

Father Bonaventure Binzegger

August 29th is the anniversary of the death of Father Bonaventure Binzegger. Alois Binzegger was born on April 5, 1837, in Switzerland, where he received his elementary and secondary education.

When he was 22 years old, he professed his vows as a Benedictine monk at the Abbey of Maria Einsiedeln in his native Switzerland. At his profession on March 21, 1860, he received the name Bonaventure. He was ordained to the priesthood on Sunday, June 28, 1863.

For the next 17 years Father Bonaventure served the community of Einsiedeln in various roles in the abbey as well as in the area townships. He authored three manuscripts for the abbey, two of which were published.

When he was 43 years old, Father Bonaventure was appointed by the abbot as a missionary to serve the newly established St. Benedict's monastery in Arkansas. At the time, Father Bonaventure was the spiritual director of students in the school at Einsiedeln and some of these students were eager to join him in his missionary work in Arkansas.

Five prospective candidates attended Mass offered by Father Bonaventure in Our Lady's Chapel at Einsiedeln on October 2, 1880. They then breakfasted with the abbot and received his travel blessing. At Le Havre, France, the group embarked for New York aboard the steamer "Labrador," arriving in early October.

Thus, Father Bonaventure was the leader of what became known in the history of Subiaco Abbey as the "First Expedition," as he brought these prospective candidates to the United States: two for St. Meinrad Abbey, and three for the new foundation in Arkansas.

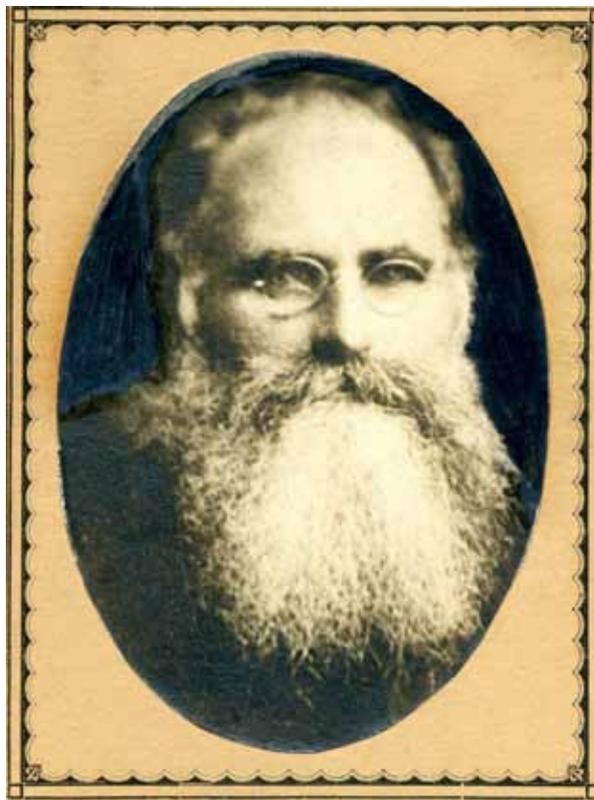
Regarding the "First Expedition," the abbot of Einsiedeln had instructed Father Bonaventure to travel first to St. Meinrad Abbey for directives from the newly elected abbot before making his way to St. Benedict's monastery in Arkansas. Once arrived in Indiana, Father Bonaventure spent a month at St. Meinrad Abbey before traveling to Arkansas in the company of Abbot Fintan Mundwiler. Once arrived, Abbot Fintan announced that Father Bonaventure would be the new prior of St. Benedict's monastery.

Father Bonaventure remained in office from January 1, 1881, until December, 1883, as the second prior of the community. He was beset by many hardships during these pioneer days, one of which was the inclement weather of 1881. First, he had to guide his little community through a severe winter. He wrote his confreres in Switzerland that they experienced a temperature of 16 degrees below zero and that more than once the precious blood froze in the chalice during Mass, something he never recalled happening at Einsiedeln.

Then the summer of 1881 brought excessive heat and drought, causing all crops to fail, and cases of actual starvation occurred among some of the immigrants in the state.

Then, on June 25, the small community was shocked by the first death in the monastery of a promising young novice whom Father Bonaventure himself had brought to Arkansas from Einsiedeln only eight months before.

Among his varied duties while prior, Father Bonaventure ministered to the spiritual needs of the local congregation of St. Benedict's Parish. He also served as the non-resident pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Paris, Arkansas, during February, 1881, and during the entire year of 1882.



In December, 1883, following a two-year tenure as prior, Father Bonaventure received a new assignment in the community; namely, manager of the abbey farm. He also continued to take care of the pastoral needs of St. Benedict's Parish.

In 1885, he was appointed chaplain and confessor to the Benedictine Sisters of St. Scholastica's Convent in Shoal Creek, Arkansas. Because of ill health in 1886, he went to Conception Abbey in Missouri to recuperate. He then went to Denver, Colorado, for medical treatment before returning to Shoal Creek, Arkansas.

In 1887, he was appointed pastor of St. Boniface Church in Fort Smith, Arkansas. Simultaneously, he served as administrator of St. Mary's Church in Altus along with its four missions. Once a month, he also ministered to the pastoral needs of the small congregation in Van Buren.

Three years later in 1890, he was assigned to St. Edward's Church in Little Rock where he served as the third pastor of this city parish.

In March, 1893, Father Bonaventure was sent to Texas as the first pioneer Benedictine to serve in the state. He jokingly remarked that he was sent to Texas to see whether Texans practiced cannibalism.

His first pastorate in Texas was at Sacred Heart Church in Muenster from 1893 to 1904. While pastor in Muenster, he also served as pastor of St. Peter's Church in Lindsay from April to December, 1893.

Five months after his appointment in Muenster, a tornado destroyed the church on July 31, 1893. A new church was built during Father Bonaventure's pastorate.

As pastor, he was interested in fostering Catholic education in the parishes. In October, 1893, he secured the Sisters of Divine Providence of Castorville, Texas, to staff the newly opened St. Peter's School in Lindsay.

In 1895, he had the Olivetan Benedictine Sisters of Jonesboro, Arkansas, to teach in Sacred Heart parish school in Muenster.

In 1889, after eight years of missionary work in Arkansas and Texas, Father Bonaventure returned to his native Switzerland for a visit with confreres, relatives, and friends.

With the arrival of Benedictine monks in north Texas at the end of the 19th century, speculation began about founding a priory there. In April, 1902, Father Bonaventure was appointed the temporary prior of the Local Center in Muenster.

In 1904, after an eleven-year pastorate in Muenster Father Bonaventure was appointed pastor of St. Peter's Church in Lindsay, Texas.

In June, 1905, Father Bonaventure left north Texas for the Texas panhandle to minister to the needs of Catholic settlers in Nazareth, Texas. He remained in this pioneer territory until May, 1909. Then, at the age of 72, and in poor health following nearly 20 years of missionary work in Arkansas and Texas, he returned to his native Switzerland, living in semi-retirement at Einsiedeln.

During the years 1911 and 1912, he was English instructor at the Gymnasium, and until his death, he was faithful to his life's dream; namely, serving as confessor to the many pilgrims visiting the shrine of Our Lady of Einsiedeln.

In 1916, Father Bonaventure suffered a heart attack in Switzerland. He died on Tuesday, August 29, 1916, while recuperating from the attack. At the time of his death, Father Bonaventure was 79 years old and in the 56th year of his monastic profession, the 53rd of his priesthood. A marker honors Father Bonaventure here in our abbey cemetery. He is buried at the Abbey of Maria Einsiedeln in Switzerland.