Sisters of the Holy Family and the Khmu Community of Northern California Collection

Sisters of the Holy Family Archives
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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 eventually 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 Bishop 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 the second woman to join the new community, Sister Teresa O’Connor, worked to establish the Holy Family Sisters as a small order under the San Francisco Archdiocese.

By the first decades of the 20th century, membership in SHF had expanded significantly and the Sisters began to spread out their operations further afield in California. Residential houses that served as sub-convents were established in San Jose, Oakland and Los Angeles; soon SHF also moved into Nevada and the Hawaiian Islands. From their new houses, SHF Sisters continued their ministries, including child care and Catholic summer schools for working class families, and for low-income and often marginalized communities such as migrant agricultural workers.

In the 1970s, the chaos and social disruption of the Vietnam War led to a rise in immigration from Southeast Asia to the San Francisco Bay Area. A small community of Catholic immigrants from the ethnic group known as the “Khmus” (also “Khammu,” “Kemu” and “Khmhu”) established themselves in the towns of Richmond and Stockton and began to seek access to Catholic religious services that integrated Khmu language, song and culture.

In 1981, a Richmond community leader, Kanseng Souriya (often called “Kan”), organized about seven or eight Khmu families around mass services at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church on San Pablo Avenue in El Cerrito, California. Between 1983 and 1985, the San Francisco Bay Area Khmu Catholics moved from St. John in El Cerrito to St. Marks in Richmond, about five miles away. During this time the Khmu Pastoral Center was also established as part of the Oakland Diocese’s Ethnic Pastoral Center, with the help of Sister Felicia Sarati, CSJ. In 1991, Father Don MacKinnon, CSSR, and Sister Michaela O’Connor became involved with the Richmond/El Cerrito Khmu and the Pastoral Center. At the same time, Kan Souriya was appointed the national leader of Khmu Catholics.

In the 1990s, the Khmu Catholic program expanded, adding a family camp at Big Bear in the Sierra Mountains, outside of Modesto. The Khmu community also joined with other ethnic groups in the Oakland Diocese to hold an event called “Chautauqua,” inspired by a Native American tradition of bringing tribes together. Father Don MacKinnon worked out of the Holy Redeemer Center in Oakland, which also began to serve as a center for programs for Khmu families and teenagers. Khmu Convocations in 1996 and 1998 at Holy Redeemer brought together Khmu Catholics from across the United States.

Scope and Contents

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SHF-003

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The collection is primarily comprised of photographs, newsletters and ephemera from the Khmu Catholic community in the San Francisco Bay Area. Ephemera includes calendars, greeting cards, event programs, and written song lyrics and prayers.

Sisters of the Holy Family (San Francisco, Calif.)
Khmu' (Southeast Asian People)
Religious Education
Richmond (Calif.)
Stockton (Calif.)