

TIDINGS ONLINE

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St. Peter Claver Church: A History

By Hermine Lees

Founded: *November 19, 1972*

Location: *5649 East Pittman Street, Simi Valley*

Santa Barbara Region: *Deanery 4*

Both the valley and the patron saint of this east Ventura County parish share pioneer histories. The Chumash Indians originally inhabited the valley, settling in two villages named Simi and Tap.

It is believed that the name of the Chumash Indian Village “*Shimiji*,” meaning ‘little white clouds,’ is the origin of the word “*Simi*,” although the area was later nickname “*Peaceful Valley*.” Eventually the Spanish controlled the area, and by 1795 Governor Diego de Borica had bestowed a land grant of 100,000 acres, one of the largest ever made, to Santiago Pico and Luis Pena who formed El Rancho San Jose de Garcia de Simi.

Less than a hundred years later pioneers settled the area and four centers of activity formed. “*The Colony*” became Simi with a postal address of *Simiopolis* that only lasted a short time. Development quickly followed and the fertile valley attracted thousands of residents.

Long before Spanish colonization, in 1580 a saint was born in the town of Catalonia, Spain, who would become a missionary model of sacrifice. The son of a Catalonian farmer, Peter Claver became a Jesuit priest and for almost 40 years ministered to the brutalized Negro slaves who were shipped from Africa to South America (*a third of them dying en route*). Peter Claver declared himself the “*slave of the Negroes forever*” as he labored among them, offering relief with medicine, food and tokens of friendship.

He was able to instill in the slaves a degree of self-respect, dignity, and worth, and became known as the Apostle of Cartagena as well as the Apostle of the Negroes. During those years of service, he baptized more than 300,000 persons. Then, he was stricken with a deadly plague and, racked with pain and abandoned, died on the feast of Our Lady, Sept. 8, 1654. Pope Leo XIII canonized him in 1888 as patron of all missionary work among blacks.

With such a saintly heritage and pioneer background, it is not unusual that the early history of St. Peter Claver parish reflects the determination and vision necessary to build a church surrounded by barren, rocky hills. Such was the situation in 1972 when Father James McKeon, a native of Detroit, became founding administrator. His headquarters were in a sparsely furnished tract house on Pittman Street where he cooked his own meals and every morning celebrated Mass in the small dining room for seven or eight neighbors. Tract homes in the area on VA or FHA terms were advertised for \$26,000, which helped lead to rapid growth in the region.

As Father McKeon’s dining room numbers grew, Sunday worshippers began assembling in the multi-purpose room of Simi Valley High School. A parish center was constructed in the mid-’70s as Father McKeon continued his campaign to foster a real community by establishing “*guilds*.”

“*There are so many areas of the parish that are tracts,*” he explained. “*With couples from each tract, each guild, we can form our parish council.*”

For more than 20 years, the genial and energetic priest labored for his parish while contributing the weekly Liturgical Calendar for The Tidings. He died in 1999 after a long illness at age 70.

The groundbreaking ceremony to launch a permanent church occurred in June of 1996 during the pastorate of Father Dennis Mongrain, a native Angeleno. In 1997 Msgr. Gary Bauler, another Angeleno, was named pastor and on Aug. 29, 1998, proudly unlocked the doors of the new church, a beautiful new structure that seats close to 1,000, with 40 stained glass windows.

Cardinal Roger Mahony, presiding at the impressive dedication liturgy, told the assembly: “*Simi Valley has a new church, but it is only an instrument of the faith and love of its people, who reflect Christ by the way that they live out their lives . . . and through their example others are drawn visibly to Christ.*”

With 40 parish organizations and more than 3,400 families, St. Peter Claver Church clearly follows the example of the Jesuit missionary for whom it is named, the man who drew thousands to Christ.