Core Collection of the Sisters of the Holy Family: Work and Life in California with a Focus on San Francisco, Fremont and the Central Valley

Sisters of the Holy Family Archives
P.O. Box 3248
Fremont, California 94539
shfarchives@holyfamilysisters.org
**Title:** Core Collection of the Sisters of the Holy Family: Work and Life in California with a Focus on San Francisco, Fremont and the Central Valley

**Date (inclusive):** 1820-2013

**Collection number:** SHF-001

**Creator:** Sisters of the Holy Family

**Extent:** 25 Linear Feet of Files and Manuscript Books with 3 Textile Boxes

**Contributing Institution:** Sisters of the Holy Family Archives

**Abstract:** This collection forms a representative sample of materials documenting the founding, work, and primary residences of the Sisters of the Holy Family of the San Francisco Bay Area in California. Includes work of Sisters in the Central Valley during the Great Depression and work with special needs religious education in the 1950s to 1970s. Materials date from 1820 to 2013, with the bulk of materials ranging from 1880 to 1980.

**Languages:** English

**Access**
Collection is open for research

**Publication Rights**
Please contact the Sisters of the Holy Family Archives for permission to publish

**Preferred Citation**
Sisters of the Holy Family Core Collection. SHF-001. Sisters of the Holy Family Archives, Fremont, California

**Acquisition Information**
Collection materials created by the Sisters of the Holy Family

**Arrangement**
Within this Finding Aid, the Core Collection is divided into groups by three main subjects: Founding of SHF, Work of the SHF Sisters, and the Motherhouse Residences. In the SHF Archives storage, materials are physically arranged according to subject-based record groups created by Sister Michaela O’Connor. This Core Collection Finding Aid gathers materials across the category divisions used in physical storage into subject groupings that represent the core work of SHF.

Series 1. Materials documenting the founding of the Sisters of the Holy Family including hand-written annals manuscripts, vow books and correspondence from the four founders of the community, Archbishop Alemany, Father John Prendergast, Mother Dolores Armer and Mother Teresa O’Connor, 1820-2005.

Series 2. Materials documenting the work of the Sisters, including summer-time vacation schools for migrant communities in the Central Valley and materials from San Francisco religious education programs for children with disabilities, 1872-2013.


**Biographical / Historical Note**
The Sisters of the Holy Family were established in San Francisco in 1872 by a young woman named Elizabeth “Lizzie” Armer. Born in 1850 in Sydney, Australia, Lizzie moved with her family to San Francisco while still a young child and was adopted by the wealthy San Francisco banker Richard Tobin and his family.

In 1872, at the age of twenty-two, Lizzie Armer approached a local priest named Father Prendergast and expressed her desire to join a community of women religious. Prendergast, with the support of Archbishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany, urged Lizzie to form a new community of Sisters with a focus on charitable work for families in need: the Sisters of the Holy Family of San Francisco (SHF). Between 1872 and 1878, Lizzie, now Mother Dolores Armer, and her loyal supporter, Sister Teresa O’Connor, worked to establish the Holy Family Sisters as a unique order of women religious in the San Francisco Archdiocese.

By the first decades of the 20th century, membership in SHF had expanded significantly and the Holy Family Sisters began to spread out their operations further afield in California. Residential houses serving as sub-convents were established in San Jose, Oakland and Los Angeles; soon SHF also moved into Nevada and the Hawaiian Islands, eventually also reaching Utah and Alaska. From their new houses, SHF Sisters continued their ministries, focused primarily on child care, Catholic summer schools, and other assistance for low-income and often marginalized communities such as migrant agricultural workers.

Despite the 1906 Earthquake and Fire—during which Sisters of the Holy Family looked after children in impromptu schools held in the tent camps—in the early 1900s the Sisters continued to expand their day homes and Sunday classes in San Francisco and San Mateo parish churches, as well as continuing home visits to the needy. By the year 1918, SHF was caring for nearly 2,000 children in Bay Area communities, including two successful day homes still-extant to this day: St.
Elizabeth’s established in 1907 in San Jose and St. Vincent’s, Oakland, in 1911.
From the 1920s to the 1980s, SHF Sisters worked in Fresno Sunday schools and summer-time “vacation schools,” including teaching and organizing musical performances for children at the Catholic Chinese community’s kindergarten at St. Genevieve’s Church. Fresno was selected as the locus to represent the missionary work of SHF in California because of its unique and diverse communities of immigrants and migrant agricultural workers throughout the 20th century.
In 1950, Sister Miriam pioneered a program she called “Holy Innocents” for special needs children in San Francisco. At the time, educational religious programs for children with developmental disabilities were virtually unknown. Several Holy Family Sisters who started out with the Holy Innocents program continued on to work on special needs religious education. Sister John Minetta worked as the Supervisor of Special Education for the Los Angeles Archdiocese and in the 1980s Sister Aurora Perez expanded the Special Religious Education program into the Diocese of Oakland.
Although they were established in 1872, the constitutions and rules of SHF were not officially confirmed by Rome until over seventy years later in 1945. In the late 1870s, Archbishop Alemany and Mother Dolores had outlined a set of specific constitutions to regulate work and life for SHF. Archbishop Hanna determined that the constitutions were not adequate to be presented to Rome in 1926; changes were also made to the habit at this time. Following revisions, the constitutions were sent to the Vatican for approval by the Holy See in 1928, a process that took until 1945. Only a few decades later, after the Second Vatican Council, members of the SHF community finally wrote their own rules to govern their life—this process lasted through the 1980s and required the services of a canon lawyer.

Scope and Contents
These materials represent the core work of the Sisters of the Holy Family, beginning with their founding in San Francisco in 1872. The materials are comprised of handwritten annals books, correspondence of the early community, photographs, materials from Sunday schools and summer-time vacation schools, and aggregated research copies and notes on the original founders.
This Core Collection is designed to present a sample of the primary sources that constitute the Sister’s history, through the lens of their work and residential communities in San Francisco, Fresno and Fremont.
Materials from Fresno are included to serve as a representation of the Sisters’ work as religious education catechists, to illustrate the life of rural and migrant workers in the Central Valley in the early 20th Century, and because of the uniqueness of the Fresno Chinese-American Catholic community.
While SHF also worked in a variety of other regions (across California, but also Nevada, Hawai‘i, Utah, Texas, South Dakota, Kentucky, and Mexico), these materials are not included in this collection because it has been specifically designed to create a moderately-sized, but primary-source rich representative sample of SHF history.
Sisters of the Holy Family (San Francisco, Calif.)
Alemany, Joseph Sadoc, 1814-1888
Religious Education
Religious Education of Children with Mental Disabilities
San Francisco Earthquake and Fire, Calif., 1906
San Francisco Bay Area (Calif.)
Fremont (Calif.)
Central Valley (Calif.:Valley)
Migrant Agricultural Laborers
Saint Genevieve Catholic Church (Fresno, Calif.)