

PART I

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Excerpt

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Introduction

Troubling Devotion

The image of the highly pious Mexican woman – devoted to priest, sacraments, and saints; clutching her rosary; and attending daily mass – is a familiar one in film and print and the cultural imaginary of both the United States and Mexico. It has a timeless quality; the women this image conjures appear to be living in a past that, for them, has not changed. Scholars of the national period have historicized the origins of this image, linked to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mexican nationalism and its discontents more than to the nonspecific colonial past it seems to represent. Rather than an unbroken tradition of female piety from the Spanish conquest to the present, the reality that this stereotype conceals is one of great dynamism and change in women’s postcolonial relationship to the church. As we learn more about these changes, it becomes clear that they were a significant part of larger shifts in the church’s role in society and its relationship to the rapidly changing Mexican state. Women’s participation in these processes has begun to garner some of the attention it deserves, but the colonial precedents of this participation are still largely a mystery.¹

This gap in our knowledge about women’s participation in colonial religious culture has been partially filled by the important scholarship on convents and nuns; literary and historical studies of the past two or three decades have rightfully placed these elite institutions and exceptional women at the center of the Catholic Church’s colonial history.² However, in doing so, it has also cast a long shadow over our understanding of what it meant to be a woman in colonial Catholic culture. The idea that women in

- 1 Margaret Chowning, “The Catholic Church and the Ladies of the Vela Perpetua: Gender and Devotional Change in Nineteenth-Century Mexico,” *Past and Present*, 221 (November 2013); Edward Wright-Rios, *Revolutions in Mexican Catholicism: Reform and Revelation in Oaxaca, 1887–1934* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009) and *Searching for Madre Matiana: Prophecy and Popular Culture in Modern Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2014).
- 2 For an overview of this scholarship, see Margaret Chowning, “Convents and Nuns: New Approaches to the Study of Female Religious Institutions in Colonial Mexico,” *History Compass* 6, no. 5 (2008): 1279–1303.

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the colonial period had only two viable options – marriage or the convent – remains a fallback assumption in much of our scholarship and teaching, even though scholars have shown that consensual cohabitation, illegitimate children, and economically independent (though perhaps struggling) women were not unusual.³ This is understandable because, while the notion of women as either wives or nuns may not entirely square with historical realities, it does reflect a powerful colonial ideal that remains salient for historians precisely because of the way it shaped all women's experiences and, in particular, their relationship to the religious culture that permeated colonial society. In other words, while it may have been unattainable, the proscription that a good woman should be either a cloistered nun or a secluded, pious, and obedient wife was familiar to everyone in New Spain. And women of all walks of life knew that they were being measured against this ideal in some context of their lives.

The day-to-day particulars of women's complex negotiations with this largely unattainable social and spiritual mandate, along with many other aspects of the church's ubiquitous role in colonial life, have remained relatively unknown. Only when the church was threatened – its traditional roles and privileges challenged after Mexico ceased to be a Spanish colony – did laywomen's intense attachments to the church become more visible to historians; and yet this happened in an era in which they were also changing tremendously. What appear to be the historical actions of women defending the church in the context of liberal opposition may be more accurately described as both women and the church seeing new opportunities, in each other, for increased civic engagement in a period of crisis, rupture, and redefinition. The affiliations, public activities, and passionate engagement that lay behind the anticlerical image of a conservative woman wedded to an antiquated, backward institution actually represented new dynamics in women's relationship to the church.⁴

3 On the distance between sexual and marital behavior and church proscriptions, see Asunción Lavrin, "Sexuality in Colonial Mexico: A Church Dilemma," in *Sexuality and Marriage in Colonial Latin America*, ed. Asunción Lavrin (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1989). On the realities of women's lives and choices, see Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, "Las mujeres novohispanas y las contradicciones de una sociedad patriarcal," in *Las mujeres en la construcción de las sociedades Iberoamericanas*, eds. Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru and Berta Aires Queija (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Históricos, 2004).

4 Margaret Chowning, "The Catholic Church and the Ladies of the Vela Perpetua"; "La feminización de la piedad en México: Género y piedad en las cofradías de españoles: Tendencias coloniales y pos-coloniales en los arzobispados de Michoacán y Guadalajara," in *Religión, política e identidad en la época de la independencia de México*, ed. Brian Connaughton (Mexico City: UAM, 2010); and "Liberals, Women, and the Church in Mexico: Politics and the Feminization of Piety, 1700–1930." Paper presented at the Harvard Latin American Studies seminar, Cambridge, MA, 2002; Silvia Marina Arrom, "Las Señoras de la Caridad: pioneras olvidadas de la asistencia social en México, 1863–1910." *Historia Mexicana* 57, no. 2 (Oct.–Dec. 2007): 445–90; and "Mexican Laywomen

But how do we explain the willingness of women to seize upon these new opportunities? What was it that made women inclined to seek them out and to lend their support to the church in the first place? Nineteenth-century changes alone do not suffice as an explanation, nor does the exclusion of women from the masculinist state and its nation-building projects. Historians need to also reckon with the long history of women seeking and finding a significant portion of the scarce emotional and material resources available to them in their relationship to the church and their participation in religious culture. If we accept the story of colonial Catholicism as uniformly oppressive to all but the most elite women and, even then, offering only very limited avenues of participation, we cannot fully understand the phenomenon of so many ordinary women publicly defending the church in the early national period.

The fuller explanation is not a simple one, however. Neither is it found clearly in stories of resistance or accommodation. Rather, to understand the colonial history of the possibilities women sought, found, and created in the national period, we have to examine the gradually forged relationships, day-to-day interactions and practices, and cumulative knowledge that constituted women's participation in colonial religious culture. This history is one of troubling devotion in two senses of the words: troubling, as an adjective, because women's devotion was significant even when it seems to have reinforced the very ideas and power dynamics that caused them harm; and troubling, as a verb, because the history that results from examining laywomen's role in shaping religious culture challenges the usual understanding of what counts as religious devotion. Women of all geographies, racial categories, and social positions participated in a spiritual economy that was both transcendent and material and that involved institutions and social networks as much as it did intimate and emotionally charged relationships. "Devotion" gets at some of the affective potency of women's connections to religious ideas, authorities, images, and sacraments and other embodied practices. But it falls short of explaining the depth to which these things shaped the whole of women's lives and possibilities, the urgency of women's negotiations and interpretations of them, and thus the impact women had on them.

Understanding women's participation in colonial religious culture has the power to change the way we think about the church's role in colonial society in general. Throughout the course of my research, I encountered a number of things that challenged what I had previously thought about colonial dynamics and processes more generally. Taking women's

Spearhead a Catholic Revival: The Ladies of Charity, 1863–1910," in *Religious Culture in Modern Mexico*, ed. Martin Austin Nesvig (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2007), 50–77.

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interactions with the church as the point of departure can nuance and sometimes transform time-honored interpretations of religious practices and cultural change. Most of these shifts are subtle, and yet they engage with important debates in the historiography. Things as varied as the development of the individual in early modern history, the relative strength and effectiveness of the Inquisition in New Spain, jurisdictional divisions in ecclesiastical justice, the shape of convent reforms, and the development of prisons and other disciplinary institutions all look somewhat different when seen through the lens of women's engagement with the church.⁵

This book explores women's participation in religious culture through their engagements with rituals, authorities, institutions, and ideas. Throughout, it pays attention to how colonial understandings of sexuality, gender, race, and social status shaped those interactions. It makes four general arguments: the first is that, over time, the church developed a distinct body of ideas and practices related to laywomen; the second is that laywomen absorbed, sometimes embraced, and always strategically engaged with these practices, even as they were deeply meaningful; the third is that women's understanding of and responses to these ideas and practices constituted an additional recognizable, though informal, body of knowledge; and the fourth is that this body of knowledge was something that church authorities and institutions engaged with in ways that in turn subtly altered institutional and sacramental practice. It is through this back-and-forth exchange that laywomen became essential players – in partnership and tension with many aspects of the church – in creating and shaping colonial religious culture. The details of this process, its varying contexts, and the specific content it produced fill the rest of these pages.

Documenting this dialogic relationship between laywomen and church authorities, infrastructure, and ritual reveals important aspects of the daily elaboration of cultures of religiosity and the social contracts that supported, challenged, and shaped the Catholic Church's role in colonial society. By the mid-seventeenth century, church courts' broad jurisdiction over marriage and sexuality, together with a long discursive tradition of theological and social concern over women's spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional capacities, led to an expansive body of pastoral, institutional, and juridical ideas and practices aimed specifically at laywomen. Ecclesiastical authorities were especially concerned with the perceived contagion of sin and scandal and with women's roles either as dangerous vectors of such contagion or as protective bulwarks against it. Images, ecclesiastical

5 Each of these subjects warrants focused research that centers women's experiences and religiosity, which may very well lead to important interpretive shifts.

communication, and official religious discourse depicted women as existing on a continuum in relation to this question – from those who posed the greatest threat to society (the defiantly corrupt woman, the fallen but redeemable woman, and the vulnerable but protectable woman) to those whose sanctioned position and model behavior actually strengthened society (the securely protected woman and the exceptionally virtuous woman capable of sanctifying others). Women of diverse social locations engaged with these concepts in their devotional lives and interactions with church authorities and institutions; they embraced, challenged, and interpreted these ideas in ways that helped them create meaning, solve problems, and navigate disciplinary forces. These efforts constituted a layer of lay religious culture that clergymen and institutional authorities then had to contend with to do their jobs effectively.

Seeing laywomen’s experiences and choices in New Spain requires paying attention to both formal and informal interactions, mining fragmentary evidence, and incorporating both marginal and mundane contexts and events. It is helpful in this process to think of the colonial church as a web of social relationships, practices, ideas, moral obligations, and beliefs rather than as a discrete institutional entity or even a collection of interlocking institutions. “The church” in New Spain (and other early modern places) was at once an institutional network, a community, and a culture. Seen this way, the boundaries of what was “church” and what was not become porous, which is precisely how people living in colonial Mexico most likely experienced them.

Historians over the past two decades have increasingly challenged the separation of “popular” and “elite” religiosity and troubled the demarcation of clear boundaries between an official, orthodox, institutional church and an informal realm of practice.⁶ In spite of this important shift, it remains methodologically challenging to focus on the role of devotional practice in people’s daily lives while also attending sufficiently to the workings of church institutions within colonial society. However, this is the very challenge we must continue to meet if we are to accurately reflect the history of “religion” and “church” in the early modern era. In colonial Mexico, this means attending to the human exchanges that forged the social contract between the church and society, which simultaneously limited and validated ecclesiastical power. It means keeping in mind the

6 The analytical lens of “local religion” has been particularly helpful in moving beyond these binaries. See, for example, William Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); Martin Austin Nesvig, ed., *Local Religion in Colonial Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2006); Amos Megged, *Exporting the Reformation: Local Religion in Early Colonial Mexico* (New York: Brill Press, 1996); and Jennifer Schepher Hughes, *Biography of a Mexican Crucifix: Lived Religion and Local Faith from the Conquest to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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material and economic aspects of religious culture. And it means remaining alert to the ways that emotions and affective states like fear, respect, reverence, desire, guilt, relief, and joy brought meaning to and motivated people's decisions.⁷

Imagining an interlocking history of institutions, ideas, practices, and embodied, emotional experience and holding in productive tension concepts like devotion and coercion, belief and negotiation, and power and intimacy are essential in this history. While many laywomen identified profoundly with church teachings and practices, these same women also learned to interpret and navigate them strategically in order to find protection, assistance, and comfort. A key way that they did so was by expressing their needs and desires as consistent with the purposes of the church – particularly as manifested in attitudes toward sin and guilt, practices related to sacraments and the seclusion of women, and the proper role of priests in communities.

This expression both challenged and strengthened the constrictive force of Catholicism on women's lives. Confessors, ecclesiastical judges, and administrators of church-supported cloisters and shelters for laywomen found themselves having to accommodate women's interpretations in the day-to-day execution of their jobs. In this dynamic and ongoing exchange, women learned to see themselves as female parishioners with gender-specific obligations owed to them, and religious authorities learned to see their vocations as including specific responsibilities to laywomen. Through this mutually constitutive learning process, laywomen contributed to, elaborated upon, and helped shape the devotional landscape and religious culture of colonial Mexico.

Laywomen: Clarification of Terms

“Laywomen” is an inherently problematic term for this time period. Though some scholars of modern Catholicism consider all women part of the laity because they are excluded from the clergy, this is not the way the term was used in colonial Mexico. *Laicas*, or laywomen, referred to women who had not taken binding religious vows to live as black-habited nuns, living in a convent, after completing a novitiate period and professing to a particular religious order. There was nonetheless some slippage in this term. *Laicas* included a whole range of women, some of whose lives looked very much like nuns – namely, novitiates, white-habited nuns, and *beatas*

7 Javier Villa-Flores and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, eds., *Emotions and Daily Life in Colonial Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2004); Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, ed., *Historia de la vida cotidiana en México*, Vols. I–III (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004).

living in convent-like institutions called *beaterios*.⁸ In some instances, the language used to describe these women combined the language of the laity with that used for professed nuns. The terms “lay sisters” and even “nuns of the white habit” show up in convent records and other documents, and scholars of nuns and convents do not always agree about their meaning. *Donadas*, for instance – women who were “donated” or who “donated” their own bodies and labor to convents but who wore habits and participated in the devotional life of the convent to a greater degree than other servants – sometimes appear in both primary and secondary sources as nuns who could not afford a dowry and found another path to a permanent, second-tier, cloistered religious life, while at other times they appear more like ordinary servants or even slaves.⁹ Contemporary observers and scholars alike reflect a certain fluidity between the terms “lay sisters,” “beatas,” “donadas,” and “nuns of the white habit.” In addition, laywomen living in convents – including servants, slaves, and *niñas* (girls and women who lived as dependents of individual nuns) – often shared space and daily routines with professed nuns. All of this renders the distinction between these groups of women more or less relevant, depending on the question at hand.

With all of this ambiguity and blurriness around the category of “laywomen,” my use of the term requires some justification. First, the term “laywomen” is simply a more elegant way of saying “non-nuns.” Nuns appear in this study, but they are not the focus. Nuns were an important but unusual group of women in colonial Mexico, and their prestige and education resulted in a rich body of sources that has led to a layered historiography. This study seeks to place the “other” women at the center – the majority of women who did not take binding religious vows and live as a class of cloistered religious elites. My second reason for using the term “laywomen” is its capaciousness. Using laywomen as my broadest organizing category allows me to see the variety of factors that shaped women’s lives within and aside from their lay status. In other words, rather than making a claim that laywomen’s lives were more like one another’s lives than that of nuns, my hope is that by excluding nuns from my main focus but including everyone else, I can highlight the diversity of experiences and practices that existed among laywomen. Race/*casta*, class/social status, geography, and spiritual status are the primary categories of analysis through which I understand the choices available to different laywomen

8 Beatas were laywomen who took nonbinding vows of celibacy and devotion. Some lived independently, some took additional vows of poverty and obedience to a particular religious order and lived adjacent to them, and some lived in cloisters exclusively for beatas called *beaterios*.

9 Kathryn Burns, *Colonial Habits: Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999); Asunción Lavrín, *Brides of Christ: Conventual Life in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); and J. Holler, “*Escogidas Plantas*”: *Nuns and Beatas in Mexico City, 1531–1601* (New York, NY: Columbia University, 2005).

and the varying ways they participated in the making of colonial Catholicism.¹⁰

The very imprecision of the term “laywomen” is also useful; like the boundaries of church and not-church, complete clarity is not possible, nor should it be. Some laywomen’s lives and associations placed them squarely within the world of nuns and clergy, while others had very little contact with these manifestations of church authority. These differences, and the fact that some women are more accurately thought of as inhabiting a liminal space between professed nun and laica, make “laywomen” a productive category for highlighting the way that gendered understandings of piety and reputation shaped women’s social status, alongside and entangled with racialized, economic, and geographic differences.

Spiritual Status

A theoretical proposition that underlies many of the arguments in this book is that there existed a historically specific category of social power that was related to one’s reputation for piety and virtue, together with one’s concrete connections to the church. Elsewhere I have proposed using the term “spiritual status” to describe this nexus of social difference and argued that doing so helps us better understand the co-constitutive nature of racialized, gendered, and economically shaped colonial hierarchies.¹¹ When historians approach “religion” as a category of analysis rather than simply an object of study or a description, it becomes clear that what I am calling spiritual status was something that accrued and could be lost through relational interactions. It was both entangled with and distinct from other forms of

- 10 I use the word “casta” throughout the book in three ways: (1) together with race, to indicate the workings and hierarchies of power mapped onto the differences between colonial categories such as: *Españoles*, *Indios*, *Negros*, *Mulatos*, *Mestizos*, *Castizos*, *Moriscos*, and *Lobos*; (2) in the plural, “castas,” to refer collectively to people of “mixed” descent; and (3) with the phrase “casta category” to refer collectively to the recognized colonial racial/ethnic categories that people used and assigned to one another. For various approaches to the workings of casta in colonial Latin America, see Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); and Rachel Sarah O’Toole, *Bound Lives: Africans, Indians, and the Making of Race in Colonial Peru* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012).
- 11 Jessica Delgado, “Virtuous Women and the Contagion of Sin: Race, Poverty, and Women’s Spiritual Status in Colonial Mexico,” unpublished essay; “Public Piety and *Honestidad*: Women’s Spiritual Status in Colonial Mexico,” Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Chicago, IL, November 2012; and “Contagious Sin and Virtue: Race, Poverty, and Women’s Spiritual Status in Colonial Mexico,” Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Chicago, IL, November 2012.