

THE SPANISH MISSIONS OF THE SOUTHWEST

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ONE of the unique features of colonial North America was the frontier mission which was developed on this continent by the rulers and clergy of imperial Spain. No other mission system elsewhere in the world has been quite like it, although the Spanish mission was by no means confined, in scope, to North America. On the contrary, this peculiar frontier institution has left its mark on nearly all borderlands of Spain in the New World, north or south of the equator.

Suppose one glances briefly at the background of this instrument of Spain and the Church in North America. In the early and middle Sixteenth century, nothing is found exactly resembling the frontier mission in New Spain. The reason for its absence is obvious—for Spain was then following the semi-feudal policy of dividing her new Indian subjects among their conquerors, by a process known as the *repartimiento* in which particular villages or tribes of Indians were assigned to *encomiendas*, each *encomienda* under an *encomendero*. The *encomendero* was expected to look out for the civilization and spiritual welfare of his charges, while receiving the profits of their labor in return. Thus it was expected that the purposes of establishing government, and society and religion would be served; and although the *encomenderos* were not always conscientious in caring for their wards, on the whole the *encomienda* system served fairly well for the Indians of tropical America.¹

But the *encomienda* system was best applicable to Indians who lived in close communities and large numbers. When the Spanish conquerors came in contact with what they called "wild" Indians (*Indios bravos* or *bárbaros*), who lived semi-nomadic lives in scattered groups, it was found difficult if not impossible to collect them

¹ Simpson, Lesley B., *The Encomienda in New Spain: Forced Labor in the Spanish Colonies, 1492-1550* (Berkeley, 1929).

and keep them subdued and industrious on the plantations and in the mines of would-be encomenderos. Therefore, some new agency had to be developed to deal with this less tractable type of native, and at least keep him peaceful and well disposed toward the Spanish settlers. Such an agency was found in the mission as it is known in our history. It should be noted, too, that the development of the mission was not a sudden, spontaneous affair—that the technique of mission-building and management took many years to perfect; in fact, its full development required centuries. It is in the latter part of the Sixteenth century, however, that one sees the problem of contact with the Indians on the frontiers of New Spain being turned over to the orders of friars who were willing to assume such responsibility. They responded with zeal and enthusiasm.²

In discussing the Spanish mission it should be remembered that it was a three-fold institution—political, religious and economic or social. As a religious institution, its purpose is fairly obvious, for the friars and the members of the Company of Jesus regarded their conversion of the Indians as heaven-sent opportunities for the advancement of the Church. It sometimes mattered rather little to them how much the Indian understood of the religious doctrines served up before him, provided he went through the necessary forms of becoming a Christian. Yet this statement should not be taken as applying to a majority of the missionaries, most of whom were perfectly sincere in their religious motives and thoroughly conscientious in performing their duties. As a political and imperial instrument of Spain, the mission served the purpose of peace-maker and spreader of Spanish civilization and authority. As such, it received substantial aid from the Crown. In addition, the mission took care of all those wild and half-wild tribes whom the encomenderos did not consider it worthwhile to exploit. As time went on, too, the encomienda system was gradually abolished; and then the missions took charge of the economic life of the collected frontier Indians. Thus missionaries became actually Indian agents of the Spanish government, keeping peace on the frontier, serving God and civilizing the savages.³ Of course, from the viewpoint of the Spanish rulers, the mission was always a temporary phase in making the Indian into a Spanish citizen, just as the work of our Indian agent was so re-

² Bolton, Herbert E., "The Mission as a Frontier Institution in the Spanish American Colonies." *American Historical Review*, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, October 1917, pp. 42-61.

³ *Ibid.*

garded. When the white settlement increased sufficiently in the neighborhood of a mission, it was expected that the missionary would be replaced by the priest, and his lands divided among the whites and the Indian converts. Then the missionary might advance to another new frontier. As an economic and social institution, the mission began the clearing of agricultural lands, brought in cattle for the Indians, and prepared the way for the white settlers who followed the trail. At the same time, Spanish civilization, or the rudiments of it, was imparted to the red men, and they were taught better and more efficient methods of gaining a livelihood.⁴

One might distinguish three main institutions of the Spanish-American frontier: the mission, the presidio, and the pueblo. The order in which they have been mentioned indicates the manner in which they were used when it was feasible to do so. First, the mission, and after it had pacified the Indians, the presidios were established to keep order and guard against the wilder Indians out beyond the area of mission influence. Then, in course of time, came the pueblo, with its civilian colonists, rancheros, miners, merchants, as the country became more safe for individual economic enterprise. Of course, we are most concerned here with the mission; but it is well to remember that behind the padre there was always the military arm of Spain reaching out to take in territory or merely to protect the religious worker; and that back of the missionary and the soldier there came, in course of time, the settler.⁵

The methods of the mission are reasonably familiar to most Americans, and need not be dwelt upon at length in this general survey. Of course, there was first the *entrada*, or exploration of any possible mission field by individual padres or small groups of them, bringing word of the teaching of Christ, introducing the natives to the Cross and if possible baptizing them. Depending upon the reception given them in these *entradas* (literally "entrances") the padres could decide the question of establishing missions in the territory explored. Possibly after one or two *entradas* a few bold padres would come to make their homes permanently in the new country. Then would come the building of the mission proper, which at first was likely to be nothing more than the habitation of the missionaries. Two padres were ordinarily considered enough for each mission, although there might be more if the number of Indians served seemed to

⁴ Blackmar, Frank W., *Spanish Institutions of the Southwest* (Baltimore, 1891).

⁵ Bolton, *op. cit.*

justify a greater number. One padre was supposed to devote his time to managing the mission and its chapel, and conducting the religious services, while the other made regular journeys to neighboring Indian villages. Both devoted a good part of their time to instructing the Indians in agriculture and such trades as they could learn, and to building more structures for the mission establishment. Each mission extended its influence, if possible, by planting branch missions or *visitas* among the neighboring Indian tribes. A *visita*, usually only a small chapel to begin with, might be regarded as a mission in the process of growth; for if the labors of the padres there and the numbers of the natives justified it, the *visita* might be made into a full-fledged mission, with resident instead of merely visiting missionaries. The task of making the rounds among the *visitas* was a dangerous one at times, for even if the surrounding tribes always remained friendly, there was ever the fear of raiding parties of hostile Indians, such as Comanches or Apaches. Many a padre met martyrdom in such service. For this reason it was usually the chief aim and endeavor of the padres at a given mission, to collect the Indians at the mission itself, or as near as possible; an additional reason for this being the greater ease with which they could be instructed and influenced. So in the most successful mission establishments, such as those of California, the Indians were collected in close communities and kept at work, the neophytes going through a regular routine of labor each day, labor interspersed, of course, with the religious services. What the Indians thought of this system is uncertain but we may infer that to many of them it was satisfactory, because they were at least ensured food and shelter. In fact, a large part of the initial influence of the padres in almost any frontier mission was undoubtedly due to the dispensing of food and gifts among the Indians.⁶

So much for the technique, in general, among the mission padres. Let us glance now at the general division of the mission fields. Far over in the eastern part of North America the mission as a frontier institution seems to have been tried out first in Florida. Here were to be seen the Christian soldiers of the Company of Jesus (Jesuits) taking charge of missions soon after the founding of St. Augustine in 1565; and that the Jesuits were at least ambitious if not successful in this region, can be seen in the fact that nearly forty years before the founding of English Jamestown, Padre Segura of the Jesuit Order had established a mission of the Rappahannock River in Vir-

⁶ Blackmar, *op. cit.*

ginia, where he and his companion suffered martyrdom, in 1570. It was not long afterward that the Jesuits gave up the Florida frontier to the Franciscans, who were not much more successful, although they maintained themselves there until the Eighteenth century.⁷ Turning westward the Order of Friars Minor (Franciscans) were to be found taking over the mission work in what are now New Mexico and Texas. Franciscan missions were planted in New Mexico with the coming of the Oñate expedition of 1596;⁸ but it was not until 1665 that the Franciscans began to make entradas into Texas, and not until much later that the Texas missions were established. Farther to the west the Jesuits took charge of the mission work in Sinaloa, Sonora and Lower California, being succeeded there in 1768 by the Franciscans.⁹ And last of all, the Franciscans, after taking over the Jesuit field, pushed their famous line of missions northward into Alta or Upper California, beginning in 1769.¹⁰ Thus the Franciscans survived the Jesuits as missionaries although they soon gave up their exhausted field in Lower California to the friars of the Dominican Order.

Now let us examine this advance of the missionary frontier in more detail. One point to be noticed is the point of view of New Spain. She regarded these missions as institutions for the spreading of Hispanic civilization and control. We of the Southwest today have to reverse our viewpoint, and imagine ourselves looking northward, from Mexico toward the wilderness, just as our Anglo-Saxon ancestors looked westward beyond the limit of white settlements in the United States. Consider what it meant to these Spanish pioneers to be pushing out into the unknown—without most of the weapons and resources of Anglo-American pioneers, and depending chiefly upon moral suasion for their success if not for their personal safety.

First one sees the Jesuits creeping up the Pacific slope of North America. They had first crossed the Cordillera of Mexico and

⁷ Bolton, Herbert E., and Ross, Mary, *The Debatable Land* (Berkeley, 1925), pp. 10-23.

⁸ Hammond, George P., *Don Juan de Oñate and the Founding of New Mexico* (Santa Fe, 1927).

⁹ Bolton, Herbert E., *Spanish Exploration in the Southwest, 1542-1706* (New York, 1916), pp. 427-463; Chapman, Charles E., *The Founding of Spanish California* (New York, 1916).

¹⁰ Bolton, Herbert E. (ed.), *Historical Memoirs of New California, by Fray Francisco Palou, O. F. M.* (4 v., Berkeley, 1926); *Fray Juan Crespi, Missionary Explorer on the Pacific Coast, 1769-1774* (Berkeley, 1927); Chapman, *op cit.*

come down to establish their missions in Sinaloa in 1591. From that point may be traced their slow but steady progress northward, from one short, fertile river valley to another, along the narrow western coastal plain of Mexico. Step by step they advanced, establishing schools, setting up the authority of Spain, suppressing the native medicine men, suffering martyrdom on various occasions and often facing starvation, but always advancing; the places of the fallen being taken by new workers. In the Fuerte River valley, the bold Yaqui nation was for a long time a difficult obstacle; but in 1610 the Yaquis were subdued and given missionaries, although they often broke loose in the years that followed, carrying on the 300-year war that ended only about thirty years ago with the submission of the Yaquis to Mexico. The Jesuits also made futile efforts during the middle Seventeenth century to bring missions to Lower California.¹¹ But by 1636 Jesuit missionaries were established at Ures, in the Sonora River valley. Fourteen years later they were functioning in Cucurpe and Arizpe in northern Sonora, where there were thirty of them in 1679, serving, it was estimated, some 50,000 neophytes, in what the Jesuits called the Pimerías—Baja and Alta—Sonora and southern Arizona.

At this point, eight years later, the now famous Padre Eusebio Francisco Kino was entering the mission field of the Pimerías. In 1687 he founded Mission Dolores, a few miles east of Magdalena. This was his headquarters for twenty-four years thereafter, and from it as a base, he founded his famous chain of missions, in the Altar valley and in the valley of the Santa Cruz. After his death in 1711 the missions of the Pimería country languished for a time. San Xavier del Bac (founded by Kino in 1700) was occupied by a series of padres, as were San Gabriel de Guevavi and San Cayetano del Tumacacori, the other two Jesuit missions of Arizona. The discovery of the Bolas de Plata mines at Arizonac in 1736 caused a temporary revival of interest in this borderland, and after the Pima revolt of 1750, presidios were established to protect the missionaries—Tubac, Terrenate, Altar and Fronteras, although by that time several of the missions had been abandoned.¹²

¹¹ Chapman, Charles E., "The Jesuits in Baja California, 1647-1768," *Catholic Historical Review*, Volume VI, No. 1, April 1920, pp. 46-48.

¹² Bolton, Herbert E., *Kino's Historical Memoir of Pimería Alta* (2 v., Cleveland, 1919); *Spanish Exploration in the Southwest*, loc. cit.; Hammond, George P., "Pimería Alta after Kino's Time," *New Mexico Historical Review*, Volume IV, No. 3, July 1929, pp. 220-238.

Such was the mission situation in the far Southwest when in 1767 the Jesuits were expelled from all the dominions of Spain. Franciscans came into Pimería next year to take the place of the Jesuits; the explorer, Fray Francisco Garcés, becoming the missionary at San Xavier for ten years.¹³ Likewise, Franciscans took over the Jesuit missions of the peninsula of Lower California, which had been founded there, beginning in 1697 with the efforts of Padre Juan María de Salvatierra, and which were prospering after a fashion.¹⁴ The Franciscans soon turned the Lower California missions over to the Dominican Order, and instead took up the work of extending mission control into Alta California, in 1769.¹⁵ Thus from Alta California to the borders of Texas, Franciscans were in charge of the Spanish frontier missions by 1770.

It will be necessary to turn back here a moment and note the progress of the Franciscan missions. The Franciscans, as has been said, came into New Mexico with Juan de Oñate in 1598, and they took an important part in the founding of that wedge of Spanish colonization along the ranges of the eastern Rockies and up the Rio Grande valley; they went out among the Indians of the pueblos and set up missions in strategic places, and by 1630 there were some twenty-five missions serving 60,000 Indians under Franciscan control in New Mexico. But quarrels with the military authorities hampered mission development here, although the enterprising Franciscans did push westward into the Painted Desert of northern Arizona by the middle of the Seventeenth century. Then came the great Popé Indian rebellion of 1680 which resulted from the mismanagement of the government and missions, and which caused a general exodus of Spaniards from New Mexico.¹⁶ The province was not recovered until 1693, when the Franciscans were restored to their missions; but they had suffered too great a blow, the missions as establishments no longer prospered, and finally priests came in to take the place of the missionaries. Meanwhile, the Franciscans had been pushing into Texas, but not getting much encouragement there, in 1693 they withdrew from the country for a long time. In 1718, however, they came back with military support, and

¹³ Engelhardt, Padre Zephyrin (Charles Anthony), *The Franciscans in Arizona* (Harbor Springs, Michigan, 1897).

¹⁴ Chapman, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Bolton, *Palou*; Chapman, *Founding of Spanish California*; Denis, A. J., *Spanish Alta California* (New York, 1927).

¹⁶ Hackett, Charles W., "The Pueblo Revolt of 1680," Texas State Historical Association, *Quarterly*, Volume XV, pp. 93-143.

founded San Antonio de Bejar, dean of the Texas missions. The Texas missions were never very prosperous, being exposed too much to the raids of the Plains Indians, who had now secured horses, and not having the geographic advantages of the missions of the Pacific slope. The experience of San Saba Mission is an example of how little the Christian teachings appealed to the Plains Indians, for it had no sooner been founded (1758) for the purpose of serving the Apaches, when the Comanches swept down upon it and destroyed it completely.¹⁷

Finally, one might glance at the Franciscan missions of Alta California. The political reason behind them is well known—the fear of Russia and England. They resulted largely from the recommendations of José de Gálvez, visitor-general of New Spain, in 1768.¹⁸ In accordance therewith, came the advance of the missionaries under Fray Junípero Serra, escorted by Gasparde Portolá, in 1769. The founding of San Diego, 1769, opened the first of a long line of twenty-one missions, ending with the establishment of San Francisco Solano (Sonoma) Mission, in 1824.¹⁹ The great prosperity of the California missions was due largely to their isolation from dangerous enemies, and to the wealth of cattle which they owned. They were connected with New Spain by Juan Bautista de Anza's tracing of an overland route from the Pimería to San Francisco Bay, 1774, and his colonial venture thereto in 1776.²⁰ The excellent management of the California missions was due partly to the lack of interference from the military authorities, and partly to the lack of fear of any strong foes, as well, perhaps, as to the relatively pure-blooded stock of the Spanish colonists who settled near these missions.

Now to sum up the discussion of the Spanish mission frontier of the Southwest. The missions were most successful in California, for some of the reasons already shown. The type of Indian of California was easily controlled; there was a source of wealth as well as food in the cattle which roamed the California hills by countless thousands; and the soil was very fertile in many places; but most of

¹⁷ Bolton, Herbert E., *The Spanish Borderlands* (New Haven, 1921); *Texas in the Middle Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1915).

¹⁸ Priestley, Herbert I., *José de Gálvez, Visitor-General of New Spain, 1765-1771* (Berkeley, 1916).

¹⁹ Chapman, *Founding of Spanish California*, 97-101.

²⁰ Bolton, Herbert E., *Anza's California Expeditions* (5 v., Berkeley, 1930), Volume I, *An Outpost of Empire*.

TABULA CALIFORNIAE Anno 1702.
Ex autoptica observatione delineata a R.P. Chino S.I.



Jesuit map of Arizona and Lower California.

all the remoteness of California missions from foreign or savage dangers preserved them in relative safety, by comparison with many other frontier missions.

In the Pimeria and in Lower California, the missionaries held their own, and did little more. They were able to do so chiefly because the Pimas and similar tribes were strong enough to resist the attacks of Apaches, and not so much because of fertility of soil. In Baja California, the Indians were a dying race, hence the missions there were gradually abandoned as their services were less needed. As for the New Mexico missions, there has already been noted their slow recovery after the Popé rebellion, and their final secularization. In Texas, there is mainly failure to record concerning the missionary endeavors. Several reasons help to account for this. There were the predatory Indians of the plains, who had acquired horses from the Spaniards and turned them into a means of making continued and successful raids into Spanish settlements. The Comanches, Jicarillas, and Lipans and other Apache tribes proved too much for Spain to control, on this exposed frontier where no geographical barriers aided the soldiers or missionaries. Besides, the land of the Great Plains was not attractive to the Spanish settlers, who preferred, for the most part, the mountainous country of Mexico, so much more like their native Spain.²¹ Then, to make matters worse, there were the occasional disturbing visits of the French in Texas. We might summarize the Texan missionary failure by saying that the missions were altogether too much exposed to a variety of enemies, and that the Indians whom they tried to serve were either weak or indifferent and even hostile to missionary influence.

Here might be drawn up, then, some generalizations from the history of the southwestern missions. In general, it may be said that they succeeded among sedentary or weak or peaceful Indians, such as those encountered in New Mexico, Sonora, Arizona, Lower California and Alta California. But in some of those same regions, and in Texas, they met the nomadic Indians of the Great Plains and of the Arizona-New Mexico mountains. Especially after the horse had been acquired by these nomads, did the Spaniards and missionaries have a difficult problem to solve in controlling them; and of course the missions were the chief sufferers from the raids of the nomads, because they were the most isolated, and often suffered from the treachery of their own neophytes. Another point to be considered, is the relative weakness of political support for the mis-

²¹ Webb, Walter P., *The Great Plains* (New York; 1931), pp. 114-126.

sions in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, for then Spain was increasingly unable to raise money and men for the protection of the missions. So the missions might languish in New Mexico, Texas, Arizona and Lower California, while deserts and mountains protected the slender line of Alta California missions from the fierce Apaches and Comanches.

It is not necessary to dwell upon the services of the Spanish missions to the Southwest. Much of the romance of its history is due to them. A glance at our architecture is enough to show the influence of the Spanish mission buildings. And finally, the trails of commerce and empire are those which were originally traced for the white race by the missionaries. If no other service had been performed by the padres, their contributions to geography would be enough to make them immortal.

