The introduction of frontier missions as humanitarian agencies for converting and assimilating indigenous cultures into the mainline society distinguished the Spanish colonial experience in North America from the historical record of other European nations. Among ecclesiastical communities of religious men, the Franciscan missionaries achieved notable distinction for their apostolic work in the Spanish Borderlands of North America. Their patient evangelization among the Coahuiltecan tribes of the Coahuila-Texas corridor represented a hallmark segment of an American saga.

With the second wave of Spanish immigrants who followed Christopher Columbus to the Indies, Franciscan missionaries began their evangelization of indigenous cultures on the four principal islands in the Caribbean. Within one generation, Spanish explorers began probing Central America, culminating in 1521 with Hernán Cortés’s conquest of Mexico. Shortly afterwards, twelve Franciscan friars arrived in the Valley of Mexico to convert the indigenous civilizations.¹

In the first century of colonial experience, the missionaries applied the European model of conversion, namely the preaching of repentance and atonement through popular missions that did not require plazas and ancillary structures. The silver bonanza that began in earnest in 1549 in Zacatecas rapidly transformed the landscape of the central corridor of Mexico, leaving in its wake roads, mines, haciendas, towns, presidios, and missions.² The success of silver mining and its attendant economic boom made possible the eventual occupation of New Mexico in 1598 at the northern end of El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro.³

Meanwhile, along the eastern corridor, dominated by the Sierra Madre Oriental, frontier leaders and Franciscan missionaries in the second half of the 16th century gradually extended the line of colonization. Francisco de Urdinola the younger in 1576 settled sixty families at Saltillo, thus establishing a foundation for the subsequent development of Coahuila. Similarly, to the east, Luis de Carvajal founded Nuevo León in 1579, an enterprise that failed, causing government officials to appoint another leader, Luis de Montemayor, who renewed the colonial effort with the establishment of the town of Monterrey in 1596. In Coahuila and Nuevo León, Franciscan missionaries contributed to the eventual stability of the region.⁴

During the 17th century, Franciscans of the ecclesiastical Province of Jalisco (Guadalajara) joined military leaders in Coahuila in advancing the line of exploration to the Río Grande. In 1675, a mutually supportive Bosque-Lários expedition traversed the Río Grande in search of wilderness sites for future missions. By then, Coahuila emerged as a permanent frontier province.⁵ Concomitant with this
development, in 1683, Franciscan leaders inaugurated Santa Cruz de Querétaro, an apostolic college with an innovative curriculum, to train missionaries for frontier service. The alumni of Santa Cruz began the process of evangelizing the natives of the Coahuila-Texas corridor through a mission system. Unlike the popular missions in the central Valley of Mexico, the new system encompassed an evolution of phases, beginning with misión, representing a definite commitment to evangelize a frontier, and culminating with parroquia and pueblo, signifying a conclusion of the process as manifested in the emergence of a town with a parish church. In promoting the founding of frontier missions, royal officials and ecclesiastical leaders accepted the principle of transitory status for these institutions of conversion. In practical terms, within a mission's normal cycle of operation, from the date of its formal foundation, the spiritual-temporal initiative included a projected time for its secularization. Neither the church nor the state envisioned frontier missions as permanent outposts of empire. Within this context, therefore, the Río Grande missions of Coahuila became preliminary models for the later spiritual-temporal centers in Texas.

The Order of Friars Minor, a religious community that originated early in the 13th century, consisted of ordained priests and lay brothers. In deference to the Latin word frater (brother) and to the biblical passage in the Gospel of Matthew (25: 40-45) alluding to the “least of the brethren,” the Franciscans called themselves Friars Minor. In their ministry the friars became advocates for the poor and needy members of society. Frequently in their letters these missionaries interchanged the terms fray and fraile, which some historians erroneously interpreted in English as father instead of friar. Be that as it may, the missionaries who ventured into the wilderness of the Coahuila-Texas corridor belonged to the First Order of Friars Minor whose wearing apparel consisted of blue-gray habits and cowls, tied with a white cord. With varying degrees of approximated perfection, the friars practiced three vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Three knots in the Franciscan cord tied around their waist consistently reminded them of their voluntary vows.

In the fourth quarter of the 17th century, friars from conventos in the province of Jalisco, complemented by the work of alumni of the Apostolic College of Santa Cruz de Querétaro, accelerated the push of the missionary initiative toward the Río Grande. Slowly, but with firm resolve, they established a network of missions at locations that met two basic requirements: the presence of roaming bands of Coahuiltecos to be evangelized and the availability of natural resources (water and construction materials). These early Franciscan foundations included San Miguel de Aguayo, in the jurisdiction of the provincial capital, Santiago de Monclova; San Bernardino de la Caldera, located between the prosperous mining camp of Boca de Leones and Monclova; and Dulce Nombre de Jesús de Peyotes in the Río Salinas-Río Grande watershed.
In the summer of 1699, Francisco Cuervo y Valdés, governor of Coahuila, dispatched a squad of presidial soldiers, led by Captain Juan Martín Treviño, to escort a group of friars from Santa Cruz in search of mission sites in the verdant Río Sabinas valley. Among the Quereteran missionaries who performed outstanding work in the transition period from one century to the next were, Diego Salazar, Francisco Hidalgo, and Antonio Olivares. On June 24, the feastday of John the Baptist, this contingent of friars and soldiers founded Mission San Juan Bautista near the banks of the Río Sabinas.11

In less than six months, Friar Olivares secured permission from church and state authorities to relocate the missionary effort farther north by the Río Grande.12 Late in the year, with a complement of soldiers led by Sergeant Major Diego Ramón, the Franciscans explored several low water crossings of the Río Grande. Although their objective was to transfer San Juan Bautista to a new location, the friars’ assessment of the river fords signified long-range plans for extending the mission chain into Texas. For the time being, however, they concentrated on their immediate work on the west bank of the river. On January 1, 1700 the Franciscans named the region the Valley of the Circumcision. That same day, to demonstrate continuity of effort, Father Olivares, commissary of the group, proclaimed the transferred mission as San Juan Bautista.13

To protect themselves from inclement weather, these hardy pioneers constructed rudimentary shelters of branches and straw, including a chapel and living quarters for the friars. For several months the three confreres—Olivares, Hidalgo, and Salazar—shared a small grass hut which they found grossly inadequate.14 Personal discomfort to the contrary, the military approved of the location of San Juan Bautista, because it was safely removed from the Río Grande and the danger of floods, yet close enough for sentries to guard the nearby fords. The elevated terrain of the Río Grande-Río Sabinas watershed was generally arid, accented by irregular, rocky hills, covered with prickly-pear cacti, creosote brush, mesquite trees and lechuguilla (a variety of agave). The soil of the drainage plain, where Olivares and Ramón relocated Mission San Juan Bautista, was unusually fertile and capable of supporting irrigated farming with water from upland natural springs.15

Three months later, encouraged by the availability of natural resources to justify modest expansion, Fray Olivares founded a second mission, San Francisco Solano, adjacent to arable land in the vicinity. At the initial founding of San Francisco Solano, named in memory of an intrepid 17th-century missionary in South America (now northwestern Argentina), Félix Sánchez, an interpreter, asked the indigenous Coahuiltecos if the establishment of a mission conformed to their wishes. According to Diego Ramón, who witnessed the formal act of possession, the congregation of sixty-five natives signaled affirmation of the fundamental step in the mission process. To attract attention, Fray Olivares rang a bell and commenced
instruction in four basic prayers of Christianity, ending with the Alabado, a hymn in honor of the Blessed Sacrament and the Virgin Mary. Characteristic of Spanish frontier liturgy, Father Olivares then celebrated a Mass of Thanksgiving. In temporal affairs, the natives pledged obedience to the officials of their mission community.16

Having fulfilled the objectives of his assignment, Sergeant Major Ramón returned with the presidial escolta to Monclova, leaving the Franciscans to work in an exposed periphery of the Spanish empire. Emboldened by the absence of mission guards native aggressors, mainly a group called Tobosos, periodically raided the livestock. At other times the marauders intimidated the new converts, either by kidnapping women and children or by frightening the more docile neophytes into abandoning the mission. In response to an urgent appeal from Friar Olivares, Governor Cuervo y Valdés assigned an experienced frontier fighter, José de Urrutia, to protect the missions. Notwithstanding Urrutia’s courage, one soldier was not an effective deterrent. In the spring of 1701, when the Bishop of Guadalajara, Felipe Galindo Chávez Pineda, inspected the northeastern limits of his immense diocese which included the territory of the Río Grande mission, the Franciscans outlined plans for securing and extending their apostolic activities. Encouraged by the bishop’s visit to San Juan Bautista, Friar Olivares journeyed to Santa Cruz de Querétaro where he received approbation to continue to Mexico City for an audience with Viceroy José Sarmiento de Valladares, the Count of Moctezuma y Tula. The significant outcome of Olivares’s visit to the viceregal palace was two-fold: he obtained the military protection which the missions needed and also enlisted the support of the viceroy’s wife, the Duquesa de César, in furthering the work of the Santa Cruz friars in Coahuila. Of immediate importance to the defense of the Río Grande missions was the government’s deployment of a mobile cavalry unit of thirty soldiers in July 1701, commanded by Sergeant Major Diego Ramón.17

The Spaniards’ temporal and spiritual presence at the river passage, conveying security and assistance to the missions, clearly manifested the union of church and state, embodied in the Patronato Real (a diplomatic accord between the Crown of Spain and the Vatican), in the pursuit of the mutual goals of evangelization and colonization. On the return trip to the frontier, Antonio Olivares stopped at Santa Cruz de Querétaro to pick up replacement personnel, Alonso González and Jorge de Puga, for service at the Río Grande. With material goods procured in Mexico City, thanks to the generosity of the Duquesa de César, Father Olivares furnished the interior of Mission San Francisco Solano. “Each day,” wrote a Franciscan chronicler, “the Indians decorated the church with branches and flowers, and attended doctrinal classes in the morning and afternoon.”18

Encouraged by the prospect of continuing support from their benefactress, the Franciscans enlarged the scope of their work in the immediate vicinity. At a
distance of “two musket shots” southeast of San Juan Bautista, early in 1702, the friars inaugurated Mission San Bernardo, named in deference to the devotion of the Duquesa de César who had donated the church’s furnishings. By May, the resident missionary, Fray Alonso González, acknowledged an assembly of 400 natives under vocational and spiritual instruction.19

The concentration of three missions within a limited radius of approximately three miles, each trying to serve the spiritual welfare of interrelated Coahuilteco bands, inevitably contributed to a realignment of colonial settlements. By 1703, Matías de Aguirre succeeded Cuervo y Valdés as governor of Coahuila. This appointment, in turn, resulted in an upgrading of the mobile cavalry patrol into a permanent garrison, Presidio San Juan Bautista del Río Grande, commanded by the governor’s relative, Captain Pedro Buenaventura de Aguirre. Situated at the center of unappropriated mission lands, the presidio contained an adequate plaza de armas around which soldiers constructed ten flat-roofed adobe-and-stone houses. Owing to the privilege of seniority, the presidial commander occupied the most spacious structure, the capitania. The complex also included barracks for unmarried soldiers, supply rooms, and an enclosure for cavalry horses.20

In the first decade of the 18th century, the permanent status of Presidio San Juan Bautista del Río Grande, protecting the adjoining missions and the riverine fords, created a social climate of cooperation among officials of church and state. The uncertainties and jeopardies of frontier living sustained that spirit of friendly interdependence. Indicative of this tendency was Captain Aguirre’s assistance, with artisans and materials, in the building program at the nearby missions. By September 1703, presidial workers completed the initial phase of construction.21

Not surprising, the establishment of a presidio, with three missions clustered around its periphery, increased human demands upon the natural resources of the region, particularly water, arable fields, and grazing land. As a consequence, the scarcity of water, among other reasons, influenced the neophytes of San Francisco Solano to escape into the wilderness. Father Olivares, assisted by Fray Francisco Hidalgo (former guardia of Santa Cruz), retrieved most of the fugitives and resettled them at a site sixteen leagues (nearly 42 miles) west of the Río Grande which they called San Ildefonso. Five years later, when other mission converts fled to avoid the aggression of the Tobosos, the Franciscans returned the church ornaments to the Río Grande and reestablished San Francisco Solano at a site called San José, three leagues (7.8 miles) north of the more historic outposts, where the mission remained for a decade. In 1718, in response to Father Olivares’s recommendation, the viceregal government suppressed San Francisco Solano and authorized its transfer eastward where it became the noted Texas institution, Mission San Antonio de Valero.22

During the first decade of operating the Río Grande missions, the Santa Cruz friars experienced moderate success and unexpected reversals. In the spring of
1705, Diego Ramón, once again assigned to the frontier, personally inspected the missions. He reported to the provincial governor that San Juan Bautista had an aggregate native population of 144, of whom more than half were Christians, including twelve married couples and their offspring. San Bernardo, although with fewer marriages, possessed a comparable congregation of new Christians and *gentiles*. Aside from statistics on conversions, instruction, equipment, buildings, and agricultural and pastoral production, the report disclosed interesting insights into the human experience. The church of San Juan Bautista, constructed in the form of a cross with two side altars, displayed only one bell in the tower. The resident friar organized several Indian boys into an *a capella* choir, well trained in traditional church hymns, to sing at solemn religious services. Besides equipment and tools, the report alluded to the ability of Indian women to operate weavers’ looms for cotton and wool. Reflecting other customs and values, while the missionary cultivated vegetables and fruit trees in a garden grove fenced by an adobe wall, the Indians maintained a separate granary for storing items obtained outside of the mission compound. At Mission San Bernardo, the church was a single-room linear structured with two bells installed in the tower. The mission, which also cultivated a vegetable garden, excused eight Indian artisans from training in local government so that they could plow the fields and work in the carpentry shop constructing useful household accessories (doors, windows, tables, et cetera).

Shortly after this inventory, a smallpox epidemic broke out among the mission Indians that devastated the community. The natives of the Río Grande missions lacked natural resistance to the contagious disease. Under the dire circumstances, there was little the friars could do except to comfort the sick and dying. Gradually the epidemic subsided, leaving the survivors to confront the difficult task of rebuilding. Altogether, owing to the ravages of the epidemic and other causes, 96 adults and 57 children died at Mission San Juan Bautista, and 80 natives of all ages at San Bernardo. In the rebuilding process, the friars tacitly accepted a small creek as a line of demarcation between San Juan Bautista and San Bernardo.

On the outer fringe of the Spanish empire, the province of Texas benefitted substantially from the colonial enterprise at the Río Grande. In the course of the first decade, leaders of church and state hurriedly prepared to establish missions, presidios, and towns as focal points of Spanish determination to occupy the wilderness. In 1709, Antonio Olivares, an experienced frontiersman and father president of the Río Grande missions, personally led an *entrada* of exploration into Texas to survey the terrain from the Río San Antonio to the Río Colorado. Afterwards, Olivares became a strong advocate of extending the chain of missions from the Río Grande to the Río San Antonio to reinforce the colonizing initiative in east Texas.
During subsequent years of development, the Franciscan missions of the Río Grande and the adjacent presidio continued to function as complementary agencies of frontier colonization. In the process of restoration and consolidation, the friars depended upon presidial soldiers for assistance in pursuing fugitives or in recruiting new native converts. Such close interdependence was not without consequence, as disputes frequently arose between soldiers and missionaries regarding priorities, prerogatives, and compensations. For the most part, however, there was more harmony than discord among representatives of church and state on the Río Grande corridor. In the intervening years, personnel of the frontier changed. As veteran missionaries, such as Olivares and Hidalgo, retired from active service, new Franciscan leaders emerged to assume responsibility for guiding the missions through the formative years of the first quarter-century. Similarly, the soldiers of the presidio established their permanence as settlers in the community. Upon the founding of Presidio San Antonio de Béxar in 1718, emulating the model used successfully elsewhere, the Río Grande corridor became an integral component of colonial defense, as demonstrated by the expedition of the Marqués de Aguayo in 1720 which definitely secured Spanish territorial claims in Texas. In the rise and decline of colonial expansion at the Río Grande, Mission San Bernardo emerged as a memorial monument of the Franciscans' efforts to acculturate and assimilate the native converts into the larger social fabric of the Spanish frontier experience.

Notes


5. Ibid., 248.


18. Espinosa, Crónica de los Colegios, 756.


21. Fray Francisco Hidalgo to the Guardian of Santa Cruz de Querétaro,


23. Diego Ramón to [Provincial Governor], May 20, 1705, AGN, PI, 28: 274-274v.


27. Fray Isidro de Espinosa, Fintos Espirituales de las Misiones pertenecientes al Colegio Apostólico de la Santa Cruz de Querétaro en los Confines de la Provincia de Coahuila y Nuevo Reyno de León, December 5, 1707, AGN, PI, 28: 434.


29. Fray Isidro de Espinosa, February 18, 1707, AGN, PI, 28: 357.