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Fray Silvestre Vèlez de Escalante

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## LETTER TO THE MISSIONARIES OF NEW MEXICO

FRAY SILVESTRE VÉLEZ DE ESCALANTE

*edited by Eleanor B. Adams*

## INTRODUCTION

THE SHORT career of the eighteenth-century Franciscan missionary and explorer of "the mysterious kingdoms of the north," Fray Silvestre Vélez de Escalante, fell within the period of Spain's last major effort to broaden and strengthen her control over the North American borderlands of her Empire. So it came about that the writings of a young priest, who had scarcely reached his thirtieth year when he died in the spring of 1780, were highly influential in his own time and have continued to arouse unusual interest ever since. In the eighteenth century his reports and opinions were eagerly awaited and widely circulated by the highest governmental and military officials for their usefulness in the search for solutions to the complicated problems of administering and safeguarding the vast Interior Provinces of New Spain. In the nineteenth century the government and military of the United States found them helpful in the search for a route for a transcontinental railroad. And, before the discovery in the twentieth century of the voluminous source material for the history of the western United States in the archives and libraries of Spain and Mexico, historians considered his letters, the diary of the expedition into Utah which he kept in collaboration with his superior and companion, Fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez, and a truncated version of the abstracts and copies Vélez de Escalante made of the documents then in the governmental archives of Santa Fe, capital of New Mexico, major sources containing many unique data.<sup>1</sup>

Most of Vélez de Escalante's extant writings have been published in Spanish or English, or both. The major exception is the long missing first part of the *Extracto de Noticias*, which for some reason was omitted or lost from the copies made and sent to Spain for the use of the historian Don Juan Bautista Muñoz as part of the important collection known as "Memorias de Nueva España." The complete original turned up some years ago in the National Library of Mexico among a group of papers from the old Archive of the Convento Grande, headquarters of the Franciscan Province of the Holy Gospel of Mexico, to which the New Mexican missions of the Custody of the Conversion of St. Paul were subordinate throughout the Spanish Colonial period.<sup>2</sup>

A hitherto unknown product of Vélez de Escalante's pen turned up when a later Franciscan of New Mexico, Fray Angelico Chavez, undertook to organize and make a calendar of the scattered papers pertaining to the Archdiocese of Santa Fe assembled by Archbishop Gerken in the 1930's. This is a *patente* of Fray Silvestre Vélez de Escalante, Vice-Custos of the interior missions of New Mexico, addressed to the mission fathers and dated San Ildefonso, August 17, 1777.<sup>3</sup> Although it provides further evidence, if any were needed, of the progressive decline of the New Mexican missions which had disturbed the peace of mind of the Visitor Fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez in 1776, and of other able and conscientious friars for years before his time, the document is even more interesting for the light it throws on the character and education of Fray Silvestre—not as an explorer and researcher whose words were heeded in the councils of the great, but as a sincere youthful religious in the unhappy position of making well-founded strictures on the conduct of his brethren, most of them his seniors, in an obedient effort to force them to reform their unbecoming ways.\*

\*I should like to express my gratitude to the Chancery officials at Santa Fe who permitted me to have a photograph made of this document.

## PATENTE

Fray Silvestre Vélez de Escalante, of the Regular Observance of our Father St. Francis, Apostolic Preacher, Vice-Custos of these interior missions of the Conversion of St. Paul. To all their friars, and peace in the Lord.

Reverend Fathers and very beloved brethren: Your Reverend Paternities already know from the patent of our Reverend Father Visitor and Custos Fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez, in which he announced his elevation to the prelacy of this Custody, that, owing to serious and urgent business which had arisen at that time, he was unable to include in it his scheme of government as his illustrious predecessors have been accustomed to do. Nor was he able to give them notice of it later because of the urgency of his departure for the El Paso missions to complete the juridical visitation which by order of our Reverend Father Provincial Fray Isidro Murillo he began in these interior missions.<sup>4</sup> Therefore he left his order and command that I should do so, granting me all his authority for this, as well as the necessary instructions lest my few years, less experience, and great lack of the wisdom that comes with experience should cast me either into an inertia harmful to his conscience, or to mine, to all your Reverend Paternities, to all the faithful in our charge, or into an indiscreet show of authority which, instead of correcting, might provoke antipathy against the intent of his pious, charitable fervor and prudent zeal.

I have put off issuing this scheme of government until now because the internal provisions to which exact obedience was proper, and even indispensable, were still ineffective. And because, in addition to the obligations imposed by our religious status, we have those pertaining to the ministry to which we are dedicated, I shall divide the scheme into two parts.

And, beginning with what relates to the Seraphic Institute we profess, we must observe the following:

1. In regard to the necessary temporalities, let our poverty be adjudged without stain or suspicion of covetousness or attachment.

2. In regard to the sowings that are made with the labor of the Indians, let there not be the least excess whereby they go beyond the limit of what is strictly necessary for the maintenance of the minister, of the sacristans, and of the other weekly help who are attached to the convent, to whom it is ordered and commanded that the necessary sustenance be given daily since they serve daily.

3. Let no friar carry on or engage in any lucrative trade or commerce, whatever it may be. This is to be understood to include all trade in kind, barter, which is made to acquire something in addition to what one has, but not the exchange of a thing the friar may have which is no longer necessary for something else that he may need more, without the intervention of any civil contract.

4. Let no friar, whoever he may be, have in his care or support any family of Spaniards within or outside the convent, nor succor it with grains, income from Poor Souls, or anything else in which the very slightest labor of the Indians may be involved. Nor are they to send one or more of these [Indians] with a letter, verbal greeting, or anything else to the house of those who may once have served in their friary. And all this is strictly forbidden regardless of any reason which may be alleged to lend it a good appearance.

5. Let no friar keep in his convent or visit, or receive visits from women suspect either because of their youth or beauty, or, finally, because of their customs and ill fame.

6. And lastly, let no friar sell or give to any layman any mantle of the same kind we use in order that the laymen may use it in the same way, nor likewise a shroud without the blessing pertaining to this and necessary in order for the one who gives the alms and wears it to his grave to win the indulgence. For this authority has long ago been granted, and is now granted anew, to each and every one of your Reverences so that each of you in your districts can and may bless the said shrouds. You must and are ordered to give a certification of this blessing on a piece of paper in order that the one who obtains it, the parish minister of the deceased who may wear our shroud, or the one who gives him burial [may

have proof of it], for both must require proof that this blessing has been given before performing the burial.

With regard to the ministry as parish priests which we actually exercise, the following is ordered and commanded:

1. Daily personal assistance in our respective missions; and the friar who should absent himself from his for several days, especially if there be any feast day among these, without any important motive and without permission from our Reverend Father Custos, or from me or from the one who may succeed me, shall be re-proved as is fitting on the first and second occasions, and on the third removed from the mission.

2. The explanation of a point of Christian doctrine every Sunday and feast day of obligation by each one to his parishioners with the truth, order, and clarity that their more or less limited understanding may require; and in the case of the Indians by means of the best interpreters, instructing these last beforehand in what is to be interpreted by them; and admonishing them that they are to express those words, such as God, Trinity, Person, Blessed Sacrament, which all the languages of these Indians lack, as they sound, and not to try to translate them, because not having, as their languages do not have, equivalent terms, if they try to say it all in their language, it is unavoidable either that they will say something different or give rise to errors of which it will not be easy to disabuse the people who hear them, since they usually believe that what the interpreter says is on all occasions the same as what the Father teaches.

3. Let each and every one of us apply the Mass for his parishioners every Sunday and other feast days on which they are obliged to hear it, even though, after hearing it, they may work, because the Council of Trent so orders and our Most Holy Father Benedict XIV has so declared and decreed, as is evident from an Apostolic Constitution of his which has already been incorporated in the Canon Law and which is being remitted by order of our Reverend Father Custos in a separate letter to your Reverences,

faithfully and literally translated into Spanish with some reflections upon it so that no one who holds a cure of souls at present may think himself exempt from this obligation, trusting in the now improbable opinion of various summarists there have been of moral theology who formerly defended and considered the contrary probable.

4. Let no friar write to the governor of the kingdom on any subject; and they shall be able to write to him only Christmas and Easter greetings, congratulations, and on days [of his name saint]. Item, let no friar reprove in writing the alcalde mayor or lieutenant there may be of his pueblo and mission with regard to the vexations these men may bring upon the Indians, or with regard to the personal services they may exact. Much less may the friar himself prevent them, since the most serious discords between the ecclesiastical and secular ministers result from this and nothing can be remedied. And even when one of your Reverences may see your Indians unjustly and gravely vexed by their alcaldes or lieutenants, you must, as has been and is ordered, tell your prelate and no one else about the abuses there may be in this regard, when they are grave and capable of proof, and when there is no danger that the accuser may come out of the affair as the delinquent. Under these circumstances the prelate will take the most appropriate course of action, having recourse to the government in due form, if it be necessary in order to cut off such disorders.

5. Let no friar have dealings with laymen nor talk to them about decisions of the prelates or of the government, nor receive in his convent anyone except those who as benefactors, or for other important reason, it may be necessary and unavoidable to receive.

6. And lastly, let no friar issue certifications in favor of or against any lay person, whoever he may be, without permission from our Reverend Father Custos, or from me or from my successor. Nor is he to give a receipt for payment for Masses, for which he has not received the alms, even though the one who asks for the receipt may promise prompt payment; because it is known that some laymen have satisfied other debts with such receipts and have

never given the promised alms nor have the Masses been applied; this trustfulness thereby working to the serious prejudice of a third party, either to the creditor, or to the one for whose benefit it has been decided that the Masses should be applied.

Now that the scheme of government is concluded, I might be able to conclude this writing, but I should fail in part to fulfill the orders of our Reverend Father Custos and the strict obligation which falls upon me at the present time to procure by all practicable means the exact observance of our Seraphic Institute. In fulfillment of this I will expound to your Reverences some reflections upon the chastity and poverty which we promised to observe throughout our life, because I know, not without grave sorrow and vehement fear of falling, that either because of the guile of the common enemy of mankind, or because of our small favor, there are more perils in this country than elsewhere against the first and not a few abuses against the second. And therefore I shall touch upon both so that no one may fail to avoid them for lack of light on the subject.

And beginning with the most sublime poverty which we profess, there is no doubt that any kind or species of trade or lucrative barter is an intolerable abuse and clear violation of it; and even when it may not be lucrative, if it is without true need, present or imminent, there is no doubt whatsoever that it is contrary to our poverty, because, in addition to the assumption of ownership which usually is implicit in any exchange of this type, it results in superfluity of goods, property, attachment, and greed, and besides this, in scandal, distraction, and great neglect of what pertains to our ministry. For this reason St. Paul, in his Second Epistle to Timothy, ch. 2, says: *Nemo militans Deo implicat se negotiis saecularibus*. And for the same reason the Sacred Councils, Supreme Pontiffs have strictly forbidden business and trade to secular priests and friars, as is evident from many passages of Canon Law, specifically *ex. cap. negotiatorem 9 tit. eod.*, the Supreme Pastor of the Church *secundum instituta praedecessorum nostrorum sub intermissione anathematis prohibemus, ne clerici*

*vel monachi causa lucri negociantur*. A Bull of our Supreme Pontiff Urban VIII, issued on February 22 of the year 1633, contains the same prohibition speaking *in terminis* of the missionary friars of the Indies, when, as the result of a formal report and opinion by the Council placed before the Catholic King of Spain, it was decided that not only the fathers of the extinct Society [of Jesus], but also the other regular clergy who wished to do so might enter the missions and conversions of Japan, under the condition that they should neither hinder one another by private disturbances nor engage in trade under any pretext nor for any reason, as Dr. [Juan de] Solórzano [Pereira] says, speaking on the said opinion of the Council and Bull in book 3, *Gubernatione Indiarum*, ch. 18 no. 38, in these words: *Denique adjicitur in dict. consultatione, & Bulla supra relata, ut Missionarii at omni mercatura, & negotiatione absterneant sub censuris ibidem, contra facientibus, irrogatis*. And lest any of those who perhaps may see very little and meditate less concerning the obligations of our state may think that new precepts are imposed here or that a new and very rigorous reform is introduced, let all hear Father Fray Antonio Victorino, who, at the beginning of this century, came to this Custody as Visitor for our Reverend Father Fray Juan de la Cruz, who was then Commissary General. In one of his patentes, issued on December 3, 1706, he makes this formal statement: "And do not fail to exercise very great vigilance lest the friars barter with the infidels for boys or girls, pelts, or any other thing, because of the very great scandal that results from doing so, and because it is directly against our Sacred Institute, and the trade which necessarily must intervene in such exchanges involves excommunication in the Bull of Urban VIII already cited, which I brought especially for the purpose, as none of the friars is unaware. For this reason we shall make a very special inquiry about this in order to impose the appropriate remedy and give the punishment merited according to our laws for so pernicious an evil." Father Victorino to this point.<sup>5</sup> Father [Antonio] Guerra had already said the same, although at less length, in his patente of government issued in the first year of this century.<sup>6</sup>

Another no less tolerable and even more pernicious abuse results from this one. This is the excessive sowings made with the personal labor of the Indians. And this, in addition to being against reason and against the royal laws of the Indies, is contrary to our evangelical poverty, by virtue of which we must content ourselves with what is strictly necessary to eke out our existence with religious decency as poor evangelicals, and not like laymen who are capable of having a great deal. It is also very harmful to our ministry because when the said sowings are excessive, and the minister dedicates to their cultivation the time that should be given to the administration and teaching of the Indians; in order to exercise the necessary care he busies himself in seeing whether it is fallowed, planted, irrigated, weeded, harvested, whether the Indians steal or are neglectful. And it is also harmful because we should live free from all covetousness in order that these rude neophytes may realize that we seek nothing for ourselves, but for God; that we seek their eternal welfare and not our temporal comfort. Moreover, if they are forced to work too much for the father, taking from them the time necessary for their own farms; if, because they do not serve him in this and in other things according to his desire, the father punishes and mistreats them, it is natural for them in their rusticity not only to abhor their minister but even to conceive no little repugnance for Christianity. In addition, when they are employed in this way and mistreated for any defect, perhaps imagined, they suffer great need of the spiritual nourishment of doctrine and grave scandal, believing their minister to be not only inhuman, but covetous, as the *Concilio Limense III* states: [*Quoniam vero avaritiae, negotiationisque, turpitudine in Rectoribus Indorum et crebrior est et periculosior,*] *cum neophiti iste ea de causa tum scandalum grave sustineant, tum instructionis suae jacturum non mediocre faciant, dum ab his in temporalibus ipsorum quaestibus occupantur a quibus debeant spiritualibus incrementis augeri.* Nor for such things nor for neglect of them, nor even for really culpable defects, and not even for those defects in them which reach the point of being mortal sin should the minister show himself harsh and severe with the Indians or punish

them rigorously, because extremely serious detriments result from this. One of these, and the most important, is that when confession is essential to them they conceal their sins. Therefore [Diego de] Avendaño in *Tesaurus Indico*, tit. 15, ch. 2, no. 51, art. 8, has this to say about the matter: *Dico octavo, Parochi Indorum grauius peccare possunt, si se erga illos asperos et seueros exhibeant. . . . Et ratio est manifesta, timiditate eorum ac pusillanimitate perspecta. Quomodo enim ad illos confidenter accedent confessuri peccata, et animarum remedium inter diaboli frequentia tentamenta quaesituri?* And truly it is very alien to the mildness which Christ Our Lord recommends to us and a very indecent thing that we, His ministers, should always go about with a rigorous whip in our hand as if we belonged to the secular justice, as the aforesaid *Concilio Limense* well puts it, Actio 3, ch. 3: *Profecto enim turpissimum est Dei ministros in saeculi satellites verti.* And the *Concilio Tercero Mexicano*, tit. *De his, quae ad parochos indorum attinent*, fol. 50, § 6, says: *Quia Indi timidi sunt, et pusillanimes, oportet Parochos cum eis mansuete, ac benigne agere, nec eos minis deterrere, sic enim fit, ut languescentes animo, peccata sua confiteri, non audeant, ac salutari poenitentiae remedio destituantur.* And finally, if our Sovereign, being, as he is, empowered to do so, asks no tribute from these Indians nor desires that they be treated with severity lest it impede the spread of the Gospel, with what reason, with what conscience, can we burden them with work in sowings or other things or maltreat them for this reason? Would this not be placing obstacles in the way of the Gospel? In this respect I cannot explain to myself what any one of your Reverences is thinking of to have done or to do such a thing. But henceforth let us all try with greater diligence to do what Our Lord Jesus Christ tells us in these words, which should inspire us greatly: *Quaerite primum regnum Dei, et haec omnia (ident[idem] ad vitam necessaria adjicientur vobis discite a me quia mitis sum, et humilis corde).*

And coming to the religious purity and chastity we promised to God, the extremely grave perils against it which we suffer are numerous, especially when we find ourselves alone, outside the

cloister and with freedom for anything, as Father [José de] Acosta, the very celebrated historian of the Indies, in book 5 of his *Procuranda Indorum Salute*, cap. 16, weighs the matter on a high plane in these words, so much to the purpose that it seems as if he were writing in New Mexico: *Atque ut omittam reliqua quenam levia sunt, duo habent parochi indorum gravissimam incommodam. Unum est continentia periculum propter parochorum, miram solitudinem ac libertatem quidvis perpetrandi cum perpetua quadam esca libidinis et feminarum aspectu colloquiis et rei familiaris usu atque accedit cur cumulum faciam, mira ipsarum feminarum facilitas rarus pudor resistendi vis propemodum nulla saepe etiam sponte oblata copia.* Who will not tremble, Fathers, at the sight of so many perils? Who will think it possible to dispense with any effort to avoid them? Only the one who, to his extreme misfortune, loves them, and such a one will undoubtedly perish, for infallible truth says so: *Qui amat periculum in illo peribit.* Ecc. ch. 3. Then what must we do? Nothing more than observe exactly what our Seraphic Father St. Francis commands in the eleventh chapter of the Rule we profess, in which he says: I firmly order all the friars not to keep suspect company or counsels of women. This precept, which *ex se* governs, obligates us under mortal sin, along with the other two that are contained in the same chapter. Navarro very properly says that our Sainted Father imposed them for the purer observance of our chastity, desiring to remove all occasion for breaking this vow.<sup>7</sup> And St. Bonaventure, cited by the same Navarro, says in 2 Sent. dist. ult. q. ult. that this vow of chastity is more strict in our Order than in all the others because even though avoiding suspicious company and conversation with women is a thing implicit in and consequent upon this vow since the one who promises to observe chastity consequently promises to avoid the immediate causes of losing it, nevertheless our Father St. Francis, desirous that this vow should be kept with more purity, imposed a special precept to avoid the conversation and company of women, which the other Orders do not have. The friar, the said Navarro continues, who has familiar association and conversation with women, with whom he either causes scandal or exposes himself to probable

danger of losing his chastity, sins mortally against this precept of the Rule. Ani San Buenaventura, ch. 11, all the ancient exegetes, and Córdoba, Quaest. v, Concla 1 and below. The same Navarro says, along with the exegetes cited: Suspicious company and conversation with women with regard to whom the friar knows that he is placed in danger of falling, or that there is sufficient occasion for those who see this to be scandalized and consider him incautious about his chastity.

Taking the foregoing for granted, if, for one thing, we contemplate the solitude and liberty that each of us has in his mission, and that as religious we do not cease to be fragile men, and, for another thing, the extreme exertion which the devil puts forth to deprive the friar of so important a virtue, together with the great facility with which many women of these lands condescend to any indecent suggestion, their lack of modesty, and the fact that if they even have any hope of an enduring affair to their material interest, they offer themselves voluntarily, or others offer them; if this is true, I say, let us no longer consider women frequenting convents, or we their houses, a remote occasion for loss of chastity. Being on familiar terms with them, affable, and sometimes jesting conversations with them, and much less their living with us and within the convents and being at our free disposition, all this we must avoid without regard to any pretext whatsoever, by virtue of the said precept of our Rule. And if anyone should reply that he has come to no harm on many such occasions, and that the dangers are therefore remote in his case, despite such great stringency as someone perhaps may think it, at the same time that efforts are being made to remove dangerous occasions the necessity that can occur and be succored without such great peril is heeded. The friar who because of chronic illness or other serious cause may need an old woman to attend him is permitted to have her under the indispensable condition that in order to take her into his convent he must frankly inform our Reverend Father Custos, or me or my successor, stating the quality of the said woman, her name and surname, if she has one, her age and customs, her family, the place of her birth, that of her dwelling, so that the prelate may see

whether she is in any way suspect or not. And I strictly order those who may have such assistance at the present time, even though it may be with my permission or that of our Reverend Father Custos, to remit to me at once the said report concerning them, stating also whether the women are alone or accompanied by some female relatives, and if they are so accompanied, they shall give the same details about each of her companions and in the same way as about the principals.

This is, my Fathers, what I, in the name of and with all the authority of our Reverend Father Custos Fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez, state, order, and command to each and every one of your Reverences in this letter patent, signed by my hand and name and countersigned by the undersigned secretary.

And in order that it may come to the attention of all your Reverences and you may have it for your guidance, I order that it is to go from mission to mission according to the circuit in the margin, a copy to be recorded at each in the book of patents within the period of one day, and from the last [be returned?]

Issued at this mission of San Ildefonso on the seventeenth day of the month of August of the year 1777. Fray Silvestre Vélez Escalante, Vice-Custos. By order of his Paternity, Fray Carlos de Velasco, pro-secretary.

#### NOTES

1. For a summary of the known facts about Vélez de Escalante's life, see E. B. Adams, "Fray Silvestre and the Obstinate Hopi," NMHR, Vol. 38 (1963), pp. 97-138.

2. See "Writings," pp. 333-35, *infra*. The Biblioteca Nacional original of the *Extracto de Noticias*, edited with an introduction and annotations by Adams, is scheduled for publication in the *Biblioteca Histórica Mexicana de Obras Inéditas* of José Porrúa e Hijos, Sucs., México, D. F.

3. A. Chavez, *Archives of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, 1678-1900* (Washington, D.C., 1957). "Patentes were the official letters from Franciscan major Superiors, such as the Commissary General of the Indies, the Minister Provincial . . . and the local Custos or the Vice-Custos in charge." *Ibid.*, p. 149.

4. Patente, Santa Fe, April 17, 1777. Chavez, p. 164. Rather than wait for the annual cordon, Fr. Domínguez left for El Paso on May 5 with Don Diego Borica, who had been summoned by the Commandant Inspector of the Interior Provinces Croix. Domínguez to Provincial Muriillo, El Paso, May 21, 1777. E. B. Adams and A. Chavez, *The Missions of New Mexico, 1776* (Albuquerque, 1956), pp. 293-94.

5. Cf. Chavez, p. 157.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Fray Pedro Navarro, *Exposición de la Regla de Nuestro Padre San Francisco* (Madrid, 1636). There were copies of this in the library of the Custody. Adams and Chavez, p. 231.