

The First Final Vow Ceremony of the Sisters of the Holy Family

On July 2nd, 1887, a day devoutly hoped for by Lizzie Armer (now Sister Dolores) and her first companions, a ceremony occurred in the little chapel of 110 Hayes Street, the convent and Day Home of the sisters. It was a long time in coming.

Lizzie and her first companion, Sally Collins, had begun "the glorious work" on November 6, 1872 in a little rented flat on San Francisco's Pine Street. Overtired from the zealous work the young women undertook, Sally had a nervous breakdown and left Lizzie to go into recuperation in New York, where she had relatives. Several months later Emma MacDonald joined Lizzie, and she, too, departed after a short time. Priests commiserated with Father Prendergast, for it seemed his visionary work was dying before being fully born. John Prendergast had an answer for them. "There is one who will not fail," he said. He knew Lizzie's heart and soul well. Indeed, she persevered alone until 1874's mid-summer, when she was joined, at last, by Ellen O'Connor, who had come to stay.

The small group grew slowly and took on many works with energy and untiring charity. Ellen was sent to Benecia, to the Dominicans, to learn "how to be a sister", to return and act as novice mistress to her companions, even Lizzie. First vows were pronounced in 1880. Seven busy and fruitful years passed, and the newly formed religious group was soon being sought by pastors to come teach catechism, home visit, care for the pre-school and after-school children of working parents, find and succor the poor and do many other needed and time consuming tasks in the parishes. They underwent difficult trials as all new groups do. Perhaps one of the most difficult was the death of one of their dear sisters.

In 1886, Sister Magdalene Javete died. She was the oldest of their number, who had first come to the group only by day. She had gone home every night to care for her teen aged children, finally coming to remain only after her boys were of legal age and securely settled in their choice of home and work. She was a faith filled, tireless worker and dearly loved by the small community. What were the procedures to be followed when death comes, for the first time, to a tightly knit group? What were the choices to be made, where was the grave site to be chosen, how did one observe ceremonies of death in a new religious community? Many decisions had to be made, never dealt with before among their number. As much as she had longed to make her

final commitment of vows to the Lord, Sister Magdalene, alone of all Lizzie's first beloved companions, went home to God before the longed for day.

Now, however, the long 15 years between the initiation of the Holy Family Sisters and their first ceremony of final vows was completed. The annals of the day tell us what happened that long desired morning.

"The Most Reverend Archbishop [Riordan] accompanied by Fr. Montgomery came at seven o'clock to celebrate holy Mass and receive the Vows of the Sisters. Before Mass the Archbishop gave a short instruction on the Ceremony he was about to perform. The Sisters made their Vows before receiving holy Communion. After Mass, Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament was give by his Grace. Father Prendergast was present in the Sanctuary....The little Sanctuary looked heavenly decorated in natural flowers."

Eight members of the Community made their final vows that day: Sisters Dolores, Teresa, Joseph, Augustine, Agnes, Baptist, Vincent and Clare. The Annals entry of the next day is significant: *"Sister had a picture of the Chapel taken."*



The picture reproduced here is that photograph. In it we see the small chapel of 110 Hayes Street, San Francisco, gloriously festooned in the style of the day for the ceremony of final profession. There are numbers of flower vases and baskets, numerous candlesticks of multi-branched splendor, all displayed

around the Holy Family, represented in the statues of St. Joseph, and the Mother with her Child.

Amazingly, after 119 years have passed, some of the same decorative vases and candelabra are still being used in the Community. For instance, the vigil light shaped like a heart that stands in front of Mary, the semi-circular branched candlestick in the foreground, and the ornate alabaster vases at each side of the Communion rail. Those alabaster vases were a part of another major event in the Community's history in 1906, when they were being used for Easter during the great San Francisco earthquake. One of the vases was broken, but it was lovingly cemented back together, so that it still serves its decorative purpose for new generations of Holy Family Sisters.

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