

Spanish Missions in America (Part I — Mexico)

The first decades of Spanish rule in the Americas were confined mainly to Islands in the West Indies, especially Hispaniola, Cuba, and Jamaica. Soon after Columbus discovered the islands gold was found on Hispaniola and a flood of adventurers, privateers, mercenaries, and speculators descended on the region and attempted to enslave the natives. The natives were not accustomed to hard labor and many committed suicide or rebelled rather than submit to Spanish abuse. Native rebellions led to massacres and within only a few years the population of Hispaniola was drastically reduced. The first slaves from Africa were brought to Hispaniola to work in the mines in 1503, barely ten years after Columbus first discovered the Island.

Spanish rule during this period was very chaotic. The first governor of the region was Columbus but he had many enemies and was unable to control either the Spaniards or the natives. Because the Spanish government did not have the resources to directly manage their colonies, the **Encomienda** system was established, whereby European colonists were given the right to extract work or tribute from natives in a region. In theory the encomenderos would respect Spanish laws, but in practice many operated without effective oversight.

The discovery of gold inflamed the greed of all involved, brought in hundreds of additional adventurers and speculators, and made enforcing rules difficult even for man more suited to governing than Columbus. After seven years Columbus was forced to return to Spain, but the governors who followed him were just as ineffective, and governed with personal gain in mind rather than the best interests of the natives. During this period privately funded mercenaries and independent traders had few checks on their behavior, and their abuse made conversion of the natives nearly impossible.

Fortunately, conditions did improve, especially in Mexico under the early Viceroy. In other places, such as Peru where mining remained the primary economic activity, the encomenderos opposed laws aimed at protecting the Indians. Fortunately, however, there were many good Spaniards who objected to their enslavement eventually laws which benefited the Indians were enforced. The missionary friars, the scholars of Salamanca, and a number of admirable viceroys and judges made especially notable contributions to this end, and it was undoubtedly due to those protectors and defenders of the Indians that so many were eventually won over to the Catholic faith.

Timeline of the Spanish Empire in the Americas

This unit will focus on topics relevant to the conversion of the natives of Spanish America to the Catholic faith, but first a quick review of major historical events may be helpful.

- 1492 First voyage of **Columbus** to the Americas. New World claimed for Spain.
- 1494 **Treaty of Tordesillas** divides Western territories between Spain and Portugal.
- 1494-96 Discovery of gold in Hispaniola leads to enslavement of Indians, rebellions, and massacres.
- 1499 More Gold mines discovered. Privateers, merchants, traders, slavers flock to the New World.
- 1503 First Slaves brought from Africa to Hispaniola to work the mines.
- 1511-14 Spanish conquest of Cuba
- 1511 Dominican **Antonio Montesino** preaches against the abuse of Indian and Negro slaves.

- 1512 Spanish king promulgates the **Laws of Burgos** to protect the Indians, but they are not enforced.
- 1521 **Hernando Cortez** conquers Mexico for Spain. Rules as governor for six years.
- 1524 Cortez invites **Twelve Apostles of Mexico** to convert the natives.
- 1530 **Juan Zumarraga** appointed first Archbishop of Mexico
- 1531 **Our Lady of Guadalupe** appears to **Juan Diego** in Mexico
- 1532 **Pizarro** conquers Peru for Spain -- Silver and Gold Mines found, Adventurers flock to Peru.
- 1532 **Antonio de Mendoza** appointed First Viceroy of Mexico
- 1542 **New Laws for the Protection of the Indians** promulgated by Charles V
- 1551 First Universities: **University of San Marcos" in Lima, and "University of Mexico.**

Notable Governors and Viceroys of Mexico

The Spanish government did a poor job of protecting the native Indians during the first chaotic generation of Spanish rule, but soon after Cortez conquered Mexico, the caliber of the Spanish governors and Viceroys improved dramatically. Cortes himself treated the Indian allies who had helped him defeat the Aztecs very well. Unfortunately he had many enemies, and after seven years **Nuna de Guzman** was appointed governor in his place. Guzman brutally mistreated many of the Indian allies of Cortes, but his reign was short and when word of his abuse got to Spain, much better governors were appointed.

The following are some of the early bishops and viceroys who deserve credit for protecting the natives of Mexico, and looking out for their interests. All are held in high regard by historians and were much respected by the Indians themselves. They enforced laws, punished those who abused the natives, encouraged the work of missionaries, built schools, hospitals, and universities, and set a positive example of Spanish leadership for generations to come.

- **Juan de Zumarraga** (1468-1548) — First Archbishop of Mexico, served for almost 20 years under both bad and good governors, and was a critic of the violent governor Nuna de Guzman. Worked to protect the Indians. Worked with and encouraged missionaries.
- **Vasco de Quiroga** (1478-1565) — Canon lawyer and judge appointed to lead the Second Audiencia that deposed Nuna de Guzman from power and tried him for treason. He made great efforts to protect the Indians and tried to replace the Encomienda system. Once a good Viceroy was installed he served as Bishop of Michoacan for 30 years, building hospitals and Indian villages at his own expense.
- **Nunez Vela** (1490-1546) — First Viceroy of Peru, appointed in 1542. In 1546 he was charged by Charles V with enforcing the "New Laws for the Protection of the Indians" that outlawed enslavement of the Indians and force encomienda owners to pay taxes. This provoked a civil war in which Nunez Vela was killed.
- **Antonio de Mendoza** (1495-1552) — First Viceroy of Mexico who worked closely with Archbishop Zumarraga to bring peace to rival factions, protect the Indians, establish Spanish rule, and found schools, Universities, and other civic institutions. Sought common ground and compromise rather than conflict between interests of Spaniards and natives.
- **Pedro Moya de Contreras** (1528-1591) — Canon lawyer from the University of Salamanca who served as both Archbishop and Viceroy of Mexico and later the President of the Council of the Indies. He was sincerely committed to the protection and education of the Indians, and sought to remove corrupt and abusive officials from Spanish government. He passed laws permanently forbidding the enslavement of natives, and founded schools that taught catechism, basic literacy, and trades.

Protectors and Missionaries — Dominicans and Franciscans

The Dominican order was the first to bring attention to the Spanish treatment of natives in the Americas. Several notable Friars spoke out strongly against abuses and worked for reform.

- **Antonio Montesino** (1475-1545) — Early Missionary to Hispaniola, who preached directly to the Spaniards, shaming them for their mistreatment of the Indians. His sermons caused such outrage he was sent back to Spain, where he exhorted the king to do more to protect the natives.
- **Bartholomew de las Casas** (1484-1566) — Colonist who gave up his Encomienda, became a Friar, and spent his life advocating for better treatment for the Indians. Wrote 'An Account of the Destruction of the Indies', and later became bishop of Chiapas.
- **Francisco de Vitoria** (1483-1556) — Scholar and jurist from the University of Salamanca who advocated for the rights of the natives, and worked with **Charles V** to draft laws to protect the Indians.

The most famous advocate for native Americans was **Bartholomew de las Casas**, but it was **de Vitoria** (founder of the 'School of Salamanca') who worked with Charles V to promulgate the **New Laws of the Indies for Good Treatment of Indians of 1542**. They were intended to replace the "Laws of Burgos" of 1512 which had established the Encomienda and set guidelines for treatment of the natives, but without adequate safeguards. In contrast, the "New Laws" clearly enumerated the rights of the Indians and included penalties for Encomenderos who violated them. The New Laws:

- Prohibited enslavement of natives, especially in mines.
- Insisted Laborers got paid wages instead of being forced into servitude.
- Gradually phased out Encomienda system.
- Encomenderos required to attend to religious instruction of the natives.

Unfortunately, the reception of the "New Laws" in Spanish America was not good!!!! In Peru, the Pizarro brothers led a rebellion against **Nunez Vela**, the Viceroy who tried to enforce the law. In the civil War that followed, the Viceroy and many of the king's other supporters were killed. In Mexico, Mendoza was aware of the disastrous uprisings that had occurred in Peru and was much more cautious. He did not enforce all the laws at first but gradually complied with many parts and did what was possible to improve the conditions of the natives.

The Dominicans are best known as the 'Protectors' of the Indians and deserve credit for encouraging the Spanish government to pass and enforce laws that benefited them. But it was the Franciscans who are mainly responsible for widespread conversion of the natives to the Catholic faith. Most Dominicans took instruction in the faith seriously and declined to baptize neophytes until they had mastered their catechism. The Franciscans, on the other hand, were more willing to baptize all who requested baptism, and focused on instruction later. They sought to 'civilize' the natives through education and by encouraging them to adopt Christian morals and customs, rather than focusing on direct instruction.

There was some disagreement about priorities and methods between the two orders, but both Dominican and Franciscan orders had among them accomplished scholars, and were committed to establishing schools and seminaries in the New World. The first secondary school was founded in Mexico only a few years after the Spanish conquest, and the first Universities in the New World were established in both Mexico and Peru in the early 1550s. Some of the leading schools and Universities founded in the early years of Spanish rule include the following:

Schools and Universities of Latin America

- **University of St. Thomas Aquinas**, established as a seminary for the Dominican order in 1518 on Hispaniola. It was upgraded to a University in 1538 but was not officially recognized by Royal Decree until 1558. It was operated continuously under Spanish rule until 1801 when it was closed during the French Revolution. It was closed permanently in 1823.
- **University of San Marcos**, established by Royal decree by Charles V in Lima, Peru in 1551. It is the oldest continuously operating University in the Western Hemisphere.
- **Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico**, established by Royal decree by Charles V in Mexico City in 1551. It operated continuously and was the premier University in New Spain until it was closed by Republican revolutionaries in 1833.
- **Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco**, secondary school established as for the indigenous peoples of Mexico by Franciscans, including Bernardo de Sahagun in 1536. Students were instructed in their native Aztec language (Nahuatl) but also in Spanish and Latin. The school only lasted a short time, but it was extremely important in the early years of Spanish rule. Franciscan scholars associated with the School produced Nahuatl dictionaries, Aztec medicine manuals, and the Florentine Codex, an illustrated history of the Aztec civilization.

Historians and Scholars of Mexico

- **Bernal Diaz** (1496-1584) — Spanish soldier who participated in the Conquest of Mexico, and later wrote the definitive history for the episode called 'True History of the Conquest of New Spain.'
- **Bernardino de Sahagun**. (1499-1590) — Franciscan Friar and missionary to Mexico who spent a lifetime studying the Aztec language and history. He ran a school for Nahuatl (Aztec) scholars and curated the **Florentine Codex**, the definitive Aztec history.
- **Toribio de Benavente Motolinia** (1482-1568) — One of the Twelve Apostles of Mexico, who worked in Central America among the Nahua peoples. He wrote one of the earliest histories detailing the first encounters of the Central American peoples with the Spaniards.
- **Andres de Olmos** (1485-1571) — Franciscan Friar and missionary who wrote the first grammar and dictionary describing the Nahuatl, the native language of the Aztecs.

Other Notable Missionaries and Saints of Mexico

A great many people, some saints, some martyrs, and some 'Servants of Gods' played important roles in the conversion of the Indigenous people of Mexico to the Catholic faith. These are some of the most important saints and Missionaries of Mexico that have not been mentioned previously.

- **Martin of Valencia** (1474-1534) — Leader of the Twelve Apostles of Mexico
- **St. Juan Diego** (1474-1548) — Indian peasant to whom "Our Lady of Guadalupe" appeared in 1531 near the hill of Tepeyac.
- **Sts. Child Martyrs of Tlaxcala** (died 1527) — Three young Aztec boys, Christobal, Antonio, and Juan, were killed by village elders when they converted to Christianity and renounced the Aztec Gods.
- **Luis Cancer de Barbastro** (1500-1549) — Dominican priest who made many converts in the West Indies and Guatemala before being martyred while trying to set up Spanish missions in Florida.
- **St. Philip of Jesus** (1572-1597) — Native Mexican Franciscan who was martyred in Japan in 1597.
- **Pedro de Agurto** (1544-1608) — Mexican priest who became a missionary in the Philippines and was appointed first bishop of Cebu.
- **St. Junipero Serra** (1713-1784) — Franciscan Friar who traveled thousands of miles on foot and Established nine missions in California, many of which grew into the most important cities in California.