

“Becoming Catholic in the 19th Century: The Missions of Francis X. Weninger, S.J.”

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What perhaps fascinates me the most about studying missionaries is their devotion to their work, their true belief that to convert is to save. Over the course of the past year and a half, from when I first discovered Fr. Francis X. Weninger, S.J. through and continuing forward in my research, I have consistently been stunned by his faith and his dedication to his work, *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* - for the greater glory of God. Weninger drew me into the nineteenth century with his travels across the sea to the United States and his passion for working with those German Catholics fleeing persecution as revolutions swept through Europe. Arriving in 1848, Weninger embarked again almost immediately, traveling to Williamsburg, New York, then to Cincinnati, Ohio before finally conducting his first mission at Holy Family Church in December. I spent hours reading through the Jesuit’s memoirs, smiling at times as he recounted his past, which includes both a wayward carriage ride that nearly killed him and a train crash from which he was saved by an African American man who he counts as his savior but never reveals his name.¹ This last example is perhaps the most telling about Weninger. The Jesuit was progressive in the sense that he vocally advocated against slavery during the Civil War, but he was still likely to express and enact other forms of racism. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the omission of his savior’s name, despite mentioning him several times in his memoir. Also clearly dissonant is the lack of acknowledgement of the Jesuits’ history of slaveholding, a fact he never addresses in his writing, despite his verbosity on other matters.

As Kelly Schmidt writes in “‘Regulations for Our Black People’: Reconstructing the Experiences of Enslaved People in the United States through Jesuit Records,” records of the order are “valuable not only in understanding the Society of Jesus itself but in learning about the communities with which the order interacted and the nature of those interactions”² In much the same way, exploring Weninger’s missions and missionary work provides a means by which voices that he and so many others ignored can finally be heard. He, like many Jesuits of his day per their founder’s order, kept extensive records, carrying with him a small notebook in which he recorded (in German) periodic notes, such as an ending to his memoirs or comments on the costs of his travels.³ Likewise, his interest in working on behalf of Black and Indigenous Catholics offers an opportunity to push the boundaries of his writing and to read against the archive to see these stories.

Influenced by the legacy of St. Peter Clavery - a story likewise fraught with contradiction as the Spanish saint ministered to enslaved persons just before they went sent to their new masters yet is lauded as a patron saint of racial justice - Weninger began fundraising for the formation of St. Ann’s Colored Church in Cincinnati in 1866. David Komline notes in his 2017 article that Weninger believed that national churches “aimed to both comfort and protect,” advocating for their continuance despite calls for assimilation.⁴ He likewise saw such enclaves as ideal for African American Catholics who would be shunned by their white coreligionists.⁵ However, the German connection that Weninger seemingly both facilitates and serves as the

¹ Francis X. Weninger, “Memoirs,” trans. Susan Blakely, 1848-1888 (unpublished). Box 2.0060, Folder 11. Francis X Weninger series, Jesuit Archives & Research Center, St. Louis, Missouri (hereafter “JARC”).

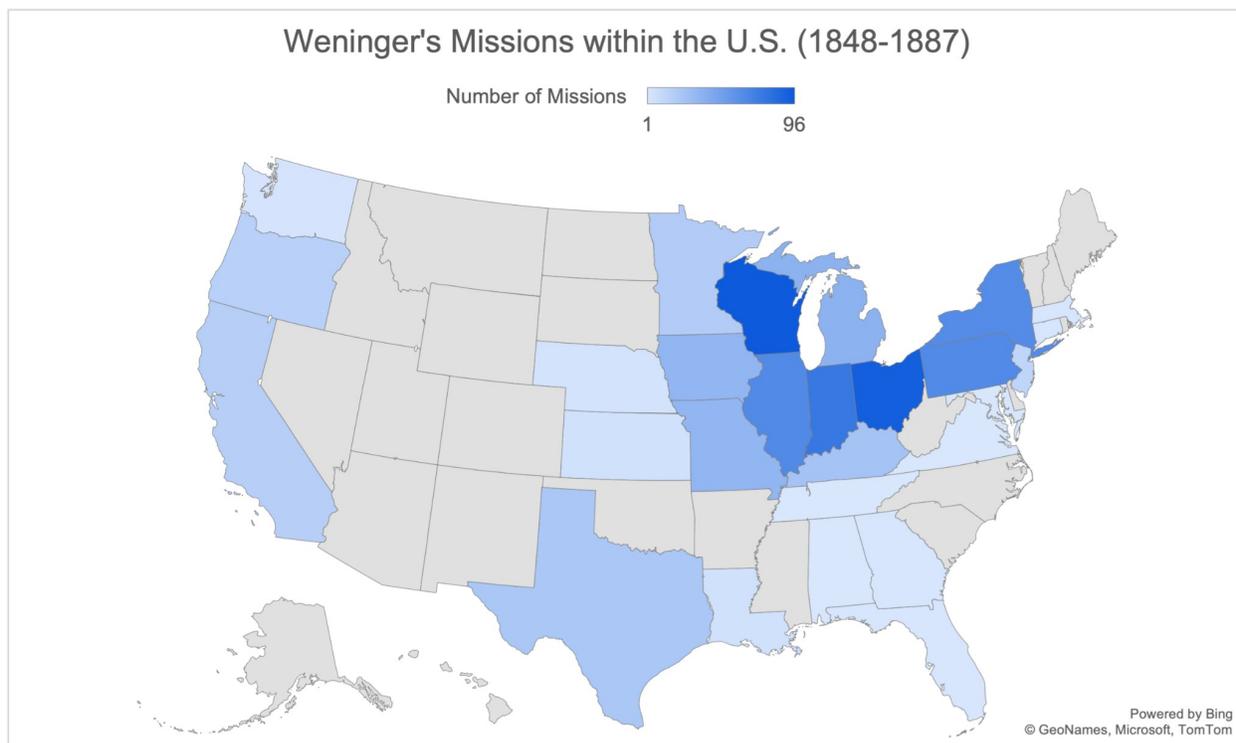
² Schmidt, Kelly L. “‘Regulations for Our Black People’: Reconstructing the Experiences of Enslaved People in the United States through Jesuit Records. in *Engaging Sources: The Tradition and Future of Collecting History in the Society of Jesus (Proceedings of the Symposium held at Boston College, June 11-13)*. Cristiano Casalini, Emanuele Colombo, and Seth Meehan (eds). Institute of Jesuit Sources (2021). www.doi.org/10.51238/ISJS.2019.12, 1.

³ Notes. Francis X. Weninger Collection. St. Xavier High School Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio.

⁴ David Komline, ‘If There Were One People’: Francis Weninger and the Segregation of American Catholicism,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 27, no. 2 (2017): 220, doi.10.1525/rac.2017.27.2.218.

⁵ Francis X. Weninger, “Memoirs,” trans. Susan Blakely, 1848-1888 (unpublished). Box 2.0060, Folder 11. Francis

embodiment of does not end there. Rather, in looking at Weningen as a catalyst, the exchange between German and Black Catholics becomes even more clear, especially from a financial perspective.



The above map allows us to see where Weningen concentrated his missionary efforts in his four decades of travel through the United States. Based on the darkest shades of blue, he spent most of his time in Ohio and Wisconsin (where he conducted 93 and 96 missions respectively).⁶ This is hardly surprising when one considers the context under which Weningen arrived in the United States. Like many of the Germans forced to flee their homeland, Weningen too was pushed out by revolution in 1848, and he was therefore able to offer special patronage to his countrymen in the New World. This connection too ensured the Fatherland's patronage, financially forging a bond between German and Black Catholics through Weningen. When he wanted to open a school at St. Ann's Church in 1866, Weningen went first to King Louis of Bavaria, who granted him \$4,000 toward the cause.⁷ He then established the St. Peter Claver Society to continue to support the school, calling it in 1875 "a work worthy of the generous character of Germans in America, those Catholics who, as the Archbishop of New York once rightly said, well understood how to organize themselves for the protection and welfare of the church."⁸ This society provided much support, and Weningen's decision to name it after Peter Claver was a marker of his commitment to the ministry he saw as inherently tied to the saint's legacy - that of ministering to African Americans - as well as a reminder of the

X Weningen series, JARC.

⁶List of Missions, Box 2.0065, Folder 58, Francis X Weningen series, JARC.

⁷Francis X. Weningen, "Memoirs," trans. Susan Blakely, 1848-1888 (unpublished). Box 2.0060, Folder 11. Francis X Weningen series, JARC.

⁸Francis X. Weningen, "Memoirs," trans. Susan Blakely, 1848-1888 (unpublished). Box 2.0060, Folder 11. Francis X Weningen series, JARC.

saint's connection to the German community in America in particular, as it had been a German immigrant who was miraculously healed after touching a relic from the saint.⁹

Nine years later, Weninger proposed a collection of African Americans and Indigenous peoples, citing the success at St. Ann's. He spoke to the Archbishops of Baltimore, New York, and Cincinnati and wrote to a number of other bishops.¹⁰ In 1884, at the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, it was formally adopted, with a plan to divide the collection among dioceses with priority given to those with ministries for Black and Indigenous Catholics. Weninger also continued to solicit donations from his German, Austrian, and Bavarian patrons, receiving money from the Ludwigsmissionverein and the Leopoldine Stiftung.¹¹ Forging this philanthropic spirit among Germans was exceptional among benevolent societies, as Oates notes, and this had lasting effects. The German Central Verein, one such organization within the United States had, "[b]y the 1870s [...] expanded its interests to include national social problems, the situation of African Americans and Indians, Catholic schools, and the media. As a result, it was *the* organizational vehicle for Catholics of German heritage by 1900."¹² Weninger's causes were certainly not the only recipients of such funding, but his advocacy had lasting ripple effects. One such effect was on Daniel Rudd, the founder of the Colored Catholic Congress movement and editor of *The American Catholic Tribune*. He was heavily influenced by the national congresses hosted by the German Central Verein.¹³

My research going forward will continue to address these intersections, considering the question of citizenship in both nation and church. I also hope to break more deeply into the stories of the communities funded by German-specific collections, as well as by the annual collection taken up for Black and Indigenous Catholics so as to "follow the money." Where did this money go? Undoubtedly, it went to colonizing efforts, but Daniel Rudd and the Colored Catholic Congress movement provide just one example of the ways in which Black Catholics used the philanthropy of their German counterparts to exert their own rightful place in the Church. There are many more stories like these to be found, both of movements and of individuals, including that of Weninger's savior. The extensive nature of Weninger's travels may not offer these stories, but they give us a map for a better understanding of the meeting of race, culture, and Catholicism during the nineteenth century.

More information on my research so far can be found at fxweningerproject.wordpress.com.

⁹Weninger carried several relics of the Spanish saint and even testified in his cause for canonization.; Joseph H. Lackner, "St. Ann's Colored Church and School, Cincinnati, the Indian and Negro Collection for the United States, and Reverend Francis Xavier Weninger, S.J.," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 7, no. 2/3 (Spring - Summer 1998): 150.

¹⁰Francis X. Weninger, "Memoirs," trans. Susan Blakely, 1848-1888 (unpublished). Box 2.0060, Folder 11. Francis X Weninger series, JARC.

¹¹Theodore Roemer, "The Ludwig-Missionsverein and the Church in the United States (1838-1918)," *Franciscan Studies*, no. 12 (August 1933): 152.; Mark Wyman, *Immigrants in the Valley: Irish, German, and Americans in Upper Mississippi Country, 1830-1860*, (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 137.

¹²Mary J. Oates, *The Catholic Philanthropic Tradition in America*, (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1995), 57.

¹³Gary B. Agee, *A Cry for Justice; Daniel Rudd and His Life in Black Catholicism, Journalism, Activism* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press), 98.