German Jesuit Identity on a Mission: Anton Maria Benz, First Letter (c. 1750)

Abstract

Anton Maria Benz (b. 1716), a German Jesuit involved in the mission in the Americas in the mid-eighteenth century, described several of his early experiences in letters to his parents. In this selection, he mentions several Germans traveling with him as well as the favorable welcomes they occasionally received on account of their Germanness. Here we see evidence of a "German" identity that persisted beneath the universalizing force of the religious society, especially vis-à-vis other Europeans. Benz's letter also addressed the major gulf between the missionaries and the indigenous populations, an area where "European" or "Christian" was again more significant than "German."

Source

[....]

In the evening, the two warships went back, to our great pleasure, because they just held up our travel, and the Moors could not be seen from a hundred miles away. Today before 12:00 a favorable wind arose, which held on the 22nd, 23rd, 24th, and 25th, so that we saw the high mountain Pico [Viejo] on the island of Tenerife at 6:30 in the evening. On the morning of the 26th at 5:00, we traveled with a strong wind through the Canary Islands. On the 27th and 28th there was nothing noteworthy besides the good wind. On the 29th was the renewal of our vows, according to the custom of our society, and at the same time the mission ended, so that the 2nd began very beneficially. There were two sermons every day and just as many sessions of instruction. These were held by the leader of our mission, B.P. [Bishop Father] Ignatius Coromina, a Catalan, a very prudent and saintly man, and by another, a father from Sardinia who died on the journey on land, as follows below. We other missionaries had enough to do hearing general confessions. One of the people who confessed to me admitted that his only reason for boarding our ship was the opportunity to make a child-like confession to a German, and speaking in general, we noticed that the Spaniards had greater trust in, not to say esteem for, us Germans than in their own countrymen. Today almost everyone on the ship talked. At the midday meal, five pieces were roasted. In the morning there was a mass, in the evening, a sermon and the Te Deum with the firing of three canons.

[....]

The exceptional love and esteem with which we Germans were received here cannot be described. Especially the P. procurator showed his inclination; every day after the meal he instructed us in his room and honored each of us Germans with a peso. On the 9th, the R.P. [Reverend Father] rector took us to the bishop who received us, especially the Germans, with much love. We had scarcely entered, when he said, "So and so is a German." When he saw the Spanish novices, he said, "They could just as well have stayed in Spain; priests who can work are needed here." Even our people who were born here talk that way.

On the 10th, we inspect the new college, named for the great Indian apostle, which is supposed to be finished and opened next year on the Feast Day of Saint Ignatius. It has cost 130,000 pesos to date and is very nice and beautiful. It was built for twelve people, eight of them missionaries who must learn the Mexican language and will

live there all the time. Some of us Germans will probably have the good fortune to be the first inhabitants. These individuals will pass through the complex diocese with missions. We had the midday meal in the Colegio de San Ildefonso, there the R.P. rector splendidly welcomed us.

On the 15th, our ten Germans were invited to a sumptuous snack and rather good music by a canon who was a born Spaniard. He had acquired his love for our nation in Jamaica, where he sat in captivity in '45 with P. Fr[ancis] Xav[ier] Weiss and other missionaries. Here I was visited by my former co-novice Philippo Kern, who is married here to a locally born woman who has Spanish parents. He is doing fairly well and is commendable in his conduct. The misfortune is that six of his children have already died and the one who is still alive, it seems, will soon follow the others.

Incidentally, Puebla is a fine, rather large, and rich city. The streets are all controlled and wide, in the way that I remember having seen Mannheim in [a] copper [engraving]. Some of the churches are better than in France. In my modest opinion, they are richer in gold and silver, but their construction completely lacks the marble and other precious stones that I saw there. The cathedral is superior to all the others; it will yield to few.

Early in the morning of September 14, the entire mission departed from this city, together with the P. procurator of the said college and another father and brother, and after having covered 24 long leagues, difficult because of the rough road, arrived at around 1:00 on the 16th at the St. Anthony Hacienda, which belongs to the province. A P. provincial procurator, together with two fathers, had come a good half hour to meet us and were waiting for us there. This entire hacienda was well set up, but especially provided with large churches that would be impressive in any city because of their beautiful construction and ornamentation. At one of these, belonging to the Colegio de San Pedro y San Pablo, there are around 160,000 sheep alone. Early on the 17th, the novices traveled in carriages to Tepotzotlán, where the novitiate is located, seven hours distant from Mexico, but we [traveled] to Mexico.

At around 11:00 we arrived in Guadelupe, three-quarters of an hour distant from the city. Here R.P. Provincial J[uan] Antoni[o] Balthasar, who was born in Lucerne in Switzerland and joined the Society in the Province of Rome, a P. praepositus [rector], three other rectors, and all the other fathers and brothers, among them Ch(arissimus) [esteemed] Le(o)pold Schenck from (Würzburg) and C[harissimus] Georg Haber from my province, awaited us there; although they had already lived there for 27 years, they still spoke German well. There we all admired the miracle-working picture of Maria, who is the patron of all (Mexico) and Spain and has been worshiped here for more than 200 years. The origin in brief is as follows. Several years after Ferdinand Cortez had conquered the city of Mexico, a poor Indian went by the hill at the foot of which the church now stands. He heard a voice calling him and saw the Queen of Heaven, who ordered him to go to the bishop so that he would build a church in her honor on this spot. However, he was not believed without having brought a sign with him. For that reason, he went back downcast, and as he came to the previous spot, he heard the same voice, but at the same time saw the most holy virgin, who ordered him to pick the fresh roses present there, which at the time were not in season, and to take them to the bishop in his coat. But as he opened his coat in front of the bishop, the roses fell apart from each other and in their midst appeared the loveliest, most chaste painted picture of Maria, representing her immaculate conception. Then, with a Te Deum, I gave my dutiful thanks to God and his holy mother for my call to these lands.

After having breakfast, which consisted of sausage, snails, and buttered bread sprinkled with sugar, we traveled from this place to the Colegio Maximo de San Pedro y San Pablo and had our first midday meal with the desired peace. In the evening we were divided up: four went to the religious house: three to the Colegio de San Gregorio; P. Georgius Rhedls [Georg Retz], a Spanish father, and I to the Colegio de San Andrés, and the rest to the [Colegio]

Maximo de San Pedro y San Pablo. Our P. rector, named Juan Anton[io] Oviedo, already a fifty-year-old man, had been provincial twice, visitator of the Philippines, and provincial procurator in Rome. This man, as well as all the people at the college, were loving to us. On the 19th, the R.P. provincial went with us to the viceroy, who received us graciously.

On the 20th, we ate in the religious house. After the meal, R.P. provincial called me to him in his room, and because I told him that I had lectured in Lucerne, he asked me about various things in his fatherland and kept me with him for an hour. He was very friendly to everyone, jolly and altogether very much liked. Although he had already spent 32 years in this country, he had not yet completely forgotten German.

On the 22nd, we visited the archbishop, a very humble gentleman and great friend of our society. On the 24th, the missionaries ate in our Colegio de San Andrés, on the 27th, in the Colegio de San Gregorio, which was founded for the missionaries serving the Indians of this archdiocese. On the 28th, that is, the Day of Saint Wenceslas, two German brothers, Ch[arissimus]. Georg Haberl, born in Abensberg, in my dear province, and another from the Bohemian area, plied us with food in a small but merry place on the outskirts of the city. All the Germans were together, without any (others) with them, and lived fittingly in the German way.

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Source: Peter Masten Dunne and Ernest J. Burrus, "Four Unpublished Letters of Anton Maria Benz, Eighteenth Century Missionary to Mexico," *Archivum Historicum Societatis Iesu* XXIV (1955), pp. 344, 351–54. Available online at: https://archive.org/details/AHSI-1955

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