

## Adorning the Great House of the Lord



St. Mary's Cathedral has existed under two titles and on three sites since its inception by Archbishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany, OP, first Archbishop of San Francisco. The first Cathedral, St. Mary's of the Immaculate Conception, is the little jewel of a building that San Franciscans know as "Old St. Mary's" on the corner of California and Grant Streets in the city's colorful Chinatown. It was one of the first projects that Alemany involved himself in upon his arrival, not because building churches was popular

Old St. Mary's circa 1865

with him (he was an extremely pastoral man), but because he envisioned it as a community center that could be utilized by citizens of all races and faiths. He succeeded in his objective. The building's basement housed an adult school, a lending library, a hall for concerts and entertainments, catechism classes for Catholic youngsters and a Temperance Society among other things, operating from midnight December 24, 1854 (the first Mass upstairs in the church) until his successor opened the doors of the second St. Mary's. The Paulist priests took over in Old St. Mary's, which became a parish church.

Sanctuary of Old St. Mary's Cathedral on California St. Draped in memory of people Leo XIII, July 26, 1903.

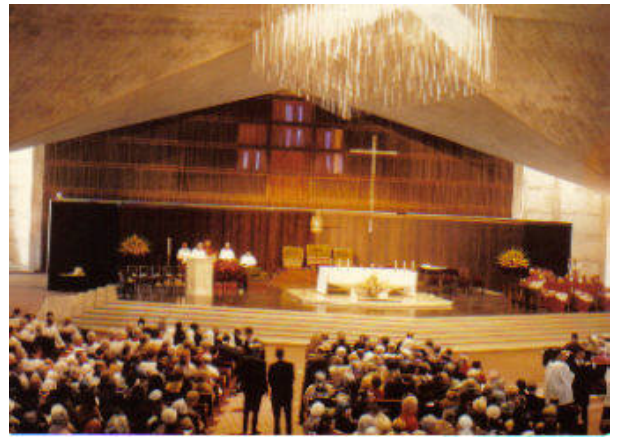




Cathedral number two was constructed under the episcopacy of William Patrick Riordan, and stood on Van Ness at Franklin Street. It was a much larger building, with an impressive set of marble steps descending from the imposing façade to Van Ness Avenue, the steps famous as “morticians’ despair” because of their number and steepness. Because the official church frowns upon two churches in a city sharing an identical name, it was christened [St. Mary’s of the Assumption](#). It served the city for many years, burning down in a tremendously spectacular fire in 1962.



The [third Cathedral](#), built during the episcopacy of Archbishop T. McGucken as a replacement for the immolated number two, occupies an entire block (parking is so important in compact San Francisco) at Geary and Gough on the subsequently renamed [Cathedral Hill](#).



Although Mass was celebrated in the lower Cathedral halls for a number of months, the first Mass in the modern building's great upper Church was held on October 15, 1970. It serves the Archdiocese well and is one of the architectural highlights of tours in the City of St. Francis.

[May 5, 1971 Dedication of current Cathedral of St. Mary](#)

[The Sisters of the Holy Family](#) from 1872 until 1992 (120 years) were the sacristans at each of the Cathedrals. They made or bought, cleaned, organized and set out for ceremonies and ordinary church services, the vestments, altar boys' cassocks and surplices, altar linens, vases, decorations, draperies and incidental objects used at St. Mary's. Their duties in Cathedrals one and two included such ordinary pursuits as arranging flowers and laundering linens to more obscure activities such as painting buskins (the fancy slipper-like shoes that bishops once wore) and coats of arms. They draped the interiors in black for the funerals of popes or decorated for elaborate anniversaries (garlands around the chandeliers included. This necessitated enormous ladders that many of the men around the place refused to climb, causing the sisters to occasionally assume the personality of trapeze artist.) They prepared the intricate scene of Bethlehem at Christmas time and another elaborate display of Mary Magdalene and Jesus in the garden at Easter. They cleaned, polished and filled the three samovars of Holy Week with the oil that would become Chrism, the Oil of Catechumens, and the Oil of the Sick. After the ceremony, the sisters filled the hundreds of small containers brought from every parish, hospital and special ministry of the Archdiocese from those urns.

The Sisters kept a binder in the Cathedral work sacristy to outline the necessities and how-to of each ceremony, where to procure the items needed, the special requirements of each occasion that was unique to the Mother Church of the Archdiocese: ordinations, many graduations, the funerals of dignitaries and special Masses, such as the Red Mass celebrated for lawyers of the City on the feast of St. Thomas More.

The care of all the Cathedrals also extended into the Bishop's residence where the sisters decorated for Christmas -- trees, door hangings, table decor and incidentals for the Bishops and priests who resided there. That also included creating in the new Cathedral whimsical Christmas decorations for the interior patio so that elves and Mr. and Mrs. Claus and their helpers could wander amongst the cyclamen and shrubs of the garden.

This very interesting and time consuming ministry began with Sister Dolores Armer, herself, and continued unbroken under the direction of many gifted and talented sisters and their incomparable work crews of sisters and laity. Finally, on June 30, 1992, the last Holy Family Cathedral Sacristan, Sister Monica Kennedy, hung up her apron, broom, ironing board and flower clippers.

St. Monica's feast is August 27. It seems appropriate to highlight, in the month of her feast, Sister Monica's marvelous ministry, which combined what was creative, fun, and hard work into a ministry "behind the scenes."

Cathedral sacristans, religious and lay, provide an environment of beauty for the Liturgy, and an appropriate atmosphere of respect for the Shepherds of the local Church.



Sr. Monica SHF greeting Pope John Paul II