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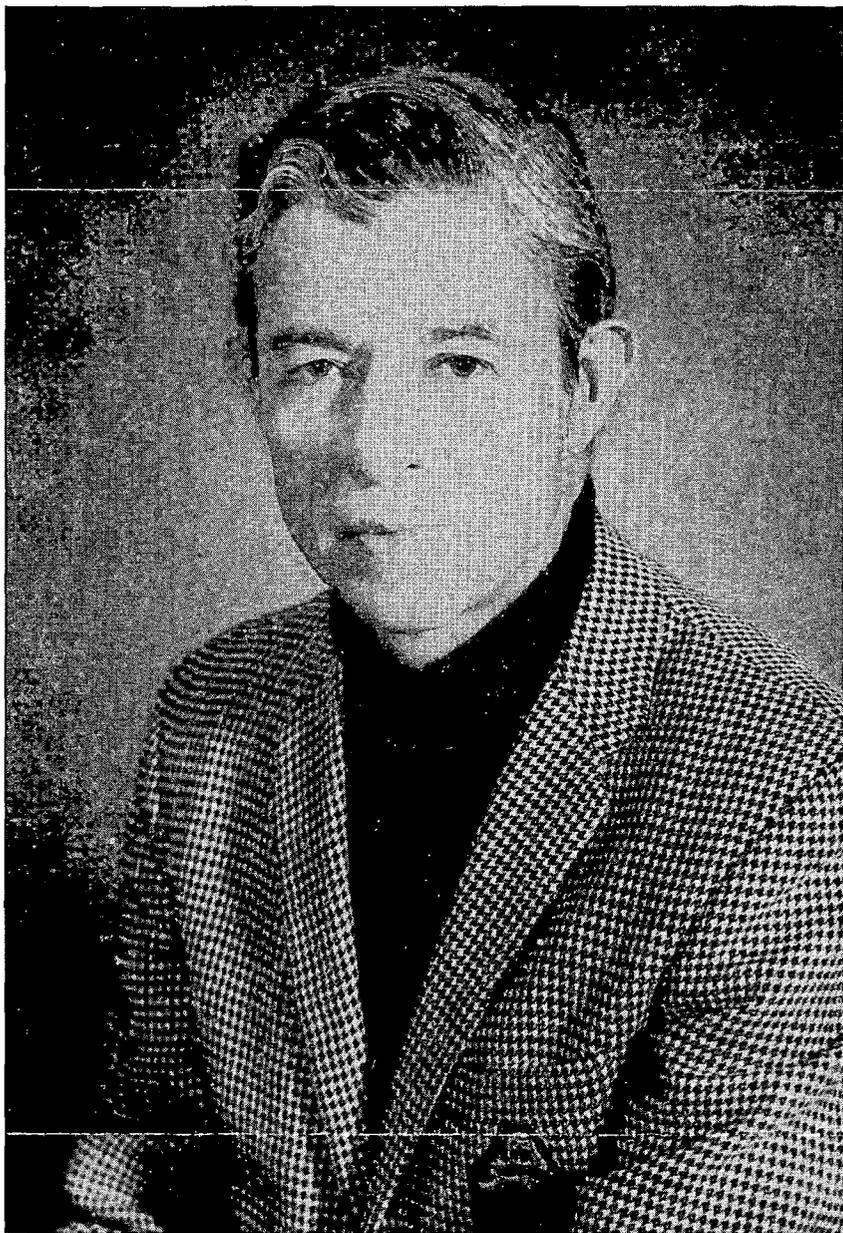
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Fray Angélico Chávez, 1972. Photo courtesy of the Museum of New Mexico, neg. no. 132817.

In Passing: Fray Angélico Chávez (Manuel Ezequiel Chávez), 1910–1996

NASARIO GARCÍA

Fray Angélico Chávez, the oldest of ten children, was born Manuel Ezequiel Chávez on 10 April 1910 in Wagon Mound, New Mexico, to Fabián Chávez and Nicolasa Roybal de Chávez. He died in Santa Fe on 18 March 1996, after a long and illustrious career as a poet, historian, storyteller, archivist, and artist. With his passing New Mexico lost one of its most luminous treasures.

Fray Angélico held Santa Teresa de Jesús (1515–1582), the Spanish mystic from Avila, in high esteem. In her spiritual biography, *El libro de las misericordias de Dios*, she declared her passion for religion in this way:

Since this new death—in–life I've known,
Estrang'd from self my life has been,
For now I live a life unseen:
The Lord has claim'd me as His own.
My heart I gave Him for His throne,
Whereon He wrote indelibly:
"I die because I do not die."
(Peers E. Allison, trans., Sheed and Ward, 1946.)

Like Santa Teresa de Jesús, Fray Angélico made a lifetime commitment to God. On 10 August 1933 he declared himself a Franciscan. “[My] parents,” he once wrote me, “took me to San Diego, California [1911–1916], where father did carpentry for the Panama–Pacific Exposition, especially the Grant Hotel. There I first heard of Fray Junípero Serra, and

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the *Franciscan idea* first got hold in my mind, if only vaguely." His "penchant for reading and writing" intensified in Mora, New Mexico. "My extra reading," he confided, "taught me that the Franciscans had been the only clergy in New Mexico for two centuries, 1598–1798. This woke up my California dream of Fray Junípero Serra, and I dreamt of becoming a Franciscan myself!"

After being accepted to the St. Francis Seraphic Seminary in Cincinnati in 1924, this "Mexican" lad, as he put it, did well in his studies, thanks to his parents' reading habits and the teaching of the Loretto Sisters, whom he had come to admire while in Mora. He was also inspired by his English professor to read John Donne, Lord Byron, and other poets. Fray Angélico began writing his own poetry in simple and pure language.

As a boy, Fray Angélico Chávez also acquired a taste for art; he started to cultivate his talent while in Mora, where he did pencil and pen drawings and painted scenes with water colors. At the St. John the Baptist Province of the Order of Friars Minor in Cincinnati, a fellow student gave him a fine set of oil paints. One year Fray Angélico painted saints and angels for some new Corpus Christi altars, and the Seminary Rector was so impressed that he began calling him "Fra Angélico" after Giovanni da Fiesole (1387–1455), the famous Florentine painter. When Fray Angélico entered the Franciscan Order in 1929, the Rector named him *Fra Angélico*. Years later, after he began his publishing career, he used *Fray* (the Spanish form) *Angélico Chávez* as a penname. "This," according to him, "helped when it came to non-Catholic editors and critics."

From 1929 until he was ordained a priest in Santa Fe in May 1937, his love of poetry and literary prose continued. Upon ordination, he was assigned to Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in Peña Blanca, New Mexico as assistant pastor, where his main task was to attend the three Keres Pueblos of Cochití, Santo Domingo, and San Felipe, thus continuing the work of his Franciscan predecessors. His love and affection for the Indians was mutual, and Indian expressions in his sermons became legendary among the three pueblos.

In 1939 Fray Angélico Chávez's first book of poems, *Clothed with the Sun*, was published by top literati of Santa Fe such as Alice Corbin (founder of *Poetry* magazine), Witter Bynner, John Gould Fletcher, and Haniel Long. The last three, whose poetry Fray Angélico had revered in English textbooks, were nationally famous at the time.



Fray Angélico Chávez (Manuel Ezequiel Chávez), 1910–1996. *New Mexico Historical Review* file photograph. Photo credit: Ravini.

That same year, he decorated the Peña Blanca Church with life-size murals of the *Via Crucis*, using local people (including his sisters). Prominent artists of Santa Fe took their friends to see them, but in 1987 the church was destroyed, along with the forty-five-year-old murals. Controversy ensued, but the young priests in charge claimed the murals had no artistic value. Fray Angélico did not protest.

During the early 1940s he began publishing poems in New York magazines such as *Commonwealth*, *America*, and *Spirit*. From the latter, three of his works were published in London in Thomas Moults' *Best Poems of the Year* (1938, 1940, 1941). Fray Angélico joined the U.S. Army as a chaplain in 1943. While at Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, he visited poet John Gould Fletcher at his estate in Little Rock. Subsequent assignments took him to Camp Stockton, California, Honolulu, New York, and two beach-head landings on Guam and Leyte. He finished his tour of duty at Ft. Bliss, Texas, and returned to Santa Fe in 1946 after the war ended.

Meanwhile, he had continued writing and publishing more poetry and short stories. One story made Foley's *Best American Short Stories* in 1948, and a poem was chosen by famous London poet Alfred Noyes for his *Golden Book of Catholic Poetry*. In 1963 Fray Angélico was recognized for his poetic talents by the Catholic Poetry Society of America.

From 1948–1952, while in the Army Reserves, he was asked to join the New Mexico National Guard, but instead of being sent to Korea he was assigned to Europe. From his base in Germany, he was able to visit Spain and the birthplaces of his ancestors—from Toledo to small towns in La Mancha and Extremadura. He also visited places near Burgos and Santiago de Compostela. These sojourns played a pivotal role in his later writing career.

Toward the end of World War II, Fray Angélico switched from poetry and short stories to historical research. France V. Scholes, eminent historian at the University of New Mexico (UNM) in the 1940s and 1950s, had seen Fray Angélico's criticism of some bad Spanish translations by a "famous historian." This prompted Scholes to invite him to his home to discuss New Mexico documents discovered in Sevilla in the 1920s but never studied at UNM except by Scholes himself. Therein lies the genesis of Fray Angélico's historical books on New Mexico as well as his articles in the *New Mexico Historical Review*.

Between 1952 and 1959 Fray Angélico found himself in Jémez Pueblo, where he continued his historical research. From 1959 to 1964 he served as the Pastor of St. Joseph Parish in Cerrillos before devoting himself full time to research and writing.

Highly prolific in his writings, Fray Angélico published a large volume of work, including articles, monographs, poetry, and short stories, in addition to over twenty books. Among his most highly acclaimed works are *My Penitente Land*; *Origins of New Mexico Families*; *Missions of New Mexico, 1776* (with Eleanor B. Adams); *La Conquistadora*; *New Mexico Triptych*; and *Lady from Toledo* (his only novel), to name but a few.

In the early 1970s Fray Angélico took a respite from Franciscan life, although he would spend the next five years (1971–1976) organizing the Archives of the Archdiocese of Santa Fe; in 1989 he rejoined his beloved Franciscan Order. He spent the remaining years of his life in retirement at St. Francis Friary at the Cathedral of Santa Fe.

Although not one to seek notoriety, Fray Angélico was awarded honorary doctorates from both the University of New Mexico and New Mexico State University for his lifelong accomplishments as a scholar and creative writer. In 1992, at the behest of King Juan Carlos, Fray Angélico was awarded the medal of the Order of Isabel la Católica, one of Spain's loftiest honors, for his long-standing contributions to Hispanic culture in his beloved state of New Mexico.

In looking across time and space in our state, Fray Angélico the poet, artist, historian, storyteller, archivist, and Franciscan will always loom as the consummate humanist. His work, both within and outside the church, has left a legacy second to none and a memorable imprint for us and future generations to cherish and upon which to reflect for a long time to come.