

# Missions, Missionaries, and Native Americans

Long-Term Processes and Daily Practices

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and what was evil, missionaries demonized Native practices and produced cultural change. Today many Native American groups who descend from mission communities claim Catholicism as their religion. One might say that God works in mysterious ways.

The historical development of the Order of Friars Minor and the Society of Jesus imparted their missionaries with distinct characteristics that facilitated their conversion work. The next two chapters identify these characteristics and focus on gauging their relevance.

## 3

## The Franciscans

## Men of the Cloth

To understand the lives and acts of the missionaries who came to the Americas it is necessary to consider the conceptual world and experiences that shaped their perceptions. Without knowledge of their cultural background and the core tenets of the religious orders they joined, we might read their acts as if their lives in the New World were remade out of new cloth. That would be misleading; they were shaped by the order they served and their lives were patched with other missions, other trials, and other truths. Coming from many areas of the western world, missionaries brought to the Americas their quilted cultural knowledge plus all their misconceptions about the New World and its peoples.

The original thematic and historical development of the Order of Friars Minor was central to the spread of Christianity among indigenous populations in the Americas. The Franciscan apocalyptic vision and the dialogic undertow of the Spirituales and Conventuales, which eventually led to the emergence of the Observants, left an indelible wash on the religious practices of the Americas. This chapter discusses some of the early characteristics of the Franciscan Brotherhood and the development of the Franciscan Order and relates them to the Franciscans who came to the New World and the practices they used in their attempts to convert the Native people there.

## A Beginning

St. Francis of Assisi was born Giovanni di Bernardone. His father was a prosperous cloth merchant. Giovanni was renamed Francesco by his father, and he later adopted that name. Francis followed a tortuous route to salvation, flirting with debauchery, corruption, and the Crusades, finally falling in love with God.

Most of the narratives of St. Francis's life, whether they are well researched or romanticized, try to identify the point when his life changed

and his search for God found a response. This modern quest for the moment of epiphany reflects our need for a plot with a denouement and discounts the process of becoming. In a certain sense, this quest parallels the attitudes we have when analyzing the actions of the missionaries. Epiphanic signposts that point the way from sinner to saint characterize the way the histories of the early Franciscans and Jesuits have been told. Interestingly, researchers have often read the signs in the same way as the medieval saints and missionaries read them (de Nicolas 1986). Julien Green has pointed out that "if we edited all the dreams out of the history of the Middle Ages, the whole thing would grind to a halt" (1987, 119). I would include in that statement all the signs that people received in various forms. A language of dreams, visions, and revelations constituted a corpus of signs that scripted many a life change and the contours of sainthood (de Nicolas 1986; Frugoni 1996, 161–90).

Francis was not unique in his behavior or quest. There were others, such as Joachin of Fiori from Calabria or Robert d'Arbrissel, who chose to dispossess themselves of all worldly goods in order to live like Christ and preach the gospel. Some were viewed as mystics, others as revolutionaries; some died at the stake as heretics, while others were co-opted by the very principles and people they vowed to change. The end of the twelfth century was a time of great debate about the nature of good and evil and of intensely lived movements such as those of the Bogomils, the Cathars, and the Albigensis, whose members questioned the sanctioned path to salvation and rejected the structures and practices of the Catholic church as well as its teachings.

What we know of St. Francis's episodic process of conversion appears to reveal a series of attempts to discern a path almost by trial and error, each attempt followed by a revelatory event that redirected or confirmed the path he chose. These affective mystic moments, which were heuristic moments, occurred in specific places such as caves, continuing a medieval trope that was used in the New World until at least the eighteenth century and that harmonized well with several Native shamanic traditions. Francis's starts and stops and their affirmation by appropriate revelations created the basic tenets of what would become the Rule of the Franciscan Order. These tenets and the controversies that surrounded them during St. Francis's lifetime and long after created deep rifts within the Franciscan Order and among its practitioners. As we shall see, these conceptual and practical rifts were very much alive in the religious frontiers of New Spain.

From the beginning, Francis's stories highlighted certain themes that differentiated the order from a multitude of others that were created during the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, the period of explosion of religious

organizations. These themes marked the appeal of the order to those who joined it and eventually resulted in both internal divisions and a program of conversion (Roest 2000).

At the Church of the Lady of the Angels (La Porciúncula) in Assisi, Francis had a revelation that commanded that he and his followers "take no gold, silver or copper in your belts, no pack for the road, not two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff . . . and Preach as you go, saying, 'The Kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Le Goff 2000, 148). Discounting the millennial aspects of the commandment, the instructions were clear. First, Francis and his followers were to journey and teach the gospel; they were to be itinerant preachers. They would take to the road and have no permanent abode. They were to possess or carry nothing except one tunic: just enough to cover their nakedness. They were to have no shoes, no staff, no money. Theirs would be an order of absolutes with no compromise; that would remain the challenge and the danger of the order. Its members would rebuild churches. They would beg for food and lodging. They would have no books. All teachings would emanate from the Lord; no other teachings would be needed. They would owe complete obedience to their superiors, would strictly abstain from any sexual intercourse, and would perform harsh penance for their sins. Throughout his life St. Francis battled against the institutionalization of the brotherhood; he struggled to maintain its nomadic tradition and the absence of a place of abode to retain, as Michel de Certeau would say, a "proper" (1988, 36).<sup>1</sup>

The close association of the Franciscans with the dispossessed, the forsaken, and the diseased as well as the order's complete prohibition of possession of material goods created a close relationship and empathy with the native groups of the New World, particularly the hunting and gathering populations. Unlike other orders, the Franciscans sought an itinerant lifestyle that fitted well with the mode of living of nonsettled populations that moved frequently to obtain their sustenance. Francis's prescriptions to perform manual work for one's sustenance and never accept money for one's labor, to beg for food and the necessities of life, and to be joyful in poverty and austerity created a mindset and social framework that made the Franciscans (at least the early ones) perfect for working with hunter-gatherers all over the world.

Francis did not allow his followers to use or own books. He believed that knowledge nourished pride and "he regarded knowledge as a form of possession and property and the educated (*doutos*) as an especially formidable section of the powerful" (Le Goff 2004, 84). In his view, knowledge damned more souls than it saved. Throughout his life Francis sharpened the contrast between poverty, indigence, and ignorance and wealth, power, and knowl-

edge (85). For him the greatest social evil was power based on birthright, wealth, and knowledge (91). It is no accident that the first order was called Friars Minor (where "minor" is synonymous with "subject" and "pauper" [*subditi et pauperes*] [89–91, 94]) and that it recognized a hierarchical structure of masters and subjects. Francis felt, and intrinsically understood, the symbiosis of power/knowledge, and his actions and words indicated that he believed that books and philosophical debates distanced people from faith; he knew that questioning unravels faith. His gospel was one of orality positioned in the present that emphasized the role of memory and refused any ties to a textual religious past, with the exception of the gospels (152).

Rome and the papacy of the thirteenth century could not withstand the contrast between their wealth and Faustian behavior and the raw, minimalist approach of the Franciscans to Christianity. God's command to Francis, or Francis's interpretation of it, may not have questioned directly the behavior of the pope and the Curia, but the order's proscriptions and the practices of those who joined the brotherhood were an overt indictment of the church. Also, the questions raised by the tenets of Francis's rule bordered too closely on issues raised by other visionaries and by the cults Rome was intent on destroying, such as the Cathars and the Albigensis. Besieged by dissent, Rome called to arms its faithful to destroy the heretical cults in crusades and instituted inquisitory procedures to burn heretics in public demonstrations of purification and power. Tongues of fire swabbed ideas and burned dissent.

The affective charm and public appeal of Francis's work and rule (*Regula non bullata*) were not lost on the papacy. Sanitized of its nonorthodox elements, such as the refusal to obey immoral orders and the prohibition against using money or books, and provided with a permanent residence (convent), the brotherhood or fraternity of Francis's followers metamorphosed into a legitimate religious order by the official rule (*Regula bullata*) issued by Pope Honorius III on November 29, 1223.

The institutionalization of the Franciscan Order aggravated the growing rift among its members and marginalized those who had joined because of the ascetic and rigorous aspects of the rules, particularly the emphasis on poverty and lack of a domicile. Many of the Observants,<sup>2</sup> who advocated stricter adherence to the rule of poverty (*Spirituals*, *Zelanti*, or *Fraticelli*) did not abide by the *Regula bullata* and were excommunicated and persecuted by the church and by the Inquisition (Burr 2001, 312). The Conventuals, who wanted to amend the rule of poverty and allow members of the order a place of residence, saw their requests sanctioned by the official rule. Unhappy with a sanitized order, Francis, tired, sick, and disheartened, retired to his Golgotha to await stigmata and deliverance. St. Francis died in 1226. His order,

which would envelop the world in rapture and rupture, reached "the people, tribes, languages, nations and all men, present and future, throughout the earth," as he had commanded (Le Goff 2000, 108).

For centuries after St. Francis's death, internal dissension among the Franciscans convulsed the order, leading to the disillusionment, banishment, and Inquisition trials of many of its members as well as to spin-offs of other religious orders, such as the Capuchins and the disalced Franciscans. The need for a string of papal bulls to bring about a consensus among the various factions while increasing papal control over the Franciscans is indicative of the extent and difficulty of the problem. The reform movement centered in Spain during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was essential to the final resolution. It was supported by such iconic Franciscan figures as Cardinal Cisneros and Fr. San Buenaventura (Saranyana 1991, 33–34).<sup>3</sup> By the sixteenth century a solution had been reached that gave the Observants the upper hand but also reflected an agreement to disagree. The point of disagreement was how rigorously the rule of poverty should be applied to the daily practices of Franciscans (Moorman 1988, 484, 487, 508–9). That debate, which cannot be divorced from the issue of power and how the missions were administered, resurfaced in the Americas (see chapter 6).

### Across the Sea and over the Hill

*Does this land belong to the kings of Spain or not? The second alternative no one dares to suggest, because it means being thrown out of the land and exiled from the kingdom.*

Fr. Francisco Ribera (Chapa 1997, 78)

Three centuries after St. Francis's death, the first Franciscans arrived at Veracruz, followed by the Dominicans in 1526, the Augustinians in 1533, and the Jesuits in 1572. Fr. Martín de Valencia led the first twelve Franciscans, called the Twelve Apostles, whose mission was to create the kingdom of heaven on earth—a city of God and men. The New World and its Native populations would enable them to re-create the ultimate kingdom of God. The choice of twelve Franciscans was as clear a message of their messianic mission as it was possible to convey in a single act (Phelan 1956, 44). The Amerindians, as Gerónimo de Mendieta perceived them, were meek, gentle, simple of heart, humble, obedient, patient, and content with poverty (56). Mendieta saw them as *tabulae rasae* imbued with natural reason but lacking the emotions and desires conducive to sin. Native Americans were the perfect utopian vessels for grace. Primed for goodness, in reality like angels,

they were closer to God presumably because they were still trapped in pre-limbo. Yet Mendieta was clear about how the Scriptures outlined the role of friars: "He meant that the Gentiles should be compelled in the sense of being guided by the power and authority of fathers who have the faculty to discipline their children for committing evil and harmful actions and to reward them for good and beneficial deeds, especially in all those matters relating to the obligations necessary for eternal salvation" (9). In order to accomplish the apocalyptic renewal of the church, it would be necessary to use force, although some, like Fr. Bartolomé de las Casas, a Dominican, vehemently disagreed with the procedure but not with the process. From 1524 to the 1600s, revolts, epidemics, conflicts, Inquisition trials, and the realization that Natives were neither meek nor obedient nor patient led to disenchantment. Angelic children had turned into rebellious adolescents.

In New Spain, the Franciscans operated mostly in California, central and northeastern Mexico, New Mexico, Texas, and the Southeast. The members of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, operated in California, northwestern and central Mexico, and in the Southeast. The two orders often missionized the same areas at different times, especially in Florida during the early period (from the 1500s through the mid-1700s) and in California after the expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767–1768.

In the early period, the Franciscans who came to New Spain adhered to the ideals of the Spirituales, who clung to St. Francis's vow and practice of poverty (Weber 1992, 93–94). The influence of Cardinal Ximénez de Cisneros with the crown, the Inquisition, and the wide distribution of Franciscan centers of religious and political power were all central to Franciscan theological supremacy (Ricard 1933/1982, 68). Amid empires of gold and human sacrifice, the encounter between the missionary, who was poor by choice, and the Native laborer, who was poor by condition, seemed to validate at last the long struggle of the Spirituales; they had found the appropriate place and folk for their mission of renewal. Later, on the inhospitable and untamed frontier, their encounter with hunters and gatherers reaffirmed this connection while it challenged the friars' capacity to imitate St. Francis and to re-create the city of God on earth.

In central Mexico, the honeymoon between Franciscans and civil authorities was short lived. The clashes between the Audiencia de Mexico and the Franciscans over civil and criminal jurisdiction culminated in 1530 with Bishop Juan de Zumárraga's excommunication issued for the people of Mexico City (Baudot 1990, 38–40). Regardless of the bitter arguments and subplots that marked these clashes, the core issues were control of the Natives and their labor. The movement northward of Franciscans from the Central

Basin of Mexico was erratic. Conversion accompanied military and commercial ventures, particularly mining and ranching, the two most prevalent industries of northeast New Spain. Hunting and gathering Native populations, who the colonizers feared and described as warlike, occupied this vast area. Most of the early campaigns of the northward conquest involved violent and protracted military actions that resulted in massive displacement of local Native populations, often after successive waves of Native revolts. From the settlers' point of view, these populations had nothing of value to contribute except their labor. For the Franciscans, a limitless horizon of possible converts kept alive a messianic dream. Ahead lay pristine fields of souls—a trope to behold.

### Conclusion

About 300 years separated the founding of the Franciscan Order by a homeless and joyful Francis and the arrival of Franciscan missionaries in the New World. St. Francis envisioned that his brotherhood would convert all tribes and all nations, present and future. And they did, and they do. The tenets of the order as established by St. Francis were particularly suited for work among nomadic Native populations. The foundational debates between Spirituales and Conventuales brought to New Spain, particularly to the frontier, a controversy that became embedded in mission policy. Those debates, which were ontological in their essence but pragmatic in their effects, were translated into mission models and conversion practices.