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"FRENCH CLERGY ON THE TEXAS FRONTIER, 1837-1907"

by *Fr. Barnabas Diekemper*

In the process of time and of exigency, events occurred which would culminate in the Franciscan Friars of the Apostolic College of Zacatecas leaving the Province of Texas. The gray robed Friars had arrived in the early 1690s. One hundred years of their presence had been celebrated. Likewise the two secular priests in Texas would make their exit.

The Mission San Antonio de Valero was already secularized by April 12, 1793,¹ i.e., the mission was completely independent of Franciscan control; the inhabitants were to form their own town, elect their own officials, and own private plots of land. And the priest who cared for the people was to be a secular priest in charge of the parish formed from the mission. No secular priests were available, however, so the Franciscans continued as pastors of the missions.

With the advent of the Mexican revolt for independence, from 1810 through 1820, the missions continued to decline. Once actual independence from Spain was achieved, a few of the Spanish Franciscans loyal to the Crown left the Province of Texas and returned to Spain.² By 1830 there were two *criollo*³ Franciscans left in the Province of Texas: Padre Miguel Muro, O.F.M., who, soon after 1830, went to the California missions⁴; and Padre José Antonio Díaz de León, O.F.M., who was shot near Sandy Creek on his way to Nacogdoches. The reason Father de León was shot is not known, nor was the man apprehended who shot him. Father de León died in 1834.⁵ All the Franciscans were gone from the Province of Texas.

This left the whole of the Province of Texas in the hands of two secular priests who lived at the parish church of San Fernando in the small village of San Antonio. Father Refugio de la Garza had been appointed pastor of San Fernando Church in 1820. He remained as pastor until 1840, although he was on leave of absence in 1822-1823 to attend, as a delegate from Texas, the Mexican National Congress. Padre José Antonio Díaz de León, O.F.M., was his substitute pastor in 1822. In 1823 Father Francisco Maynes (a secular priest who returned to Mexico) was also a substitute. The other priest was Father José Antonio Valdéz, who was the assistant at San Fernando Church.⁶ "The aged Father Garza and his companion Valdéz had, for years, disregarded their parochial duties. Worst of all, they were living publicly in concubinage."⁷ Also, both had acquired properties in San Antonio.⁸ The condition of their clerical lives left much to be desired.

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Father John Timon, C.M., a native of York, Pennsylvania, was in Texas to investigate the condition of the Catholic Church by 1839. Bishop Antonio Blanc of New Orleans had sent Timon on the reconnaissance journey.⁹ Upon Timon's arrival in San Antonio, José Antonio Navarro and Don Erasmo Seguin testified that Garza and Valdéz had been derelict for years in their duties as priests. Navarro and Seguin agreed to sign affidavits about the dereliction of Garza and Valdéz. Timon did not allow Garza and Valdéz a defense, and sought letters from the Holy See for their removal.¹⁰

These letters of removal arrived in 1840. At the same time, Father Jean Marie Odin, C.M., arrived in Texas as Father Timon's assistant, with full authority to remove the two priests from San Fernando. Likewise, Odin was accompanied by Father Miguel Calvo, Brother Raymond Sala, and Father Eudald Estany. These three were Spanish volunteers who came to work in Texas. Odin arrived in San Antonio on July 30, 1840, along with Father Calvo and Brother Sala.¹¹ On August 1, Odin presented himself to Valdéz first and then to Garza. He told Father Garza he wished to celebrate Mass the next day in San Fernando Church. Garza expressed consent with a mere shrug of his shoulders. Odin preached in English and Calvo in Spanish.

Monday morning, August 3, Odin saw Garza. He showed Garza the letters which removed him as pastor and withdraw Garza's rights as a priest to celebrate Mass and hear confessions. Garza accepted the removal without recrimination. On August 6, Garza was arrested by Republic of Texas authorities for carrying on correspondence with General Artesia of the Mexican Army in Nuevo Laredo. The Republic of Texas had passed a law forbidding such correspondence with its former enemies.

On August 7, Father Odin approached Father Valdéz and presented him with the letters of removal. Valdéz, like Garza, offered no remonstrance, even though both Valdéz and Garza had relatives and friends living in San Antonio. Later on, some friends tried to have Garza reinstated as pastor, but the move was not successful. Both Garza and Valdéz fade out of the picture. They walk off the stage of activity in Texas into the oblivion of retirement in Mexico.¹²

The act of Odin to install Father Calvo on August 7, 1840 as pastor of San Fernando Church was the beginning of the French flavoring of the frontier in Texas. France not only had influence through Alphonse Dubois de Saligny, *charge d'affaires* of the court of Louis Phillippe to the Republic of Texas, but also in the ecclesiastical realm through Jean Marie Odin. Odin knew Alphonse Dubois, and Dubois rendered valuable service to Odin in the re-establishment of the Catholic Church in Texas. It was because France recognized the Republic of

Texas that Odin found cooperation from the civil authorities in Texas upon his arrival and subsequently.¹³

Likewise, the young, struggling Republic found the French priests coming to work in Texas to be advantageous for itself. France recognized the Republic. This recognition boosted the struggling Republic in its early days. If the Republic cooperated with the French clergy, the French government would be pleased. Furthermore, the delicate situation of the Holy See and the rebellious nations of Latin America at the time was critical, to say the least. In 1839, the Holy See again began to appoint bishops for Mexico. The papacy and Mexico had worked out an agreement. But it was truly a difficult diplomatic problem with Mexico for the papacy to recognize the separation of the Republic of Texas from Mexico by appointing official representatives in the persons of Timon and Odin. This practically amounted to *de jure* recognition of the Republic of Texas. It was *de facto* recognition.¹⁴ French recognition of the Republic of Texas must have influenced the papacy's decision to send representatives.

The French flavor immediately began to permeate the Texas frontier. The baptismal records of San Fernando Church show a marked increase in the number of baptisms. 1835 was the last year that Father Garza had entered his name as the minister of baptism. The next entry into the baptismal records was August 7, 1840, with Father Calvo signing the registry. Between 1835 and August 7, 1840, there were no entries. Between August 7, 1840 and 1845, there are 54 baptisms. Between 1828 and 1835 there are 58 baptisms recorded, 4 more than between 1840 and 1845; but there are two additional years as well. Calvo had gone to work immediately, and Odin's removal of Garza and Valdéz had borne fruit.

Before Father Odin left San Antonio for Austin, in October 1840, he made a tour of the missions around San Antonio. These were Concepcion, San José, San Juan and San Francisco de la Espada. He planned to turn Concepcion into a girl's school, staffed by sisters. San José, in the plan of Odin, was to be a boy's school.¹⁵ Neither plan subsequently materialized.

But Odin and Timon met in Austin to plead the repossession of Catholic Church property within the Republic of Texas. By January 18, 1841, with the help of Alphonse Dubois de Saligny, *charge d'affaires* of the French Government, Odin and Timon were able to have the church properties, the buildings, and no more than 15 acres around the buildings, confirmed by the Republic of Texas legislature.¹⁷ The Catholic Church had a foundation again and could continue to expand as time went on.

By March 30, 1846, Odin had 23 missionaries working in Texas. There were two Irishmen, John Lynch and Richard Hennesy, working among the English speaking exclusively. There were two Germans, Fathers James Miller and Anthony Lienhart, who were working among the German speaking people of New Braunfels and Fredericksburg. Lynch and Hennesy were missionaries of the Congregation of the Mission, or Vincentians. Lienhart and Miller were secular priests from Austria. Fathers Edward Clark and James Fitzgerald were secular priests from the eastern United States. Father Eudald Estany and Michael Calvo were Spanish. Fathers John Brands, Bartholomew Rollando, Claude Dubuis, James Girandon, Louis Chambodut, Matthews Chazelle, Anthony Charrion, Emmanuel Domenech, Charles Padey, and Joseph Anstaett were French. There were fifteen French missionaries, including Odin and four seminarians.¹⁸

These 19 priests had to care for, in 1846, a Catholic population of 25,000 people within the State of Texas. There were ten constructed churches and some eleven Mass stations.¹⁹ Mass stations were locales where Mass was celebrated in a house when there was no permanent church available. A priest would ride from place to place to hear confessions and celebrate Mass at these stations, usually visiting them once a month.

Odin felt the need to request the Holy See for a diocese for Texas in 1846. On May 14, 1847, Pope Pius IX created a diocese for Texas. The See of the diocese was situated in Galveston. Jean Marie Odin was appointed the first Bishop of Galveston. Odin had been consecrated a bishop on March 6, 1842, in New Orleans; and he had been functioning in the territory of Texas as a bishop, but without an official diocese, from 1842-1847. Once the diocese was set up, Odin began to organize and establish the Catholic Church in Texas as he saw fit.

Bishop Odin had brought to Texas a total of thirty-five priests by 1850. Of these thirty-five, ten died of yellow fever, drowning and accidents.²⁰ Eleven of the thirty-five priests were Oblates of Mary Immaculate. All of the Oblates had to leave Texas because their religious superiors thought that the work was too difficult and debilitating for the men. The Oblates were a French foundation, and the first ones to arrive in 1849 came from Canada to work in the lower Rio Grande Valley. They withdrew in 1850, but they returned in 1852²¹ and the Oblates have been in Texas ever since.

Bishop Odin had augmented his priests to forty-two and five seminarians by 1860. The lists show that 98% of the forty-two were French born.²² The priests in Texas were predominantly French. Earlier in 1852, Bishop Odin had called a synod of all the priests of his diocese. Of the thirty-six priests who were in Texas at the time, sixteen showed

up in Galveston at Saint Mary's Cathedral. The following were named consultors to the bishop: Claude M. Dubuis, Augustin Gaudet, and Louis Chambodut. The diocese was divided into four areas where a direct representative of Bishop Odin took care of local problems: Louis Chambodut, as Chancellor and second in command to Bishop Odin, took care of the Galveston-Houston area; Claude Dubuis, as Vice-Chancellor, took care of the San Antonio area; Augustin Gaudet, as a Vice-Chancellor, took care of the Brownsville area; and James Guiraudon, as a Vice-Chancellor, took care of the Laredo area.²³ All were immigrants from France. All had received training at the Grand Seminaire in Lyons; all had volunteered to come to Texas at Odin's request; all were French in outlook and learned English as a second language. Whenever they met together they spoke French. Odin, Dubuis, Chambodut, and Gaudet were all buried in France.²⁴

Claude Dubuis became the second Bishop of Galveston after Bishop Odin was appointed to be Archbishop of New Orleans in 1861. Dubuis was in France at the time of his appointment and was consecrated there in 1862. He returned to Texas through the Union blockade via Matamoros in April, 1863. With him he brought a total of sixty priests, sisters and seminarians, all French, who were to work in the Diocese of Galveston.²⁵

The Catholic population of the Diocese of Galveston in 1873 was approximately 180,000. Only eighty-eight priests took care of these 180,000 people. Of the eighty-eight, sixty-two were French. The other twenty-six were German and Irish. There were fifty-five churches and chapels to take care of. There were three colleges, eight schools for boys, and nine academies for girls to staff.²⁶ The original sisters who came to Texas to staff most of these schools were Ursulines, Incarnate Word Sisters, and Sisters of Divine Providence, all originally French foundations. There were a few scattered Irish sisters such as the three Ursulines who helped to open Ursuline Academy in San Antonio,²⁷ but the others were French. There was truly a French flavored Catholic educational process within Texas. Even the Marianist Brothers, who later developed St. Mary's University in San Antonio, were French, with the exception of one brother who came from Ohio and was a native speaker of English.

It was not an easy task for these French men and women. It was difficult to adapt to the climate, to the Texas food (cornbread, beans and bacon), and especially to the language. Some spoke Spanish as a second language, but most of them struggled to learn English: English as it was spoken in Texas.

Eventually, the ideas of French education and French morality struggled into the Texas society. The French priests and sisters were

still somewhat tainted by Jansenism, and this is evident within their letters as they make judgments about the people and the environment of Texas. They were strict disciplinarians, and it was difficult for them to understand the casualness, at times, that the Spanish speaking population showed toward the official church.

Likewise, it is difficult for them to comprehend the east with which many English speaking Catholics in Texas tolerated the pluralism around them. The Catholic Church in France had again become the first daughter of the Papacy. The devastation of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era had passed. The Catholic Church in France flourished again. It was the country that sent out missionaries to all parts of the earth. There was not a small amount of church triumphalism evident among the clergy and sisters who came to Texas from France in the 1850s, 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s. This is truly brought out in the huge structures that were constructed on the campuses of Our Lady of the Lake University at San Antonio, Incarnate Word College, and Saint Mary's University, all in San Antonio.

Part of this French triumphalism is also evident in these statistics. Between March 25, 1846, and March 12, 1861, Bishop Jean Marie Odin ordained 47 Frenchmen to the priesthood. They were to work in Texas. Jean Pierre Bajard died in October of 1853 during a yellow fever epidemic. He never reached the priesthood since he was only a subdeacon at the time of his death. In the same epidemic five French priests also died. Some of them were newly arrived from France. Between January 11, 1863, and January 30, 1881, Bishop Claude Marie Dubuis ordained seventy-seven Frenchmen to the priesthood to work in Texas. In 1867, the yellow fever epidemic took the lives of two more priests in Galveston. Over a span of 35 years, 124 ordinations seems a lot. But the records show that many returned to France to die; many died here because of the harshness of the environment; and some just seem to disappear.²⁹

In 1874, San Antonio became a diocese of its own with Anthony Dominic Pellicer, a native of Florida, as its first bishop. At the same time, 1874, Brownsville became a diocese, with Bishop Dominic Manucy, a cousin of Pellicer, as the first ordinary. In 1890, Dallas became a diocese with Bishop Thomas Francis Brennan as the first bishop. Pellicer and Manucy were descendants of Minorcan families in Florida. Bishop Brennan and Bishop Nicholas Gallagher, who succeeded Dubuis in Galveston, were American-Irish. But their clergy were still predominantly French.³⁰

The next two bishops of San Antonio, after Pellicer, were John C. Neraz and John A. Forest. These two men were French imports during Dubuis' administration. Bishop Dubuis resigned in 1882 from the

diocese of Galveston: 1) because of age and infirmity; 2) a rising opposition to French clergy in Texas at that time. The opposition came from laity and priests.³¹ Nevertheless, Bishop Neraz was appointed in 1881, and Bishop Forest in 1895.

Besides bishops Neraz and Forest, who were colorful characters themselves, there are a few outstanding characters among the French clergy of Texas at this time to point up the colorfulness of these Frenchmen in an alien land. Here are some of them.

Father Peter Berthet accidentally shot off the index finger of his right hand. The source does not indicate the circumstances of the accident, which accident occurred in 1869 near Galveston.

Father Antoine Borias, in 1856, was beaten up by ruffians near Goliad. In 1860, he was shot at by ruffians near San Patricio, but he escaped because his horse out ran the ruffians' horses. Then, in 1864, on his way to Brownsville from Goliad, he nearly died on the way. His horse froze to death and Borias was found by a Mexican-American and brought to Brownsville. He died in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana, in 1900.

Father John Bottet drowned in a lake near Nacogdoches on August 23, 1857. He was swimming and trying to cool off in the Texas August heat.

Father Francis Bouchu acted as pastor of Mission San Francisco de la Espada from 1867-1907. He also took care of Losoya, El Carmen and Graytown, Texas. He wrote a Spanish catechism which became the official Spanish catechism in Texas and New Mexico. When he died on August 19, 1907, he left no money and just a few ragged personal belongings. He died in Santa Rosa Hospital, San Antonio, Texas.

Father Jean Marie Bourbon died of starvation and thirst when he lost his way on a trip between Laredo and Corpus Christi in 1866. A cowboy found Bourbon's bones near San Ignacio, Texas, several years later.

Father Etienne Bufford wrote from San Antonio to Bishop Odin in New Orleans, in 1864: "No one is able to see the end to the war . . . send any mail to Father Gage in Matamoros, who will forward it through Brownsville." The Civil War hampered all communications.

Father Claude Chambodut helped confederate General Magruder during the siege of Galveston in 1862. Chambodut was rector of Saint Mary's Cathedral in Galveston. He ordered the nuns at the Ursuline Academy to turn the academy into a hospital. They did, and they nursed the wounded from both sides.

Father Emmanuel Domenech was celebrating midnight Mass on December 24, 1849. While the Mass was going on, Comanches killed

two men and a child. Domenech had to bury them on Christmas Day in the Castroville cemetery. In 1863, Domenech became a military chaplain in the army of Archduke Maximillian in Mexico. After the French defeat in Mexico, he went back to France and retained a chaplaincy in the army of Napoleon III.

Father Joseph Guyot was the first pastor of St. Patrick in Fort Worth. He had fifteen Irish Catholic families out of a total population of 10,000 in 1884. He built the church with his own funds, and it was dedicated on July 10, 1892. In 1889 Guyot helped the Sisters of the Incarnate Word to establish Saint Joseph's Hospital in Fort Worth. Father Guyot died in Saint Joseph's Hospital on August 5, 1907. As a resume of his life, he said, "Tell them I came here thirty years ago and have been here ever since," He is buried in Saint Patrick's Church, Fort Worth.

Father Peter Anthony Levy is another interesting French priest. This story, which occurred about 1875, is told about him. On a visit to Orange County, Levy was met by a band of ruffians. They forced him to dismount, and they led him to a large tree on the river bank that was famous for its lynchings. The ruffians showed the nicks that had been cut in its bark and acted as a record of the number of executions. Then they told him to hit the trail, without his horse. He obeyed, but he said to them: "Boys, you have the drop on me now. I'll do as you say. But remember this! I'll be back and I'll make you line up together and say the Lord's Prayer." They didn't know that Levy had formerly been a sharp shooter in the French army.

Levy went back into the same area shortly after and carried out his promise. "I can knock the eye out of a fly with this rifle," he told the ruffians and he proceeded to prove it. Then he suddenly turned on them and told them to line up. They were so astonished at his marksmanship just displayed that they obeyed his order. It is said that they all gladly repeated the Lord's Prayer, besides delivering his horse to him.

In 1873 in Dallas, Father Joseph Martiniere was made the pastor of Sacred Heart Church, which was built in 1872. He got the Ursulines to come and open a school in 1874. In 1888 he opened an orphanage. He was born in 1841 and died in 1910. He labored in Texas from 1862 to 1910, almost 48 years. He is buried in Dallas.

The Reverend Mathurin Pairier first worked in New Zealand, 1849-1869. Then he came to Texas. In 1874 he was appointed pastor in Fort Davis, Texas; but he headquartered at Fort Stockton, Texas. In 1884 he built the first Catholic Church in San Angelo, Texas. This was the first church in the present Diocese of Amarillo. Too heavy to ride a horse, Pairier would ride his buckboard from San Angelo to the army

forts in West Texas. He followed the schedule of military pay trains that left San Antonio twice a year to Forts Griffin, Throckmorton, Belnap, and as far as Fort Worth. His main source of income came from the Irish soldiers on pay day at the forts.

Father Peter Tarrillion came to Texas in 1855. This tale is told of him. Having heard that some persons had threatened to tar and feather the first priest who would come to their town, Father Peter decided to pay the town a visit. He rode coolly into the village with a Winchester strapped to his saddle. He went boldly to the leading grocery store to make some purchases. His fearless, though kind manner, so impressed the hasty threateners, that no one attempted to apply tar and feathers.¹²

These are just a few of the French flavored men who worked, lived, sweated, and some died and were buried, here in Texas. It was in 1855 that the Know-Nothing Party managed to have about 20 representatives and five state senators elected to the Texas legislature. It was during 1861-1865 that Texas joined the Confederate States of America. And in 1861, Father Claude Chambodut was blessing the men in gray who left Galveston to join Hood's Brigade in Virginia. They were all sons of French settlers around Galveston whose fathers had fought with Napoleon and settled in Texas.¹³ It was the time of Reconstruction, and two new dioceses were made in Texas: Brownsville and San Antonio, right in the teeth of Union occupation.

It was the time of packing rifles, going by horseback, losing your way and dying in the wilderness. It was the time of French clergy who added their flavor of life to the frontier church of Texas in the nineteenth century.

NOTES

¹Habig, Marion A., *The Alamo Chain of Missions* (revised edition; Chicago, 1976), 77.

²Habig, Marion A., *San Antonio's Mission San Jose* (Chicago, 1968), 119.

³*San Antonio's Mission*, 119.

⁴Leutenegger, Benedict and Marion A. Habig, *The Zacatecan Missionaries in Texas, 1716-1834* (Austin: Texas Historical Survey Committee), 133.

⁵*The Zacatecan*, 116.

⁶Taken from the list of pastors at San Fernando Church and on file in the Catholic Archives at San Antonio.

⁷Castaneda, Carlos E., *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas, 1519-1950*. (New York, reprint, 1976), vii, 46.

⁸*Catholic Heritage*, 11.

⁹*Catholic Heritage*, 11.

¹⁰Timon, John M., *Memoir*; an unpublished manuscript of Timon's located in Catholic Archives of Texas, Austin, Texas.

¹¹Odin, Jean Marie, "Diary of John Mary Odin, First Bishop of Galveston, Texas," entry July 30, 1840; Catholic Archives of Texas, Austin, Texas.

¹²"Diary," appropriate dates.

¹³"Diary," entries December 14, 21, 1840.

¹⁴"Petition of John M. Odin, Prefect Apostolic, in reference to church property in Texas," file number 1717, Fifth Congress, December 21, 1840; Catholic Archives of Texas, Austin, Texas.

¹⁵Baptismal records of San Fernando Church; Catholic Archives at San Antonio.

¹⁶Odin to Bishop Antonio Blanc of New Orleans, October 2, 1850; Catholic Archives of Texas, Austin, Texas.

¹⁷"Petition."

¹⁸Priests' Files, list of priests; Catholic Archives of Texas, Austin.

¹⁹*Catholic Heritage*, 106-107.

²⁰Priests' Files.

²¹Doyon, Bernard, *The Cavalry of Christ on the Rio Grande* (Milwaukee, 1956), 14-30.

²²Priests' Files.

²³"Records of the First Synod of Galveston," 1858; Catholic Archives of Texas, Austin.

²⁴Priests' Files.

²⁵*Catholic Heritage*, 110.

²⁶*Sadlier's Catholic Dictionary, Almanac and Ordo; 1873*; 196-198.

²⁷McDowell, Catherine, *Letters From the Ursulines, 1852-1853* (San Antonio, 1977).

²⁸Schmitz, Joseph William, *The Society of Mary in Texas* (San Antonio, 1951), 26.

²⁹Priests' Files.

³⁰*Sadlier's Catholic Dictionary, Almanac and Ordo; 1874*, 198-201. *Hoffman's Catholic Directory and Clergy List; 1890*, 302-304.

³¹Perrichon, Abbe Jean, *The Life of Bishop Dubuis, Apostle of Texas*, N.D., copy of typed manuscript in Catholic Archives at San Antonio.

³²The material for these thumbnail sketches was taken from "Biographies of French Diocesan Priests in Nineteenth Century Texas," by James F. Vanderholt, February 16, 1978. This limited, duplicated work was done from material gathered from sources found in Catholic Archives of Texas, Austin, and Catholic Archives at San Antonio.

³³"Biographies."