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Clergy—Spanish America

Divine intermediaries, arbiters of justice, fire-and-brimstone preachers, score-settlers, compassionate allies, and greedy careerists—clergy filled a multiplicity of roles and brought to mind a range of opinions in the Spanish Americas, just as Gretchen Starr-Lebeau makes clear they did in Spain. Indeed, the history of the clergy on both sides of the Atlantic has much in common, particularly during the Baroque, a period that lasted from the late-sixteenth through the mid-eighteenth century. Clergy on both sides of the Atlantic were at the apex of their size and power. Patterns in the compositions of urban versus rural as well as diocesan versus regular clergy were similar, and they engaged in comparable pastoral works. At the same time, the not insignificantly different circumstances and clientele in the Americas offered a distinct set of challenges for American clergy.

During the first decades of Spanish colonization, the majority of clergy were Europeans who had come to the Americas as part of a grand project to bring the land's native populations into the Catholic fold. Most clergy were members of Mendicant Orders (especially Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and Mercedarians) while diocesan structures remained weak and staffed by insufficient numbers of clergy. As the Americas developed stronger colonial institutions and their own systems of governance, as a bifurcated society of Indians and Spaniards gave way to a more racially complex society with larger creole and *mestizo* populations, as cities grew, and as European culture including Catholicism established deeper roots, the church came to balance these early missionary programs with more conventional pastoral duties similar to what priests were doing in Europe.

Scholars have often portrayed this transition in terms of a shift from a Mendicant church to a Tridentine church based on new orders like Jesuits and especially secular clergy.[1] While Trent did champion secular clergy and parochial hierarchies at the expense of other branches of the church, and while Jesuits quickly established themselves as a powerful force in the Spanish Americas, the result was not a replacement of Mendicants, however, so much as a rebalancing these branches of the church, the three largest and most influential during the Baroque period. For along with increasing numbers of Jesuits and secular clergy, numbers of Mendicants grew exponentially. For example, in the Franciscans' Mexico Province, the number of friars grew from 225 in 1569 to 556 in 1682 and 840 in 1730. As in Spain, the Baroque was a time of expansion for all branches of the Spanish American clergy.

The source of these increases was not, however, European priests who made the journey to the Americas: figures show that their numbers dipped during the mid-colonial period. According to one calculation, more than 5,000 members of regular orders arrived in each of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, while only 3,800 came in the seventeenth.[2] Instead, growth originated from newly founded seminaries and novitiates that allowed men already living in the Americas to enter religious life. For instance, Guatemala was something of a colonial backwater, but even there the three major orders—Franciscans, Dominicans, and Mercedarians—were each operating novitiates by the 1570s, and the diocese opened its seminary in 1597. The primary beneficiaries of these new career opportunities were not Indians nor people of mixed race but creoles. Long-standing Spanish concerns with *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) acquired new meanings in the Americas, where Indian or African blood could prevent or limit a man's career as a priest. While colonial law eventually allowed Indians and mestizos to enter the priesthood, social realities made their place in the church ambiguous, and either few became priests or few priests were willing to admit to such a background. Baroque clergy were predominantly American and of at least nominally Spanish descent.

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[1] Two examples are Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain: 1523-1572* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) and Solange Alberro, *El Águila y la Cruz: Orígenes religiosos de la conciencia criolla. México, siglos XVI-XVII* (México: El Colegio de México, 1999).

[2] Borges Moran, "Características sociológicas de las ordenes misioneras americanas" in *Evangelización y teología en América (siglo XVI)* (Pamplona: Universidad de Navarra, 1990), pp 619-25.

The transformation from an early missionary church staffed by Europeans to a creole church was met with resistance from some Europeans who believed creoles to be ill suited to the demands of the priesthood. One particularly vocal detractor of creoles was the peninsular Franciscan Jerónimo de Mendieta, who considered them infected by the same vices as Indians, including inclinations to drunkenness and disobedience and who sought to cap their numbers. Although efforts to limit the numbers of creoles proved ineffective and creole clergy held positions of power across regular and secular branches of the Church, Europeans retained a level of influence disproportionate to their smaller numbers. Nearly all bishops in the Spanish Americas came over from Spain, and many orders followed an *alternativa*, in which creoles and *peninsulares* alternated important offices. This infusion of

Europeans (they were mostly Spaniards but not exclusively so, particularly in the case of the Jesuits) into positions of power was one of the ways in which officials in Spain sought to maintain control over an increasingly independent American church.

Standard definitions of the clergy's roles in colonial society have centered on the types of populations that they served. In these views, Mendicants worked almost exclusively with Indians; Jesuits targeted Indians and, especially through schools, elite Spaniards; diocesan clergy ministered to some Indians as well as the majority of the non-Indian population. In reality, divisions were not clear cut, and each branch of clergy worked extensively with broad segments of the population. A better indicator of the populations that the clergy served is where they were located, either in cities or rural areas. Outside of cities, clergy worked predominantly with Indians: Mendicants through their missions and *doctrinas* (Indian parishes run by orders), Jesuits in their missions, and secular clergy in rural parishes. Within cities, all three branches ministered to the full range of urban populations: Spaniards, Indians, Africans, and people of mixed race. Even though diocesan clergy ran most of urban parishes, Mendicants and Jesuits were also extremely active in these locations. Cities were home to the orders' most important houses, which could take up several city blocks and accommodate hundreds of clergymen.[3] The result was a clergy concentrated in cities. Combined with the vast territories of the Americas, this arrangement meant that rural areas suffered chronic shortages of priests, leaving, as in Spain, many smaller towns or even entire regions without any resident priests. Clergy could thus be transient figures who appeared in town only at Lent and on local feast days or, on the other extreme, weekly visitors in the homes of urban devotees.

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[3] Daniel T. Reff "Introduction" in Andrés Pérez de Ribas, *History of the Triumphs of Our Holy Faith amongst the Most Barbarous and Fierce Peoples of the New World* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999) p. 306; Karen Melvin, *Building Colonial Cities of God* (Stanford University Press, 2012).

By the mid-colonial period, most clergy were engaged in similar sorts of pastoral work as their counterparts in Spain, most notably administering sacraments, preaching, running schools, sponsoring lay organizations, and encouraging people to be good Christians. Clergy staffed parishes and *doctrinas* that were meant to function as spiritual home bases, and the primary duty of these men was to attend to the faithful's spiritual wellbeing. Parishes held monopolies on some sacraments, like baptism and marriage. People were supposed to attend Mass and complete their annual precept (confession and communion during Lent) at these churches. At the same time, the orders' churches were also heavily patronized for many of these functions, providing an ongoing point of tension between regular and diocesan clergy. Perhaps it was the proximity of a church, devotion to an image renowned for working miracles, the prestige of the order, or the personalities of individual priests that drew the faithful to one church over another.

Working with native populations gave a distinct character to pastoral work in the Americas. One reason was that the missionary project begun in the sixteenth century was never completed. Traditional missionary work continued through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century especially along New Spain's northern frontiers, among the Guaraní of Paraguay, and into southern Río de la Plata and Chile. But even among Christianized native populations, clergy gave special place to work with Indians, whom they continued to regarded as perpetual minors in need of protection. "To defend the Indians is the cura's obligation," wrote one eighteenth-century parish priest.[4] A darker side to this type of work was the fear, not always unfounded, of lingering idolatrous beliefs, and some clergy sought to root them out, most notably during the Extirpation of Idolatry campaigns in Peru (1640-1750). In this sense, American clergymen shared the anxieties of their Post-Tridentine European counterparts that the devil's presence in the world was a growing threat. The enemy included Indian idolaters as well as witches and Protestants.

The baroque period was also marked by frequent interactions among the different types of clergy. The branches' relatively equal footing and their overlapping duties could lead to conflict. Some of the most visible battles took place over Mendicants' rights to run *doctrinas* and whether or not regular clergy had to pay tithes, an issue that helped spark Bishop Juan de Palafox y Mendoza's virulent clash with the Jesuits. Different orders could also find themselves in opposition, such as when Dominicans and Franciscans found themselves on opposite sides of debates over Mary's Immaculate Conception. To focus solely on points of dispute, however, misses important parts of the picture. Secular and regular priests regularly gave sermons in each other's churches, bishops requested that orders found new convents in their sees, and clergy sometimes cooperated on projects of mutual interest, such as the creation of a local school or petitions against a troublesome peninsular official.

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[4] William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 155.

The mid-eighteenth century brought considerable change to the Spanish American clergy. New interest in making sharper distinctions between secular and religious life and establishing state primacy over the church curtailed clergy's place in society. Jesuits were expelled from Spanish territories, and Mendicants had to relinquish their *doctrinas*, shifting the balance of power toward secular clergy. But secular clergy also found their roles diminished as state reforms pushed them out of some of their traditional roles as judges or local agents for royal officials. Even within the more tightly-bounded ecclesiastical sphere, clergy's roles were shifting as they fashioned themselves more as teachers than as judges and as some advocated a Jansenist-influenced Reformed Catholicism that was characterized by less emotional and more sedate forms of piety than during the Baroque. Clergy continued as central figures in people's lives, but the time when secular clergy, Mendicants, and Jesuits were at the height of their influence had ended. The baroque era had come to a close.

Suggested Further Reading

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