

5-2001

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Recommended Citation

Franz, Louis C.M. (2001) "Apostolate Among Native Americans," *Vincentiana*: Vol. 45 : No. 3 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vincentiana/vol45/iss3/11>

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Apostolate Among Native Americans

By Louis Franz, C.M.
Province of USA-South

The Southern Province's apostolate among the Native Americans began when the members of the province adopted a mission statement in 1983 stating that every new apostolate must be clearly missionary and among the poor. Subsequently, it was decided that the poor would most likely be found among the significant minorities within the province; namely, Hispanics, blacks and Native Americans.

The first new apostolate established by the province following these guidelines was the Arkansas mission begun in January 1985. The beginnings of this new mission can be found described in volume 2-3, 1985, of *Vincentiana*.

As the end of the province's nine-year commitment to the Arkansas mission was approaching, efforts were begun to plan for another new apostolate, this one among Native Americans within the area of the province.

This initiative was begun by Fr. Louis Franz, C.M. toward the end of August 1990, when he contacted Msgr. Paul Lenz, director of the Catholic Office of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C., to ask his advice as to where the confreres might best serve.

Msgr. Lenz suggested the confreres serve in the diocese of Gallup, New Mexico, because it was a missionary diocese, the poorest in the USA, in need of priests, and had just gotten a new ordinary, Bishop Donald E. Pelotte, SSS, himself a Native American, who we would find most welcoming.

Fr. Franz met with Bishop Pelotte in mid-August and the bishop enthusiastically welcomed the prospect of help from the Vincentians. He said he had just recently become ordinary and was in the process of working on a strategic plan for the diocese and establishing goals in consultation with the people of the diocese. The bishop felt the Vincentians would be most helpful in implementing these goals in the areas assigned to them.

It was made clear to the bishop that the province was just in the early stages of planning this new apostolate but in due time would be back in contact with him.

In February, 1992, Fr. George Weber, C.M. was elected Visitor and, after settling in, asked Fr. Miles Heinen, C.M., to visit the diocese of Gallup in December 1992, to gather information about the diocese's needs and how the

province might be able to help meet them. Fr. Miles provided a history of the diocese, a copy of the six goals that had been decided on and some knowledge about the culture and needs of the Native Americans.

On the basis of this information Fr. Weber formally announced on 15 March 1993 that the province would begin an apostolate among the Native Americans in the Diocese of Gallup, New Mexico, and that Frs. Lou Franz and Mark Ford would be the first members of the mission team.

Fr. Weber and his council set the goals of the new apostolate as 1) truly missionary, 2) work with the abandoned poor and, 3) specifically, with Native Americans, the goals the province had adopted for new apostolates in its 1993 mission statement.

With these goals in mind Fr. Franz again visited Bishop Pelotte on 6 May 1993 to ask where the bishop felt the confreres could best serve in his diocese. Fr. Franz indicated that the Southern Province had now made a decision about beginning the new apostolate by early 1994 and he had been appointed director of the apostolate to work out its practical details.

In order to do this more effectively, Fr. Franz moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, on 30 May 1993, just after leaving Arkansas. One of the first things he did was extend invitations to the Daughters of the West Central and Western Provinces to be full members of the mission team. The Western Province responded by sending Sr. Cecilia Van Zandt, a councillor, to serve as their contact person with the Vincentians.

A working group, made up of Sr. Cecilia and Frs. Weber, Franz and Ford, met at the provincial offices in Dallas during the summer to draw up a detailed proposal as to what would be involved in this new mission. This proposal, dated 25 August 1993, was submitted to Sr. Joyce Weller, Visitatrix of the Western Province, and to Fr. Weber and his council for review and approval.

Both the Daughters and confreres found the new goals of the Diocese of Gallup completely consistent with our own Vincentian goals; namely, evangelization, especially of the Native Americans, cultural sensitivity, social justice and outreach to the poor, involvement of the laity in leadership positions, adult spiritual formation, and adult religious education.

As it turned out the Daughters were not in a position to join the mission team initially. However, Bishop Pelotte and Fr. Weber signed an agreement, dated 22 December 1993, for five years. The bishop's hope was that the Vincentians and Daughters would accept the northern half of the Navajo deanery centered around the parishes in Page, Tuba City, Keams Canyon and Kayenta as an area in which they would work together in the spirit of Vincent and Louise to

bring the good news of Jesus Christ to the poor, especially the more abandoned, with special concern for the Navajos and Hopis in the area.

The response to this challenge began on 1 March 1994, when Fr. Franz became co-pastor at Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish in Page. Fr. Ford came to join him after his assignment at Holy Trinity in Dallas ended. Together they served as pastors of the parishes in Page and Tuba City, Arizona.

In late January 1995, Fr. Italo Zedde, C.M., as Assistant to the Superior General, came for a visitation of the Southern Province and spent three days with the confreres in Page and Tuba City, meeting the native people and seeing first hand the sad conditions in which they lived on the reservation. He left convinced that this was truly a Vincentian mission deserving of support.

Shortly thereafter Bishop Pelotte wrote Fr. Maloney expressing his gratitude for the confreres and asking the Superior General if he might support the mission by asking the Visitors and Visitatrixes of the USA to send personnel so that the mission might have the interprovincial support of the Double Family. Fr. Maloney responded positively to this request.

As a result, the number of confreres and Daughters has steadily increased.

On 1 November 1995, Fr. J. Godden Menard, C.M. of the Southern Province was assigned to the mission. In July 1996, Fr. Clayton Kilburn, C.M. of the Western Province was assigned as pastor of St. Joseph's Parish in Keams Canyon, Arizona, to minister to the Hopis. With his assignment the mission became an interprovincial project. On 1 August 1996, five Daughters of Charity were assigned to the mission, three to work at St. Jude's Parish in Tuba City and two to work in Gallup as Diocesan Directors of Charity for the diocese. Later on two more Daughters were assigned to minister at St. Joseph's Parish in Keams Canyon. On 15 September 1997, Father Jerome Herff, C.M., former Visitor of the Western Province, was assigned as pastor of the parish in Kayenta, Arizona. Finally, a Daughter living in Albuquerque, New Mexico, was assigned to a newly established house of the Daughters of Charity in Gallup.

At this writing then, there are five Vincentians and seven Daughters assigned to the Native American mission making it an interprovincial mission of the confreres and a joint effort of the Double Family.

In the Jubilee Year 2000, the Daughters and Vincentians met to form themselves into an evangelization team focused primarily on the northern half of the Navajo deanery as Bishop Pelotte had originally planned. The goals of the team are to share information about what is going on in their various assignments, pray and study together about evangelization and ways to

accomplish it in the area, and plan for smooth transitions when members are reassigned.

The challenges of the team are many: primarily, learning about the cultures of the Navajos and Hopis. They are deeply religious people and open to learning about the Catholic Faith which complements their own natural beliefs. They welcome the outreach programs of the Daughters and confreres in addressing their many needs, especially dealing with alcoholism and its many attendant ills. They are also open to accepting leadership positions if invited and properly prepared.

Another challenge the mission team has accepted is implementing a diocesan program entitled "Strengthening of Ministries" The purpose of this program is to invite the laity to become fully involved in their local faith communities as their right and responsibility by baptism and confirmation. In the short-term this will become increasingly important because of a shortage of priests and in the long-term it is crucially important for the full vitality of each faith community. The Vincentians and Daughters have committed themselves to implementing this important diocesan program in all the parishes entrusted to them, a commitment the Bishop greatly appreciates.

Further, a unique opportunity for the confreres and Daughters assigned to Keams Canyon has presented itself; namely, trying to bring healing to long-held hurts of the Hopis toward the Catholic Church. Especially during the Jubilee Year the bishop has worked very closely with the Double Family to bring about true healing and reconciliation.

Finally, the Daughters and confreres have found the Bishop as welcoming as Msgr. Lenz said he would be, especially by inviting them to become involved at the diocesan as well as the local levels. The Daughters have the opportunity as Directors of Catholic Charities to give leadership to outreach efforts across the entire diocese. They are also active on a number of diocesan committees. The confreres have been invited to serve as consultors, deans, members of the presbyterial council and coordinators of such diocesan programs as "disciples in mission," an evangelization effort recently approved by the Bishop.

In summary, the apostolate among the Native Americans in the diocese of Gallup, New Mexico, is off to a good start. It is a uniquely Vincentian challenge and the Daughters and confreres are responding to it enthusiastically. It is interesting to recall that such a mission was the goal of the confreres when they first came to the USA in 1818. Then, they found the Jesuits already meeting this need, so they turned to others. Now we, their successors, are meeting the need the Franciscans, who served here for over a hundred years, are having to withdraw from for lack of personnel.