



The Roman Catholic Missionary Experience in Ibero-America

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With the advent of the fifth centenary of Christopher Columbus's voyage to the Americas, and the subsequent conquest of the continent by European powers, much attention has been given to the role played by the Christian churches in the history of the western hemisphere. This has included not only the missions and their methods, some of which have been subjected to a highly critical scrutiny, but also the impact of culture shock, the use of compulsion, the breakdown of native cultures, and the resulting syncretic forms of Christianity. Clearly it is not possible to present a detailed and comprehensive view of all these questions within the space of a brief article. This study, however, will attempt to survey the more important constitutive elements in the history of the Catholic missionary enterprise in Latin America, with special emphasis on the Spanish experience. While Portuguese America was also important in this missionary endeavor, it will be less prominent in this study.

I. CASTILIAN CATHOLICISM

While the term "Spanish" is used rather freely, it is actually misleading. When in April 1492 Columbus signed his capitulations, or contract, of exploration and discovery with the Catholic sovereigns Ferdinand and Isabella, Spain as it is known today did not exist. The Iberian peninsula was shared by a number of emerging nation-states, of which the most important were Portugal, Castile, and Aragon. The responsibility for the voyage to the New World belonged to Isabella and the kingdom of Castile, not to Ferdinand and Aragon. It was Castilian law, customs, and religion that were exported to what is now known as Spanish America. Only in 1580, when Philip II brought Portugal under his rule and the

Iberian peninsula was united for the first time since the Roman empire, did the sovereign begin to call himself king of Spain.

The Castilian Roman Catholicism that was preached in what is now Spanish America was the religious system of a specific area of the Catholic world as it existed prior to the reforms of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the reforming popes, or the founding of the Jesuits. Untouched by the religious upheavals following the revolt of Martin Luther (1517), it bore the stamp of the nature, genius, and shortcomings of the Castilians.¹ Spanish Catholicism, like the Spanish character itself, was molded in the seven-century struggle to drive the Arabs (Moors) from Iberian soil. In 711 the Moors of northern Africa, newly converted to Islam, invaded the Visigothic kingdom of Spain and within seven years had conquered all but a small northern area. In 718 the Christians (they did not call themselves Spaniards in their struggle with the infidel)

began the long and costly process of recovery, the *reconquista*. By the thirteenth century it was essentially complete. In the course of this struggle Catholicism and Spanish identity became fused, in both reality and myth. Militancy, a crusading spirit, intolerance, and the use of force for religious ends were part of the heritage of the reconquest.

Like Catholicism throughout the world, the church in Castile was structured and hierarchical. In the cities bishops reigned as spiritual, and sometimes civil, leaders. Below the bishops was a complex hierarchy composed of chapters, canons, chaplains, and parishes with their pastors and curates. The clergy had a clear status in society and, in spite of rather widespread anticlericalism, prestige. Many were graduates of the great Spanish universities, such as Salamanca or Valladolid, often with degrees in canon or civil law. Both bishops and clerics frequently served the crown as royal officials, while others, especially outside the great cities, were often ill-educated or even illiterate.

Religion in Castile tended to be strongly local, especially in the rural areas.² It centered around the village, with its festivals and traditions. In general the ordinary Castilian was not well instructed in his or her faith, which was often a folk religion mingled with superstition. There was little systematic instruction, and in the rural areas sermons were rare. Religion was often externalized, consisting of certain actions which, if repeated often enough or in the right way, would produce the desired result. On the other hand, the mystical element was strong and during the course of the sixteenth century would grow into a movement that would produce some of the greatest religious literature of modern times. Cult centered on local devotions. Attendance at mass was casual in a way that might shock a modern Catholic. People often walked about the church during services (there were no pews and rarely chairs, except for the upper classes), carrying on animated conversations and sometimes making assignations. Pilgrimages and celebrations of saints' days were equally as important as liturgy. Devotion was directed primarily toward the Virgin Mary and the local patron saint. Christ was a more distant figure, often seen as a threatening judge, whose wrath was turned

¹An excellent survey of Latin American Catholic thought and practices is Ernest S. Sweeney, "The Nature and Power of Religion in Latin America: Some Aspects of Popular Beliefs and Practices," *Thought* 59/233 (June 1984) 149-63.

²The best single treatment of this in English is William Christian, Jr., *Local Religion in Sixteenth Century Spain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1981).

aside by the tender and protective Virgin. Mary represented a compassionate approach to religion, in contrast with her son whose anger was directed toward a sinful world. In New Spain she was sometimes depicted in the Trinity, giving birth to the Holy Spirit.³ As Allison Coudert has observed, "For many Catholics the real Trinity consisted of God, Christ, and Mary. Some went even farther. In the fifteenth century people kept statuettes of the virgin that opened to reveal the Trinity within."⁴

As Castilian domination spread from the Caribbean to Mexico and then to Peru and South America, the missionaries followed. In the beginning their methods, like the Spanish colonial administration itself, were improvised. There was little in the way of experience or tradition to fall back on. The New World was the scene of the first major, concentrated missionary enterprise since the conversion of the Slavs some five centuries before. It was necessary to evolve a

missionary program. Most of this was done in what is now modern Mexico, known in the colonial period as New Spain. It was there that the essential model of evangelization was formulated which, with refinement and variations, would be used throughout the missionary epoch, from the Jesuit reductions of Paraguay to the Franciscan missions of California.

The task was daunting enough. Geography was a major obstacle. Missionaries in New Spain wrote about caring for areas that were as large as provinces in the mother country. Jungles, mountain ranges, isolated villages, and deserts often proved to be insurmountable barriers. In addition, there was no such thing as an “Indian” as such. The Native Americans were a widely varying group of peoples who spoke a bewildering variety of languages and dialects. They included the sophisticated and highly-developed peoples of Central Mexico and Yucatan, the tightly-organized and centralized monarchy of the Incas, the warlike and cannibalistic Guaranís of Paraguay, and the virtually unconquerable Araucanians of Chile. Their religious beliefs and systems were equally varied. The Mexica (Aztecs) of Mexico had a complex theology, a powerful priesthood, and elaborate ritual that included human sacrifice. They were accustomed to accepting other deities into their pantheon and later had difficulty understanding the exclusive claims of the Christian God. The Incas, on the other hand, had a simpler theology that at times tended toward a form of monotheism and their priesthood was relatively weak. Less developed cultures often followed a form of animism or spirit worship.

II. THE MISSIONARY PROGRAM

The missionaries who preached Roman Catholicism to these peoples were Europeans who belonged to the major religious orders: the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and later the Jesuits. Not all were Castilians or Spaniards. In the sixteenth century their ranks included Flemings, Frenchmen, Italians, and even an occasional Irishman. All, however, came to the New World with a European

³William B. Taylor, “The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain: An Inquiry into the Social History of Marian Devotion,” *American Ethnologist* 13 (1986) 21.

⁴Allison P. Coudert, “The Myth of the Improved Status of Protestant Women: The Case of the Witchcraze,” in *The Politics of Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Jean R. Brink, Allison P. Coudert, and Marianne C. Horowitz (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal, 1989) 85.

background and mentality, which often hindered their communication with the natives. They soon evolved a number of principles which constituted the missionary program.

One of these was to use the native languages as the instrument of evangelization. Apparently no thought was given to the use of Spanish as the universal language of preaching and instruction. In New Spain this approach was facilitated by the fact that Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, was widespread and could be used as a *lingua franca*. The situation was more complex in Peru and South America. Though the Quechua and Aymará languages were widespread in Peru, they were not in any sense universal. In addition languages changed almost from village to village. It is not surprising that the volume of Nahuatl writings from the sixteenth century far exceeds that of any other native language in the entire hemisphere. It should also be noted that toward the end of the sixteenth century the Spanish government instituted a complete legal system in Nahuatl for the natives of New Spain. These facts should be kept in mind when

evaluating the charges of cultural or linguistic destruction that are often leveled against the missionaries and the Spanish crown.

The use of the native languages involved processes far more complex than mere translation. The natives and the missionaries were separated by a wide cognitive and psychological gap. The search for native words that could translate concepts of personal sin and redemption, heaven and hell, when these concepts as the Europeans understood them did not exist among the natives, caused innumerable difficulties. The use of a native word added nuances that subtly changed the original meaning of the word toward a more native concept. In the case of New Spain this has been called the “nahuatilization” of Christianity.⁵ There is also the implication that the missionaries themselves were affected by these sometimes arcane changes. In the post-Vatican II era the idea that the evangelizer is to some extent evangelized by those to whom he or she preaches has gained some currency in the Catholic Church, though the process has been at work throughout history.

This gap in understanding between evangelizers and evangelized probably aided syncretism. The natives appeared to have accepted Christianity in its fullness, yet in many instances their Christianity was only a veneer. The language/cognitive gap may have prevented the missionaries from understanding the syncretic process whereby Christianity was being mingled with native beliefs and practices, or it may have given them an excessive optimism about the success of their efforts.

Another missionary tactic was that of relocating nomadic or semi-nomadic natives into larger town and city units. The unsettled nomadic way of life, together with the large number of small village units, was viewed as an obstacle to evangelization. While the friars often built their monasteries in rural districts in order to be near the natives, many bishops and governmental officials preferred a policy known as *congregación* in Spanish America and *aldeamento* in Brazil, that is, resettling the natives in larger urban groupings. Aside from the envisioned aid to evangelization, this policy assumed that European city life was the only civilized

⁵Charles E. Dibble, “The Nahuatilization of Christianity,” in *Sixteenth Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún*, ed. Munro S. Edmonson (Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico, 1974) 225-33.

one and that natives would eventually have to adopt a European culture and lifestyle. There was no concept in the sixteenth century of the culture shock that such abrupt uprooting could cause. This resettlement was never consistently carried out, partly because of strong resistance by many of the missionary orders, partly because in some areas it was simply impossible to implement.

In more remote areas or in those controlled by hostile natives, the Spaniards turned to the presidio system. Attempts to evangelize hostile Indians without military protection usually ended in martyrdom for the missionaries. The new system was developed on the Chichimeca frontier of Mexico, to the north of the present capital, in the late sixteenth century. Basically, the presidio was composed of a small group of missionaries, a number of Christian Indians who acted as a leaven among the other natives, and enough soldiers to keep the missionaries alive. The presence of the soldiers was usually a negative factor because it brought the Indians into contact with the more corrupt and brutal elements in the Spanish world. The presidio/mission was an outpost of empire, and the missionary enterprise and imperial administration, despite frequent hostility among their respective agents, reinforced each other.

An important factor in the missionary enterprise, and one that is usually neglected in most standard histories, was the financial support that it required. That was something that only the crown of Castile could provide. That such abase was found and even proved adequate is one of the wonders of the entire undertaking, all the more so in view of the precarious nature of royal finances throughout the period of Castilian rule in the New World. Governmental support was inevitably followed by governmental control, a system that is known as the right of royal patronage (*patronato real*). Early in the sixteenth century the crown gained the right to collect all tithes, which were redonated to the church according to a complex formula. In addition there were individual grants, called *mercedes*, which were made in response to petitions from monasteries, churches, hospitals, convents, and other religious groups. Eventually the crown's domination became almost total, reducing the church to a department of state that was in many ways independent of the papacy. In exchange for the security and support given by the state, however, the church gave up its freedom. The domination of the Spanish crown over the church reached its climax under the Bourbons in the eighteenth century. In Brazil the domination was not quite so total, and there were missionaries whose primary accountability was to Rome, not to Lisbon.

The cost of evangelization and the uncertain nature of royal finances caused many of the missionaries and religious institutions to turn to their own moneymaking projects. In Brazil, in a special way, the challenge of supporting the missions led to the involvement of the religious orders in commercial enterprises, such as sugar plantations. In New Spain the Jesuits became famous for their well-administered sugar plantations. For the modern reader it is both shocking and dismaying that in both areas the religious orders made use of black slaves. Thus, as strongly as the Jesuits of Brazil sought to protect the Indians from Portuguese slave raiders, they apparently felt no qualms about black slavery.

However much the religious orders may have opposed the policy of *congregación* and believed in the eventual integration of the Indian into European society, in the short run they sought to keep the natives away from the Spanish and

Portuguese. This was the fundamental policy of the Jesuit reductions and the California missions. The presence of the Europeans was thought to undermine the missionaries' work, a belief rooted in bitter experience. Slave-raiding expeditions, expeditions for the sake of conquest, labor exploitation, biological contamination, all undid the good that the missionaries attempted to do. An appalling example was the statement by a Mexican Indian who said that he did not want to go to heaven if there were going to be Spaniards there.

An important question that has emerged in the aftermath of the beatification of Junípero Serra is that of the use of force and punishment as instruments of evangelization. Though this needs further detailed study, there is evidence that it was a recurring problem. There were numerous complaints, for example, that even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Franciscans of New Spain, contrary to royal orders, maintained jails and stocks for the natives. In 1688 the Jesuit Francisco de Florencia wrote that it was still customary in New Spain to give the natives five or six blows with a stick when they were late for services or instruction. Certainly this view of punishment and force, a heritage of the *reconquista*, fitted in with the mentality of the times. There were unabashed apologists for it, such as the Spanish aristotelian scholar, Juan

Ginés de Sepúlveda, who held that the words in Luke's gospel, "force them to come in" (14:24), applied to the Indians and Christianity.⁶ The policy of *congregación* was in itself a form of compulsion. The presence of an armed conqueror who overthrew idols and of royal officials who endowed churches was also a potent form of intimidation. It is often argued that it is unfair to judge the mentality of the sixteenth century by that of a later, supposedly more enlightened one. On the other hand the long-standing tradition of Christianity and a basic theological principle of Catholicism has been that faith must be accepted freely. Many churchmen and missionaries in the New World lost sight of that principle, often out of frustration when gentler methods proved ineffective. In a human way the missionaries blamed their own ineffectiveness on the flaws of the natives, shortcomings that needed a firm and authoritarian hand for correction. This is a dark side of mission history. It cannot be denied, but it also must not be exaggerated. The Jesuit reductions, for example, were characterized on the whole by a mild administration.

This authoritarian approach to evangelization was offset by the fervent dedication of the missionaries to their task. The cost of mission work was personal as well as financial. The number of missionaries who lost their lives in the course of their work cannot be known for sure, but it was large. The missionaries endured their own form of culture shock: alien environments, harsh climates, strange food, and disease.

III. ADVOCACY FOR THE OPPRESSED

The Spanish, and to a lesser extent the Portuguese, were unique among all colonizing and imperialistic peoples in having a formidable movement in favor of the oppressed natives. In the sixteenth century a strong and vocal pro-Indian movement emerged in the New World that unhesitatingly condemned the injus-

⁶An older, but still classic study of this question is Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (reprint; Boston: Little, Brown, 1965).

tices and exploitation by the Europeans. In Spanish America it was represented by Toribio de Benavente, Alonso de Zorita, Gerónimo de Mendieta, Diego Durán, and the greatest and most controversial of all, Bartolomé de las Casas. In Brazil, at a later period, the gauntlet was taken up by Antônio Vieira and the Jesuits of Paraguay. Unlike the British, and later the Germans and Dutch, the Iberian nations had an institutionalized conscience in the form of a church which had a clearly defined place in society. In addition, Spaniards enjoyed a surprising freedom of speech and protest. Clerics, officials, and private citizens wrote to the king with amazing frequency and frankness. Their letters were noted and evaluated with bureaucratic thoroughness. It was this thoroughness, together with an efficient archival system, that enables us today to reconstruct the great humanitarian movement of the sixteenth century.

The pro-Indian lobby was never an organized, clearly defined group. Some of the protagonists, like Motolinía and Las Casas, were hostile to each other. There were opposing opinions about the Indians and how they should be helped. Some held a patronizing view of Indians, while others exalted them in the best "noble savage" tradition. Motolinía and Juan de Zumárraga, the first bishop of Mexico City, upheld the basic justice of Spanish rule, while Las Casas, toward the end of his life, believed that the Spanish were bound to full restitution, including all the conquered lands themselves. More important than the differences, however, is

the fact that the movement on the whole had an impact, despite setbacks, failures, and the omnipresent “American reality,” that is, the de facto situation that laws and theories could never entirely affect. The frenzied reactions of the colonials demonstrate that quite clearly. There was nothing like it in the history of any other nation. Anglo-America never produced a single figure comparable to the great Spanish defenders of the Indians of the sixteenth century or to Antônio Vieira in the seventeenth. Helen Hunt Jackson scarcely belongs in their company.

IV. THE OUTCOME

Was the evangelization of the Iberian New World a success? Opinions vary widely, not only according to one’s view of history, but also to one’s definition of success. One school of thought holds that it implanted a fervent and deep-rooted Christianity that remains to this day. Another views this Christianity as little more than a veneer placed over an enduring paganism. A third school finds it to be a syncretism, a combination of Christian and pre-Christian beliefs and practices. The second opinion is given support by the pessimism that overtook many of the missionaries in the late sixteenth century. They found that in many cases Christianity was superficial and that their peoples were still pagan at heart. This caused many of the friars to look back nostalgically to the early years as a golden age of missionary success.

Given the obstacles that were met and with varying degrees of success overcome, it must be admitted that on the whole the Ibero-American missionary enterprise was in great part successful. Such an assertion, however, can be made only with serious reservations. It does not mean that the resulting Christianity of the native peoples was all that the missionaries envisioned or that it fit neatly into western European categories. Christianity in the Americas was based on a late

medieval Iberian model and was filtered through the prism of various native American cultures and beliefs.

Christianity in Ibero-America is in many ways a local and folk religion. Deeply embedded in the local culture, its strength is as much cultural as it is religious. In some areas, such as Brazil, Haiti, the Maya country, and the Andean areas, the fusion is such that the old has dominated the new, and the result is neither Christian nor pre-Christian but a mixture of the two. Even where the Catholicism is more identifiable, it tends to be non-clerical, non-institutional, and non-intellectual. The sacramental system is of less importance, or relevance, than in other Catholic communities. It is significant that sixteenth-century Nahua Indians in New Spain did not speak of attending mass, but of “seeing” mass. At the heart of worship stands the *santo*, the local patron saint who is the center of grass-roots religious life. The *santo*, who in some places is identified with a pre-hispanic deity, is invoked for all needs; his image is a special blessing and is cared for zealously. He gives direct access to the divine.

Supreme among the *santos* is the Virgin Mary. She is the patroness par excellence, whether as Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico or the Virgin of Luján in Argentina. She embodies compassion, particularly toward the oppressed and suffering, and gives them hope, if not for this life, at least for the next. In both Spain and the New World she was the center of innumerable apparition stories and legends, often for the purpose of giving supernatural approval to a specific shrine or church.

Both Iberian Catholicism and some pre-conquest religions shared a deep concern, almost an obsession, with suffering and death. It can be seen in bloody crucifixes, physical mortification (also characteristic of some pre-conquest native religions), and the realization of the brevity and contingency of life. The realities of the conquest and post-conquest life reinforced this for the natives. Life after death was often more real than life before death. Contemporary celebrations of All Souls Day, the Day of the Dead (2 November), testify to the ongoing strength of this preoccupation. Fatalism, common to both conquerors and conquered, came to characterize the overall view of life.

In summary, what emerged from the missionary enterprise was a Catholicism with unique characteristics that combined elements of late medieval Iberian religion with pre-conquest beliefs. The pervading influence of that religion is the most important and enduring legacy of Columbus's fateful expedition.