

UC Riverside

UCR Honors Capstones 2023-2024

Title

THE COST OF BECOMING A NUN: DOWRIES, CLASS, AND GENDER IN COLONIAL MEXICO

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1dp9t83b>

Author

Cobain, Dallys I

Publication Date

2024-07-24

THE COST OF BECOMING A NUN:
DOWRIES, CLASS, AND GENDER IN COLONIAL MEXICO

By

Dallys Ivette Cobian

A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

May 10, 2024

University Honors
University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

Dr. Alejandra Dubcovsky
Department of History

Dr. Richard Cardullo, Howard H Hays Jr. Chair
University Honors

ABSTRACT

Dallys Cobian, History

Dr. Alejandra Dubcovsky, Department of History

The Cost of Becoming a Nun: Dowries, Class, and Gender in colonial Mexico

Restricted by the gendered, patriarchal structures of colonial society, women in New Spain had limited options or protections outside of marriage. The church, and convents in particular, offered women an alternative. Many women found fulfillment in conventual communities, where music, libraries, servants and even delicacies were part of their lives. But not every woman could enter a convent. The church required an extensive dowry for a woman to enter the convent and become a fully professed member of the order. The status and luxuries of a “nun of the *black* veil” was limited to elite women who could afford the significant expense. Those who could not secure the full dowry were relegated to second class religious citizenship as “nuns of the *white* veil,” or a “*donada*” a resident and servant who never professed. My research explores how women with religious vocations from elite and non-elite social backgrounds navigated ecclesial social structures and how class (as well as race) impacted the social status of nuns before and after professing.

Analyzing colonial manuscripts from the Archivo General de la Nación in México City, my research expands our understanding of the role of dowries in women’s conventual experiences. In recovering the complex religious lives of women under colonial rule, this paper argues that while convents were an escape and an alternative to marriage, for some women, this access was not constructed equally.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea for this project formed after reading *Hombres Necios / Foolish Men*, a poem written by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a remarkable nun in seventeenth century colonial Mexico. As I delved into her other works and responses, I realized I wanted to learn more about women of the era and the way they navigated the restrictions imposed on them by religious institutions and the men who oversaw them.

Dr. Alejandra Dubcovsky, I cannot put into words how grateful I am that you mentored me through this project. Thank you for allowing me to work through my doubts and frustrations while also encouraging me to apply for grants, to submit my work to the American Historical Association and beyond. Most of all, thank you for your time and insight over the multiple meetings and for reading through the initial draft of this paper when it was nowhere near ready.

Dr. Jennifer Hughes thank you for working with me during the Mentoring Summer Research Internship Program (MSRIP) and for encouraging me to write and get my thoughts on paper, even if only one bullet point at a time. Above all, thank you for encouraging me to join the Graduate student writing group, to visit the Santa Barbara Mission Archives and to search online archives where I found the material I used for the symposium.

To my parents, my mom who told me never to give up on my goals and my dad, the family singer and comedian, thank you for being my biggest supporters. My kids, Johnny who is currently on his own educational journey and learning the ropes at the same time I am, I am so proud of the hard-working young man you have become. Keep dreaming and reaching for your goals. Jake our in-house comedian and math whiz, who gets a kick out of how much faster he can solve math problems than his mom, what can I say my love? Your brain is better equipped for math than mine. Keep working hard kiddo and when you hear a good joke, remember to

share it with us. To our sweet girl Alexis, your determination and speed on the soccer field is incredible to see and the expressiveness and emotion in your stories is beautiful. You are a great writer, and I can't wait to read your next story.

To my husband, you more than anyone understands the adjustment and emotional journey this has been. Thank you for listening when I read out loud, for the multiple, I knew you could do it, and for always stepping up during those moments where I needed to step away. For this and so much more, I love you.

Mami, Papi, Johnny, Jacob, Alexis and Ismael, I am here for all of you. I love you.

The Cost of Becoming a Nun:
Dowries, Class, and Gender in Colonial Mexico

Doña Mariana Hurtado de Mendoza doncella noble y pobre, con el rendimiento debido digo que hallandome en este convento de la Natividad de Nuestra Señora y Regina Celi con el destino y grandísimos deseos de ser Religiosa y no teniendo para este fin más de dos nombramientos de a trescientos pesos por tanto, a vuestro excelentísimo suplico se sirva de admitirme bajo de su Piadosa Protección en lo que tubiere advitrio de lo que reciba gracia y Merced su mas rendida Sierba y sarta

Mariana Hurtado de Mendoza¹

Lady Mariana Hurtado de Mendoza unwed, noble and poor, with all due respect, I declare that finding myself in this convent, Natividad de Nuestra Señora y Regina Celi, with the intent and deepest desire to become a religious woman, but not having to that effect more than two payments of three hundred pesos at the moment, I implore your excellency allows my admittance into your benevolent protection and that I should receive by your grace and mercy your most obedient servant and server.

Maria Hurtado de Mendoza

When Nuestra Sra. de La Concepción opened its doors to women with religious vocations in 1540 Mexico City,² it set a precedent that many municipalities would swiftly follow and soon, the colonial “period [in Latin America] was... marked by exponential growth in the power and social influence of religiously devout Catholic women, particularly those who entered convents.”³ This growth meant that as convents spread across colonial Mexico and other parts of colonial Latin America, so too did they become intertwined with feminine religiosity and virtue. Founded only twenty years after the overthrow of the powerful city of Tenochtitlan, Nuestra

¹ Archivo General de la Nación / Instituciones Coloniales / Cajas 1-999 / Caja 0592

² Lavrin, Asunción. *Brides of Christ: Conventual Life in Colonial Mexico*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020. 20.

³ Restall, Matthew. *Latin America in Colonial Times*. Second edition. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 209. This period is also known as and often referred to as the Baroque period or colonial middle. It was marked by a period of intense monastic activity where missionaries sought to convert Indigenous people and identify heretics, “police morality... and the spread of dangerous books” through the official duties of the Inquisition or “Santo Oficio”

Señora speaks to the voracity with which the Spanish crown sought to transplant its religious institutions in the region and of paramount importance was the ability to provide females with a legitimate alternative to marriage while at the same time “absorb[ing] orphaned or illegitimate daughters of the elite.”⁴

In addition to religious institutions, the “honor-obsessed culture” where family values and female virtue were of utmost importance and which developed in Iberian Peninsula, also made its way across the Atlantic and became fully embedded in the highly religious communities that formed in the colonial world.⁵ This obsession meant that a woman’s honor was intertwined with that of her family and for this reason her virtue had to be protected. For women who did not want to marry, have children, or found themselves in precarious arrangements, one of the limited options available to them was the option to marry God. In choosing God, many women found fulfillment in conventual communities where music, libraries, learning, and even servants were part of their lives. However, despite the societal concern with virtue and the convent’s ability to provide such a haven, access to cloistered life was not accorded equally. Cloistered life became even more exclusive when sixteenth century societal restrictions and monetary obligations,

⁴ Chowning, Margaret. *Rebellious Nuns: The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent, 1752-1863*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁵ Sierra, Horacio. “Gossiping Women and Talkative Nuns: The Transatlantic Feminism of María de Zayas and Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz.” *Women’s Studies* 50, no. 3 (2021): 207–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2020.1855180>. 209. Analyzing the writing of two nuns, Maria de Zayas of Spain and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Sierra is comparing their writing and the way in which each woman, despite being separated by time and the Atlantic, each used their position within the convent to challenge the double standard of the patriarchal society which often forgave men for their transgressions while blaming women and casting them aside when they have been dishonored. Furthermore, both cloistered women, challenged the “silencing of women” and advocated for women’s rights through their writing.

openly asserted what type of women would be granted the protection and honorable life offered by religious institutions, like convents.

Although convents were quickly founded, to enclose and protect women, historian Jessica Delgado notes that they were not the only spaces available to women. *Lay cloisters* were also founded and became important institutions that responded to “women’s spiritual and social vulnerability.”⁶ One such place that took in girls and young women were “colegios de niñas [which offered] protection, room and board, education and a five-hundred-peso dowry,”⁷ (schools for girls) that could be used when a girl or woman decided to enter a convent. The money for these dowries and for maintaining these institutions was raised and received from “confraternities and pious donors.”⁸ Donations from pious citizenry also reveal the way lay men and women actively participated in the protection and enclosure of females. Through continuous donations to these institutions, access was extended to more women and as a result, there would be less opportunities for these women to turn to lives of sin and thus they would maintain their purity for the day they chose a station and married man or God. In addition to these schools there were other institutions called, “casas de arrepentidas” (homes for regretful women). These spaces often housed prostitutes who were repentant, while others were “punished... by being sent ... against their will.”⁹ Whether they entered by force or choice, these casas were immensely popular spaces for women.

⁶ Delgado, Jessica L. *Laywomen and the Making of Colonial Catholicism in New Spain, 1630-1790*. Cambridge Latin American Studies ; [110]. Cambridge: University Press, 2018. 143.

⁷ Ibid. 145. Like professing in a convent, entering a colegio was a significant event where the “girl[s]... would make a ceremonial appearance in the choir balcony of the colegios church, announcing her new status to the public” Because these institutions did not require a dowry many were accepted, so long as they were pure of blood. Records of such colegios are limited and it is thus far difficult to uncover how the colegio worked and how many of the entrants were there by choice or force.

⁸ Ibid. 141.

⁹ Ibid, 171

The popularity of these spaces shows the importance colonial society placed on providing a safe environment for at risk females where they would be removed from exposure to society's perceived or real vices. Moreover, that colegios provided a modest dowry also speaks to the way in which these institutions and their benefactors saw no option available for these women other than a marriage to man or God. Despite the popularity of colegios and casas, one of the most desirable spaces women had access to and chose were convents and through an analysis of a small sample of primary source documents from the Archivo General de la Nacion and other documents, this paper aims to analyze the ways women actively sought to access and enter these religious institutions while also gaining a better understanding of the ways payment of a full or partial dowry dictated their experiences once inside cloistered walls.

Path to the Convent: 4 Requirements

Mexico 3 de Septiembre

El 1802

Tengase presente con oportunidad

Doña Maria de Los Angeles Pardo y Solis Española doncella, hija legitima de Don Joaquin Pardo difunto y de Doña Josefa Solis ante vuestra excelencia con el mayor respeto digo: Que me hallo ya recibida y votada para entrar de Religiosa en el convent de Nuestra Madre Santa Teresa de esta capital y en ello se erogan unos precisas y considerables gastos de que en la mayor parte aun carezco.

Mi madre viuda ha podido con afanes coleccionar parte de ellos:

Me será muy sensible que por falta de su complete me hall de privar de un tan santo estado a que se halla reulto mi voluntad. Tengo noticia de que vuestra excelencia tan piadoso esta socorriendo por medio de nombramientos a las que como yo casercen en la mayor parte de auxilios para semejante erado.

Bajo de este supuesto ocurro a la notoria piedad de vuestra excelencia a fin de que por un efecto de vondad se sirva tener me presente para los que tenga arbitario en lo successive. Suplico provea como pido en que recibire gracia juro lo necesario.

*Excelentissimo Sor
Maria de los Angeles Pardo y Solis¹⁰*

¹⁰ Ibid. Archivo General

Mexico 3 September
1802

Behold presently this request

Doña Maria de los Angeles Pardo y Solis Spanish, pure, unwed, legitimate daughter of Don Joaquin (deceased) and of Doña Josefa Solis, appear before your excellency with the greatest respect. I say: I am received and voted to enter as a nun into the convent of Santa Teresa in this Capital and for that expenditure there are costs and considerable expenses, which for the most part I am lacking.

My widowed mother has been able through her own efforts to collect part of them: It would be most sad, that due to the lack of funds, I should be deprived of such a holy office, which I am fully committed to.

I have word that your excellency being so benevolent has been giving mercy by way of support to those like me, who lack for the most part the aid for such a payment.

With this consideration I ask the well-known benevolence of your excellency, which by the kindness for those in need of the aforementioned request.

To your excellency I beg that you provide in what I request, and that I receive the grace that I vow is necessary.

Excelentísimo Sor
Maria de los Angeles Pardo y Solis

In the above petition, Maria de los Angeles Pardo y Solis, a young woman from Mexico City lacks one of the requirements to profess and gain access to a convent. Through this petition she makes it known that although she lacked, “la mayor parte,” (the largest portion) of the required dowry, she remained devoted to her religious calling and because she was already accepted into the Nuestra Madre Santa Teresa convent, she is asking that as an “Española, doncella, hija legitima,” (Spanish, pure, unwed, legitimate daughter) she be granted mercy and allowed entry into the convent in spite this one shortcoming, her lack of dowry.

Maria’s petition shows that no matter how intent a woman was on becoming a nun, before she was allowed to enter a convent, a woman needed more than just a religious vocation, she also had to meet four requirements.¹¹ The precedent for the first requirement was set when

¹¹ Lavrin, Asunción. *Brides of Christ: Conventual Life in Colonial Mexico*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020. 18. Here, Lavrin shows how a “desire” to become a nun was not enough to join a convent. When the society was overly intent on protecting the “unique female world” that was the convent, they increasingly sought to limit entry to those who were deemed worthy and untainted by life outside cloistered walls.

“Archbishop Moya de Contreras explicitly rejected the possibility of admitting mestizas,”¹² into the convent. This rejection meant, that, from that point on, women with religious aspirations had to, before anything else, prove they were of Spanish descent. Only by proving their “limpieza de sangre” (purity of blood) would women be allowed to continue onto the next step. After *limpieza de sangre* was verified, a potential nun also had to prove her “legitimacy of birth.”¹³ Legitimacy of birth came in second only to *limpieza de sangre* and was also of great importance because after the fifteenth century illegitimacy was largely connected to the birth of mestizo children. For this reason, verifying one’s Spanish lineage and proving legitimacy of birth became foundational indicators that predicated whether a potential nun would be allowed to profess. The petition above shows that Doña Maria de Los Angeles Pardo y Solis was aware of these requirements and that is why she made sure her petition revealed she was an, “Española... hija legitima de Don Joaquin Pardo... y de Doña Josefa Solis”¹⁴ (Spanish... legitimate daughter to Don Joaquin Pardo... and Lady Josefa Solis). By making this assertion, Doña Maria is relaying both her *limpieza de sangre* and legitimacy as a way to propel herself two steps closer to cloistered life.

Unlike *limpieza de sangre*, illegitimacy could, on occasion, be circumvented. One way “hijas naturales”¹⁵ (natural daughters) bypassed this roadblock was to seek a pardon directly from the bishop. If granted, the *hija natural* was pardoned for her parent’s premarital indiscretions and thus a potential hinderance to her conventual aspirations was eliminated. It is important to note that because race remained central to acceptance, only those “of white parentage were allowed this exemption.” Such was the magnitude of legitimacy, that evidence

¹² Ibid. 20.

¹³ Ibid. 21

¹⁴ Archivo General de la Nación / Instituciones Coloniales / Cajas 1-999 / Caja 0592 “Spanish...legitimate daughter of Sir Joaquin... and Lady Josefa Solis”

¹⁵ Lavrin. Ibid. 22. Daughters born out of wedlock.

exists to show how on occasion those with the right connections were able to have birth records forged to improve their odds of being accepted. This was the case for one of colonial Mexico's most well-known nuns, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, whose "powerful patrons forged a legitimate birth document"¹⁶ so that she could be accepted into the Convent of San Jeronimo.

The third requirement needed for entry into a convent was "virginity."¹⁷ Like race and legitimacy, virginity was also an important qualifier for conventual acceptance and entry. To attest their purity, women often included the word, "doncella"¹⁸ to show they were pure and therefore able to enter the convent. That is precisely what Doña Maria did when she included the word, "doncella"¹⁹ to her petition. For women like Doña Mariana Hurtado de Mendoza (whose petition is found at the beginning of this paper) who did not or possibly could not claim legitimacy, including "doncella, noble"²⁰ was a signifier of not only her *limpieza de sangre*, but of her ability to maintain her chastity by refraining from the "sinful and filthy act," that the church desperately tried to control. Because her words are powerful including them in their petition must have carried enough weight to potentially help secure their entry in the convent.

Having met the above requirements, as "symbolic Brides of Christ,"²¹ the final item needed for entry was the presentation of a dowry. In the sixteenth century, the required dowry was only 1,500 pesos but by the "end of the eighteenth century... [dowries were] 4,000 pesos in most convents."²² A tremendous amount considering that an elite family could live comfortably on 1,500 pesos a year. Dowries were essential because they allowed convents to be self-sustained

¹⁶ Lavrin. *Ibid.* 22

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 23.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Archivo General de la Nacion. Doña Maria

²⁰ *Ibid.* Archivo General de la Nación. In her petition, Doña Mariana does not mention parents, it is possible this was not done because she was an *hija natural* who was pardoned and therefore she did not need to bring further attention to her parent's indiscretions.

²¹ Restall. *Ibid.* 206

²² *Ibid.* 24.

while also playing a vital “role in the economic life of the viceroyalty”²³ that also relied on generous loans and contributions made available through the ongoing collection of dowries.

Securing a dowry was often the final hurdle that many seeking the protection of the convent found difficult to overcome. In cases such as these, women with religious vocations had the opportunity to secure benefactors, raise a partial dowry or resign themselves to a domestic position within the convent. An analysis of the petitions of Doña Maria and Doña Mariana reveals they only had part of the required dowries. Doña Marianas petition declares she has the deepest desires to be a religious woman and it would be a shame if she was denied such a life because she only had, “dos nombramientos de a trescientos pesos.”²⁴ (Two payments of three hundred pesos.) How she raised this amount is unclear, but what is certain was her sincere desire to be a religious woman. Doña Maria, whose father is deceased, had the full support of her mother, “Mi madre viuda ha podido con afanes coleccionar parte de ellos.”²⁵ (My widowed mother has been able through her own efforts to collect part of them) It is possible, that with her husband’s passing Doña Maria’s mother was able to use some of the inheritance, which was rightfully hers as well as her daughters, because contrary to the patriarchal society that regulated women’s lives, inheritance laws in “Latin cultures, women have traditionally held many property rights spelled out in custom and law.”²⁶ What this meant is that a mother who was eager to see

²³ Lavrin, Asuncion. “The Role of the Nunneries in the Economy of New Spain in the Eighteenth Century.” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 46, no. 4 (November 1966): 371–93. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/2510979>. 371. In addition to dowries, convents received donations of land and property from generous benefactors as well as inheritances from nuns within their convents. These gifts were also vital because convents were able to rent or collect fees with. Additional assistance provided by convents were loans, usually at a rate of 5% interest that were instrumental in securing annual income for the convent. 371.

²⁴ Ibid. Archivo General. Doña Mariana. She has two payments of three hundred pesos.

²⁵ Ibid. Archivo General. Doña Maria. *My widowed mother has been able through her own efforts to collect part of them.*

²⁶ Metcalf, Alida C. “Women and Means: Women and Family Property in Colonial Brazil.” *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 2 (1990): 277–98. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh/24.2.277>. 277. Spain and Portugal’s laws developed in the “Mediterranean Region” and because of their close proximity, many of their property holding and inheritance laws were similar and eventually were transplanted into the “new” world. Although property holding women (many of whom were widowed) were contradictory to patriarchal beliefs, many women retained family property upon the

her daughter's virtue remain intact could elect to convert her property into a dowry that would allow her daughter to move one step closer to the *holy office* she so greatly desired. Such a sacrifice speaks volumes to the affection a mother had for her daughter. Moreover, this also shows how entry into a convent was also reliant on the approval and external efforts of an aspiring nuns' family.

Another example of a woman's desire to join a convent that was stalled and then made possible by family intervention is found in the seventeenth century—"spiritual autobiography (vida) of Madre Maria de San Jose."²⁷ Here, Professor Kathleen Myers uncovers one woman's twenty-one-year struggle to enter the convent. As the daughter of Creole parents, Madre Maria, grew up in a hacienda where she had servants and many comforts. Unlike other families, Madre Maria and her family lived on the hacienda year round and because of this, their home was a very social place where, they received licensure to say, "Mass at the Chapel," and became a space that also welcomed many Franciscan friars as they journeyed about the country, and it was also a welcoming location to many of Madre Maria's childhood friends. Despite outward appearances, her family was struggling financially and finances were further aggravated by her father's passing, at which time her mother, Señora Palacios, found herself, "burdened with seven daughters who had no station [estado] in life nor hope of having any."²⁸ What this shows is how

death of parents and spouses. However, retaining ownership, did not necessarily transfer into more power nor autonomy for lay women in Colonial Latin America. Additionally, because of perceived, "frailty of reason" laws limited the way that women could manage any inheritance.

²⁷ Myers, Kathleen A. "A Glimpse of Family Life in Colonial Mexico: A Nun's Account." *Latin American Research Review* 28, no. 2 (1993): 63–87. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2503578>. Ordered by her new confessor to record her "difficult" path to the convent, Fray Placido de Olmedo received more than 200 pages of autobiographical work that breaks down her youth, attempts at entering the convent, denial and beyond.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 69. Descending from "*gachupinos from Spain*" her grandparents and both of her parents were wealthy, during this time it was not unusual that wealth would not last more than one or two generations as was the case for this family. As time passed their wealth diminished and her father's passing made the financial situation more dire

concerned her family was for the proper future of their daughters each of whom required a substantial dowry. Significantly, this also serves as an important example that shows how despite Madre Maria's religious calling, her ability to prove *limpieza de sangre*, legitimacy and virginity, the convent was for the moment closed to her because she lacked the dowry required to profess and enter the convent as a black veiled nun. The monetary limitations, she and her sister's faced, together with her brother Tomás's "stubborn insistence [to] make decisions about his sister's futures,"²⁹ and two of her own sister's sorrowful responses that they would lose her,³⁰ to the convent were additional complications she had to overcome. The love Madre Maria, her mother and most of her sisters shared is spoken about and although she understood the sorrow they would all feel when she entered a convent, she remained determined in her religious aspirations.

Thanks in large part to her mother's ongoing, but "discrete" efforts to circumvent Tomás's wishes that his sisters remain at the hacienda by not providing a dowry, her mother was able to stay in contact with Bishop Santa Cruz and through these efforts she secured her daughters futures. In the end, her mother's intervention, much like the intervention of Doña Maria de los Angeles's mother, also proved vital in securing her dowry and entry into the convent and despite gaining access to the convent a decade later than most, Madre Maria would become an important figure in the convent. These two sources show how women and their families worked within the system and became their own advocates. More importantly, it shows

when her mother understood she would not have any dowry available for any of her daughters to *take a station*, that is they do not have the ability to marry a man or marry God.

²⁹ Ibid. 77. As the only surviving male in their family, Tomás, became the hacienda manager and set about returning the hacienda to profitability. Part of this meant that he was not willing to pay the dowry her or her sisters (two others who also wanted to enter a convent) needed. Through this writing there is some belief that by refusing to pay their dowries and keeping his sisters on the hacienda, he was aware the land and properties would not be divided and would therefore remain under his control and therefore increasing his profits. Two of Madre Maria's sisters would never marry and remained at the hacienda and therefore under her brothers "protection."

³⁰ Ibid. When a woman entered the convent it was expected that she cut all ties with the world, her family included. For this reason, her oldest sister was saddened to learn that she would be losing her sister to the convent.

the ways women worked together to ensure they or their loved ones would be granted entry into a convent.

The Benefit of Paying the Full Dowry

Geronima de La Encarnacion Monja Profesa de este convento de Nuestro Padre San Joseph de gracia de la obediencia de vuestra y Santisima digo que necesito de mosa que me sirba y me endilga Una donsella y Segura y asi pido y suplico vuestra y santisima Se reciba de consederme licencia para que entre y espero recibir Este bien y mersede la grandesa de vuestra y Vss y Ma Subita que Esta a sus pies

Geronima de la Encarnacion

Geronima of the Incarnation, nun Professed to this convent Our Father St. Joseph of Grace, of your holy obedience. I say that I need a servant to serve me and who is unwed and faithful. This is what I ask and implore that you agree to grant me license so she may enter. And I hope that I will receive this benefit and mercy of the greatness of your lordship. Your servant who is at your feet.

Geronima de la Encarnacion

When a woman, like Geronima de la Encarnacion paid the full dowry, she expected and received benefits that were not available to women who professed without the full dowry. For this reason, access to and payment of a full or partial dowries resulted in a conventual hierarchal system similar to those found in colonial society. Black veil nuns were women who secured and paid the full dowry. Full payment resulted in an elevated and elite status that allowed black veil nuns to hold office positions as well as elect or become abbesses. Additionally, more leisure time was also expected and in turn allowed many black veiled nuns the opportunity to pursue personal passions such as music and writing. Examples of this are found in the many letters and poetry left by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the spiritual autobiography of Madre Maria. Black veiled nuns were also in a position to make certain requests, as seen in the petition of, Geronima de La Encarnacion whereby she requested a “mosa... don[s]jella.³¹” (servant that is unwed) who would

³¹ Ibid. Archivo General. Geronima is requesting a servant who is pure, unwed and that will be loyal to her.

be loyal to her. That she was able to make such a request reveals that she was most likely a nun of the black veil who had the position and means to make the request.

White veil nuns were women most likely like Doña Mariana and Doña Maria, who only had partial dowries and were automatically one rung below black veil nuns. As white veil nuns, they were not allowed to run or vote for convent positions nor were they likely to have leisure time. Furthermore, because white veil nuns, did not have to be literate (unlike black veiled nuns who held office positions and oversaw convent finances), their load of prayers and religious obligations were much lighter than those of black-veiled nuns,³² and accordingly they also worked as servants to nuns of the black veil. Below white veil nuns were donadas, women who desired the protection of the convent, but could not profess, therefore they “donated their own bodies and labor to convents but wore habits and participated in the devotional life of the convent to a greater degree than other servants.”³³ Despite their involvement in the cloister, donadas lives kept them in what renowned scholar, Asunción Lavrin referred to as a life that was “almost close to slavery insofar as they could never leave the convent,”³⁴ and in addition to their service to the convents upkeep donadas were also in service to nuns of the black and white veils.

As the elite class grew in colonial Mexico suitable marriage partners remained limited and rather than marrying a man who was below their station, many women chose to profess and through their ongoing entries and dowries women extended these institutions as they remained the “most reliable patrons of their convents.” Moreover, as more elite women entered the convent and became black veiled nuns, they were allowed to have private income that remained

³² Ibid. Brides of Christ. 122

³³ Ibid. Delgado. 9

³⁴ Ibid. Brides of Christ. p161. Despite the work and life commitment, there was a ready supply of women willing to give themselves as donadas because the conditions outside the cloister were often worse than they were once in service of the convent.

separate from convent finances. These personal reservas (reserves) were meant to provide for a nuns “personal needs,” that the convent could not fulfill. Reservas were not restricted and could be “several hundred pesos to as much as 20,000 pesos”³⁵ and when a nun passed, the contents of her reservas became part of the convent’s income. Thus, even with their deaths, nuns continued to provide convents with financial support.

Founding a New Convent

In addition to joining a convent, some women, usually those of elite status had a unique opportunity – establishing a religious institution, such as a convent. Such was the case for Maria Josepha Lina de la Canal, a young woman who lost both her parents at twelve years of age and as a result, decided to use 58,000 pesos of her own inheritance and dowry to fund a convent.³⁶ With her pledge, the community eagerly rallied behind her and her proposal for a new convent to be called, La Purísima. They did this by providing additional funds and writing letters to show why the convent “was necessary for the ... material and spiritual well-being of young girls in the region.”³⁷ They did this by asserting that the distances of their closest convents, respectively 300 and 120 miles away, meant that many of their girls would remain vulnerable to the “dangers of the world,”³⁸ because they could not afford to travel such long distances. However, they argued, if La Purísima opened in their vicinity, many girls would be saved from the dangers of the world.

Despite having a male confessor and family advisors who were also presumably male and because Maria Josepha Lina provided the majority of the funding needed for the convent, she was allowed to create the convents constitution and if there were ever any disagreements, she

³⁵ Ibid. 374.

³⁶ Ibid. Chowning

³⁷ Ibid. 28.

³⁸ Ibid. 29.

was the one “to whom everyone else deferred, further proof of this is evidence written into the constitution that “include[s] the words, Maria Josepha Lina ordered... or the Foundress decided.”³⁹

It is worthy of attention that although Maria Josepha made many of the declarations included in the convent’s constitution, she did not break with societal norms to challenge the way the convent would run. No, despite being in charge, she did what was expected and standard for many convents that came before hers. Women who sought entry into La Purisima were expected to pay a “3,000 peso dowry (black veiled nuns)... 1,500 (for white veil nuns)... all, including ideally donadas... were to be free of mala raza.” This shows that even when given the opportunity to make major changes to a convent, limpieza de sangre and dowries remained at the core of their admittance policy, with minimal exceptions to be made for donadas.

Ultimately, that Maria Josepha was able to fund a convent and create a constitution that placed her as the decision maker and speaker of the rules shows that she was integral part of La Purísima’s foundation, yet despite this responsibility, Maria Josepha Lina did not challenge ecclesial authority or the way the convent would run. However, as a foundress and nun who made all constitutional decisions, she went against ecclesial and patriarchal norms and the belief that a perfect nun must defer to her religious male superiors, such as directed by Archbishop Nuñez.

When Archbishop Nuñez “presented the aims of a perfect nun,” he maintained cloistered women must, “be humble, chaste, suffering, amiable, charitable, and disinterested... in this consists the true perfection to which you aspire,”⁴⁰ he was asserting that a virtuous nun would

³⁹ Ibid. 30.

⁴⁰ Lavrin, Asuncion. “Values and Meaning of Monastic Life for Nuns in Colonial Mexico.” *The Catholic Historical Review* 58, no. 3 (October 1972): 367–87. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25019098>. 387.

remain humble and unbothered by the events which occurred outside conventual walls by fully submitting to monastic rule. However, because convents were, “the only know institutions that women ran by themselves [and where] they assumed positions of responsibility which they would perform following their own sensibilities as women,”⁴¹ this meant that cloistered women were in direct opposition of Nuñez’s proclamation. Because cloistered nuns, specifically those of the black veil participated in convent elections, held office, and oversaw convent finances this meant that they could not remain unbothered when they took on active roles in the management of the convent.

What’s more, for some cloistered women, humility and suffering were not what they had in mind when they took the veil. On the contrary, as had become custom, “vows of enclosure were often breached, and personal servants, luxuries... and a wide range of activities were permitted within convent walls.”⁴² More than that, there is evidence that cloistered women felt free enough to challenge the strict rules before them and thus used their time to express and expand their intellectual power through advocacy or private studies, while in other cases, they sought to make their lives more comfortable. One nun turned advocate, was Sor Maria Ignacia Azlor y Echevers. When her parents passed away, Sor Maria traveled to Spain and in 1745 joined, “the Order of Mary... a teaching order... [and] after professing... she petitioned for a royal license for the extension of the [teaching] order in Mexico.”⁴³ Her goal in extending the teaching order was to assist girls who without a proper education, “suffer a lamentable ignorance.” Her teaching order would be immediately stalled by male ecclesial authorities, but undeterred, Sor Maria remained steadfast as she faced active resistance from the bishopric, and it

⁴¹ Ibid. Brides of Christ. 123

⁴² Ibid. Chowning. 33.

⁴³ Ibid. 386

would take nearly a decade of her persistence before the school finally opened in 1753. Because of her perseverance, the archbishop also gave his benediction and provided “100 pesos monthly” for the school’s upkeep. Initially, many of the girls who attended funded their education, but by 1779 the school was also educating girls whose families could not afford the tuition. So great was the school’s success that it would eventually be “extended [from Mexico City] to Irapuato and Aguascalientes.” Despite ongoing opposition, from male ecclesial authorities, Sor Maria continued to advocate for the school she knew would benefit local girls. Using her position within the convent she was able to not only open the school, but also secure financial support for the teaching order that was originally not allowed to open.

Other women took advantage of the protection afforded by cloistered walls and used their time to expand their mind and write in open opposition of the patriarchal society that limited so many of their sex. One such woman was Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a highly intelligent woman who used her religiosity to directly challenge ecclesial authority who asserted that above all else, women in church were to remain silent. “What can be evil about spending my time studying,”⁴⁴ demanded Sor Juana when the alternative would mean she would be focused on gossiping, arguing with other nuns or worse “letting [her] mind wander” She continued, when God gave me this inclination [to study] it did not seem against the holy law or the obligations of my state [her femininity]— I have this mind, even if it may be evil, it made me what I am; I was born with it and with it I must die.”⁴⁵ Her mind and love of learning were a gift from God and despite

⁴⁴ Juana Inés de la Cruz. *Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz: Selected Works : A New Translation, Contexts, Critical Traditions*. First edition. A Norton Critical Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016. 149. This is a letter written to her confessor, the Reverend Father Antonio Nuñez de Miranda. In this writing, Sor Juana is responding to Reverend Miranda who asserts there is danger found in cloistered women who focus on “intellectual pursuits.” Such pursuits are in direct opposition of *feminine humility and obedience*.

⁴⁵ Ibid

demands to stop, she was determined to keep learning. How could she ignore such a calling, when this inclination was granted to her by God? Directly challenging ecclesial and patriarchal authority, she fearlessly asserts, “irritating me is not the way to subdue me. I do not have such a servile nature that I can be threatened into doing something I am not persuaded of by reason.” Here Sor Juana, is highlighting her strength of mind and her virtue as a woman of the cloth who will not be silenced nor cast aside simply because her mind made male authorities, such as her Confessor Bishop Miranda, uneasy. Such is her defiance of Miranda’s demands that she limit her learning and writing, that Sor Juana, ended her response by proclaiming she no longer wanted him as her confessor and that she would “choose freely the spiritual father [she] wish[es]... put me out of your mind, except to commend me to God.” Certainly, reading Sor Juana’s response would have angered Miranda, however, the way in which Sor Juana used God to justify her intelligence and ultimate dismissal of her confessor shows how she used her position within the convent to extend her personal autonomy and rights to continue to learn.

Brazil and Peru

Conventual life did not develop along the same path in all of colonial Latin America. How and when a convent opened depended on the citizens and also on royal edicts that allowed or restricted the construction of a convent in their colonies.

When Peru opened its first convent, Santa Clara in 1558, one of the first to enter was the “six-year-old daughter of an Inca ruler.”⁴⁶ In Peru, Spanish women were in limited supply and because men did not want to wait for nuns to arrive, they allowed a “local widow named

⁴⁶ Burns, Kathryn. *Colonial Habits: Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999. 3.

Francisca Ortiz de Ayala to serve as abbess for life.”⁴⁷ The swiftness with which the convent was founded and that one of the first to enter was a mestiza girl shows how patriarchal society was vested in protecting daughters, born to Indigenous women and Spanish men. The main goal of this convent was to remove daughters from Indigenous society and their mothers and place them in the *protection* of the convent. However, the long-term goal of the convent was not to keep them as nuns. Instead, by removing young girls from their Indigenous mother’s these convents would “save” girls from the devil allowing them to remain pure as they grew and decided either to become nuns or wives.

In Peru, a *cabildo* (council) sponsored the founding of the Santa Clara. This was unique because the excessive expense was typically handled by, “aristocratic, wealthy,”⁴⁸ citizens, as was the case with Maria Josepha Lina. It is notable that unlike convents in colonial Mexico, the local council sought to open Santa Clara to protect the growing numbers of Mestiza daughters. Also unique to Peru was that Santa Clara served as a type of holding place where mestiza women would remain until they learned Spanish customs and religiosity at which point they could marry into Spanish society. One such example is the story of “Doña Beatriz Clara Coya, the only fully Inca child among the convents residents.”⁴⁹ When her father Sayri Túpac died, Doña Beatriz inherited a large estate that was coveted by many. Not long after her father’s death, Doña Beatriz she was taken from her mother by a friar and placed in Santa Clara to learn how to be a proper Spanish lady. When her mother took her out of the convent, it is believed she was raped by a man who sought her property, but instead of being forced to marry her rapist, she was returned to the convent where she remained for another two decades until she left to marry another man.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 24

⁴⁹ Ibid. 27.

Doña Beatriz's story shows that rather than becoming spaces of permanent enclosure, many women could enter and be taken out by their families when they chose a proper station.

Not long after founding Santa Clara became a location where Spaniards could find a wife and would remain so until more Spanish women arrived. Other mestiza women were removed from convents, not to marry but to work as servants in Spanish households.

As in colonial Mexico, Santa Clara and the other convents would begin to see the emergence of black veiled nuns who were of Spanish descent and they would assert that, "no illegitimate daughter of a Spanish man and an Indian or other nonwhite women could be elected abbess for a twenty-five-year period."⁵⁰ Such a shift showed that as more Spanish women arrived, mestizas who were instrumental in expanding these religious institutions, were quickly downgraded to second class status as white veiled nuns. Therefore, although convents in Peru actively removed daughters from indigenous mothers for their *protection* and *proper* upbringing, these spaces quickly became more favorable to Criollas, leaving mestiza residents for whom the convents were originally created relegated to second class residents.

Unlike colonial Mexico and Peru, the elite citizens of Brazil had a different conventual founding experience. Here, despite multiple attempts, the Portuguese crown was in direct opposition to opening a convent because it believed that by secluding women in convents there would be a direct threat to, "the colony's population growth."⁵¹ For this reason the elite citizenry of Salvador, Bahia in Brazil, citizens would not see a convent founded in their colony until more than a century after colonial Mexico and Peru already constructed multiple convents in their regions.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 34

⁵¹ Soeiro, Susan A. "The Social and Economic Role of the Convent: Women and Nuns in Colonial Bahia, 1677-1800." *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 54, no. 2 (May 1974): 209-32. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/2512567>. 210.

Opening in 1677, “the Convent of Santa Clara do Destêro,” quickly became an appropriate alternative to marriage, a crucial part of the community and economy. Soon many women would see the convent as a viable alternative to marriage. Unable to find suitable men for his daughters, Pires de Carvalho, did not want to marry his daughters “to marry off his daughters to persons of [un]equal station” for that reason, he petitioned the crown for permission to have all five of his daughters enter the convent. The crown denied this request, however despite their denial, Carvalho defiantly “succeeded in having all five of his female offspring take the veil.”⁵² Cloistered life was a much better alternative for his daughters than was marrying a man perceived to be below his daughters.

The way this convent received dowries and from whom is unusual when compared to their Mexican counterparts. Here, the planter class who was largely reliant on sugar profits whose prices varied from one season to the next, were allowed to present their daughters to the convent without paying a dowry up front. Instead to secure the dowry and without any negative effect to the position and status of the women within cloistered walls, the convent placed liens on the nuns, relative’s properties to secure payments. In theory, this meant, that the convent would continue to receive income in the form of payments that would help sustain it. On the other hand, merchant’s daughters who were initially excluded from convents because the planter class believed those girls were below their daughter’s station and for that reason should not be allowed in the same cloister as their planter daughters. However, when it became evident that merchant daughters were able to pay the dowry in full and more importantly up front, they were welcomed by convents.⁵³

⁵² Ibid. 220

⁵³ Ibid. 223. Sugar was central to Brazil’s economy and as more planters arrived to plant and harvest this sugar, the competition meant reduced and fluctuating sugar profits for many. This was aggravated when the Caribbean successfully grew sugar. As the middlemen, merchants continued to see immense profits and because many worked

With more women professing, the convent quickly became a community “lending institution,” that provided funding to locals. Soon, those who had daughters or relatives in the convent benefited from favorable terms. Although on occasion it may have been difficult to collect on certain debts, the financing provided by the convent made it an important location for not only women, but also for the growing community who relied on it for personal funding. Despite the centrality of Destêrro, this convent would be the only such institution for women in colonial Brazil for more than “50 years.”⁵⁴

As can be seen by the conventual experiences and founding of convents in colonial Mexico, Peru and Brazil, the development of convents and the experiences of women who accessed these institutions varied from one location to another.

Conclusion

When the research for this paper began, the goal was to reveal the ways women challenged colonial norms and stood up to ecclesial and patriarchal authorities, however, what the sources revealed is that women in colonial society were active participants who eagerly played a role in the expansion of religious institutions. Whether through pious donations or their own attempts to enter religious institutions there was a great desire to get involved with such spaces. For women who had religious aspirations but could not meet all the requirements to join a convent they wrote letters explaining their desire to enter a cloister while simultaneously asking for mercy and the opportunity to join despite their shortcomings. Therefore, despite personal or external hinderances, women became their biggest advocates as they sought to

with multiple planters and were involved in more than just sugar crops and sales, they benefited from a more reliable source of income. For this reason, despite initial rejection of merchant daughters as nuns, they convent and planter class grew to welcome their daughters into the cloister.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 214

overcome their shortcomings. Through their own efforts, women joined lay religious institutions, fought sometimes for decades for the right to finally profess. Other women were more fortunate and benefited from large dowries that placed them at the top of conventual hierarchy or received inheritances they used to establish their own religious institutions. This evidence shows that rather than challenging ecclesial or patriarchal authority women ardently sought the protection of cloistered walls and when they found their entry might be hindered, they wrote petitions to bishops where they requested mercy, pardons and permission to join convents.

Additionally, there is also valuable evidence that shows the ways cloistered women worked within the system to advocate for themselves, as is seen in Sor Juana's letter to her confessor where she courageously demanded her confessor, Reverend Father Antonio Nuñez de Miranda tell her, "By what direct authority did your Reverence [Miranda] take charge of my person and the free will given to me by God," in response to his declaration that he would have "married [her] off"⁵⁵ if he knew she was going to use her time in the convent to write. Using her position as a cloistered woman, she will not remain submissive to a man who is not providing the spiritual guidance she desires. Angered, yet aware of his position of authority in comparison to hers, Sor Juana chose her words wisely calling Miranda *your reverence*, while simultaneously admonishing him. Such a carefully penned yet, strongly worded letter, together with the petitions and additional sources found here, reveal the ways women worked within these spaces to improve their lives and when necessary, stand up for themselves.

⁵⁵ Juana Inés de la Cruz. *Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz: Selected Works : A New Translation, Contexts, Critical Traditions*. First edition. A Norton Critical Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016. 150-151

REFERENCES

- Archivo General de la Nación / Instituciones Coloniales / Cajas 1-999 / Caja 0592
“Spanish...legitimate daughter of Sir Joaquin... and Lady Josefa Solis”
- Burns, Kathryn. *Colonial Habits: Convents and the Spiritual Economy of Cuzco, Peru*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Chowning, Margaret. *Rebellious Nuns: The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent, 1752-1863*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Juana Inés de la Cruz. *Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz: Selected Works : A New Translation, Contexts, Critical Traditions*. First edition. A Norton Critical Edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.
- Lavrin, Asunción. *Brides of Christ: Conventual Life in Colonial Mexico*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020.
- Lavrin, Asuncion. “The Role of the Nunneries in the Economy of New Spain in the Eighteenth Century.” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 46, no. 4 (November 1966): 371–93. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/2510979>.
- Lavrin, Asuncion. “Values and Meaning of Monastic Life for Nuns in Colonial Mexico.” *The Catholic Historical Review* 58, no. 3 (October 1972): 367–87. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25019098>.
- Metcalfe, Alida C. “Women and Means: Women and Family Property in Colonial Brazil.” *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 2 (1990): 277–98. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh/24.2.277>.
- Myers, Kathleen A. “A Glimpse of Family Life in Colonial Mexico: A Nun’s Account.” *Latin American Research Review* 28, no. 2 (1993): 63–87. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2503578>.
- Restall, Matthew. *Latin America in Colonial Times*. Second edition. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Sierra, Horacio. “Gossiping Women and Talkative Nuns: The Transatlantic Feminism of María de Zayas and Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz.” *Women’s Studies* 50, no. 3 (2021): 207–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2020.1855180>.