

Chapter XI

POWER OF THE SPIRIT

PORTUGUESE CLERGY

CALIFORNIA



PORTUGUESE CLERGY IN CALIFORNIA

Over one hundred native Portuguese and Portuguese American priests have for more than a hundred and forty years attended to their parishioner countrymen in California.¹

The first missionaries to arrive on the Pacific coast were obviously Spanish. It is not unthinkable, however, that a few among them might have been Portuguese. To mention one instance, in 1587 Fathers Francisco Nogueira and Rufino, members of a Spanish expedition under the command of Pedro de Unamuno, landed on Californian shores. Nogueira is a Portuguese surname and Rufino could be either Spanish or Portuguese. After a few days, Unamuno sailed off to Acapulco, and there is no indication that either of the two priests was left ashore.

Years went by, and in 1814 the first documented Portuguese immigrant jumped ship in Monterey. Between that year and the Gold Rush, only some two dozen Portuguese were recorded as living in California. None of them was a priest. It is a well known fact that a feverish migration to California occurred during the period from 1849 to 1855. Only an extremely scant number of the Portuguese who arrived, however, engaged in gold prospecting. Rather than that, these new migrants, mainly born in the Azores Islands, developed a huge network of supply to the forty-niners. Activities included growing vegetables, raising chickens and cows, opening boarding houses and restaurants, and operating flat bottom barges to ferry merchandise in the San Francisco Bay.

Families joined these pioneers, and by 1860 there were already 1,459 Portuguese recorded as living in California. By 1910 the number had risen to 22,457. Many priests also arrived from Portugal, to offer support and spiritual comfort to the Portuguese community.

Also in 1910, a violently anticlerical Republican regime was installed in Portugal. Priests were persecuted, arrested, and even murdered. Owing to these tragic circumstances, some seminarians took refuge in California to pursue their studies, and many of them were certainly ordained and stayed in the new country.

Priests also promoted the construction and dedication of churches in numerous locations. The Holy Spirit Church, built in Fresno in 1886, was the first of them.

In the twentieth century, two churches were created with names that clearly showed their ethnicity. Serving the large Portuguese community of the Santa Clara Valley, the Five Wounds Portuguese National Church, an impressive classic building in East San José, was founded in 1914 by Monsignor Henrique Ribeiro. One of its latest pastors was the very popular and enterprising Father Leonel Nóia.

In 1972, inspired by Fathers José Carlos and Ivo Rocha, a group of Portuguese Americans, most of them young, decided to build a temple to cherish their Catholic faith. As a consequence, they acquired a five-acre lot in Turlock. There, in December of that year, religious services began to be held in a mobile home. In 1981 a church named Our Lady of the Assumption of the Portuguese was established, and Father Ivo Rocha became its pastor. In 1988 Father Manuel Fontes Sousa was installed as the new pastor and is still serving in that position.

As a virtually 100 percent Roman Catholic body, the Portuguese in California,² aided by their priests, initiated a variety of traditional festivals, such as those in honor of Our Lady of Fátima and Our Lady of the Miracles. Held annually in Gustine, the latter has attracted attendance from a vast number of communities in California, other states, and even from Canada.

Celebrated in dozens of Californian cities for about one and a half centuries, the Holy Ghost festival constitutes the high point of religious celebrations by Azorean immigrants. Curiously enough, this event is marked by a lay character. Priests do carry out church ritual ceremonies, but the organization and the development of the festival rests in the hands of Portuguese community members.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Portuguese fraternal societies emerged, with the original purposes of helping families defray funeral costs and promoting the cult of the Holy

Ghost. Later they developed into powerful state-wide welfare, social, and educational organizations. Although strongly inspired by Masonic rituals in their proceedings, priests served as chaplains, and occasionally church attendance was required before work sessions began.

In the late 1800s, when illiteracy prevailed among the migrant Portuguese society, the clergy, together with a few political exiles, stood out as its *intelligentsia*. Thus, in addition to their clerical duties, many priests engaged in different cultural fields. One of these was journalism. Priests founded and edited several of the early Portuguese-language newspapers. Two trends marked the national press of the day, one Catholic and traditionalist, the other Republican and aggressive, both violently clashing at times.

In 1888 Fathers Manuel Francisco Fernandes and a lay supporter launched a weekly named *O Amigo dos Católicos*, the fourth in the Portuguese language in the state. Later the periodical was acquired by two laymen, who appointed Father Guilherme Silveira Glória as its editor,³ a position he held from 1894 to 1896. He was also the author of two books of poetry, *Poesias* (1935) and *Harpejos* (1940).

In recent times, Ferreira Moreno, the pen name of Father Joseph A. Ferreira, has published in the *Portuguese Times* of Massachusetts and the *Tribuna Portuguesa* of California an impressive collection of extremely well-researched and informative essays on Azorean and Portuguese-Californian history, culture, and traditions.

As for education, it must be noted that a brilliant academic career has been achieved by Jesuit Father Luís Proença, an associate professor in the School of Film and Television of Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. Father Proença has also produced three documentaries, two on the Portuguese in the United States, respectively Hawaii and California, and one on the former Portuguese colony of East Timor.

In Tulare, Father Raul Marta and Portuguese teacher Diniz Borges started the *Centro Português de Evangelização e Cultura* in 1986. Among various other activities, the *Centro* organizes a very successful annual symposium, attended by scholars and community members from all over the United States as well as the Azores Islands and Continental Portugal. It has also created the Vitorino Nemésio School, which teaches Portuguese to children after their regular school hours.

Over the long years the role of the Portuguese clergy in California has been truly epic. Although in most cases they themselves felt the shock of a painful acculturation to a strange environment, the priests felt the energy and wisdom to create parishes and churches, offer a dynamic social and moral guidance to their flocks, and stress the need to maintain language, customs, and traditions as an antidote to social isolation. Theirs is an admirable story of devotion and success.

This is the saga that Ferreira Moreno has masterfully revived and analyzed in the pages of the chapter that follows, truly a work of love and scholarship.

Notes

¹. In the article that follows, Ferreira Moreno was able to identify sixty-three of these priests.

². Among rare exception to this unanimity, it is to be noted that a Portuguese Methodist Church was founded in Oakland by the year 1904. In addition, in 1980 a former seminarian, Manuel V. Pereira, a married man, after having been denied the position of permanent deacon by the Oakland Diocese, created in Hayward a Portuguese church of the Old Roman Catholic rite.

³. Father Glória resigned the priesthood in 1899.

Eduardo Mayone Dias, PhD

BIOGRAPHIES

MATEUS ABRANTES

Father Mateus Abrantes was born on December 3, 1874, in Águeda, Portugal. He studied at the diocesan seminary in Coimbra, Portugal, and was ordained a priest on November 1, 1897.

Abrantes came to California in 1910, and by May of that year he was working for the Archdiocese of San Francisco. He was assigned to St. Leander Church in San Leandro, where he remained as assistant through 1911 and into the first few months of 1912. Much to the sorrow of San Leandro's Portuguese community, Abrantes was moved to Petaluma, where he served as assistant for an undisclosed period of time. In 1912 he was also helping Father Domingos Governo at Holy Ghost church in Centerville (Fremont).

In December 1912 Abrantes was transferred to the former Diocese of Monterey-Los Angeles (created in 1853), where he had been invited by the local bishop and where he served as assistant of several parishes and administrator of others. Later he held pastorates in the former Diocese of Monterey-Fresno (created in 1922), namely at St. Peter Church in Lemoore (1920-1927), at St. Aloysius Church in Tulare (1927-1939), and at St. Ann Church, in Riverdale (1940-1942).

Abrantes died suddenly at the parish house in Riverdale on October 2, 1942. He was "beloved by his people," as one account described him. He was buried in Holy Cross Cemetery in Fresno.

CARLOS ALEXANDRE

Father Carlos Alexandre, who came from Chaves, Portugal, was an assistant at St. Leander's, San Leandro, for a very short time. The exact dates could not be verified; however, he was present at the organizational meeting for *Clube Recreativo da Familia Portuguesa* held at the old UPEC building in San Leandro on January 30, 1965.

Researched by José D. Rodrigues

JOSÉ MARIA ÁLVARES

Shortly after celebrating his eighty-fifth birthday on July 26, 1999, Father José Maria Álvares died on August 4 in Newark, California, where he had resided for the previous twenty years in the company of his nephews and his two sisters, both of whom were over ninety years of age.

The Funeral Mass took place at St. Edward Church in Newark on August 9, 1999. There were several Portuguese priests in attendance, and the eulogy was given by the late Father Leonel Nóia.

Álvares was born in 1914 in Fazenda de Santa Cruz, Flores, Azores. He was ordained a priest on June 20, 1937, at Angra on Terceira Island and assigned to Senhor Santo Cristo parish church on Fazenda das Lajes on Flores Island.

A few years later, he was transferred to Our Lady of the Pillar at Cedros, also in Flores, where he spent thirty-six years, not only as a parish priest, but also as everybody's friend and counselor. He also built a beautiful new church at Cedros.

Álvares was particularly known as a man with a fine sense of humor. It is said that when the local bishop remarked that the new church bell tower resembled a chimney Álvares replied, "Your Excellency, between us, you can say whatever you want, but let me assure and advise you that among our people, your remark would be considered as coming from someone with an impaired brain."



GILBERTO AVELAR, S.J.

Gilbert Avelar, the son of Portuguese emigrants from the island of Flores, was born in



San Leandro, California. Soon after he became ordained a priest and left to work as a missionary in Brazil.

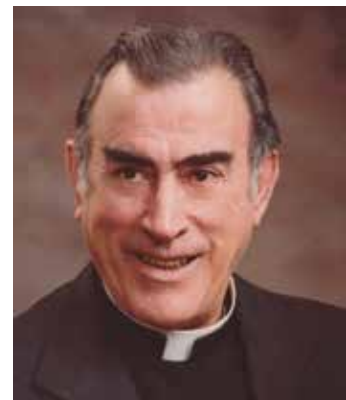
In 1972, he returned to the US to complete his studies. While attending Santa Clara University, Father Avelar met several Portuguese immigrants outside of the church and was informed of the great need for a Portuguese speaking priest to guide the spiritual lives of the local Portuguese community. He immediately volunteered to provide that service to the community.

During his one year of service, Father Avelar created a committee and lead the efforts of the parishioners in their search for a Portuguese speaking priest, solidified the idea of having mass and religious services in Portuguese, recruited parishioners for the several ministries and left the local Portuguese community with a sense of empowerment to find the priest needed to serve the large Portuguese speaking community in Santa Clara.

Father Avelar served the Portuguese community of St. Clare until October of 1973 and was instrumental in securing Father Eduardo Salazar SJ to succeed him with the celebrations of the Mass in Portuguese.

Researched by José D. Rodrigues and João Arruda

MANUEL ALVERNAZ



Monsignor Manuel Alvernaz was born on July 28, 1917, in Ribeirinha, Pico, Azores. He attended Colégio Sena Freitas in Ponta Delgada, São Miguel, where his brother, the late Archbishop-Patriarch José Alvernaz (1898–1986), was its director from 1926 to 1930. In 1931 Manuel Alvernaz entered Angra's Seminary in Terceira. He transferred to St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park, California in April 1940. He was ordained a priest on March 20, 1943, at St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco. By the end of the month, he was already serving as assistant at St. Leander Church in San Leandro, where he would achieve notoriety for his work with the local youth.

The San Leandro Boys Club evolved from Alvernaz's project to use the church's St. Joseph's hall as headquarters for youth activities. In recognition of his service to the city and its people, Alvernaz was named San Leandro's Young Man of the Year in 1946.

Alvernaz left St. Leander's on February 19, 1957, when he was appointed assistant at St. Mary Church in Gilroy, where he served for a couple of years. He returned to San Leandro on August 1, 1957, to join former President Herbert Hoover at the groundbreaking ceremonies for the future building for the Boys Club. The new structure was dedicated on September 25, 1960.

On January 23, 1959, Alvernaz was appointed pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Turlock. There he remained until his retirement on July 28, 1982, when he moved to a house he owned in Santa Cruz. He died there on January 5, 1996, at age seventy-eight. While at Sacred Heart parish, Alvernaz built the parochial school gym in 1961, organized the Our Lady of Fátima Society in 1969, built a more spacious and beautiful new church in 1972, and hosted the *Hora Católica* in 1976 at KLBS radio station to broadcast mass in Portuguese throughout the Central San Joaquin Valley.

Msgr. Fagundes was one of the founders of CASE, the Catholic Association for Seminarian Education, a non-profit organization founded by Portuguese priests in California for the purpose of providing scholarships for seminarians of Portuguese ancestry in California and for needy students at the Seminary of Angra.

On October 4, 1973, Alvernaz was recognized by the government of Portugal with the Insignia of the Order of Prince Henry. On November 19, 1973, he received the title of monsignor. In March 1983 he was the recipient of *Causa Portuguesa* awarded by the UPEC and in June 1983 he was selected as a Knight of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre.