

Primary Sources: A Day in the Life of Friar Alonso de Benavides, 1630

By U.S. National Park Service, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.11.17

Word Count **1,085**



Inner walkway and Spanish courtyard of Mission San Antonio De Padua, built by Father Junipero Serra in 1771, California. Photo By: Education Images/UIG via Getty Images.

Alonso de Benavides was a Spaniard appointed as a high-ranking friar at the New Mexico missions. Friars are like monks. The main difference is that friars go out in the world to spread Christianity, while monks stay inside a monastery.

Along with 12 other friars, he was sent to New Mexico from Spain in 1626.

The friars joined 14 missionaries already residing in New Mexico. Benavides' arrival led to an expansion of the New Mexican missions. The missions were buildings where missionaries and other people lived and worked. Spanish military forts were built nearby. The tireless friar toiled in the growing missions and promoted them with his writings. Written for the Pope and Spanish king, his book "Memorial of 1630" was published in five languages.

An offshoot of the colonial Mexican Church, the New Mexico missions were similar to others in the Americas. In his "Memorial," Benavides offered a romanticized and positive view of the friars' religious tasks, which Native Americans probably didn't share.

Benavides wrote a description of a friar's daily routine that could be similar to what friars did anywhere in the Americas during the Spanish colonial period. Benavides' "Memorial" embellished the successes of the New Mexico missions and brushed off the American Indian view — in particular that of anti-mission Pueblo Indians. They often rejected the missionaries attempts to convert them.

When peaceful resistance failed, the Indians turned to armed rebellion. The friars ultimately settled for imperfectly converted Christian Indians. The Native Americans integrated Christianity with their native beliefs and spirituality. But the missionaries felt they had done their job; they had satisfied the Spanish government's objectives to make the frontier calm for Spanish settlements and colonial expansion, and the church's quest to spread Christianity.

Benavides' description of a day in the life of a missionary resonated in the daily lives of missionaries in remote lands. He wrote:

"He Stands As A Lighted Torch"

The land is very remote and isolated and the difficulties of the long journeys require more than a year of travel. Because of this, the many friars who wish to dedicate themselves to those conversions find themselves unable to do so because of their poverty. Hence, only those who go there are sent by the Catholic King. It is at the king's own expense, for the cost is too excessive that only his royal zeal can afford it. This is the reason that there are few friars over there. Each friar ministers to four, six or more neighboring pueblos, in the midst of which he stands as a lighted torch to guide them in spiritual as well as world affairs. More than 20 Indians, devoted to the service of the church, live with him in a convent. They take turns in relieving one another as cooks, bell ringers, gardeners and in other tasks. They perform their duties with as much care as if they were friars. At evening, they say their prayers together, with much devotion, in front of some image.

In every pueblo, the friar has schools for the teaching of praying, singing, playing musical instruments and other interesting things. Promptly at dawn, one of the Indian singers goes to ring the bell, at the sound of which those who go to school assemble and sweep the rooms thoroughly. When everything is neat and clean, they again ring the bell and each one goes to learn his particular specialty. The friar oversees it all, in order that these students may be mindful of what they are doing. At this time, those who plan to get married come and notify him, so that he may prepare and instruct them according to our holy

council. If there are any persons who wish to confess, or who wish anything else, they come to tell him. When the bell is rung for mass, all go into the church and the friar says mass and administers the sacraments.

"Food For The Sick Is Sent To Their Homes"

At mealtime, the poor people in the pueblo who are not ill come to the porter's lodge. The cooks of the convent have food ready, which is served to them by the friars. Food for the sick is sent to their homes. After mealtime, it always happens that the friar has to go to some neighboring pueblo to hear a confession or to see if they are careless in the boys' school, where they learn to pray and assist at mass.

In the evening, they toll the bell for vespers, which are chanted by the singers who are on duty for the week. According to the importance of the feast, they celebrate it with organ chants as they do for mass. Again the friar supervises and looks after everything, the same as in the morning.

On feast days, he says mass in the pueblo very early, and administers the sacraments and preaches. Then, he goes to say a second mass in another pueblo, where he observes the same procedure and then he returns to his convent. One of the weekdays which is not so busy is devoted to baptism and all those who are to be baptized come to the church on that day.

"They Look Upon Him As A Father"

One of the greatest tasks of the friars is to settle the disputes of the Indians among themselves. Since they look upon him as a father, they come to him with all their troubles, and he has to take pains to harmonize them. If it is a question of land and property, he must go with them and mark their boundaries, and thus pacify them.

For the support of all the poor of the pueblo, the friar makes them sow some grain and raise some cattle. If he left it to their discretion, they would not do anything. Therefore, the friar requires them to do so and trains them so well that with the meat he feeds all the poor and pays the various workmen who come to build the churches. With the wool he clothes all the poor, and the friar himself also gets his clothing and food from this source. All the wheels of this clock must be kept in good order by the friar, without neglecting any detail, otherwise all would be totally lost.

The most important thing is the good example set by the friars. This, aside from the obligations of their vows, is forced upon them because they live in a province where they concern themselves with nothing but God.

Quiz

- 1 Read the paragraph from the section "They Look Upon Him As A Father."

One of the greatest tasks of the friars is to settle the disputes of the Indians among themselves. Since they look upon him as a father, they come to him with all their troubles, and he has to take pains to harmonize them. If it is a question of land and property, he must go with them and mark their boundaries, and thus pacify them.

What does this paragraph accomplish?

- (A) It indicates that Benavides cares about the Indians as if they were his own children.
 - (B) It suggests that Benavides is unable to keep peace among the Indians.
 - (C) It presents the idea that Benavides views the Indians as children.
 - (D) It introduces the idea that Benavides spends most of his time dealing with land issues.
- 2 Read the paragraph from the section "Food For The Sick Is Sent To Their Homes."

At mealtime, the poor people in the pueblo who are not ill come to the porter's lodge. The cooks of the convent have food ready, which is served to them by the friars. Food for the sick is sent to their homes. After mealtime, it always happens that the friar has to go to some neighboring pueblo to hear a confession or to see if they are careless in the boys' school, where they learn to pray and assist at mass.

How does the last sentence in the paragraph MOST contribute to the central idea of the article?

- (A) It indicates that friar is constantly attending to the needs of the Indians.
- (B) It shows that the friar gets enjoyment out of going to different pueblos.
- (C) It indicates that the Indians are reluctant to make confessions to the friar.
- (D) It shows that the friar has high expectations for the boys who are in school.

- 3 Which answer choice most likely explains Benavides' MAIN purpose in this article?
- (A) He wants to prepare new friars in America for the type of work they will be doing with the Indians.
 - (B) He wants to convey to the king that friars have to spend too much time helping the Indians.
 - (C) He wants to present the activities of the friars in America as beneficial to the Indians.
 - (D) He wants to make a case to the king that more friars should be sent to help the Indians.
- 4 Which piece of evidence from the article BEST conveys Benavides' point of view about his role as a missionary?
- (A) Each friar ministers to four, six or more neighboring pueblos, in the midst of which he stands as a lighted torch to guide them in spiritual as well as world affairs.
 - (B) In every pueblo, the friar has schools for the teaching of praying, singing, playing musical instruments and other interesting things.
 - (C) One of the greatest tasks of the friars is to settle the disputes of the Indians among themselves.
 - (D) Therefore, the friar requires them to do so and trains them so well that with the meat he feeds all the poor and pays the various workmen who come to build the churches.