new Jesuit-inspired high schools, one in Palm Desert and the other in Sacramento, in recent years.

"As evidenced by our new initiatives and by the success of our ongoing traditional ministries, the California Province is going strong," says provincial John McGarry, SJ.

"Morale is good thanks to our strong apostolic partnership with the laity and to our ability to promote vocations among men who believe they have a call."

The province is succeeding, he adds, because the Jesuits continue to find ways to answer the question first posed

by Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, several years ago to all the provincials: How best can Jesuits serve the needs of the Church now and in the future through their Ignatian charism?

"How we answer that question is at the heart of our mission," said McGarry. "That question, and how we answer it, drives all that we do." 



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