The Cord
A Franciscan Spiritual Review

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The Cord (ISSN 0010-8685 USPS 563-640) is published quarterly by Franciscan Institute Publications at St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778 (716-375-2062).

Subscription Rates: $30.00 a year domestic; $35.00 a year international; $9.50 plus shipping per copy. Periodical postage paid at St. Bonaventure, NY 14778 and at additional mailing office.

Send address changes to The Cord, P.O. Box 17 St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778 USA.

Notice to Contributors: Address all manuscripts to Editor, The Cord, Franciscan Institute Publications, St. Bonaventure, NY 14778. (Email: dmitche@sbus.edu)

1. Mss should be submitted in Microsoft Word in electronic format (CD, flash drive or email attachment). Please include name, mailing address and brief bio information.
2. The University of Chicago Manual of Style, 14th ed., is to be consulted on general questions of style.
3. Titles of books and periodicals should be italicized. Titles of articles should be enclosed in quotation marks. Please do not use single quotes except when it is a quote within a quote.
4. References should be footnoted except Scripture sources or basic Franciscan sources. Scripture and Franciscan source references should be identified within parentheses immediately after the cited text, with period following the closed parenthesis. For example:


A list of standard abbreviations used in The Cord can be found inside the back cover. Franciscan sources used should be noted in the first reference in a ms and should be taken from Francis of Assisi: Early Documents or Clare of Assisi: Early Documents.

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Cover design: Mark Sullivan

Table of Contents

Foreword .................................................................................................................. 114

About Our Contributors ...................................................................................... 115

Franciscan Priesthood Today
   Solanus M. Benfatti, C.F.R. ............................................................................... 117

Lay Contemplatives
   Suggestions from Saint Anthony of Padua
   Barnabas Hughes, O.F.M. .................................................................................. 129

Haymo and Gregory in Consultation
The Rule and the Gospel
   David Flood, O.F.M. ......................................................................................... 149

The Bull “Quo elongati” Pope Gregory IX
   Johannes Schneider, O.F.M. ............................................................................ 156

Francis was Politically Correct
   Karen Zielsinski, O.S.F. .................................................................................... 166

The Franciscan Third Order and the Penitential Tradition
   Elise Saggau, O.S.F. ......................................................................................... 169

God’s Holy Name
   Martha Herkness, O.S.F. .................................................................................. 187

The Gift of Sight
   Martha Herkness, O.S.F. .................................................................................. 188

Bernardino de Sahagún and the Global Reach of the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition
   Keith Douglass Warner, O.F.M. ....................................................................... 189

Now and Forever
   Martha Herkness, O.S.F. .................................................................................. 201

Book Review .......................................................................................................... 202

Announcements ..................................................................................................... 204

On the Franciscan Circuit ..................................................................................... 224
THE GIFT OF SIGHT

Lift up your eyes to God in praise of His creation,
To see and sense the height, width,
And depth of God’s glory of creation.

To see the many colors of blues and greens,
The different hues of color,
The yellow and orange of the sun,
The yellow of the sunflower and daisy,
The many brilliant colors of flowers and berries;
The reflection upon a pond
Giving pleasure from its smoothness and calmness of water,
Speaking of the different hues and shades of green.

To see a butterfly dance from flower to flower.
To see a moth dance from harm’s way to find safety.
To see the deep purple of a morning glory giving praise to the rising sun.
To see the smile of delight on an older person’s face as we sit and talk.

All this and more, because You, my God
Have given the gift of sight.
Praise be to You for the gift of sight that enables us to see the wonders of Your creation!

Sister Martha Herkness, O.S.F.
Sylvania, Ohio

BERNARDINO DE SAHAGÚN AND THE GLOBAL REACH OF THE FRANCISCAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

KEITH DOUGLASS WARNER, O.F.M.

The retrieval of our intellectual tradition has been among the most exciting initiatives in Franciscan life over the past decade. We can now draw inspiration from the examples of Francis and Clare, but also the philosophical and theological work of Bonaventure and Scotus. As we seek to engage the broader currents of our globalizing world, we have access to a much broader Franciscan vocabulary than in decades past.¹ This essay seeks to expand the topical and geographic extent of the Franciscan tradition by investigating the vocation of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan Friar and missionary priest who was also a pioneering anthropologist in colonial New Spain (now Mexico).

The Franciscan intellectual tradition is broader than commonly realized; it includes theology and philosophy, but is not limited to these. We should not conceive of our retrieval project as echoing the ideas of Bonaventure and Scotus. Rather, our Franciscan intellectual tradition is an integral and dynamic approach to knowing God, nature and humanity in light of the Gospel and in the spirit of St. Francis.² With this richer understanding of our tradition, we can include the sciences, expand our scope beyond medieval Europe,

and deepen our reflection on what it means to undertake its retrieval.3

For example, Franciscans were active contributors to medieval science.4 Bartholomew the Englishman (c. 1203-1272) wrote a medieval encyclopedia to instruct friars preparing for ministry, and this became one of the most important sources of information about nature during the Middle Ages.5 Bartholomew’s encyclopedia introduces basic information and concepts of the natural world which would help a student understand the metaphorical meanings of creation in Bonaventure’s The Soul’s Journey into God.6 Roger Bacon (c. 1220-1294) was an English friar with a passion for investigating the natural world, and he helped establish the conceptual foundation upon which the modern scientific method was built. He insisted science be studied in preparation for theology, and that to reform Christianity, education must be reformed to include study of the natural world.7 These friars undertook their study of nature as an expression of their religious vocations, their Franciscan values. Their work contributed to medieval European society’s understanding of nature, philosophy and science.8

The Franciscan intellectual tradition took its first institutional forms at the Universities of Oxford and Paris, but this tradition was in no way limited to these places, any more than it is to monastery walls. Franciscan spirituality is dis-


6 Ewert Cousins, Bonaventure: The Soul’s Journey into God, the Tree of Life, the Life of St. Francis (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).


8 Warner, “The Incarnation Matters!”


2. To describe and explain ancient Indigenous religion, beliefs, practices, deities. This was to help friars and others understand their “idolatrous” religion.
3. To record and document the great cultural inheritance of the Indigenous peoples of New Spain as it crumbled under the weight of colonial occupation.12

His work can be understood as a five decade long research project investigating a cluster of religious, cultural and nature themes. Perhaps most impressive was his pioneering methodology, for he created new forms of gathering information and validating its accuracy. One scholar described the Historia general as “one of the most remarkable accounts of a non-Western culture ever composed.”13

**Bernardino as a Franciscan missionary and academic**

As a teen, Bernardino attended the University of Salamanca (in what is now Spain), which exposed him to the currents of renaissance humanism. The University of Salamanca was then a center for Franciscan intellectual life, and Bernardino joined the Franciscan Friars there. Due to his academic and religious reputation, he was recruited to travel to New Spain as a missionary.14

Shortly after arriving in New Spain, Bernardino helped found the first European school of higher education in the Americas, the Colegio Imperial de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco in 1536, in what is now Mexico City.15 This became a vehicle for the Franciscans recruiting native men to the clergy, but also a center for Franciscans to study native languages to further their evangelization efforts. Bernardino taught Latin and other subjects during its initial years.16 Other friars taught grammar, history, religion, scripture, and philosophy. Native leaders were recruited to teach about native history and traditions, which would later stir controversy among conquistadores and colonial officials concerned with controlling Indigenous populations.

The school at Tlatelolco was important for the establishment of Catholic Christianity in New Spain, but it also became an important institution for cultural exchange. Two notable “products” of the school are the first New World herbal, and a map of what is now the Mexico City region.17 An herbal is a catalogue of plants and their uses, including descriptions and their medicinal applications. The plants are drawn, named and presented according to the Aztec system of organization.18 It describes where the plants grow and how they can be prepared into herbal medicines, and was likely used to teach Indigenous medicine.19 The Mapa de Santa Cruz shows the urban areas, networks of roads and canals, pictures of activities such as fishing and farming, and the broader landscape context. The herbal and the map display clear influence of Spanish and Aztec cultures; they convey by their structure and style the blending of these cultures.

In addition to teaching, Bernardino spent several extended periods evangelizing Aztecs outside urban areas. Bernardino was first and foremost a missionary, motivated to bring the peoples of the New World to the Catholic faith. His writings reflect this fundamental missionary interest. His intellectual curiosity drew him, and his linguistic gifts allowed him, to learn more about the worldview of the Aztecs. He conducted all his research in the Indigenous language of Nahuatl. In 1547, he collected and wrote down huehuetlatollii, Aztec formal orations given by elders for moral instruction, education

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14 León-Portilla, Bernardino De Sahagún: The First Anthropologist.
15 León-Portilla, Bernardino De Sahagún: The First Anthropologist.
16 Nicholson, “Fray Bernardino De Sahagún.”
19 Robertson, Mexican Manuscript Painting, 159.
of youth, and cultural construction of meaning.\textsuperscript{20} As a result of these initial investigations, he grew increasingly skeptical of the mass conversions of Aztecs to Christianity. He thought most of them were superficial. Perhaps more importantly, he concluded that most of his fellow Franciscan missionaries misunderstood the basic elements of traditional Aztec religion and cosmology. Bernardino became convinced that only by mastering native languages and worldviews could missionaries be effective.

**Anthropological research**

Bernardino’s life changed dramatically in 1558 when the new provincial of New Spain, Fray Francisco de Toral, commissioned him to write in Nahuatl what he considered useful for the missionary project. This allowed him a more creative, sophisticated and rigorous approach to gathering, analyzing, and presenting his studies of Indigenous language and culture. Subsequently he conducted research for about twenty-five years.

He began his formal research by spending two years conducting interviews with ten to twelve elders of a village about fifty miles from present-day Mexico City. Bernardino questioned them regarding the religious rituals and calendar, family relations, economic and political customs, and natural history. Bernardino recruited and collaborated with graduates of the school at Tlatelolco. They actively participated in the research and documentation over decades. This early work has been named Primeros Memoriales ("first memories"), which he would use as the basis for subsequently creating the more ambitious Historia general.\textsuperscript{21}

Bernardino systematically gathered knowledge from a range of diverse informants who were recognized as having knowledge of cultural tradition. He did so in the native language of Nahuatl, but then compared the answers from different sources of information. He sought out different kinds of informants, including women (which was unusual). Many passages of the texts in Historia general present descriptions of like items (e.g., gods, classes of people, animals) according to consistent patterns, and it appears that Bernardino deployed a series of questionnaires to structure his interviews.\textsuperscript{22} Other parts appear to be the transcription of spontaneous narration of religious beliefs, society or nature. Some sections of text report Bernardino’s own narration of events or commentary.

Bernardino was among the first to develop a diverse set of strategies for gathering and validating knowledge of Indigenous New World cultures. In the context of significant uncertainty among Spaniards about Aztec culture, Bernardino created new ways to gather, document, and justify the human knowledge of others. Thus, his work can be considered a pioneering form of social science. Centuries later, the discipline of anthropology would later formalize these as ethnography (the scientific research strategy to document the beliefs, behavior, social roles and relationships, and worldview of another culture, but to explain these within the logic of that culture). Ethnography requires the practice of empathy with those very different from oneself, and the suspension of one’s own cultural beliefs in order to understand and explain the worldview of those living in another culture. Even though Bernardino conducted his research before the advent of the modern scientific method, his research activities and his strategies for validating information shared by members of another culture disclose a brilliant epistemology, or philosophy of knowledge.

The Historia general is a complex document. It was assembled, edited, revised and appended over decades. Bernardino’s goals of orientating fellow missionaries to Aztec culture, providing a rich Nahuatl vocabulary, and recording the Indigenous cultural heritage at times compete with each other within it. A general ordering of his twelve book presentation is as follows:

\textsuperscript{20} León-Portilla, Bernardino De Sahagún.
\textsuperscript{21} León-Portilla, Bernardino De Sahagún.
\textsuperscript{22} López Austin, “The Research Method of Fray Bernardino De Sahagún.”
1. Gods, religious beliefs, moral philosophy and cosmology,
2. Humanity (society, politics, economics, including anatomy and disease),
3. Natural history (animals, plants, rocks, soils and landscapes).

This reflects the late medieval European approach to knowledge.

The manuscript pages are generally of two columns, with Nahuatl, written first, on the right and a Spanish translation on the left. Most of Historia general is text, but its 2000 pictures provide vivid images of sixteenth century New Spain.23 Some of these pictures directly support the text; others are thematically related; others are for decorative purposes. Some are colorful, large, and consume most of a page; others are black and white sketches. Half of them represent various elements of the natural world. The illustrations offer remarkable detail about life in colonial New Spain. Several different artists’ hands have been identified, and the drawings convey a blend of Indigenous and European artistic influences.24 Bernardino’s innovative methodologies were developed in partnership with collaborators, most of whom had been his students. He named them, and described their contributions. Bernardino accorded greater credit to Indigenous collaborators than did any other sixteenth century European researcher.25

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23 To see full color examples of these manuscript pages and their pictures, please refer to the Wikipedia entry on the Florentine Codex: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florentine_Codex](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florentine_Codex)

24 For analysis of the pictures and the artists, see several contributions of John Frederick Schaller, ed., Sahagún at 500: Essays on the Quincentenary of the Birth of Fr. Bernardino De Sahagún (Berkeley: Academy of American Franciscan History, 2003).


26 For a history of this scholarly work, see León-Portilla, Bernardino De Sahagún.
as they understood it, and not exclusively from the Euro- 
pean perspective. “The scope of the Historia’s coverage of 
contact-period Central Mexico Indigenous culture is remark- 
able, unmatched by any other sixteenth-century works that 
attempted to describe the native way of life.”27 Foremost in 
his own mind, Bernardino was a Franciscan missionary, but 
he may also rightfully claim the title as Father of American 
Ethnography.28

**Bernardino’s Franciscan spirit**

Bernardino has been described as a missionary, ethnog- 
rapher, linguist, folklorist, Renaissance humanist, and his- 
torian and he was all of these.29 Scholars have proposed 
different explanations for how he was able to engage all these 
different ways of knowing. Some have pointed to early renais- 
sance humanism he learned at the University of Salamanca. 
Others have pointed to the intellectual influence of medieval 
encyclopedias or worldbooks.30 These may have been the 
source of some of his inspiration, but they do not fully 
explain his actions and innovations. Few studies reference the 
influence of his Franciscan vocation, and none investigate 
him specifically as a Franciscan Friar.

An alternative explanation may be his training in Franc- 
ciscan philosophy, specifically that of John Duns Scotus and 
his philosophical anthropology. The philosophy of Scotus 
is founded upon the primacy of the Incarnation, and was 
widely taught in Spain during his lifetime. A Franciscan hu- 
manistic philosophical anthropology expresses a vision and 
understanding of what it means to be a human being. In 
the context of dramatic differences across cultural frontiers 
such as that in New Spain, a philosophical anthropology 
guides the thinking and behavior of missionaries.31 The pro-
Indigenous approach of the Franciscan missionaries in New 
Spain is quite consistent with the philosophy of Franciscan 
John Duns Scotus. Several specific dimensions of Bernar- 
dino’s work (and that of other Franciscans in New Spain) 
reflect this philosophical anthropology. The native peoples 
had dignity and merited respect as human beings. The friars 
were, for the most part, deeply disturbed by how conquis- 
tadores abused the native peoples. In Bernardino, his pio- 
nering methodologies and overall ethnographic project, we 
can perceive Franciscan respect for the human dignity of all 
peoples, including those perceived to be inferior.

He invested his life’s effort in meeting, interviewing, and 
interpreting them and their worldview as an expression of 
his faith. He valued them. While others – in Europe and New 
Spain – were debating whether or not they were human, or 
even had souls, he was interviewing them, seeking to un- 
derstand who they were, how they loved each other, what 
they believed, and how they made sense of the world. In his 
passion for evangelization, he fell in love with their culture. 
Even as he expressed disgust at their sacrifices and their 
“idolatries,” he spent five decades investigating Aztec 
culture. Bernardino is one of the greatest Catholic missionar- 
ies of the sixteenth century, and deserves to be recognized 
along with Bartolomé de las Casas and Mateo Ricci. He was 
an outstanding pioneer of missionary activity, of scientific 
investigations in the New World, and in valuing the culture of 
others.

**Conclusion: the global reach of our intellectual tradition**

The witness of Bernardino challenges us to expand our 
thinking about the Franciscan intellectual tradition. His nat-
ural and social science research helps justify the term “intellectual” tradition. His example demonstrates that our tradition has reached across space, time, and topic. To appreciate the geographic scope of our tradition, we should better incorporate our retrieval project to include the Iberian institutions (e.g., the University of Salamanca), but also evangelization projects in the Americas, Africa and Asia. The Franciscan intellectual tradition did not end in medieval European universities. Further research will doubtless demonstrate that Franciscans brought elements of this intellectual tradition with them wherever they travelled, and that they brought it to bear on their mission.

Bernardino challenges our understanding of the scope of inquiry possible within our intellectual tradition. He pursued research topics that we would today label geography or environmental studies; health sciences; and anthropology. He was very interested in nature, and the largest book in the Historia general is devoted to nature. Colonial New Spain was afflicted by many plagues, and he was keenly interested in diagnoses and remedies. Finally, he worked to further what we would call cultural understanding, long before this term was coined. Bernardino was profoundly open to Indigenous ways of knowing, a courageous stance in the context of a brutal colonial project. As the retrieval of our tradition continues into its second decade, we Franciscans would do well to recall the global breadth of interests in our history—in subject and geography.

Bernardino’s example demonstrates that our intellectual tradition is dynamic and evolutionary, organic and holistic. We should avoid the pitfall of conceiving of it in terms of lists of concepts. A suitable metaphor might be of assistance: our intellectual tradition is like the Incarnation. It is alive and responsive, and undergoing growth and development. It consists of an integral body of knowledge, but it also senses the richness and beauty of all creation, and thus, it can guide our souls ever more deeply into God.