

**ATTEMPTS AT THE FORMATION OF
A CARMELITE PROVINCE IN CALIFORNIA:
1602 - 1633**

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Extensive reforms within the Order of Our Lady of Carmen initiated by Santa Teresa de Jesús in Avila and expanded to friaries in 1562 as the Orden de Carmelitas Descalzos (Order of Discalced Carmelites) brought rapid growth in vocations in Spain. By the death of Santa Teresa in 1582, fifteen monasteries had been established throughout Spain under San Juan de la Cruz (d. 1591) who revived eremitic, contemplative traditions in Carmelite hermitages, known from their Palestinian origins as "desiertos" (deserts). In 1580 the reformed order was recognized by the crown and enjoyed particular favor from King Felipe II.

This expansion was sufficiently great to permit, on 7, 1585, the issuance of a Royal Order to San Juan de la Cruz and Provincial Jerónimo Gracián for the sending of twelve Carmelite friars to New Spain. These first Carmelites in the New World, under Father Juan de la Madre de Dios, reached the port of Veracruz on 27 September 1585 and arrived in the City of Mexico on 17 November in the entourage of the new viceroy, Marqués de Villamanrique. The latter issued a license on 17 January 1586 for the establishment of the first hermitage, San Sebastián Mártir in the Indian pueblo of Tomatlán, and this became the seat for the Discalced Carmelite Province of San Alberto of the Indies of the Congregation of San José of Spain. Although preceded by the Franciscan, Dominican, and Jesuit orders, the friars of the Province of San Alberto were also destined to missionary labors notwithstanding their contemplative rule.¹

¹ Quintero García, Elvira C. and Gerardo HERNÁNDEZ HERNÁNDEZ, *Catálogo de la Biblioteca del Colegio de los Carmelitas Descalzas de San Juan*

The arrival of Discalced Carmelites in New Spain corresponded with an active interest in the settlement of the Californias to provide refuge for ships crossing the Pacific from the Philippines, the Manila galleons, from enemy attacks such as those of Francis Drake in 1579 and Thomas Cavendish in 1587. In 1595, Franciscans Fray Francisco de Balda as Commissary, friars Diego de Perdomo, Bernardino de Zamudio, Nicolás de Sarabia, and lay brother Cristóbal López were sent by the Provincial of the Franciscan Province of the Santo Evangelio, Fray Esteban de Alzúa, and Commissary General Fray Pedro de Pila to accompany Sebastián Vizcaíno on his expedition to settle the Bay of La Paz. Sailing from Acapulco on 15 June 1596, the expedition halted at Mazatlán on 13 August to take on supplies and Balda, together with some of the crew, deserted. This failure of Franciscan friars in the evangelization of California motivated interest in providing opportunities to other religious orders for this mission.²

In view of the inability of expeditions originating in Manila to determine the desired port of refuge, a Royal Order of King Felipe III on 27 September 1599 designated the mounting of an expedition for demarcation to be initiated from Acapulco and, in July, 1601, Viceroy Gaspar de Zúñiga y Acevedo, Conde de Monterrey, commenced its outfitting under the command of General Sebastián Vizcaino. To provide for religious needs of the expeditionaries and for evangelization of Indians encountered on the voyage, on 24 November 1601, Zúñiga issued an order to the Provincial of the Carmelite Province of San Alberto and Commissary General of the Order in the West Indies, Fray Pedro de los Apóstoles, to appoint three friars as chaplains. Fray Andrés de la Asunción, Provincial Counselor and Prior of Nuestra Señora del Carmen of Celaya, was elected in council as Vicar and Commissary General and the office was confirmed on

de Tacuba, México (I). (México: INAH, 1991), 11-12; DIONISIO VICTORIA, *Los carmelitas y la conquista espiritual de México*. (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1966); JOSÉ GÓMEZ DE LA PARRA, *Fundación y Primer Siglo. Crónica del Primer Convento de Carmelitas Descalzos de Puebla*. (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1992).

² W. MICHAEL MATHES, *Vizcaíno and Spanish Expansion in the Pacific Ocean 1580-1630*. (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1968), 34.

3 January 1602 by Archbishop Fray García de Santa Maria de Mendoza y Zúñiga along with appointment as ecclesiastical judge and license to administer the sacraments, thus effectively denoting the Californias as a Carmelite province. At the Monastery of San Sebastián on 20 February, Fray Pedro, under the authority of Father General Fray Francisco de la Madre de Dios, with First Difinidor Fray Eliseo de los Mártires, Difinidores Frailes Pedro de San Hilarión, Andrés de la Asumpción, Pedro de la Concepción, secretary Fray Juan de San Pedro appointed Friars Antonio de la Ascensión and Tomás de Aquino to accompany Fray Andrés, and to succeed him in case of death. Fray Antonio, who had entered the order in Mexico in 1600, was a native of Salamanca where he had studied cosmography in the university and later in the Colegio de San Telmo in Sevilla, was also appointed as second cosmographer of the expedition.³

Leaving the City of Mexico on 7 March 1602, the friars sailed from Acapulco on 5 May. On 12 June at Cabo San Lucas (San Bernabé), Fray Tomás heard confessions and said mass, and Vizcaíno gave the dominant interior mountain range the name of Sierra del Monte Carmelo (modern Sierra de la Victoria). Reaching Isla de Cedros on 8 September 1602, Fray Tomás officiated at a chanted mass and a procession with a statue of the Virgin, and subsequently also went ashore with Vizcaíno on 18 October. At the bay named San Diego on 11 November and island named Santa Catalina on 24 November, Fray Antonio accompanied Vizcaíno to land, and on 17 December the expedition reached the bay Vizcaíno named Monterey in honor of the viceroy. The following day the three friars concelebrated mass under a great oak tree and an encampment was established. A river to the south of the bay was named Carmelo by Vizcaíno in honor of the order, on 29 December Fray Tomás, who was ill, was sent aboard *Santo Tomás* to accompany the scurvey afflicted crewmen and confess the dying on their return to Acapulco,

³W. MICHAEL MATHES, ed. *Californiana I: Documentos para la historia de la demarcación comercial de California, 1583-1632*. (Madrid: Ediciones José Porrúa Turanzas, 1965), documentos 41,42; Mathes, *Vizcaíno*, 52-59.

and on 1 January 1603, Friars Andrés and Antonio continued the voyage northward toward Cape Mendocino.⁴

Following the return of the expedition to Acapulco on 21 March, Fray Antonio revised and augmented the rutter of the coast from Cape Mendocino to Acapulco prepared by chief pilot Francisco de Bolaños, and in Mexico from 23 May to 28 July, Fray Arsenio de San Ildefonso as attorney for prior Fray Pedro de San Hilarión of San Sebastián defended rights of the friars to officiate at the funerals at sea of the thirteen crewmen who died on the voyage. On 3 July hearings were begun before the Audiencia of Mexico as to Vizcaíno's competency and service, and on 24 September Fray Andrés testified that he had known Vizcaíno for seven years, that he had given valuable services to the crown, and recommended the granting of an encomienda or other privilege. The success of the expedition was demonstrated through highly detailed diaries, descriptions, sailing directions, and thirty-two maps, prepared by cosmographer Gerónimo Martín Palacios with the assistance of Fray Antonio, presented to the viceroy on 8 November.⁵

The success of the Vizcaíno expedition did not, however, resolve the question of a port of refuge but rather opened it to decades of dispute and speculation. Although Vizcaíno recommended the settlement of Monterey in that it fulfilled all of the requisites for a way-port for the Manila galleons, Pacific islands and Japan were also proposed, and Fray Antonio, with his impeccable reputation as a priest, cosmographer, and member of the expedition of 1602-1603 presented yet a more radical solution. In a memorial to King Felipe III on 18 June 1608 Fray Antonio opposed the colonization of Monterey as unnecessarily costly in time, lives and funds, and recommended San Bernabé at Cabo San Lucas as the site for a way-port. He argued that its proximity to New Mexico would permit that recently established colony to be more readily supplied by sea across the Gulf of

⁴ *Californiana I.*, documentos 52,57,177; MATHES, *Vizcaíno.*, 92-94. A large oak near Monterey is called the "Vizcaíno Oak", however there are many such trees in the area and no documentation indicates the precise location.

⁵ *Californiana I.*, documentos 52,56,57,58,183; *Mathes, Vizcaíno.*, 105.

California, it would be a relatively nearby base for continued northern expansion and it could serve both Manila and Peruvian galleons, since from it sailing could proceed northward through the gulf to the entrance of the Strait of Anián, and thence through the strait to the Atlantic. As missionaries for the California enterprise, regardless of the plan followed, he requested the appointment of Discalced Carmelites from the Province of San Alberto. On 14 April 1609, a Royal Order to Viceroy Luis de Velasco transmitted this memorial for viceregal consideration.⁶

Conceived under the early Greek view of a symmetrical globe, an easily navigated water passage between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans in temperate latitudes, the Strait of Anián or, to England, Northwest Passage, had been sought by Spanish and English navigators since the mid-sixteenth century, for the nation which controlled the strait would hold the key to rapid, safe, and direct commerce with Asia. After over a decade of indecision relative to California, in a memorial from San Sebastián in Mexico on 12 October 1620 Fray Antonio reiterated his proposal of 1608 and, insisting that California was an island as had been believed in the early sixteenth century, expounded on an approach to Anián via the Gulf of California, thus avoiding the difficult sailing of the Pacific littoral. He also expressed concern over reports of Europeans in the interior who were thought to be Dutch or English who had reached the area via the strait, and suggested the outfitting of an expedition financed by the crown, with four Discalced Carmelite priests and two lay brothers for evangelization, and employing San Bernabé as a base for expansion to the Colorado River, New Mexico, and the fabled land of Quivira. In this manner, Fray Antonio, as the only surviving professional cosmographer from the California expedition, established the insularity of the region and connected it to the concept of a strait via an inside passage, a view accepted by European cartographers by 1624.⁷

⁶ *Californiana I.*, documentos 80,87; MATHES, *Vizcaíno.*, 114

⁷ *Californiana I.*, documento 177; MATHES, *Vizcaíno.*, 160-165; MATHES, *La geografía mitológica de California: orígenes, desarrollo, concreción y desaparición.* (Guadalajara: Academia Mexicana de la Historia, 1985), 21-28.

In conformity with these concepts, settlement of California devolved upon the region of the gulf and, after additional failures by Nicolás de Cardona between 1615 and 1627, a Royal Order of 2 August 1628 required testimony regarding California, mentioning Fray Antonio as the principal witness whose opinion should be received before all others. This order was acknowledged by Viceroy Marqués de Cerralvo on 25 May 1629, although five days earlier Fray Antonio had given his testimony at the Monastery of Nuestra Señora del Carmen in Valladolid (Morelia), Michoacán repeating the points of his memorial of 1620. These were reiterated in a second deposition from Valladolid on 8 June 1629, and, writing from the Carmelite monastery in Puebla de los Angeles on 16 October 1631, Fray Antonio briefly reiterated his plan and recommended the taking of a Franciscan friar rather than a secular priest from Guadalajara to Juan García de Mercado, cousin and partner of Francisco de Ortega who was preparing a voyage to the Gulf of California. A third deposition, conforming to those given earlier and stating that Friars Andrés de la Asunción and Tomás de Aquino were deceased, was presented in Puebla on 22 March 1632, and Fray Antonio's expertise in preparing charts and reports was sustained in testimony presented on 30 September by Esteban Carbonel de Valenzuela, pilot for Francisco de Ortega, who had just returned from the Gulf of California.⁸ Six months later, in keeping with his geographic vision of an insular California and interoceanic strait, Fray Antonio, in writing to the crown from Puebla on 4 March 1633, remitted reports and other documents and expressed his support for the continued explorations of Ortega and Garcia de Mercado in the Gulf of California. The final extant communication of Fray Antonio, an order for a certified copy of Ortega's memorials and reports was dated in Puebla on 24 November 1635, reflecting a continued active interest in the Californias of almost four decades.⁹

⁸ MATHES, *Californiana II: Documentos para la historia de la explotación comercial de California 1611-1679* (Madrid: Ediciones José Porrúa Turanzas, 1970), documentos 27,30,35,37; *Californiana I.*, documentos 180,182,188.

⁹ *Californiana II.*, documentos 24,38.

Although the California Carmelite province was short-lived, the influence of the Carmelite Order on the region was not. Fray Antonio de la Ascensión, considered the maximum authority on the Californias, not only established the concept of California as an island which, although never confirmed, determined the cartography of North America for over a century and, with this, continued the search for the Strait of Anián until 1793. These geographic phenomenon determined various aspects of Spanish policy toward Pacific North America and directed exploration of California to the gulf region until 1768. His descriptions and maps served as the basis for all knowledge of the Pacific littoral of California until 1770, and his accounts of the 1602-1603 expedition achieved permanency as published by Franciscan Fray Juan de Torquemada in his *Monarquía Indiana* which appeared in its first edition in Sevilla in 1615. In 1770, Franciscan Fray Junipero Serra founded the mission of San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo, his administrative headquarters, on the banks of the Carmel River, and in modern California this has given its name to the world renowned resort city of Carmel, a subtle reminder of the Carmelite presence of 1602-1603.