"Kino's Saeta Biography" Historical Background
"Kino: A Legacy"
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New Men -- New Missions

1695

 Almost eight years had sped past in the Pimería. Although a common impression has emerged that Kino was a lone missionary on a lonely frontier, nothing is further from the truth. True, Eusebio’s enthusiasm and energy simply overwhelmed the “rim of Christendom” such that his companions on the frontier have been left in the dust of history. But following the visitation by Salvatierra, the Pimería Alta continually experienced the injection of new blood and a rapid circulation of assignments. The murder of Fathers Juan Ortíz Foronda and Manuel Sánchez in the Tarahumara had disrupted evangelization in the Sierra Madre; men had to be reassigned at least temporarily while peace was reestablished and missions rebuilt. The new rectorate of Dolores profited by an influx of missionaries to staff the inchoate missions at Tubutama, San Ignacio, and Cocóspera,. Padre Antonio Arias at Tubutama was replaced by Daniel Janusque; Pedro Sandoval at Cocóspera, by Juan Bautista Barli; Jorge Hostinski at San Ignacio, by Agustín de Campos; and the outpost of Nuestra Señora de la Concepción de Caborca would receive its first missionary in this expansion phase.

 Kino had been very occupied with the harvests of ’94. His maritime exploits were drying up in the desert heat when a young Sicilian, Padre Francisco Xavier Saeta, arrived in October, with orders from Father Visitor Burgos to be sent on to Caborca – this despite Kino’s advice to the contrary. Once again Kino marshaled a parade of horses, cattle, and supplies to leave with Saeta at the remote mission with its small chapel and priest’s house. At least Saeta was joyful in his new assignment and anxious to get started. Kino was anxious also to make his historic visit to Casa Grande as mentioned above. In his opinion, it would have been better to invite the vibrant young Italian along on the northern expedition and to introduce him to that expanding mission field. Caborca was many leagues into the western desert and the Pimas, as Manje had witnessed, were extremely discontent and unruly because of their treatment by Indian overseers at and around Tubutama. Caborca simply was unsafe, but it was not Kino’s place to make the assignments.

 Saeta’s letters to Kino reveal traces of a strong, emerging friendship. The Sicilian radiated an enthusiasm to rival Kino’s. He reflected Kino’s own optimism that was still not blunted by opposition and reversals. Who knows but that the dried ribs and planks at Caborca might still be joined to make a boat that would bridge the gulf between the Pimería and California. Word from Saeta indicated that the fields were already giving promise of an abundant harvest which would come early in the warm desert air. So the new missionary planned a quick junket of the neighboring missions to beg more livestock, supplies, and some moments of companionship. Back again in Caborca, he found that Kino’s handymen had finished a new corral and had completed a larger house for the priest. By early March Saeta was busily engaged in whitewashing the house with a lime plaster finish; as isolated as the mission may have been, it would maintain a certain elegance! Rumors abounded that four Jesuits, companions of Saeta on the voyage from Spain, were in the vicinity. Might it be possible that they would assist in these new conversions? Saeta could only speculate and hope. What an Easter this would be!

 Only he was unaware of the festering discontent at the mission of Tubutama, higher up the Río Altar. As Holy Week commenced, the cruelties of Antonio, the Opata overseer on the mission farm, brought about an explosive reaction. Already one Pima had died from a severe beating, and his relatives and friends vowed revenge. Catching Antonio in the pasture at dawn, they showered him with arrows. Although wounded, he managed to escape, hoping to reach the safety of the mission before he died. Although he reached the pueblo, he fell dead at the priest’s house. Father Janusque himself, having learned of an imminent attack, had already ridden off to San Ignacio for help. Saeta, meanwhile, blissfully attended to his gardening and the celebration of the season’s special liturgies.

 The sun rose gently over the near-by hills. It was Holy Saturday, April 2, 1695. Francisco Xavier Saeta was still thinking of the events of Good Friday as a band of determined Pimas approached his newly finished house. Exchanging a few pleasant greetings, he noted the surly responses and their menacing attitude. In an instant poisoned arrows thwacked into his chest; he staggered back into his room while dozens of arrows pierced him from all sides. The joy of Easter was being splattered with the blood of the first martyr of the Pimería Alta. His body crumpled on the floor as he clutched the figure of the slain Jesus which had been so much a part of the previous day’s celebrations. An irony and a tragedy.

 Indian runners from Caborca dashed to find Padre Kino. Word of the murder reached him in hours. What he had so feared many months before had happened – distant and defenseless, there had been no way to warn or protect him. And then, Indian messengers, who came by a different route, handed him Saeta’s last letters. On the outside of one, Saeta had scrawled news of the rebellion at Tubutama and a plea: “Dear Father, don’t lose sight of me.” It was already too late.

 Caborca, Oquitoa, and Tubutama smoldered in ruins. San Ignacio and Cocóspera were exposed to attack. What others had always predicted was happening; the Pimería Alta, once peaceful and filled with promise, was in revolt. Yet, not all the Indians were involved; peace still might have a chance to work. As soon as word reached General Domingo Jironza at San Juan, an expeditionary force of Spaniards and loyal Indian auxiliaries set out for Caborca. It was a tragic scene. Saeta’s body was partially cremated. The ashes were carried to Cucurpe for burial, and the articulated statue of the crucified Christ to which Saeta had clung in death was sent on to Arispe. Although the funeral for the martyred Christians was impressive, it could not offset the sorrow and resentment that remained strong in everyone’s mind. Such episodes almost always invited a stinging reaction from the Spanish settlers. Jironza dispatched his erstwhile lieutenant, Antonio de Solís, to hunt down the murderers and exact punishment. In a matter of days he terrorized several Piman villages. Just knowing that Solís had been commissioned to regain control jangled Kino’s nerves because this military officer had done more to unsettle peace in the Pimería than any other single official. His reputation for swift and severe punishment hung over the territory like the angel of death. So Kino moved quickly to mobilize his friends among the Indian leaders; perhaps he could avert a catastrophe.

TREACHERY BEFORE A TRUCE

 Within a few short weeks the Sobaipuri and Soba chiefs identified and located those responsible for the murder of Saeta and the Christian Indians at the missions. Solís had wasted little time in reprisals among unsuspecting Indian rancherías. The Pimas knew they had to sue for peace or face decimation at the hands of a relentless Spanish cavalry. With Kino’s good offices, a meeting was arranged at El Tupo, a village clearing just west of Magdalena. For three days bands of Indians converged on the clearing of the ciénega nearby. Solís and his light horse cavalry milled about in anticipation. On the morning of June 9 the Indian leaders decided to hand over some of those who had participated in the revolt. The chief perpetrators were still in hiding. By agreement the Indians left their weapons stashed in the bosque and entered the clearing unarmed for the impromptu trial. Sitting on the damp earth in a circle, they waited. Soon a neighboring chief dragged one of the ringleaders to his feet, proclaiming his guilt to Lt. Solís. Surrounded by his armed cavalrymen, Solís drew his saber. For a moment it glinted in the morning sun; then it swished through the air, toppling the Indian’s head into the trampled weeds! Justice ala Solís.

 In total panic, the Indians, guilty as well as innocent, lurched to their feet and lunged in the direction of their stacked weapons. This was no trial. It was a trap. Musket fire cracked from soldiers seated on their horses, and swords flashed through the smoke as the Spanish cavalry cut down the terror-stricken Indians. In a matter of minutes the council of El Tupo was ended. The ciénega ran deep in the blood of the simple people who had trusted too much. And from that day forward, the marshy ground has been known as La Matanza, the place of the massacre.

 Kino couldn’t believe his eyes. [Editor Note: the historical record shows that Kino was not at La Matanza; he was sick and did not attend] The wailing of the wounded, the choked cries of the dying, the blood, the terror, the treachery made him sick to death. In the days to come he could never forget the murder of his Indian friends before his own eyes. And he fought back the memories of that day in La Paz twelve years before when innocent and unsuspecting natives were blown away by violence that some insisted was the best kind of schooling for Christian morality. Kino and Campos left the scene grief-stricken, angry, and determined to turn back the tides of war. But what could two Blackrobes do in a desolate desert to unseat the arrogance of power?

 The frontier exploded into open war for three terror-filled months. The ponderous Spanish cavalry struck fear into the Indians, but their warriors continued to dart from mountain strong-holds to burn missions and fields, escaping long before the Spaniards could react. The "hawks" who put their trust in power made no progress toward peace. Frustrated and irritated by their failure, they handed the problem over to Kino whose friends their justice had murdered. And typically, Padre Eusebio accepted the responsibility of bringing peace back to the Pimería. With assurances from the beloved Blackrobe the Piman leaders summoned their people once again to a council of peace –and symbolically the site of La Matanza at Tupo was chosen for the rendezvous. This time, however, a genuine treaty of peace was agreed upon, and the site’s bloody name was changed to “Santa Rosa” because it was on the August feast day of that saint the documents were signed. One priest did in days what confounded the agents of the Crown for months.

ON TO MEXICO CITY

 One might expect that after the Pimería had calmed down that Padre Kino, now fifty years old, would relax somewhat himself. But no. In November, only three months after the peace was effected, Kino was in the saddle. This time his destination was Mexico City! The 1200 mile ride was completed in seven weeks; riding at his side were the sons of his chieftain friends who were as astonished at the riches of Mexico as the Mexican officials were at the stalwart young Pimans. His visit was by no means to renew old acquaintances; he rode on urgent business -- to press for the reopening of the California missions and to explain what was really happening on the frontier. Part of the Padre's explanation was made through the pages of a small book he wrote about the martyrdom of Saeta. His untimely and tragic death provided an occasion for Kino to clarify the situation in the Pimería and to elaborate on his own mission methods. Kino knew he was fighting for his missionary life because ugly rumors had ensnared both the man and his work. Quite unbeknown to Kino while he rode back to Mexico, there was a movement to have him removed and stationed at the Jesuit university. So he unleashed all the talent he had in writing and drawing maps.

He really did not need to demonstrate his ample literary prowess, however, since Kino's plight had come to the attention of the Jesuit General Tirso González in Rome. Comparing Kino to St. Francis Xavier, the powerful head of the order made it scathingly clear to the superiors in New Spain that Kino was not to be hindered in his extraordinary efforts in the Pimería. Shortly before Kino arrived in the capital, a letter from the General reached the new Provincial, Father Juan de Palacios, indicating that Kino should be assigned to six months in the Pimería and six months in California. Rome recognized the missionary’s apostolic restlessness as a virtue!

1696

 In fact, the very afternoon of Kino’s arrival, January 8, 1696, Father Juan María Salvatierra joined him at the Casa Profesa where they renewed their friendship and reaffirmed their mutual interest in California. With the new authorization from the General, Kino could press for a return to the peninsula, if only the Viceroy could be convinced. And that became the immediate task of these two holy conspirators. Salvatierra enlisted the aid of Father Juan de Ugarte, a giant of a man and an accomplished solicitor. Between the three of them a plan for the conversion of California was concocted that would have repercussions for centuries to come. It was the birth of the Pious Fund of the Californias – but more on that later.

 Padre Kino had lost none of his ability to argue a good case. The Provincial agreed to send five new men to the Pimería so the expansion could continue apace. Then, having spent exactly one month in Mexico City, the Padre was back in the saddle and headed homeward. As always, Kino’s routes were circuitous, this time taking him via Durango where he met up with another priest destined for work in the Pimería. Easter was spent in celebratory fashion at Conicari, and then he headed into the mountain country to see Father Horatio Polici, the new visitor. From his own memoirs we learn that despite all the seeming misfortunes and setbacks dealt him by Providence, Kino was being favored all the while. Near Oputo the very military escort he traveled with through terrain ravaged by Jocomes was ambushed and wiped out to a man; that is, all except Padre Kino who had made one of his typical brief detours to greet two old Jesuit companions.

 News of his arrival at Dolores in mid May, 1696, swept through the mission territory. The whole of the Pimería surged to life. Chiefs of distant tribes walked scores and hundreds of miles to celebrate with him at Dolores. The Indian residents of Cosari and their visitors joined together to harvest the winter wheat in the fertile valleys. Many who had been instructed earlier were baptized; others had to wait because they were not sufficiently prepared. Rarely, if ever, did Padre Eusebio let his enthusiasm outrun his responsibilities. In a way this return was a miniature copy of what Kino's original coming to the Pimería had meant. The events of the summer manifested unity, friendship, industry, gaiety, and plenty revolving around a common sacramental life in the mission pueblo. What had been words in writing the life of Saeta were now deeds in the desert.

[Editor Note: Kino back to Dolores for wheat harvest in May - same time of year in 1966 when his grave was found]