

3. Sanctifying the City: Elite Anxiety, Urban Government, and Women's Institutions 1548-1582

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The foundation of La Concepción was followed by almost thirty years in which no other convents for professed nuns were established in Mexico City. While this lull in convent foundation guaranteed the primacy of La Concepción, it should not be interpreted as an indication of a lack of interest in the protection of women. Indeed, between 1548 and 1582, three recogimientos, or "shelters," were established to enclose, protect, and even punish the vulnerable women of the *república de españoles*. After 1569, Mexico City gained three new convents for professed nuns, one of which was designed to receive dowryless entrants.

Thus the forty years after the foundation of La Concepción appear a seminal moment for women's institutions. By 1583, the urban government of Mexico could claim seven "*monesterios*": "that of Our Lady's conception, that of Regina Coeli, that of Saint Clare, that of Saint Catharine of Siena, that which is now being built in the houses of Doctor Puga, the monastery of the Sheltered Maidens, [and] the monastery of the repentant women." ¹ 

The extent to which such institutions were important to Mexico City's transformation is illustrated by the nature of these foundations. By and large, they were cooperative efforts in which an important role was taken by local government, particularly by the urban government or *cabildo*. This chapter studies the establishment of institutions for women during the period between 1548 and 1582, with particular attention to the role of the *cabildo* and the urban elite it represented. The elite, of course, sought to found monastic institutions in order to perpetuate and enhance the prestige of their families. Yet this age-old tendency co-existed with a strong and generalized desire to protect various women of the "*Spanish commonwealth*" (*república de españoles*) perceived as vulnerable. Between 1548 and 1582, then, anxieties and ambitions related to the continuing and occasionally uneasy transformation of the city from Aztec to viceregal capital were expressed in efforts to enclose and protect various groups of women.

The Sixteenth-Century City

Spanish city planning for American colonies predated the conquest of Tenochtitlan. ² Yet that planning yielded most fruit in Mexico, where urbanization was a consistent and early theme of colonization, leading to a systematic urbanism unparalleled anywhere else in the Indies. ³ To the pre-existing city the conquerors brought "a developed body of urban concepts" ⁴ which would interact with the Amerindian city in a "dialectical relation." ⁵ Foremost among these urban concepts was the *cabildo*: the city council, a form of government that in Spain connoted legitimacy and authority

comparable and complementary to that of the monarchy. ⁶ For the Spanish settlers, urban living organized by municipal government was the basis of a civilized and political life. ⁷

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The cabildo of Mexico City, established almost immediately after the conquest, long predated the establishment of the audiencia of Mexico (1528). Mexico's cabildo was staffed by property-owners or vecinos and thus, like municipal governments elsewhere in the Hispanic world, represented the aspirations and interests of the urban elite, ⁸ or more generally the interests of the settlers vis-à-vis the Crown and Church. ⁹ In its earliest years, until 1526, its members were directly appointed by Cortés or his lieutenants. ¹⁰ Though the Crown gained the right of approval of all cabildo appointments by the 1530s, Mexico's cabildo continued to represent local — and particularly encomendero — interests. Indeed, the audiencia itself often represented such interests. ¹¹ Nonetheless, the cabildo remained the principal instrument for the elaboration of settler objectives and aspirations.

While the city council was only one element in colonial administration, it was an important one. Though its jurisdiction was poorly defined, municipal government was granted or arrogated to itself a great deal of responsibility for the functioning of the city. It oversaw provisioning, public health, and other important aspects of urban living. It granted vecindad, or urban citizenship. It had in addition a critical ceremonial role. How important this role was can be seen in the office of *alférez*, or ensign, which was the most prestigious office in the city government, and wholly ceremonial. ¹² The importance of this latter office inhered in its representation of the authority and power of urban government.

The importance of the cabildo was enhanced by its consciousness of the importance of Mexico City, an urban complex both glorified and plagued by its location. Glory came from the constant reminder of the astonishing feat of conquest the Spaniards had performed there. And yet these laurels rested uneasily on Spanish brows. As we have seen, the presence of so many native people around the city was a source of great anxiety. This anxiety had not diminished by mid-century. In 1550, the cabildo was still concerned with fortifying the city, "as there are many Indians and in a rebellion there is no way to defend oneself." ¹³ Seven years later, the cabildo asserted the importance of repairing the brigantines with which the city had been conquered, "as, being the principal instrument with which this land was won, [they] will [also] be for keeping it safe." ¹⁴

If rebellion was a constant fear, the city's geography was no more reassuring. Cortés's insistence that the Spanish capital be erected on the ruins of the Mexican one meant that Mexico City would be subject to continuing problems attributable to its island site: flooding, swampiness, and provisioning difficulties. Though the conqueror allegedly chose the best and healthiest

area of the city for the Spanish traza, ¹⁵ the center too was prey to the vagaries of climate and geography. The first post-conquest flood to reach the traza occurred in 1553, ¹⁶ prompting Viceroy Velasco to complain in 1556 that, "the site of this city is the worst that could have been selected." ¹⁷

But despite its poor location, Mexico City was critical to the whole colonial endeavor. Mexico City was the "*administrative center and power of all the land.*" ¹⁸ As "cabecera," here used in its Spanish rather than Indian sense, Mexico City was both the secular and ecclesiastical capital of the new colony. ¹⁹ Indeed, Spanish Mexico knew itself to be the guarantor of Christianity in early New Spain. In 1545 the visitador Tello de Sandoval claimed that, "among the Indians there is little Christianity, especially outside of Mexico." ²⁰ And Mexico guarded its privileges jealously. Arguing in 1543 for the superiority of Mexico's bishopric over that of Michoacán, the cathedral chapter wrote that because native people saw Mexico as "the most distinguished and principal city, as in truth it is" it was important to the conversion effort to maintain that status. ²¹ In 1568, Mexico's cathedral chapter asserted that because Mexico was "metropolis and head of the other bishoprics, ... it is just that it be superior in some things." ²²

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The ecclesiastical importance of the city was matched by its importance as fortress and seat of justice for New Spain. Tello de Sandoval claimed that only twenty leagues from Mexico "there is little or no justice... [and] farther outside is confusion." ²³ Mexico City as administrative center thus stood as an island in a sea of chaos. As "power," moreover, the metropolis was citadel of the entire land. Mendieta would even claim later (and perhaps unconvincingly) that the city was not only necessary but sufficient for the Spanish claim on this portion of the New World: "the city of Mexico alone suffices for the security of all New Spain." ²⁴

Mexico City was not only the military or strategic center of the colony, but it fulfilled an important symbolic role as well, particularly in relation to the aboriginal population. Mendieta referred to it as "head and mirror of all of New Spain, in which all the other provinces see themselves, and because the Indians have this custom of looking at the order and style of their head and governing themselves thereby." ²⁵ The Spanish inhabitants of Mexico City were thus both proudly and uneasily conscious of their metropolis's importance in the establishment of a Spanish colony. The fomenting of a strong civic identity was an important goal, linked to the assertion of Spanish dominion and, indeed, its very perpetuation.

The urban government took a strong interest in this goal, as is evident from its vigilance over the city's plaza. The Laws of the Indies issued in 1573 ordered that the main plaza of a town "be the starting point for the town,"

26 meaning this not merely literally, in that streets issued forth from the plaza, but also figuratively. The plaza "was the point at which civic identity was expressed." 27 Long before these provisions were codified, they were in effect in Mexico City. In the 1520s, for example, the cabildo denied a plaza site to two dancing masters on the grounds that their presence would be prejudicial to the nature of the plaza, though it rented them a site temporarily. In 1530, the cabildo ordered the construction of a public fountain as an ornament to the city. 28 Efforts to prohibit the slaughter of livestock in the plaza and the addition of civic and religious symbols are further examples of the city council's attempt to control the expression and construction of civic identity at the city's heart. 29 The city fathers were equally concerned to establish the municipal government's dominion over the property of the plaza mayor. In 1532, for example, the cabildo claimed all land left over after the building of the cathedral (*iglesia mayor*) as its property. 30 Not even the king was to be allowed to infringe upon the city government's rights in regard to this most important urban space; in 1539, the cabildo instituted a lawsuit over royal donations of solares in the plaza mayor. 31 Thus the urban government jealously guarded its role in the creation and assertion of civic identity.

Yet while the city fathers sometimes strove to protect municipal privilege against the church, they recognized that the sacred was critical to metropolitan identity. 32 Within the city, the sacred played an important role in urban structure and symbolism. In our age, when religious architecture no longer carries as much weight, this statement requires some elaboration. In modern urban landscapes, churches are now subsumed by corporate and public buildings. 33 But no inhabitant of sixteenth-century Mexico City would have been surprised to note that religious architecture was, in Thomas Merton's phrase, the "keystone of the city's intelligibility." 34 This was generally true in the pre-industrial city, but the importance of the church in the urban environment was greatly enhanced in the Mexican context. The dialogue *Mexicus Exterior* of Cervantes de Salazar has Zamora and Zuazo showing Alfaro a view over the city from outside it. Alfaro proclaims that Mexico City is a "microcosmos" uniting the Spanish and Indian worlds. The Spanish buildings stand out from the Indian buildings because of their greater height; yet even in the Indian areas, where buildings are "mingled together and grouped without order," churches "no less splendid and magnificent in construction" than those found among the Spanish give meaning to the chaotic native landscape. 35

The primacy of the church in the colonial urban milieu would later be prescribed by an ordinance dictating the nature of the churches to be placed in plazas. 36 The authority of the church in the construction of civic identity, then, was not to be disputed or trifled with. And even at the quotidian neighborhood level, the sacred was critical to individual identity. Throughout the colonial period, for example, witnesses before the Mexican Inquisition

readily used religious landmarks, such as churches and convents, to quickly describe the location of their homes. [37](#)

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The most important site in Mexico City was the main cathedral on the plaza mayor. Though its construction was delayed and dragged on, it was clearly intended to be the city's touchstone. Its plan was modeled on the cathedral of Seville, "because His Majesty by his royal decree orders that it be made very sumptuous as is appropriate for a metropolitan city and church."  In addition, bullfights were to be forbidden in its vicinity to enhance its sacred character and prestige. [38](#) Though the cathedral was outside its jurisdiction, the urban government took an interest in its construction. Indeed, the cabildo generally played a supportive role in regard to the Church, helping establish and maintain religious buildings that were considered not only sacred but municipal resources.

Like the siting of religious structures, religious ritual served to demonstrate the power of the church and to cement civic consciousness and cohesion. This was also true in the Old World, of course; [39](#) in Seville, Holy Week processions and dances served as a focus for urban pride and were not abandoned even when the city government's poor finances might have suggested the practicality of such a move. In fact, the more tenuous Seville's grasp on its status as "trade and cultural capital of the world" became, the more insistent became the display of wealth and social unity enacted in its processions. [40](#) Such an example shows how both pride and anxiety could be manifested in civic ritual.

In a newly conquered land in the process of being Christianized, the urban sacred took on added significance. The civic identity of Mexico, therefore, was no mere matter of entertainment. The city was surrounded by indigenous people whose numbers seemed to the colonists vast and — erroneously, of course — ever-increasing. Mexico represented the standard of Spanishness planted in apparently inhospitable soil. At the same time, this gave the city an importance that evoked pride in its Spanish citizens, who sought to create on the ruins of Tenochtitlan a city to rival any in the world they had left behind. Both the pride and the anxiety of the city would be manifested, between 1548 and 1580, in the foundation of institutions for women. Such institutions united the power of the Christian sacred and the desire for the protection of women, two potent elements of Spanish identity.

Institutions for Women and the Urban Scene

Convents and similar institutions for women are logically studied within the urban context, as they were overwhelmingly urban institutions. In Spain, nunneries were traditionally found in cities and only rarely in smaller towns. [41](#) This Spanish tradition would be enhanced by the decrees of the Council of Trent, which specified urban locations for women's religious communities.

Yet if the colonial period is examined as a whole, urban governments in Spanish America tended to discourage foundations of convents for women. This has led Kathryn Burns to suggest that the situation of Santa Clara de Cuzco, founded by the local cabildo in 1551, is anomalous because, both in Spain and in Spanish America, convents were generally founded by pious individuals rather than cabildos, which rarely involved themselves. [42](#)

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The conventional Spanish American foundation narrative begins with a secular individual patron who seeks church approval for his or her pious work: the foundation of a monastic institution for women. [43](#) This pattern, an inheritance from medieval and Renaissance female monasticism, would be the standard foundational paradigm throughout the colonial period. Cooperative efforts involving urban governments are not part of this narrative. Asunción Lavrin notes that urban governments often "gave negative assessments of the proposed establishment of convents," and assumed patronage of convents only "under special circumstances." [44](#) Indeed, in the middle of the seventeenth century, Philip IV was asked by local governments to forbid the foundation of any more convents for women, as there were already too many of them. [45](#)

Yet while these conclusions about cabildos' reluctance to get involved in convent foundations may be true for the colonial period as a whole, they seem invalid for the sixteenth century, particularly during the period of early colonization. The cases so often cited as exceptions may in fact be the sixteenth-century rule. For example, Lavrin mentions the case of Santa Catalina de Arequipa, for which the local cabildo collected alms and purchased houses. It comes as no surprise that this foundation was undertaken in 1550. Indeed, it seems that sixteenth-century foundations were, in various regions, commonly promoted by cabildos and audiencias, often working in tandem with the secular church. The case studied by Burns is one example. Yet another is provided by Popayán (Colombia), where, much as in Mexico City and Guatemala, the cathedral chapter and cabildo joined forces to establish the convent of La Encarnación, founded in 1592. [46](#)

If sixteenth-century cabildos were eager founders of women's institutions, the Crown was often reticent or openly reluctant. In the case of La Concepción, as we have seen, local enthusiasm was met by firm royal disapproval. In general, the Crown seems to have feared the specter of armies of nuns begging royal favor; an investigation of foundations' financial prospects was evidently a prerequisite for royal approval. [47](#) Local governments were less cautious. The cabildo of Mexico City was active in many of the sixteenth-century foundations, particularly before 1582. Moreover, members of the urban government generally displayed positively sanguine enthusiasm about the prospects of institutions for women in the volatile early colonial context.

Why were institutions for women promoted in the sixteenth century by

cabildos? The first reason clearly relates to the assertion of civic pride. As Burns convincingly asserts, monasteries were "a mark of civic confidence" in colonial Spanish America, as in Europe, [48](#) a manner of ensuring the authority, status, and reputation of a city. Just as the presence of Spanish wives had signified stability and male citizenship in Spanish border towns of the *reconquista*, [49](#) the establishment of convents for women signified stability and confidence in a city's future. Thus convents were established in the most settled and prosperous Spanish American cities in the sixteenth century, while outlying areas had to wait until the seventeenth. [50](#) The establishment of women's institutions was an important emblem of the transition from garrison to colony.

Such foundations reproduced European cultural norms, and thus were almost always explicitly modeled upon those undertaken in Old World cities. In 1557, for example, the founders of the School for Mixed-Race Girls (Colegio de Niñas Mestizas) asked that the King seek from the pope "the privileges, exemptions and graces and indulgences granted to the house of orphan girls of Rome, which is similar to this one." [51](#)  Seville also served as an example, as will be seen in the case of the recogimiento Jesús de la Penitencia. And Isabel López, arguing for a mixed convent/recogimiento, noted the existence of such houses in Spain. [52](#) The reproduction of European norms, then, was of self-evident importance to the founders of women's institutions.

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Settlers' pride in their creation of a European colony was also expressed in foundational efforts. The founders of the Colegio de Niñas Mestizas claimed proudly that the colegio was "one of the most enclosed houses that exists in this New Spain or could exist in Spain." [53](#)  Don Fernando de Portugal, a supporter of the school and himself a native of Spain, said that the colegio was "one of the best works which exists in Spain or in this land." [54](#)  A sense of how local institutions compared to those on the peninsula was never far from the minds of founders and their supporters. A witness for La Concepcion in 1592 claimed that the convent "can compete with the most excellent ones of Spain." [55](#)  A confessor of the convent went even further, saying that La Concepción "could be an example" to many Spanish convents. [56](#) (*puede ser exenplo de muchos monesterios de los rreynos despaña*).

But the symbolic power of convents went beyond simply signifying that a particular city could compete with others. Rather, the enclosure of women was at the very core of Spanish society's identity. The "female purity ethic" was a critical part of the self-creation of a local elite. [57](#) But because, in European culture, the honor of a city was a direct outcome of the honor of its families, [58](#) Mexico City's honor was implicated in the purity of its women. So asserted Don Luis de Velasco, testifying before the audiencia in 1586. He described the convent of Regina Coeli as a house "from which results much

honor and utility to this city and kingdom." ⁵⁹  The benefits of female purity flowed up to include even the monarch. Velasco, now viceroy, wrote to Philip II in 1590 that Mexico's convents for women were exemplary institutions in which royal honor "is very involved." ⁶⁰ The foundation of institutions for women thus signaled stability, reinforced settlers' sense of their own Spanishness, allowed them to assert parity or even superiority vis-à-vis the mother country, and confirmed the honor of their city.

The second reason for the cabildos' activity on behalf of women's institutions relates to anxiety and the need to purify the urban core. In her influential anthropological study of purity, Mary Douglas argues that in general, societal order and purity are created through separation, classification, and the exaggeration of difference. ⁶¹ Holiness requires that things conform to the class to which they belong, and that different classes not be confused. ⁶² In this sense, the quest for social order required that the citizens of New Spain be able to discern in each individual his or her identity and place. ⁶³ Yet in sixteenth-century Mexico City, the constant erosion of lines between Spanish and Indian commonwealths produced not order but ambiguity. As we have seen, one of the principal goals of settlement in the 1530s was to erect and maintain boundaries between the two republics. Order was connected with those boundaries, disorder with their permeability. ⁶⁴ By 1560 the city was sufficiently concerned about the difficulty of maintaining separation to suggest that a unified city government — dominated by Spaniards, of course — be established to govern both the Indian and Spanish areas of the city. ⁶⁵ Clearly, the old idea of separation was untenable, but if mixing was to occur, Spanish primacy must be ensured.

As the notion of two republics foundered, *mestizaje* emerged as a presumed cause of social dissolution. Race mixture produced no small unease in an anxious Spanish population heavily outnumbered by the non-Spanish population. In 1547, the cabildo attempted to prohibit contact between caciques and "blacks, *moriscos*, and mestizos." ⁶⁶ Anxiety over race mixture was not limited to the city fathers. Fray Nicolás de Witte, an Augustinian friar, summarized the fears of many Spaniards in 1552:

Well, what can be expected from this land where a mixture of such a bad people breeds and goes on peopling it. As is clear, this land is full of mestizos, and they come out evilly inclined. It is full of black men and women, from whom come slaves. It is full of black men who marry Indian women from whom proceed mulattos [sic]. It is full of mestizo men who marry Indian women from whom proceed a diverse and innumerable caste, and from all these mixtures come other diverse and not very good mixtures. ⁶⁷ 

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This sense that race mixture led to "such a bad people" would later be expressed in rather paranoid fear of the mulatto and mestizo inhabitants of

Mexico City, whose numbers approached approximately 3000 by the 1560s. ⁶⁸ Viceroy Martín Enríquez reported in 1572 that Spanish fear of the castas had reached hysterical proportions, complaining that "it was said that the Indians and mulatos and mestizos wanted to rebel, and it was something that had absolutely no foundation." ⁶⁹ If the conquered were a source of fear, so too were those mixed-race and downtrodden people figured as a fifth column within the *república de españoles*.

The mobility of colonial society was another cause of anxiety. A concern with wandering already marked New Spain in the sixteenth century. Mendieta wrote that one of the most critical necessities of the Indies was to clean up its vagabonds:

By wandering in this manner, everyone for his own part and where he wishes, one does not know whether they are Spanish, French, or English, nor whether they are Greeks or Latins, nor whether they are Christians or pagans, only that every such one can be that which he wishes, and live under the law that he fancies. Further, because wandering with this liberty among the Indians, [vagabonds] give them many evil examples. ⁷⁰

Here Mendieta weds the recurrent Franciscan theme of example with the specter of social dissolution, arguing that vagabondage cuts the individual off from community and obligation, allowing self-invention. Moreover, wandering obscures what should be obvious, blurring lines among ethnic and religious groups; one cannot tell what vagabonds are. In short, as Viceroy Don Luis de Velasco the younger would claim in 1592, vagabondage produced "great disorder and confusion in the land." ⁷¹ (*gran desorden y confusión en la tierra*)

Female wandering was particularly pernicious, however, because it led to sexual laxity and took women from their very identity, which was rooted in home and family. "Not wanting to be in her house" (*No gusta de estar en su casa*) was the mark of disorderly femininity. ⁷² Such disorder was considered especially dangerous, perhaps because it marred the cherished notion of constructing a Spanish society. Thus, in proscribing gambling in 1583, the *audiencia* would claim that

what is even worse is that many women of this city ... have gambled and do gamble ... with the same disorder as the men ... which is not only scandalous in the republic, but from which could result other, greater excesses in offence to God. ⁷³

Because of this, gambling was forbidden, "especially among the said women, for the good example of the other women of this kingdom and city of Mexico." ⁷³ Women's example, then, was of special importance, and their

disorder "worse."

The particular dangers of women's disorder relate to several characteristics of sixteenth-century society. A venerable misogynistic tradition claimed that women would become more dangerous than men if allowed to escape proper (male) authority. In the sixteenth century, a new theme was added to this tradition; increasingly, with social change and disorder of growing concern, women were seen as instruments of societal dissolution. ⁷⁴ Women's sexual chastity or looseness was thus a matter of grave concern to society: a moral issue, to be sure, but also a social one. ⁷⁵ Through the course of the European sixteenth century, philosophers and churchmen presented enclosure as the primary solution to the "problem" of disorderly women. Though anxiety about such disorder could be the cause of an impulse to enclose women, honor could be the result, because honor was above all a system of social organization aimed at order. ⁷⁶ Containing women in a state of enforced chastity addressed anxieties about deterioration of the social order while enhancing the honor of society at large.

Yet in Christendom in general, and in New Spain in particular, to wish women to be chaste was inherently contradictory; only some women could be chaste if society was to perpetuate itself. In fact, even the desire for decency among the non-virgin women of a community contained a germ of contradiction, because in the eyes of both ecclesiastical and secular leaders, it required the use of a group of women — prostitutes — who would be receptacles for the pollution created by illicit sex. ⁷⁷ But if pollution could be delegated to one group of women, purity too could be enjoyed at second hand, by delegating it. ⁷⁸ In this manner, convents of nuns can be said to have sanctified urban space by embodying the ultimate feminine purity and order inaccessible to most urban women.

Women's monastic institutions were a striking presence in the urban landscape. Fernando Benítez speaks of them as disquieting and monumental presences in the colonial capital, from which emanated "the odor of sanctity, a sense of chastity." ⁷⁹ Luis Martín, speaking of the convents of Lima, describes them as a vast "archipelago of women," virtual cities within the city, where "humans seemed to touch the boundaries of the supernatural city of God." ⁸⁰ To be sure, sixteenth-century convents were not the vast structures they became in later centuries. They were, however, buildings of power, evoking purity and order through their assertion and creation of physical and symbolic boundaries between men and women, chastity and procreation, sacred and profane. While, as we shall see later, sixteenth-century cloistering was very much a work in progress, the notion of the boundary between world and convent was one of the most potent aspects of the institutions for women established in the sixteenth century.

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The boundaries between outside and inside took on special significance in women's institutions because the maintenance of those boundaries upheld

feminine purity as well as the sacred-profane division. Indeed, in contemporary Mediterranean culture the sexual purity of women was often symbolically linked to the security and enclosure of buildings. Fray Luis de León, in his *Perfecta casada*, compared the bad woman to a "leaky house." ⁸¹ (*casa que se llueve*) In sixteenth-century Rome, the practice of "house-scoring" was often linked to attacks on a woman's sexual honor. ⁸² While there were wide variations in such practices, chastity and the security of buildings were often conflated. ⁸³ If houses could be the loci of sexual shame, their windows and doors bearing stains of ignominy, buildings could also be loci of purity. The ritual of encerramiento, which officially opened — or, more accurately, closed — a new convent, may thus be described as a "house-honoring." Sixteenth-century documents concerning the foundation of women's institutions invariably describe this ritual, which involved the transportation in procession of the women chosen as foundresses of the new institution. To judge from contemporary reports, the ceremony made a huge impression on witnesses. Processions would be accompanied by the most important citizens of the city, as well as representatives of all its governing corporations. In 1575, Andrés Quixelmo described the normal process of convent foundation as involving "much harmony and solemnity," with "a very great accompaniment of people." ⁸⁴

In the seventeenth century, Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora drew on convent records to describe the encerramiento of the convent of Jesús María in 1580. On 10 January of that year, at 3 PM, the foundresses were conducted from La Concepción to the new convent, accompanied by the archbishop, audiencia, and nobility of the city. All of the city's churches pealed their bells. When the procession arrived at the new convent and entered its church, the abbess received her seal of office from the archbishop, and then the obedience of the nuns she would govern. Then the nuns entered the door of the convent "to the applause of all." The ceremonies continued for almost a week, with special masses attended by the archbishop. Householders put out luminarias to light evening festivities. ⁸⁵ The ceremony of enclosure, then, was a potent ritual involving the entire city. Once the ceremony was consummated, the building became a consecrated locus of purity.

The potency of encerramiento related to the creation of boundaries. Yet in entering a convent one entered, as Luis Martín emphasizes, a world where the boundaries between the human and sacred were particularly porous. This was so because of the work of prayer the nuns engaged in, which was a constant act of supplication for the sake of the world. Entering a convent was seen as self-sacrifice; Sigüenza y Góngora refers to convent life, in a striking and famous metaphor, as a "virginal holocaust." ⁸⁶ Nuns' labors in the convent were understood as working toward the salvation of humanity, ⁸⁷ the most important work that a human being could perform. ⁸⁸ Nuns themselves were conscious of the importance of this work. In 1582, the nuns of Santa Clara told the king that their convent "occupies itself in offering to the Lord its prayers for Your Majesty." ⁸⁹ (*se ocupa en ofrecer al señor sus horaciones*

por v. mt) The nuns of La Concepción stressed that "in our sacrifices and prayers we beg for many and very prosperous years of life and health"  for the royal person. ⁹⁰ Male clerics made no such references to prayer in their bids for royal preference; indeed, prayer was the defining characteristic of female monasticism. In 1581, Fray Juan de León told the king that nuns were "third parties between God and men"; ⁹¹ (*terceras entre dios y los hombres*) a more concise statement of their role does not exist. Thus if women's institutions were symbolically potent buildings, they were also sites where women's continual prayer worked for the good of the kingdom.

Convents were also perceived, simply, as useful institutions. In 1597, to use a rather late example, the cabildo was asked to provide water to the convent of La Encarnación. A discussion arose concerning who should bear the costs. The cabildo decided that even though the nuns had the funds to pay for the works, the city should bear the costs for such religious institutions, "which are so useful to the city." ⁹² In addition to their prayers for the city, such institutions were useful because they provided a remedy for the problem presented by the many daughters of the elite who had no possibility of contracting a socially advantageous marriage. Just as schools for the sons of Spanish vecinos were necessary and useful institutions, so too were places of enclosure that would prepare daughters to enter marriage or take the veil.

The taking of state by women was a grave concern in which personal and social honor were implicated. From a modern perspective this may seem absurd: What dishonorable thing would happen to women who neither married nor became nuns? Many such women existed, particularly, of course, among the lower classes. But again and again men alluded darkly to the insults to honor that would surely result if the daughters of the elite were not confined within either the strictures of matrimony or the salutary discipline of the convent. Members of the elite conflated their high social standing with the sexual purity of their daughters. In 1544, Gonzalo de Arando wrote to the king of the Mexican settlers' response to the New Laws' limiting of *encomienda* to the lifetime of the current holders: "now they are wandering like madmen, saying that when they are dead their wives and daughters must go to the whorehouse and their sons to seek lords whom they can serve." ⁹³  Enthusiasm for women's institutions on the part of the cabildo, an organ of the elite, can be linked to this concern for feminine purity and its necessity for the identity of an urban elite whose status sometimes appeared ephemeral.

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Yet the urban government and elite of Mexico were sympathetic to arguments for the protection of non-elite women as well. Indeed, after the foundation of La Concepción, the attention of the cabildo turned for a time to the creation of other institutions aimed at the protection and rehabilitation of disorderly women.

Such institutions, often known as *recogimientos*, were founded in many regions of Spanish America during the sixteenth century. In general, they

were established after the creation of one or more convents of professed nuns, and arose to address the perceived vulnerability of women of the Spanish "republic" who were not served by previous convent foundations. The recogimiento of Santa María de Quito, for example, was founded in 1595 for mestiza orphans, penitent women, and women in the process of divorce. Friars had long urged the foundation of such a house, as had Don Hernando de Santillán, who became president of Quito's recently established audiencia in 1563. However, foundations of convents for professed nuns took up much of the energy of Quitense society until the end of the century. Santa María was established through the patronage of a married couple who were prominent vecinos of the city, yet the foundation was carried out under the added patronage of Quito's bishop, and thus united all sectors of the local elite and government. ⁹⁴ In Mexico City, no less, mestiza orphans, Magdalens, and women in marital difficulty would become the focus of several foundations during the period in question. In these foundations, however, Mexico's urban government would play a leading role.

Rather than asking why cabildos and urban elites supported the foundation of women's institutions in the sixteenth century, we might rather ask why they would not support such foundations. Women's institutions were an important urban resource. They signaled the arrival and status of the city, provided a symbolic (and sometimes practical) counterpoint to the disorder and ambiguity of the colonial endeavor, and provided a respectable option for women who could not contract matrimony. Each of these functions was expressed in the women's institutions established between 1548 and 1580, whose foundations we will now examine.

Appendix

[Appendix 1. AGI, México 280. A SM de fray nicolas de witte \[?\]. 8 January 1552.](#)

Notes:

Note 1: AGI, México 317. Memorial de las iglesias y monesterios que ay en esta ciudad de mexco. 15 September 1583. [Back.](#)

Note 2: The first royal ordinances concerning city planning in the New World date from 1513. See Crouch, Garr, and Mundigo, op. cit., 1. [Back.](#)

Note 3: Ibid., 357-8, 367. [Back.](#)

Note 4: Ibid., 32 [Back.](#)

Note 5: Morse, op. cit., 69-70. [Back.](#)

Note 6: John Preston Moore, *The Cabildo in Peru under the Hapsburgs: A Study in the Origins and Powers of the Town Council in the Viceroyalty of Peru, 1530-1700* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1954), 3-4, 13-14 passim. [Back.](#)

Note 7: W.W. Pierson, "Some Reflections on the Cabildo as an Institution," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 5:4 (November 1922), 573-96; 581; C.M. Stafford Poole, *Pedro Moya de Contreras: Catholic Reform and Royal Power in New Spain, 1571-1591* (Berkeley: University of California, 1987), 20. [Back.](#)

Note 8: This was generally true in Spain as well. In Ávila, for example, a small group dominated office-holding by the late fifteenth century. See Bilinkoff, op. cit., 15. [Back.](#)

Note 9: Peter Marzahl, *Town in the Empire: Government, Politics, and Society in Seventeenth-Century Popayán* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), 75. [Back.](#)

Note 10: Ida Altman, "Spanish Society in Mexico City after the Conquest," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 71:3 (August 1991), 413-45; 416. [Back.](#)

Note 11: Ibid., 417. [Back.](#)

Note 12: Marzahl, op. cit., 65. [Back.](#)

Note 13: O'Gorman and Novo, *Guía, Acta del 6. iii. 1550*, 259. [Back.](#)

Note 14: Ibid., *Acta del 22. ii. 1557*, 327. [Back.](#)

Note 15: Marroquí, op. cit., I, 25. [Back.](#)

Note 16: Ibid., 111. [Back.](#)

Note 17: Ibid., 24. [Back.](#)

Note 18: Información hecha por el ayuntamiento de la ciudad de México.... 3 September 1534. In Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario* III, 155-72; 172. [Back.](#)

Note 19: Gibson, op. cit., 33. A cabecera in the Indian context was the capital town of a local ruler who bore the title *tlatoani* (34). [Back.](#)

Note 20: Carta al príncipe don Felipe, del licenciado Tello de Sandoval, visitador de la Nueva España, dando su parecer sobre las cosas que deberían proveerse para el buen gobierno de la misma. 9 September 1545. In Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario* IV, No. 246, 209-26; 210. [Back.](#)

Note 21: AGI, México 339. Carta del cabildo eclesiástico de México. 7 January 1543. [Back.](#)

Note 22: Carta el rey, del arcediano y tres racioneros de México, sobre curatos, diezmos y otros particulares. 20 March 1568. In Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario X*, No. 601, 233-9; 235. [Back.](#)

Note 23: Ibid. [Back.](#)

Note 24: Carta del Padre Fray Jerónimo de Mendieta al Ilustre Señor Licenciado Juan de Ovando... c. 1571. *Cartas de Religiosos*, No. x, 101-15; 112. Mendieta made this claim in arguing for the limiting of Spanish settlement outside Mexico, so of course the claim is extreme. Yet whether one accepted Mendieta's argument or not, the primacy of Mexico in maintaining Spanish dominion was no matter for dispute. [Back.](#)

Note 25: Carta de Fray Jerónimo Mendieta para sm en Nombre del Provincial y Difinidores, en favor de la escuela de S. Francisco de México y del Colegio de Tlatelulco. C. 1572. In Gómez Canedo, *Marginados*, 357-61; 358. [Back.](#)

Note 26: Crouch et al., op. cit., Ordinance 112, 13. [Back.](#)

Note 27: Ibid., 43. [Back.](#)

Note 28: *Guía*, Acta del 19. v. 1530, 60. [Back.](#)

Note 29: Marroquí III, 202-7. [Back.](#)

Note 30: *Guía*, Acta del 19. ii. 1532, 88. [Back.](#)

Note 31: *Guía*, Acta del 5. ix. 1539, 162 [Back.](#)

Note 32: See Trexler, *Public Life*, 7 passim. [Back.](#)

Note 33: See Spiro Kostof, *The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings through History* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1991), 279-82. [Back.](#)

Note 34: In his classic *Seven Storey Mountain*, Thomas Merton writes of St Antonin, a town in Southern France in which he spent part of his childhood: "Here, in this amazing, ancient town, the very pattern of the place, of the houses and streets and of nature itself, the circling hills, the cliffs and trees, all focussed my attention upon the one, important central fact of the church and what it contained. Here, everywhere I went, I was forced, by the disposition of everything around me, to be always at least virtually conscious of the church. Every street pointed more or less inward to the center of town, to the church. Every view of the town, from the exterior hills, centered upon the long grey building with its high spire. The church had been fitted into the landscape in such a way as to become the keystone of its intelligibility." Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1948), 36-7. [Back.](#)

Note 35: Shepard, op. cit., 52 (English), 268v-269 (Latin). [Back.](#)

Note 36: "The temple in inland places shall not be placed on the square but at

a distance and shall be separated from any other nearby buildings, or from adjoining buildings, and ought to be seen from all sides so that it can be decorated better, thus acquiring more authority; efforts should be made that it be somewhat raised from ground level in order that it be approached by steps, and near it, next to the main plaza, the royal council and cabildo and customs houses shall be built ... in a manner that would not embarrass the temple but add to its prestige." Crouch et al., Ordinance 124, 15. This ordinance has been interpreted to mean that the church was not to be on the plaza, but should be rather understood to imply the church's separation from the other buildings on the plaza. See Crouch, 43. [Back.](#)

Note 37: R. Douglas Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society in a Colonial Mexico City, 1660-1720* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 200, n. 3. [Back.](#)

Note 38: Carta del arzobispo de México al Consejo de Indias sobre la edificación de la iglesia, diezmos y otros particulares. 15 December 1554. In Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario* VII, No. 422, 307. A short time thereafter, however, the plan was modified, as the plan of Seville's cathedral was considered too expensive to recreate; now the churches of Segovia and Salamanca were considered better models. Carta del arzobispo de México al Consejo de Indias, sobre el Concilio Provincial y el estado y gobierno de aquella Iglesia. 12 September 1555. In Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario* VIII, No. 432, 30-4; 33. [Back.](#)

Note 39: For discussion, see Trexler, *Public Life*, xix passim. [Back.](#)

Note 40: Lynn Matluck Brooks, *The Dances of the Processions of Seville in Spain's Golden Age* (Kassel: Edition Reichenberger, 1988), 339 passim. [Back.](#)

Note 41: Christian, op. cit., 16. [Back.](#)

Note 42: Kathryn Burns, "Convents, Culture, and Society in Cuzco, Peru, 1550-1865." Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1993, 34. See also Burns, "Gender and the Politics of Mestizaje: The Convent of Santa Clara in Cuzco, Peru," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 78:1 (February 1998), 5-44; 19. [Back.](#)

Note 43: María Justina Sarabia Viejo, "Controversias sobre la Cevida común' ante la reforma monacal femenina en México," in Ramos Medina, *Monacato*, 583-92; 584. [Back.](#)

Note 44: Lavrin, "Female Religious," 167. [Back.](#)

Note 45: Braden, op. cit., 250. [Back.](#)

Note 46: Marzahl, op. cit., 13. [Back.](#)

Note 47: See, for example, AGI, México 27, N. 75. s.f. [c. 1540]. Decreto ... sobre dar licena para fundar dos monasterios de monjas. [Back.](#)

Note 48: Burns, "Convents," 33. [Back.](#)

Note 49: Dillard, op. cit., 22. Dillard suggests that having a wife in a given town was "the most secure pledge and measure of a man's allegiance to a particular community." [Back.](#)

Note 50: Lavrin, "Female Religious," 167. [Back.](#)

Note 51: AGI, Justicia 157, No. 2, Pieza 2, f. 24v. Información sobre la casa de nuestra señora de la caridad. 6 December 1557. [Back.](#)

Note 52: AGI, México 289. Ysavel Lopez de Jesus rectora e fundadora del monesto y rrecogimiento de sancta monica de la ciudad de mexco sobre que su magd sea patron del dicho monesto ... 1586-1591. [Back.](#)

Note 53: Ibid., 30v. [Back.](#)

Note 54: Ibid., 58v. [Back.](#)

Note 55: AGI, México 289. Ynfformacion rrecibida en la rreal Audiencia de mexco sobre la necesidad de la casa e yglesia del monasterio de la concepcion de la dicha ciudad. 1592. Testimony of Rui López de Salcedo, f. 3. [Back.](#)

Note 56: Ibid., testimony of Doctor Melchior de la Cadena. [Back.](#)

Note 57: For a theoretical discussion of the relationship between women's sexuality and the construction of masculine, family, and state identity in stratified societies, see Sherry Ortner, "The Virgin and the State," *Feminist Studies* 4:3 (October 1978), 19-36. [Back.](#)

Note 58: Trexler, *Public Life*, 36. [Back.](#)

Note 59: AGI, México 218, N. 17. Información — Regina Coeli. 1586. f. 2v, im. 4. Velasco had three daughters in the convent. [Back.](#)

Note 60: AGI, México 22, N. 18. El virrey Luis de Velasco, hijo, a SM. 5 June 1590. [Back.](#)

Note 61: Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 35. [Back.](#)

Note 62: Ibid., 53. [Back.](#)

Note 63: Douglas suggests that societies' needs for beliefs about pollution and purity are related to the degree of ambiguity in a given society. Where beliefs are not relative, but are absolute, pollution beliefs are less likely to arise; for example, when male dominance is completely accepted, as among the Walbiri of Australia, no sexual pollution beliefs exist. According to Douglas, such beliefs arise to clarify ambiguity. Ibid., 141-3. [Back.](#)

Note 64: Gibson, op. cit., 377. [Back.](#)

Note 65: *Guía*, Acta del 19. ii. 1560, 356-7. [Back.](#)

Note 66: *Guía*, Acta del 7. iii. 1547, 234. [Back.](#)

Note 67: AGI, México 280. Carta a SM de fray Nicolás de Witte. 8 January 1552. [Back.](#)

Note 68: Gibson, op. cit., 380. [Back.](#)

Note 69: AGI, México 19, N. 82. Martín Enríquez a SM. 28 April 1572. [Back.](#)

Note 70: Carta del Padre Fray Jerónimo de Mendieta al Ilustre Señor Licenciado Juan de Ovando... c. 1571. *Cartas de Religiosos X*, 101-15; 111. [Back.](#)

Note 71: Carta de D. Luis de Velasco el segundo a Felipe II. 24 May 1592. In Cuevas, op. cit., 440. [Back.](#)

Note 72: Josefina Muriel, *Los recogimientos de mujeres: Respuesta a una problemática social novohispana* (Mexico: UNAM, 1974), 16. Mary Elizabeth Perry has written of the theme of the wandering woman in seventeenth-century Seville, where such women were viewed as menacing a city enervated by the flow of many of its men to the Indies. See Perry, op. cit. . [Back.](#)

Note 73: Ordenanzas y Pregón de la ciudad de México sobre el juego de naipes. 19 July 1583. In Cuevas, op. cit., 329-30; 329. [Back.](#)

Note 74: Sánchez Lora, op. cit., 41. [Back.](#)

Note 75: Ibid., 53. [Back.](#)

Note 76: José Antonio Maravall, *Poder, honor y élites en el siglo XVII* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1979), 138. [Back.](#)

Note 77: Douglas, op. cit., 162. Lest this be thought an overstatement, consider Thomas Aquinas's description of such women as "cesspools." A more explicit statement of belief in the polluting qualities of their undertaking cannot be imagined. [Back.](#)

Note 78: Ibid., 163. [Back.](#)

Note 79: Fernando Benítez, *The Century after Cortés*, trans. Joan MacLean (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 19. [Back.](#)

Note 80: Martín, op. cit., 172, 201. [Back.](#)

Note 81: Fray Luis de León, *La perfecta casada* (Buenos Aires: Espasa-Calpe, 1938), 18. [Back.](#)

Note 82: Elizabeth S. Cohen, "Honor and Gender in the Streets of Early Modern Rome," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 22:4 (Spring 1992), 597-625. "House-scorning" (Cohen's term) involved defacing and besmirching a house to shame its owner or occupant. At least three quarters of the cases of house-

scorning studied by Cohen concerned prostitutes or unchaste women. [Back.](#)

Note 83: Ibid., 618; Peter Stallybrass, "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," in Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers, eds., *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 123-42; 126. [Back.](#)

Note 84: AGI, México 283. Proceso y informaciones fechas en la ciudad de Mexico y otros autos sobre haver salido las monjas de santa clara del monasterio... 1574-5. Testimony of Andrés Quixelmo, f. 53v. [Back.](#)

Note 85: Sigüenza y Góngora, op. cit., ff. 10-11. [Back.](#)

Note 86: Ibid., f. 5v. [Back.](#)

Note 87: Johnson, op. cit., 61. [Back.](#)

Note 88: Mariano Cuevas, S.J., *Historia de la iglesia en México* (Mexico: Imprenta del Colegio Salesiano, 1926), Vol. IV, 176. [Back.](#)

Note 89: AGI, México 285. Las monjas de santa clara de Mexico a SM. 30 March 1582. [Back.](#)

Note 90: AGI, México 289. Las monjas de la concepcion a SM. 6 February 1589. [Back.](#)

Note 91: AGI, México 285. Fray Juan de Leon a SM. 9 April 1581. [Back.](#)

Note 92: "Se aprueba la petición, se manda ejecutar y pagar de la sisa. Previamente se discutió el asunto, ya que las monjas de la Encarnación no son mendicantes y tienen fondos para costear la obra, pero se aprobó la propuesta de Guillén Brondat, quien alegó que el Ayuntamiento ha pagado los gastos ocasionados por obras similares a los monasterios, sean pobres o ricos... que tan útiles son a la ciudad." Acta del 14 Nov. 1597 (5844), in O'Gorman, *Guía*, 886. [Back.](#)

Note 93: Carta al rey de Gonzalo de Aranda dando noticias de su viaje desde Sevilla a México ... 30 May 1544. In Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario IV*, No. 225, 82-94; 88. [Back.](#)

Note 94: Viforcós Marinas, op. cit., 59-92. [Back.](#)

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