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A Final Chapter on Bishop Amat

BY
FRANCIS J. WEBER

Thaddeus Amat (1811-1878) epitomizes those pioneer prelates whose breadth of experience and depth of perception are reflected today in the flourishing condition of the Catholic Church in California. Named to the bishopric on 29 July 1853, the Barcelona-born Vincentian was entrusted with the gigantic task of guiding ecclesial activities over the 75,984 square mile area then comprising the diocese of Monterey.

The problems faced by the prelate are evident from many sources. In a letter of appeal to the missionary colleges of Ireland, for example, written shortly after his arrival in California, Amat pleaded for priests to serve the spiritual needs of the "many thousands of Gold Seekers from every nation, who found misery where they expected to make a fortune." He pointed out that his sixteen priests were unable to care for the 78,000 Indians in the diocese, a third of whom were Catholics. "Living still in a savage state they are deprived of all education, and so poor, that they have hardly clothes to cover them." Nevertheless, Amat noted, "these poor Indians might all be gained to religion, if there were any missionaries to visit them."¹

The bishop observed that "we have some very striking proofs of the admirable effects which the faith would produce in their hearts. Many of those Indians who are enlightened by the light of the true faith, have undertaken journeys of three hundred and even six hundred miles, to be able to see the Priest before their death, and to receive the last Sacraments."²

The notable development of Catholic life under his direction reflects a measure of Amat's administrative competency. The vigor and enthusiastic energy of his younger days, coupled with the resources latent in his strong personality figured prominently in Amat's successful efforts to bring the missionary diocese out of the near-chaos in which

¹The text of this letter is reproduced from an undated excerpt from *The Tidings* which is on file at the Archival Center, Archdiocese of Los Angeles, hereafter referred to as AALA.

²Quoted by Francis J. Weber in *California's Catholic Heritage* (Los Angeles, 1974), 5.



Thaddeus Amat, C.M.

he found it, to that of an efficiently organized ecclesiastical jurisdiction.

The Spanish-born prelate brought to the United States and California an academic background that few ecclesiastics in the young republic of that period could match. Perhaps nowhere are Amat's talents more obvious than in his solicitude for Catholic education. In a pastoral letter, written in 1869, the prelate reminded the faithful of the diocese of Monterey-Los Angeles of the serious obligation that parents had to watch over their children and diligently see and assiduously labor to secure for them a thorough Catholic education. Amat's zeal in promoting education spoke for itself. When he arrived, there was but one struggling college; when he died, in 1878, there were two colleges, six academies, nine parochial schools, and five orphanages, an impressive total for a diocese that boasted barely 34,000 Catholics.³

The charm of Amat's character, his deep but unostentatious piety and outward dignity, would have ennobled human nature in any profession, but they dignified it with a peculiar grace in the person of this Catholic bishop. His quick-tempered disposition in no way diminished Amat's effectiveness among the people of Southern California, who esteemed the prelate's "sweet simplicity and extreme goodness of heart."⁴ Thaddeus Amat was looked upon and respected as a plain and humble man, a well-disciplined priest, and a shepherd of deep personal convictions.

Perhaps the most significant and certainly the most striking chapter in the life of the Right Reverend Thaddeus Amat is one which could only be written 114 years after his death. And with the disclosure of the events mentioned here for the first time, one might be led to conclude that this postscript on the prelate's life is only the most recent in a long series of incidents that make his story one of the more remarkable sagas in United States ecclesial annals.

Thaddeus Amat was a native of Barcelona, Spain. Born on 31 December 1811, he came to the United States in 1838 as a member of the Congregation of the Mission. He spent the succeeding fifteen years as missionary, pastor and professor. By the time he assumed the mitre in 1854, Thaddeus Amat had been rector of five seminaries, vice provincial of his community's American foundation and a director of the Daughters of Charity. An active individual in every sense of the word, Amat's

³AALA Thaddeus Amat, C.M., *Pastoral Letter* (Los Angeles, 1869), 19ff.

⁴"Bishop Amat, Champion of the Poor" in *The Tidings*, December 29, 1972.

quarter century episcopate in Southern California witnessed the transformation of that area from missionary to diocesan status and earned for the industrious Vincentian the respect and esteem of his spiritual heirs.

With his death in 1878, Amat was relegated to that earthly oblivion reserved for those who carry the banner of Christ. Only in fairly recent few years has there been any attempt to chronicle the more important events in his busy life.⁵

In mid 1962, when arrangements were being made to move the remains of Bishop Francis Mora back to California from Spain,⁶ it was suggested that Amat's body be moved from its vault in Saint Vibiana's Cathedral to the special chapel at Calvary Mausoleum set aside for members of the California hierarchy. Accordingly, "on the 30th day of November, 1962, at the direction of Bishop Timothy Manning, V.G., acting on the authorization of His Eminence, James Francis Cardinal McIntyre, Archbishop of Los Angeles, the remains of Right Reverend Thaddeus Amat y Brusi, C.M. were disinterred from their place of entombment in the vault beneath the sacristy of Saint Vibiana's Cathedral."⁷

That procedure would have attracted little if any attention were it not for the events contained in the next part of the testimony, events which are as extraordinary as they are unexplained. "The undersigned⁸ attest to the remarkable state of preservation of the remains of Bishop Amat. The features were completely intact and easily recognizable. No external evidence of decomposition was present except for a slight darkening of the facial features."

Despite the obvious dismay of those witnessing the opening of the casket, it was decided that no public statements would be made until a thorough investigation had been conducted. The Most Reverend Timothy Manning, then auxiliary bishop of Los Angeles, directed this writer to examine all the available evidence in an effort to place the phenom-

⁵This writer's biographical study on the life and time of the Right Reverend Thaddeus Amat, C.M., was published in 1964 by Dawson's Book Shop in Los Angeles under the title *California's Reluctant Prelate*.

⁶See Francis J. Weber, "The Search for a Bishop," *Southern California Quarterly*, XLV (September, 1963):235-43.

⁷AALA "Testimony of Disinterment of the remains of Bishop Thaddeus Amat, C.M.," 30 November 1962, Los Angeles.

⁸Those affixing their names to the "Testimony" were: Right Reverend Patrick J. Roche, Administrator of Saint Vibiana's Cathedral, Reverend Lawrence Donnelly, Secretary, Archdiocesan Tribunal, and Reverend Francis J. Weber, Archivist.

enon in its proper perspective. The results of that study were negative inasmuch as they merely indicated what did *not* happen. No assertion of a preternatural cause seemed warranted, although the investigation left practically no room for a purely natural explanation.

Very little is known about the last days of Bishop Amat. While his health had been declining for several years, the suddenness of his death astounded his closest friends. Even Coadjutor Bishop Francis Mora, the vicar general, believed Amat to be improving, as is clear from a note written to Archbishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany of San Francisco a few months before Amat's death. Mora concluded a long letter with the observation that Amat "continues improving in his health."⁹ In any event, the Vincentian prelate appeared in excellent spirits the day before he died and had a lengthy conference with his coadjutor on diocesan business. That very afternoon he took his customary carriage ride about town. Hence it must have been quite a shock when ". . . shortly after one o'clock Sunday morning, May 12th, the Right Reverend Thaddeus Amat, Bishop of the Diocese of Monterey-Los Angeles, departed this life. Bishop Amat had been in declining health for six years, his malady being heart disease."¹⁰

Soon after his death, Bishop Amat was vested in full pontificals and placed in an artistically designed metallic casket. The mortician took the precaution of placing ice around the outer liner "for the better preservation of the remains."¹¹ Both the inner and outer cases had glass panels through which the face of the deceased could be seen. We are told that in the afternoon, "the body was placed in state in the Church of the Angels, opposite the Plaza. The catafalque was placed near the chancel rail and was profusely decorated with callas and leaves of myrtle. The coffin was also covered with floral decorations and at the foot stood candelabra with burning tapers."¹²

Sunday morning's papers carried the official announcement of Amat's demise signed by Bishop Mora and Joaquin Amat, who had come from Spain a few years previously to help his uncle complete work on the cathedral. "With the deepest grief we announce to you the

⁹ AALA, Mora to Alemany, 27 November 1877, Los Angeles.

¹⁰ Los Angeles *Express*, 13 May 1878.

¹¹ There was no indication that Amat was embalmed, a practice that was not common in California until well after the turn of the century.

¹² Los Angeles *Express*, 13 May 1878.

death of our Most Worthy Bishop, the R.R. Thaddeus Amat, which occurred in this city on Sunday, May 12th, at one o'clock A.M., at the age of 67 years, 4 months and 13 days."¹³

That Amat was well thought of and respected by his flock is obvious from the "great number of people" who filed into the Church during the hours when his remains rested in state. One contemporary account notes that "the funeral services of the deceased prelate . . . were among the most imposing and the most largely attended ever seen in Los Angeles."¹⁴

At precisely ten o'clock on Tuesday morning, the funeral cortege set out for the cathedral which was generally thought to have been the greatest of Amat's physical accomplishments. The procession was headed by the Daughters of Charity and their pupils, the Societies of Santa Maria and Santa Vibiana, the faculty and students from Saint Francis College and a large delegation from the Ancient Order of Hibernians. Bringing up the rear were diocesan clergymen forming a procession reaching fully two-thirds of the distance from the Plaza to the cathedral. Arriving at Saint Vibiana's, the "elegant metallic casket" resting on a *porte-mort* was carried in by eight priests and placed on a catafalque in the center aisle before the main altar. By the time the last of the mourners had filed into the cathedral, the immense church was packed to capacity.

The Solemn Pontifical Mass was celebrated by the Most Reverend Joseph Sadoc Alemany, archbishop of San Francisco, Amat's predecessor in the diocese of Monterey, assisted by eleven priests of the far-flung ecclesial jurisdiction. At the conclusion of the obsequies, Amat's casket was lowered into a vault beneath and behind the main altar. When it had been secured in place, a brick outer casing was walled around the casket. The inscription placed on the west wall at the head of the tomb read:

Illmus. ac Revmus. D.D. THADDEUS AMAT, C.M. Natus die 30 Dec.
A.D., 1811. Consecratus Episcopus Montereyensis et Angelorum 12 Mart.
1854. Obit 12 Maii, 1878. R.J.P.¹⁵

¹³AALA, Circular, 13 May 1878, Los Angeles.

¹⁴Los Angeles *Express*, 14 May 1878. ⁴

¹⁵The plaque was removed from the wall of the cathedral after the bishop's remains were disinterred. It now hangs outside the chapel at Bishop Amat High School in La Puente, California.

The next day, Father Peter Verdaguer, pastor of the Church of Our Lady of the Angels, publicly expressed the gratitude of the clergy for the impressive ceremonies.

I will feel deeply grateful if you allow me to make use of your excellent journal to thank the community in general, in the name of Rt. Reverend Bishop Mora, for the esteem and respect that has been shown to the deceased prelate, Rt. Reverend Thaddeus Amat. Though his death has been to him a great loss and a cause of great sorrow, yet he feels consolation when he sees that the whole community accompanies him in his grief, for which I again offer my most sincere thanks.¹⁶

All available evidence indicates that Amat's tomb remained unopened for the next eighty-four years. The seals were intact and there was no indication that the outside vault had been touched. In the absence of any obvious natural explanation for the remarkable preservation of the bishop's remains, the advice of several medical authorities was sought and their reactions noted.

It is a commonly known medical fact that the cause of death usually has some influence on the rate of decomposition since the process of *algor mortis* or cooling of the body is accelerated or retarded depending on the suddenness of death. In Amat's case, the actual death was unexpected for, as we are told, "none of those most intimate with the deceased prelate had any idea that his end was so nearly approaching."¹⁷ Nonetheless, the bishop had been in such poor health during the six years preceding his death, that he asked for and received a coadjutor to assist in governing the vast diocese. Amat had suffered several minor strokes as evidenced by the fact that his memory was severely impaired on occasion. Whether the actual cause of death was heart failure¹⁸ or generalized debility", as recorded on his death certificate, his demise was surely "sudden," a fact that would retard, if only briefly, that phase of decomposition known as *algor mortis*.

Forensic experts also suggest that the amount of clothing alters somewhat the rapidity of decomposition by acting as an insulating agent in preserving body heat. That explanation has little application in

¹⁶Los Angeles Express, 15 May 1878.

¹⁷Ibid., 13 May 1878.

¹⁸Putrefaction is accelerated when body tissues are edematous, as is the case when death occurs from congestive heart failure.

this case because, even though the bishop was interred in complete pontifical regalia, including black mass vestments, these garments were placed on his remains some hours *after* his death, when the process of *algor mortis* was already well advanced.

Obesity also affects decomposition rates. Though Bishop Amat was not overly obese, his pictures indicate that his weight exceeded the average for a man of his relatively short stature. We have a report of Doctor William Jones which states that Amat "was quite corpulent"¹⁹ a description that corroborates Bernard Ullathorne's observation that the bishop was "a little man, with broad shoulders and a broad compact head, like that of the first Napoleon."²⁰ Obese persons tend to decompose more quickly because of the higher moisture content and the greater retention of body heat. But here again, the medical facts have no obvious application.

When the casket was opened in 1962, the body gave no indication of dehydration or mummification. "Dehydration is a drying of the body or a tissue as a result of the removal of moisture (water)."²¹ This was certainly not the case, since the sealed casket still retained a considerable quantity of the melted ice in which the body had been packed. Nor was it likely that any naturally dry air was able to circulate within the vault, something which could have brought about mummification. Mummification normally occurs when a body is interred in extremely dry soil where the temperature remains consistently above or below the point where bacterial activity takes place. And where mummification occurs, the body loses weight and becomes stiff and brittle, neither of which was the case in this instance.

Bodily incorruption after death has traditionally been regarded as a supporting but not a conclusive or necessary sign of personal holiness. The reason is that it indicates alteration of the natural process of decomposition, a process which conserves the earth's natural resources and makes possible the use of the structural elements over and over again in different forms.

In those cases where the natural order is impeded, for no apparent or obvious cause, observers find justification for concluding that an exception *may* have been allowed for reasons known only to the Lord.

¹⁹AALA, 25 October 1877, San Francisco. Part of Doctor Jones's report was published in *The Monitor*. There is no copy of this paper in the AALA, but the report was later reprinted in *The Catholic Review*, 11 January 1880.

²⁰Quoted in Francis J. Weber, *Educatio Christiana* (Saint John's University; 1962), VII, 19.

²¹Clarence G. Strub, *The Principles and Practice of Embalming* (Dallas, 1959), 102.

In the case herein described, the natural process gives every indication of having been impaired. More than that we cannot say. This final postscript in the life of Bishop Thaddeus Amat must await the verdict of another generation.²²

The Son of God taught his followers much more by example than by word.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity,
6 January 1642).*

What is paradise? God's dwelling place. And where do you think God dwells on earth? In hearts filled with charity and in companies that are always united.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity,
conference #17).*

²²It should be noted, in passing, that the then Auxiliary Bishop Timothy Manning asked this writer, in 1962, to desist from speaking or writing about this phenomenon for "at least a quarter century." Having complied with that directive, I here submit this essay as part of the public record, leaving its interpretation to others.