

Spring 1997

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### Recommended Citation

Poole, Stafford C.M. (1997) "Notable Vincentians (8): Aloysius Meyer, C.M.," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.  
Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol18/iss1/6>

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## Notable Vincentians (8): Aloysius Meyer, C.M.

By

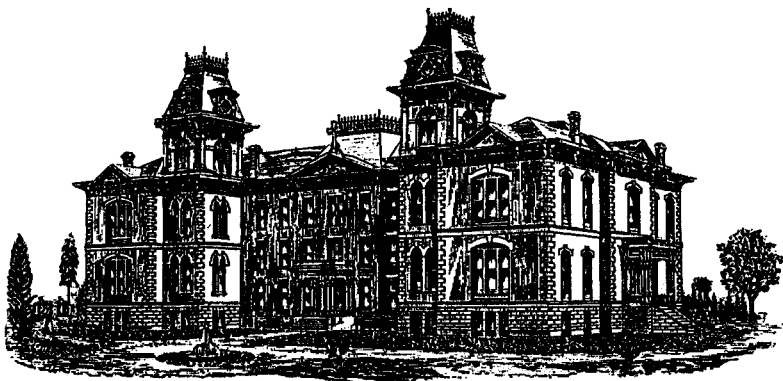
STAFFORD POOLE, C.M.

Though he is almost unknown today, Reverend Aloysius Meyer was one of the most respected and influential Vincentians in the United States in the nineteenth century. His apostolates encompassed almost all the traditional works of the Vincentian Community, including parish missions, parochial ministry, education, and, briefly, the formation of clergy. He was president of two Vincentian directed colleges, one of which is today a major university. His death brought immense sorrow to the priests and people of Los Angeles, California, where he spent the most important years of his career.

Aloysius Joseph Meyer was born on 19 December 1839 in the Grand Duchy of Baden, now the German state of Baden-Württemberg. He received his early education in France, which left him able to write fluent French. It is not clear why he went to France, but the fact that Catholic schools in the Grand Duchy were controlled by the government and had inferior religious programs may have been a reason. Apparently France was little better since his mother, fearing the effects of a secular education in that country, persuaded him to seek his education elsewhere. In 1856 he migrated to the United States and lived for a while with relatives in Quincy, Illinois. Deciding that the priesthood was his vocation, he resolved to enter the Society of Jesus. He went to Saint Louis for that purpose, but his search for the Jesuit residence proved fruitless. After walking through a good part of the city, he finally arrived at Saint Vincent's church. Thinking that it might be the Jesuit residence, he called at the door. It was opened by Father John Uhland, a Vincentian of German birth. Uhland took an interest in Meyer, and the two became friends.<sup>1</sup> As a result the would-be Jesuit

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<sup>1</sup>In his report on the American province in 1878, Father Mariano Maller described Uhland as "A good German confrere, for nearly thirty years in charge of the German portion of this parish [Saint Vincent's]. He has very modest talents and is not very healthy, yet he has done and continues to do great good. Nevertheless, people find him a little too attached to the customs of his countrymen and too moved to agree with them. . . . It would perhaps be better for the good and peace of the parish to send him to Germantown to end his days." See the article on the Maller report by Father John Rybolt in this issue.



Saint Vincent's College, Los Angeles, 1884

decided to become a Vincentian. In 1858 he entered the internal seminary (the equivalent of a novitiate in religious congregations) of the Congregation of the Mission at Saint Mary's Seminary, Perryville, Missouri, and made his vows two years later. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1863 by Archbishop Peter Richard Kenrick at Saint Vincent's Church in Saint Louis.

His first assignment was as a faculty member at Saint Mary's Seminary. In 1866 he was transferred to Saint Vincent's College in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, where he was the director of the seminarians. In 1868 he helped to organize Saint Mary's parish for the German speaking Catholics of Cape Girardeau. Two years later he was appointed associate pastor of Saint Vincent's in Saint Louis, which had a large number of Germans in its congregation. The pastor was his friend, Father Uhland. Meyer stayed there until 1870. In that year he was sent to Immaculate Conception Church in Baltimore. In 1877 he was named president of Saint John the Baptist College, Brooklyn, New York, (now Saint John's University in Jamaica). In accord with the custom of the time, he was also the pastor of the university church. The position of president gave him a certain national prominence, and he soon numbered among his friends Cardinal James Gibbons, archbishop of Baltimore and the unofficial head of the American Church. Gibbons was so impressed by Meyer that he persuaded the Vatican to name him bishop of Galveston, Texas. Meyer received his bulls of appointment but declined to accept the honor.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Minutes of the General Council, 14 June 1881, Archives of the Congregation of the Mission, Paris, France.

Meyer's primary concern at Saint John's was financial. When the superior general's special visitor, Father Mariano Maller, visited the college in 1877, he had high praise for Meyer, whom he described as "thirty-nine years old, eighteen of vocation. Excellent. German confrere, very good spirit, capable, pious, prudently devout. His general health is good, but his sight is worn out and it is feared that he might become totally blind. This will be a great loss, since he could become useful to the province. The house has changed appearance since he got there."<sup>3</sup> Maller, however, was alarmed by the debt of \$167,657. Meyer worked strenuously to reduce the debt he had inherited from his predecessors. His public relations efforts helped to raise the enrollment, especially after a decrease resulting from the panic of 1873. During his presidency the college years were made clearly distinct from the preparatory, or high school, years, and the first bachelor's degree was conferred in 1881. The lower years were then organized into a distinct academy.

While president of Saint John's, Meyer made a trip to Europe (1879). In 1881 he was transferred from Brooklyn to Germantown, Pennsylvania, and spent the next three years giving missions in various parishes throughout the east.

In 1884 he was appointed president of Saint Vincent's College in Los Angeles, where he arrived on 18 January. He proved to be extremely effective not only in raising the standards of the college but also in his relationship with the wider Southern California community. Meyer, however, had to deal with numerous problems, particularly with a lack of qualified faculty members and student discipline. In 1885, for example, a boarding student ran away and was recaptured and whipped. He ran away again, was recaptured, whipped again, and locked in a room until his father could come for him.

The most serious problem was a strained relationship with Bishop Francis Mora. There had been a long history of disputes, including one with Vincentian Bishop Thaddeus Amat, over allowing non-students to attend Sunday mass in the college chapel. In 1885 Mora issued a series of demands that no outsiders be allowed to attend mass in the chapel, that students whose families lived in the city should not make their first communion in the chapel (at that time the common age for first communion was about twelve), and that students make their Easter duty at their home parishes or at the cathedral. The bishop sent

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

these demands to Reverend Antoine Fiat, the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission, with the question as to whether or not they contradicted any of the privileges of the Vincentian Community. Fiat turned them over to some canon lawyers, who found that except for the question of Easter duty, the demands were contrary to the Vincentians' privileges.

That did not settle the question. Reverend Thomas Smith, the Vincentian provincial, denounced Mora to the superior general and declared that it was impossible for the Vincentians to remain in a situation where the bishop was so hostile. Meyer supported some of Smith's accusations against Mora. He wrote to Fiat that the Vincentians had a large house in the middle of the city but that "our usefulness is entirely confined to the walls of our college."<sup>4</sup> Enrollment had declined because of the small number of Catholics and because "the bishop and clergy of the diocese are not our friends and never were. They not only take no interest in our College, but work against it, at least indirectly. The Bishop will not permit us even what our Privileges grant us."<sup>5</sup> In contrast, when Smith visited Los Angeles in January 1886, he found the college to be free of debt and rather prosperous.

Smith concluded that the fundamental problem was that the college was too close to the cathedral, and so the chapel was in direct competition it. With the approval of Meyer and his house council, it was decided that the college property be sold and the money used to build a new college at a greater distance from the cathedral. On 15 January 1886 Mora erected the new parish of Saint Vincent de Paul with boundaries that included almost all the southern part of Los Angeles county. The college property was sold in June and construction begun on a new building situated at Grand and Washington. The pace of construction was very rapid. Meyer celebrated the first mass in the new church on 25 January 1887, and classes opened on 7 February. From an initial congregation of 150, the parish expanded so rapidly that in 1892 two new wings had to be added to the church.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Meyer to Antoine Fiat, superior general, 15 October 1885, quoted in Stafford Poole, C.M., "The Educational Apostolate: Colleges, Universities, and Secondary Schools," in *The American Vincentians: A Popular History of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States 1815-1987*, John E. Rybolt, C.M., ed. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1988), 307.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>6</sup>The college's publication, *Saint Vincent's College Student*, tactfully, and inaccurately, credits the move to the need to build a large college building because of the expanding enrollment (volume 3, no. 6, March 1898). As a matter of fact, the new college building was smaller than the previous one.



Saint Vincent's College, Los Angeles, 1897

Meyer often found his work frustrating and discouraging, something that was not noticeable to others. In 1884 he reported "we have no intercourse with the outside world; all our work is confined to the walls of our college." The enrollment was about ninety students, thirty of them boarders. Meyer called them good boys, but without any inclination to the priesthood—theoretically the college was also supposed to function as a minor seminary. He described the students as "like our country . . . a mixed nature: Mexicans, Californians, French, German, English, Dalmatians, Americans."<sup>7</sup> In 1891 he sounded even more discouraged. "My confreres and I follow almost the same path, sacrificing our life and our talents in teaching letters to a certain number of worldly and ungrateful boys, most of whom stay in the college only by force; young people without faith, having no love or fear of God, Americans and Mexicans imbued with ideas of independence and liberty . . . here in Southern California a part of the population has an indifferent and apathetic character, as in all hot countries."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Meyer to Fiat, 10 November 1884, quoted in Poole, "The Educational Apostolate," 307.

<sup>8</sup>Meyer to Fiat, 18 February 1891, *ibid.*

In 1893 Meyer was appointed rector of the newly-organized Kenrick Seminary in Saint Louis, a post for which he felt totally unqualified.<sup>9</sup> His parishioners together with the many friends he had made in Los Angeles gave him a farewell celebration, in the midst of which he received a call to attend a dying person. Father Meyer left the celebration and went to give the last rites in a small town about ten miles from downtown Los Angeles.

Meyer's stay at Kenrick Seminary was brief, from June 1893 to December 1894, and not particularly happy.<sup>10</sup> The seminary, which had been entrusted to the Vincentians after some maneuvering, had an inauspicious beginning because of a lack of qualified Vincentians and the indifference of the provincial, Reverend Thomas Smith. Though Meyer had had extensive experience in lay colleges, missions, and parochial work, he felt entirely unqualified to be a seminary rector. In part his appointment was a way of mollifying the strong and vociferous German clergy of Saint Louis. He lamented to the superior general, "You have sent me here to be in charge of a work for which I am not capable. I was not educated to direct a major seminary."<sup>11</sup> He also complained about Smith's indifference to the seminary. Because of the lack of a capable faculty, he saw the Vincentians' reputation as under threat, "and the *visitor refuses to understand it.*"<sup>12</sup>

On 10 December 1894, during a special visitation, the superior general's commissary, Reverend Malachy O'Callaghan, an Irishman, removed Meyer from office. The precise reasons are not clear, but the move was undoubtedly to Meyer's satisfaction. In that same month he returned to Los Angeles as president of Saint Vincent's College and pastor of Saint Vincent's Church. This second term probably marked the high point of the College's prestige and influence. He was also a diocesan consultor and active in several civic organizations.

For years Meyer had suffered from a chronic kidney ailment. On 12 February 1898, he died of pneumonia brought on by his illness. His funeral was a major civic event. Bishop George Montgomery celebrated the requiem mass, and Reverend Patrick Harnett, later the vicar general, gave the homily. It was in the course of this homily that he revealed Meyer's previously unknown nomination as bishop of Galveston. One result is that his tombstone rather inaccurately calls him "bishop-elect." There were twenty-eight honorary pallbearers,

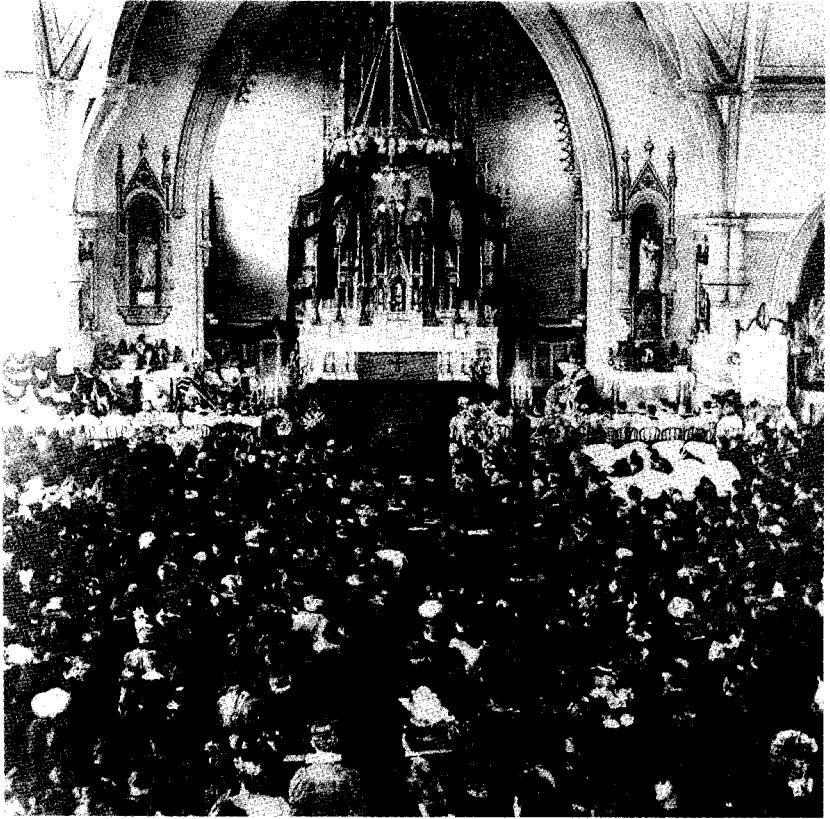
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<sup>9</sup>On Kenrick Seminary, see *ibid.*, 137-43.

<sup>10</sup>Meyer to Fiat, 13 August 1893, *ibid.*, 141.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, emphasis in original.



Funeral Mass of Reverend Aloysius J. Meyer, C.M.,  
Saint Vincent's Church, Los Angeles, 15 February 1898.

representing the civic and ecclesiastical elite of Los Angeles. The casket was covered with a pall of fresh violets, woven by the ladies of the parish and buried with the casket.

On 14 February a Daughter of Charity in Los Angeles wrote:

It would be impossible to describe the overwhelming sorrow of the students, the parishioners; and this grief is shared by all who knew him. To say nothing of our confreres and our sisters, the whole city as with one heart mourns his loss. The Bishop [George Montgomery] made him several visits during his illness, and each time, was unable to restrain his tears.

The priests of the diocese made their retreat every year during the vacation under his direction. All held him in



the highest veneration and had the most entire confidence in him. God alone knows all the good effected by this zealous and holy Missionary, this true Son of St. Vincent, a man after his own heart.

The death of Father Meyer leaves an immense void in our city, but who can estimate the loss sustained by the double Family of St. Vincent? Its members can only be reconciled in the thought of the reward exceeding great, merited for this truly model priest, by his piety and unvarying devotedness.<sup>13</sup>

An obituary in the Saint Vincent's College Student declared, "Few men leave this world so universally regretted; and that his untimely demise was regarded as a public calamity was evidenced by the countless multitude that thronged around his bier."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>The *Annals of the Congregation of the Mission*, 5, no. 3 (1898): 593-94.

<sup>14</sup>*Saint Vincent's College Student*.