
St. Louis de Montfort Church: A history

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Founded: 1963
Location: 5075 Harp Road, Santa Maria
Santa Barbara Region: Deanery 1

The roots of this Santa Maria parish go back more than 100 years --- and beyond, including the Chumash Indians who long ago hunted deer, bear and rabbits in the wild unconquered land. The city, named for an unknown Indian, finally was incorporated in 1905 after various land grants, ranchos and enterprising pioneers settled the land. That same year the first Catholic Church was established in the area, St. Mary of the Assumption.

That parish also included the settlements of Los Alamos, Sisquoc, Bettaravia and Orcutt. To attend Mass, people traveled many miles in different directions until the first 50 families formed the nucleus of St. Mary's. Then, time, progress and expansion filled the next 60 years. All led to the early '60s decision of Cardinal James Francis McIntyre to divide the parish in half to accommodate the ever-increasing growth of the Santa Maria area.

St. Louis de Montfort was named for the 18th century French saint, who founded the Company of Mary and was one of the greatest apostles of the Rosary in his day. The saint's spirituality has been espoused by millions, especially Pope John Paul II whose motto was "Totus Tuus" referring all to Mary. Pope Pius XII canonized St. Louis in 1947 and his feast day is April 28.



His namesake parish officially started on March 2, 1963 when Father Vincent McCabe became the first pastor. The 42-year-old priest from County Leitrim, Ireland, knew the area well; he had served as an associate at St. Mary's. During his 11 years at St. Louis, he built the school, new church and in 1967 established the mission church of St. Anthony in Los Alamos. That little mission chapel --- started in 1905, administered by priests from Santa Ynez, Lompoc and St. Mary's --- received much-needed repair through the efforts of Father McCabe and the local community.

The first services for St. Louis de Montfort were held in an old airport mess hall at Goodwin and Industrial Roads. A 10-acre site was purchased in 1964 at Clark and Harp Roads and on Jan. 30, 1966, Father McCabe celebrated the first Mass in the new church when it was listed in Orcutt. The concrete masonry building seated 1,000 persons with the altar facing the people. Msgr. McCabe later headed San Roque parish in Santa Barbara for 14 years; he is presently a chaplain at Santa Teresita Medical Center in Duarte.

The Josephite Fathers were given permission to administer the parish in 1975 with the appointment of Father Anthony Runtz as pastor. A native of Staten Island, N.Y., he had lived in England for 28 years and served with the British Army signal corps. Ordained in 1958, Father Runtz was assigned to the U.S. in 1964 and was an associate at St. Mary's for nine years before his pastorate at St. Louis.

For eight years he headed the parish, added the parish hall, built a new rectory and school playground and helped in restoring the historic San Ramon Chapel in Sisquoc. A talented woodworker whose cabinetry and furniture were evident at the parish and at the missions, Father Runtz died in 2006 at age 78.



The little church in Sisquoc (a Indian name for quail) built along Foxen Canyon was completed in 1875. Services were held once a month until 1908 when the chapel was turned over to St. Mary's. By 1967 San Ramon was dedicated as Santa Barbara's first historical landmark after extensive restoration work was completed. Father Bertin Foxen, great-grandson of Captain William Foxen, who helped build the original chapel, celebrated the 100th anniversary Mass in August, 1975.

From 1985 to 1990, Josephite Father Guillermo Garcia, a native Angeleno, served as pastor until his appointment as Superior General of the order and then lived in Belgium. The Josephites were founded in that country in 1817 by Father Constant Van Crombrugge who also founded the Daughters of Mary and Joseph. They came to California in 1963 and expanded their ministry to parish work and education, particularly at St. Joseph High School in Santa Maria. The Josephites' principal work remains the formation of youth into a love of Christ and the Church.

Josephite Father Mark Newman, from England, served the parish for 11 years, having previously been principal of St. Joseph High. The current pastor is Father Charles Hofschulte, from South Gate, also a teacher and former local superior of the order.