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## THE CAVALRY OF CHRIST: THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND SOUTH TEXAS (1821–1882)

*by Francisco Ortiz Jr.*<sup>1</sup>

Life in Texas can best be described as chaotic, confusing, and dangerous during the years between Mexican independence in 1821 and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Catholic Church in Texas had been left in disarray after 1821 because of the violent clashes between Mexico and Spain and the subsequent expulsion of all Spanish clergy. From 1821 to 1831 the See of Linares (later Monterrey) was vacant because the incumbent bishop had been Spanish and was therefore unacceptable to the new government of independent Mexico.<sup>2</sup> During this time the Catholic Church in Texas, still under the jurisdiction of the See of Linares, was in severe need. There were only five clergymen in all of Texas by 1820; one of whom was Fr. Refugio de la Garza in San Antonio.<sup>3</sup> These early Mexican priests were enigmatic figures whose principles were frequently called into question. However, priests such as Fr. de la Garza were able to help preserve the faith and administer sacraments for those who were lucky enough to live in the vicinity. There were many others that were denied the Holy Sacraments, which are of utmost importance to a Catholic. It is likely that many Catholics in Texas lived and died without ever seeing a priest. Despite the many problems that all people in frontier Texas faced most pastors did not neglect their flocks and continued to administer the sacraments, sometimes at great personal sacrifice.<sup>4</sup>

The character of the Mexican Catholics in Texas is difficult to define because in a sense it reflects the chaos and confusion of this time. Many times, this group was divided over its loyalties and struggled to maintain some form of identity in a world that was ever changing. There were thousands upon thousands of immigrants from both America and Europe changing the demographic landscape of Texas. This influx of people had started before the 1820s but accelerated after 1821. By 1830 Anglo-Americans dominated Texas numerically, and this dominance was further strengthened by large-scale immigration between 1834 and 1850.<sup>5</sup> These immigrants were of questionable ethics. Many of the new immigrants to Texas were men who had fallen deeply in debt during the early twenties and had fled

their native states to escape harassment or imprisonment.<sup>6</sup> There was also great instability of the ruling governmental bodies that made lawlessness rampant and a staple in Lower Rio Grande Valley society. The area had been claimed by both Mexico and Texas but was so isolated that, for a time, neither was able to secure it properly.

The Catholic Church's absence had led to the Mexican population's decline in its understanding of its faith. Most simply tried to carry on what was taught to them by their parents. This knowledge would diminish as time passed, so that by the time the American Catholic Church arrived, only a remnant of the original faith survived. In light of the shortage of priests and places of worship Mexican Catholics upheld certain religious traditions such as family altars within the home, the visiting of gravesites on certain days of the year, and celebration of religious holidays. The faithful observance of these traditions helped manifest the Mexican attachment to the Catholic faith.<sup>7</sup> A sense of identity was maintained by Mexican Catholics through certain traditions which were unique to this group. These were easier to maintain with the help of a pastor and a strong tradition of local initiative in public celebrations.<sup>8</sup>

The continuance of these traditions was very important for the Mexican population and may have served as a cultural anchor in a world that was quickly changing around them. Many of the American settlers that had arrived in Texas did not look kindly on the Catholic traditions and viewed the Mexican population as a degraded people. Some were out right hostile toward them and considered them as second-class people or worse. William Stuart Red wrote that the Anglo-Texan considered himself to be a superior type of human over the Mexican. Red wrote that the Mexican people "were but one degree removed from the primitive condition in which Cortez found them, and their civilization consisted of a strange mixture of heathen tradition, mnemonics, and superstition."<sup>9</sup>

In 1837, shortly after the Texas Republic was recognized by the United States, a petition was presented to American Bishops by a group of Catholics. They requested English speaking priests (even though most Catholics in Texas spoke Spanish) and help in confronting anti-Catholic sentiment that had become much more prominent. After Texas independence thousands of settlers from the United States began to pour into Texas, some of whom thought that victory over Santa Ana had been a triumph over the Catholic Church as well.<sup>10</sup> The call for Catholic clergy came from a rather influential group of English-speaking Catholics; however, because of population difference, there was a much greater need on the part of the Spanish speakers. In San Antonio, the second largest center of Catholics after the Valley, there were approximately fifty English-speaking Catholics, as opposed to the fifteen hundred that were Mexican Catholics who spoke Spanish.<sup>11</sup> The Vatican was somehow informed of the Texas plight, though not necessarily because of the petition, and responded.

Father John Timon C.M. was first to arrive in Texas, sent by Rome to survey the situation. His religious order was founded by Saint Vincent de Paul in the early seventeenth century to train priest and carry out missions to country people.<sup>12</sup> The order is known as the Congregation of the Mission, Lazarists, and Vincentians. In his initial report on Texas, January 1839, he stated that San Antonio was the largest center of Catholics. In this report he also mentioned that he was told that the two pastors serving San Antonio, Fr. Refugio de la Garza and Fr. Jose Antonio Valdez, were not living in celibacy. He received a signed sworn affidavit detailing the neglect and laxity of the clerics signed by Juan Seguin and Jose Navarro.<sup>13</sup>

Fr. George W. Haydon was the first priest from the American church to arrive in San Antonio early in 1840. There Fr. Refugio de la Garza extended to him the use of San Fernando church for the celebration of mass and gave Haydon much needed vestments and a chalice for use in his travels. Haydon also assumed, from what he was told, that neither priest was honoring his vow of celibacy and advised that a Spanish speaking priest should be sent to replace Fr. de la Garza. He noted that the Mexicans were very tractable and extremely fond of Church, since many attended his celebration of mass with only three hours of notice.<sup>14</sup>

In 1840, Pope Gregory XVI appointed Fr. Jean Marie Odin C.M. as Prefect Apostolic of Texas.<sup>15</sup> He arrived in San Antonio on July 30, 1840 in the company of fellow Vincentians Fr. Miguel Clavo and Bro. Ramon Sala.<sup>16</sup> Fr. Jean Marie Odin described a dire situation in which “The vestments and other appurtenances of divine worship ... were rotting... the people were even more appallingly neglected” and on Monday, August 3, he decided that “the time had come to end the reign of these wretches.”<sup>17</sup> Odin believed the allegations against the two native priests and removed them, placing in their stead as pastor the Spaniard Fr. Miguel Clavo.<sup>18</sup>

Many historians take these accusations as truth, or at least do not question the accusations. Bayard, a Vincentian historian, described these two priests when he wrote that in Bexar County there existed, “two elderly clerics—Mexicans ignorant of English and the sole priests left in Texas—[who] had long been living more after the flesh than after the spirit.”<sup>19</sup> James T. Moore, in his book “*Through Fire and Flood*”, points out that this was based on hearsay, and that the communication of this conclusion only helped create an assumption that the hearsay was fact and denied the accused priests a real investigation.<sup>20</sup> Moore suggests that some of the complaints against these priests may have come about because of political reasons such as their loyalty to Mexico and questions the validity of these accusations.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that there seems to have been no protest by the local Mexican Catholics against the removal of said pastors.<sup>22</sup>

Although it is not known whether all of the accusations against the Mexican priests were accurate, what is known is that up until this point the priests had been lax concerning some of the Church’s laws. It is believed that because of fear of the American Protestants, Fr. de la Garza had previously accepted non-Catholics as

godparents, and even some who were un-baptized. He also rang the church bells for the funerals of non-Catholics. When Fr. Odin arrived, he had every intention to follow Church law, and when Odin refused to ring the bells for the funeral of Col. Henry W. Karnes, a prominent non-Catholic, he faced “a storm” of protests and a crowd threatened to break the bells and run Odin out of town. A doctor and a lawyer are said to have gone into the church and rang the bells themselves. The mayor, John W. Smith, made an unsuccessful attempt to get the Mexican citizens to sign a petition with the intent to drive Odin out and reinstate Fr. de la Garza.<sup>23</sup> After this incident Odin felt that the Mexicans supported him for not yielding to the demands of Anglos. Odin defended himself publicly by stating that he was an officer of the Catholic Church and had laws to abide by. He stated that he was enforcing a law that he had not framed, but that he was bound to follow.<sup>24</sup> Odin seems to have had a genuine interest in establishing a solid foundation for the Catholic Church. After years of turmoil which had left the Church in disarray, he may have felt that the firm following of Catholic law was of utmost importance. He was not willing to yield to outside pressures concerning matters of the Church.

Many of the customs and traditions that he observed during his initial three months in San Antonio were unfamiliar to him. Realizing that most Catholics in Texas were Spanish speaking, he quickly learned the language and insisted that all priest coming to Texas do the same.<sup>25</sup> Although outside pressures would not move Odin to ignore Church law, the realities of this area would. At that time church law prescribed that one should abstain from meat every Friday, however, in San Antonio abstinence from meat was only observed on Good Friday. Odin understood that in this instance Church law was almost impossible to follow since agricultural foods were very expensive, and beef very cheap.<sup>26</sup> Mandating the observance of fasting every Friday would be a very severe burden for the many poor Mexicans of the area.

Fr. Odin returned to San Antonio in September of 1841 and here his sensitivity for the culture of the Mexican Catholics is apparent. On this occasion Odin actively participated in the planning of the celebration of the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which occurs on December 12. It was a very elaborate celebration lasting two days in which many people participated. Odin was very impressed with the amount of devotion which the people showed.<sup>27</sup> Besides the people of the city, many Mexicans who resided along the river, and a number of Americans from Austin and other remote places had come to the celebration.<sup>28</sup> These traditions were unique to the Mexican Catholics, and for many years they had helped preserve their identity and culture. Odin acknowledged their importance by actively participating and encouraging the lay people to celebrate according to their custom.

These events in San Antonio are important because they illustrate the first contact between the American Church and an area in which the Catholic population was dominated by Mexicans. After 1837, when the American Church took over

Texas, its primary composition was that of French Vincentians and Oblates with no previous contact with the cultural differences that Mexican Catholics presented. By leaving a Spanish pastor in San Antonio, Father Clavo, and by insisting that all priests learn Spanish, Odin demonstrated his interest to serve the needs of the Mexican Catholics.

Regardless of what inroads the American Catholic Church made with its Mexican Catholics, this continued to be a very difficult time for Mexicans in Texas. Some Mexican communities were brought under Anglo control, and many Mexicans were expelled. Mexican families were driven from their homes and lost their homes, their land, and things that they had worked so hard to obtain. Juan Seguin was a captain in the Texas army, he was considered a hero of San Jacinto, and until recently he served as the last mayor of San Antonio of Mexican decent, yet he was forced to flee to Mexico because of threats against his life. Seguin wrote that as whites drifted into the area in the late 1830's many residents of San Antonio sought him for protection from the whites who "on the pretext of them being Mexicans, treated them worse than brutes."<sup>29</sup> It is believed that by 1840 at least two hundred Old Spanish families had fled San Antonio.<sup>30</sup>

The area between the Nueces and the Rio Grande River was generally seen as a "no man's land" during this period. This area was unique from the rest of Texas in that because of the risk of travel, Native American attack, and the fact that it was so out of the way, its development did not follow the same pattern as the rest of the frontier and remained rather isolated throughout the century.<sup>31</sup> This area had a violent history in which the local indigenous people played their part. When the war for Texas's independence began in the early nineteenth century, local natives took advantage of the turmoil and began attacking settlements along the northern areas of the Rio Grande River. At this southernmost area of Texas, Native Americans went on the warpath attacking and destroying Palafox north of Laredo and continued down the Rio Grande where the settlement of La Feria, on the Arroyo Colorado, met the same fate. After the capture of Santa Anna, all of the Mexican garrisons in Texas were withdrawn and left the Valley entirely at the mercy of the local Native Americans and "enterprising Texans."<sup>32</sup> Because of the subsequent dispute over political boundaries between Mexico and Texas, Odin wrote Rome in 1848 asking for a further definition of his area of jurisdiction. Learning that this stretched to the Rio Grande meant that the center of the largest Catholic population in the newly formed Galveston diocese now rested on the banks of the Rio Grande, rather than in San Antonio.<sup>33</sup>

The first priest from the Galveston diocese, in the form of French Oblates, did not arrive in Deep South Texas until December of 1849. So, while The Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in Rome created the Prefecture Apostolic of Texas in October 1839, making the Catholic Church in the United States responsible for ministering to the faithful in Texas, more than ten years

would pass before the Valley was officially recognized as being a part of the first Diocese in Texas.<sup>34</sup> This area, however, held a greater number of Catholics, the majority of whom were Mexican, than any other area of Texas.

Odin had always struggled to recruit priests of the right level of intelligence and ones that would succeed in the extremely challenging missions of Texas. He traveled to Montreal in 1849 in search of recruits and met Father Adrien Pierre Telmon, O.M.I. Upon hearing of the enormous need for clergy in Texas, Telmon immediately made arrangements to go to Texas accompanied by Oblate Fathers Alexander Soulerin, Augustin Gaudet, Brother Henri (Joseph) Menthe, and Sub-deacon Paul Gelot. Fathers Telmon, Soulerin, and Brother Menthe arrived at Point Isabel on December 2, 1849,<sup>35</sup> and quickly established Brownsville as their headquarters. The Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate was founded by Charles Joseph Eugene de Mazenod, who served as bishop of Marseilles. They were a new order which was approved by Leo XII on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February 1826.<sup>36</sup> Their motto was ‘He hath sent me to evangelize the poor.’

Brownsville was a new town that was dominated by recently arrived Anglos, some of whom exhibited bigoted views toward the local Mexicans. The Mexicans of Brownsville looked at these newly arrived priests with suspicion, judging them to be in league with the Americans, since they spoke only English at first.<sup>37</sup> The town of Brownsville was rather lawless throughout its early years. Its two main industries were ranching and smuggling. These opportunities, whether legal or illegal, attracted foreigners, including Americans, to migrate to this river settlement.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the many initial hardships, the Oblates soon began construction of a temporary wooden chapel. They had very humble beginnings and relied on the help of Protestants, Jews, and a Mormon to help establish themselves. Father Soulerin was the first to begin the missionary work that earned them the title of *Cavalry of Christ*. He would mount his horse every Thursday to visit the Ranch of Santa Rita, which was ten miles away from their headquarters.<sup>39</sup> Odin himself arrived in Brownsville in early August of 1850 and was gone by the 28<sup>th</sup> of that same month.<sup>40</sup> While his stay at Brownsville was short, he had already logged more than 2,000 miles over a seven month period meeting the people and assessing the needs of the area, all while traveling by horse and avoiding run-ins with the Comanche.<sup>41</sup> However, after a somewhat successful start the Oblates were recalled on September 2, 1850 by Bishop de Mazenod who at this time was uncomfortable with the Oblate mission in Texas. The need for clergy in the Lower Rio Grande Valley was greater than anywhere in Texas, and according to Odin there were 9000 Catholics in the Lower Valley in 1850, while San Antonio had only 6000.<sup>42</sup>

During this time Odin sent a young priest by the name of Emmanuel Domenech to serve the people of the Valley during the Oblate absence, and he arrived there May, 1851. When he arrived in Brownsville Domenech noted that, “Before the municipal organization of Brownsville, lynch law was in full force... The judgements of

the people no doubt had the merit of impartiality in the punishment of the guilty.”<sup>43</sup> He tells of a confrontation he had with the local sheriff which helps illustrate the overall attitude toward Mexicans. After warning the sheriff about his dogs, who had been chasing the priest everyday as he walked by the prison on his way home, Domenech shot two of the sheriff’s dogs. The sheriff paid Domenech a visit with a whip in hand. After a few words regarding the incident the enraged sheriff raised his whip to strike the priest. Domenech, expecting this, pulled out a gun from his pocket and put the muzzle to the sheriff’s breast and coolly said, “Sheriff, I am no Mexican; and if you value your life treat me as a gentleman.”<sup>44</sup> From then on, the sheriff ceased from harassing the priest. He also describes a scene in which he,

“...saw at Brownsville Mexicans whom the sheriff was flogging to death with his ox-hide lash. They were bound, half-naked, their arms extended across the prison door, and then scourged on the sides and loins with the most brutal violence. To save the expense of their support, pending sentence, they were not sent to prison, but were sent back untried...”<sup>45</sup>

Some of these men died from their injuries before being sentenced. Domenech felt sympathetic to the Mexicans and could not comprehend their submission. He stated that although in these badly organized regions, where the Mexicans greatly outnumbered the Anglos, “the Mexican might have an easy vengeance... [But] vengeance is not in his heart.”<sup>46</sup> The abuses against the Mexican population were ingrained in the culture of Brownsville. One gets the sense, from Domenech’s accounts, that this may have been a common occurrence. This type of treatment would eventually lead to a Mexican insurgency in the form of Juan “Cheno” Cortina.

During his stay, Domenech traveled the length of the Rio Grande and visited ranches on both sides of the river. He expressed that the faults of the Mexicans had been greatly exaggerated and that although, “It is true there are many robbers among the poorer Mexicans...they rob from necessity and do so in a very clumsy way.”<sup>47</sup> He noted that Catholic commemorations remained alive among the people who held celebrations on major Christian feasts and certain saints’ days whether or not there was a priest available. Shortly before the Oblates returned to relieve him of his duties, Domenech celebrated at Santa Rita the Feast of our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of the Mexicans. He described an elaborate celebration with seven or eight hundred “rancheros”, and a procession with girls dressed in white carrying a decorated image of Guadalupe. Throughout the procession songs were sung and guns or cannons were discharged. The procession was followed by a rosary and ended with a “fandango” or dance. Domenech wrote that he had “rarely witnessed a more interesting spectacle.”<sup>48</sup>



During the short time Domenech spent in the Valley he witnessed first-hand the injustices committed against Mexicans. He sympathized with their plight and found that many of the negative things said about them were not true. The racial comments and false views that many had of the Mexicans may have helped to dehumanize them, and thus made it easier to mistreat them. Domenech saw beyond the misconceptions, felt empathy toward the Mexican Catholics of the region, and served them well.

For much of the early years of the Galveston diocese, Odin's main concern was recruiting priests of the right caliber for the work in Texas. He personally pleaded his case before Mazenod and was able to convince the Bishop to reassign priests to Texas. In mid-October of 1852 a community of Oblates arrived in Texas. They consisted of Fathers Jean-Marie Verdet, Rigomer Olivier, Pierre Keralum, and Brother Pierre Roudet. Father Verdet was their superior and was to oversee the reestablishment of their order's work. Three months later the Oblates were joined by the Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament and soon established a convent and a school. The sisters were the first of their order to establish a convent in the United States.<sup>49</sup> Additional Oblates arrived in 1859 (Fathers Francois Sivy and Joseph Rieux) and in 1861 (Fathers John Eugene Schumacher, Jean Maurel, and Jean-Marie Clos). Construction began on the church of Immaculate Conception in 1856 and was completed and blessed by Father Augustine Gaudet on Pentecost Sunday, June 12, 1859.<sup>50</sup>

Throughout the late 1850's anti-Mexican sentiment was rampant in Texas, and rumors that Mexicans had been helping slaves only helped to exacerbate the situation. In Matagorda County all Mexicans were expelled on the pretext that they were vagrant horse thieves. This was thought to have been a mild course of action by those who would have felt justified in resorting to lynch law. In 1857 Uvalde County required any Mexican traveling through the area to have a pass issued by an Anglo official.<sup>51</sup> Other counties and towns passed similar resolutions making the abuses against Mexicans a matter of law. Most Mexicans were submissive as Domenech had noted, but some took matters into their own hands.

On July 13, 1859, Juan "Cheno" Cortina rode into Brownsville and saw the town Marshal, Robert Shears, arrest an elderly man who had worked on his mother's ranch. Shears had viciously pistol-whipped the man and was dragging him to jail when Cortina intervened. When the marshal insulted him, Cortina shot him.<sup>52</sup> Cortina went on to start an insurgency citing many injustices that had been committed against the Mexican of the Valley since 1848. These included land thievery and unequal treatment before the law. The accounts of Domenech attest to the unequal treatment before the law, and even he had questioned why the Mexicans submitted to this abuse rather than fight back. Finally, someone had fought back rather than submitting to the abuse. Cortina, however, was not seen in a positive light by the Oblates of the time. Father Pierre Parisot, an Oblate priest in Brownsville,

sympathized with the Anglos and considered Cortina ignorant and unprincipled.<sup>53</sup> He felt he was uneducated and illiterate, which he was, and condemned his movement. Parisot may have viewed him as a threat to social order, and an instigator of violence. There is no doubt, however, that many injustices against Mexicans did take place, and some Mexicans saw Cortina as their defender against the oppressive Anglo.

Problems continued for Brownsville as the American Civil War began to affect the area. As the Civil War progressed, control of Fort Brown and Brownsville proved to be critical. In late 1861, the Union army tried to suffocate the Confederacy through a blockade that hoped to disrupt its trading of cotton by which the Confederacy was obtaining industrial goods it needed to continue its military operation, however this move fell short when the Confederate cotton shippers found that they could move their shipments through Brownsville to Matamoros and the port of Bagdad without interference from the Union Army. When the Union realized what was happening, they attempted to disrupt trade by sending six thousand Union forces. They arrived at Brazos de Santiago and advanced on Brownsville.<sup>54</sup>

In Brownsville Confederate forces began to retreat. General Bee set Fort Brown and its cotton on fire before he abandoned the town to the flames. The fires in Brownsville got out of hand and extensive damage was done, not only by the flames, but by the looters and plunderers as well.<sup>55</sup> Brownsville fell to union forces on November 6, 1863 under Edmund J. Davis. Some of the men under his command were Mexican Catholics from the Valley. Parisot recounts a story of a poor Mexican father who had been drafted into "the ranks" and was stationed some fifty miles from Brownsville. He was worried about his family and asked permission to go and provide for them. His request was refused so he went one day without permission. While returning to the regiment, he was seized and sentenced to be shot. He received the last Sacraments of the Church from Parisot before his execution.<sup>56</sup>

The cotton trade was not stopped, as it was diverted westward to other towns on the Rio Grande, such as Laredo and Eagle Pass. By July 1864 it was obvious that the occupation of Brownsville had failed to stop trade and Federal forces began to pull out on July 30.<sup>57</sup> The occupation was relatively short lived and most of the heavy fighting occurred east of the Mississippi; however the end of the Civil War marked the beginning of an economic decline for Brownsville.<sup>58</sup> After the war Ford and his troops resolved to prevent the looting of Brownsville, but accounts tell of soldiers plundering government property, as well as two or three stores owned by merchants. Witnesses report chaos continuing for the next four days until the arrival of Federals on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1865.<sup>59</sup> From 1861-1865 many of the local disputes and differences between Mexicans and Americans had faded into the background because of the great opportunities for all to make money. The "cotton boom" attracted strangers who paid scant attention to local prejudices or feuds.<sup>60</sup>

Soon after the Civil War ended, the forces of Maximilian and Benito Juarez collided in Mexico sending thousands of Mexicans seeking refuge to South Texas. The late sixties saw an increase of the general population, as well as Catholics in the area.<sup>61</sup> The task of the Oblates became larger, and when they saw that Matamoros was also in crisis they ventured forward to render aid. The Oblate fathers would regularly work in Matamoros where Father Olivier served as pastor. In 1866 liberals had taken over the city. Anarchy reigned in Matamoros and much of the population had deserted, but the priests stood their ground. They were asked to abandon their post and to hand over the keys of the church by the Liberals that had recently taken over. They planned on using the church as storage for their military items. Father Olivier refused, and he along with Fathers' Clos and Vignolle were imprisoned.<sup>62</sup> Upon hearing of his fellow priest's situation, Parisot traveled to Matamoros to try and get the priests released. He spoke to Governor Gen. Carvajal at his quarters where they discussed the matter for over an hour. Finally, Parisot promised to deliver the keys in exchange for the priests. Carvajal agreed and Parisot proceeded to give him a set of keys, however not the keys to the church.<sup>63</sup> Paisot and his fellow priests crossed the Rio Grande quickly. They had misled the Liberals and Governor Gen. Carvajal and wanted to cross the Rio Grande before Gen. Carvajal realized that those were not the keys to the church.

Disaster struck Brownsville again at 10 p. m. October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1867, however this time it was in the form of a devastating hurricane. The nun's convent was a total loss, and nearly all the poor Mexicans' huts were down. "A collection of \$4500 placed in the hands of the Priests for distribution, helped considerably in rebuilding the poorest districts of the city."<sup>64</sup> This natural disaster had left Brownsville more damaged than it had ever been, however the Oblates and the Sisters soon rebuilt.

The Oblates in the Valley were a truly amazing order that took to heart their motto of evangelizing to the poor and desired to do this on both sides of the Rio Grande. Their jurisdiction comprised eight counties (Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Zapata, Jim Hogg, Brooks, Kennedy, and Willacy) and part of Kleberg. This area was the size of a small country being two hundred and ten miles long and ninety miles wide. It was populated with approximately fourteen thousand people, with all but about five hundred being Spanish speakers.<sup>65</sup> Later, in 1867 Bishop Dubuis, who succeeded Odin as Bishop of Texas, assigned the Oblates to the mission at Roma with its dependencies of San Ignacio and Rio Grande City.<sup>66</sup> Roma would soon become a second center from which the Oblates operated.

The pastoral duties that the Oblates faithfully tended to can be considered anything but normal, and their efforts were nothing short of amazing. The Oblate priests quickly realized that they would have to conduct a dual apostolate. They would minister to the people of Brownsville, but the real work would be missionary. Because of the vast expanse of land that comprised the Oblate territory, and because the majority of Catholics lived on the ranches rather than in the town of

Brownsville, the Oblates typical days' work was very rarely done in a church. "The Texas Oblate was much more likely to be seen roaming the sandy plains, on horseback, under a large sombrero, and carrying a portable altar."<sup>67</sup>

The phrase "sandy plains", however, does not convey the reality, since many parts of the Valley were, and in many cases still are, covered by cactus and brush. Most of the year there was an unbearable heat, as those who are familiar with Valley summers can attest. Many of the communities of poor Mexicans were located far from any sources of water, and travelers had to be mindful of their personal supply. If they were lucky they might come upon a well where the cattle drank, and they could refill their containers of water. There were very few trails to follow, and many of these paths were nothing more than cattle trails which one could mistakenly, and at times tragically, take. Although there were fertile meadows and rich farmland, the Valley also included many swamps and resacas in which water stagnates and thus becomes a breeding ground for disease ridden mosquitoes.

The people of the Rio Grande Valley were very poor, and many lived in miserable conditions. Their homes were no more than huts or jacales. These, mostly Mexican Catholics, were spread out over the many ranchos that comprised most of the Valley. Livestock was the major industry, and the vast landscape was dotted with isolated settlements where ranchers, their families, friends, and servants clustered together.<sup>68</sup>

As for their spirituality, the Oblate fathers noted that most of the poor Mexicans living in their vast jurisdiction were very ignorant of Catholic doctrine; however, this was overshadowed by their great faith. An Oblate priest noted that although they knew very little about their religion, they boasted their willingness to die for it.<sup>69</sup> After thirty years of doing God's work in the Valley, Father Olivier wrote, "These Mexicans have been so abandoned that they have fallen...What is more, humanly speaking, they have motives galore to live in such indifference...They are poor, extremely poor. The Americans detest them, and few priests take any interest in them...With these things in mind, one may very well ask himself how these poor people have been able to keep the Faith. It is really miraculous."<sup>70</sup>

The great majority of the people living on the ranches were Catholics. The Oblate Fathers visited the ranches as often as they could, but travel was slow, and the ranches were scattered over an enormous area. For the most part, mothers and aunts took the responsibility of teaching the children the Christian catechism, but no sacraments could be administered until a priest came. For that reason, the coming of the priest was always an occasion of great significance. All the unbaptized babies were christened, Mass was celebrated, confessions were heard, Holy Communion was received, and weddings were solemnized. The spiritual life of the community was revived; the blessing of the Lord was more keenly felt with the presence of the spiritual advisor.<sup>71</sup>

The labor imposed on the Fathers in visiting the inhabitants of these plains and

forests was enormous. After a long day's ride, they would arrive at the huts on the ranch. Parisot described the huts, and what these missionary journeys were like once they reached the ranch.

“A few poles fixed in the ground...interlaced with branches of trees, and the whole interior is then coated with mud. Such is the habitation which is offered the missionary at his arrival by some poor family, who are glad to give him a corner in their hut and share their unsavory tortilla cake with him...They are full of reverence for the Priest, but...are often found to be very ignorant...During his stay in their midst the Father gives instructions and hears Confessions; baptizes; marries; corrects abuses, and adjudicates quarrels. He leaves one ranch to pursue his apostolic labors in the next, and so on until he has completed his circuit of visits.”<sup>72</sup>

Through all their hardships the Oblates felt a sincere love for their work. While working among the ranchos, the priest lived and ate like the people they served. Many nights were spent sleeping under a tree and with the night sky as their ceiling. Father Piat served the people of the ranchos for twenty-seven years, and it is estimated that he spent one third of his life going about on horseback, traveling thousands of miles.<sup>73</sup>

Pope Pius IX erected the vicariate apostolic of Brownsville, consisting of the area lying between the Nueces River and the Rio Grande, on September 18, 1874,<sup>74</sup> with the Immaculate Conception Church chosen as the Cathedral. Bishop Dominic Manucy was the first vicar apostolic of Brownsville. Unlike the foreign-born priests that were serving the Valley, Manucy was born in St. Augustine, Florida, and was educated at the Jesuit College of Spring Hill in Alabama.<sup>75</sup>

Bishop Manucy's tenure began with a threatening letter sent to Parisot and problems continued. From the start the Bishop was greeted by hostility. An anonymous letter was sent to Parisot stating,

“Sir: I am delegated by the W. L. of W. M. G. R. P. A. O. of &c. to announce that if you attempt to have a procession through the public thoroughfares of our city there is a bullet ready for your worthless carcass and another for your d--- Bishop. And if you erect a throne for your d--- Prince of the Church...Remember, sir, that in this grand Republic there is no room for such trash as a Prince sitting on a throne. Bullets are in readiness, look out, &c.”<sup>76</sup>

Father Parisot wrote that he did not know what the abbreviations stood for. Troubles continue when on February 24th, 1875 twenty-two Sisters of Charity, who

had been exiled from Mexico, arrived in Brownsville. The Sisters of the Incarnate Word and Blessed Sacrament had offered them an area of their convent where they could live. The people of Brownsville greatly sympathized with these exiled sisters and wished for them to stay, however, Bishop Manucy felt that he did not have the authority to allow them to stay. When the Bishop refused their stay in Brownsville crowds gathered in protest. Three hundred men appeared under the windows of the Bishop's apartments in protest, and while the Sisters were readying to leave by train, "300 men lifted the coach off the track with the Sisters inside and carried it to a distance of twenty feet from the track."<sup>77</sup> The Sisters did eventually leave however the Bishop was and continued to be unhappy in Brownsville.

Bishop Manucy's attitude did little to improve the situation. Manucy regretted that the vicariate's Catholics were mostly Mexican, who he referred to as "Mexican greasers", and stated that "worse than all, the only priests in the country are the O.M.I." These attitudes only helped to alienate the Bishop from some of the Oblate priests who felt very differently about the Mexican population in the Valley. Rather than trying to appeal to the main body of Catholics, he sought out the Anglos, declaring that he was one of them, and seemed to want nothing to do with the Mexican laity.<sup>78</sup> Father Florent Vandenberghe, the Oblate superior at the time, wrote that the new Bishop "is always crying, and yet believes himself fit for a bigger place...Moreover, he manifests an evident repugnance for the Mexicans. He turns away from them."<sup>79</sup>

Father Clos' views were contrary to that of the new Bishop and felt that most of the work should be missionary rather than in Brownsville. Father Clos along with Father Olivier sympathized so much with the Mexicans of the ranchos that they opposed the building of a college in Brownsville, because they felt that it would be using the money of the Mexicans for the good of the English speakers in town.<sup>80</sup> Manucy spent only eight months in Brownsville before moving his residence to the small city of Corpus Christi. When he left, only three men of the parish went to bid him farewell.<sup>81</sup>

The Catholic Church progressed in the Valley, because of the almost superhuman Oblate efforts to evangelize to the population in the Ranchos. In Brownsville they had established a church, the Sisters had a school, and eventually there were parishes at different sites throughout the Valley. They had endured great sacrifice in order to fulfill their mission. Father Verdet died early on when the ship he was traveling on sank while trying to obtain supplies for the Valley, and eight Oblates died of Yellow Fever.<sup>82</sup> In 1872, the architect of the Brownsville Cathedral, Oblate Father Pierre Yves Keralum disappeared on his way to La Piedra ranch. He had been visiting Campacuas mission, a few miles north of Mercedes and was traveling north when he disappeared. On November 30, 1882 his remains were found including his Chalice, Holy Oil, a small bell, a small Holy Water bottle, a piece of Rosary and \$18 along with his saddle.<sup>83</sup> He had lost his way and died of exposure while serving

the Mexicans in the Ranchos. Oblates had given their lives in order to serve the Catholic laity of South Texas.

Bp. Manucy continued the work of the Church in the area for a number of years from his residence in Corpus Christi. This area was at that time very rugged and physically taxing, something he may not have been accustomed to. The story of the Valley has had many sad episodes and is full of ironies. The Rio Grande Valley had the largest population of Catholics in Texas, but because of various circumstances this area was the last to be attended to by the Church. The wait was worth it. It produced some of the best men for the job, who truly were committed to serve the poor and endured great sacrifice to fulfill their divine duty. These men lived in great poverty while on their missions, ate what the poor of the ranches ate, and laid a foundation for the Catholic Church. They truly were the Cavalry of Christ.

The Oblate priest and Brothers of the middle 19th century are immortalized in history and their honored remains are buried in the heart of the Diocese of Brownsville. In the Cathedral there is an impressive monument indicating the burial place of many of these early missionaries.<sup>84</sup>

## Endnotes

1 Francisco Ortiz Jr. is a life-long resident of the Rio Grande Valley. He received a B.A. in Anthropology and a M.A. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Texas-Pan American. He is currently a full-time Psychology Instructor at South Texas College.

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