

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

RECEIVED

MAY 31 1988

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

NATIONAL  
REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name St. Francis by-the-Sea American Catholic Church  
other names/site number St. Francis Cathedral Chapel; American Catholic Church (The Chapel of St. Francis

2. Location

street & number 430 Park Avenue N/A not for publication  
city, town Laguna Beach N/A vicinity  
state California code 06 county Orange code 059 zip code 92651

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	_____ buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	_____	_____ sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	_____	_____ structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	_____	_____ objects
		_____	_____ Total

Name of related multiple property listing: N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.

Kathryn Gueltner 5-27-88  
Signature of certifying official Date of letter

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register. Delores Byers Entered in the National Register 6-30-88  
 See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register.  See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain:)

Signature of the Keeper \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Action \_\_\_\_\_

---

**6. Function or Use**

---

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)  
religion/religious

---

---

---

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)  
religion/religious structure

---

---

---

---

**7. Description**

---

Architectural Classification  
(enter categories from instructions)Mediterranean Revival

---

Romanesque

---

Craftsman

---

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation \_\_\_\_\_ concrete \_\_\_\_\_  
walls \_\_\_\_\_ stucco \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ brick \_\_\_\_\_  
roof \_\_\_\_\_ tile \_\_\_\_\_  
other \_\_\_\_\_ ceramic tile \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ wood \_\_\_\_\_

---

**Describe present and historic physical appearance.**

St. Francis-by-the-Sea American Catholic Church is distinctive in its mixture of architectural styles - Mediterranean Revival, Romanesque, Gothic, Byzantine, and Craftsman. Located on a very small lot measuring 25' x 60' and with an interior size of only 1,008 square feet, it was built to be a bishop's church and indeed has all the traditional features of a cathedral. It was constructed in 1933 from the rubble of the Long Beach earthquake by the Rev. Percy Wise Clarkson and his followers. The building's architect is unknown, but the design ideas of Rev. Clarkson were incorporated. The church has remained essentially unaltered, with the exception of window alterations on the front bay and in the side aisle. Otherwise, the building's integrity is intact. Located in a mixed residential and commercial neighborhood approximately one block from downtown Laguna Beach, it is surrounded by St. Mary's Episcopal Church with its parish offices and parking lot.

St. Francis-by-the-Sea is described in Gebhard and Winter's A Guide to Architecture in Los Angeles and Southern California as "being on the Gaudiesque side: stucco surfaces contrast strongly with one another." (p. 424) The exterior of the church is composed of stucco and used brick from the buildings' devastation and is decorated with colored ceramic tile, also taken from the earthquake rubble. The adobe roof is gabled. The front of the building is multi-faceted, with a front bay, pilasters, tile hoods, and a wooden bell tower. The front bay, which forms the altar inside, is angled with rounded corners. Above the bay is a half-moon stained glass window flanked by two small rectangular windows. On the surface of the bay is the Chi Rho, the Greek symbol for Christ, formed by colored tiles. Above the half-moon window is a projecting tile hood. There are pilasters on either side of the bay, each with two stained glass rectangular windows. Below the bell tower is another projecting tile hood with an oval shaped window in which the headwork forms a double cross in an inverted circle.

Adjoining the church is an open wooden entry structure with two side benches known as the Litch Gate. The wooden columns are set on concrete piers and are joined by a tile gabled roof topped by a cross, the whole forming an entry shelter such as Clarkson remembered in English country churches.

Below the tile roof over the nave is a clerestory with irregularly shaped windows. The exterior of the nave is accentuated by a small white stucco apse embellished with colored tiles. At the upper part of the apse are five rectangular windows framed by colored tiles. Below the second and fourth windows are two long rectangular windows with diamond shaped panes, separated by rectangular stucco panels framed by colored tile.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 1

---

A brick pathway leads to a brick arched porch in front of the entrance to the church. Inside the porch is a tile bench on the left and the door to the church on the right. Above the portal is a square second story with an adobe tile roof that forms a small room off the choir loft. Three sides have craftsman style windows in varying shapes.

The interior of the church measures 17' x 60' and has, on a small scale, the traditional church elements of sanctuary, chancel, nave, narthex, side aisle, and choir loft. There are two rows of pews each with three seats. The church qualifies as a cathedral and contains all the religious and decorative features of a Catholic cathedral. The walls are painted white, and the wood floor is covered by carpet except under the pews. The wooden gabled ceiling is stained dark brown and has seven arched crossbeams, varnished dark brown. Upon the beams are symbols and sayings representing Eastern as well as Christian religious ideas, painted for the most part in gold and red-orange. The beam separating the sanctuary from the nave has a crucifix at its apex, with Ecco Homo below.

Separating the nave from the side aisle are five white columns with Byzantine style pulvins of colored tile from which spring wide arches divided into three parts with angled corners. In the side aisle are two niches. The larger niche is framed by ceramic tile and contains five small stained glass windows above with two rectangular windows with diamond-shaped panes below. This niche now contains the baptistry font upon which stands a statue of St. Francis. On the floor under the font there is a ceramic tile zodiac sign. The smaller niche contains one very narrow rectangular window with leaded glass, a tile shelf, and plaster pedestal which rests on a floor insert of colored tile. Assorted tiles in various colors and shapes are used for decoration in many places, including window sills and pedestals for religious statues.

The sanctuary is separated from the nave by a double wrought iron gate. It was once the entry to the cocktail lounge of a hotel lobby in Long Beach, but seems quite appropriate in its present setting. The altar is decorated with colored tiles of varying colors and designs. A tall statue of Jesus is on the altar and above is a half-round stained glass window representing St. Francis preaching. The walls to the sides of the altar are covered with tile, as are two small niches on each side of the altar.

On the balcony wall of the choir loft are three primitive paintings\* which portray Biblical scenes and occult symbols. The pictures are separated by decorative painted borders. These paintings and the decorated beams were executed in the 1930s by an unknown artist who exchanged his work for a place to sleep in the church.

In 1982, a restoration program was undertaken to repair damage done by weather and the passage of time. Rotted window frames were replaced, the tile roof over the altar was repaired, the walls were repainted, and the floor was refinished. New stained glass windows have been installed in the side aisle, in one of the niches, and on the sides of the altar. The most significant change is that the four gothic style arched rectangular windows on the pilasters on either side of the exterior front bay lost their gothic arches and are now rectangular.

\*One painting is hidden by a heater. The church plans to remove this heater and install a more effective and less intrusive system when funding permits.

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally  statewide  locally

Applicable National Register Criteria  A  B  C  D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)  A  B  C  D  E  F  G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)  
Religion  
Social History  
Architecture

Period of Significance  
1933-1938

Significant Dates  
1933-1934

Cultural Affiliation  
N/A

Significant Person  
Clarkson, Percy Wise

Architect/Builder  
Unknown

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above. St. Francis-by-the-Sea American Catholic Church is a historically and architecturally significant structure and deserves consideration under Criteria A, B, and C and Criterion Consideration A of the National Register. St. Francis-by-the-Sea represents a period in the social history of this country in the first part of this century when interest in Eastern philosophy and occultism led to the development of alternative religious and philosophical movements in the United States. California was the center of many Theosophy oriented religious and philosophical movements in the first part of the 20th century, which included the well known Theosophical centers at Point Loma and Ojai, the Liberal Catholic Church in Los Angeles and the Rosicrucians in San Jose. St. Francis-by-the-Sea was the local center of the American Catholic Church, which combined the Eastern beliefs and occultism of Theosophy with Christian theology and for a time enjoyed significant success. The building is significant for its association with Percy Wise Clarkson. Clarkson, the church's designer, founder, and first bishop, was responsible for introducing Theosophy into American Catholic beliefs. Architecturally, the building is significant as an example of many diverse design elements effectively combined into an integrated whole. These diverse elements symbolize the many influences affecting this church's doctrine.

\*\*\*\*\*

Percy Wise Clarkson (1875-1942), the designer, founder, and first bishop of St. Francis-by-the-Sea, left the Episcopal priesthood in 1928. He first joined the Liberal Catholic Church, and then, in 1933, was consecrated a bishop in the American Catholic Church. Bishop Clarkson was born in England and came to Orange County in the early 1920s from New Zealand, after having served as chaplain to the Anzacs unit during World War I. After coming to California, he became vicar of the Trinity Episcopal Church in Orange. Drawn to Laguna Beach by its beautiful setting and thriving art colony, he built the first Episcopal church there as a summer chapel in the 1920s. This small chapel, reportedly a scaled-down version of the church built by St. Francis in Assisi, also was called St. Francis-by-the-Sea. A dispute with the Episcopal bishop

See continuation sheet

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

Brandreth, Henry R. T. Episcopi Vagrantes. 2nd ed. London: Faber & Faber, 1964.  
Gebhard, David and Robert Winter. Guide to Architecture in Los Angeles and Southern California. Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, 1977.  
Melton, J. Gordon. Encyclopedia of American Religions. Wilmington, N.C.: McGrath, 1978.  
Pruter, Karl and J. Gordon Melton. The Old Catholic Sourcebook. New York: Garland, 1983.  
Bacin, Jimm. "One-of-a-Kind Church Part of Small Catholic Sect." Laguna News Post. 9 Sept. 1982: II-1.  
Eggers, Michael. "St. Francis: Little Cathedral With Big Hopes." Laguna News Post. 14 Oct. 1978: I-1.  
Kassen, Bill. "World's Smallest Cathedral Right Here in Laguna." The Register. 31 July 1984, community ed.: 1.  
Keavy, Hubbard. "Tiny Laguna Church Squeezes into History." The Register. 27 Feb. 1977: A3.  
Meyer, Chris. "Tiny Cathedral Gets New Priest." Laguna News Post. 16 July 1983: I-1.

See continuation sheet

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository: \_\_\_\_\_

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of property 1/25 acre (1650 square feet)

**UTM References**

A 

1	1	4	2	7	4	0	0	3	7	1	1	4	5	0
Zone				Easting				Northing						

B 

Zone				Easting				Northing						

C 

Zone				Easting				Northing						

D 

Zone				Easting				Northing						

See continuation sheet

**Verbal Boundary Description**

Brock's Re-sub portion of lot 28 southerly portion

See continuation sheet

**Boundary Justification**

The boundary includes the entire city lot that has historically been associated with the property.

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Anne Frank  
organization M.A. Public History Program, CSU Dominguez Hills date February 25, 1988  
street & number 625 Glomstad Lane (Home) Home telephone (714) 494-2318; (714) 856-4968 (work)  
city or town Laguna Beach state California zip code 92651

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service****National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**Section number 8 Page 1

over land ownership led to Clarkson's deposition or resignation (there is some dispute as to which action happened first). As a settlement, Clarkson was given a small section of the original parcel, and on this land he and his followers built the present St. Francis-by-the-Sea in 1933-34 from the rubble of the Long Beach earthquake. The first St. Francis was renamed St. Mary's Chapel by the Episcopal Church and, unfortunately, was demolished in 1979 as an unsafe structure. By that time, a larger church, also called St. Mary's, had been built in 1957 next door to the American Catholic Church.

Both the original and present St. Francis were designed by Bishop Clarkson, and there are similarities between the two structures. Both had basically the same floor plan, and ceramic tile was used as decoration in both. The buildings are, however, by no means identical. Furthermore, Bishop Clarkson worked with an architect to ensure the structural soundness of the present St. Francis.

Two craftsman style houses at 432 and 432-1/2 Park Avenue also were designed by Clarkson. They were his residence after he left the Episcopal Church, and his wife's until her death in 1959. Today they are owned by Ronald Kaufman who bought the property from Clarkson's daughter. The shingled craftsman structure at 428-1/2 Park behind St. Francis, presently the parish offices for St. Mary's Episcopal Church, also formerly belonged to Clarkson and is one of his designs.

The American Catholic Church has its roots in the Old Catholic movement which arose in Europe in opposition to the doctrine of papal infallibility proclaimed in 1870. Another fundamental difference from Roman Catholicism is that American Catholic priests are allowed to marry. Joseph Rene Vilatte, a former Roman Catholic seminary student who left the Roman Catholic Church and later was ordained a priest in the Old Catholic Church, established the American Catholic Church in Chicago in 1915. There are various branches in the Vilatte succession, and St. Francis-by-the-Sea belongs to the Lloyd branch named after Frederick Ebenezer John Lloyd, whom Vilatte consecrated as Bishop in 1915 and who succeeded Vilatte as archbishop in 1920. Lloyd, in turn, was succeeded in 1932 by Daniel C. Hinton who consecrated Percy Wise Clarkson in 1933. Bishop Clarkson's religious beliefs corresponded to those of the Liberal Catholic Church, and thus he is responsible for introducing Theosophy into American Catholic beliefs. Under Bishop Clarkson's successor, Lowell Paul Wadle, the Theosophical orientation continued until 1965. Bishop Wadle's center of operations was Long Beach although the church remained in Laguna Beach. During the 1920s, reportedly there were 20 American Catholic congregations in the United States, and as late as the 1970s there were churches in Cincinnati, Ohio; Short Hills, New Jersey; and Miami, Florida. St. Francis-by-the-Sea is the only remaining church at this time, although recently a new congregation has formed in Pennsylvania.

The present American Catholic congregation in Laguna Beach is active and healthy. It has about 75 families in its parish membership and celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1984. It received some degree of national fame in 1984 when it was listed in the

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section number 8 Page 2

---

Guinness Book of Records as the "world's smallest cathedral". The church has no budget, the priests receive no salaries, and maintenance of the building depends on donations of time and money. The priests are "worker priests", all supporting themselves with secular professions. It should be noted that although the architecture and decoration of St. Francis-by-the-Sea preserve the former Theosophical orientation of the American Catholic Church, these beliefs represent the past and have been rejected by the Church's present leadership. The liturgy and beliefs of today's American Catholic Church are traditional Christian and very similar to the Roman Catholic. Bishop Talarczyk and the present clergy recognize the historical significance of the building and have done much to preserve it. However, it is possible that future leaders might decide differently. Recognition by the National Register could help prevent this.

I should add that the single outstanding feature of St. Francis-by-the-Sea is the almost perfect preservation of its original appearance, a feature which I believe may be unique. None of the publications I have consulted say anything about the church buildings of the various alternative religious movements, but they all indicate the central role of leading individuals and a lack of institutional continuity. Often, when the leader dies, the congregation disbands and is absorbed into another group. As a consequence, it is most likely that few church buildings of alternative religious movements have remained intact for over fifty years.

The Theosophical orientation of the church continued under Clarkson's successor, Lowell Paul Wadle, until Wadle's death in 1965. For this reason, the period of significance is seen to continue until this date. However, because nothing of exceptional importance occurred within the last 50 years, the date of 1938 is chosen as the terminal date for period of significance.

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section number   9   Page   1  

---

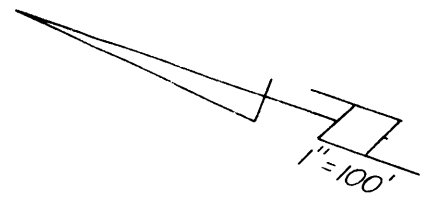
Major Bibliographical References (continued)

- Duff, Father Joseph. Personal interviews. 26 January 1985. 9 February 1985. (Member of clergy, St. Francis-by-the-Sea)
- Talarczyk, Archbishop Simon E. Personal interview. 3 February 1985. (Archbishop-Primate, American Catholic Church).
- Taylor, Reverend Dunham. Telephone interview. 21 February 1985. (Rector of St. Mary's Episcopal Church, 1942-1943).

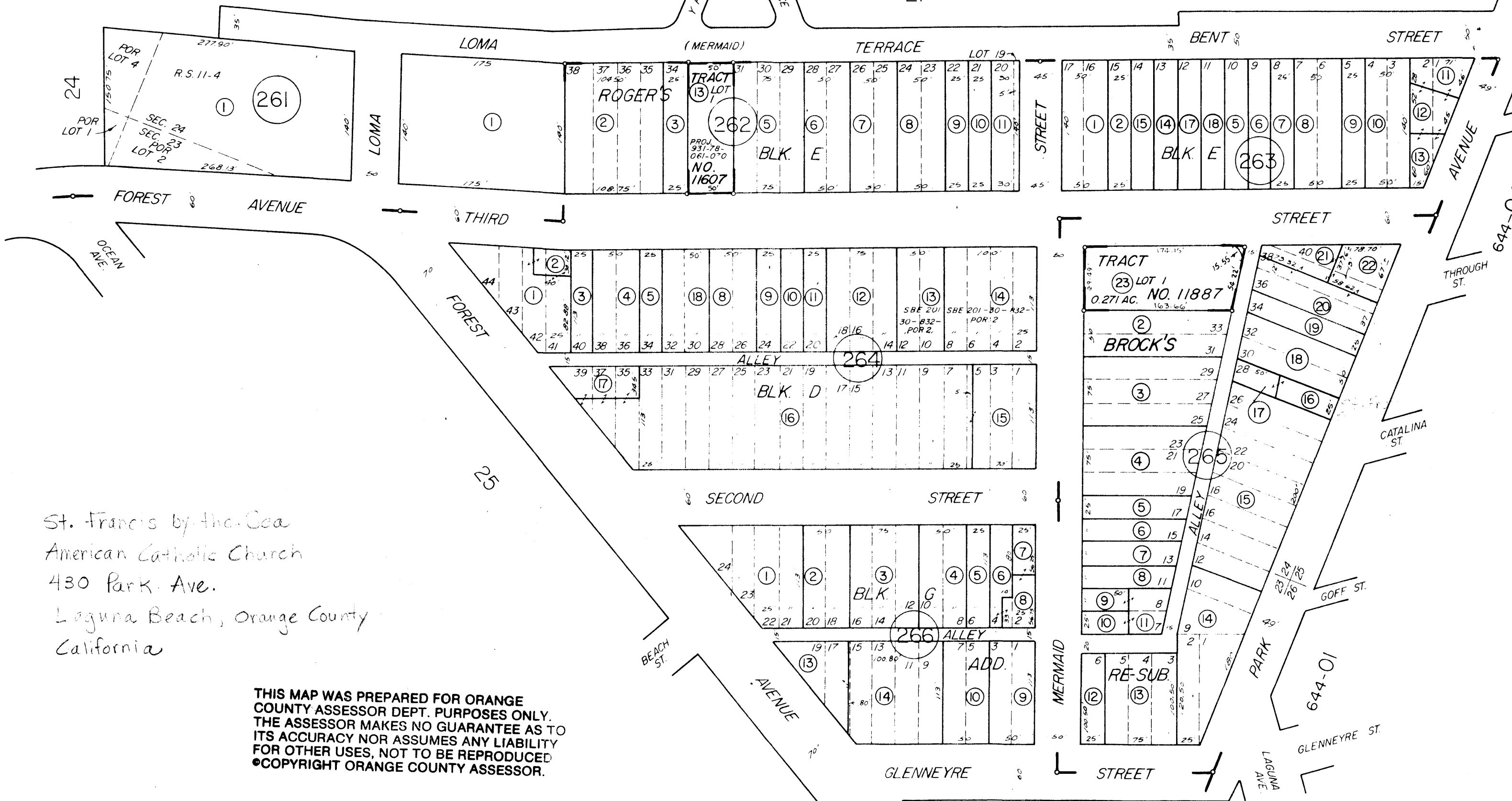
G-5417H



27



1"=100'



St. Francis by the Sea  
American Catholic Church  
430 Park Ave.  
Laguna Beach, Orange County  
California

THIS MAP WAS PREPARED FOR ORANGE COUNTY ASSESSOR DEPT. PURPOSES ONLY. THE ASSESSOR MAKES NO GUARANTEE AS TO ITS ACCURACY NOR ASSUMES ANY LIABILITY FOR OTHER USES, NOT TO BE REPRODUCED  
©COPYRIGHT ORANGE COUNTY ASSESSOR.

MARCH 1972

ROGER'S ADD.  
BROCK'S RE-SUB.  
TRACT NO 11607

L.A. 3-11&12  
M.M. 4-64  
M M 505-2 3

NOTE - ASSESSOR'S BLOCK & PARCEL NUMBERS SHOWN IN CIRCLES 644-01

ASSESSOR'S MAP BOOK 641 PAGE 26 COUNTY OF ORANGE

3-1-85