Parish History

Earliest history

About 8,000 years ago, Chumash and/or Playo Salinan Native American tribes came to the Central Coast.

In 1542 and 1543, Juan Cabrillo sailed the coast between Santa Barbara and Monterey. And in 1769, Don Gaspar de Portola's expedition passed through Harmony and Green Valley (near what is now the intersection of Highways 1 and 46).

Mission San Luis Obispo was established on September 1, 1774 by Fr. Junípero Serra, the fifth mission of 21 to be built between San Diego and Sonoma. Mission San Miguel was founded by Fr. Fermín Lasuen on July 25, 1797, as the 16th mission in the chain. That same year, land north of San Simeon to south of Harmony was designated as a portion of Mission San Miguel's holdings/responsibility.

From 1784 to 1820, the king of Spain gave land grants in this area to 30 California residents. Then, in 1821, Mexico became independent from Spain. Beginning in 1831, the Missions were secularized, giving Californians with Mexican citizenship the opportunity to acquire land grants and properties previously controlled by the 21 Mission, dividing 8 million acres. Most Missions went into private ownership and a wide variety of non-Church uses.

A local Catholic community

In 1849, Catholic ceremonies began to be celebrated at the adobe home of Dona Nicolasa and Don Julian Estrada on Rancho Santa Rosa. Priests from the Missions in San Luis Obispo and San Miguel came for Mass and sacraments at the Estrada compound located near the present intersection of Highways 1 and 46.

California joined the Union in 1850, to be the 31st state. The Federal Land Act of 1851 opened the way for land grants to be redetermined. Many were declared legitimate. The gap between Rancho Santa Rosa and Rancho San Simeon was declared public domain and opened for claim and settlement.

Cinnabar was discovered in local hills in 1862 and used to produce liquid mercury (quicksilver). New settlers started a town referred to as Slabtown, Santa Rosa, and Rosaville, and ultimately recognized as Cambri.

In 1870, Jeffrey Phelan deeded a small piece of land for $100 to Bishop Thaddeus Amat of the Los Angeles-Monterey Diocese. This was atop the hill next to Bridge Street, which was the main road to the cinnabar mines.
Starting a church
Fund-raising began for a local church in 1871. Santa Rosa Chapel was built of locally grown and milled pine and dedicated to Saint Rose of Lima that year. It was the first church built in the county after California became a state, and the 13th in the state since statehood. (The late Paul Squibb noted this years ago, and this special designation was verified by the U.S. Department of the Interior in 1982.)

Priests from the Missions in San Miguel and San Luis Obispo led services from 1871 to 1905. When a diocesan priest was assigned full-time to Cayucos in 1905, he administered Santa Rosa until 1960. A small and vibrant community kept the Catholic faith strong in Cambria during these years. Often, Masses at Santa Rosa Chapel were attended by guests at William Randolph Hearst’s ranch in San Simeon: Hearst Castle. Actress Marion Davies donated a pump organ that is still in the chapel, as well as the original heating system there.

Building the current church

Santa Rosa Parish of Cambria, as it is today, was established in the late summer of 1960. Father Thomas Morgan arrived in town surrounded by controversy. Why was Father Martin Cooney being replaced? Was Father Morgan here to build a new church? Who was he?
The newly founded and independent parish of Santa Rosa celebrated its first Mass on Sunday, September 11, 1960. Between September and December of 1960, Fr. Morgan continued to also serve the Cayucos parish and lived in its rectory. In December of 1960, Fr. Laurence O’Sullivan assumed full-time service of the Cayucos parish, and Fr. Morgan moved into a rented stucco house on Bridge Street in Cambria. For the first time in 50 years, the Cambria and Cayucos Catholic churches were completely independent of one another.

Through his homilies, home visits, and answers to parishioners, many questions about Fr. Morgan’s unexpected arrival and intentions for the new parish soon became clear: he was sent to raise funds for a new church at a new location.

He instituted a church building program. He set out a schedule for 156 weeks. He appointed a site selection and building committee that included: Constant Fiscalini, Peter Negranti, Sr. Ray Ross, Leo Nock, Pico Soto, and Johnny Fiscalini. He also enlisted 20 men (including the six previously mentioned) to visit each family of the parish at their homes to obtain monetary pledges for the three-year building program.
Lucy M. Fiscalini, a Cambria native and member of the Green Valley Fiscalinis, generously donated a site for the new church on part of her town ranch, which at that time included what is now the CCSD yard on Rodeo Grounds Road, the Rabobank located next to us, and her ocean pasture now known as the Fiscalini Ranch Preserve. (A few years before this generous act, Miss Fiscalini donated nearby land to the Cambria Lion’s Club for the Cambria Youth Center. Her best-laid plans for the town’s young people did not come to be; the land and its building were later transferred to San Luis Obispo County and renamed the Veteran’s Memorial Building.)

Father Morgan engaged John R. Ross, a San Luis Obispo architect, to design the new church. Mr. Ross stated in numerous newspaper interviews that his design for the church had “absolutely nothing traditional about it.” One interview continued, “I looked at the pine trees on the town’s surrounding hills and the water tanks on local ranches and tried to fit the structure to the terrain.” His controversial hexagonal design or six concrete buttresses supporting laminated wood beams rising to gather at the top contained 4,750 square feet with a seating capacity of 400.

Now, there are several versions of the history of the design of the church. They include the following: that it was modeled after Our Lady Mary’s Crown; that it was designed with an inverted morning-glory blossom in mind – the origin of this rumor can be attributed to the following observation by Mrs. Geneva Hamilton in the July 14, 1962 edition of the Telegram Tribune: “The unique positioning of the beams gives the
appearance of a giant inverted morning glory flower, a structure from yesterday’s fairy tales.” To continue with other hearsay: some said that the design was copied from contemporaneous and similarly designed Catholic churches in Ireland; and finally, that it was the winning design of a contest won by a group of nuns from Barboo, Wisconsin (northwest of Madison).

Father Morgan had a site and a design; now he needed a contractor. He hired Mr. Caspar Mandella of Paso Robles as the general contractor. The projected cost was $99,225.00. The official ground-breaking ceremony for the new church was on March 19, 1962. Shortly thereafter, the Pierce Construction Company of Morro Bay began grading the entire site (including the parking lot) and compacting the fill area (more than half of the church was built on fill). (Written by Dawn Dunlap with Copyright and Permission by Dawn Dunlap)

On May 31, 1962, The Cambrian reported that “Mandella Construction Company was laying the foundation for Santa Rosa Church.” A few weeks later, the huge laminated arched beams were brought in by special double-header motor transport (two trucks at
opposing ends, with the trailer platform in the middle). The tandem arrangement was necessitated by the sharp curves on Old Highway 1 between Cayucos and Cambria.

The collection of monies to fund the new project was very slow. Many of the parishioners were displeased with the soggy location (since the location had previously been the manufacturing site of Rigdon’s Brickyard) and with the unusual design. However, Fr. Morgan had a vision and a goal; he was undeterred. He secured the monies to continue construction through parishioner pledges, loans from the Diocese, a grant from the church extension (a national appeal that builds mission parishes to this day) and an outright bequest. The final construction costs totaled $150,000.

The interior was unfinished in the spring of 1963. Sisters from the Sisters of Mercy Order in Arroyo Grande held weekly catechism classes in the great empty interior; the children sat on the floor. On March 31, 1963, The Cambrian reported that the pews were being made by Trappist Brothers in Lafayette, Oregon, and were still unfinished. On April 14, folding chairs were brought in and Easter Sunday services were conducted in the new church.

The custom pews finally arrived and were assembled and installed on May 31. Construction was deemed complete on June 1. The first Mass was celebrated by Fr. Morgan on June 2, 1963.
The Administrators and Pastors of Santa Rosa Parish from 1960 to present day include:
Rev. Msgr. Thomas Morgan (1960-1965)
Rev. Lawrence McHugh (1965-1974)
Rev. Derek Hughes (1994-1997)
Rev. Larry Betrozoff (1997)
Rev. Dennis Gilbert (1997-2005)
Rev. Mark Stetz (2009-present)

The acquisition of the history of our parish is, like all history, an ongoing collection of oral histories and written documents, correspondence, articles and photographs. If any of you can contribute your memories, notes, photographs or copies of documents, letters or newspaper articles to enrich our history, please give our parish office a call.

Thank you for your interest in our parish history. (Joyce Williams)