On a mission for the Nation: A microhistory of Fr. Francis X. Weninger, S.J.

THOMAS RICHARDSON

National Archives and Records Administration <thomas.rich1989@gmail.com>

After the Civil War, Rev. Father Francis Xavier Weninger’s efforts in establishing black parish communities, including St. Ann’s Colored Church in Cincinnati, spearheaded the Church’s campaign in assisting newly liberated slaves in the United States. The national campaign included black evangelization, creating parishes, opening schools, and initiating a national collection.

Keywords: Catholic Church, Jesuits, Know-Nothing, nativism, American Civil War, missionary, evangelization, slavery.

INTRODUCTION

The Catholic Church of the United States faced a significant social and ecclesiastical challenge following the Civil War. With the abolition of slavery and the military defeat of the Confederacy, thousands of liberated slaves were in flux without proper schools, churches, or parish communities. Catholic missions in southern states lacked basic necessities for the newly liberated slaves and without their availability, they faced bleak prospects. In northern states, Catholic clergy were faced with the prospect of assimilating and evangelizing thousands of freed, displaced slaves who flocked to the Church for basic necessities, community protection, and education. Confronted with both racial antagonisms and anti-Catholic frustrations, the Church managed to conduct evangelization and relief efforts for freed blacks. Black parishes slowly began emerging in states like Maryland, Illinois, and Ohio and small communities were created from these parish centers. This progress was only minimal, however. The Catholic Church was still hindered by its ambivalent slavery policy prior to the Civil War, translating into a disorganized policy of black assimilation during Reconstruction. Multiple ranks within the Church hierarchy debated over different approaches on how to effectively welcome blacks into the Catholic faith, but a precarious balancing act between national politics and social image sprouted from this indecision.

As the Church debated proposals on black assimilation, one Jesuit missionary, the Reverend Father Francis Xavier Weninger S.J., committed his time and energy to the evangelization and communal fulfillment in fostering black parishes in Northern states. Following the 1848 Revolutions in Germany and Austria, Weninger immigrated to the United States and conducted nationwide missions from New York to California with his trademark presentation style, focused on salvation oratory. Weninger was a practical and realist priest who recognized what he interpreted as social evils directed at the Church and humanity in general, and he sought a number of resolutions. Reconstruction and the dire situation of transient, uneducated, and unemployed former slaves shifted Weninger’s mission to properly evangelizing and caring for freed slaves. Weninger also proposed that these goals become the new mission for the national Catholic Church. The focus of this research centers on his missionary and parish work, culminating with the establishment of the first all-black church in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1866: St. Ann’s Colored Church. His evangelization work resulted from decades of conducting missions. He argued that the Catholic Church had a spiritual and social obligation to assist freed slaves.

NAVIGATING A DANGEROUS LANDSCAPE

From 1848 to 1888, Father Weninger conducted missions and recorded the country’s racial ideology. Weninger tailored his sermons by regional audiences and offered methods on effective assistance for blacks. During this time, he became a prolific author on theological subjects such as papal infallibility, interdenominational marriages, and sacramental sanctity. These theological writings overlapped with his personal social and political standings. What Weninger witnessed was a dichotomy between the national Catholic Church’s official policy on slavery and his personal ideology. The country’s dangerous political and social landscape shaped the Catholic position as a crucial component. Disagreements between Republicans and Democrats permeated his memoirs covering the Civil war, as he criticized political leaders and party members over their participation and even their orchestration of the conflict. Weninger refused to join political factions, but he did express more northern sympathies than southern ones. His condemnation of slavery on religious grounds accounts for this. Although sympathetic to the Union, Father Weninger also criticized the Northern political makeup before and during the Civil War. These political confrontations included ideological clashes with Know-Nothing American nativism in the 1850s. During Reconstruction, Weninger fully dedicated his ministry to assisting freed slaves. His climactic ecclesiastical project was the founding of St. Ann’s Colored Church. Accompanying his parish work, he founded the Saint Peter Claver Society, a lay organization created to support the parish school’s financial needs. He also initiated a national
Richardson

collection with approval from the Holy See in the Vatican. Father Weninger’s advocacy garnered national and papal recognition for the development of black parishes:

“He [Weninger] wanted to institute a national collection for the Indians and African-Americans, and he received papal encouragement when Pope Leo XIII granted a plenary indulgence to everyone who would contribute to a collection for Indians and blacks.”

His accomplishments had residual effects on the Church’s black relief initiatives. Weninger applied his missionary skills and Jesuit education in developing methods for starting educational opportunities and building sustaining parishes. Did his example inspire other clergymen to adopt similar goals? Investigating a detailed historiography of Catholic interaction and ideology concerning slavery in the U.S. can reveal how particular historical trends developed over time, and how they coincide with Weninger’s ministry.

**BRIEF HISTORIOGRAPHY OF BLACK CATHOLIC CHURCHES IN THE U.S.**

Literature covering the history of black Catholics and clergy participating in black evangelization focused heavily on black parishes and their socio-political environment and building sustaining parishes. Did his example inspire other clergymen to adopt similar goals? Investigating a detailed historiography of Catholic interaction and ideology concerning slavery in the U.S. can reveal how particular historical trends developed over time, and how they coincide with Weninger’s ministry.

The difficulty in examining how much the clergy were directly involved with the development of black parishes exists because of limited sources. Meager amounts of primary sources from these parishes exist, restricting understanding of the historical scope and significance of these groups. Their position within broader U.S. history trends was discussed in Lackner’s research on the St. Ann’s Colored Church, the focus of Father Weninger’s black missionary work:

“Even though their [blacks] stories were rich in human struggle and emotion and has made it possible for others to follow after them, their lives were not thought significant enough to be repeated in standard histories.”

These standard histories still provide evidence in examining 19th century black parishes. Lackner’s examination of St. Ann’s provides an introduction to the creation process involved with a black parish. Mid-19th century black parishes were wholly independent and found primarily in northern states, in part because there were no ordained black priests to operate these new parishes. St. Ann’s was the turning point for this historical trend. Lackner argued that multiple factors and local efforts created an ideal setting for black communities. First, black Catholics simply needed their own churches because there was too much resistance to integration within white congregations. Despite ideological assertions that segregation was prohibited in the Catholic Church, in reality this practice occurred regularly. Public grievances concerning integrated congregations were alleviated by creating separate black parishes. The role of local clergy in establishing black parishes became a national debate, one which influenced St. Ann’s inception. Church leaders such as Archbishops Martin John Spalding and John Baptist Purcell advocated for Catholic assistance, bringing their needs to the attention of national conventions such as the Baltimore Plenary Councils. However, debating the issues in council only acknowledged rather than resolving said issues. Bureaucratic obstacles hindered major progress:

“It was also a continuing concern for Roman officials, about which they reminded the American hierarchy at the council and through the ensuring years...However, the “opportunity” mentioned by Spalding was generally missed.”

This ‘opportunity’ Lackner references is a broad evangelization and education of freed slaves during Reconstruction. Church officials demonstrated a moral obligation in preaching the Catholic faith to this newly liberated group. Local support from Catholic charities and clergy pioneered St. Ann’s establishment, but this required providing blacks with communities in which to live and raise their families. The remaining question was whether or not these evangelization practices were orchestrated at the local or national level. St. Ann’s Colored Church demonstrated a significant undertaking for the rise of evangelizing and incorporating freed slaves by using Church resources.

Historian Cyprian Davis covers an extended chronology of blacks in North America. Detailing their arrival in the early colonial period and into the mid-20th century, Davis’ research broadens this historiography by setting black Catholics and churches within political, economic, and social contexts. What Davis acknowledges is how the Catholic Church operated within the complex socio-political environment while encountering multiple prejudices. Various black Catholic communities in cities such as Baltimore remained diligent in practice despite retaining limited historical records:
‘We have no record of black Catholic parochial life, but it is the first glimpse of how black Catholics in the antebellum period organized themselves and what their piety was like.’6

Davis’ anthology includes references to prominent white Catholics and their involvement in the creation and development of the black Catholic community. The focus on these persons, including those who caused restrictions and blockages for black assistance, highlights Weninger’s missionary work and achievements with St. Ann’s. It was a watershed moment in black evangelization. Weninger’s national collection and fundraising in Europe was especially crucial to the parish’s establishment. Davis recounts how Weninger conducted fundraising trips in Midwestern states and after vigorous campaigning, received over $4,000 from domestic and foreign contributors, including King Ludwig II of Bavaria.

Despite these calls for national assistance, implementation was limited to local venues. National church councils disagreed over the process by which to indoctrinate blacks into the Church. Critics argued that the help used to assist black Catholics was insufficient. Prominent Catholic historian John Tracy Ellis attributes local pressures towards united responses to anti-slavery movements and race riots:

‘More than once, the Church had tried to improve the lot of the Negroes, but general attempts to educate them had been frustrated through local pressure.’7

Local attempts also faced resistance, but this local aspect is a key to measuring the Church’s progression with blacks. Extensive travel through missionary work educated Weninger on the social and racial attitudes with religious communities. Ellis does reveal a critical point with this local pressure argument because it reflects the disconnect between local and national actions by the Church. Official policy regarding slavery and the evangelization of blacks was debated repeatedly by senior clergy, evident by Archbishops such as Spalding and Purcell. Implementation was the logical step, but failure to compromise with this national debate had consequences for both the Church and blacks. During the antebellum period, this pressure stemmed from anti-Catholic sentiment attributed to the Know-Nothings.

**ROLE OF THE KNOW-NOTHINGS**

Anti-Catholic prejudice did not begin with the Know-Nothings, but their coordinated efforts solicited national attention. Sections of Protestant groups in the U.S. harbored Catholic resentment for fear of foreign usurpation by the Vatican, including fears of controlling certain behaviors, rights, and knowledge:

‘Undoubtedly, the political and intellectual antagonisms of many Protestants grew from a visceral rejection of what they saw…Catholics were doing. Besides the historical corruption of the Catholic hierarchy, its purportedly oppressive control of laypeople’s minds, and the supposed sophistry associated with Jesuits that contorted the truth, many Protestants also believed Catholicism turned believers away from spiritual certainties and towards material distractions.’8

To understand the national pressures faced by Catholics and black evangelization, analyzing the political and social influence of the Know-Nothing Party is integral. Anbinder’s examination of Know-Nothingsm revealed the extensive anti-Catholic ideology which was their main political tool. The party’s vision and mission statements included their long-winded animosity focused on Catholic communities:

‘Hence whatever is told you of Catholicism as favorable to all that is American, put no faith in it. The Pope of Rome says America must be crushed—and all political economists of any note or weight, agree that if it is ever crushed, it will be by Romanism. Let us remember these matters. Let us regard every Roman Catholic as an enemy to the country—and so treat him. He is nothing else.’9

Know-Nothings exploited the Church’s ambiguous slavery stance, which attributed to the party’s public focus behind the anti-slavery camp and pinned pro-slavery associations on their opponents:

‘Perhaps the pro-slavery reputation of the Catholic Church and its immigrant adherents had opponents of slavery extend to join the Know-Nothing lodges. Know-Nothings then argued that the Catholic Church condoned slavery…Know-Nothings also reminded Northerners that not one Catholic priest has signed the well-publicized anti-slavery petition statement to Congress in 1854.’10

Anbinder delivered an interesting argument to the black Catholic assistance debate. Public perception played key roles in the Church’s interaction with blacks, as the public associated them as being pro-slavery stemming from the Know-Nothing’s information campaign. As pressure over slavery mounted in the 1850s, it became a wedge issue within society. Political implications resulted from these social issues and if Catholics were perceived as pro-slavery, it created an untenable public environment for their national programs. Even if Catholic intentions were to assist blacks, their ambiguous public stance on slavery provided Know-Nothings with endless smearing opportunities that enflamed anti-Catholic rhetoric. This public perception translated to the local level as well and it only increased the difficulty of efficiently orchestrating charitable relief. Weninger’s memoirs recounted the antics of Know-
Richardson

Nothings, believing their presence in national politics hindered Catholic progress. He conducted missions focused on the definition of nativism and how being a citizen did not require preset beliefs. Weninger understood the dangers of political battles affecting ecclesiastical work for blacks. Through removing organized anti-Catholic rhetoric, Weninger could then accomplish his goals.

DISAGREEMENT AMONG THE CLERGY

An additional chronological examination of Catholics in the U.S. is provided by James Hennessey, who examined Catholic communities and their relationships to the American public. Hennessey included a detailed analysis of church hierarchy during this time, giving a comprehensive look into the Church’s stymied reactions regarding slavery. During Reconstruction, archbishops disagreed on how to address the issue of liberated slaves and a weak united effort prevented from accomplishing any national reform. What church councils produced were irregular agreements on black charities and education initiatives:

“Specific actions plans fashioned by Spalding and recommended by Roman authorizes were watered down to the level of pious exhortation with implementation left to local choice. Archbishops Odin and Kenrick led the opposition; taking the position that all that could be done was being done…The mixed signals sent by the council were reflected in an evangelization effort that was largely unsuccessful.”

From Hennessey’s perspective and preceding historiographical works, national reaction to black Catholics was largely uncoordinated and lacked efficiency. The broader trend of Catholic indecision merits investigation of local endeavors, leading one to ask why there were disconnects between national and local reaction, and uncovering who engaged in black advocacy.

This local engagement featured prominently amongst Jesuit missionaries who worked closely with black parishes and schools. In building a chronology of Jesuit missionary work for blacks, another historian, Edmond Reynolds, recounted that early education and parish support for blacks was carried out by Jesuits. Described as ‘skirmishes’, Reynolds argued that these individual efforts had impacted black communities and it was the actions by singular missions rather than the Church institutional approach that assimilated blacks into the Catholic community. Jesuits were not under any national directive, but the work of a handful was instrumental for their successes in black parishes. Weninger’s work with blacks had significantly improved the educational and social prospects for black parishes within local communities, especially his work establishing ecclesiastical societies and St. Ann’s Colored Church.

FATHER WENINGER’S MINISTRY AND MISSIONS

What is significant about this historiography is that broad trends increasingly incorporated local actions. What explanations exist that focus on Archbishop Kenrick’s stance on liberated slaves versus Weninger’s dedicated ministry for black advocacy? Investigating Weninger’s mission work and life experiences become the next step in learning more about this disconnect. Weninger’s sermons, memoirs, and ecclesiastical writings reveal much about his association with liberated slaves and black communities, pointing out his charity efforts and subsequent black initiatives by other clergy. Herein lays the spiritual enthusiasm of a dedicated Austrian Jesuit.

Francis Xavier Weninger, S.J., was a learned scholar of theology, history, and Hebrew studies. His oratory skills distinguished him as an eloquent public speaker. Born in Austria in 1805, his family maintained noble connections to the old Austrian aristocracy. Originally planning on a military career, Weninger’s was dissuaded by his father, who eventually sent him to Vienna to pursue higher education. After completing his studies at the University of Vienna and the Gratz Episcopal Seminary, Weninger was ordained in 1829 and joined the Society of Jesus in 1832. While serving as a confessor in Innsbruck, the 1848 Revolutions in Germany made Europe hostile for Jesuits. Weninger requested missionary work in the United States’ western territories. Weninger arrived in New York in 1848 and started his missionary work in earnest, arriving at the height of anti-Catholicism and Know-Nothing political influence. During the height of American nativism in the 1850s, Catholicism experienced a brief period of revivalism that consolidated parish communities. What stimulated this revivalism was the mission effect, carried out by newly arrived European missionaries.

Both the Catholic revival and emerging nativism collided:

“In the era of the immigrant church, however, a siege mentality emerged, fostering a militant sectarian attitude that was no friend to tolerance. A major reason for this was the emergence of a nativist crusade in the antebellum era. Targeting both Catholics and the foreign-born, this crusade subjected Catholics to intense discrimination.”

Despite such prejudices, Weninger conducted an extensive and widespread mission to a majority of the country. More unsettled areas in western territories were especially receptive to his and other missions during this revivalist period. Other preachers such as Lyman Beecher recognized a similar importance of evangelization in western territories. In his text, A Plea for the West, Beecher sees ministers and missionaries as changers of society:
“Most unquestionably the West demands the instrumentality of the first order of minds in the ministry, and thoroughly furnished minds, to command attention, enlighten the understanding, form the conscience, and gain the heart, and bring into religious organization and order the uncommitted mind and families of the great world.”

Modern historians have described Weninger as novel and pioneering in his missionary delivery. Directness, person ability, and practicality were considered trademarks of a Weninger mission. Dolan writes, “Weninger’s principal genius was his calculated, systematic approach to the parish mission.” He gained notice as a public speaker, known for a strict adherence to Catholic doctrine and commitment to local communities. The continuing anti-Catholic prejudices shaped Weninger’s perceptions of the country’s socio-political network. The Know-Nothing Party was of grave concern to him with their perceptions of the country’s socio-political network. The Know-Nothing Party was of grave concern to him with their connections in state and national parties:

“This period of time was marked by the organization of a new political party amongst the enemies of the Church. They styled themselves Know-Nothings, and were American Protestants, native Americans…Their principal aim was to oppose immigration, for the steady industry of those who sought a home in America and the great numbers of their children excited fear as to the results of elections in future years.”

CONFRONTING ANTI-CATHOLICISM

General opposition to Catholics on religious grounds troubled Weninger as he drew similarities between Know-Nothingsism and the revolutionary fervor of 1848. He was especially vitriolic towards anti-Catholic Germans for their role in the 1848 Revolutions, and their presence combined with Know-Nothings fostered even greater toxicity. Violence perpetrated by Know-Nothings in Kentucky and elsewhere revealed how prevalent anti-Catholic violence was in daily antebellum life. After conducting a Mass service, a mostly anti-Catholic mob gathered and threatened to kill Weninger, citing only the fact of his being a priest. Weninger describes the scene as ‘almost' becoming a martyr from Cincinnati.” The ideological battle was much broader than physical violence. Know-Nothing riots in Kentucky illustrated the social and religious divides within the country and Weninger gained first-hand experience over Know-Nothing influence on the general public. Anti-Catholicism within the political spectrum grew exponentially from the local to national level. He interpreted this through the establishment of the Republican Party and its membership base:

“The Republican Party was built upon the Federal Party of the North, with a strong infusion of Know-Nothingsism and a decided fervor of the puritanical opinion of New England.”

The political arena is an important component to incorporate in Weninger’s black advocacy due to the Know-Nothing policy on slavery. Even if public support included evangelization of slaves, the Church faced prejudices that stymied most major progress. It was precarious for Catholics during the antebellum period and their slavery views as well:

“The English-American abolitionists have adopted a similar motto: No slavery, no Popery. Of course all Republicans were not so better but many and those the most influential, were, and hence the danger which hung over the Church.”

BLACK EVANGELIZATION

As Weninger continued preaching, his crowds become increasingly integrated with white and blacks attendees. He delivered sermons in German and French. He also delivered his first English sermon to a black audience. That sermon exposed Weninger to the social, economic, and ecclesiastical environments of blacks. Years later, his obituary recalled this memory: ‘Before I [Weninger] left Florissant…I mustered up courage enough to preach, in the neighboring church, my first English sermon, and that to a very obscure audience—they were Negroes!’ Weninger’s “black missions” in St. Louis were pivotal in his career. Along with engaging with the small black community, two miracles were associated with Peter Claver, a 16th century Jesuit who ministered to slaves occurred in St. Louis, whereby a terminally ill parishioner was healed through a Peter Claver relic. These miracles signaled to Weninger that his support of black evangelization practices should become the new focus of his ministry. Weninger conducted few missions in southern states, but he still preached to black congregations in cities such as New Orleans and Jackson, performing black baptisms whenever needed as well. There was no evidence of segregation or any degree of racial discrimination at any of Weninger’s missions.

The foundation for Weninger’s black advocacy stemmed from his analysis of Southern justification for slavery. What he abhorred was the idea of slavery authorized by Christian theological practice:

“They [the South] maintained that slavery is authorized by Holy Writ, that God created a portion of the human race to be under subjection, and that masters should control their servants. So thought the extreme radicals of the South, and to maintain this principle, they seceded from the Union.”
The religious conviction of the South condoning slavery clearly vexed Weninger due to his devotion to interpreting scripture and the Church’s ambiguity, which he explained as follows: “Catholics have never been told that they must no longer return their slaves, nor required by the Church to dismiss them at once.”26 These mixed signals notwithstanding, Weninger maintained that emancipation should occur as there was no theological confirmation of slavery’s acceptance.

Simultaneously, racial ideology over slavery perturbed Weninger and shaped his own observations. Slaves were not dependent individuals who lacked basic survival skills, nor did he interpret them as children within the paternalistic slavery ideology. Weninger acknowledged these traits and argued how resourceful slaves were; “There are many intelligent Negroes; thousands of those who provide for themselves.”27 The argument continued by referencing the flaw within the principal slavery argument:

“But the principle is wrong, essentially wrong, for if it were true, then any one would be privileged to reduce those of the white race who are not able to care for themselves to a state of subjection.”28

Herein lies the key to Weninger’s black advocacy. Intelligent blacks have the capacity to function within society and with their own parishes; freed slaves could secure a basic education and social standing harnessing their skills and intelligence. The disruption of slave marriages through commerce and physical abuse by white slave owners also offended Weninger. Through his interpretation of marriage, physical separation by commercial means did not dissolve marriages. However, since slave owners saw no legality in slave marriages, this willful separation conflicted with the traditional Catholic institution of marriage. Weninger now saw slavery not only an affront to Christianity, but also to the institution of marriage. He took the matter seriously as he published several texts concerning the integrity of racial marriage within the Catholic Church. Slavery was flawed in both ecclesiastical and racial contexts, making it an unjustifiable, blasphemous institution. If blacks were granted emancipation and received the necessary attention and education, evangelization potential increased and helped establish black parishes. Weninger saw such possibilities and forthcoming events jettisoned his mission work towards the forefront of black evangelization and parish building, causing the Catholic Church to re-examine its stance on slavery; the Civil War.

**NOT A REPUBLICAN**

Weninger continued his missions during the war, but his memoirs reflected a growing resentment for its origins and progression. The political scenes in the North caused concern for Weninger, who saw impending difficulties for Catholics serving in the Union Army. Catholic clergy from Northern states put forth their grievances and perspectives on the war. They pointed to slavery as the primary evil and root cause for the war and their concerns varied on the political spectrum. Weninger adopted a unique position in criticizing all factions and stressed a uniform reconciliation proposal.29 Even though Weninger did not identify himself as Republican or a Lincoln supporter, he argued that slavery was the greater moral evil:

“...Weninger was convinced that the north was in the right. He blushed on account of the company he was in because of that statement but he consoled himself with the reflection that just because a person agrees with the north does not make him a member of the [R]epublican [P]arty.”30

Slavery created radicals within the South who instigated the secession. Weninger argued that rebellion was unjustifiable and he criticized politicians for mishandling the crisis. Many Catholics still enlisted for the chance to prove themselves as Americans and to remove many of the instilled prejudices that had branded them as un-American.31 As those Catholics enlisted, Weninger further criticized the Republican Party for its anti-Catholic influence of ‘48 Germans (those who participated in the 1848 Revolutions and resented Catholicism) and residual members of the Know-Nothing Party.

“Of course, all Republicans were not so better; but many, and those most influential, were, and hence the danger which hung over the Church. Even whilst loyal and brave sons of that Church entered the army and shed their blood for the cause, dark threats resounded over the land.”32

Staunchly opposed to Democrats and their support of slavery and Republicans for harboring anti-Catholic dissidents, Weninger restrained himself from directly participating in the political or military conflict. He understood the military aspects and events, but what concerned him was the situation of slavery following the war’s outcome:

“The North now has gained victory and after victory, and it seems that the war will not be of long duration, but that does not mean that things will be happily settled. The great question of slavery remains, the issue of which cannot be foretold...If slavery continue, the root of the evil will remain, and sooner or later there will be repetition or all the trouble and discord, for so bitter is each [political] party, and so violently are their passions aroused, that a reconstruction of the former status quo is not to be thought of…the fitness of the negro for any species of labor can never be sufficient grounds for the perpetuity of slavery.”33
These concerns were a combination of the well-being of liberated slaves and the public reception of the Catholic Church. Proposals such as slave compensation for owners and African re-settlement did nothing for the well-being of blacks themselves. Weninger believed He overrode these with the idea of national emancipation and atonement:

“Should the abolitionists gain their point and slavery cease, should the Union be consolidated upon a new and permanent basis…doubtless there will be grievous trials in store for the Church, but at present she has no reason to fear. Divine Providence in this present juncture watches over her.”34

Weninger assuaged the moral issue over slavery by arguing the need for avoiding the political backlash and simply initiate reconstruction through faithful devotion. He acknowledged the political factor within Church operations and what he saw precipitated the oncoming issue of black evangelization in a post-Civil War country. Slavery had established a version of the U.S. when Weninger arrived, but believed that the Church would serve as a catalyst in creating opportunities for newly liberated peoples to lead religious lives out from underneath bondage.

Weninger’s missionary work fully expanded into black evangelization and education during Reconstruction. Leading the movement by establishing a national collection for black and Indian Catholic missions, he garnered national reaction:

“I encouraged the bishops of the United States, by circulars and in conversation, during the past twenty years, to institute an annual collection in all churches of the United States, in order to procure priests, churches, and schools for Negroes.”35

Establishment of St. Ann’s Colored Church

The most prominent achievement of Weninger’s black advocacy manifests with his financial and ecclesiastical support of the all-black St. Ann’s Colored Church in Cincinnati, Ohio. Black Catholics at the time pushed for their own church as they faced segregation and discrimination from all-white congregations in the area.36 Ohio church leaders such as Rev. Walter Hill called for the church’s establishment, but it was Weninger whose zeal spearheaded the campaign and brought St. Ann’s the necessary financial and community support that sustained the church through its early years. Weninger began the St. Ann’s mission in 1866 and he attracted a majority of the congregants. With the church conducting its first service in July 1866, continuing to finance the parish and its connected school was necessary for the parish’s future. Weninger saw the solution that both benefitted the parish and fulfilled his canonization efforts for Peter Claver. The Peter Claver Society was established to help fund the parish school and to institute the growing need for black evangelization:

“…I called a meeting of good Catholics and unfolded my plan. This was to form a society under the patronage of Blessed Peter Claver, of one hundred members to begin with. Each was to contribute the sum of one dollar monthly, so that I could depend on 1200 dollars towards the immediate establishment of the St. Ann’s school for boys.”37

Until his death in 1888, Weninger collaborated with bishops, archbishops, and other Jesuits in promoting further causes for black Catholics. Archbishop Purcell and Weninger collaborated extensively in expanding parish schools and addressing parish segregation. Weninger understood that such support was not just an act of charity. He firmly believed that this was the Church’s new mission to fulfill the spiritual mandate of evangelizing blacks. There was spiritual satisfaction in bringing blacks into the Catholic Church. While campaigning for a national collection, Weninger encouraged other Church leaders in supporting similar works. Bishop Augustine Verot of Savannah supported black parishes and schools and his works received significant notoriety.38

Weninger’s work culminated on December 3rd, 1883 when Pope Leo XIII announced a plenary indulgence collection for blacks and Indians in the United States. This obligatory national collection was a milestone for the Church. As blacks increasingly struggled before the Civil War in establishing their own churches, they now received international attention and devotion from the Holy See geared towards their spiritual and practical well-being. Shortly following the success of the national collection’s establishment, Weninger also led the canonization campaign for the Jesuit minster of slaves, Peter Claver. A lifelong devotee of Claver, Weninger submitted two miracles attributed to him and was finally canonized in 1887.39

Weninger was the instrument in accomplishing the goals of St. Ann’s Colored Church, but his success faced substantial obstacles. Weninger believed the Church lacked organized efforts for black advocacy. Despite whatever setbacks arose, this dedication exhibited by Weninger expanded his religious zeal and work ethic surrounding black advocacy. These evangelization efforts through Catholic education and parish building had an undeniable benefit for the black community. During the last five years of Weninger’s ministry, St. Ann’s became a home parish for him. He was heavily drawn to the local congregation and clergy and worked regularly with the community. Weninger participated in school activities and classroom lectures, conducted Mass services, and worked diligently to sustain the financial needs of the Peter Claver Society. His dedication to blacks, missionary style, and the Jesuit educational philosophy culminated in his work with St.
Ann’s and the national black collection. Weninger was at the forefront of black evangelization during Reconstruction. However, not all Catholic clergy shared similar visions.

**Catholic Church’s missed opportunity**

Coherent policy concerning liberated slaves was required in order to effectively evangelize these groups, but this opportunity was missed:

“…One year after the end of the war, the episcopate of the United States was no longer faced with the moral question of slavery. Rather it was faced with the necessity of working out a policy on the national level for ministry and evangelization of the former slaves. In the end, no coherent policy was forthcoming. This failure is one of the tragedies of American church history.”

Genuine concern for the welfare of liberated slaves existed with Archbishop Spalding who espoused slavery as a social evil. However, church councils during Reconstruction were not as optimistic about the situation of those liberated. Concerns relating to evangelization and suggestions such as hiring additional missionaries, appointing a national reformer, or work delegations within Southern parishes, represented the broad range of propositions. These approaches reveal what the Church was willing to commit, but lacked completion relating to ideological differences. If archbishops such as Odin of New Orleans, Verot of Savannah, and Kenrick of St. Louis disagreed on their methods, it was clear that divided administration undermined national black evangelization:

“In the end the council fathers rejected the notion of an ecclesiastical coordinator or prefect apostolic. In fact, nothing new was created to deal with the situation on a nationwide scale. It was decided that each bishop who had blacks in his diocese should decide what was best and work in concert with others in the provincial synods.”

Local action was deemed the most effective manner regarding black evangelization, but more could have been done after seeing what could have been achieved with a national initiative. Weninger progressed with his ministry and black support while acknowledging the Church’s ambivalence:

“It is lamentable that, owing to pecuniary inability, so little has been done for the conversion of the Negroes or for the instruction of those who are already within the fold; especially is this the case in regard to the youth who are too often perverted by the Methodists. This would not be so if there were Catholic schools for them to attend.”

Other Jesuit missionaries also embarked on missions to liberated slave communities, including Father Serra and Father Michael Kenny. Additionally, small groups of priests and Jesuits carried out black missionary work, such as the Congregation of the Holy Ghost, leading evangelization work in Arkansas and other southern states in the 1880s. The foundation of the Peter Claver Society was part of a larger lay organization movement taking place in the 1880s. Black evangelization fostered participation in black missionary and parish work, raising their awareness of such issues. These lay organizations grew exponentially and provided much needed community outreach and relief to struggling churches, black churches being a top priority:

“…It is accurate to describe the 1880s as a turning point in the history of the American Catholic laity. The closing decades of the nineteenth century witnessed new patterns of lay leadership and activism, not only in the labor unions but also within a whole spectrum of Catholic organizations and movements that sought to meet the spiritual and material needs of the immigrant church.”

Whether or not Weninger’s work with St. Ann’s triggered exponential growth in conducting missions for liberated slaves, an increasing amount of attention was directed towards this effort in the late 19th century. Weninger had been on the forefront of evangelizing liberated slaves and understood the national accomplishments upon both blacks and the Catholic Church.

**Analysis**

Was Father Weninger’s missionary work relevant in impacting the course of the Catholic Church in the United States? Was he impactful from a micro-historical perspective? Historically speaking, Weninger’s actions were influential within the Church in recognizing the need to adopt national policies on liberated slaves. Individual efforts persevered and became mainstream activity. Black Catholics had limited contact with those evangelizing priests, both North and South, because of their socio-economic status that alienated them from mainstream society. Serving as spiritual custodians and educators for blacks re-evaluated interpretations of what numerous Catholics saw as the main cause for the Civil War. As slaves were emancipated during the war, the Church gained a responsibility to do proper evangelization. As blacks lacked the proper resources or connections in establishing separate parishes, they required assistance from those who actively engaged with similar groups: missionaries.

Weninger’s theological beliefs centered on the equality of men before God. Spirituality, not race, concerned Weninger and what he saw with blacks were people who, if given the proper
It was Weninger’s hope to see the equal religious treatment of blacks and he accomplished this with collections and the establishment of St. Ann’s parish. The continued debates over the status of liberated slaves were disconcerting to Weninger, who fought anti-Catholic prejudices throughout most of his life. Weninger’s historical importance is found with his direct, personable approach to social and ecclesiastical concerns. As historiography revealed how the Church lacked coherence, organization, and mutual agreement on black evangelization, Weninger worked directly with communities, families, and the dioceses and brought both national and international attention to their struggle.

Foremost in Weninger’s mind was his fervent dedication to spreading the doctrine of the Catholic Church during missions. His encounters, observations, and recordings of the country’s social, political, and racial climate revealed to him the importance of black evangelization. His writing and public speaking eloquence were not the only factors contributing towards this goal. Decaying anti-Catholic rhetoric during Reconstruction, dissolution of Know-Nothing political influence, and the Catholic Church’s increasing role in formulating black evangelization efforts created an advantageous environment for not only Father Weninger, but also for other clergy involved with black communities. St. Ann’s parish is an ideal example of Church attitudes on black assistance during Reconstruction because it illustrates the local campaigns leading the way for the spiritual care of those liberated.

Personal initiatives by Weninger were instrumental in securing financial support for the parish, resulting in national and papal recognition. Weninger saw the need for caring for the newly liberated from the grass-roots level and understood that real progress occurred through direct involvement. Relief efforts mired by ideological differences and personal opinions stemming from senior levels within the Church hierarchy reflected the national debate over blacks. However, this only constituted disconnect between these debates and the clergy carrying out their own work on the local level. Statements and resolutions from national councils were not reflective of local actions. What historians gain from analyzing Father Weninger’s local work is the knowledge that collaboration and cultivation with liberated slaves occurred through individual connections that were expanded and applied to the national dialogue.

Political shifts also favored Weninger and other clergymen. The antebellum period was rife with anti-Catholic sentiment, making it difficult for Church leaders to effectively orchestrate black education and relief efforts and contribute to building black parishes. With both blacks and Catholics experiencing prejudices, national assistance was highly improbable. The dismantling of the Know-Nothing Party and the defeat of the Confederacy changed the Church’s course dramatically. Propaganda promoting the Church as pro-slavery dropped as the Know-Nothing Party lost its political traction and infrastructure. Clergy who participated in black evangelization could now continue their work openly in Northern states with limited anti-Catholic misinformation. Racial violence still occurred, but political coercion perpetuated by a single-platform party was deteriorating. Although Weninger may have harbored some resentment against the Republican Party for their inclusion of Know-Nothings, their dissolution was a political, social, and moral victory for the Catholic Church.

From analyzing Catholic historiography, Father Weninger’s ministry, and his effect on black ecclesiastical work and relief during Reconstruction, what influences did he project within broader historical trends of this time period?

Observers gain an understanding of the relationship between national ecclesiastical agendas and social issues of that specific period that are found on both the national and local levels. The social and moral issues that clergy address reflected those occurring during their lifetimes, as they applied their theological doctrine to real-life examples. Weninger witnessed the struggles of emancipated slaves and recognized what was necessary in caring for them spiritually and socially. He saw how they lived, provided for their families, and their relationship to Christianity. All they required were the tools to obtain a secure, Christian life, and Weninger made it a mission to fulfill such achievements. His black advocacy occurs within Reconstruction’s national rebuilding and local black initiatives. The Catholic Church saw the importance of being spiritual custodians to emancipated slaves. Weninger pushed aside ambiguity and indecision that plagued debates amongst senior Church leaders. Whether or not leaders agreed on any united plan for black evangelization, Weninger had his own mission.

CONCLUSION

Father Francis Weninger evangelized blacks and conducted an almost 40 year mission in a country divided over slavery. Combined with prejudice aimed at his faith, he persevered in
cultivating local commitments to formulating black parishes, contributing to the national response of assisting newly emancipated slaves. Just as a shepherd guides his flock, Weninger shepherded the emancipated through danger to greener pastures were they flourished.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary

Francis X. Weninger Series, 1808-2010, Jesuit Archives—Central United States Branch
Woodstock Letters, 1872-1969, Jesuit Archives - Central United States Branch


Secondary

Beecher, Lyman, A Plea for the West, Cincinnati: Truman & Smith, 1835
Bled, Benjamin, Catholics and the Civil War, Milwaukee: privately published, 1945
Dunham, Chester Forrester, The Attitude of the Northern Clergy to the South, 1860-1865, Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1974
Ellis, John, Tracy. American Catholicism, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969
Faherty, William Barnaby, The St. Louis German Catholics, St. Louis, MO: Reedy Press, 2004
Luecking, Dave, “Knights of Peter Claver honor their patron saint,” St. Louis Review, September 17 2014
Reynolds, Edward, Jesuits for the Negro, New York: America Press, 1949

END NOTES

17. Weninger Memoir, 46.
19. Weninger, 201.
22. *Father Francis Xavier Weninger: A Sketch of His Life and Labors, Woodstock Letters, A Record of Current Events and Historical Notes connected with the Colleges an Missions of the Soc. of Jesus in North and South America, Vol XVIII*, Woodstock College, 1889, 52, Woodstock Letters, Jesuit Archives - Central United States Branch, St. Louis, MO.
25. Weninger Memoir, 201.
27. Weninger Memoir, 203.
28. Ibid.
30. Benjamin Blied, *Catholics and the Civil War* (Milwaukee, 1945), 129.
33. Weninger Memoir, 209-10.
34. Weninger Memoir, 240.
37. Weninger Memoir, 299.
41. Davis, *History of Black Catholics*, 120.
42. Weninger Memoir, 257.