

The Sons of St. Vincent: from the Mississippi River to the Río Grande

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The narrative of Roman Catholicism in America offers no more compelling an aspect of its history than that of the story of the frontier missionary and his labors to build the Faith among countless people living in remote locations far removed from centers of settled civilization. From the earliest days of Catholic Spain's colonization of the New World—a time when it was understood that to be Spanish was to be Catholic—through the nineteenth-century immigrant Church period of Catholicism in the United States, European missionaries were the leading edge of the growth of the Catholic religion in the Americas. Such was especially true in the United States, where there were few native-born priests.

For scholars of the Roman Catholic religion in America today, the missionary phase of the foundation of Catholicism in United States remains a challenging study. The contemporary historian is called upon to renew with vigor the inquiry into the substance and historical significance of that remarkable era of the pilgrimage of Roman Catholics in the United States, turning once again with sincerity and intensity to archival materials and other primary sources in his or her search for historical truth regarding the nature of the maturation of Roman Catholicism in America.

Such a Catholic intellectual response to this scholarly need at such a time in history as ours must be an earnest one. Despite a wealth of information on the missionaries and their missionizing having been made available through numerous publications of books and other works by past historians, lamentably there exists presently in influential circles of Roman Catholic historiography a marginalization of the importance of that period to the legacy of the Church in this nation. At the heart of this regrettable situation seems entrenched a mindset among many scholars—some Catholic, some not—which exhibits a strong Europhobia.

The collective body of works of these thinkers—historians, theologians, sociologists, and others—acts to set aside as unimportant, or even worse, operates to question as being irrelevant to any study of Roman Catholicism in America presently the very same European Catholic traditions that acted as a conduit of the Faith across the seas to the American continent.

To be sure, the Catholic Church for centuries has had its detractors, and the anti-Catholic continues to publish in today's world.¹ But far more disconcerting to the intellectual environment of the present day is the appearance in the last couple of decades of a broad grouping of historians, theologians, sociologists, and so forth who cross disciplinary lines to interpret the Roman Catholic legacy of the

United States from a narrow ethnocentrist vantage point, an outworn liberation theology ideological basis, or possibly from some exaggerated “Americanist” perspective.

These modern day “revisionists” consistently exhibit a shallow understanding of Catholicism’s European history and that heritage’s influence on the growth and maturation of the Roman Catholic presence in the United States. At the center of the difficulty with many of these various studies is an obvious absence of archival research. Regularly citing their own previously published works and secondary sources from other authors sharing their views, these students of Catholicism ignore the basic requirement of writing history—a rule of scholarship for historians of Catholicism in the United States first emphasized by John Gilmary Shea more than a century ago—to work mainly from primary sources.²

It is with an awareness of these problems that we now turn to a sketch of the “Sons of St. Vincent” and their labors in evangelizing from the Mississippi River to the Río Grande. Most prominent among the missionary orders and societies originally working the frontier regions of New Spain, New France, and English colonial America were the Franciscans, Recollects (Grey Robes associated with the Franciscans), and Jesuits. With the passing of time, the Recollects’ role in the missionizing endeavor diminished, but that of the Franciscans and Jesuits remained significant.

The dawning of the Immigrant Church period saw the appearance on the scene of other clerical communities dedicated to bringing the Good News to the frontier lands. Highly visible among this latter group were the priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Mission, better known in Europe as the Lazarists and in America as the Vincentians. While the Franciscans and Jesuits left the Roman Catholic legacy of the United States with memories of such personages as Frays Antonio Olivares, Antonio Margil de Jesús, and Junipero Serra, as well as Fathers Isaac Jogues, Jacques Marquette, Eusebio Kino, and Andrew White, with the Vincentians came the likes of Fathers Felix de Andreis, Joseph Rosati, Jean-Marie Odin, and John Timon.³

As the eighteenth century came to an end, two expansive frontier regions were identifiable in the vast hinterland and coastal areas of North America. One consisted of an extensive rim of relatively sparse settlements and ranches populated by Mexicans, indigenous peoples (many still roaming as hunters), and Spaniards moving outward from the city and province of Mexico. This grand territory to the north included the Mexican provinces of Potosí, Durango, Sonora, and beyond to New Mexico, Texas, and Alta California.⁴ The Roman Catholic Faith was spread in those lands through the Franciscan missions system, by an emerging parish structure and its clergy in the *pueblos* (towns or villages), and via the traditions of local religion—New Mexico’s *santeros* serving as a prime example.⁵

The other frontier embraced the entire Mississippi River Valley, from the

Kaskaskia country (roughly today's Illinois and Indiana) downriver to New Orleans. It was to that section of the continent that the Vincentians came in the early nineteenth century, almost two centuries after the Recollects (1615) and the Jesuits (1625) first ventured to the territory from France to serve the region's French Catholics and to evangelize the Kaskaskia and other indigenous peoples.

Within three decades of their arrival in the Mississippi River Valley—before the mid-nineteenth-century—the Vincentians had responded to a call to labor in Texas.⁶ Thus, the Vincentians were to missionize on a frontier where the spiritual roots of the Catholic faith found their historical traditions cemented in Spain, and intermixed with the narrative of Catholicism as it developed among the indigenous peoples of Mexico

In 1787, almost two decades before the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and in the same year that the United States Federal Constitution was written and signed, the first permanent settlers in what was to become Perry County, Missouri, arrived from the Atlantic seaboard. Jean Baptiste Barsaloux and his father—Frenchmen who in all likelihood were Roman Catholics—moved to a tract of land which they had received from the royal government of Spain—the Missouri area at that time being part of New Spain—to build their home and settle down to a life of farming.

Perry County—as the area later was named in honor of Oliver Hazard Perry of War of 1812 fame—was situated just beyond the west bank of the Mississippi River approximately eighty miles south of the present-day city of St. Louis. It was to Perry County three decades later that twenty-five Vincentian priests, brothers, and seminarians under the leadership of Father Joseph Rosati would come to establish a seminary. That center of spiritual formation and study, known originally as the Barrens Seminary and later as St. Mary of the Barrens Seminary, would serve as the Vincentians' headquarters for a good number of years thereafter. It would be missionaries from St. Mary of the Barrens Seminary who evangelized the Mississippi River territory and southwest all the way, eventually, to Texas.⁷

Rosati, who in 1827 was consecrated first Bishop of St. Louis, surfaced as one of the stalwarts of early Vincentian history in America. But he himself always acknowledged his spiritual indebtedness as a Vincentian to Father Felix De Andreis, the priest who led the Vincentian venture to America and served as American Vincentian head until his death on 15 October 1820.

De Andreis and Rosati were Italian priests who early in their vocations had worked out of the Congregation of the Mission motherhouse in Rome, Monte Citorio. Often during those years both had voiced their desires to enter the foreign mission field. When in 1815 newly consecrated Bishop Louis William DuBourg of the American Diocese of Louisiana and the Floridas asked them to join him as missionaries in his far-off diocese, they enthusiastically agreed to the adventure.⁸

Joseph Rosati was ten years younger than De Andreis. Inasmuch as it was the saintly De Andreis who first actually proposed to his fellow Vincentian, Father

Rosati, that the latter accompany him to America in response to Bishop DuBourg's beckoning, Rosati consistently looked to his friend and confrere for leadership and example. De Andreis and Rosati were intent upon building a deep spiritual formation for the Vincentians in America. The Barrens Seminary, after all, was only the second such center of formation for priests in the United States, the first one being St. Mary's Seminary at Baltimore founded under the auspices of the Sulpicians in 1791. Although Father De Andreis himself ultimately was stationed in St. Louis and never resided at the Barrens Seminary, he gave to Father Rosati his full support in laying the base for a solid Vincentian formation at the Barrens Seminary.

Vincentian spirituality lay at the heart of the formation of the priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Mission. Like that of other communities such as the Sulpicians and the Eudists which grew from the seventeenth-century Catholic religious renewal in France, Vincentian spirituality built upon a deep commitment to mental prayer in each member of the Congregation of the Mission. "We know that our works are worthless if they are not living and animated by God's will," wrote Vincent de Paul at a 7 March 1659 "Conference on Conformity With the Will of God."⁹

This strived-for full adherence to God's will demanded that the priest seek out the Divine Will, and then with the priest's spiritual maturation would come a cooperation with Divine Grace. From that form of mental prayer would develop in the priest an intense interior life which would serve to initiate and mold the substance of the priest's actions. It was from such a spiritual formation that the priests of the congregation of the Mission became dedicated to their vocations in the foreign mission field, the giving of parish missions, parish work in general, and seminary duties.¹⁰

There arrived at the Barrens Seminary in 1822 two seminarians, one a Frenchman and the other an Irish-American, who over the next several decades would come to exhibit very clearly this Vincentian formation. In so doing, the two would emerge perhaps as the most prominent of the Sons of St. Vincent after the era of De Andreis and Rosati.¹¹ Father Jean-Marie Odin, C.M.—the Frenchman—would labor as a missionary, seminary - college professor and administrator at the Barrens Seminary and throughout Missouri and Arkansas from 1822 to 1840.¹² Then in the summer of 1840 he arrived in Texas as Vice Prefect Apostolic, and there he would toil to strengthen Roman Catholic life in that land for two decades more. In 1847 Father Odin was consecrated first Bishop of Galveston. Then in February 1861 he succeeded to the archepiscopal see of New Orleans as that ecclesiastical province's second archbishop.¹³

Meanwhile in 1835 the second seminarian, Father John Timon, C.M., was named the first Visitor (Superior) of the newly-organized American Province of the Congregation of the Mission. In 1840 he became Prefect Apostolic of Texas, in which capacity he was to support strongly his colleague and friend Father Odin in

the latter's endeavors to build up the Roman Catholic presence there. Finally in 1847 Father Timon, was elevated to hierarchical status as first Bishop of Buffalo, New York.¹⁴

Looking somewhat more deeply into the lives and accomplishments of these two frontier missionaries, Jean-Marie Odin arrived at the Barrens Seminary on 30 August 1822. He had reached his destination in Missouri after a long and difficult voyage that had commenced more than three months earlier, on 8 May, at the French port of Le Havre. On that spring day young Odin had hurriedly boarded the ship, *Highlander*, bound for New Orleans. In less than two months after his arrival at Barrens, on 12 October 1822, Bishop DuBourg ordained Jean-Marie Odin a deacon of the Catholic Church. Six weeks later, on 22 November, the new deacon from France entered the Congregation of the Mission as a novice.¹⁷

Not many months later, Jean-Marie Odin was able happily to exclaim to his *mere* and *pere* back at his boyhood home in France, Hauteville, "what favors the Lord has bestowed upon me. Here I am a priest!..Oh what dignity, what honor!"¹⁸ Bishop DuBourg had again traveled south from his residence at St. Louis the eighty miles to the Barrens Seminary, where on 4 May 1823, he ordained the 23-year-old Odin a priest.¹⁹

Subsequently, a mere six weeks before his twenty-fifth birthday, on 12 January 1825, in the dead of winter at the Barrens Seminar, Odin took his final vows as a priest of the Congregation of the Mission. Father Jean-Marie Odin, C.M., now a fully-professed Vincentian, recalling that his final vows were taken in the bicentennial year of the foundation of the Congregation of the Mission in 1625, would be answering the same call to which Vincentians had been responding for almost two centuries, a mission statement which St. Vincent de Paul had urged upon some of his early priests and brothers back in 1664 as they prepared to leave France for Asia:

Go gentlemen, in the name of the Lord. It is He who is ending you; it is for His service and His glory that you are undertaking this voyage and this mission. It will also be He who will lead you and who will assist you.²¹

While Father Odin was maturing as a frontier Vincentian, his friend and confidant Father Timon, who was ordained two years after him, had come to know and appreciate the missionary from France. When Timon, years later, was serving as Bishop of Buffalo, he wrote a monograph entitled "Diary of Our Starting the Barrens." In that work Timon said of Odin:

For a considerable time Mr. Odin was left the sole priest in the Seminary. He had to attend to the duties of Provisional Superior, parish priest, confessor to the brothers, students, and collegians, and Lorretine nuns; and at

the same time direct the general course of teaching. Often on Saturdays he would be out [until] ten at night on sick calls, and when he came home find students and brothers waiting to go to confession, and occupying him a great part of what remained of the night.²²

After his ordination to the priesthood in 1823, the new Father Odin immediately began to stand forth as one of the mainstays of the Congregation of the Mission in the Mississippi River Valley. His activities included all of the duties that Father Timon noted later as Bishop of Buffalo. In addition, during his years at the Barrens Seminary, Father Odin carried out a grueling schedule of missionizing, traveling in the vicinity of the seminary and often miles distant from it. Carrying on these labors, usually accompanied by Timon, he would venture north and south from the Barrens, on occasions deep into Arkansas.

Both Odin and Timon rose quickly to upper ranks of the Congregation of the Mission in America. In 1835, after attending the Baltimore Provincial Council as Bishop Rosati's theologian, Father Odin acceded to the wishes of the American bishops and carried their provincial proceedings report to the Holy See. While in Europe, Father Odin was powerfully influential in convincing the Congregation of the Mission Superior-General, Father Jean-Baptiste Nozo, C.M., to erect a separate American Province of the Vincentians. Father Timon, as we have seen, was designated Provincial Superior at the suggestion of Father Odin. While much more could be written of both Odin and Timon and their work in the Missouri-Arkansas region, we must now briefly address their significance to the mid-nineteenth-century resurrection of the Catholic religion in much of Texas.

The newly-erected Republic of Texas, by the late 1830s, presented an especially complex challenge to the Roman Catholic Church. In Texas, a region with almost two centuries of formal Catholic history, a healthy religious faith seems to have survived the decline of the Franciscan missions and the destruction to the Church associated with the Texas revolution against Mexico in 1835-1836 along the Lower Rio Grande Valley. But, and this point must be emphasized, in San Antonio—the most important of the Texas municipalities—and the vicinity around that city, the Church existed in a state of complete disorder and ruin.

Meanwhile, Roman Catholic immigrants—Irish, Germans, Czechs, French, and other nationalities—were entering Texas in record numbers. They needed priests, nuns, and as much as might be possible of the Church's organization. Most important, the sacraments had to be made available to the immigrant Catholics. And the thousands of Mexican Catholics had to be served.

After Father Timon, assisted by other Vincentians, laid the groundwork for Odin's labors in a Texas that had been removed from Mexican ecclesiastical authority in 1840 and erected as a prefecture Apostolic, Father Odin came in to the land as Vice Prefect and spent twenty years ably serving the Catholics of the area.

He showed no favorites, working as affectionately with the Mexicans as he did with the immigrants. Named a bishop and Vicar Apostolic in 1841, Odin in 1847—again, as we have seen—was consecrated first Bishop of Galveston. Following his many years of dedicated service in Texas, this missionary bishop *extraordinaire*, in 1861, went to New Orleans to succeed Archbishop Antoine Blanc, a long time friend and supporter, as ordinary of the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Father Timon had by then had been Bishop of Buffalo for almost fourteen years.

They had left their native countries, their homelands and families, to enter the foreign mission field. In so doing, they brought the blessings of the universal Church, its sacraments and teaching, to people living on the frontiers of civilization in far-off territories. Through their endeavors they laid the foundation for the Roman Catholic pilgrimage to the Americas. They were giants of the Faith: these Franciscans, these Recollects, these, Jesuits—these Vincentians!

Notes

1. At the present time Robert H. Jackson is producing a most anti-Catholic publications on the Catholic missions. His focus is the Franciscan missions of Alta California and Northern Mexico in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See for example his *Indian Population Decline: The Missions of Northwestern New Spain, 1687-1840* (Albuquerque, New Mexico, University of New Mexico Press, 1994), and, with Edward Castillo, *Indians, Franciscans, and Spanish Colonization: The Impact of the Mission System on California Indians* (Albuquerque, New Mexico, University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

2. A brief list of these kinds of primary source studies would include Jay P. Dolan and Gilberto M. Hinojosa, eds., *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); Moisés Sandoval, *On the Move: A History of the Hispanic Church in the United States* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990); Jay P. Dolan and Allan Figueroa Deck, S.J., eds., *Hispanic Catholic Culture in the U.S.: Issues and Concerns* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994); Allan Figueroa Deck, S.J., *The Second Wave: Hispanic Ministry and the Evangelization of Culture* (Mahwah, New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1989); Lawrence J. Mosqueda, "Twentieth Century Arizona, Hispanics, and the Catholic Church," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 9 (Winter/Spring 1990): 87-103; and Gilberto M. Hinojosa, "Friars and Indians: Towards a Perspective of Cultural Interaction in the San Antonio Missions," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 9 (Winter/Spring 1990): 7-26.

3. In the United States the main archival repositories housing sources on the Vincentians are the De Andreis-Rosati Memorial Archives, Perryville, Missouri

(hereafter cited as DRMA); the Archives of the University of Notre Dame (hereafter cited as AUND); the Catholic Archives of Texas in Austin (hereafter cited as CAT); the Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans (hereafter cited as AANO); the Archives of the Archdiocese of St. Louis (hereafter cited as AASL); and the Archives of the Diocese of Galveston-Houston (hereafter cited as ADGH). On the Vincentians and their missionizing in the United States see Joseph Rosati, C.M., *Memoires sur l'établissement de la Congregation de la Mission aux États-Unis d'Amerique* (original in the archive of the Roman Province of the Vincentians, with a translated copy—serialized in *Vincentian Heritage* vols. 1-4 (1980-1984); Vincent Ryan, C.M., “Early Lazarist Missions and Missionaries,” *Three Centuries of Vincentian Missionary Labor* (Philadelphia, 1917); *The American Vincentians: A Popular History of the Congregation of the Mission in the United States, 1815-1987*, John E. Rybolt, C.M., ed., (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1988); Ralph Bayard, C.M., *Lone-Star Vanguard: The Catholic Re-Occupation of Texas, 1838-1848* (St. Louis: The Vincentian Press, 1945); James Talmadge Moore, *Through Fire and Flood: The Catholic Church in Frontier Texas, 1836-1900* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992); Yannick Essertel, “Lyon et les Missions lointaines a L'Époque contemporaine, 1815-1962,” (Ph.D. diss., Universidad Jean-Moulin Lyon III, 1994); Yannick Essertel, “Réseaux et Vocations missionnaires dans le Diocese de Lyon de 1815-1962,” *Extrait de la Reveu d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* vol. XC (1995), n. 1-2 (Louvain, 1995); *Histoire des Diocèse de France*, sous la direction de Jacques Gadille, vol. 16: *Le Diocèse de Lyon* (Paris: Beauchesne Editeur, 1983); all volumes of *Vincentian Heritage* since 1980 (Perryville, Missouri: Vincentian Studies Institute); and Patrick Foley, “Jean-Marie Odin, C.M., Missionary Bishop *Extraordinaire* of Texas,” *Journal of Texas Catholic History and Culture* 1 (1990): 42-60.

4. Juan Alfaro, “The Spirit of the First Franciscan Missionaries in Texas,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 9 (Winter/Spring 1990): 51.

5. Robert E. Wright, O.M.I., “Local Church Emergence and Missions Decline: The Historiography of the Catholic Church in the Southwest During the Spanish and Mexican Periods,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 9 (Winter/Spring 1990): 27-48. See also Thomas J. Steele, S.J., *Santos and Saints: The Religious Folk Art of Hispanic New Mexico* (Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, 1994); and Félix D. Almaráz, Jr., *The San Antonio Missions and Their System of Land Tenure* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989). The best recent study of the Spanish missionaries, their visions and goals, is José María Iraburu, *Hechos de los apóstoles de América* (Pamplona: Fundación Gratis Date, 1992).

6. Blanc to Purcell, 29 August 1838, Vincentian Collection, AUND; Rosati to Blanc, 16 March 1840, Vincentian Collection, AUND.

7. John J. Bagen, C.M., *St. Mary's of the Barrens Parish: The Early Days* (Perryville, Missouri: The Association of the Miraculous Medal, St. Mary's Seminary, n.d.), DRMA.

8. Rybolt, *The American Vincentians*, 13. On Bishop DuBourg see Annabelle

M. Melville, *Louis William Dubourg: Bishop of Louisiana and the Floridas, Bishop of Montauban, and Archbishop of Besancon, 1766-1833* 2 vols. (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1986).

9. Pierre Coste, C.M., "Conference on Conformity With the Will of God, 7 March 1659," vol. 12 of *Saint Vincent de Paul Correspondence, Entretiens, Documents* (Paris, 1924): 154, DRMA.

10. Rybolt, *The American Vincentians*, 98.

11. The author of this essay is completing a book on the life of Jean-Marie Odin, C.M., and Leonard Riforgiato is finishing a book on the life of John Timon, C.M.

12. "Odin, Joannes Marie, C.M., Rev. 1800 Feb. 25 Natus in Ambierle Dioc. Lyons in France," AASL. The author wishes to thank Professor Martin Towey, Archivist of the AASL for this source.

13. Charles N. Bransom, Jr., *Ordinations of U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1790-1989: A Chronological List* (Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, United States Catholic Conference, 1990), 20.

14. Bayard, *Lone-Star Vanguard*, passim.

15. The name of the ship on which Odin crossed the Atlantic Ocean is identified in Milton P. Rieder, Jr. and Norma Gaudet Rieder, *New Orleans Ship Lists*, vol. 1: 1821-1823 (1968): 38, Texas State Library, Gen. 976, 3, R 441, 2: 1821/23, filed for Louisiana Records.

16. Odin, Joannes Maria, C.M., Rev. 1800 Feb. 25, AASL.

17. Bony, Abbé, *Vie de Mgr. Jean-Marie Odin, Missionnaire Lazariste, Archevêque de la Nouvelle-Orleans* (Paris: Imprimerie de D. Dumoulin et C., 1896), chap. 6, 2, DRMA.

18. *Ibid.*, chap. 6, 3.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Odin, Joannes Maria, C.M., Rev. 1800 Febr. 25, AASL.

21. "Advice Given to the Departure of Missionaries for Distant Countries," Luis Abelly, Bishop, *La Vie du Venerable Serviteur de Dieu, Vincent de Paul* (1664), bk 3, 12, DRMA.

22. John Timon, Bishop of Buffalo, "Diary of Our Starting the Barrens," 12-13, DRMA.

23. The notes which Ralph Bayard, C.M., employed to write *Lone-Star Vanguard*, detailing the activities of both Father Odin and Father Timon are on deposit at the DRMA.

24. Bayard, *Lone-Star Vanguard*, 11, 12; Rybolt, *The American Vincentians*, 38.

25. Wright, "Local Church Emergence and Missions Decline."