Introduction

> Therefore I cannot refrain from speaking about the city of this world, a city which aims at dominion, which holds nations in enslavement, but is itself dominated by the very lust of domination.
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> Augustine, *City of God*, Book I, Preface.

Across the highlands of central Mexico, hundreds of stone churches stand as a testament to the turbulent history of sixteenth-century Mexico. Austere and windowless, their massive walls of dark red stone propped by pyramidal buttresses, the largest of these missions are among the most imposing erected in the Spanish Empire. In bustling provincial towns and near-abandoned villages these edifices are still imposing, with gothic arches and barrel vaults often rising as high as eighty feet. Closer up these structures lose their severe appearance as their details come into view. In delicately-carved façades, and on murals inside the churches and their adjoining monasteries, native artists left lavish evidence of Mesoamerica's encounter with the European Renaissance. Surrounding these structures, vast churchyards attest to the multitudes that once assembled for masses and instruction. The scale of these missions seems outsize for the handful of mendicant friars who used them as their bases. Yet between 1521 and 1590, indigenous communities undertook monumental campaigns in the wake of conquest and in spite of four catastrophic epidemics, each of which was on the magnitude of the Black Death. Stone by stone, laborers built the infrastructure for one of the most extensive mission enterprises in global history. Amid these stout cloisters and churches that still echo with murmured prayers, questions arise: What motivated native communities to raise these complexes while they sought to recover from conquest and epidemics? Are these walls a testament to Spanish power? Or are they monuments to indigenous persistence?

This book addresses these questions by exploring the social history of the mission enterprise in sixteenth-century Mexico: a story of upheaval, recovery, and the costs of rebuilding. Long studied principally through the lens of religion, missions were also a political force that reinforced colonizers and colonized alike: it was not only a spiritual encounter, but also a worldly enterprise whose transcultural power both colonized and remade Mesoamerica. Amid demographic crises, disruptive social change, and shifting indigenous and Spanish politics, this hybrid enterprise held sway over the indigenous politics of the Viceroyalty of New Spain for seventy years.

At first glance, the Mexican mission epitomized the epochal ambitions of Spanish imperialism. After all, Spaniards – especially missionaries – doggedly pursued an ideal of establishing a universal Christian *imperium*, a new order in which Augustine's city of man would do the work of the city of God. A messianic, exclusivist Christianity shaped their imaginations of the lands that suddenly fell within the perimeters of their world. In like manner, sixteenth-century missionaries viewed the violence of conquest and the colonial regime as instruments of conversion. Preaching alone would not complete their task, and the asymmetry of colonialism offered them a means of implanting the Church on a scale unseen since Charlemagne. To build churches, force recantations, and impose Christian governance, missionaries embraced temporal powers: primarily that of the king of Spain, but also the authority of local native rulers. With the authorization of the Crown and Papacy, the mendicant Orders – Franciscans, Augustinians, and Dominicans – established the Mexican mission as a system of spiritual and temporal rule over native communities. Each colossal church was an ostentatious affirmation of their aim.

Natives had a more urgent mission of their own: that of recovering from demographic, social, and political catastrophe. Rulers in over two hundred city-states used missions to legitimize their rule and consolidate their territories under Spanish sovereignty. Around mission bases known as *doctrinas*, indigenous rulers and missionaries reconstituted local native governments and communities, each with its own church, council, treasury, jurisdiction, and partial autonomy. For even while missions contributed to the violence of colonial rule, they offered indigenous nobles the means to reassert their claims to sovereignty in the wake of losses of at least a third of their population. Survivors of the *hueycocolixtli* epidemic of 1545–1547 actually *doubled* the construction of monasteries in the decade that followed the catastrophe, evidence that these churches arose less from obedience to custom or piety than from the intention to rebuild polities around church structures that would preserve the life and force of

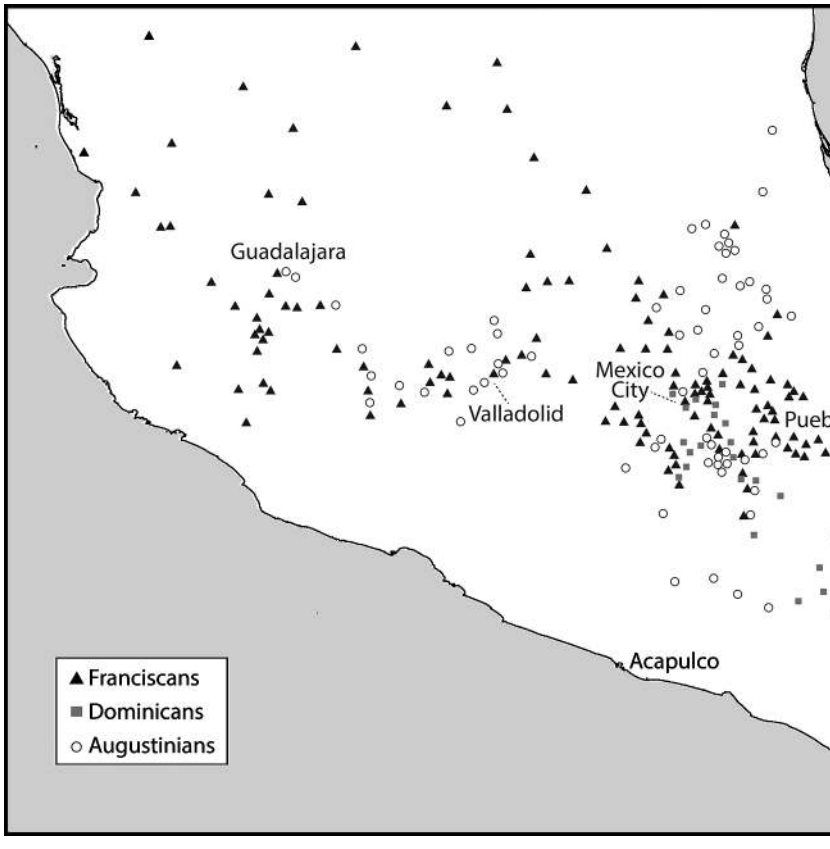
their Mesoamerican forebears, the *teocallis* (temples). The mission was a vehicle of native survival and social reconstitution.

The Mexican mission therefore comprised two missions: one was an apostolic enterprise that legitimized Spanish sovereignty over the New World, while the other was a program of native recovery that legitimized local polities. The Mexican mission expanded across the map of Mesoamerican politics, which consisted of a complex web of interdependent but competing polities. Over two hundred local states, each with their own alliances and rivalries, as well as two moribund empires, the Aztec Triple Alliance and the Kingdom of Michoacán, populated this terrain. In just thirty years, the mission enterprise achieved something that the Aztec Empire had never accomplished: it united the length and breadth of sedentary Central Mexico from Jalisco to Veracruz and from the Río Pánuco to Southern Oaxaca under the sway of Spanish-ruled Tenochtitlán. By the 1570s, a constellation of nearly three hundred doctrinas extended across the highlands of Central Mexico. Alongside their associated indigenous governments, these doctrinas formed the very sinews of colonial governance. For Spaniards, doctrinas instilled *policía* – rational temporal rule – as much as they enabled the spiritual enterprise. This book traces the social construction of the mission on this continental scale, something lacking in a field that has fragmented into studies defined by place and ethnicity.[1] It examines the expansion of this transcultural institution in polities across several ethnic regions, arguing that similar sedentary patterns of settlement and economy laid the basis for this broad network of missions.[2] In 277 doctrinas in indigenous communities, each with its own history and desire for autonomy, the mission enterprise derived its power from its capacity to align, however unequally, the interests of local native leaders with those of Spanish colonizers.[3]

[1] The last major region-wide works on the mission enterprise were those of Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, trans. and ed. Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966); and George Kubler, *Mexican Architecture in the Sixteenth Century* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1948). More recently, Mark Christensen has used native devotional texts to compare central Mexico with Yucatan, in *Nahua and Maya Catholicisms: Texts and Religion in Colonial Central Mexico and Yucatan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

[2] Based on archival data and printed primary sources, this work traces the foundation and development of 277 *doctrinas*. See Appendix for data on *doctrina* foundations and construction projects of mission churches.

[3] Given its focus on native city-states, this study does not examine indigenous urban parishes where Spanish settlement predominated. On indigenous parishes in Tenochtitlán, see Jonathan G. Truitt, *Sustaining the Divine in Mexico Tenochtitlan: Nahuas and Catholicism, 1523–1700* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018).



MAP 0.1. Doctrina monasteries founded in sixteenth century New Spain.
Drawn by Peter Anthamatten and Cody J. Peterson. Based on Elena Vázquez, Distribución geográfica de
City: Biblioteca enciclopédica del Estado de México, 1968).

DEFINING THE MISSION

Of all the popular images of Spanish colonialism, the mission certainly is one of the most enduring. Yet in academic studies the mission has been a fluid concept, subject to changing ideas and approaches. For much of the twentieth century, and indeed for centuries before that, mission history was an extension of the missionaries' worldviews. Apologetic narratives located missions within a broader story of missionary action and native reaction. More recently, indigenous ethnography has reoriented this relationship by paying attention to long-ignored patterns of indigenous agency. The encounter, in their telling, was anything but passive.[4]

As interpretations of the mission shifted, so too did Mexico's place in mission history. In early mission scholarship, central Mexico stood out like a jewel in a Spanish prelate's miter – it embodied what a Spanish mission was about.[5] This changed, however, with indigenous ethnography. Most influential was James Lockhart's argument that the apostolic labor of Spanish priests among the sedentary cultures of Mexico should not be considered a mission nor should the Spanish priests who preached in this foreign land be considered missionaries. The essence of this argument is linguistic: sixteenth-century Spaniards did not generally use the terms "mission" or "missionary." *Misión* and *misionero*, in the Spanish language of the time, referred to evangelism on the frontier in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Spanish priests working in sixteenth-century Mexico were typically called *doctrineros*, or instructors of Christian doctrine. Accordingly, the sites where they worked and resided were called *doctrinas*. That these more pedagogical terms reflect a cultural reality is the second part of Lockhart's argument. In contrast to frontier missions among nomadic peoples, he states, the sedentary peoples of Mesoamerica "needed less to be converted than instructed." Early Christianity in Mesoamerica was exceptional because European and central

[4] Charles E. Dibble, "The Nahuatlization of Christianity," in *Sixteenth-Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún*, ed. Munro S. Edmundson (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), 225–33; Louise M. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989); Osvaldo V. Pardo, *The Origins of Mexican Catholicism: Nahua Rituals and Christian Sacraments in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005); Christensen, *Nahua and Maya*.

[5] Mariano Cuevas, *Historia de la Iglesia en México*, 3 vols. (Mexico City: Patricio Sanz, 1921); Ricard, *Spiritual Conquest*; Lino Gómez Canedo, *Evangelización y conquista: Experiencia franciscana en Hispanoamérica* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1977).

Mexican societies were fundamentally compatible.[6] Having sounded the alarm regarding anachronism, Lockhart's argument ends up mirroring the very anthropological categories that missionary authors like Acosta and Las Casas had used to rank native cultures according to their perceived degree of advancement relative to Europe.[7]

Nevertheless, the fact that contemporary Spaniards did not employ the term *misión* does not negate its usefulness as a concept. The mission is of central importance to the history of Christianity and European imperial expansion. It denotes a frontier relationship between priest and native neophyte that is entirely applicable to the history of sixteenth-century Mexico. "Mission" refers to a delegation of people sent abroad to propagate a faith and to the stations where missionaries and natives interacted. By insisting on an untranslated Spanish term for such an important institution, we risk using language to segregate colonial Mesoamerica from global history. The term allows historians of places as different as Quebec or Goa to compare and contrast the varying experiences of a mobile Christianity that advanced in tandem with early modern colonization, trade, and cross-cultural interactions.[8] It speaks to the spiritual ambiguities of a transoceanic apostolate, as well as to the temporal power that missions acquired in the Spanish Empire. Additionally, thanks to the dynamic work of historians of Spanish frontiers in Northern New Spain and South America, studies of missions have also come to address secular factors like demography, ecology, and native politics.[9]

The Mexican mission was both noun and verb. It was, of course, a frontier institution that had its own organizational schema, systems of financing, police forces, schools, and protocols for cooperation between

[6] James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Conquest* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 203. See also Susan Deeds, *Defiance and Deference in Mexico's Colonial North: Indians under Spanish Rule un Nueva Vizcaya* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), 4.

[7] José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, trans. and ed. Jane Mangan (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Apologética historia sumaria*, ed. Edmundo O'Gorman (Mexico City: UNAM, 1967).

[8] Alan Greer and Kenneth Mills, "A Catholic Atlantic," in *The Atlantic in Global History*, eds. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra and Erik R. Seeman (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2007), 3–19.

[9] See Deeds, *Defiance*; Steven W. Hackel, *Children of Coyote, Missionaries of Saint Francis: Indian-Spanish Relations in Colonial California, 1769–1850* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Cynthia Radding, *Wandering Peoples: Colonialism, Ethnic Spaces, and Ecological Frontiers in Northwestern Mexico, 1700–1850* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Barbara Ganson, *The Guaraní under Spanish Rule in Río de la Plata* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

missionaries and native officials. Each mission was a space of political negotiation, economic production, and social relations that reflected contending interests and demographic pressures. Its infrastructure could not be missed. A good number of its churches overshadowed all others in Mexico, save the cathedral in the colonial capital. Indeed many still overshadow their towns and villages to this day. This was intentional: missionaries and native rulers, for their distinct reasons, wanted the mission to be tangible, visible, and imposing, a thing to be ignored at one's peril. But the mission was also a verb, a practice, a sum of actions that both bridged and marked the divides of culture and class. For Spaniards, it was an act of crossing seas and cultural boundaries, of learning and translation, and above all of preaching, persuading, and converting. For natives, it involved recovering, regrouping, gaining recognition, and restoring order. These actions built an institution that ordered its participants into asymmetrical relations of power, and the repeating rhythms of rituals, preaching, and almsgiving sanctified and routinized it to the point that it became a hegemonic force in native politics.[10] In many ways the Mexican mission epitomized sixteenth-century Spanish colonialism. It was a Church born in violence and raised on a bounty of native tributes; it was a Church of appearances, a structure quickly built for political ends, whose very success in the mundane – in the city of this world – left lingering doubts in the spirit and sowed jealousy among all those who did not profit from it.

REMAKING MESOAMERICA

"The day the Spaniards arrived was when Our Lord began to punish us." So responded a group of Mixtec elders in 1580 to Spanish queries about their lives since the Spanish conquest.[11] The scale and pace of the calamities that they witnessed had been nearly unfathomable. The war of conquest of 1519–1521, though certainly disruptive, paled in comparison to the

[10] William F. Hanks draws upon Bourdieu to define these two crucial political aspects of the mission as "field," the mission's "schematic structure," and "habitus," the habits of thought and action that reproduce the mission as a core part of the colonial social order. See *Converting Words: Maya in the Age of the Cross* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 93–6.

[11] Kevin Terraciano, *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca: Ñadzahui History, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 362; René Acuña, ed. *Relaciones geográficas del siglo XVI* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1982); See also Barbara Mundy, *Mapping New Spain: Indigenous Cartography and the Relaciones Geográficas* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

devastation of the smallpox epidemic that accompanied it.[12] Over the remainder of the century three more demographic catastrophes followed in 1545, 1575, and the 1590s. Each one of these epidemics claimed at least a third of the population; by the end of the century, roughly ninety percent of the preconquest population had been lost. Lack of immunity to European diseases undoubtedly triggered these disasters, but the losses incurred by each epidemic were magnified by the "socially-mediated catastrophe" of colonialism. Communities that were already straining to sustain themselves still had to meet unrelenting demands for tributes and labor from Spaniards and the native rulers whom they recognized. While natives buried their dead and gathered the survivors, they faced an avaricious colonial system that only mourned their mortality as an economic loss.[13] This vicious cycle of disease and exploitation resulted in widespread famine, malnutrition, and depopulation. Towns and city-states across the region survived these existential threats by fusing local systems of governance with the mission enterprise. They directed the mission towards their urgent task of rebuilding and remaking their world in this century of death.

The mission's role in social reconstruction has largely been overlooked by a historiography that has focused on the more intangible dimensions of the enterprise. The spiritual encounter, not politics and society, has garnered the most attention. Classic studies, especially those of Robert Ricard and George Kubler, spoke of a "spiritual conquest" of the natives.[14] Subsequent historians challenged these triumphal narratives by calling attention to indigenous agency in adopting and engaging Christianity.[15] Following ethnohistorian Charles Dibble's call to view the mission encounter as a process of *nahuatlization* of Christianity, historians advanced our understanding the ways in which natives assimilated and translated Catholicism as a means of preserving their own cultural world. These scholars

[12] Thomas M. Whitmore, *Disease and Death in Early Colonial Mexico: Simulating Amerindian Depopulation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992); Hans J. Prem, "Disease Outbreaks in Central Mexico during the Sixteenth Century," in *Secret Judgments of God: Old World Disease in Colonial Spanish America*, eds. Noble David Cook and W. George Lowell (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 20–48; B. H. Slicher Van Bath, "The Calculation of the Population of New Spain, Especially for the Period before 1570." *Boletín de estudios latinoamericanos y del Caribe*, vol. 24 (1978), 67–95.

[13] Slavoj Zizek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), 94; Massimo Livi Bacci, *Conquest: The Destruction of the American Indios* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 140–55.

[14] Ricard, *Spiritual Conquest*; Cuevas, *Historia*.

[15] Matthew Restall, "A History of the New Philology and the New Philology in History." *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 38, no. 1 (2003), 114–15.

drew upon native-language sermons, *confesionarios*, confraternity constitutions, and liturgical texts. Instead, they argued, natives in central Mexico "Nahuatlized" Christianity, and the "missionary was missionized" by indigenous culture.[16] By bringing native-language sources into the study of the mission enterprise, ethnohistorical scholarship has greatly advanced our understanding the ways in which natives assimilated, shaped, and translated Catholicism as a means of preserving their own culture.

Yet in its mission to place indigenous spiritual and intellectual life at the center of early colonial religion, the 'cultural turn' has let questions of power and class fade into the background. This is especially the case regarding the increasingly asymmetrical relations between Spanish colonizers and indigenous peoples, and between nobles and commoners within indigenous communities.[17] The ambiguities of native translations have received more attention in the mission history of central Mexico than the social history of demographic catastrophes and colonization. Moreover, the very provenance of ethnohistorical sources calls into question any native counter-conquest of Christianity. Indigenous ecclesiastical texts, whether in Spanish or native languages, were produced mainly by a minority of lettered indigenous elites who received their education at mission schools. The records of a native confraternity in Tula, for example, reveal that its membership represented just three percent of the local population in 1570.[18] Indigenous nobles and

[16] Dibble, "Nahuatlization"; Burkhart, *Slippery Earth*, 15–24; Pardo, *Origins*; Christensen, *Nahua and Maya*; Louise M. Burkhart ed. and trans., *Holy Wednesday: A Nahua Drama from Early Colonial Mexico* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Bartolomé de Alva, *A Guide to Confession Large and Small in the Mexican Language: 1634*, trans. and eds. Barry D. Sell, John Frederick Schwaller, and Lu Ann Homza (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999); Alonso de Molina, *Nahua Confraternities in Early Colonial Mexico: The 1552 Nahuatl Ordinances of Fray Alonso de Molina, OFM,* trans. and eds. Barry D. Sell, Larissa Taylor and Asunción Lavrín (Berkeley, CA: American Academy of Franciscan History, 2002); Barry D. Sell and Louise M. Burkhart, eds. *Nahuatl Theater*, 2 vols. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004).

[17] There are notable exceptions. Studies of culture and linguistics that address colonial power directly include: Viviana Díaz Balsera, *The Pyramid under the Cross: Franciscan Discourses of Evangelization and the Nahua Christian Subject in Sixteenth-century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005); Hanks, *Converting Words*.

[18] Barry D. Sell, "The Molina Confraternity Rules of 1552," in *Nahua Confraternities in Early Colonial Mexico: The 1552 Nahuatl Ordinances of Fray Alonso de Molina, OFM*, trans. and eds. Alonso de Molina, Barry D. Sell, Larissa Taylor, and Asunción Lavrín (Berkeley, CA: American Academy of Franciscan History, 2002), 53–5. Recent analyses of these small but influential circles of *letrados* have gone beyond the *nahuatlization* thesis: Rosend Rovira Morgado, *San Francisco Padremeh: El temprano cabildo indio y las cuatro parcialidades de México-Tenochtitlán (1549–1599)* (Madrid: CSIC, 2017); Hanks, *Converting Words*.

pious converts voluntarily marched in processions, performed charity, and produced texts and art, but as Eric Van Young has warned, we risk distorting the mission enterprise if we assume that elite records reveal a "hegemonic status they may not have in fact enjoyed."[19] Privileging elite collaborators and voluntary participants risks losing sight of the fact that the mission was a political institution that governed over anyone who made their life in a polity reduced to Spanish rule. It encompassed sincere converts, secret devotees and practitioners of native rites, and many others who freely drew elements from both traditions that they felt empowered them.[20] Drawing conclusions about missions solely from elite spiritual records effectively means writing the majority of native commoners out of the story – the very social group that hauled the mission's stones, built its walls, and furnished its upkeep.

This book widens the lens on the mission enterprise. It draws from a variety of archival records that bear witness to the role of the mission enterprise in adjudicating territories, policing natives, regulating conflicts, and mobilizing laborers. Based on *mandamientos* (viceregal responses that summarize petitions from indigenous and ecclesiastical actors), civil and inquisitorial trials, correspondence, and viceregal account books, this study documents the everyday struggles that raged within the mission enterprise: commoners protesting against overwork in friars' kitchens, witnesses recalling the construction of a monastery, or native rulers ordering the demolition of rival churches. These political and material contingencies set the parameters for religious change in post-conquest Mexico. As such, these civil records lay the foundation for a new social history of the mission.

In ways great and small, from matters as momentous as the foundation of a new mission to details as small as a barrio's contribution of lumber for scaffolding, civil sources document a mission enterprise that helped reorder a world in crisis. Precisely because it was a means of survival and reconstitution, the mission was also a pawn in the intensifying rivalries, class struggles, and factional divisions of indigenous politics in the years after the conquest. Like the colonial legal system, the mission enterprise served as an arena for indigenous struggles over land, resources, and power. Ambitious native rulers drove its expansion for the better part of six decades, drawing upon its rituals and architecture to reconstitute local governments and reaffirm hierarchies of deference in the eyes of their

[19] Eric Van Young, "The New Cultural History Comes to Old Mexico." *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 79, no. 2 (May 1999), 236.
[20] David Tavárez, *The Invisible War: Indigenous Devotions, Discipline, and Dissent in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).