

The Conventual Franciscans Celebrating 150 years of Gospel Life in North America 1852 - 2002

Foundations in Europe

In 1209, St. Francis of Assisi received formal approval from Pope Innocent III for his new way of life. He entitled his community the "Friars Minor," a title literally meaning Lesser Brothers. St. Francis wanted his followers to imitate the humility of Christ and to minister to the least in society, to those of no account by the world's standards.

But soon, Francis' pooling of religious men of such varied backgrounds, with so many talents and initiatives, led the community toward the broader response of transforming every level of society. The friars became preachers and educators, royal administrators of charity and advocates of social justice. They spread the faith far and wide as missionaries, and spilled their blood as martyrs. The friars' expanding influence ultimately obligated them to sacramentalize even the world of culture. As musicians they began to dispel the dullness of life, as architects they reached beyond the ordinary shapes and forms, and as scientists they explored the mysteries of the universe.

After St. Francis' death, his movement was possessed of such a vitality, with so many opinions of how to live his form of Gospel life, that over time it could not be contained in one community. In 1517, the Order decided to divide into autonomous branches, each professing a valid perspective of their observance of his Rule.

The "Conventual" followers of St. Francis chose to minister in the heart of the cities rather than in more remote hermitages. They chose to band together in concentrated communities, in large houses or friaries (conventus, from the Latin). From here they felt they could offer a more concentrated flow of ministry and live a life of regular observance of their Rule.

The New World

Although the friars had been missionaries to the East since the thirteenth century, by 1492 they felt it was time to explore any new worlds to the West. Christopher Columbus, a Secular Franciscan, sought the advocacy of the Conventual friars of the Rabida Friary in Seville, Spain. It was Friar Juan Perez, an astronomer, who pleaded Columbus' case before King Ferdinand, to whom he was financial advisor, and to Queen

Isabella, to whom he was confessor. Needless to say, the monarchs were won over. Friar Juan Perez was able to sail with Columbus on his second voyage in 1493. He is credited with celebrating the first Mass in the New World.

As time past, it would be another branch of the Franciscan Order that would evangelize the Spanish colonies of the Southwestern parts of the United States. The Conventual branch of the Order focused its attention on the former British colonies of the East Coast.

The United States

The Napoleonic suppression of religious houses in 1803, devastated the life and ministry of the friars in Germany. It was legislated that when the last friar affiliated to a friary died, then that friary would become the property of the State. In 1839 only two friaries (Wurzburg and Schonau) were still possessed by the Order when the King of Bavaria overturned Napoleon's degree and gave permission for the Conventuals there to receive novices.

Thus, the small and weakened community of German friars saw the missionary adventure to America as a great hope of continued rebirth. It would be a sacrifice, but the invitation of Bishop Jean Odin of Galveston, Texas initiated the missionary adventure of pastoral care for German and Polish immigrants. The first five friar missionaries were Fr. Bonaventure Keller, first superior of the mission; Fr. Leopold Moczygamba, Fr. Anthony Mueller, Fr. Dominic Messens, and Br. Giles Augustin. These daring men of German, Polish and Belgian ancestry, were given four parishes in Castroville, Fredericksburg, New Braunfels, and Ohanis. Twelve missions were attached to these parishes that extended westward to California and south to Mexico.

Between the 1780s - 1850s, several individual Conventual friars ministered to German immigrants in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Brooklyn, and Cincinnati. But it was not until they arrived in Texas on September 14, 1852, when the Conventuals were able to establish de facto a permanent and abiding presence of the Order in North America.

Two years after their arrival, in 1854, Bonaventure Keller was invited East to minister in Brooklyn, New York. There he was responsible for twenty-two mission stations, including the premier German parish of Holy Trinity, currently on Montrose Avenue. In that same year, Leopold Moczygamba was appointed as second superior of the mission. In 1858, the friars received permission to place the mission under the patronage of the Immaculate Conception (a Franciscan sponsored dogma that had been declared four years earlier). That same year, John McCloskey, the first bishop of Albany, invited Moczygamba to send German friars to Syracuse and Utica to care for German Catholics. Since the number of friars in the country could not care for both the Texas missions and the East Coast missions, it was decided to transfer all activity to the East Coast. By 1859, the mission in Texas was failing. The territory was

terribly under-populated. The constant travel and basic exhaustion of the friars had led them to discern that a settlement in the East, where the Church was more settled, would be the wisest way to lay a solid foundation for the Order. In the East there would be more available resources and more vocational opportunities.

It was also in 1859, that the motherhouse of the American mission was established in Syracuse at Assumption Parish. A novitiate was also established there, and Assumption soon became well known for its beautiful liturgies and music. After this time, more and more mission stations were entrusted to the friars in upstate New York, and finally in 1867, Our Lady of Angels parish was offered in the capital of Albany.

The First Province

In February of 1872, the General Administration in Rome felt that the American mission was mature enough to become an autonomous Province. Bonaventure Keller was elected the first provincial of the "Immaculate Conception" Province.

In his first circular letter as provincial, Keller wrote, "Although the friars are involved in many activities, the first and greatest activity is personal sanctification by means of religious observance." Basically, the friars were very good pastoral laborers, but they had become accustomed to an independent lifestyle. Notwithstanding the immediacy of ministering to an overwhelming tide of immigrants, Keller passionately believed that the mission would be less fruitful if the friars neglected the regular observance of their common life.

Even as he worked to stabilize the community, Keller's health quickly declined and he died in office in 1877. Joseph Lessen was elected as the second Provincial. Lessen also tried to convince the friars that their constant pastoral activity would limit their common religious strength. He commented that "frequently religious obligations are viewed by the friars as impediments to ministry, as things that detract from work..." Thus, Lessen also challenged his confreres toward religious observance. And it was actually Lessen's organizational skills that placed the young province on a firm administrative foundation.

In the 1880s there was a tremendous number of Polish immigrants coming to the shores of America. Mostly of them being citizens of the then German-Austrian controlled region of Poland, these people naturally gravitated toward the German speaking parishes. Eventually this influx necessitated more Polish speaking friars. It was Friar Hyacinth Fudzinski, who was at the time ministering as a confessor at St. Peter's in Rome, who was delegated to begin recruiting Poles for the American mission.

Fudzinski soon returned to America himself and in 1895 he was elected the fourth Minister Provincial. Fudzinski, a man of Polish-German origin, was diplomatically able to quell the growing tension between the Polish

and German friars. Fudzinski was praised for his pastoral zeal, his piety and prudence. Through his tact and administrative efforts, Fudzinski also elevated the respect of ecclesiastical and civil leaders toward the friars. He and his successors accepted many debt-ridden parishes and through years of personal sacrifice and financial acumen they almost miraculously stabilized every apostolate.

New Provinces

As early as 1852, the friars had welcomed Polish immigrants, the first settlement being Panna Maria, Texas (near San Antonio). In 1906 it was decided to establish a second American Province to specifically minister to Polish immigrants. This new province, headquartered at Baltimore, would also help to stave off the terrible rift between the Church and those Poles who were leaving to join the new "Polish National Catholic Church." Although the Conventual friars were not able to settle the division completely, they were able to catechize well enough to welcome many back into the fold.

In succeeding years, three other jurisdictions were founded: in 1926 Our Lady of Consolation Province in the Midwest was created with its motherhouse at Mount St. Francis, Indiana; St. Bonaventure Province was created in 1939 with its motherhouse at Chicago. And in 1981, a West Coast Province was formed named after St. Joseph of Cupertino.

An Expansion of Conventual Heritage

In the intervening years of continued immigration, the Depression and World Wars, the friars ministered at many secondary schools as teachers and administrators; they served as military, university, prison, and hospital chaplains; they established printing presses and founded several publications. The friars have been pastoral and substance abuse counselors, itinerant preachers, directors of retreat centers, art's colonies, and the sponsors of a radio station. They have ministered in AIDS hospices and homeless shelters. They have constructed housing for the handicapped, founded a network of international shelters for youth and runaways, have co-sponsored a Franciscan NGO Office (non-governmental organization) at the United Nations, and have even initiated a wine making venture.

Many Sisters' communities have been co-founded or aggregated to the American Conventual Provinces. To name a few: Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, LaCrosse (aggre. 1870); Sisters of St. Francis of Assisi, Milwaukee (aggre. 1900); Franciscan Sisters of St. Joseph (co-founded 1909) Sisters of the Third Order of St. Francis, Syracuse (aggre. 1902); Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, Cornwells Heights (aggre. 1912); Sisters of Providence, Saint Mary-of-the-Woods (aggre. 1913).

The American Provinces of Conventuals have continued to water their roots of evangelization by either founding or re-founding a number of missions, namely: England (1907), Brazil (1946), Costa Rica (1946), Zambia (1959), Central America (1970), Japan (1970), Canada (1976), Ghana (1976), Mexico (1977), and Denmark (1993). The American friars have also generously assisted the international Order with ministry as confessors in St. Peter's in Rome, and pilgrim leaders in Assisi.

In keeping with their long heritage of cultural promotion, the friars minister at various significant sanctuaries across the country: Our Lady of Mount Carmel, located in El Paso, is the oldest Spanish mission in Texas; The National Shrine of St. Francis in San Francisco; St. Stanislaus Basilica in Chicopee, Massachusetts; St. Josaphat Basilica in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; the National Shrine of Blessed Kateri Tekawitha (Native American), Fonda, New York; the National Shrine of St. Maximilian Kolbe (Marytown), Libertyville, Illinois; and the National Shrine of Our Lady of Consolation in Carey, Ohio.

Significant American Personalities

Besides observing the feasts of the Franciscan saints in the universal calendar, the Conventuals also retain a special memory of several other American friars. Friar Aloys Fish +1939, historian and preacher, was also a long time advocate for prison reform. Friar Dominic Szymanski +1951, was the co-founder of a printing apostolate in the spirit of St. Maximilian Kolbe. Friar Justin Figas +1959, was the founder of the radio program, "The Rosary Hour." He was also an advisor to President Roosevelt regarding the German occupation of Poland during World War II. Friar Casimir Cyphir + 1976, was a missionary in Honduras who was brutally martyred. Friar Frederick Gorke +1992, a man who escaped Nazi aggression, spent his entire life dedicated to serving displaced immigrants. He even founding an orphanage in Africa. And Friar Jeremy Chodacki, 1906- , one of the senior most friars in the country, was a professor and musician, who while a student in Cracow was commissioned to compose the arrangement for the Israeli National Anthem.

Minister Generals

The American Provinces have also contributed to the international administration of the Order with four men who have served as Minister Generals. These men served with distinction at times of international crisis. Friar Dominic Reuter (1904-1910), was the first American to be elected General and the 107th successor of St. Francis. He was actually born in Germany, but immigrated to the States when he was three. Friar Dominic held a doctorate in both philosophy and theology. During the First World War he was appointed to head the Vatican Office for war prisoners. Friar Bede Hess (1936-1953) served the Order during the

precarious year of the Second World War. Friar Bede was an intermediary between the Allied and Axis powers. He promoted culture, social works, and new missions in Latin America. Friar Basil Heiser (1960-1972) served during one of the most transforming events for the Church of the modern era. The renewal of the Second Vatican Council confirmed his own beliefs that only reclaiming confiscated buildings was not enough to renew a lifestyle. During his many travels Friar Basil promoted a reawakening of social ministry and cultural activities that were all to be balanced by a contemplative attitude. After his term, Paul VI named him to the position of Under-secretary to the Congregation for Religious. And even the third millennium was ushered in with the election of an American, Friar Fr. Joachim Giermek (2001-). Friar Joachim, the 118th successor to St. Francis, is a man of culture who is imbued with both a fraternal and professorial sense of his Franciscan heritage.

–Friar Joseph Wood, OFM Conv.

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