

## 9. Religious Careers

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The secular historiography of women's institutions has often presented convents as loci of feminine power that provided a refuge from the "subjection" to masculine power epitomized by marriage. <sup>1</sup> In comparison to marriage, we are told, religion offered women "a unique opportunity to develop the autonomy that most married women lacked." <sup>2</sup> The convent gave women "an opportunity for self-development and a degree of autonomy rare in ... Hispanic society." <sup>3</sup> Religious life, then, was a "career option" that allowed a diverse group of women the ability "to find sustenance, exert influence, and develop talents." <sup>4</sup> Examples of influence, dynamism, talent, and power undoubtedly abound among religious women in the sixteenth century. Yet the notion of "autonomy," with its emphasis on self-direction and self-government, may not be the most useful descriptor of the religious careers of either nuns or semi-religious women. Both groups lived lives embedded in community, whether the circumscribed and largely female community of the cloister or the diffuse environment of the neighborhood. In this sense, women of devotion were no different from their secular contemporaries and their male religious peers. Yet religious and semi-religious women alike faced a greater degree of circumscription on their autonomy, one that arose from their gender; they were subjected to male scrutiny in the person of confessors and other male superiors. <sup>5</sup>

The autonomy of religious and semi-religious women, then, was an ambiguous one at best. While the act of profession freed a woman from the authority of secular masculinity, the convent was penetrated by masculine power in the form of confessors and chaplains. Women outside the convent may have been subject to less rigid supervision, but they too were bound to obey the religious men who governed their spiritual lives. Moreover, power was not only masculine. Inside the convent, the existence of powerful positions meant a feminine hierarchy of governors and governed as well. Outside the cloister, *beatas*, though less subject to formal strictures, also lived among and served a secular population that evaluated and scrutinized them.

This chapter examines, by way of case study, religious careers of *beatas* and nuns in sixteenth-century Mexico City. The documents sampled in this chapter provide in-depth information about the careers of individual women, rare for the period in question. Apart from this commonality, the sources used and the women they examine are relatively diverse. To examine the founding family of Santa Clara, I have used the one extant document that details the foundresses' plans for the institution. Two seventeenth-century histories (*relaciones*) written by nuns provide information about the careers of the authors, which began in the sixteenth century. I also gain access to the careers of three nuns and three *beatas* using dossiers compiled by the Mexican Inquisition. <sup>6</sup> Such dossiers are an important source for sixteenth-

century New Spain in general, and are particularly important here because they provide the only extant spiritual biographies of beatas in sixteenth-century Mexico City. <sup>7</sup>

In addition to a general examination of the "career option" represented by religious careers in the sixteenth century, this chapter will attempt to address the possible distinctiveness of the period in question. Asunción Lavrin has posited the notion of an early colonial fluidity in women's status and roles. Notions of ambiguity and fluidity have long been associated with the early colonial role of women. In his "Celoso Extremeño," Cervantes would describe the Indies as the "general lure for loose women." <sup>8</sup> (*añagaza general de mujeres libres*) Feminine freedom was associated with the Indies earlier than this, as evidenced by the story of Catalina de Erauso (1592-1650), the "nun-ensign" whose flight from a Spanish convent led to a notorious disguised career as a "male" soldier and muleteer. Even before Doña Catalina's (mis)adventures were publicized, at least one other woman had attempted a similar flight. In 1553, Isabel de Chaves, a professed Bernardine nun from Vallecas, fled her convent with the apparent intent of seeking refuge in the Indies. The Council of the Indies quickly forbade the Seville authorities to grant her passage, and the frustrated Isabel was soon arrested in Seville and deposited in that city's Bernardine house. Soon, however, that community began to complain of the hardship involved in supporting a nun who had neither professed in nor brought a dowry to the convent. In response, Philip II ordered that the Archbishop of Toledo have Isabel returned to her convent of profession; one may presume that she got no closer to the Indies. <sup>9</sup> If Isabel de Chaves, Catalina de Erauso, and Cervantes all perceived the Indies as a realm of feminine freedom (or license), there were also religious women in New Spain who thought that the early colonial experience necessitated greater feminine "autonomy." The beatas who staffed the colegios de niñas indias, as we have seen, were fierce defenders of their exemption from male governance. Their legacy, however, was a progressive narrowing of such exemptions. Our first case study of religious careers examines the ultimately fruitless quest for autonomy of the foundresses of Santa Clara de México.

### **Quest for Autonomy: The Founding Family of Santa Clara de México**

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In 1571, the foundresses of Mexico's new convent of Santa Clara wrote to the Holy See soliciting privileges for their house. They asked for the same powers held by Castilian abbesses, "and even more ample, considering that [this] is a new land and it is necessary." <sup>10</sup> (*y muy mas anplo atento que es tierra nueva y ay necesidad*) Thus the five Sánchez sisters and their mother, Francisca Galván, expressed their confidence in the special character of their project and their need for authority. Like the first male missionaries, they hoped to be granted powers that would have been exceptional in the Old World. While the men of the city elite, as we saw in Chapter Five, expressed the idea that the characteristics of the colonial scene required a greater emphasis on female enclosure, the Sánchez family vowed that enclosure would not mean impotence.

Other foundresses of convents, both in Spain and later in America, received privileges. In Europe, many foundresses insisted upon the privilege of serving as abbesses. Important women in the world, the founders of women's institutions "in religion retained their impulses to direct and command," and therefore sought privileges ensuring that their entry into religion would enhance rather than diminish their personal power. <sup>11</sup> To be sure, stricter rules after the Council of Trent restricted these privileges, but in 1608, for example, when Doña Isabel de Villanueva Guzmán founded Santa Clara de Puebla, she did so with a full complement of privileges. Doña Isabel designated the professed nuns who were to be brought from Mexico as foundresses. They were all members of two families, whose relationships with Doña Isabel are unclear but may be assumed significant. In addition, Doña Isabel claimed a panoply of patronage rights. Some of these were conventional-burial in the grand chapel (*capilla mayor*) of the convent, for example-but others contravened the rules of Trent. Doña Isabel also claimed the right to approve dowryless entry of nuns of her choice and "the privileges of other foundresses of Franciscan convents." <sup>12</sup> Even after the Council of Trent, then, at least some of New Spain's foundresses were granted extensive privileges.

As a family devoted to religion, the founders of Santa Clara de México were conversant with foundation protocol. The foundresses requested, for example, that the convent be given all the same "graces and jubilees and fullest remissions and all the other things" (*gracias y jubileos y plenísimas rremisiones y todas las demas*) given to the discalced convent founded in Madrid by the Princess Doña Juana. Moreover, they believed that they possessed special characteristics that justified special privileges. They had, after all, been solicited by the archbishop and city government because of their special qualifications. Their reputation had also spread to other areas of New Spain. In 1568 or 1569, for example, Luisa de Santa Clara, one of the daughters, and her mother were asked by the bishop of Oaxaca to found a convent in that city. <sup>13</sup> Thus the foundresses of Santa Clara clearly felt that they were in a position to decide the character of the foundation and direct the convent that would result.

This concern to preserve the founders' privileges was evident even in the dispute concerning jurisdiction over Santa Clara discussed in Chapter Seven. As we have seen, the convent was established under Franciscan jurisdiction. When met with Franciscan reticence, however, the nuns soon sought to be transferred to episcopal jurisdiction. The decision of the foundresses to accept governance by the ordinary, however, seems pragmatic and of an interim nature. Above all, it seems, María de San Nicolás and her sisters were determined to retain as much control over the convent themselves as possible. In their 1571 petition to the Holy See, while requesting official recognition of their subjection to the ordinary, they asked that this dispensation be made "with the charge that he not interfere in matters of whatever type relating to the governance and offices of the house."  Their concern, then, was to amplify their own privilege rather than to accept a

wholly subjected position vis-à-vis the archbishop. They requested, for example, that the Holy See order that the convent buildings be constructed to the specifications of the nuns, without the interference of the ordinary or anyone else. <sup>14</sup> The feminine caprice perceived by male church administrators in Santa Clara's apparent inability to adhere to either ordinary or Franciscan jurisdiction may well have been a stratagem. By keeping their intentions ambiguous and their options fluid, the foundresses could hold on to as much power as possible while the convent was being established. This was particularly important while the foundresses were dealing with the Holy See. <sup>15</sup>

The most important privilege the foundresses sought from Rome was that of professing without novitiate. The original papal bull, granted in 1570, established the convent of Santa Clara according to the dictates of the Council of Trent. This meant, first of all, that the foundresses would have to undergo a year's novitiate before becoming able to profess. This was, of course, specified by both Archbishop Montúfar and the municipal government in their support for the foundation. Nonetheless, the foundresses had no intention of complying with such a ruling. In their 1571 petition to the Holy See, the would-be nuns emphasized that they had spent twelve years in habit, living in their family home under the rule of Santa Clara, first in Puebla and then in Mexico City, <sup>16</sup> and therefore should be exempted from novitiate requirements. <sup>17</sup> On 12 October 1571, Fray Bartolomé de Ledesma, assistant to the archbishop, convened a panel to review the legality of the foundresses' profession. Present were representatives of the archbishopric, the audiencia, and the Franciscan, Dominican, and Augustinian orders. <sup>18</sup> Though there was some disagreement, the vote taken upheld the foundresses' ability to profess. They had won the first battle.

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A second privilege was also critical for maintaining the Sánchez family's power within the new convent. Just as the foundresses had no intention of completing a year of novitiate, they sought the right to appoint an abbess from amongst their number. She was to serve for life, and if she died was to be replaced by another member of the Sánchez family. The privilege of appointment as abbess was not unheard of among foundresses, and, most importantly for the foundresses, would prevent the interim imposition of a qualified abbess from the only possible source, La Concepción. In 1571, the foundresses complained that the bishop's assistant Ledesma had attempted to introduce Conceptionist nuns to govern the convent until the foundresses could be properly professed. From a juridical perspective, Ledesma was clearly in the right. According to Trent, abbesses had to be nuns of at least five years' profession and thirty years of age. None of the foundresses met these conditions. On the other hand, the foundresses were women of considerable will, and they eventually claimed this second privilege as well, when María de San Nicolás became the convent's first abbess in 1573. The foundresses, then, clearly believed that the convent they had founded was theirs to direct, and that their ambitions for it were the relevant ones. The early stages of the foundation evidently confirmed this belief.

Another obstacle soon arose, however, in regard to the marital status of María de San Nicolás. The would-be abbess revealed that she had been married to Diego Rodríguez, but that "he never had copulation or carnal dealings with me, because he is impotent." <sup>19</sup> On 9 August 1572, María presented a petition asking that this information be verified, if necessary, through an examination of her person. The cathedral chapter (now ruling in sede vacante) ordered that María desist from receiving novices and from building until her case was settled. Estevan de Portillo, provisor of the archbishopric, finally authorized María de San Nicolás, to separate from her husband. <sup>20</sup> Another hurdle had been cleared.

The foundresses of Santa Clara de México, however, would arouse further controversy with their desire to control the convent they founded. One sign that they would not tolerate being dominated by the archbishop arose immediately after they convinced - or coerced - the Franciscan provincial into granting them immediate profession as Clares. This occurred, it will be remembered, in the midst of a dispute over the proper jurisdiction of the convent. Archbishop Moya therefore forbade the convent's majordomo to transfer the dowries of newly received novices to María de San Nicolás. The nuns promptly delegated another majordomo to lodge a complaint. They described how they had been professed and veiled the day before, and how they had received for their vicar Fray Diego de Miranda. <sup>21</sup> In fact, the complaint alleged, now that the new nuns had been received and professed, neither the archbishop nor anyone else should now interfere in the life of the convent, given that the pope in his apostolic letters had threatened grave penalties against those who did so. Because of the scandal that had erupted, many young women who hoped to profess were not doing so, and if this impediment continued, both these women and the republic would receive notable damage. <sup>22</sup>

The provisor was neither moved to change his orders, nor to release the nuns from the jurisdiction of the ordinary. The nuns of Santa Clara, however, were not easily intimidated. They sent majordomo Juan Alonso de Hinojosa to the audiencia. <sup>23</sup> In February, the audiencia ruled in favor of the convent and the archbishop was forced to back down. Abbess power had apparently won the day. Yet within a short time, the Sánchez sisters were once again the focus of controversy, as the dispute over jurisdiction of Santa Clara came increasingly to include an attack on the disorder of its foundresses.

New criticisms of the Sánchez regime concerned the dissipation of the convent's wealth. Indeed, convents' financial woes were often blamed on their inhabitants themselves. Seeking to explain La Concepción's penury in 1592, the institution's majordomo described its nuns as inept in financial matters: "in the said convent," he explained delicately, "religion has been

considered more than riches." <sup>24</sup> (*se a tenido mas a la rreligion que a las rriquezas*) Yet while nuns may have paid more attention to missals than to balance sheets, the entrusting of financial affairs to abbesses seems to have occurred relatively frequently in the early years. For example, when Pedro Thomas, one of the founders of Jesús María, left for Europe to seek royal favor for the convent, he entrusted thousands of pesos in donations to the new abbess of the institution. While he was away, the abbess received further monies in the form of dowries for new entrants. Upon the founder's return to New Spain, he allegedly discovered that much of this money had been spent. He bitterly asked the Council of the Indies to ensure that what was left of the money he had entrusted to the abbess be taken away and put in the control of the royal treasury, "because as they are women they know little of business and much of the wealth of the monastery could be lost, and once it is lost [the convent] will have no remedy." <sup>25</sup> ↻ Years later, the convent's chaplain felt compelled to declare that none of the money from the royal grant had ever entered into the power of the abbess, the nuns, or even the majordomos of the convents: all had been disbursed by the audiencia and viceroy directly to tradesmen, workers, and suppliers who assisted in the building program. <sup>26</sup> Clearly, women's institutions were now assumed to be incapable of managing their own finances. Thus was repeated on the Mexican scene the general post-Trent pattern of increasing control over aspects of convent management previously controlled by abbesses.

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Not only abbesses but also their majordomos were considered untrustworthy by church administrators. In 1575, Archbishop Moya complained to the Council of the Indies that, "it is very difficult to compel the majordomos of monasteries of nuns, who are paid out of [convent] income, to accept outside direction." <sup>27</sup> ↻ Majordomos certainly appear to have acted for convents, even against the church hierarchy. During the course of the 1570s disputes over Santa Clara, the institution's majordomo showed himself to be an energetic defender of the rights of the convent and its foundresses against the attempts of the archbishop to bring the new house to heel. Gradually, however, majordomos were themselves integrated into the church's administrative system, and in 1603 an episcopal representative was appointed to govern the activities of all the majordomos of Mexico City's nunneries.

This pattern of increasing control over convent finances was enacted in the case of Santa Clara, and was given additional impetus by complaints against María de San Nicolás. The abbess had initially been able to receive and administer the dowries of newly received novices. Yet within a short time she was accused of the dissipation of those dowries in frivolous and ill-advised demolition and renovation of the convent as well as in the purchase of gifts. <sup>28</sup> In an information of 1575, Juan de Aldaz described María de San Nicolás as "*disordered*" and prodigal, claiming that she had spent almost all of the nuns' dowries destroying buildings and building new ones "*according to her whim*" and in sending gifts to whomever she pleased. She was also

accused by Doña Isabel de Barrios of refusing to relinquish her three daughters, apparently because the abbess hoped they would profess, bringing their dowries to the convent. María de San Nicolás allegedly released the girls only after firm orders from the archbishop. <sup>29</sup> Pedro Thomas testified that María de San Nicolás was a "spender," (*gastadora*) and that she spent dowries on things of little use. <sup>30</sup> Miguel de Dueñas agreed, and added that, "*she has ordered the building of edifices without foundation and for little benefit.*" Maese Alonso of the Hospital Real also commented disapprovingly on María de San Nicolás's spending habits, and noted that "without purpose or cause she had the Church of the Holy Trinity destroyed, and it cannot be rebuilt as it was without a great deal of money." 🌐

The foundresses' arrogation of all the convent's offices also added fuel to the archbishop's attack. According to Juan de Aldaz, they had parceled out the offices of doorkeeper (*tornera*), mistress of novices, and vicaress among themselves. <sup>31</sup> "They are ladies," said Pedro Thomas, "and they rule in the said convent." (*Son señoras y mandan en el dicho convento*) As a founding family, the Sánchez were undoubtedly entitled to some special treatment within the convent, but not to the complete domination of the institution.

Increasingly, observers of the convent came to focus on its domination by the Sánchez family as the cause of all its ills. Pedro Thomas said that he considered it "very great inconvenience and labor for the other nuns who are in the said house that five sisters and a mother govern and command them." <sup>32</sup> 🌐 Archbishop Moya complained that the difficulty in which Santa Clara found itself "is no wonder when in it there are five sisters and a mother who govern everything according to their own style." <sup>33</sup> 🌐 Yet if family clustering was distrusted, it was well entrenched in Mexico before Moya's time. As we saw in Chapter Eight, Catalina Flores and her namesake niece came to the city to enter religion together. When the elder Catalina left the novitiate, she stated clearly that her niece nonetheless wanted to remain, a clear indication that the desire to remain in religion might be affected by the presence or absence of a close relative in the same convent. The tendency continued throughout the century. Doctor Villanueva Zapata, an audiencia lawyer, explained in 1592 that he had in La Concepción four sisters and a daughter "in the [convent] nursery," (*en el niñado*) and that his widowed mother had died in the convent while completing her novitiate. <sup>34</sup> Another witness had both a sister and a daughter in the convent, while yet another had two sisters. <sup>35</sup> Alonso de Villanueva Cervantes had a sister, nieces, and other female relatives in the convent, <sup>36</sup> the Cervantes family being particularly linked with La Concepción. Three daughters of Don Luis de Velasco and two of Bernaldino de Albornoz lived in Regina Coeli, two of whose foundresses were also sisters, daughters of the conqueror Francisco de Santa Cruz. <sup>37</sup> The problem with Santa Clara was not necessarily the clustering of the Sánchez family therein, but rather the alleged conversion of Santa Clara into a Sánchez fiefdom.

Part of the trouble may have lain in María de San Nicolás's apparent lack of diplomacy. Miguel de Dueñas alleged that, "it is said that the abbess has little humility and loves to command." <sup>38</sup> (*se dize que la dicha abadesa tiene poca humilldad y es amiga de mandar*) Maese Alonso had also heard that she was "harsh by nature" (*aspera de condición*) and that the other nuns complained of her. Isabel Juárez, a young widow who had a sister in the convent, said that "every day [the nuns] complain to this witness and to other people." <sup>39</sup> (*cada dia se quexan a esta testigo y a otras personas*) In addition to alienating the other nuns and novices whom she governed, María de San Nicolás and her sisters had occupied those positions open to women of ambition, a reminder that power, in the convent atmosphere as in the outside world, was a limited and desired resource.

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If the domination of the convent by the Sánchez alienated other nuns, the family was no united front. The foundresses were prone to conflict among themselves, apparently over access to power. Isabel Juárez described a dispute between María de San Nicolás and her sister Luisa de Santa Clara:

the said Luisa de Santa Clara went with almost all the nuns to some cells attached to the body of the church, which are well separated from the [main] house ... and in the presence of this witness (who wanted to help restore peace) dishonest words were said, with Luisa de Santa Clara calling María de San Nicolás a wicked, bad woman, and telling her to go home to her husband, which took place in front of the maidens whom were enclosed there to become nuns; and the reason the sisters were fighting was that both the one and the other were seeking to be abbesses; and Luisa de Santa Clara said that her sister should found a monastery in the house in which the said maidens were enclosed, and she would found another in the entire site and block of the Holy Trinity. <sup>40</sup> 

Manuel Rodríguez had also intervened in the dispute, and observed that "each one of them said that she wanted to found her own convent." (*cada una de ellas dezia que queria fundar monesterio por si*) As a result, he said, Luisa de Santa Clara had left for Oaxaca to found a new convent only days after being reconciled with her sister. <sup>41</sup> The ambitions of the Sánchez sisters could not be contained within one institution.

Continuing external conflict over jurisdiction and within the convent over power led to the virtual self-destruction of the foundresses' plans. By 1577, as we have seen, the Sánchez family had alienated not only Archbishop Moya but the Franciscan order as well. Ultimately, then, though successful in many of their initial demands, the Sanchez were ousted in favor of the Conceptionist abbess and nuns imported by Archbishop Moya to "reform"

the house. Though they were reinstated by the audiencia, the Sánchez were again ejected when the Franciscans definitively accepted jurisdiction over the house and sent the foundresses to Spain where they underwent a novitiate and (re)professed. Upon their return to New Spain, the Sánchez sisters re-entered Santa Clara, but there is no evidence that future abbesses were drawn from their ranks. By the seventeenth century, Mariana de la Encarnación could describe the foundresses of Santa Clara as "some beatas who came from Spain, and who were sent back there." <sup>42</sup>  The Sánchez lost not only the many privileges they had won but the recognition of posterity as the foundresses of Santa Clara.

The case of the Sánchez family is interesting precisely because the experience of foundation was one of the defining characteristics of sixteenth-century feminine monasticism. Other than La Concepción, all of the new institutions founded before 1601 were founded using nuns pulled from pre-existing convents. Given the rate of foundation, the relatively small size of convents, and the substantial numbers of nuns selected for each new foundation, selection as a foundress was a relatively common experience among sixteenth-century nuns in New Spain. From the point of view of the convent as career option, then, the sixteenth century offered great opportunities for women of ambition. From the ranks of foundresses would be chosen the institution's first abbess and the other officeholders. Foundresses would, in addition, remain distinguished and senior nuns within their institutions.

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In another sense, foundresses were the women who combined patronage of a convent - the donation of the capital that allowed a foundation - with the desire to enter the resulting institution as nuns. Many of the institutions founded after 1585 were created in this manner and engendered special status for their foundresses as part of the foundation process. Again, because of the pace of foundation, the late sixteenth century must be reckoned a period that in its eagerness for new women's institutions for women offered elite women the chance to create for themselves and their families positions of power and prestige.

The foundresses of Santa Clara partook of both senses of the term "foundress." On the one hand, they were selected foundresses, for an institution that was a cooperative, not patrimonial, project. On the other hand, they were members of one immediate family whose piety had been the impetus for the foundation. This blurred the lines between their status as foundresses selected and governed by outside authorities and their own sense of possession in regard to the institution they had helped establish. The error of the Sánchez family lay in their belief that colonial fluidity would allow the continued blurring of those lines. They were not patrons whose financial participation in a foundation was the most important determinant of its success. Because the funding that created Santa Clara was not Sánchez patrimony but alms gathered through cooperative effort, the foundresses' power was circumscribed by the tolerance of those who considered *themselves* to be the institution's founders and governors.

The nature of foundations before 1585 may thus have limited the power of individual (selected) foundresses vis-à-vis later "patrimonial" foundresses. This is not to suggest that foundresses and abbesses ever were powerless women; quite the opposite is true. But they undoubtedly had to negotiate the space between expanding their own power and alienating the outside forces that were so involved in the creation and sustenance of the earliest female institutions in the city. The foundresses of Santa Clara simply failed to do so.

Yet if abbesses and foundresses lost some of their power in relation to male authority as a result of the maturation of conventual life, such women remained powerful in relation to the women they governed. Within the convent existed a realm of hierarchy and differentiation that rivaled that found outside the cloister.

### Life in the Convent Community

Entrance into a religious community was an awesome ritual of transformation. Though one finds little evidence of the phenomenal and lavish profession ceremonies of the kind witnessed in the nineteenth century by Fanny Calderón, <sup>43</sup> sixteenth-century ceremonies were potent and somber affairs. Thus, for example, when the nuns of Santa Clara were finally granted Franciscan profession, the ceremony began when Fray Jerónimo de Mendieta gave gray habits to María de San Nicolás and seven other women. Fray Diego Miranda then veiled María de San Nicolás. Then each of the nuns rose and wrote her name in the book held by María de San Nicolás, after which several more nuns were veiled. All of this was duly recorded by the *escrivano* Juan de Orozco. <sup>44</sup> The transformative nature of entrance into religious life as symbolized by the habit was hammered home by the ordinances of Jesús María, which dictated that novices "must enter stripped of every type of worldliness." <sup>45</sup> (*han de entrar desnudas de todo genero de temporalidad*) In taking the habit, a woman put on a new and higher identity, the dignity of a religious person, a higher state than any other. <sup>46</sup> In their transformative character, then, convents were "total institutions," clearly demarcated from the outside world. <sup>47</sup>

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Yet the convent, while it may have been a refuge from society, partook of society's characteristics and replicated within the walls the social structure that obtained outside them. As we have seen, many family clusters occurred in sixteenth-century convents in New Spain. With more than one member of a family in a given convent, family and religious identity were forced to uneasily coexist. An example arose during the 1568 Inquisition trial of Elena de la Cruz, when one nun described others as "doña Antoñia and the other Carvajal girls." (*doña Antoñia y las demas hijas de Carvajal*) The use of "doña" rather than "sor" and the application of the sisters' surname rather than their religious names suggest that the transformation was less than

total. <sup>48</sup> Indeed, even the taking of new names in religion, a tradition dating to the thirteenth century, was not in consistent use in sixteenth-century convents. <sup>49</sup> A letter written by the nuns of Santa Clara in 1579 was signed by 31 nuns, of whom only one used her religious name. <sup>50</sup> Even when secular names disappeared, memories of origins persisted. When Madre Marina de la Cruz (1536-97) attempted to correct some of the other nuns in Jesús María, she was reminded of her place by "those who when they were in the world perhaps would not have received her in their homes, not even as a servant." <sup>51</sup> 

If secular identities pervaded the convent, the "structural violence" <sup>52</sup> and coerciveness of external society cannot be assumed to have been left outside simply because the convent's inhabitants were of the gentler sex. <sup>53</sup> Accounts of convent life from Spain do not suggest a life of perfect feminine harmony within the cloister. Sor María Angela Astorhc described how, between the ages of eleven and sixteen, she was repeatedly beaten—even on an open wound by her maestra. <sup>54</sup> Madre Magdalena de San Gerónimo proposed a regime for women prisoners in Madrid that included branding for future identification, as well as harsh physical punishment. <sup>55</sup>

There is little evidence of such excess in the sixteenth-century convents of New Spain. On the other hand, there is ample evidence that violence per se was not unheard of. Sor María Magdalena Lorravaquio Muñoz (1576-1636) fell ill soon after her entry into San Jerónimo. In response to the persistence of her symptoms, her abbess ordered that the unfortunate nun be whipped, "putting [the order] into effect with much rigor." <sup>56</sup> (*poniendolo por obra con mucho rigor*) The spiritual exercises of Madre Mariana de la Cruz won her only ostracism from the other nuns, and her abbess punished her with harsh physical disciplines "upon her weakened body," (*en su extenuado cuerpo*) adding more prayer, fasting, and penances to Mariana's regimen. <sup>57</sup>

Convents were institutions of enclosure, an ambiguous term that can mean either refuge or imprisonment. Nuns experienced enclosure in both senses. Indeed, it seems that the communal life of the sixteenth century made for an intense experience of community that could amplify either sense of the term. The following brief case studies examine nuns' experience of community in a period when the private, compartmentalized convent life of the late colonial period did not yet exist. Our first study exemplifies the polarities of nuns' experiences in the convent, as it centers on the tragic death of a nun. In 1564, in La Concepción, one nun's suicide was the cause of the denunciation of another.

Francisca de la Anunciación was twenty-eight years old, a professed nun and vicarress of the choir. <sup>58</sup> During a discussion of the death and subsequent

fate of the dead nun, Francisca told the other nuns that she did not believe that the nun would go to Hell. Clearly distraught, she also asked the other nuns whether on the Day of Justice many would be raised to Heaven from dungheaps while others buried in churches and temples would be carried to Hell. The other nuns told her that this was true, but that it only referred to Christians martyred and eaten by beasts and definitely not to "those who despaired"; (*los que desesperaban*) the latter would go to Hell. Francisca disagreed. She believed that the nun in question had had time to repent before her death. In addition, Francisca claimed, the dead woman had appeared to her in a vision since the suicide. Rebuked by the other nuns, who refused to credit her vision, Francisca insisted that if the church said the nun must go to Hell, she held the opposite. [59](#)

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This conversation was reported to the episcopal Inquisitor, Bartolomé de Ledesma, who attended the convent to interview the nuns. The vicarress of the convent, Ana de San Jerónimo, was asked about Francisca's mental state. She responded that there were times when Francisca seemed a "woman lacking in reason." (*muger falta de juicio*) Six or seven months earlier, she had lost her reason and had attacked some of the other nuns "without cause." (*sin hazerles porque*) But when she returned to her senses, she seemed sane again. This view was confirmed by Francisca's first cousin, Isabel de los Angeles, who was also a nun in the convent. She had been present at the conversation, and thought that Francisca was just being "crazy," as she had been in the past. Other nuns confirmed the connection between Francisca's apparently heretical words and madness.

When Francisca herself appeared, she gave a harrowing account of how, as the first on the scene, she had found a nun hanging but still alive: "the soul had not left the flesh, and she was trembling." (*el anima no estaba fuera de las carnes y se meneaba*) Francisca said she had taken the shaking nun in her arms, telling her that if she was still alive, she should repent what she had done and beg God's mercy. It seemed to her, Francisca said, that in response to some of her words, the nun nodded her head three or four times. Francisca chose to interpret this as evidence that the suicide had repented before she died. For this reason, Francisca said, she had been unable to accept the contention of the other women that the nun would go to Hell. Nonetheless, the suicide, who was never named, had been buried in the convent dungheap. Francisca was, understandably, profoundly disturbed by the incident. The inquisitorial investigation proceeded no farther than cautioning her against future heterodox behavior. The case, although brief, is striking for two reasons. First, it is the only extant documentation of a convent suicide in the period in question. [60](#) At least one nun found the convent so uncongenial as to be driven to the ultimate act of despair. Moreover, Francisca's response to the suicide and the abbess's quick recourse to inquisitorial intervention suggest that unorthodox opinion and mental disturbance could lead to isolation within one's community.

A recognition that emotional upset or fragility could lead to apparent heresy

was highlighted in the case of María de la Natividad, a twenty-six-year-old nun who denounced herself to the Inquisition in 1598. <sup>61</sup> María's father was a deceased merchant, Cristóbal de Acevedo of Castile. Her New Spain-born mother was still alive and had remarried. She knew little about her grandparents, "more than having heard that she is the granddaughter of conquerors." (*mas de aver oydo dezir que es nieta de conquistadores*) One of María's maternal aunts, Mariana del Espíritu Santo, was also a nun in Regina, as was her sister Isabel de los Angeles. Two of her brothers were friars. Two more siblings, a boy and a girl, lived with their mother. Born in Mexico City and raised in her parents' home, María had spent her childhood "embroidering, reading, dancing, and weaving cloth", (*en labrar, leer, dançar, y tañer tecla* until, at the age of fifteen, she was placed in the convent.

On 29 January 1598, the chaplain of the convent of Regina Coeli passed a letter to the Holy Office. The letter, written and signed in the same practiced hand, purported to be from María de la Natividad, who asked that as soon as possible, the Inquisitor come to the convent. On 30 January, María was duly called to the choir at eight in the morning to tell the Inquisitor what she wanted to say.

The twenty-six-year-old nun sank to her knees and for the next three hours poured out an anguished tale of her life within Regina Coeli. María claimed that she was constantly beleaguered by the Devil, and had begun to despair of God's mercy. Many times she had been tempted to believe that God was not in the consecrated Host. On New Year's Eve, she had been tempted so vehemently that she had said to herself, "Our Redeemer Jesus Christ is not in the consecrated Host, and I would be burned alive rather than believe it." Because of (or despite) this belief, she was tempted to trample the Host. She had also been tempted to believe that the Holy Virgin was not a virgin, and had trampled "accidental" crosses (sticks or pieces of straw that had fallen on the floor in such a manner as to create crosses) that she saw in front of her feet. She had said to herself that if there were someone to teach her Mosaic law, she would keep it, and not that of Christ. In order to offend Christ more, she had whipped and spit on a small crucifix that she had, as well as throwing it on the floor and treading it to bits before throwing it into the sewer with the words "you deserve this." (*esto merescéis*) Far more than a cohesive heretical belief or program, María's actions suggest deepening misery and despair.

40

If María de la Natividad had been tempted to acts of violence against images of Christ, she was also tempted to harm herself. She told the Inquisitor that she had often been tempted by the Devil to cut her fingers and tongue off, to hang herself, and most recently to plunge a knife into her heart. When asked whether some "sorrow" was causing her to do and say the things she had confessed, María claimed that her only grief was the Devil's persecution. The Inquisitor exhorted her to resist the Devil more strongly and threatened that if she persisted in her behavior, she would be punished. Thereafter, she was left to her own devices.

More than three years later, however, the tribunal received a new letter from María, who claimed to have fallen into despair once more. After reviewing the records, the Inquisitors Don Alonso de Peralta and Gutierre Bernardo de Quiros decided to collect information with particular attention to her mental state. María, now thirty, was called to the low choir of the convent, where Don Alonso de Peralta awaited. María now seemed to be having problems with her vow of obedience. In 1598 she had described her anger when one of her superiors had asked her "to take up a little sewing"; (*que tomasse una poca de costura*) then she had become so inordinately angry that she had renounced God. Now María announced that once again she had renounced God, because one day when she sought to enter the confessional, another nun was obstructing it. Another day, when rebuked by the cleric Alonso de Ecija, she swore vengeance and spit on the floor.

María had also been tempted by the Devil. When asked how he had tempted her and in what form he had appeared, María said that she had never seen him except in dreams, but had felt strong compulsions, including temptations "relating to chastity, giving her the desire to commit a lewd and dishonest act with the same devil in the form of a man." But this was a minor point that was mentioned only once. Most of all, María was tempted to acts of despair and anxiety. Indeed, the first time the Devil had tempted her had been in choir, when he had made her obsessively repeat the words of prayers over and over again because she believed she had not said them correctly.

Peralta listened to María's litany of self-accusations, then asked her whether her disorder and inquietude arose from a distaste for the religious life. The question of whether María freely chose to enter religion was important, because churchmen clearly recognized that, despite repeated pronouncements to the contrary, profession was often less than voluntary. 63

There were several ways in which girls were pushed to enter religion. The first was comparatively gentle and persuasive. Daughters were often placed in convents for education; such a rearing, for parents who had destined their daughters for religion, offered a gradual introduction to the monastic life. 64

In Spain, parents paid convent dowries for daughters as young as four. 65

Don Diego de Velasco expressed society's acceptance of this practice in 1586, when he described Regina Coeli as containing "girls who are raised there to be nuns." 66 (*niñas que se crían ally para ser monjas*) For many such girls there was little difference between their lives in the "nursery" and true profession. In 1590, eighteen-year-old María de San Juan described herself as someone who "entered religion as a child." 67 (*avía entrado niña en la religion*) These statements suggest that for contemporaries, there was not much difference between the practice of putting a child destined for religion into the convent and true oblation.

María de la Natividad, who had entered the convent at fifteen, had not experienced this more gentle form of coercion. She may well have experienced crude parental compulsion, though she denied that she had entered religion against her will. María admitted that sometimes being a nun weighed on her, because she thought that she might be a better Christian in the world. María's fellow nun Ysabel del Espíritu Santo described her more forcefully as "disgusted with being a nun." [68](#) (*esgustada de ser religiosa*) Unhappy with the religious state or not, María was profoundly alienated from her community.

45

Nuns lived, after all, in a community of women. This is not to suggest that they were entirely closed off from life outside the walls. Though by 1600 clausura was much more rigorous than it had been thirty years earlier, there was still opportunity for people from outside the convent to visit the grille. Many of these people were strangers who took an interest in the nuns. The grille became a locus for the exchange of information between convent and outside world, as in the 1560s when a woman came to the grille to talk about an indulgence granted to the rosary. Such visits were frequent enough to be dismissed by at least one nun who complained of "women who come [to the grille] to say a thousand things that did not happen thus." [69](#) (*mujeres [que] venian a decir mill cosas que no pasavan asi*)

María de la Natividad was similarly dismissive of the attentions of strangers. She said that since entering the convent, she had spoken only to her mother and brothers, "because she had no taste for nun-lovers." [70](#) (*porque no ha gustado de devotos*) Yet María's visits with her mother were apparently relatively rare, as María did not know where her mother was living. Though the abbess said that María was visited by one brother and by her mother, their visits were sufficiently uncommon as to be unknown to other witnesses. Criticisms of convent life have often focused on visits as evidence of nuns' frivolity or even impropriety. Yet María's case suggests that such visits may have played a role in maintaining mental balance; greater incidence of mental disorder among nuns did, after all, accompany the stricter enforcement of clausura after the Council of Trent. [71](#)

Without the distractions from the convent provided by visitors, María lived wholly within the mental world of the cloister, where identity was not individual but corporate, and belonging was everything. [72](#) The "private life" that would define mature colonial female monasticism in the capital did not yet exist. Private cells were unattainable for most nuns because of insufficient funds even for completing the basic convent structures. Moreover, there was hostility toward such measures on the part of church administrators. In 1603, the foundress of San Jerónimo was forced to display a papal brief allowing her to have an individual cell "because of her illnesses and age." [73](#) (*attento a sus enfermedades y hedad*) Some nuns

clearly had individual cells in the sixteenth century; according to Sigüenza y Góngora, Marina de la Cruz got such a cell, a small upstairs room, to use during the day, while returning to the common dormitory to sleep. <sup>74</sup> In 1600, however, Regina Coeli was obviously still following *vida común* in regard to common sleeping areas. María de la Natividad described returning to the dormitory from the choir only to find it locked. When she gained admittance, she was asked where she had been and explained that she had been praying. Then María joined the other nuns in their communal disciplines, whipping herself with the rest.

Though seen as salubrious by churchmen, *vida común* was too much for María. The vicar of Regina said that María had frequently asked his permission "to be exempted from choir and refectory and other acts of community." (*para no yr al coro ni al refitorio, y a otras actas de comunidad*) In 1602, Agustina de la Asunción said that María had ceased to participate in the community about a year earlier. According to her confessor, María's fear of the community had become so great that she was convinced that the other nuns wanted to kill her, and did not want to eat in the refectory because she believed that the others were contaminating her food.

María's paranoia may have been the result of what seems to have been her total alienation from the other nuns. Witnesses were asked whether María was melancholy and whether she had any friends within the convent. None of the male religious with whom María had contact was aware that she had any friends. Her confessor said that he did not know any nun who was on familiar terms with María de la Natividad, and that the nuns tended to shun her. Not even María's sister and aunt (both in Regina) were named as nuns with whom María had close contact. The abbess of the previous three years, María de la Purificación, claimed to have little or no knowledge of María, even though she had governed her for three years, and said that she had spoken with her very little. Indeed, María's confessor may have been one of María's closest friends. She clearly felt dependent upon him, begging the Inquisitor not to substitute another confessor, and saying that "the shame that is more common in women" (*la vergüenza que es mas ordinaria en las mugeres*) would make her unable to confess with anyone else. Other male religious were also unaware of any friendships between María and other nuns. Alonso de Ecija, the convent's vicar, said that he had heard the other nuns complaining about María's moodiness and changeability.

50

Indeed, some of the nuns seemed to take a dim view of María's evident distress. When Doctor Pedro de Morales visited to console her, he was approached by Ana de la Encarnación "and the three daughters of the Viceroy and others." (*y las tres hijas del virrey de esta Nueva Hispaña y otras*) The nuns discussed María's case with him. But while Morales and the other male clerics tended to see her problem in the light of mental disturbance, these nuns told him that María "wanted to be known and distinguished through this route." (*queria ser conocida y señalada por aquel camino*) The abbess Luisa del Espíritu Santo said that she had no knowledge of any melancholy in María. Ana de la Encarnación similarly

denied that María was melancholic, "other than being slim and of delicate complexion." (*mas de ser flaca y delicada de complexion*)

In regard to María's melancholy, her confessor knew more than anyone. Balthasar Gutierrez, the fifty-four-year-old chaplain of the convent, had known María since her birth, had known her parents, and had been her confessor for ten years. He was aware that the Devil had tempted María to commit suicide and to harm herself, and had been concerned enough to discuss her case with other male religious. She had told him only the previous day that the Devil had tempted her to hang herself and that she had taken a rope and gone into the lower choir, but could not find a place to fix the rope. Alonso de Ecija had known María for eleven years and, like Gutierrez, found María of little understanding and stability. Another confessor who had visited the convent was Don Melchior Gomez de Soria, who had spoken with María and believed her problems were "more madness than anything else." (*mas locura que otra cosa*)

The Holy Office apparently concurred with the judgment of the male religious, for María was punished very mildly even though her actions and statements verged on heresy. She was ordered only to abjure her error in a private hearing. Notably, however, the abbess was given an order that María be "treated very well and with much charity and consolation." (*tratada muy bien y con mucha charidad y consuelo*) Her story shows how difficult it was for some women to live in the convent community. For those of uncertain vocation or fragile character, the convent was not a "catalyst for autonomy," but a descent into despair.

Even those nuns whose personalities were strong could endure difficulties in negotiating community life. Such was the case of Elena de la Cruz, a forty-three-year-old nun in La Concepción tried by the Mexican Inquisition in 1568. <sup>75</sup> Elena was from one of the most distinguished families in New Spain. Her late father, Juan Altamirano, was related to Hernán Cortés on the distaff side, <sup>76</sup> either as cousin or as uncle. <sup>77</sup> Altamirano had been governor's lieutenant of Cuba from 1524 to 1526. <sup>78</sup> It was during this period that Elena was born to Altamirano and his first wife, Mecía Maldonado. Finding little success in Cuba, in 1527 Altamirano moved his family to Mexico, where, of course, he had excellent connections. He remarried <sup>79</sup> to Juana Altamirano, who gave birth to Hernán Gutiérrez Altamirano (and possibly other of Elena's siblings). <sup>80</sup> The licenciado became a prominent man, holding encomiendas in Metepec, Calimaya, and Tepemaxalco in the valley of Toluca, adding mining interests in Taxco to his portfolio, and acting as Cortés's attorney. At his death, Altamirano left a substantial entailed estate (*mayorazgo*) to his eldest son. <sup>81</sup>

Elena had been in the convent since the age of thirty-five or thirty-six. She was, therefore, a woman experienced in the world. It is unclear whether she

came to the convent a widow; unfortunately, the inquisitors did not ask her for the customary autobiography. [82](#)

55

More than Francisca de la Anunciación and María de la Natividad, Elena seems to have been engaged with the life of religion. She was, first of all, highly literate, able not only to read but also to write in a smooth and practiced hand. She owned and had read a number of books, all of them mystical and devotional works, one of them a book banned by the Holy Office. In her literacy, Elena was not unusual; of the twenty-five nuns who testified during the course of her trial, only three could not write their names. Most had practiced signatures, and some were even elegant. Even the few who could not write may be presumed, like María de la Natividad, to have been able to read, as the latter skill was taught separately from and previous to writing.

Elena, however, went beyond simply reading. Thus arose her denunciation. One morning, Elena and a group of other nuns were sewing in La Concepción's workshop. A discussion of upcoming professions led to discussion of the relatively new rules decreed by the Council of Trent. According to witnesses, Elena de la Cruz told the other nuns not to believe "these things of the council." (*esas cosas del concilio*) She added some more rather unorthodox opinions, including a suggestion that the pope's powers were rather more limited than the church would have it.

The other nuns who were present allegedly warned Elena. Elena responded that she knew what she was saying, and she repeated that she didn't believe that the pope could make something a mortal sin. Later, Elena again spoke with the other nuns, telling them that what she was saying was not heresy "but a very great truth." (*sino muy gran verdad*) Then she proceeded to repeat her earlier propositions, and add a few new ones: the pope couldn't create new mortal sins, and the decrees of the Council of Trent had been instituted only for bad people who offended God.

The workshop incident that led to Elena's denunciation had an interesting dynamic. Elena was the oldest nun present, and as we have seen had entered the convent as an adult, perhaps even as the former lady of a household. In addition, she was of very high social status. Elena clearly claimed some kind of seniority in relation to the other nuns, even challenging them to denounce her. Indeed, when rebuked by some of the younger nuns for her unorthodox words, she allegedly responded that they should be quiet about things they did not understand, "as they were young and had [always] been enclosed in this house." 🔄 Yet if Elena was, in her own opinion, "lettered," there were no distinctions among the nuns, no degrees in theology, and no reason to investigate such matters. The problem for Elena was the same problem that Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz would later face: there was no legitimate use for her questioning. As a woman, she did not belong to the group (male clerics) that was allowed to

discuss matters of such import. Those matters, as Elena well knew and would later admit to the Holy Office interlocutors, were "deep things, like matters of our faith, things which are not given to women." 🌐 Those proscriptions were enforced not only by male religious, but by the women of the convent.

Elena was to some degree successful in finding within the convent a "catalyst for autonomy." She was able to read books and formulate her own spiritual path and opinions. She was nonetheless clearly frustrated by the limits her community placed on her. This did not, however, necessarily make her an unhappy or unsuccessful nun. Even her brush with the Inquisition turned out relatively well; her sentence was light. One feast day, she was to stand in the choir of the convent while the high mass was said, with her head uncovered and with a lighted candle in her hands. She was to fast three Fridays, repeat the psalms of penitence, and abjure her errors. Ten years after her punishment by the Inquisition, Elena was judged worthy of election as one of the four foundresses sent by La Concepción to found a new Conceptionist convent in Guatemala. For Elena, then, profession led to a successful monastic career. Yet she, like Francisca de la Anunciación and María de la Natividad, sometimes found community life difficult.

60

It may be argued, of course, that Inquisition sources are highly likely to identify individuals who had difficulty fitting into their communities. Yet other sources also supply evidence of the tensions inherent in community living while describing highly successful religious careers. The first of these sources is the history of the foundation of the convent of San José de Gracia (1616), written by Madre Mariana de la Encarnación (1571-1657). [83](#)

Written in 1641, the manuscript describes Mariana's life as a nun in Jesús María and her long, frustrating, but ultimately successful quest to found a discalced Carmelite convent. Mariana's narrative strategy juxtaposes the "lax" life of Jesús María with the austere and committed religious life found in the new convent. Thus the text may well exaggerate the difficulties Mariana faced in Jesús María. Nonetheless, she lived in the convent for more than thirty years, and her story gives additional support to the notion that convents were not always accepting of the diversity of their inhabitants.

Mariana entered Jesús María in the month of its inauguration, January 1580, when she was nine years old. From then on, she was raised by the convent's nuns, who gave her what she described as a very rudimentary education. [84](#)

At the age of sixteen, she professed in the convent, already feeling a pull "*to a more perfect life than that professed there.*" She had begun to engage in private devotional practices. The nuns who governed the house attempted to distract her from her ascetic tendencies, ordering her to study music, sing, and play the organ, because the convent could use her considerable musical talents. When she complained, she was firmly told that, "she had entered religion not to be a contemplative, but to obey." (*no havia venido a la Religion a ser contemplativa, sino a obedecer*) Though Mariana's history presents this command as an example of Jesús María's laxity, it can also be

interpreted as evidence of Mariana's difficulty in subordinating herself to the need of the community for a gifted musician rather than pursuing her desire for a more contemplative and private life. Soon, however, the young Mariana found that she enjoyed the "worldly" pleasures of music more than contemplation. Her fellow music students were no more exalted, "entertaining themselves in flirtations with visitors from outside." (*divertidas en devociones con los de fuera*)

Mariana was living in this way when two things changed her life. The first was that she got hold of some manuscript copies of the works of Teresa de Jesús; after reading them, she decided that she would try to become a nun in a reformed house. At the same time, Mariana befriended Inés de la Cruz, a young Toledan who had entered the house in the year of Mariana's profession. Inés had wanted to become a Carmelite in Toledo's convent, but had been forced by her parents to move to Mexico. Inés, as capable as Mariana, also started as a music student, but was soon ordered to devote herself to accounting, at which she was even more gifted. Mariana was also busy, as she soon became the vicaress of the choir, a position she found very demanding. Nonetheless, the two had time to plan together for a Carmelite foundation, and were encouraged in this by Marina de la Cruz, a close friend of Inés since the two women had gone through the novitiate together, who had attempted to introduce her own moderate reforms in the convent.

Together, the friends approached the abbess Ana de la Concepción with their plans. She supported them, and approached the Carmelite friars, who began visiting the convent to instruct interested nuns. In addition, Ana de la Concepción began to introduce some of the Carmelites' practices, such as mortifications in the refectory. The attempt to introduce new practices was met with hostility by many of the convent's nuns. Among them were the original "selected" foundresses from La Concepción, whose resistance was increased by what they perceived as attacks on their authority. Ten women had been chosen to found Jesús María, but because the institution was so poor, "and their dowries had been left in La Concepción, which did not provide their food," (*y sus dotes en la Concepcion sin darles alimentos*) the archbishop ordered that three return to La Concepción. This caused great division among the remaining nuns, who blamed the nuns who had begun to introduce Carmelite practices.

The would-be Carmelites did not abandon their plans, and the discord in the convent grew, particularly with the election of a new abbess. The fact that Inés de la Cruz was Spanish was particularly resented. Some nuns, according to Mariana's relación, said that "these Spanish people have their star in the Indies; Inés de la Cruz is a gachupína, and [so] she must succeed with the foundation." Mariana, of course, was a criolla, and had family within the convent. They now attempted to alienate her from Inés, telling her that "it is typical of Spanish women to be lovers of novelty and of making noise, and ambitious to gain fame."

If her sisters' treatment of Inés offended Mariana, she was even more hurt when the dispute escalated. The new abbess, aware that the two nuns were involved in correspondence regarding a planned new foundation, ordered them to display all of their letters. In response, Inés and Mariana asked the bishop to exempt them from this ruling. When he did so, they were even further alienated from the abbess. The final blow came when the new vicereine, wife of the Marqués de Guadalcazar, came to visit the convent. The Marquesa turned out to be a particular devotee of the Carmelite order, which she had once hoped to enter. She ignored the abbess and governing nuns of Jesús María and swept off into one of the convent's salons, where she spent the afternoon conversing with Inés and Mariana. The other nuns were outraged. Only a late-night vision experienced by one of the nuns brought an end to their persecution of Inés and Mariana. Though the two saw the foundation of their dreamed-of convent in 1616, neither forgot the opposition they had endured. Mariana, who had known no other home than the convent since childhood, was unable to keep her bitterness from spilling onto the pages of her history.

Ordered to write by her confessor, Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio Muñoz (1574-1636) left an eighty-page summary of her many mystical visions and exercises. <sup>85</sup> María Magdalena, though raised outside the convent, was like Mariana one of those for whom religious profession was the logical culmination of a spiritual life undertaken in childhood. There, however, the similarities between the two end.

Madre María Magdalena described a childhood in which she already pursued spiritual exercises in the family home. María's mother and sisters were concerned about this, believing that a child should not be "so melancholy," and therefore encouraged María to play and enjoy herself rather than praying. María, however, described herself as more interested in devotion to the Virgin. At the age of ten, she increased the intensity of her devotional practices while maintaining her devotion to the Virgin, with whom she talked "as if she were my mother." (*como pudiera con mi Madre*) At this point, the Virgin inculcated in her a desire to become a nun. She learned to read and, based on her reading of saints' lives, began to fantasize about martyrdom. At home she began to fast and to perform disciplines, while stealing from her parents to give to the poor. At fifteen, her desire to enclose herself became even more vehement, and she experienced her first mystical "transportation." About a year later, her parents consented to her desires, and on 22 July 1590 María entered San Jerónimo as a novice.

María had shunned play and had begun to withdraw from the company of her own family before entering the convent. Not surprisingly, she found certain aspects of the cloister more congenial than others. She enjoyed mortifications and was assisted in learning methods of penitence by the convent's mistress of novices. The aspects of monasticism she found less congenial can be surmised from what her history does not mention. Unlike Mariana de la Encarnación and Inés de la Cruz, she describes no friendships forged in the novitiate; her spiritual life was to be lived within the cloister,

but withdrawn from the life of the community.

Shortly after María's profession, she began to suffer various illnesses. The first of these was a throat illness; left untreated, María's throat ulcerated. Though María was subjected to "sweats" and other medical interventions, she remained debilitated. This illness was merely the beginning of a long series of bodily infirmities that María interpreted as holy signs from God, comparing to them to the martyrdom that Christ had suffered (and that she had once sought).

70

María soon began to experience new symptoms; this time it was a kind of chorea that left her constantly jerking and trembling. In response, the abbess had her whipped. When this proved an ineffective cure, the abbess forbade María to take communion and subjected her to more "great ordeals." (*grandes pruebas*) After a year of such treatment, a new abbess was elected; she took pity on María and allowed her to resume taking communion. Thus, at the mercy of her superiors, María continued through her life to pay particular attention to abbess elections, devoting a great deal of prayer to ensure that the appropriate candidate was elected. Clearly, an individual abbess had a great deal of control over whether María's unorthodox religious path would be tolerated, and whether her illness would be seen as a blessing or a sign of recalcitrance. After the torture she suffered at the hands of her first abbess, however, María mentioned no further problems.

If María was no longer tormented by her superiors, she continued to suffer at the hands of the Devil. Moreover, her physical trials continued to intensify. In 1592, when María had been in the convent for two years, she received a new medical treatment; four "fountains" were opened in her arms and legs to relieve internal pressure and cure her incessant shaking. This treatment, however, was not María's cure but a source of further debilitation. For the rest of her life - forty-four years - she was essentially bedridden, suffering both from continuous "tremors" and from the curative wounds or "fountains." Though her parents arranged for further medical treatments involving mercury, María would remain an invalid, and therefore exempt from filling any more "offices" such as the one whose labors she alleged to have caused her initial illness.

Unlike the other nuns of the convent, María now lived a wholly private life because she could not leave her cell. María described her typical day as follows. Before seven, she engaged in prayer for souls in Purgatory. Between seven and nine, she tended her wounds and the abscesses (*postemas*) that accompanied them, then taught doctrine to interested servants. Thereafter, she arranged everything necessary for herself and the nuns who tended her, before taking up some spiritual reading for a half hour. She then engaged in handiwork for the benefit of those nuns in the convent (she was evidently not among them) who were needy. She worked until noon or one o'clock, took something to eat, and then went back to work while hearing a spiritual

reading. At six o'clock, she returned to silent prayer. At eight she ate again and spent time talking with her companions. From nine to ten she read before treating her wounds again. From eleven to two in the morning she engaged in prayer before, presumably, going to sleep.

Prayer was evidently the most meaningful part of María's day because of the frequent visions and "consolations" she received therein. But María, though cut off from the communal life of the convent by her illness, found meaning in her continued existence. Believing she was about to die, she experienced a vision in which she heard a voice say it was not yet her time. Her suffering took on added significance as she understood it to be divinely mandated.

The community, though a shadowy presence in the history, also apparently came to accept María's illness as a sign of her privileged access to the supernatural. People from outside the convent also heard of María and sought her spiritual intervention. For example, she described being consulted by a man who asked her to help with "a very great affliction." María did not detail the nature of the "affliction," but it was clearly marital. The man had left his wife when he came to Mexico many years before. For whatever reason, it was revealed to María in a vision that it was best for the wife, as well as for the husband, that she die. When a fleet arrived, it brought news of the hoped-for death, for which María and her client gave thanks. Others also came to the convent to ask María to pray for their health, or for particular souls in Purgatory. Occasionally, María prayed for the health of an individual and then learned that he or she had to die. In one case, however, María was not satisfied with this explanation, because the person was a young nun whom she liked very much. María was able to intercede with God on behalf of the nun, though another nun was later taken in her stead. Clearly, María had great confidence in her own spiritual powers.

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Through her visions, María, like Mariana de la Encarnación, became an important nun in her convent. Most strikingly, María salvaged a successful religious career from the depredations of a lifelong infirmity. Her illness, in fact, allowed her to escape communal life, the aspect of feminine monasticism least congenial to her nature, while spending almost all of her time engaged in the mystical practices she found so meaningful. Thus, the convent indeed offered various avenues to "find sustenance, exert influence, and develop talents."

Yet most monastic women lived in a community. This was particularly true in the sixteenth century, when, as we have seen, the private life that would come to define New Spain's institutions for women was not yet in evidence. María's illness was practically the only way to escape intense contact with others and the constantly structured schedule of *vida común*. Community offered the chance to create important and lasting relationships with other women, such as the friendship that sustained Mariana de la Encarnación and Inés de la Cruz while they battled to found an institution that would better

meet their spiritual needs. Community also offered the possibility of the alienation that dogged the existence of María de la Natividad. The sources suggest that, while the convent offered women a meaningful life, it was not an environment that tolerated diversity easily. Madre María Magdalena became a trusted adviser and spiritual advocate for her convent only after proving herself through her endurance of ostracism and brutal physical punishment. Mariana de la Encarnación and Inés de la Cruz were able to found a new convent only after years of resentment and strife. María de la Natividad was seen by at least some of her fellow nuns as an attention-seeker rather than a sister in despair. Hostility toward those who were not average nuns is a recurrent theme of the sixteenth-century documents. While such women could find a niche within convent society, they needed stronger personalities than that possessed by María de la Natividad. Autonomy within the convent setting, then, was earned, sometimes through ordeal.

If "autonomy" is the benchmark for comparing the careers of religious and semi-religious women, the latter appear to come closer to it. Yet they too were circumscribed by the communities that sustained - and sometimes censured - them. When they fell foul of the norms of their society, they could expect harsher penalties than could professed nuns. The records of Mexico's Holy Office offer access to the careers of three sixteenth-century beatas. In two cases, the accused provided "life discourses," which represent the only extant autobiographies of the capital's beatas in this period. The Holy Office records paint a vivid picture of three very diverse women whose lives were lived on a wider stage than that offered by the convent, but still very much within a watchful community.

### **Life in the Neighborhood: Three Beatas**

In 1574, the beata María de la Concepción was called before the newly constituted Tribunal of the Holy Office of Mexico. Born in Mexico City, María was a maiden of twenty-seven, daughter of the shoemaker Bartolomé Oliva and his wife Beatriz Olvera, both of whom were still alive and living in Santa Catalina street. María said her father was a "foreigner," and she did not know where he was from. María's mother, Beatriz, was a mestiza and native of Mexico, whose parents were the conqueror Diego de Olvera and Ysavel de la Cruz, "an Indian woman from the barrio of Santiago." María's maternal uncle, Diego de Olvera, was a priest; another uncle, Manuel de Olvera, "lives from his wealth." (*bive de su hazda*) Both of these were half-uncles, "because her mother is a bastard." <sup>86</sup> (*porque su madre es bastarda*) Her mother also had half-sisters, one of whom was married to the *corregidor* Juan de Padilla. María also had twelve siblings. Among her brothers were a captain, a priest, a "weaver of taffeta," a petty merchant (*tratante*), and a boy of twelve. Of her five sisters, only one was married, to the notary (*escrivano*) Luis de Torres - though later María admitted that the couple were not married "except through the exchange of words between themselves." (*sino por palabras entre ellos*) María's social origins and ethnicity point to the diversity of the women who embarked upon semi-religious careers in the sixteenth-century capital. The beatas who appeared as witnesses and defendants before the Inquisition in this period included

two women of African descent and several women who styled themselves doñas; they were both widows and maidens.

María described her entrance into religion as originating in childhood. At the age of twelve, María said, she had made a simple vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience to her parents and confessor. At the age of seventeen, María began to wear the habit of a Franciscan beata—a tunic, habit, and scapulary—with the permission of the Franciscan commissary general, Francisco de Ribera. She made no other vows than the simple vow she had made at the age of twelve. At the age of twenty-one, María left home, purchasing her own house behind the Colegio de Niños. Her sister, Beatriz, whose "husband" was absent from the city, joined her, as did "other maidens." The house contained a chapel (*oratorio*) with a wooden bed, and a coffer and two boxes "with her clothing and that of the maidens she has there." (*con rropa desta y de las donzellas que alli tiene*) Inside one of the boxes, María had her savings: seventeen pesos. María lived "from the work of her hands," (*de la labor de sus manos*) and dedicated herself to her devotional practices, hearing mass every day and taking communion Wednesdays, Fridays, Sundays, and "every feast day of the year without missing a week." (*todas las fiestas del año sin faltar semana*) Indeed, the frequency of her communion had caused the Franciscan friars to ban her from taking communion in the church.

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In addition to her frequent communion, María described other spiritual practices. She fasted frequently. Every third night, she engaged in disciplines. She went barefoot in her house, and wore only clogs (*chapines*) in the street. She claimed to sleep on a board. In the morning, at noon, and in the afternoon she prayed mentally for one hour, for a total of three hours spent meditating on the Passion. In addition, she prayed orally. Thus her days were organized around a rigorous prayer schedule. María also knew how to read, but could not write. Her reading had included Fray Luis de Granada and other devotional authors, and she owned several books, including a confessional and a book by Saint Augustine—typical reading for religious women of her epoch. [87](#)

María spent a great deal of her time engaged in private religious devotion, but she also lived in a community of women. In fact, her relationship with another beata led to her denunciation. In October 1574, a woman appeared before Inquisitor Avalos in his afternoon audience. Wearing the habit of a "religious woman," forty-five-year-old Doña Francisca de Figueroa said she had come to denounce her acquaintance, the beata María de la Concepción. Doña Francisca said that she had encountered María in the church of San Francisco, where both had gone to take mass. María suggested to Doña Francisca that the two women dine together. The two left the church and went to Doña Francisca's house, where they ate and then began to talk about spiritual matters and about the lives of Jesus Christ and the Virgin. During the course of the discussion, Doña Francisca referred to her devotion to and need for the assistance of the saints. Laughing and appearing to mock her friend, María allegedly claimed that the intercession of the saints was unnecessary. When Francisca upbraided her for this

apparently unorthodox statement, María "became upset and changed color," (*se altero y mudo el color*) and used a typically sixteenth-century metaphor to explain herself. When someone wants to meet the king, she said, one must first get to know those around him. But afterward one can go directly to the king without intermediaries. So too it was with God. María's explanation implied the one-upmanship Francisca had detected in her first statement. In denouncing María, Doña Francisca said that another woman who lived in her house had also been present to hear this discussion, and she too had reprehended María. Later, Doña Francisca had felt uneasy about the discussion and had reported it to a Franciscan friar, who had advised her to appear forthwith before the Holy Office and give an account. [88](#)

Doña Francisca reported another questionable encounter with María de la Concepción. Doña Francisca had been in the church of San Francisco praying before an image of the Virgin to which she was particularly devoted when it appeared to her that the image was crying. Terrified, Doña Francisca said, she had reported the incident to her confessor, who told her that the image had just been painted, causing the illusion. But when Doña Francisca described the event to María, the latter said that it was not surprising. Indeed, María claimed, she too had had a revelation - the city would soon be flooded. In sixteenth-century Mexico City, that revelation was nothing dramatic; nonetheless, Doña Francisca wanted to know how this information had been revealed to her friend. María would say only that she knew. Doña Francisca thus presented herself as submissive to the correction of her male confessor, in contrast to María, who believed in suspect revelations and presumed to know better than a friar.

Doña Francisca told another story that presented María as a mocker of church authority. She said that one day, when she was in the church of San Francisco, María came in as mass was being celebrated by a secular priest. María had previously told Doña Francisca that the friars had prohibited her from communicating; nonetheless, as Doña Francisca watched, María took communion, afterward coming to sit with her friend, "seeming very happy that the friars had not seen her communicate." 🌐 When Doña Francisca questioned her, María said that the previous night she had had the strong urge to communicate in San Francisco despite the prohibition.

Yet if Doña Francisca was quick to provide incriminating details against María in October, she was less sure of herself in November, when called to ratify her denunciation. Now she added the codicil that she believed María had been drunk when she made her statements about the saints. She also emphasized that both women had been angry. Francisca was now apparently regretting her denunciation of her friend, and was presenting María's drunkenness and her own anger as ameliorating factors.

However, Doña Francisca had also named another witness who also came to testify. María de Escobar was the twenty-nine-year-old wife of the merchant Juan de León, and lodged in the house of Doña Francisca. María de Escobar

said she had come home to find Doña Francisca and a young woman "dressed friarishly" (*vestido de fraileSCO*) in post-prandial discussion. She claimed that the young beata had mocked her hostess's faith in the saints, and had claimed not to need them, "acting like a scholar and saying that she talked only about matters of the spirit." María de Escobar scoffed at the notion that María de la Concepción was drunk when she made her questionable comments. She noted that the two women had shared a half *tomín* of wine, and when Doña Francisca had attempted to excuse the beata's behavior as drunkenness, María de Escobar said that she had asked "how two women could get drunk on a half tomín of wine."

If Doña Francisca was now willing to drop the matter, the inquisitors were not. On 23 October, María was arrested at mass and imprisoned in the secret cells of the Holy Office. When presented with the accusations of Doña Francisca, María said that she had drunk "a little gulp of wine which would fit into a half eggshell" on the day in question, but that the wine had not made her do or say the things she was accused of. Thus María refused to use the drunkenness defense that her repentant friend had apparently presented.

María chose to defend herself by calling upon male religious to testify to her good character. She asked that the Franciscan Fray Luis de Guzman and the Dominicans Fray Juan de Salazar and Fray Juan Ramírez be called on her behalf. The Inquisitors decided to release María, but ordered her to remain in her house under penalty of excommunication. In the meantime, the inquisitors examined the witnesses. Fray Juan de Salazar said that he knew María, but that his acquaintance with her was so slight that he was unable to say "whether she is virtuous or vicious." (*si es virtuosa ni viciosa*) He had only confessed her twice, and could recall only that she had confessed "with devotion." Fray Juan Ramírez was more forthcoming. He had confessed María various times in the past two years and took her for "a good woman, a good Christian, God-fearing, and he does not know anything to the contrary." (*buena muger buena chriana themerosa de nro sr y no save della cosa en contrario*) However, Fray Juan said, he had scolded María for living "outside her father's house, being a maiden." (*fuera de casa de su padre siendo donzella*) María had responded that her father was a "tedious quarreler," (*trabajoso renidor*) and that she needed to move away for the good of her conscience.

As a Franciscan, Fray Luis de Guzmán knew María best of all the men she had called as witnesses. He said that he had known and confessed her for a year. He found her quite advanced in the spiritual life, and often discussed spiritual matters with her in the confessional. One day he had gone to her house and had found her transported. Moreover, he knew that she had publicly disciplined herself in the streets on Holy Thursday, and had fallen ill as a result. Clearly, María and Fray Luis were on good terms. <sup>89</sup> She had described to him various visions. In return, he had told her "as chit-chat" about goings-on in his monastery. Fray Luis claimed that he had warned

María about visions, and told her not to tell anyone about them. María told him that she thought it was the will of God that she communicate frequently, because when she did not take communion she felt ill, weak, and "dismayed." Communicating restored her vigor. All in all, Fray Luis said, he took María for a good Christian and had never seen evidence to the contrary.

The generally favorable testimony of María's witnesses and her own comportment convinced the friars appointed to examine María's case that they were not dealing with a serious criminal. Yet Doña Francisca had created the impression of a woman with little respect for male clerical authority, reinforced by María's early flight from paternal authority. Thus, the friars found in María "ignorance and much presumption and haughtiness and self-confidence." In fact, her error was common among "women of similar life." (*mujeres de semejante bivienda*) She needed to be entrusted to a prudent confessor, who would be appointed by the Holy Office, and whom María was to obey in all spiritual matters, submitting her spiritual practices for his approval.

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In February 1575, María was sentenced to abjure her error (*de levi*) in the chapel of the Holy Office. Thereafter, she was to be enclosed in the convent of Santa Clara for two years, occupying herself "in the servile offices of the house" (*en los officio serviles de la casa*) as ordered by the abbess. She was to confess with no one except the confessor appointed for her. In June, María entered Santa Clara and was handed over to the authority of abbess María de San Nicolás. Just over two years later, María was released after receiving a favorable reference from the new abbess of Santa Clara, the Conceptionist Juana de San Miguel. María had managed to live as a servant through two of the most tumultuous years in Santa Clara's history, and had, according to Juana de San Miguel, completed her sentence with humility, giving no evidence of her earlier haughtiness. María was thus released to return to her home, and disappeared. Presumably the confidence she had displayed, and that was discussed in her witnesses' testimony, was somewhat shaken by her ordeal. In her short life, she had been able to achieve a level of independence and self-direction that confounded colonial Spanish American gender stereotypes. She had also learned that her independence was circumscribed by boundaries perilous to transgress.

Haughtiness played a role in denunciations of another beata, Doña Ana de Guillamas. Early in 1597, Miguel Becerril, a thirty-year-old native of Murcia, came to denounce a woman "who wears a Carmelite habit, and he does not know whether she is married or a widow." (*que trae habito del carmen y no sabe si es cassada o biuda*) There was some confusion over Doña Ana's proper name. Apparently she went by Doña Ana de Peralta, even though her true name was Guillamas. Moreover, she said that her proper first name was Ursula. The ambiguous nature of the semi-religious life is thus highlighted. The taking of the beata's habit obscured the highly important distinctions between the three estates of womanhood: maiden, wife, and widow. Even the beata's name was subject to change.

Miguel's accusations were not very substantial, amounting only to evidence of Doña Ana's mystical visions. He claimed that three days after the auto de fe of 1595, in which the Judaiser Francisco de Carvajal had been executed, Doña Ana told him that she had been visited by the Devil who said, "poor Carvajal, that they killed him with no reason." (*pobre de carvajal que lo mataron sin culpa*) She had also told him that when she was living in the house of Don Juan Altamirano, a black servant of the house had fallen ill. He had asked Doña Ana to intercede with God on his behalf, and she had promised to do so. Despite her best efforts, the servant had died. At the moment of his death, Doña Ana told Miguel, the servant had appeared to her very well-dressed, and had told her that he was on his way to Heaven. [90](#)

Some months later, in July 1597, Doña Ana was again denounced, now by Doña Manuela Martínez de León, the twenty-four-year-old wife of the royal notary Francisco de Soto Calderón. Doña Manuela's denunciation seems to have had its origin in a dispute between the two women similar to the one between María de la Encarnación and her friend Doña Francisca. Doña Manuela claimed to have scolded Doña Ana for telling her about her visions, telling the beata that she did not believe in their veracity. Doña Ana angrily responded that Doña Manuela could not believe because she could not understand such matters. Moreover, the beata said, she had received license from her confessors to discuss her revelations, and in an apparent threat, Doña Francisca mentioned that God took it upon himself to castigate those who did her injury. On another occasion, Doña Ana had talked to Doña Manuela about various well-known male religious of the city. Though the Carmelite provincial was taken for holy, Doña Ana said, he had not reached the road to perfection; nor had the greatly admired Jesuit Acosta. In Doña Ana's view, the prior of the Carmelite convent was closer to perfection than either of the better-known men. Also worthy of admiration, in the beata's opinion, was the layman and treasurer Juan Nuñez de León. Once again, a denunciation presented a beata as haughtily independent of male authority. [91](#)

Perhaps because of her presuming to pass judgment on their relative states of holiness, Doña Ana had been barred by the Franciscan friars from taking communion in their church. Asked for her opinion of Doña Ana, Doña Manuela said that the beata was of sound mind, "and she knows a great deal, although she is very arrogant about what she knows." 🔄 Doña Manuela also had an interesting view of Doña Ana's sanctity. She said that she was suspicious of Doña Ana's revelations, "because if they were real, she would not publicize them so much." (*porque si fueran verdaderas no las publicara tanto*) Although Doña Manuela spoke with benefit of hindsight, her comment offers insight into how clients and neighbors of holy women went about assessing the value of their claims to sanctity.

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When Doña Manuela's thirty-three-year-old husband Francisco de Soto appeared, he described a rather strange incident involving a cat. He came upon Doña Ana delousing a cat with such enjoyment that he asked her "why

she did not make love to a human being the way she did to a cat." (*que porque no hazia amores a una criatura como los hazia a una gata*) Doña Ana had replied that the little cat was full of God-presumably implying that Francisco was not. For some reason, Francisco thought this might be a matter for the Holy Office. Francisco also said that Doña Ana had told him that one day, when she visited the convent of La Concepción with the wife of Juan Faraz, she was so taken with the couple's one-and-a-half-year-old daughter, and felt so happy in the child's presence, that she knew that the child had a call to become a nun. Francisco noted as well that Doña Ana said that her confessors were idiots, because they had rebuked her for her visions and revelations without understanding them. When asked whether he knew more about Doña Ana, Francisco said that Doña Ana went around telling many people about her experiences, and that his wife might know more, "because as women they have talked more." (*porque como mugeres se tratavan mas*)

Catalina de Amaya, the twenty-nine-year-old wife of Juan Faraz, appeared before the inquisitors in March 1599. She told of another of Doña Ana's alleged visions. Apparently, in 1598 the China fleet was late in arriving, and rumor had it that corsairs had been sighted off the coast. Once it was known that the supposed corsairs were actually the ships of Juan Viscayno, Catalina told Doña Ana the news, only to be told that Doña Ana had known this all along because she had seen it in a revelation. Catalina was suspicious of this supposed revelation. Even so, she said, she held Doña Ana in high esteem as a good Christian, "because she sees her perform works as such." (*porque la vee hazer obras como tal*)

Though the Holy Office decided in June 1598 to act upon the denunciations received against Doña Ana, there is no evidence that her case ever went farther than the collection of the denunciations and their examination by a panel that found suspicions of heresy. Even without the beata's own testimony, however, her case presents a vivid picture of a dynamic and independent woman full of confidence in her intelligence and sanctity. She may, indeed, have been too confident. In openly criticizing male confessors, discoursing on the "true" path to sanctity, and publicizing her own visions, Doña Ana definitely pushed at the boundaries of the toleration extended to semi-religious women in her society. If she, unlike María de la Concepción, escaped censure, it may be only because the last two years of the sixteenth century were very busy ones for the Mexico City tribunal. Perhaps it simply had insufficient time to deal with yet another haughty beata. The inquisitors were dealing, after all, with a suspected illuminist cell extending from Puebla to Mexico City.

One of the many people implicated in the illuminist trials of 1598-1600 was another Mexico City beata, Marina de San Miguel. Though her trial would reveal that Marina was not a "typical" beata, her career is worth examining. On the surface, there was nothing unusual or noteworthy about Marina's life story. Marina was born in 1544 or 1545 <sup>92</sup> in Córdoba into a family she identified as Old Christians, apparently of middling social status. Among her

uncles she counted a field marshal, an ensign, a medical doctor, and a merchant. Marina's parents were deceased, as was her brother, an unmarried blacksmith "who died in Peru." Her only sister, Luisa de los Angeles, had died in Mexico in Marina's house. Thus, in 1598, Marina had no family left in Mexico; nor had she any connection with her extended family in Castile.

Marina's biography was in many ways typical of sixteenth-century immigrants to New Spain. Her father obviously looked to the Indies with the expectation-realistic in the sixteenth century-of upward mobility. <sup>93</sup> When Marina was only three years old, her father moved the family from Córdoba to Mexico City, where they took up residence in the Calle de San Agustín. There the family remained until Marina was twelve. At that point, in the mid-1550s, the Abrils returned to Córdoba, "having earned enough to eat." <sup>94</sup> (*aviendo ganado de comer*) Back in Spain, like the stereotypical emigrant returnee, Marina's father quickly dissipated his American earnings.

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Marina, however, was already interested in more spiritual matters. From earliest childhood, she had engaged in mystical practices and interior prayer. At sixteen, Marina confirmed her commitment to the spiritual life, taking a vow of chastity in the convent of La Merced in Seville. For Marina, whose spendthrift father would probably never have amassed the means for a convent dowry, the life of a beata must have been appealing.

Marina might have become a Sevillian beata of the type so ably described by Mary Elizabeth Perry had Marina's father been less profligate in his spending. <sup>95</sup> As it was, however, he brought his family to economic ruin, forcing a return to Mexico, where Marina's mother soon died. Marina's father placed his daughters in the Colegio de las Niñas Mestizas to facilitate his remarriage. Marina remained in the colegio for four years after her father's marriage. Already a grown woman, she might have continued there indefinitely had her father's life not taken another picaresque turn. Returning home to find his wife with another man, he reacted violently, killing the man and wounding his new wife—who, according to Marina, recovered from her wounds—before fleeing to Peru. As a result, Marina left the colegio and went to live with María de Acosta, the wife of a tanner, in whose home she lived for two years until, now presumably in her early twenties, she and her sister, Luisa de los Angeles, took a house in the Calle de San Agustín, where their family had first lived on their arrival in Mexico. For the next seven to ten years, Marina and Luisa lived on their earnings from sewing and from teaching girls. The sisters moved once more, this time to the house of Juan Núñez de León, accountant of the royal treasury, a wealthy man who would become important in Marina's life as a patron and a "spiritual brother." Like María de la Concepción, Marina could read. Moreover, she could write. Her brother had taught her the alphabet and to join letters, and had given her a primer from which she learned to read and write "without more teaching, through her work and industry." (*sin mas*

*enseñanza por su trabajo y industria)*

Judging from the testimony of her neighbors, Marina seems to have enjoyed respect in the community centered on the monastery of Santo Domingo. Part of her respect and fame came from her function as a kind of spiritual social worker. For example, Ysabel Gutiérrez, the forty-year-old wife of the silkwormer Luis de Valverde, reported that after the death of her mother, seven years earlier, she had received a consolatory visit from Marina. The beata was also consulted in cases we might describe as medical or psychiatric. In addition, Marina's spiritual abilities led people to ask her to ascertain their standing with God. Thirty-year-old Ynés de Montesdoca reported having consulted Marina for this reason. <sup>96</sup> Clearly, Marina's neighbors considered her possessed of special gifts.

In fact, the intensity of Marina's spiritual life seems to have aroused admiration rather than skepticism in most of her neighbors. Like Madre María Magdalena in her convent, María de San Miguel was presumed in her neighborhood to have privileged access to the divine. Marina was frequently visited by spells of shaking, by trances in which she was "transported" and "left her senses." Marina and her neighbors also described her many illnesses, all of them apparently related to gifts from God. <sup>97</sup> Her visions and trances boosted her credibility as a holy woman. María de Cárdenas, for example, said that after she and her depressed husband saw Marina in one of her trances, the couple "asked ... more forcefully" (*le pedían ... con más ahynco*) that she commend them to God.

As well as providing such services to her neighbors, Marina also functioned as a spiritual adviser to devoted laymen. Beatriz Gutiérrez remembered that a "young married man, also spiritual" (*hombre también espiritual moço casado*) had told her that he discussed matters of God and the spirit with Marina. Alonso Gutiérrez de Castro, who lived with Marina, described his relationship to her as a virtual apprenticeship in the spiritual life. <sup>98</sup>

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Marina's spiritual authority extended beyond such laymen to at least some members of the clergy. Juana Ruiz described how she went to see Marina and found Fray Diego de Aragón, Marina's confessor, already in the house. Marina went into a trance that lasted for about an hour. Fray Diego remained at her side and when she came to her senses asked her what had happened. Marina described for him (and for Juana, who had not left) her vision, in which she had been given milk and honey to drink. Other friars were similarly interested in Marina's spiritual gifts. According to Juana Ruiz, Marina claimed that Christ would take her to him on the Day of the Incarnation, meaning that she would die. Alerted, Juana went to Marina's house on the day in question to watch the proceedings. Others had gathered at Marina's bedside, not only a group of neighborhood women, but also two Dominican friars and Don Francisco de Bocanegra, "who brought wax for the burial." (*el qual llevo cera para el entierro*) Clearly, these men were

expecting a miraculous occurrence, at least a vicarious experience of direct contact with the divine.

Indeed, male interest in and support of female mystics was common in early modern Europe and contemporary Spanish America. <sup>99</sup> Holy women and their male patrons enjoyed a kind of "dyadic cooperation." <sup>100</sup> The women received guidance, support, and sometimes even protection from their male patrons. In addition, such patrons sometimes publicized holy women's gifts and recorded their biographies. In exchange, the men received access to an exciting realm of direct revelation, and, often, ostensibly divine support of their own endeavors and beliefs.

María de la Concepción had attempted to defend herself through invoking male clerics as character witnesses. During her confessions, Marina de San Miguel also attempted to gain legitimacy through claiming that she had communicated with—and had been approved by—religious men. She told Inquisitor Peralta of a vision in which she went to Purgatory and was given power to remit the sentences of the souls therein, who in gratitude addressed her as "Our Redemptrix." Aware of the presumptuous sound of the title and the vision itself, she claimed that she had described her vision to Fray Andrés de la Cruz, a discalced Franciscan "who went to the Philippines" and who, according to Marina, expressed approval of the vision. Marina also said that she had discussed "devotion to the love of God and his union" with religious men of all orders except La Merced. Here she was, to be sure, attempting to gain authority from the approval of the friars. Yet one can infer that such friars themselves saw Marina as a conduit to a spiritual realm of direct revelation.

So too did Marina's neighbors, who, when asked to describe her character, were nearly unanimous. Isabel Gutiérrez said that she considered Marina a good Christian and that "the whole neighborhood has taken her for such, and for a very recollected woman." <sup>101</sup>  García Hernández de Corona said that "he has taken her for a saint both for the things she has said and for the good counsel she has given him."  García's wife, María de Cárdenas, also emphasized that she had a high opinion of Marina because of her good advice and saintly reputation.

Yet, to the modern reader at least, the testimony does not suggest a stereotypically saintly woman: no penances, fasts, or charitable works such as feeding the poor or tending the sick. Indeed, some of Marina's "social work" activities seem to have been motivated not by charity but by a desire for material gain. María de Cárdenas remembered that when she and her husband were consulting Marina about his mental illness, Marina had none too subtly solicited their gifts, "which seemed to her a strange and petty thing." (*lo qual pareció a esta cossa muy particular y menudo*) Juana Ruiz said that she had once thought of Marina as a saint, but now "she takes her for a fraud, and everything she says is a lie." (*la tiene por embustera y que*

*son mentiras todas las que dize)*

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Despite the disillusionment of some of Marina's neighbors, she would probably not have come to Inquisitorial attention had her name not come up in a serious context in 1598, when New Spain's ecclesiastical establishments were rocked by the discovery of a cell of alleged illuminist heretics operating in Mexico City and Puebla. <sup>103</sup> Marina was named by members of the illuminist group, within which she served much the same function as she did in her neighborhood; she was presumed to have privileged access to the divine, and her prophecies were given credence.

During the course of the investigation, Marina was imprisoned. Evidence revealed that she had gone much farther beyond the pale than any of the other religious or semi-religious women who appeared before the Inquisition in the sixteenth century. She had taken a leading role in a consciously heretical group. Moreover, she confessed to another major transgression involving a breach of her vow of chastity. Marina's case provides virtually the only mention of sexuality in the sixteenth-century sources describing religious and semi-religious women.

Religious men and women have always been cautioned against the dangers inherent in their close contact, and have had stressed the particular burden of chastity. Chastity was a huge concern of late medieval writers on convents, and became "a swelling melody" during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. <sup>104</sup> Among the earliest publications of Paolo Manuzio's papal press in Rome was an 800-copy run of *De Virginitate Opuscula Sanctorum Doctorum Ambrosii, Hieronymi, et Augustini* (1562), a compilation of writings on the subject. <sup>105</sup> In sixteenth-century New Spain, as elsewhere, the chastity of male religious was the cause of much concern. <sup>106</sup> Clausura seems to have protected nuns from similar accusations. There are no sixteenth-century cases of pregnancies, or of the kind of massive irregularities found in convents in Italy or in other areas of Spanish America. <sup>107</sup> Despite contemporary complaints about "nun-flirtations" (*devociones de monjas*), actual solicitation of nuns was apparently extremely rare during the sixteenth century, though it is possible that it increased during the seventeenth century, as was apparently the case in Spain. <sup>108</sup> The Inquisition records of the Archivo de la Nación record only one instance in Mexico during the period in question.

Because solicitation in the confessional became a particular concern of the Inquisition only after the Council of Trent, this lone case of solicitation is from the latter part of the century. In 1590, Licenciado Frutos Garcia, the forty-four-year-old chaplain of the convent of Regina Coeli in Mexico City, was charged with solicitation of the nuns in his care. <sup>109</sup> He was denounced by eighteen-year-old María de San Juan, who said that he had approached

her for the first time a year before, in 1589, after she had confessed. On another occasion, he spoke of his desire for María to Catarina de San Pedro, another young nun, telling her that if María had been a novice when he met her, he would have done everything possible to prevent her from entering religion. Despite the crude innuendo of their relationship, María claimed that García had never touched her other than by taking her hand and, once, placing his hand under her veil and touching her mouth, at which point she kissed his hand. Another time García read María a poem (*unas coplas*) that he claimed to have composed for her. Another young nun, María de San Gabriel, reported that García had told her if she had not been a professed nun, he would have carried her off with him; after this incident, María said, she had avoided confessing with him.

When confronted with the nuns' accusations, García denied many of the specifics and attempted to place responsibility for his lascivious words in the confessional squarely on the young nuns. The Holy Office, however, was not convinced. García was sentenced to perpetual privation of the right to administer the sacrament of penitence and exile from the Indies for two years. He was also to pay costs of 300 pesos. The punishment of the girls involved, if there was any, must have been a private matter within the convent, as there is no indication in the dossier of any censure against them.

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García's actions never went far, largely because of *clausura*. A chink in the armor of a semi-religious woman's chastity had the potential to be much more dangerous precisely because *beatas* were uncloistered and free from the constant surveillance of others. Thus, through the sixteenth century, *beatas* came to be associated with sexual laxity. In 1607, a Pueblan *beata* was even denounced to the Inquisition for allegedly trying to arrange sexual contact between friars and her granddaughter. [110](#)

In Marina's case, the discussion of sexuality arose at her own instigation. After being held by the Inquisition for almost three months, and left alone in her cell for two months, she requested an audience. She then reported that, for fifteen years, she had copulated with the Devil. [111](#) Marina also said that, for twenty years, she had had a sexual relationship with Juan Núñez, her "spiritual brother." Though she denied actual sexual intercourse, she freely spoke of the other "dishonesties" they had enjoyed. Marina also admitted her desire for the thirty-three-year-old Alonso Gutiérrez, who lived with her, though she insisted that nothing sexual had ever occurred between her and her lodger. Marina had, however, engaged in "a friendship" with a *beata*, now dead; "ordinarily when they saw one another they kissed and hugged, and [Marina] put her hands on the breasts [of the other woman], and ... came to orgasm ten or twelve times, twice in the church."  In addition, Marina confessed to masturbating, not for enjoyment, "but because she was melancholy." (*sino por estar melancolica*)

Because of the damning testimony against her and her own admissions,

Marina was found guilty of all charges against her and was harshly punished. After abjuring her errors *de vehementi*, Marina received one hundred lashes. She was fined 100 pesos and transported to the Hospital de las Bubas, where she was to serve the sick for ten years. Among the illuminists disciplined in the same *auto de feé*, Marina received arguably the harshest penalties of all the accused, probably because of her long resistance to full confession. Marina had taken autonomy far beyond the limits of toleration. Yet, if she had not been denounced as a result of investigations into the illuminist group, she would not have been that exceptional. Her life in the neighborhood aroused some suspicion, but she was generally respected. Her mistake, like the mistake of the foundresses of Santa Clara, was in going too far.

What emerges most strikingly from these three Inquisition cases is the relative diversity of Mexico City's beatas, the freedom with which they went about their business, and their mobility. These characteristics formed a definite boundary between religious and semi-religious women. All of the beatas who appeared before the Inquisition, either as accused or as witnesses, enjoyed a substantial degree of self-determination. Their religious identity provided a rationale for their independence. María de la Concepción, still a minor at twenty-one, was able to purchase her own home and live there free from her domineering father. Her need for a peaceful place to pursue her spiritual development justified a highly unusual degree of freedom from male authority.

But while beatas enjoyed this freedom, their autonomy remained circumscribed. No less than professed nuns, they were subject to the scrutiny of male confessors. They also existed in a loosely constituted religious community, often in close contact with other women. The relationship of María de la Concepción and Doña Francisca Figueroa exemplifies the camaraderie beatas could enjoy, and the danger into which arrogance and perceived condescension could lead. In addition, beatas lived among and served neighbors and clients for whom the beata was a figure of power, importance, and fascination. The evidence given in Inquisition cases by secular persons suggests that the clients and neighbors of beatas were constantly evaluating their behavior and comportment. Beatas believed in their complete autonomy at their peril.

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And yet both beatas and nuns enjoyed something exceptional in their society. Both women had access to the divine, and therefore had power. Both groups of women could have religious careers. As we have seen, both cloister and neighborhood placed restrictions on women. The women who enjoyed successful careers were those who negotiated the ambiguities and pressures of a life in community.

**Notes:**

**Note 1:** See Lina Eckenstein, *Woman under Monasticism: Chapters on Saint-Lore and Convent Life between AD 500 and AD 1500* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963 [1896]), 5. "The convent accepted the dislike women felt to domestic subjection and countenanced them in their refusal to undertake the duties of married life." [Back.](#)

**Note 2:** Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 89. [Back.](#)

**Note 3:** Kathleen Myers, *Word from New Spain: The Spiritual Autobiography of Madre María de San José (1656-1719)* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993), 2. [Back.](#)

**Note 4:** Electa Arenal, "The Convent as Catalyst for Autonomy: Two Hispanic Nuns of the Seventeenth Century," in Beth Miller, ed. *Women in Hispanic Literature: Icons and Fallen Idols* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 147-183; 149. [Back.](#)

**Note 5:** Emphasis on "women's culture and women's power" without recognition of its embeddedness in a society of inequality may tempt one to view women's communities as feminist utopias and overlook the degree to which women's culture was ultimately subordinate. As Cécile Dauphin and others caution,

this emphasis on female powers is fraught with danger—that of using it too freely or in a somewhat fallacious fashion. To realize that women possess powers within the framework of culture can lead to the espousal of an attitude of appeasement, juxtaposing the two cultures [i.e., men's and women's] as at once diverse yet complementary, while forgetting that relations between the sexes are also fraught with violence and inequality.

See Dauphin, et al., "Women's Culture and Women's Power: Issues in French Women's History," in Joan Wallach Scott, ed., *Feminism and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 568-600; 573. [Back.](#)

**Note 6:** No student of Mexico's sixteenth century can afford to ignore Inquisition documents. Such records have long been used as sources for microhistories—, in-depth studies in single cases that give insight into an individual's conflict with a powerful institution but also, by implication, into an entire culture. Examples include the well-known and controversial *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error* by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (New York: George Braziller, 1978); Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Gene Brucker, *Giovanni and Lusanna: Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986); Judith Brown, *Indecent Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Fulvio Tomizza, *Heavenly Supper: The Story of Maria Janis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Alexandra Parma Cook and Noble David Cook, *Good Faith and Truthful Ignorance: A Case of Transatlantic Bigamy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991). Microhistories offer the opportunity not only to delve deeply into an individual biography or a mentalité, but also to make one's interpretive

decisions transparent. More recent works, however, have begun to use either large numbers of Inquisition documents, or Inquisition documents blended with other sources, to access information about daily life. For an example of the first method, see Richard Boyer, *Lives of the Bigamists: Marriage, Family, and Community in Colonial Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); for the second, see R. Douglas Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660-1720* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994). [Back.](#)

**Note 7:** There is only one extant biography of a sixteenth-century pious laywoman in New Spain. In 1572, the *cura* of Pátzcuaro published *La abeja de Michoacán*, his biography of Doña Josefa Antonia Gallegos. She taught herself to read and write, developed a mystical practice, founded a free school for girls, promoted the foundation of a convent, and performed works of charity. See Josefina Muriel, *Cultura femenina novohispana* (Mexico: UNAM, 1982), 32. Nothing comparable exists for Mexico City, either for nuns or for beatas. [Back.](#)

**Note 8:** Quoted in José L. Sánchez Lora, *Mujeres, conventos y formas de la religiosidad barroca* (Madrid: FUE, 1988), 59. The Extremeño, of course, returns to Spain to marry. [Back.](#)

**Note 9:** AGI, Indiferente 424, L. 22. Real Cédula a Juan Martínez Celiceo, arzobispo de Toledo, primado, y del consejo del emperador, pidiéndole haga trasladar a Isabel de Chaves, monja profesa de la orden de San Bernardo... 9. vi. 1553. F. 511r, Im. 1033. Also F. 524r-v. Real Cédula al arzobispo de Toledo primado de España, pidiéndole trasladar a Isabel de Chaves, monja profesa... 17. ix. 1553. [Back.](#)

**Note 10:** AGI, México 282. Lo que maria de san niculas y mariana de jesus y ysavel del espiritu santo y franca de la concepcion ... suplican a su santidad. 26. x. 1571. [Back.](#)

**Note 11:** Bilinkoff, *The Ávila of Saint Teresa: Religious Reform in a Sixteenth-Century City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 44. [Back.](#)

**Note 12:** BN, Archivo Franciscano Caja 75, Exp. 1256. Traslado de la escritura de fundación del convento y monasterio de santa clara que doña isabel de villanueva guzman... 25. VIII. 1607. [Back.](#)

**Note 13:** AGI, México 282. Lo que maria de san niculas y mariana de jesus e ysavel del espiritu santo y franca de la concepcion ... suplican a su santidad. 26.x. 1571. [Back.](#)

**Note 14:** Ibid. [Back.](#)

**Note 15:** Mary McLaughlin discerns a similar strategy at work in Europe in the case of a foundress who deliberately kept her institutional plans obscure. See Mary Martin McLaughlin, "Creating and Recreating Communities of Women: The Case of Corpus Domini, Ferrara, 1406-1452," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14 (1989), 293-320; 300. [Back.](#)

**Note 16:** AGI, México 282. Lo que maria de san niculas y mariana de jesus y ysavel de espiritu santo y franca de la concepcion... suplican a su santidad. 26.

x. 1571. [Back.](#)

**Note 17:** The status of novice would inevitably subject a foundress to another (professed) nun. Doña Isabel de Villanueva Guzmán, the aforementioned Pueblan foundress and patron, was similarly hostile to being forced to complete a year's novitiate. She claimed the privilege of choosing how long she wished to remain a novice. BN, Archivo Franciscano Caja 75, Exp. 1256. Traslado de la escritura de fundación del convento y monasterio de santa clara que doña isabel de villanueva guzman... 25. VIII. 1607. [Back.](#)

**Note 18:** AGI, México 283. Información sobre Santa Clara de México. Bloque 1, f. 9v. [Back.](#)

**Note 19:** Ibid., f. 10v. [Back.](#)

**Note 20:** AGI, México 283. Información sobre Santa Clara de México. Bloque 2, f. 3r. [Back.](#)

**Note 21:** AGI, México 283. Información de como de le dio la obediencia al provisor. 11 xii 1573. ., f. 19. [Back.](#)

**Note 22:** Ibid., f. 19v. [Back.](#)

**Note 23:** Ibid., f. 21v. [Back.](#)

**Note 24:** 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, f. 1v. [Back.](#)

**Note 25:** AGI, México 286. Memorial de las cosas que el mo de jhs maria pide que se probean. s.f. (Signed by Pedro Thomas.) [Back.](#)

**Note 26:** AGI, México 229, N. 2. Ynformon de officio rreda en la audia rl de la nueva spana sobre la que dio el convento de monjas de jhs maria desta ciudad de mexico sobre la mrd que su magd pretende la haga ba ante su magd y su rri consejo de yndias. 1609. F. 10, Im. 19. [Back.](#)

**Note 27:** Carta del Arzobispo de México D. Pedro Moya de Contreras al Presidente de los Reales Consejos de Indias y Hacienda... 24. i. 1575. *Cartas de Indias* (Madrid: Atlas, 1974), I, No. XXXVI, 176-94; 191. [Back.](#)

**Note 28:** AGI, México 283. Relacion del negocio de santa clara. 1575, f. 1v. [Back.](#)

**Note 29:** AGI, México 283. Información de como se le dio la obediencia al provisor. Testimony of Miguel de Ecija, f. 2. [Back.](#)

**Note 30:** Ibid., testimony of Pedro Thomas. [Back.](#)

**Note 31:** AGI, México 283. Relación del negocio de Santa Clara. 1575, 1v. [Back.](#)

**Note 32:** AGI, México 283. Proceso y informaciones fechas en la ciudad de

México y otros autos sobre haver salido las monjas de Santa Clara del monasterio... 1574-5. Testimony of Pedro Thomas, f. 5. [Back.](#)

**Note 33:** Carta al rey, del arzobispo de México, tratando de las relaciones que tenía con los religiosos de todas las órdenes, de la provisión de beneficios eclesiásticos, de lo que ocurría en el convento de monjas de Santa Clara y de otras cosas. 25. ix. 1575. In Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario* XI, No. 684, 262-7. Indeed, family grouping was regarded with distrust by the ecclesiastical establishment. In 1570, Moya de Contreras asserted that the convent of La Concepción was well governed, " *aunque hay entre ellas muchas que las unas son parientas de las otras y las otras de las otras.*" Carta al Rey del arzobispo de México diciendo que algunas religiosas del convento de la Concepción de aquella ciudad, querían dar la obediencia a los frailes de San Francisco. 20. iv. 1570. In Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario* XI, No. 641, 84-6. [Back.](#)

**Note 34:** 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, f. 2. [Back.](#)

**Note 35:** Ibid., ff. 2v-3. [Back.](#)

**Note 36:** Ibid., f. 12v. [Back.](#)

**Note 37:** Josefina Muriel, *Conventos de monjas en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Editorial Jus, 1995 [1946]), 66. [Back.](#)

**Note 38:** AGI, México 283. Proceso y informaciones fechas en la ciudad de México y otros autos sobre haver salido las monjas de Santa Clara del monasterio... 1574-5, f. 5v. [Back.](#)

**Note 39:** Ibid. [Back.](#)

**Note 40:** Ibid., Testimony of Isabel Juárez, f. 7v. [Back.](#)

**Note 41:** Ibid., f. 8. Testimony of Manuel Rodríguez. [Back.](#)

**Note 42:** Texas, García MS 79. Relación de la fundación del convento antiguo de Santa Teresa, f. 76. [Back.](#)

**Note 43:** See Frances Calderón de la Barca, *Life in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982 [1842]), 199-212. [Back.](#)

**Note 44:** AGI, México 282. Información del convento de Santa Clara de México, como las monjas de sancta clara de la ciudad de mexico fueron rrecividas a la obediencia de la orden de san francisco. 10 xii 1573. [Back.](#)

**Note 45:** AGI, México 336A, Ramo 3, doc. 155. El arzobispo de México, sobre que se declare lo que convenga para que vaya adelante... Jesús María. 25. x. 1581, f. 1v. The ordinances did, however, admit the possibility of a novice's leaving before profession, "de su parte o del convento." In such a case the novice was to be given "un honesto vestido" and returned to the world. [Back.](#)

**Note 46:** This belief was generalized but also, increasingly, enforced. In 1600, a

woman denounced herself to the Inquisition for having said that "el estado de los cassados ... hera mejor que el estado de la rreligion." AGN, Inquisición 261, Exp. 9A, ff. 84-8. Others were denounced and prosecuted for the same error. [Back.](#)

**Note 47:** Erving Goffman's classic study of total institutions includes convents. Though cloisters share many characteristics with the other institutions - poorhouses, quarantine stations, jails, army barracks, and boarding schools among them - that Goffman describes, the different value placed on convents by society and the element of volition involved in entering them limit the usefulness of many of Goffman's comparisons, as he himself occasionally acknowledges. See Goffman, "On the Characteristics of Total Institutions," in *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 1-124. [Back.](#)

**Note 48:** AGN, Inquisición 8, Exp. 1, ff. 5-116. Processo del sto offico contra Elena de la Cruz monja profesa del monasterio de la ynmaculata conception de nra sa de mexco sobre ciertas palabras que dixo contra nra scta fee catholica. 1568, f. 22v. [Back.](#)

**Note 49:** Penelope Johnson, *Equal in Monastic Profession: Religious Women in Medieval France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 256. [Back.](#)

**Note 50:** AGI, México 284. Las monjas de santa clara a sm. 12. ix. 1579. [Back.](#)

**Note 51:** Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora, *Parayso occidental, plantado y cultivado por la liberal benefica mano de los muy catholicos, y poderosos reyes de españa...* (Mexico: J. de Ribera, 1684), Libro II, Cap. iii, f. 75v, 76v, 78. [Back.](#)

**Note 52:** Sánchez Lora, op. cit., 245. [Back.](#)

**Note 53:** Indeed, the notion of a gentler, as opposed to a weaker, sex was in itself incomprehensible to sixteenth-century minds, which perceived women as at least as violent as - if physically less menacing than - men. [Back.](#)

**Note 54:** Sánchez Lora, loc. cit. [Back.](#)

**Note 55:** Perry, op. cit., 142-3. [Back.](#)

**Note 56:** Texas, García MS 94. Libro en que se contiene la vida de la Madre María Magdalena monja profesa del convento del Sr. S. Jerónimo de México... 9v-10. [Back.](#)

**Note 57:** Sigüenza y Góngora, op. cit., Libro II, Cap. ii, f. 75v, 76v, 78. [Back.](#)

**Note 58:** AGN, Inquisición 5, Exp. 4, ff. 130-8. Contra franca de la anunciacion monja professa del monesterio de la conception de la cibdad de mexco. 1564. [Back.](#)

**Note 59:** An interesting parallel is suggested by Penelope Johnson's relation of the case of a noblewoman whose family placed her in a convent because of her deep depression, which had made her suicidal. In the convent, she attempted to hang herself; the male guards who found her refused to touch her body. The

nuns cut her down. Though ordered to throw her body in a ditch by the archdeacon, the nuns watched over her corpse as they would have done with a "proper" dead body; they detected signs of life and nursed her back to life, calling it a miracle, which became part of the tradition of the convent (239-40). [Back.](#)

**Note 60:** There is a tradition that one of the cursed Avila Alvarado family, María de Alvarado, committed suicide while a nun in La Concepción. See Juan Suárez de Peralta, *La conjuración de Martín Cortés y otros temas*, ed. Agustín Yáñez (Mexico: Ediciones de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma, 1945), 51-3. [Back.](#)

**Note 61:** AGN, Inquisición 166, Exp. 5. Relación de María de la Natividad, monja profesada en el convento de Regina Celi, contra si misma por aver dicho y hecho cosas contra la fe. 1598. [Back.](#)

**Note 62:** A panel was convened to discuss her case. Though five members were in favor of imprisoning the nun and investigating her further, the two other members of the panel were in favor of a less extreme approach, suggesting that an investigation be made "para saber y entender en que estado se halla cerca de sus melancolias." The case apparently rested there. *Ibid.*, 9v. [Back.](#)

**Note 63:** In 1629, the profession of Antonia de San Jacinto in La Encarnación was nullified because she was too young and because professions were invalid "quando se profeso con fuerza y violencia." AGN, Bienes Nacionales 140, Exp. 7. Sobre la declaración nula de una profesión. 1629. [Back.](#)

**Note 64:** Sánchez Lora, op. cit., 145. [Back.](#)

**Note 65:** Perry, op. cit., 91. [Back.](#)

**Note 66:** AGI, México 218, N. 17, f. 4. Información - Regim Coeli. 1586. [Back.](#)

**Note 67:** AGN, Inquisición 177, Exp. 1, ff. 1-. Proceso contra el licenciado fructos garcia natural de la va de cuellar en españa clerigo presbitero capellan y confesor del monasto de monjas de Regina desta ciudad de Mexico. 1590. [Back.](#)

**Note 68:** AGN, Inquisición 166, Exp. 5. Relación de María de la Natividad, monja profesada en el convento de Regina Celi, contra si misma por aver dicho y hecho cosas contra la fe. 1598, f. 43. [Back.](#)

**Note 69:** AGN, Inquisición 8, Exp. 1, ff. 5-116. Proceso del sto offico contra Elena de la Cruz monja profesada del monasterio de la ymaculata conception de nra sa de mexco sobre ciertas palabras que dixo contra nra scta fee catholica. 1568. f. 36. [Back.](#)

**Note 70:** By *devotos*, María probably meant the men who engaged in *devociones de monjas*, platonic but romantic relationships conducted through convent grilles. This aspect of female monasticism has received a great deal of *costumbrista* attention. [Back.](#)

**Note 71:** Sánchez Lora, op. cit., 233 passim. Rosa, op. cit., 202. [Back.](#)

**Note 72:** Johnson, op. cit., 230. [Back.](#)

**Note 73:** AGI, México 270. Doña Yssavel de guebara. 5. iii. 1603. [Back.](#)

**Note 74:** Sigüenza y Góngora, op. cit., Libro III, Cap. ii, 80-81. [Back.](#)

**Note 75:** AGN, Inquisición 8, Exp. 1, ff. 5-116. Processo del sto offico contra Elena de la Cruz monja profesa del monasterio de la ynmaculata conception de nra sa de mexco sobre ciertas palabras que dixo contra nra scta fee catholica. 1568. I study the case of Elena de la Cruz in more depth in "I, Elena de la Cruz: Heresy and Gender in Mexico City, 1568," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, New Series, 4 (1993): 143-60. [Back.](#)

**Note 76:** An assumption made on the basis of Cortés's mother's name (Catalina Altamirano). [Back.](#)

**Note 77:** Peter Boyd-Bowman, *Indice de más de 56 mil pobladores de la América hispánica* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, date), 15. [Back.](#)

**Note 78:** Boyd-Bowman, 16. Irene Wright, *Early History of Cuba 1492-1586* (New York: Octagon, 1970). [Back.](#)

**Note 79:** Francisco A. De Icaza, *Diccionario autobiografico de conquistadores y pobladores de Nueva España* (Guadalajara: Edmundo Aviña Levy, 1969), 186. [Back.](#)

**Note 80:** Robert Himmerich y Valencia, *The Encomenderos of New Spain 1521-1555* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 118. It is unclear what had happened to Mecía. [Back.](#)

**Note 81:** Boyd-Bowman, 16. [Back.](#)

**Note 82:** Before the creation of the Tribunal of the Holy Office in Mexico in 1571, local inquisitorial activities were carried out first by friars and then by the episcopacy. Procedures during this period were less regular than under the Tribunal. [Back.](#)

**Note 83:** For discussion of this manuscript see Josefina Muriel, *Cultura*, op. cit., 55-6; Arenal/Schlau, op. cit., 343-6. [Back.](#)

**Note 84:** Texas, García MS 79. Relación de la fundación del convento antiguo de Santa Teresa, 3. [Back.](#)

**Note 85:** Texas, García MS 94. Libro en que se contiene la vida de la Madre María Magdalena .... For discussion of this manuscript, see Muriel, *Cultura*, op. cit., 319-29; Arenal/Schlau, op. cit., 346-9. [Back.](#)

**Note 86:** AGN, Inquisición 48, Exp. 4, ff. 115-62. Processo contra maria de la conception beata natural y veza de mexico. 1574, 132v. [Back.](#)

**Note 87:** Josefina Muriel, "Lo que leían las mujeres en la Nueva España," in José Pascual Buxó and Arnulfo Herrera, eds., *La literatura novohispana: revisión crítica y propuestas metodológicas* (Mexico: UNAM, 1994), 159-73; 165. [Back.](#)

**Note 88:** AGN, Inquisición 48, Exp. 4, ff. 115-62. Processo contra maria de la concepcion beata natural y veza de mexico. 1574. [Back.](#)

**Note 89:** María was also on good terms with Francisco de Ribera, the Franciscan commissary general, and Maese Alonso. Both men had lent her books. One wonders why she did not call either of these men as character witnesses. [Back.](#)

**Note 90:** AGN, Inquisición 176, Exp. 9, Ff. 65v-83. Processo contra Doña Anna de Guillamas, alias de peralta residente en esta ciudad de mexco, por alumbrada. f. 71v. Miguel was also the witness who reported that Doña Ana had told a woman that she would have a good childbirth, would give birth to a son, and would suffer no difficulties with her breasts after the birth. [Back.](#)

**Note 91:** The mention of a connection with Juan Núñez should have guaranteed the Inquisition's interest in prosecuting Doña Ana, as he was the subject of his own Inquisition trial in 1598. See AGN, Inquisición, 210, Exp. 2. Proceso contra Juan Nunez Valanzario de la caja real y vecino de Mexico por alumbrado y supersticioso. 1598. [Back.](#)

**Note 92:** AGN, Inquisición 210, Exp. 3, ff. 307-430. Processo contra Marina de San Miguel vezina de la ciudad de mexico beata de la orden de sto domingo natural de cordova en los reynos de castilla, 1598. I discuss Marina's case in greater detail in "ÆMore Sins than the Queen of England': Marina de San Miguel before the Mexican Inquisition," in Mary Giles, ed., *Women in the Inquisition: Spain in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, forthcoming). An edited translation of Marina's nine confessions will appear in Richard Boyer and Geoffrey Spurling, eds. *Colonial Documents: A Reader* (forthcoming). [Back.](#)

**Note 93:** See Ida Altman, *Emigrants and Society: Extremadura and Spanish America in the Sixteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 229. [Back.](#)

**Note 94:** Ida Altman emphasizes that in the sixteenth century, "emigrating" to the Indies was perceived as similar to joining the army for a while; both were temporary. About 10 percent of emigrants did indeed return to Spain. See Altman, op. cit., 85, 248. [Back.](#)

**Note 95:** See Mary Elizabeth Perry, "Beatas and the Inquisition in Early Modern Seville," in Stephen Haliczer, ed. *Inquisition and Society in Early Modern Europe* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 147-67. Also see "Chastity and Danger," Chapter Five of Perry's *Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville*, op. cit., 97-117. [Back.](#)

**Note 96:** The unfortunate Inés learned that "dios estava muy ayrado contra [ella] sin dezir la causa porque." [Back.](#)

**Note 97:** Such illnesses are, of course, a common leitmotif in the spiritual biographies of holy women, as they were in the life of Saint Teresa. See, for an interesting example, Concepción Torres, *Ana de Jesús, Cartas (1590-1621): Religiosidad y vida cotidiana en la clausura femenina del Siglo de Oro* (Salamanca: 1995), 24-25 *passim*. [Back.](#)

**Note 98:** For a discussion of how relationships between beatas and confessors, as well as other male religious, often evolved into such "inverted" teacher-disciple relationships, see Luisa Ciamitti, "One Saint Less: The Story of Angela Mellini, a Bolognese Seamstress (1667-17[?])," in *Sex and Gender in Historical Perspective* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 141-76. [Back.](#)

**Note 99:** See, for example, Jodi Bilinkoff, "A Spanish Prophetess and Her Patrons: The Case of María de Santo Domingo," *Sixteenth-Century Journal* 23:1 (Spring 1992), 21-34. Mariá de Santo Domingo was a beata who counted the three most powerful men in Spain among her patrons, offering them in return the legitimacy brought by her spiritual endorsement. Thus, Bilinkoff argues, "an illiterate peasant woman had access to a form of spiritual authority that a duke, a king, and a cardinal of the church might only envy" (34). John Coakley makes the same point in his "Gender and the Authority of Friars: The Significance of Holy Women for Thirteenth-Century Franciscans and Dominicans" (*Church History* 60:4 (December 1991); 445-60), while emphasizing that the authority of medieval holy women in relation to friars was "as boundary figures," as people with privileged access to the divine but answerable to the friars' ecclesiastical authority, therefore enhancing rather than diminishing the friars' own authority (459). For one of the few Spanish American studies, see Fernando Iwasaki Cauti, "Mujeres al borde de la perfección: Rosa de Santa María y las alumbradas de Lima," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 73:4 (November 1993), 581-613; 590-6. [Back.](#)

**Note 100:** The phrase is Herbert Moller's, from his "Social Causes of Affective Mysticism," *Journal of Social History* 4:4 (Summer 1971), 305-38; 333. Moller's allegation that affective mysticism thrives as a response to a sexual imbalance in favor of women certainly does not explain evidence from sixteenth-century Mexico City, but his explanation of what male clerics derived from relationships with mystic women is apt: "The men had the gripping experience of witnessing in another person a depth of feeling and an immediate contact with divine forces, of which they themselves were incapable" (334). [Back.](#)

**Note 101:** "Recogimiento" is a difficult word to translate. "Devotion" conveys a general sense of what Marina's neighbors might have meant, though "reclusion," "enclosure," "recollection," and "concentration" would all be acceptable definitions. In Francisco de Osuna's *Tercer abecedario espiritual* of 1527, the author differentiates between a general *recogimiento* as an existence aloof from worldly matters, and a particular *recogimiento*, a specific meditative exercise based on collecting the senses and directing them toward contemplation of the divine. See Alastair Hamilton, *Heresy and Mysticism in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 14. [Back.](#)

**Note 102:** Note that this page has been improperly paginated in the original *legajo*. It belongs between ff. 338v and 339. [Back.](#)

**Note 103:** An excellent overview of the larger case is provided by Julio Jiménez Rueda, *Herejías y supersticiones en la Nueva España: los heterodoxos en México* (Mexico: Imprenta Universitaria, 1946), 139-57. I provide more detail about the illuminist group and Marina's place in it in "More Sins than the Queen of England," op. cit. [Back.](#)

**Note 104:** Johnson, op. cit., 112-13. [Back.](#)

**Note 105:** Carolyn Valone, "Roman Matrons as Patrons: Various Views of the Cloister Wall," in Monson, op. cit., 49-72; 67. [Back.](#)

**Note 106:** Clerics were highly sensitive to suggestions of breaches of chastity. In 1572, for example, the cabildo eclesiástico complained to the Council of the Indies about the conduct of an audiencia member. The cabildo had enacted a ruling forbidding clerics of all orders to accompany women, hold their hands, or transport them on horseback in Mexico City. The fiscal of the audiencia, discussing the ruling, complained that it would forbid men from accompanying their sisters and mothers, referring specifically to a son of his who was a priest. When challenged, the fiscal angrily said "acompañarán ellos a sus mancebas y no acompañará mi hijo a su madre." Información que hizo el Cabildo Eclesiástico de México sobre ciertas palabras injuriosas que había dicho el doctor Céspedes de Cárdenas fiscal de la Audiencia. 1. vii. 1572. In Paso y Troncoso, *Epistolario* XI, No. 663, 126-32. [Back.](#)

**Note 107:** See, for example, Judith Brown, op. cit.; Guido Ruggiero, *The Boundaries of Eros* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Peter Marzahl, *Town and the Empire: Government, Politics, and Society in Seventeenth-Century Popayán* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978). [Back.](#)

**Note 108:** Adelina Sarrión Mora, *Sexualidad y confesión: La solicitud ante el Tribunal del Santo Oficio (siglos XVI-XIX)* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1994), 290-1. [Back.](#)

**Note 109:** AGN, Inquisición 177, Exp. 1, ff. 1-. Proceso contra el licendo frutos garcia natural de la va de cuellar en españa clerigo presbitero capellan y confessor del monasto de monjas de Regina desta ciudad de Mexico. 1590. [Back.](#)

**Note 110:** AGN, Inquisición, 467, Exp. 53, fs. 242-7. [Back.](#)

**Note 111:** I discuss the sexual aspects of Marina's case more extensively in "More Sins than the Queen of England." Contemporary cases abounded. In 1546, for example, the Spanish nun Magdalena de la Cruz was pronounced a false visionary, having seen the devil as an angel of light and in the shape of Christ and receiving "carnal delights" from these visions. Alison Weber, "Saint Teresa, Demonologist," in M.E. Perry and Anne J. Cruz, eds., *Culture and Control in Counter-Reformation Spain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 171-95; 173-4. Some Sevillian beatas saw the Devil in the form of a handsome youth exposing his genitals. M.E. Perry, "Beatas and the Inquisition," op. cit., 156-7. And while she denied sex with the Devil, the Italian nun Benedetta Carlini took on the form of an angel of light to have sex with another nun. See Brown, op. cit. [Back.](#)

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