

1. Introduction

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In Francisco Cervantes de Salazar's dialogue *Civitas Mexicus* (1554), Zuazo and Zamora, inhabitants of Mexico City, give the traveler Alfaro a tour of their city, proudly pointing out stately homes, broad streets, opulent public buildings, and orderly markets. Indeed, scarcely thirty years after the Spanish conquest of Mexico, Mexico City was an impressive urban center, dominating the vast viceroyalty of New Spain as "capital and power of the whole land." ¹ The new Spanish city rose upon the ruins of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan, whose heart, its mighty ceremonial center, was razed to create Mexico's grand plaza mayor. Around the plaza were arrayed the new city's cathedral, municipal hall, viceregal palace, and university. In its center stood a great market to which flowed the most desirable goods New Spain could offer. ² Here too mingled the varied inhabitants of the capital: Spanish immigrants drawn by the promise of wealth; African slaves; Amerindians; and the mixed-race progeny of all.

Cervantes de Salazar's dialogue describes the city in detail. Only a few terse lines, however, address the recently founded convent of La Concepción, the first institution for professed nuns established in the Americas. "This is the house where the nuns live," Zamora proclaims, "who have consecrated themselves to Christ." ³ Little more is said, only a quick salutation to the Virgin, whose image guards the entrance. Zuazo and Zamora could not, of course, take Alfaro inside La Concepción for a tour of its wonders. Many scholars of our own century, however, have proved barely more attentive to religious women, noting only that women played no part in the spiritual conquest of New Spain. ⁴ Often, this statement is assumed sufficient to summarize women's contributions to the religious history of the sixteenth century in New Spain. And historians who have studied religious women in New Spain, while asserting their importance in all periods, have overwhelmingly emphasized the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a period of maturity for female conventual life in New Spain.

And yet religious women were indeed present for the transitions of the sixteenth century. With the successful conquest of the Aztec empire, Christianization became one of the major concerns of the Spanish crown. The missionary effort, as is well known, came to emphasize the conversion of children. *Beatas* — laywomen who may or may not have taken formal vows of chastity, poverty, obedience, and enclosure — were a familiar phenomenon in Spain, and seemed appropriate personnel to staff schools for Indian ⁵ girls. In 1528, the first such school was established in Texcoco under the supervision of Catalina de Bustamante, a Spanish widow and third-order Franciscan *beata*. ⁶ In 1530, Fray Juan de Zumárraga, Bishop of Mexico, imported six Franciscan *beatas* to teach Indian girls. ⁷ In 1534,

eight more pious laywomen were brought from Spain for the same purpose. The following year, Catalina de Bustamante brought an additional four Franciscan beatas to Mexico to assist in the teaching of girls. ⁸ By 1537, there were some ten schools in New Spain for Indian girls, each serving about three hundred pupils. ⁹

Only three years later, however, this ten-year experiment in educating Indian girls had essentially come to an end. The original beatas had largely dispersed, and beatas in general faded from the missionary enterprise and from the purview of the Crown. Bishop Zumárraga now founded the first true convent for women in Spanish America, Nuestra Señora de la Concepción de México. A flurry of foundations followed. By the 1580s, four new houses of nuns — Regina Coeli (founded 1573), Santa Clara (1570), Jesús María (1580), and San Jerónimo (1585) — operated in Mexico City. Also present were three quasi-monastic institutions for girls and women. The Colegio de Niñas Mestizas de la Caridad was a house dedicated to the reception and enclosure of mestiza girls and young women. In addition, sixteenth-century Mexico City housed two *recogimientos*, or houses of penitence. The first of these was the Magdalen house Jesús de la Penitencia. Governed by professed nuns, Jesús de la Penitencia offered full religious profession to those women, both reformed prostitutes and others, who sought it. The second recogimiento, Santa Mónica, was established to confine unsupervised or troublesome women. This house was not permitted to offer profession but was organized as a quasi-monastic institution governed by a mother-and-daughter team. The fact that many of the recogimientos' inhabitants — and some of the colegio's internees — became nuns, the general monastic regime of these institutions, and above all, the fact that all were houses of enclosure mean that their history blurs with that of the more regular convents for women. In fact, as we shall see, few distinctions were made between Mexico's sixteenth-century institutions for women. To contemporary observers, all were "conventos."

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Of the twenty-one "true" convents for women that would be established in New Spain's capital during the colonial period, eleven were created between 1540 and 1601. This rate of foundation was exceptional, to say the least. In Lima, also an important center of Spanish American women's monasticism, only three convents were established in the 1500s. ¹⁰ Mexico City's rate of foundation in the sixteenth century was exceptional in comparison not only to other regions, but also to the city's own later history. Between 1601 and 1699, only five convents were founded in the capital, and two of these "foundations" were in actuality conversions of quasi-monastic institutions founded in the sixteenth century. Just five more convents would be established in the eighteenth century. Thus, the 1500s were decisive for the creation of women's monastic and quasi-monastic institutions in Mexico City.

Historians of New Spain who study women's monasticism have rigorously and repeatedly asserted its importance to the creation of colonial society. Yet because those historians have emphasized the later colonial period, I

set out to examine an era in which the establishment of monastic and quasi-monastic houses for women was a particularly urgent theme of the colonial experience: an era, moreover, in which women's monasticism went from being enlisted on behalf of the missionary effort to helping create the colonial society of New Spain.

If the pace of convent foundation in New Spain's sixteenth century was urgent and even frantic, the creation of institutions for women was perceived by contemporaries not as a novelty, but as Mexico's bid for inclusion in the long tradition of female monasticism. The settlers of New Spain came from a society of which religious houses for women were an important and valued element. Thus, New Spain's institutions for women were often created in conscious adherence to European antecedents.

The most decided characteristic of sixteenth-century women's monasticism was its general exclusivity. In most of Europe, conventual life had been since the early Middle Ages an option for the elite, first restricted to the nobility, and then, after about the twelfth century, admitting non-noble members of the elite as well. ¹¹ Spain was no exception to this rule.

Because of a lack of spaces in convents, and the concomitant competition for those spaces, convents had a markedly elite character. Many Spanish convents had constitutions prohibiting the entry of women who could not present proof of noble birth. Indeed, in 1574 Fray Hernando de Castillo wrote that the peninsula's convents for women contained "a huge part of the nobility of Spain." ¹² Some convents could even boast the presence of nuns of royal blood. In addition to high birth, would-be nuns required wealth, as financial security was considered necessary to preclude the insults to honor that could result from women's involvement in labor and commerce outside protective walls. Because of the domination of convent life by noblewomen, as well as the practical requirement of a convent dowry, most women of middling and lower social status had no chance to enter religion. Thus the convents of New Spain undoubtedly partook of a tradition that claimed monasticism as the prerogative of the upper-class woman.

Mexico's convents were also subject to new currents of reform emanating from Europe. ¹³ As part of a general return to a purer, more primitive monastic life, the Council of Trent (1545-63) reinforced claustration for female religious. ¹⁴ The rigid claustration imposed by Trent solidified convents' elite character everywhere, because wealth was needed to sustain nuns in the perpetual seclusion now required by enforced law rather than mere custom.

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In Spanish America, this goal would later be reinforced by the Laws of the Indies, which ordered that no convent should take in more nuns than it was able to comfortably support. ¹⁵ In Mexico, dowries came to be substantial sums, and often included property and slaves. ¹⁶ In the

sixteenth century, the necessary dowry for profession in La Concepción was about 1500 pesos, ¹⁷ an amount that only wealthy families could provide (and many families offered more than this amount).

The elite character of the convent was further enhanced because of ethnic restrictions. In the sixteenth century, such restrictions were occasionally overlooked in the case of mestiza women descended from Mexica nobility. Two of the nuns of La Concepción, for example, were granddaughters of Moctezuma. The presence of such women, however, reflected not an abiding acceptance of ethnic diversity but the extent to which such first-generation mestizas were, like their brothers, absorbed into the elite world of their Spanish fathers. Indeed, the few convents established in the colonial period for Amerindian women were under constant pressure to convert themselves to "Spanish" institutions. For example, the cacique Diego de Tapia founded a Querétaro convent for his daughters in 1607; gradually, however, the convent was transformed into an establishment that excluded women of Indian descent. ¹⁸ The first convent explicitly limited to Indian nuns, Corpus Christi in Mexico City, was not established until 1724, and was reserved for the aristocracy. It too was the site of what might be called a hostile takeover attempt by *criollas*. ¹⁹ If female monasticism was in Spain an exclusive option, the question of ethnicity made it even more exclusive in New Spain, and this exclusivity increased as female monasticism reached maturity. Yet, as we shall see, women without the means or qualifications to enter religious life were a particular concern of several women's institutions founded in the sixteenth century.

In Europe, such women often entered semi-religious life, sometimes known as beguinage. Semi-religion was a response to the difficulties most women faced in pursuing a religious vocation because of their low birth or, more importantly, lack of wealth. "Parainstitutional" forms of feminine religion were, if possible, even more venerable than regular female monasticism, dating back to antiquity. Such movements took on added importance with rise of the penitential and women's religious movements during the twelfth century, when women flooded into semi-religious life. ²⁰ From the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, semi-religion remained a viable and attractive option for women lacking the desire or the opportunity to enter formal religion. Characteristically, semi-religious life entailed the adoption of religious garb, adherence to chastity, and some form of devotional practice. Beyond this, however, semi-religious women were a diverse group. They lived either in private houses or in communities; they took vows or did not. Beguinage, then, was of tremendous importance as an alternative to elite monasticism for the growing number of women from all social groups who sought to lead a life of devotion in the face of church ambivalence. The movement was particularly important in northern Europe and in Italy, where semi-religious women formed large and important quasi-monastic communities. ²¹ Though England had no formal beguinages of the northern European type, there were informal communities of semi-religious women in the British Isles, particularly in

the Middle Ages. [22](#) More often, English women entered semi-religious life as anchoresses, women from every social group who usually lived alone in private enclosure. Anchoritism remained an important "alternative religious vocation" for Englishwomen throughout the Middle Ages and into the sixteenth century. [23](#)

Spain also had a tradition of feminine semi-religion, though it seems to have developed later there than in other parts of Europe. In addition, Spain's semi-religious women were generally less organized. Many women, frustrated in their desire to enter traditional orders for women, formed *beaterios* (uncloistered communities) or *emparedimientos* (cloistered houses), in which unmarried or widowed women lived semi-religious lives. Such groups often occupied a house near a parish church, attending mass and supporting themselves through handiwork. Often, though not always, they kept the Augustinian rule. [24](#)

There were, however, no firm rules for what constituted a beaterio, or, indeed, a beata. The wearing of a habit, it seems — a symbolic visual marker — was more significant than the existence or non-existence of formal vows. The beatas of New Spain, the first women of Christian religious devotion to exist in the New World, inherited the peninsular tradition just as did the cloistered nuns who would follow them. And for Spanish immigrants to the Indies, the beata was a familiar figure.

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, eleven convents of nuns — complemented by the other feminine institutions I have described and by any number of uncloistered beatas — labored in Mexico City for the spiritual and temporal betterment of the kingdom. Such institutions, and the women who inhabited them, are the focus of this work, which seeks to integrate religious women, both nuns and beatas, into the urban fabric so triumphantly described by Cervantes de Salazar. Thus, this study elucidates the history of the city's women religious, both nuns and beatas, from 1531 to 1601. The earlier date reflects the arrival of the first beatas sent by the Spanish crown to participate in the conversion of the Indians of New Spain. The later date is chosen because this seventy-year period neatly straddles the transition from a conquest to a colonial society and from a missionary church to an established one, [25](#) and because the foundation of Santa Isabel de México in 1601 brought to a close a particularly intense period of convent foundation.

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I examine two broad questions: first, the role of religious and semi-religious women in the sixteenth-century transformation of Mexico City from center of the Aztec empire to viceregal capital of the colony of New Spain; and second, the character of female religious life in Mexico during the period in question. Thus I have yoked questions we might call exterior and interior. The first question considers religious women as participants in and instruments of a conscious process of social transformation; the second concerns how they experienced religious life.

This study thus seeks membership in a tradition of secular [historiography of female monasticism](#) [26](#) that dates back many years, and whose contributions are of great importance to women's history in both Europe and Latin America. [27](#) I have been influenced by writers on European history who have emphasized the symbolic importance of religious women within the urban context. In sixteenth-century Ávila, for example, both nuns and other holy women were instrumental in "sacralizing" the city and providing legitimacy to urban governments and elites. At the same time, city fathers were ambivalent about some expressions of female monasticism, even opposing a foundation by the woman who would become St. Teresa. [28](#) In seventeenth-century Florence, convents served as a symbol of good government, but also occasionally subverted civic order, as when the convent became a "parallel medical system" in opposition to the city's public health dictates. [29](#) In seventeenth-century Seville, when enclosure and purity became especially important, convents provided a symbolic counterpoint to the perceived disorder of "uncontrolled" women such as beatas. [30](#)

The first part of this study, while drawing on existing scholarship concerning the religious women of New Spain, situates itself within the aforementioned discussion of the relationship between such women and their urban environments. In the sixteenth century, convents in New Spain were almost wholly urban. There was little inclination toward exurban foundation because of the perceived dangers to nuns such locations held; moreover, the Council of Trent prohibited the foundation of feminine institutions outside city walls before most of the city's convents were founded. Thus, the urban character of female monasticism was virtually a given in Mexico City's early colonial period.

In contrast, male monasticism, enlisted in the missionary effort, straddled both urban and rural worlds. Since the Middle Ages, the term "convent" has been associated with urban foundations, while the term "monastery" is associated with the agrarian foundations of the High Middle Ages. The Franciscan friars of New Spain preferred the term "monastery" when they established their friaries for this reason. [31](#) On the other hand, they and others freely interchanged the terms *monasterio* and *convento* in speaking of male and female, urban and exurban foundations. In English usage, however, the use of convent is customary for female foundations, monastery for male. I shall follow that usage, while considering it a happy accident that such usage emphasizes the character of institutions for women. Urbanism and female monasticism, it seems, went hand in hand.

If sixteenth-century religious institutions for women in New Spain were urban, most were also concentrated in Mexico City itself. [32](#) Even Puebla had only two convents in 1601, compared to Mexico City's eleven. Only in the eighteenth century did this pattern change, [33](#) when outlying towns sought to enhance their civic prestige through founding institutions for

women. ³⁴ The presence of holy women, then, was an honorable addition to a city; on a more prosaic note, it also demonstrated financial stability. Since only an area sufficiently wealthy to support a convent could hope to have a foundation proposal accepted, "support of nunneries thus became an index to the wealth of a given city." ³⁵ Convents meant that a city was financially, demographically, and politically stable. Having a convent in one's neighborhood could also confer more mundane benefits. In 1597, for example, the inhabitants of Mexico's Barrio de San Juan de la Penitencia were successful in gaining access to the water supply being brought in for the new convent of San Juan de la Penitencia. Thus, a public water source was created outside the convent. Aside from such benefits to neighbors, a convent was simply a massive fact. In the heart of the city, one could not walk far in any direction without encountering the somewhat disquieting walls of the sanctified space represented by the convent. Institutions for women were thus important in their cities in a number of ways, both physical and metaphysical.

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Yet while female institutions were of great importance in establishing "Spanish" cities in New Spain, their importance has often been overlooked by modern observers. Part of the problem relates to women's claustration, which today tends to look like irrelevance. After the education experiment of the 1530s, run by uncloistered beatas, the cloister became the dominant and most trusted mode of female devotion. This tendency was reinforced in the 1560s by the decrees of the Council of Trent. The contemplative character of female devotion was juxtaposed in New Spain with an almost complete absence of cloistered male religion. Male religious, rather than secular priests, were jealous possessors of the duty of evangelization. Thus, while male monastics were totally uncloistered, active, and "in the world," female religious were cloistered, contemplative, and "out of the world." Beatas, of course, did not fit either model precisely, because they were an intermediate group between the world and the convent. But they too were pushed out of the work of evangelization and toward contemplative life.

This dramatically heightened gendering of religious life was unique to the early colonial period. While this has acted to trivialize women's religious contributions, as contemplation tends now to be seen as inactivity or passivity, it is worth remembering that for the church, contemplation was always the more perfect activity. The story of Mary and Martha was often used to illustrate the importance of contemplation. Martha, of course, busied herself with serving Christ and his disciples while her sister Mary sat at Christ's feet to hear his words. When Martha chided her sister, she in turn was gently rebuked: "Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken from her" (Luke 10:42). Women's confinement, then, was by no means construed as uselessness or inactivity. Indeed, there was a venerable European tradition invoking the moral protection of religious women. ³⁶ In arguing for a perpetual exemption from city taxes, nuns in fifteenth-century Florence cited their usefulness to the city in simple terms: they prayed continually for the city. These prayers, they claimed,

"coming from persons of such great religion, are more useful than two thousand horses." ³⁷ The society of sixteenth-century New Spain, then, inherited and carried forward a tradition in which prayer was a holy and efficacious act necessary for the continued prosperity and very existence of society. To see convents as simple repositories for the daughters of the wealthy is thus to miss at least half of the point.

Scholars have hinted at a symbolic role for women religious in relation to the colonial enterprise, but few have attempted to analyze that role in detail. The notion, however, is suggestive. New Spain's government (clerical and secular), seated in the newly Christianized Mexico City, was attempting to extend its control over a vast and unruly territory. In this context, it has been suggested, religious women took on even more importance than religious women had had on the Iberian peninsula, "because the image of their Marian purity represented Spain's providential mission." ³⁸ A symbolic role as exemplum was critical, given that, as friars and settlers alike lamented, Indians learned as much about Christianity from observing the *república de españoles* as they did from the friars' teachings. ³⁹ In fact, it seems that this symbolic role of nuns occasionally became very explicit indeed. In the seventeenth century, the Spanish nun María de Ágreda was said to have miraculously appeared to Indians on the northern frontier, thus pacifying them and making them amenable to Christianity and Spanish rule. Here is a case in which the symbolic role of female religious appears to have worked hand in hand with the active role of male missionaries. ⁴⁰ In the face of the difficulty of the colonial enterprise, moreover, the convent offered a tangible representation of the model society: apparently ordered, hierarchical, and moral, with Spanish nuns soberly governing the subject races who entered the convent as servants and lay sisters. ⁴¹

Even the organization of the viceregal capital reflected this quest for symbolic order. At the heart of the city lay a central plaza surrounded by governmental and municipal offices, church buildings, and important businesses, "all dominated by the white aristocracy." ⁴² The central Spanish area, known as the *traza*, stretched about thirteen blocks in each direction. Around the *traza* were grouped "four L-shaped, irregularly planned Indian barrios governed by Indian officials and providing a workforce for the central city." ⁴³ Toward the periphery, the city's planning broke down; it became less and less orderly and "Spanish," and its borders were in constant flux. Women's convents, notably, were placed as close to the center as possible. ⁴⁴

To understand the importance of religious women to the transformation of Mexico City, then, one has to understand the extent to which that transformation operated on the symbolic level as well as the material. That enormous urban change, the transition from the destruction of Tenochtitlan to the creation of a great colonial administrative center, was not merely a

matter of ripping down Amerindian temples and building Spanish structures. Rather, the process was also religious and symbolic. The very decision to found the new Spanish capital on the ruins of the old Mexica capital was apparently pushed forward by Cortés in the face of quite reasonable objections concerning Tenochtitlan's swampiness and unhealthy air ⁴⁵ — precisely, one must believe, for symbolic reasons. Indeed, Richard Morse suggests that in the Indies in general, a town founding was "a liturgical act sanctifying newly appropriated land." The city, in the Spanish American context, became "the vehicle for a transplanted social, political, and economic order and exemplified the 'mystical body' that was central to Iberian political thought." Morse claims that the idea of a city brought by the Europeans must be placed in a "dialectical relation with New World conditions of life." ⁴⁶ This is particularly true of Mexico City.

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In such a context, none of the acts and institutions associated with the Spanish urban model — such as convent foundation — could be anything but symbolic acts involved in a dialectical relationship with the still stubbornly present indigenous past. I believe that to understand the foundation of women's institutions in Mexico City as merely the expression of an emerging elite is to miss this point entirely. First, as we shall see, the women's institutions established in the sixteenth century were created to house and protect various groups of women coming from the *república de españoles*, not just members of the growing elite. Moreover, even the most elite of Mexico's convents were considered more than just warehouses for unmarried daughters; their labor of prayer and their symbolic purity enhanced the city and its Spanishness.

Though much is understood about the importance of religious women in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, the sixteenth century remains mysterious. The scope and erudition of existing scholarship aside, not enough is known about the formative period of female monasticism in Mexico City, nor have its *beatas* been studied in any systematic fashion. The relationship between these women and an urban center undergoing a long transition is the focus of this study.

Sources

As early as 1586, archbishop Don Pedro Moya de Contreras complained that he could find no records of the foundation of the convent of La Concepción, either in the convent's own archive or in the cathedral archive. Moya suggested, with some evident irritation, that this might be because of "the time that has passed, or because of the carelessness of the officials that there were then, or for other reasons." ⁴⁷ In the eighteenth century, the archivist of the monastery of San Francisco was frustrated by the state of the monastery's records relating to convents under its jurisdiction; he described these records as "*a mixed-up salad*." ⁴⁸ (*una ensalada confusa*) In 1767, while attempting to write the history of the Convent of Santa Clara, the Franciscan friar Antonio de la Rosa Figueroa gloomily noted that

he could not decide from the available records whether the first nuns had brought dowries; if they had them, he noted, they must have been "spent in their sustenance, or consumed in the floods of Mexico."

This litany of complaints is characteristic of those who have tried to investigate the history of religious women in sixteenth-century Mexico, and points to several complicating problems. First, record keeping was undoubtedly shoddy, as the frustrated comments of sixteenth-century officials such as Moya confirm. Moreover, the disasters of the seventeenth century — the great flood of 1629 and the riots of 1624 and 1692, among others — and the simple passage of time have done great damage to the bodies of documentation that might have assisted in such a project.

But the historians of the colonial period were nevertheless more fortunate than today's researcher. Modern historians have been hampered by "the huge gap that nothing can fill": ⁴⁹ the absence of convent archives from most of the sixteenth century. As is well known, the convents of the new nation of Mexico were extinguished in the process of exclaustation that followed the promulgation of the Lerdo and Juárez laws of 1855 and 1856. The archives of the convents were sold and gradually resold in ever less cohesive form. By the end of the Mexican Revolution, very few of these archives remained intact. ⁵⁰ Today, these archives, rather than forming a coherent base of sources for the researcher, are scattered far and wide. While the presence of some of these documents in national archives and public libraries in the United States and Mexico undoubtedly makes them more available to researchers than they might be in a religious institution, their diffusion and incompleteness are to be lamented.

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Because of the spotty nature of the sources, an exhaustive prosopographical study of the religious and semi-religious women of sixteenth-century Mexico City is impossible. Records of nuns who traveled to the New World should, by rights, have been kept by the Casa de Contratación archive ⁵¹ in the Archivo General de Indias (AGI) in Seville, Spain. These records have proved a particularly useful source for historians of the sixteenth century. ⁵² Yet very few such records exist for religious women of the sixteenth century. It seems possible that religious women do not appear in the records because very few traveled to the New World. As we shall see, convents in sixteenth-century Mexico City were generally founded by local women rather than by imported Spanish nuns, despite the symbolic importance of transoceanic voyages to certain convents' identity. ⁵³ However, the poor state of the Contratación archive does not allow firm conclusions. As for semi-religious women, the informal and varied nature of their religious lives militates against using passenger records. Beatas need not have identified themselves as such. More importantly, many may have become beatas only after their arrival in the New World. Thus the Contratación records proved virtually useless. The AGI did, however, yield a variety of letters, petitions, and informations regarding the women's institutions of sixteenth-century Mexico City, which

form an important part of the sources for this study.

These records are complemented by a variety of documents from the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) in Mexico City. The section Bienes Nacionales contains many documents relating to the administration of convents, particularly in the material realm. Though most of these are seventeenth- and eighteenth-century documents, some deal with the period in question. Inquisition dossiers are also helpful in identifying holy women — both nuns and beatas — as defendants and as witnesses in the sixteenth century, particularly because Inquisition documents tend to be much more detailed than many other types of documents. They contain a great deal of information about everyday life in addition to their discussion of "religious" matters. Judiciously used, they provide almost the only possible window on the daily lives of nuns and, particularly, beatas in the sixteenth century.

Though most of Mexico City's religious women were under the jurisdiction of the archbishop, some were not. Sources for the convents under Franciscan jurisdiction were held in the archive of the monastery of San Francisco. Part of it, the Archivo Franciscano, now held by the Biblioteca Nacional (BN), contains a section relating to nuns. Much of its material dates from the eighteenth century, but the archive contains some documentation from the earlier period. The other section of the original archive is now the Fondo Franciscano of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH); it too contains traces of nuns of the Franciscan order. INAH's Colección Antigua and Colección Gómez de Orozco were also of use.

Writings by colonial nuns and beatas are rare. Many writings from this period survive only as quotes in biographies or other works written by men, as do, for example, the nuns' writings used by Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora for his *Parayso Occidental*.⁵⁴ But even male biographies of religious and semi-religious women are lacking for the sixteenth century. Whole categories of literature, such as the funeral panegyrics common in the eighteenth century, do not exist for the 1500s; similarly, confessors' biographies, common in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are wholly absent for the sixteenth.⁵⁵ The writings that have been so fruitfully studied for the later colonial period simply do not exist for its beginnings. The University of Texas holds two seventeenth-century examples of nuns' writing from Mexico City: the *vida* of Madre María Magdalena (1576-1636), a professed nun in the Convent of San Jerónimo; and the account of the foundation of the convent of San José de México in 1616, by Mariana de la Encarnación. While these works were written after the period to be studied here, they discuss the nuns' lives in the sixteenth century. Such writings provide our only access to holy women's self-perception. Thus, the few extant letters of sixteenth-century religious and semi-religious women and their testimony in Inquisition trials take on added importance.

Through studying a broad variety of sources, this study attempts to

uncover the holy women who populated the convents and neighborhoods of Mexico City. In particular, I seek to elucidate their relationship to the city, arguing that the enclosure of women and the entrance of women into religion were an important aspect of the conversion of Mexico City from Aztec to Spanish capital. Part One is dedicated to this argument. In Part Two, I argue that the changes in female religion in the sixteenth century, combined with the nature of the foundational period, made women's experience of religious life in the years in question much more variable than would be the case during the next two centuries of colonial rule. While Part One is concerned for the most part with institutions, Part Two attempts to look at individuals. Semi-religious women, who disappear from Part One with the collapse of the *beaterio/colegio de niñas indias* of La Madre de Dios, return here in their new role as residents of neighborhoods. I hope that the text's bipartite structure will allow the reader to access each part separately and non-consecutively, according to interest, and that each part forms a thematic whole. The conclusion closes the circle once more.

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Throughout both parts, the reader will notice, I have been concerned to tell the stories that have come to me through the documentary traces that remain. This is not costumbrismo but, in many cases, the only way to approach materials of such divergent kinds. It also seems to me the best way to convey the character of female religious life and its meaning, and to uncover a little bit of what has apparently been forgotten.

Notes:

Note 1: So asserted Francisco Villegas in 1534, testifying for the city government about the need to populate Mexico City. Información hecha por el ayuntamiento de la ciudad de México 3 September 1534. AGI, Papeles de Simancas, Est. 91, caj. 2, leg. 18. In Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, ed., *Epistolario de la Nueva España 1505-1818*, Vol. III, 1533-1539 (Mexico: Porrúa, 1939), 155-72; 172. [Back.](#)

Note 2: Minnie Lee Barrett Shepard, ed. and trans., *Life in the Imperial and Loyal City of Mexico in New Spain and the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico as Described in the Dialogues for the Study of the Latin Language Prepared by Francisco Cervantes de Salazar for Use in His Classes and Printed in 1554 by Juan Pablos* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970 [Texas, 1953]), 42 (English), 260v (Latin). [Back.](#)

Note 3: *Ibid.*, 52(English), 268v-269 (Latin). [Back.](#)

Note 4: See, for example, Josep M. Barnadas, "The Catholic Church in Colonial Spanish America," in Leslie Bethell, ed., *The Cambridge History of Latin America Vol. 1, Colonial Latin America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 511-540; 524. [Back.](#)

Note 5: The term "Indian" is a poor descriptor for any group of indigenous people, and may offend members of indigenous groups and nations. Historically, however, it does describe those who under colonial Spanish law endured a special legal status as tributaries and perpetual minors. [Back.](#)

Note 6: Josefina Muriel, *Conventos de Monjas en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Editorial Jus, 1995 [1946]), 26. [Back.](#)

Note 7: Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain: 1523-1572*, trans. Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley: University of California, 1966 [1933]), 210. [Back.](#)

Note 8: Muriel, op. cit., 27. [Back.](#)

Note 9: Ibid., 30. [Back.](#)

Note 10: Josefina Muriel, "Cincuenta años escribiendo historia de las mujeres," in Manuel Ramos Medina, ed., *El Monacato Femenino en el Imperio Español: Monasterios, beaterios, recogimientos y colegios*, Memoria del II Congreso Internacional (Mexico: Condumex, 1995), 19-31. [Back.](#)

Note 11: Lina Eckenstein, *Woman under Monasticism* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968 [1896]), 478; Penelope D. Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 16-17. [Back.](#)

Note 12: Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, *Las clases privilegiadas en el Antiguo Régimen* (Madrid: Ediciones Istmo, 1973), 322-3. [Back.](#)

Note 13: The extent to which the decrees of the Council of Trent affected Mexican monasticism, and the early date of their implementation, is evident in the 1568 Inquisition trial of the Conceptionist nun Elena de la Cruz; her denunciation arose during a discussion of the decrees among nuns. (AGN Inquisición 8, exp. 1, ff. 5-116). [Back.](#)

Note 14: For an extensive discussion of the effects of Trent on women religious, see Joan Morris, *The Lady Was a Bishop: The Hidden History of Women with Clerical Ordination and the Jurisdiction of Bishops* (New York: MacMillan, 1973). For a general history of the council see <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15030c.htm>. For the decrees on claustration see <http://history.hanover.edu/early/trent/ct25reg1.htm>[Back.](#)

Note 15: Asunción Lavrin, "Religious Life of Mexican Women in the XVIII Century" (Ph.D. diss.; Harvard University, 1962), 3 [Back.](#)

Note 16: Lavrin gives a figure of 3000 to 4000 pesos for the late colonial period. See her "Values and Meaning of Monastic Life for Nuns in Colonial Mexico," *Catholic Historical Review* 58 (October 1972); 367-87; 371 n. 9, 375. [Back.](#)

Note 17: This figure, which may not have been universal, is given in John Schwaller, *Origins of Church Wealth in Mexico: Ecclesiastical Revenues and Church Finances, 1523-1600* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), 130. [Back.](#)

Note 18: Lavrin, "Values and Meaning," 369-70. [Back.](#)

Note 19: See A.M. Gallagher, "The Indian Nuns of Mexico City's Monasterio of Corpus Christi: 1724-1821," in A. Lavrin, ed., *Latin American Women: Historical Perspectives* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 150-72; and J. Muriel, *Las indias caciques de Corpus Christi* (Mexico: UNAM, 1982). [Back.](#)

Note 20: Katherine Gill, "Open Monasteries for Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Italy: Two Roman Examples," in Craig Monson, ed., *The Crannied Wall: Women, Religion, and the Arts in Early Modern Europe* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 115-47; 17-18. I have borrowed the term "parainstitutional" from Gill. The essay is available [on line](#). [Back.](#)

Note 21: Ernest W. McDonnell, *The Beguines and Beghards in Medieval Culture, with Special Emphasis on the Belgian Scene*. (New York: Octagon, 1969); Gill, loc. cit. [Back.](#)

Note 22: Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (London: Routledge, 1994), 171. [Back.](#)

Note 23: Ann K. Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 19-25. [Back.](#)

Note 24: Domínguez Ortiz, op. cit., 322. William Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1981), 16-17. The text of the Augustinian Rule is available [on line](#). [Back.](#)

Note 25: Robert Ricard uses 1570 as the closing of the foundation of the Mexican church. Ricard, op. cit., 3. [Back.](#)

Note 26: As opposed to the histories often commissioned by or written within religious communities, whose tradition is, of course, of much greater antiquity. [Back.](#)

Note 27: To summarize a field as diverse — and, indeed, as fragmented — as women's history is difficult. Much of women's history before about 1980 can be somewhat untidily subsumed under the rubric "herstory." Joan Scott uses this term to encompass three characteristic strategies of women's history. The first strategy attempts to fit a new subject — women — into received historical categories. The second uses evidence associated with women to critique accepted notions of progress. And the third illuminates the lives of women, seeking to discover what is characteristically female about their behavior and experiences, and uncover and explore "women's culture" (Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1988], 18-19). The first strategy can be seen in the work of early scholars who emphasized the

search for "women worthies": those women of the past whose independence, virtue, and/or exceptional deeds made them foremothers for those who had heretofore found the past a bleak place indeed (Natalie Zemon Davis, "ÆWomen's History' in Transition: The European Case," *Feminist Studies* 3:3/4 [Spring/Summer 1976], 83-103). This tradition, of course, has a long pedigree, going back at least to the fifteenth century and what would come to be known as the *querelle des femmes* (Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Early Feminist Theory and the *Querelle des Femmes*, 1400-1789" [1982], reprinted in Joan Kelly, *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984], 65-109). Adding great women to the rosters of great men, such literature has often had the aim and effect of showing what women could do, if only given the opportunity (Davis, op. cit). So, for example: Laureana Wright de Kleinhans, *Mujeres notables mexicanas*. [Mexico, 1910], and; Nancy O'Sullivan-Beare, *Las mujeres de los conquistadores: La mujer española en los comienzos de la colonización americana (Aportaciones para el estudio de la trasculturación)* [Madrid: Compañía Bibliográfica Española, 1956]. See also a much more recent work, Luis Martín, *Daughters of the Conquistadores: Women of the Viceroyalty of Peru* [Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 1983]). Such works have consistently asserted the importance of women to history, if sometimes in a rather vague and mystical manner. So Cesárea Fernández Duro writes, that "La mujer [española], seguramente, era turquesa en que se moldearon las energías nacionales" (*La mujer española en Indias: disertación leída ante la Real academia de la historia en la sesión pública celebrada el día 1o de junio de 1902* [Madrid: Viuda e Hijos de M. Tello, 1902], 26). Fitting women into received historical categories has also meant studying the institutional, legal, and social structures governing female lives. Scholars have sought out information on the rules and attitudes that governed women's lives, largely through examining such texts as laws, regulations, and prescriptive literature. Valuable and relatively recent examples of such studies are Ian MacLean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Heath Dillard, *Daughters of the Reconquest: Women in Castilian Town Society, 1100-1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Gloria Kaufman, "Juan Luis Vives on the Education of Women (1523)," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3: 4 (1978), 891-6. The institutions of importance to women's lives, such as the dowry in Iberian and Iberoamerican societies, have also been studied to fruitful effect. See Muriel Nazzari, *Disappearance of the Dowry: Women, Families, and Social Change in São Paulo, Brazil (1600-1900)* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1991); Asunción Lavrin and Edith Couturier, "Dowries and Wills: A View of Women's Socioeconomic Role in Colonial Guadalajara and Puebla, 1640-1790," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 59:2 (1979), 280-304. Eugene Korth and Della M. Flusche, "Dowry and Inheritance in Colonial Spanish America: Peninsular Law and Chilean Practice," *The Americas* 43:4 (April 1987), 395-410. [Back.](#)

Note 28: Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Ávila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989). [Back.](#)

Note 29: Giulia Calvi, *Histories of a Plague Year: The Social and the Imaginary in Baroque Florence*, trans. Dario Biocca and Bryan T. Regan, Jr. (Berkeley:

University of California Press, 1989). [Back.](#)

Note 30: Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990). [Back.](#)

Note 31: Patricia Nettel D., "Cosmovisión y cultura material franciscana en los pueblos de indios de Nueva España según fray Diego Valadés (una perspectiva etnográfica)," in Elsa Cecilia Frost, ed., *Franciscanos y mundo religioso en México* (Mexico: UNAM, 1993), 39-53; 40. [Back.](#)

Note 32: Asunción Lavrin, "Female Religious," in Susan Socolow and Louisa Schell Hoberman, eds., *Cities and Society in Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 192. [Back.](#)

Note 33: See Asunción Lavrin, "The Role of the Nunneries in the Economy of New Spain in the Eighteenth Century," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 46, No. 4 (Nov. 1966), 371-93. [Back.](#)

Note 34: Ibid., 169-70. I am here indebted to the argument of Richard Trexler in his *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, Studies in Social Discontinuity, 1980). [Back.](#)

Note 35: Lavrin, "Female Religious," 169. [Back.](#)

Note 36: See Edmundo O'Gorman and Salvador Novo, *Guía de las Actas de Cabildo de la Ciudad de México: siglo XVI* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1970), 5485 (868). [Back.](#)

Note 37: Richard Trexler, "Le celibat à la fin du Moyen Age: Les religieuses de Florence," *Annales: ESC* 27 (1972), 1329-50; 1329. [Back.](#)

Note 38: Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau, *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 293. [Back.](#)

Note 39: Serge Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico: The Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, 16th-18th Centuries*, trans. Eileen Corrigan, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 198. [Back.](#)

Note 40: See T.E. Kendrick, *Mary of Agreda: The Life and Legend of a Spanish Nun* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967). [Back.](#)

Note 41: By the eighteenth century, calced convents might contain up to five servants or slaves for each nun. While the numbers of servants were much lower in the sixteenth century, the lower orders (both racial and class) were represented in the convent as well. [Back.](#)

Note 42: Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico 1519-1810* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1964), 125. [Back.](#)

Note 43: Richard Morse, "The Urban Development of Colonial Spanish America," in L. Bethell, ed., *The Cambridge History of Latin America Volume 2* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 67-104; 87. [Back.](#)

Note 44: Lavrin, "Female Religious," 172. [Back.](#)

Note 45: Gibson, op. cit., 368. [Back.](#)

Note 46: Morse, op. cit., 69-70. [Back.](#)

Note 47: AGN, Bienes Nacionales 176, Exp. 5. Carta anónima ſ refiriéndose las fundaciones de conventos de religiosas conceptionistas en México. 1635. f. 1. [Back.](#)

Note 48: BN, Archivo Franciscano, Exp. 1444. [Back.](#)

Note 49: The phrase is Muriel's, Conventos, 43. [Back.](#)

Note 50: Kathleen Ann Myers, *Word from New Spain: The Spiritual Autobiography of Madre María de San José (1656-1719)* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 10-11. [Back.](#)

Note 51: That is, the Board of Trade, which licensed and registered travelers to the Indies. [Back.](#)

Note 52: Letters from individuals and institutions in the Indies were sometimes entered with a traveler's registration. See Enrique Otte and James Lockhart, eds., *Letters and People of the Spanish Indies: Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), x. [Back.](#)

Note 53: See Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela, *Colonial Angels: Narratives of Gender and Spirituality in Mexico 1580-1750* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 1-13. [Back.](#)

Note 54: See Arenal and Schlau, 340. [Back.](#)

Note 55: Josefina Muriel, *Cultura Femenina Novohispana* (Mexico: UNAM, 1963), 34-5, 38-9. [Back.](#)

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