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## A Potential saint thwarted: The politics of religion and sanctity in late eighteenth-century new Spain

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A Potential Saint Thwarted:  
The Politics of Religion and Sanctity in Late Eighteenth-Century New Spain

Early in 1784, the Office of the Inquisition in Mexico City received word that two Discalced Carmelite friars in the nearby city of Toluca had acted suspiciously at a young woman's deathbed. According to the denunciation, the Carmelites had knelt before the corpse of María Josepha de la Pina, kissed its feet, and ordered everyone present, including the young woman's parents, to do the same. The friars then crawled on their knees to the place where María Josepha had done her spiritual exercises and "with great effusion of tears" prostrated themselves many times. Finally, they collected her things and distributed them as if they were relics. All this was done, concluded the complaint, in the presence of lay persons, who, because of their "vulgar mode of thinking", might be persuaded to think of María Josepha as a holy person. The inquisitors were indeed concerned, and, after collecting preliminary statements, ordered the two Carmelites removed from Toluca. The inquisitors also commissioned their local agents "recoger las insinuadas reliquias, atajar la injusta, e infundada fama de extraordinaria virtud y Santidad; y averiguar el espíritu de la Dirección de los expresados religiosos con dicha difunta."<sup>i</sup>

The inquisitors' investigations into the incident produced, in good bureaucratic fashion, a thick file of reports, interviews, and letters related to María Josepha's life and the post-mortem struggles to determine her legacy. I consider these subjects as a way of exploring how religion was lived, practiced, and perceived in late eighteenth-century New Spain and, in particular, how rivalries and politics of religion shaped the fate of a potential saint. María Josepha, with the encouragement of the two Carmelite friars, had followed models of piety steeped in mystic

traditions, and like many Catholic women of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, she fashioned her spiritual life after Saint Teresa of Avila. Such practices, long a subject of concern within the church hierarchy, had become especially troublesome by the late eighteenth century when reformist clergy sought to instill a more austere and moderate piety among the faithful. Reformers' efforts to curtail mystic practices often revealed gaps between their goals and local practices. From this perspective, the case involving María Josepha seems a fairly straightforward instance of local tradition butting up against the ideas of Mexico City's elite church hierarchy. Still, the reason María Josepha's spreading fame came to the attention of the Inquisitors had little to do with reformism or disapproval of mystical piety. Instead, the Carmelites' major rivals in Toluca, the Franciscans, had denounced the two Carmelite friars and had done so as part of an effort to protect the Franciscans' position as Toluca's most important order. In other words, the outcome of the case had as much to do with local politics of religion as it did with more general politics of sanctity.

### María Josepha's Life

According to those who knew her, sometime around the age of twenty María Josepha underwent a dramatic transformation. This daughter of honorable but not especially wealthy Spanish parents gave up a life of parties and amusements and began confessing with a Carmelite friar. Whereas before witnesses described her as having gone months at a time without receiving sacraments, she now entered a Carmelite lay organization and sought to become a Carmelite nun, even signing papers with a chosen religious name: María de la Santísima Trinidad.<sup>ii</sup> She began practicing an affective piety, fasting and using instruments of mortification, such as a crown of thorns, a girdle, and a discipline of hooks. She dedicated a room to prayers and exercises, and

her mother complained about the amount of time she spent there. Much of her piety was steeped in Carmelite traditions, and she focused on Saint Teresa, the Spanish nun who founded the Discalced Carmelites in the sixteenth century, as a model, wearing a vellum image of the saint, referring to Teresa as her “holy mother”, and reading and copying Teresa’s writings. María Josepha also claimed that one day Teresa appeared to her and helped her pray and, even more extraordinary, that she could understand what Teresa was saying. The most telling sign of María Josepha’s emulation of Teresa was her claim that to have received “the dart”, which undoubtedly meant the transverberation, that uniquely defining moment in Teresa’s life when, while in a trance, she was pierced by the arrow of Divine Love. In addition to these claims of a special relationship with Teresa, María Josepha swore that she received special gifts directly from God, including visions and prophecies. She maintained that two recently-deceased Carmelite friars appeared to thank her for her prayers, as a result of which the men were already leaving Purgatory for Paradise. She also claimed that God had wanted to punish Toluca and it was only through her pleas that she stopped “the arm of His Divine Justice.”<sup>iii</sup>

María Josepha’s practices and assertions were not unusual. Similar stories filled hagiographical biographies of pious men and especially women in Catholic Europe and came to the Iberian Americas in the sixteenth century.<sup>iv</sup> Here, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mystic practice and its reliance upon direct experience over intellectual or book knowledge flourished. The most important role model was Saint Teresa, whose visions and ecstasies often focused on a human Christ and especially the suffering and sacrifices of his Passion. Recent scholarship has pointed to her influence on numerous pious women, including Saint Rose of Lima (1586-1617), Catarina de San Juan (*la china poblana*, 1582-1637), Sor Ursula de Jesús (1604-1666), and Sor María de San José (1656-1719).<sup>v</sup> According to

contemporary Catholic beliefs, boundaries between the mundane and divine could be bridged with the right approaches and heavenly assistance. Someone who fasted heavily, disciplined her flesh, fervently prayed to Jesus, or mediated upon the image of Mary might be rewarded with the gift of an ecstasy or vision. Aside from its spiritual possibilities, mysticism could also allow women to take on privileged but otherwise unlikely roles, giving them access to public forums or positions of power. For instance, ecstasies allowed Sister Benedetta, the sixteenth-century Italian nun studied by Judith Brown, to preach publicly, and the piety and visions of Sor Ursula de Jesús, an Afro-Peruvian servant in Lima's Santa Clara convent, set her apart and gave her more prestige than her fellow servants.<sup>vi</sup> The benefits of well-practiced mysticism could also extend to the people and community associated with the individual. A holy individual could bring worldly prestige and attract people (and their alms) to a particular church or shrine, and she might help people with their needs by acting as an intercessor with God, Mary, or other potentially powerful residents of heaven. As Kathleen Ann Myers noted, these women often "were considered icons of heroic virtue who brought blessings to their cities, to the New World, and ultimately to Christendom itself."<sup>vii</sup>

On the other hand, claims to direct mystical connections with God that bypassed priestly intermediaries could be threatening to the church hierarchy. As Michel de Certeau noted, mysticism existed at the intersection of the spiritual and political church, and it became increasingly troublesome to churchmen of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many of whom worked to institutionalize the invisible, bringing it into the visible, and therefore controllable, realm.<sup>viii</sup> Mystics therefore risked investigations and punishments if judged not to be the real thing. Teresa herself faced the scrutiny of the Inquisition and was a controversial role model long before the end of the eighteenth century. Her transverberation in particular came to

be portrayed less as a path to holiness to be imitated than as evidence of her gifts from God.<sup>ix</sup> By the late eighteenth century, however, the church hierarchy had become even less tolerant of mystics. Whereas the primary concern was once separating the false mystics from the genuine ones, mysticism now lost favor to a different set of attributes. Clergymen like Archbishops of Mexico Francisco de Lorenzana (1766-1772) and Alonso Núñez de Haro y Peralta (1772-1800), and Bishop of Puebla Francisco Fabián y Fuero (1765-1773) arrived from Spain and set to work reforming the New Spanish church. Influenced by Jansenism, they considered unpalatable the baroque excesses in many people's forms of worship, such as their penitential processions and devotion to miraculous images, and these churchmen sought a more structured and conventional practices. Rather than stirring up emotions or inflaming the senses, piety was to be more sedate, intellectual, and orderly; rather than approaching God through a physical, sensory piety, it should be done through quiet prayer. The mystic, in this view, was a dangerous distraction from true devotion. A result of these reformist campaigns was what David Brading termed a "growing fissure" between clerical opinion and popular religion.<sup>x</sup>

This combination of a widely-practiced baroque Catholicism and the church hierarchy's anxieties about mystics kept New Spain's Inquisition busy investigating the scores of women accused of being witches, *alumbradas* (false visionaries), or *ilusas* (deluded ones), including María Josepha. A case against her was open when she died at the age of twenty-four during an epidemic in 1784. This case was not included with the separate case against the Carmelite friars, but according to conjectures of some witnesses (Inquisition denunciations were, in theory, secret), the proceedings may have begun after a woman, who was not from Toluca, denounced María Josepha after a confrontation and exchange of insults in the street.<sup>xi</sup> When the woman subsequently became sick, she accused María Josepha of witchcraft and abuse of the Holy

Sacrament. It was also possible that members of María Josepha's own family denounced her. María Luisa Gonzáles Zepulveda, María Josepha's good friend, testified that a relative had gone to the Holy Office after the incident in the street, and one of the Carmelite confessors thought that María Josepha's father and a cousin also had accused her. According to one confessor's statement, the Inquisitors wanted to know if María Josepha had a pact with the devil, if she abused religious images for her spells, if she wore an image of the demon around her neck, if she took communion daily, and if she had two confessors and why. He said that she had denied the first three accusations and affirmed the latter two, explaining she had two confessors to walk more securely to God.<sup>xii</sup>

One of the questions begged by this case is why María Josepha, who had lived what María Luisa described as “una vida desarreglada, que gastaba en fandagos, bureos, y diversiones”, sought to become a model of baroque piety who took communion daily.<sup>xiii</sup> In hagiography, lives of saints and venerable men and women commonly included similarly dramatic turning points often prompted by divine visions or miraculous healings or rescues (such as after a near-fatal illness or a fall down a well). The lucky recipients of such divine gifts then changed their ways and devoted themselves to God, but if María Josepha had such an experience, it was not recorded.<sup>xiv</sup> One impetus for her transformation that can almost certainly be ruled out was pressure from her parents. Witnesses' accounts were replete with her problems with them, including instances when her father hit her with a rock and threatened her with a knife, not to mention his possible denunciation to the Inquisition. What prompted these conflicts were her devotional practices and desire to become a nun. One witness explained that María Josepha had been well-regarded by her parents until she began confessing with the Carmelites and that María Josepha's mother tried to prohibit María Josepha from doing her spiritual

exercises.<sup>xv</sup> Some of her parents' opposition came from their desire to see her marry an important local official, a plan that did not fit well with María Josepha's desire to become a nun. It is possible that María Josepha's transformation was simply a means of avoiding marriage, and María Luisa even testified that divine favor helped her friend avoid the pursuits of the suitor. Apparently, he had once tried to remove María Josepha's petticoats, but he instantly felt such a great chill that he changed his mind. Still, even if this resistance was the origin of her transformation, María Josepha's actions over the last four years of her life suggest that there was more to it.

María Josepha's dogged opposition to her parents indicates that she was certainly strong-willed enough to have been the driving force behind the changes in her life, but it is also hard to discount the role of Fr. Lorenzo and Fr. Sebastián, her Carmelite confessors who took a keen interest in her, providing her with guidance and protection.<sup>xvi</sup> They advised and encouraged her during the Holy Office's investigations, and once when she was sick, Fr. Sebastián sent her an image of Veronica, the saint who had given Christ a cloth to wipe his face during his walk to Calvary. This cloth had preserved an imprint of his face and thereafter could miraculously cure the sick, and the image sent to María Josepha was undoubtedly meant to replicate the healing powers of the original. The two friars also worked to defend her from her own parents, and the month before she died, each wrote to the Inquisition asking to have her removed from her parents' house to someplace where she would be safe. It was common for confessors during this time to establish close relationships with spiritually exceptional women, and, aside from any spiritual benefits, such relationships could offer opportunities for promoting the reputations of both parties.<sup>xvii</sup> In addition to offering the sacraments of confession and communion, which María Josepha supposedly took daily, Fr. Lorenzo and Fr. Sebastián taught her how to make



daily rounds of prayers, lent her prayer books, and instructed her on Teresa's writings. Furthermore, despite the potential dangers of imitating Teresa's mysticism, both confessors actively encouraged her emulation of the saint. Fr. Sebastián had lent her a copy of Teresa's *Moradas*, and some witnesses, including another Carmelite friar, believed that she had written some *moradas* of her own "like those of Teresa". According to Fr. Lorenzo many years later, these were more than something similar; they were "una copia puntual de las de S[anta] Teresa en sentencias y palabras sin más distinción que la material de mano, pluma, tinta y papel," and they had been made at Fr. Sebastián's direction.<sup>xviii</sup>

The two Carmelites encouraged María Josepha on this path, even if it was no longer in favor among many elite churchmen, as part of their order's strong mystic tradition. Founded by Teresa and fellow mystic John of the Cross, the Discalced Carmelite order had an identity and institute (that is, a particular way of doing things) that were closely tied to the contemplative. Carmelite hagiographers took special care to describe how especially virtuous men and women associated with the order dedicated themselves to long meditations, harsh penances, and reclusion from the world. It was also common practice in any order to encourage the imitation of its most important figures. María Josepha, with her special room devoted to exercises and her close connections to Teresa, was thus following a model of piety steeped in Carmelite traditions. Even so, neither she nor the Carmelite friars were out of step with mainstream baroque practices. As will be seen with María Josepha's legacy, this sort of piety continued to be valued among a broader segment of the laity. This was why the Inquisition official in charge, Dr. Antonio Bergosa y Jordán, who would later become Bishop of Oaxaca (1800-1812 and 1815-1817) and Archbishop of Mexico (1813-1814), went to great pains to stop María Josepha's nascent celebrity dead in its tracks. Although the Inquisition and its officials in Mexico City would be

the final arbiters in María Josepha's case, the battles to shape her legacy were ultimately rooted in local circumstances and the politics of religion in Toluca.

### María Josepha's Legacy

As much as the records of this Inquisition case tell us about María Josepha's life, that was not the focus of the inquisitors, who did not concern themselves with the dead. What was instead at stake was María Josepha's legacy: how would *toluqueños* and future generations of *toluqueños* view her? The struggles to define her legacy entered this historical record only eight days after her death when Fr. Francisco Castellanos, a Franciscan living in Toluca, denounced the two Carmelite friars to the Inquisition. Fr. Francisco was especially concerned about the spread of María Josepha's fame in Toluca, claiming that "various people" had complained to him about the Carmelites' behavior in front of María Josepha's corpse. That the denunciation came from a Franciscan was no accident, as the order had the most to lose from María Josepha's potential veneration. If she did gain the sort of fame that her confessors seem to have been seeking for her, then the Carmelites might surpass the Franciscans as the most important order in Toluca. This fear, rather than any shared ideas with reformers regarding the dangers of mystic practice, motivated the Franciscans to call in the Inquisition.

Dr. Bergosa y Jordán was especially concerned with the two Carmelites' actions on the day of María Josepha's death and asked the local *comisario* (agent of the Inquisition) to focus his investigation "sobre las acciones que se executaron con el cadavor, si se le dió adoración o culto."<sup>xix</sup> According to Fr. Lorenzo's testimony, Fr. Sebastián and another Carmelite were there when María Josepha died early that morning, but when Fr. Lorenzo arrived later that afternoon, he told those present not to be amazed at what he was about to do because María Josepha possessed some "heroic virtues, characteristic of a saint", and then kissed her feet, hands and

heart (over her clothes). He did not think that anyone else followed suit, but he was sure the other Carmelites did not since they were not in the room at the time. Most of the other witnesses interviewed confirmed this story, although a couple said that some onlookers followed Fr. Lorenzo's example and kissed María Josepha's corpse. This emulation was one reason why the inquisitors were so concerned with the friars' actions that afternoon: the effects of their undue reverence on others. When the *comisario* asked one of the women present about the consequences of Fr. Lorenzo's words and actions, she responded that:

muchas Personas la tengan por sierva de Dios, y que toda la Gente que concurría en su casa (que fue mucha) desde la hora en que falleció hasta la mañana del día siguiente que sacaron el cuerpo para la Yglesia, bezaron con reverencia el cadaver. Porque a quantos entravan daban noticia de que Fr. Lorenzo lo havía adorado, y bezádole pies, manos y corazón.<sup>xx</sup>

It was for the same reason that the inquisitors feared the Carmelites' distribution of some of María Josepha's things as relics, and indeed the focus of the case quickly became their retrieval. A few hours after María Josepha's death and still in the Pina home, Fr. Sebastián parceled out some of what he found in a small chest in María Josepha's room, including crucifixes, crosses, images, items or pieces of clothing, a prayer book, crowns of thorns, disciplines and other instruments of mortification, and then had the rest taken back to the convent. The crucial element in the items distributed was that they somehow participated in María Josepha's alleged holiness: a cross that she held when she died, a piece of silk used to mark her place in her breviary, or the crucifix said to have bowed its head when she died. This element was evident in one man's explanation that although many persons asked him for a thorn from one of the crowns of thorns, he did not give any away because Fr. Sebastián told him María Josepha had never used it. The items circulated fairly widely within Toluca. In addition to at least four Carmelites and to María Josepha's immediate circle of family and friends, at least

thirty people had acquired a thorn from one of her crown of thorns. The two Carmelites who distributed María Josepha's things both maintained that they did not intend the items be treated as relics, and one explained that these things were distributed only "como apreciables a la manera que se guardan las cosas de algunos venerables." On the other hand, María Luisa claimed the friars did distribute things as relics and that she had seen Fr. Sebastián "adorar las que tiene y trae consigo, bezándolas, y llegándoselas al pecho con reverencia."<sup>xxi</sup>

Whatever the confessors may have intended, Lorenzo's reverence of María Josepha's corpse and Sebastián's distribution of her things did indeed have repercussions among the residents of Toluca. When one of the Carmelites was asked about the effects, he responded that he thought it "causaría admiración a los circunstantes y a quantos lo hayan sabido."<sup>xxii</sup> The friars' actions even seem to have changed the opinions of María Josepha's once-doubting parents, and they also participated in the distribution of her things. For example, one of María Josepha's uncles testified that they gave him a piece of her tunic and a medal she wore, telling him "hermano, guarde eso, que es reliquia."<sup>xxiii</sup> Her mother also told various people that she saw a light coming from María Josepha's room only a few days after she died, and when her mother went in, she smelled a sweet fragrance, which she took as a sign of her daughter's sanctity.

Two specific examples offer some deeper insights into how the Carmelites' actions were received. The agents of the Inquisition went to the house of María Josepha's aunt and uncle, José Pina and his wife María de Nava y Mota, to collect a pair of María Josepha's shoes that were supposedly bloody on the inside from where she received the stigmata. The agents found the shoes in a chest with other "womanly things" and without any signs of veneration, but when they asked José and María why they kept not only the shoes but other items of María Josepha's, the issue was not so clear-cut. María responded that she looked at these items "con respeto en

vista de lo que dizeron e hizieron los referidos religiosos” and José said that he heard María Josepha had died “in the opinion of a saint” and he wanted to save all her things “hasta ver el fin que tiene la tal opinión.” Still concerned, the agent asked why none of these items were being used. Both José and María offered the nearly same answer: how could they “quando los Padres del Carmen haviéndolos tomado en sus manos los bezaron y mandaron que se guardasen.”<sup>xxiv</sup> In the second example, a man testified that since María Josepha’s death, her fame had spread, and after he heard of how Fr. Lorenzo had kissed her feet, he commissioned a portrait of her. Although he denied giving it reverence as if it were an image of a saint, he said that he sometimes prayed to María Josepha like he did the saints. He also admitted that sometimes when he lost something he invoked María Josepha’s soul, once reciting an Ave María to her when he lost a horse.<sup>xxv</sup> Not surprisingly, the inquisitors had the painting burned along with the rest of María Josepha’s “relics”. Although José and María’s strategy of keeping but not using María Josepha’s things may have been more cautious than Francisco’s use of the portrait and invocations, in each case the witnesses cited the friars’ conduct as favorably influencing their opinions of María Josepha.

The Carmelites’ promotion of María Josepha and their efforts to link her to their order did not sit well with Franciscans. Fr. Francisco, who originally denounced Fr. Lorenzo and Fr. Sebastián, did so as part of a Franciscan hierarchy. He did not send his letter directly to the Inquisition, but he gave it to the head of his convent, who then sent it to Mexico City with a letter of his own detailing additional complaints about the actions of the Carmelites. When both of these letters reached Mexico City, they did not go directly to inquisitors but to the head of the Franciscans’ main convent in Mexico City. He, in turn, added a letter of his own before sending the whole package along to the Holy Office. The original denunciation thus traveled through

two layers of Franciscan hierarchy, each of which added a supporting letter, before making it to its intended audience. These letters also presented the Carmelites in an especially unfavorable light, offering versions that were not corroborated by other witnesses' accounts.

It might be interesting to speculate whether or not these Franciscans would have turned in any of their own for similar actions, but beyond the dubious behavior of the two Carmelites, the Franciscans had additional reasons for the denunciation. One was that the viaticum (the Eucharist given to someone in danger of death) had come from the Franciscan's parish church (as was custom, claimed the Franciscans) only once during María Josepha's final illness. According to the head of the Franciscan convent, the Carmelites had told María Josepha's parents not to worry because she had received the sacrament from their convent with more ceremony and splendor than if it had come from the parish.<sup>xxvi</sup> The Franciscans were plainly displeased that the parochial right of attending to the deceased had been usurped by the Carmelites, but the Carmelites' supposed claims to have honored the sacrament with greater magnificence would have been intolerable. A second and equally impassioned protest was to María Josepha's alleged stigmata, and a later Franciscan denunciation claimed that Fr. Lorenzo kissed María Josepha's hands, feet, and chest as he did because he was venerating the Wounds of Christ. The friar who wrote it also reported that Fr. Lorenzo had admitted to him "outside of oath" that Christ had imprinted María Josepha with the wounds, and after she had bled for some time, the wounds became luminous. Yet another letter claimed the Carmelites had taken a pair of María Josepha's shoes said to have blood on the inside and treated them "like something sacred."<sup>xxvii</sup> The Franciscans' sensitivity to this issue was part of a defense of what they considered to be Christ's unique gift to their founder, Saint Francis of Assisi: the bloody wounds of the stigmata. Although the church recognized a few saints as having the stigmata, it

stipulated only Francis had bloody and visible wounds. In New Spain (as in Europe) Franciscans put considerable effort into stopping Dominicans and Carmelites from portraying two of their respective saints, Catherine of Siena and Mary Magdalena de' Pazzi, with Francis-like wounds.<sup>xxviii</sup> When it came to the case of María Josepha, only one witness ever made reference to this particular divine favor (and that was made much later in Mexico City), indicating that this element was not a defining characteristic in how people in Toluca viewed María Josepha. The Franciscans, however, were taking no chances with any potential association of the stigmata with María Josepha.

In spite of the efforts to shut down the Carmelites' promotion of María Josepha's virtue, the Franciscans did not appear to be attacking her two confessors. No one ever complained about incidents outside of the María Josepha case, nor did anyone attack the Carmelites' characters. In fact, when the inquisitors in Mexico City initially requested information about the two confessors, a Franciscan from Toluca responded with a letter that described them in glowing terms. Fr. Lorenzo followed a model life both in and outside the convent and was tireless in the confessional. Fr. Sebastián lived with great virtue, performed his offices well, and attended all his ministries "with great promptness and example." The Franciscans were not trying to disparage these particular friars. Their actions were instead part of a more general Carmelite-Franciscan rivalry, and they wanted to prevent their rivals from establishing what many residents might have viewed as a local Carmelite saint.

This rivalry is central to understanding what happened to María Josepha's legacy. Since the Franciscans' arrival in Toluca in the 1520's, they had been the most significant church presence there, but the establishment of a Discalced Carmelite house in 1699 changed the dynamics of the town's religious politics. Unlike the few other branches of the church present in

Toluca, the Carmelites had the ability to challenge the Franciscans' primacy.<sup>xxix</sup> The two orders' convents were located at the center of town just across the river from each other, they housed roughly the same number of friars, and they directed most of their energies to providing priestly services to Toluca's residents. During the last half of the eighteenth century, residents of the two convents squabbled over burial rights, processions, sermons, and membership in their lay organizations. They disparaged each other and each other's devotions in sermons and tried to situate their respective churches as the city's most important spiritual center.<sup>xxx</sup> Contemporaries not only recognized the tensions between the orders, but also their potential consequences for Toluca, and one local official wrote to Mexico City, with, admittedly, some hyperbole, about the need "apagar los ardores de un fuego, a si no se sufoca con tiempo, puede tomar tal incremento que sea la ruina de este pueblo Christiano."<sup>xxxi</sup> Nor were these incidents simply spats between friars, unrelated to the daily lives of Toluca's faithful. They were, in fact, so contentious *because* they involved the faithful, as each order tried to convince people to practice religion its way. In short, they were battling for the spiritual devotion of *toluqueños*.

This rivalry explains why Franciscans were quick to defend their privileges (the viaticum) and identity (stigmata), but the greatest danger undoubtedly lay with how the faithful viewed María Josepha. The actions of the Carmelites in front of her corpse and with her relics did indeed influence at least some people, and in this relatively small city most people seem to have known of her, whatever their opinion. Even Fr. Lorenzo realized that María Josepha and her two Carmelite confessors were at the center of attention, and he testified to "la ignorancia o malicia de varias personas que murmuraban de todos tres."<sup>xxxii</sup> If enough people viewed María Josepha as a local Carmelite saint whose miraculous crucifix grew real hair instead of an *ilusa* whose crucifix was simply a wooden figure with glued-on locks, then the Carmelites would have



gained a distinct advantage over the Franciscans in the contest for *toluqueños*' loyalties. The Carmelites would have been the ones most closely associated with her and her intercessory powers. Their church would have held her relics and would have been where people came to pray and ask for her help. That so much was at stake explains the Franciscans' tenacious efforts to ensure that her fame did not increase.

Toluca's Franciscans thus appealed for help from a branch of the church that, in conjunction with late eighteenth-century reformist views of piety, had little place for mystics. The Franciscans did so despite their order's general views on baroque or mystical piety that had far more in common with the Carmelites than church reformers. The Franciscan institute centered on searching for understanding through prayer and practice rather than in books or intellectual pursuits, and the order's hagiographies celebrated friars for their strict poverty, asceticism, and focus on Christ's Passion. For instance, Franciscans were the primary promoters of the Way of the Cross, a devotional exercise in which people re-enacted Christ's journey to Calvary. Often done communally, people prayed and meditated on themes associated with each of the sixteen stations, such as how Christ suffered as he was whipped, as he fell carrying the weight of the cross, or as he was nailed to the cross. This communal, physical piety that centered on Christ's sufferings rather than God's love was certainly not compatible with reformist ideals.

Once called in, the Inquisition's actions indeed had powerful effects. The items associated with María Josepha were confiscated and destroyed, and witnesses were admonished against giving her undue reverence. Even her confessors, in an apt metaphor for devotion to her more generally, changed their stories. Each originally considered María Josepha to be of uncommon virtue and went out of his way to explain why. In a letter written shortly before her death, Fr. Sebastián showered her with praise, describing her as humble, penitent, honest in

words and actions, and possessing proper fear and respect of God. What truly set her apart, though, was that divine power had favored her with a “special providence”, and he pointed to “el thesoro de gracias y marbillas, que la misericorida de N[uestro] Dios depositó en su persona.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> Similarly, Fr. Lorenzo was convinced that her soul was a “templo vivo del Esp[íritu] Santo y una de las más santas, puras y atajadas q[ue] tiene Dios en su Iglesia.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> By the time of Fr. Sebastián’s first statement to the Inquisition, however, he had already done a complete about face, essentially testifying that María Josepha manipulated him. He said that he began to distrust her statements after she died because she had told him that the Lord had revealed to her that she would die at age forty; when she died sixteen years before then, he became suspicious. Fr. Lorenzo, however, continued for some time to keep up her defense. After she died, he took the initiative to write her life and sent it to the Holy Office, explaining that he did so because he wanted to ensure her story would endure so that it might someday be published. He pushed to have a sermon and “honors” for her in the Carmelite church and even wrote to the Inquisition asking if the sermon could speak of her many gifts, favors, and extraordinary successes. But he, too, eventually dropped his efforts and admitted that, in the one hint of the Inquisition’s verdict on María Josepha, she was an “*ilusa*”. After examining both friars, Dr. Bergosa y Jordán opined that Fr. Sebastián might once have been firmly persuaded of María Josepha’s virtues, but he had come to realize that he had been fooled, and Dr. Bergosa y Jordán attributed Fr. Lorenzo’s errors to his simple spirit and credulity. Both friars, he concluded, were of a disposition to give whatever satisfaction was ordered. Although there is no record of a sentence against them, neither ever resided in Toluca again.

By the end of the eighteenth century, Toluca was an important, medium-sized city with a prosperous economy (based on providing foodstuffs to Mexico City) and a reputation for having

a good, Spanish population. Toluca, however, had no Rose of Lima or Sebastián de Aparicio. That is to say, it did not have its own local saint (like Lima) or venerable figure (like Puebla).<sup>xxxv</sup> María Josepha offered the possibility for one. She was a Spaniard from an honorable family, and, as Laura Lewis and Nora Jaffary have demonstrated, race and social status were crucial factors in whether someone was judged a witch or *ilusa*.<sup>xxxvi</sup> In addition, at the time of María Josepha's death, she had two confessors, each of good repute, who considered her spiritually exceptional and promoted her virtue. Fr. Lorenzo had even written her Life so as to preserve it for future generations. Thanks to the Carmelite friars' actions at her deathbed and their distribution of some of her things, her reputation had spread throughout Toluca. People there also seemed disposed to consider her sanctity, whether that meant praying to her to find a horse or just holding on to her things while waiting to hear the church's official judgment. In other words, the sort of baroque piety practiced by María Josepha was still an accepted part of local religious practice. The main opposition to her on the local level came from the Franciscans, who, despite sharing similar ideas about the benefits of baroque piety, were unwilling to countenance a potential Carmelite saint in Toluca. Had María Josepha lived a century or two earlier, in the time of Rose or Sebastián, she might even have had a chance of overcoming this local opposition, but by the late eighteenth century the deck was stacked too high against her. The Franciscans had but to call in the Inquisition to seal her fate. Members of the main church hierarchy and its reformers like Dr. Bergosa y Jordán viewed visionaries and mystics as dangerous, and María Josepha did not represent the sort of austere, moderate piety that these churchmen sought. Together, this combination of local rivalries and broader politics of sanctity ensured that María Josepha's story remained in Inquisition files rather than in published lives of saints.

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<sup>i</sup> Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, Ramo Inquisición (hereafter AGN INQ), vol. 1139, exp. 3, f. 323; “to get back the insinuated relics, restrain the unjust and unfounded fame of María Josepha’s extraordinary virtue and Sanctity, and determine the spirit of the expressed friars’ spiritual direction of the said dead woman.” The Discalced Carmelites were a particular branch of the Carmelite order, but for the sake of convenience I use the term Carmelites to mean Discalced Carmelites.

<sup>ii</sup> The case against the Carmelite friars, investigated after María Josepha’s death, does not contain any testimony from María Josepha herself, and most of what we know about her comes from the testimonies of her Carmelite confessors, her family, and friends. The record of María Josepha’s profession as a member of the Carmelite Third Order on December 27, 1780 can be found in “Libro Primero en que se asientan los habitos que se toman en esta tercera orden de Na. Sra. del Carmen”, Archivo Histórico de la Provincia de San Alberto de los Carmelitas Descalzos, Mexico City, Carpeta 1751.

<sup>iii</sup> In some instances, more than one witness testified that María Josefa had made similar claims, such when Fr. Mateo de San José (a Carmelite priest), María Luisa, María Josepha’s uncle, each testified to the claim that the devil had once caused María Josepha to fall in the river while on her way to confess with the Carmelites, but after a long swim she miraculously emerged from the water dry. The quote is from the testimony of Fr. Mateo, AGN INQ, vol. 1139, exp 3, f 330.

<sup>iv</sup> The origins of female mystical piety can be found, according to Carolyn Walker Bynum, in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, when women gained more opportunities to participate in new, specialized religious roles through affective practices, including extreme forms of penitential asceticism. Such forms of piety also contributed to a religious revival in the early seventeenth century, according to Barbara Diefendorf and Elizabeth Rapley. Rapley, for example, argues that the focal point of this revival in France was a growing female interest in Teresa of Avila and the Carmelites. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), and *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Elizabeth Rapley, *The Dévotes: Women and Church in Seventeenth-Century France* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990); Barbara Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>v</sup> This scholarship includes: Antonio Rubial García, *La santidad controvertida: hagiografía y conciencia criolla alrededor de los venerables no canonizados de Nueva España* (México: UNAM, 1999); Ron Morgan, *Spanish American Saints and the Rhetoric of Identity, 1600-1810* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002); Nancy E. van Deusen, *The Souls of Purgatory: The Spiritual Diary of a Seventeenth-Century Afro-Peruvian Mystic, Ursula de Jesús* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004); Kathleen A. Myers, “The New Spanish Inquisition and the Hagiographic Biography of Catarina de San Juan” in Mary E. Giles, ed., *Women and the Inquisition: Spain and the New World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Myers, *Neither Saints Nor Sinners: Writing the Lives of Women in Spanish America* (Oxford:

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Oxford University Press, 1993). In “The New Spanish Inquisition” Myers specifically notes Teresa’s strong influence during the century and a half following her canonization (89).

<sup>vi</sup> Judith C. Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); van Deusen, *The Souls of Purgatory*.

<sup>vii</sup> Myers, *Neither Saints nor Sinners*, viii.

<sup>viii</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable* vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), especially chapter three, “New Science”.

<sup>ix</sup> Gillian Ahlgren, *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996). As an example, Bernini in his famous sculpture in Venice’s Cornaro chapel (1651) portrayed Teresa as a passive receptacle of a divine action. Her closed eyes and limp body along with her placement in a recessed frame above eye-level remove her from this world, and the viewer becomes little more than an “inadvertent witness” to an event that Teresa does not actively seek and only inertly accepts. For Bernini’s portrayal of Teresa, see Irving Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of Visual Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) and Robert T. Petersson, *The Art of Ecstasy: Teresa, Bernini and Crashaw* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1970).

<sup>x</sup> D. A. Brading, *Church and State in Bourbon Mexico: The Diocese of Michoacán, 1749-1810* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). An assessment of how reformism (especially regarding nuns) changed during the late eighteenth century can be found in Margaret Chowning, “Convent Reform, Catholic Reform, and Bourbon Reform in Eighteenth-Century New Spain: The View from the Nunnery” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 85:1 (February 2005), 1-37. Reformers also have a central role in Pamela Voekel’s *Alone Before God: The Religious Origins of Modernity in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). For a short description of some late colonial principals of reform, see “Juan Francisco Domínguez’s Discourses on the Ten Commandments, Mexico (1805)” in Kenneth Mills, William B. Taylor, and Sandra Lauderdale Graham, eds. *Colonial Latin America* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, Inc, 2004), 366-71.

<sup>xi</sup> I have not been able to locate the case against María Josepha.

<sup>xii</sup> AGN INQ, vol. 1139, exp. 3, ff 171v-172

<sup>xiii</sup> AGN INQ, vol. 1139, exp. 3, f. 344; “an immoderate life, which she spent in parties, amusements and diversions.”

<sup>xiv</sup> It is also possible that the witnesses in the case were recounting María Josepha’s life in accordance with her own later efforts at self-fashioning or with stories promoted by the Carmelites. María Josepha would almost certainly have been aware of such tropes about transformations, at least by the time she read saints’ lives with her Carmelite spiritual directors. On the other hand, the record of her profession into the Carmelite Third Order around the same time that she began confessing with Fr. Sebastián lends some credibility to the idea that she really did take a new direction in her spiritual life around this time.

<sup>xv</sup> Myers, *Neither Saints nor Sinners* (73-4) found that María de San José’s family did not like the disruptions to the family routine caused by her penance and visions, and she notes that Bell and Weinstein reported similar finding in their study of medieval saints; Rudolph Bell and Donald Weinstein, *Saints and Society: The Two Worlds of Western Christendom, 1000-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>xvi</sup> Fr. Sebastián de San Francisco and Fr. Lorenzo de la Concepción, were both long-term residents of the Carmelites’ Toluca convent. Fr. Sebastián, a Spaniard and former prior of the

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convent (1768-70) as well as its occasional acting head of its third order, had been living there for sixteen years and had been María Josepha's confessor for nearly four years. Fr. Lorenzo, approximately forty-eight years of age and also European, had never held an office, but he had been assigned to Toluca as a preacher and confessor for at least several years. He had been Maria Josepha's confessor for less than one year, claiming he took on this role at Fr. Sebastián's request. AGN INQ, vol. 1139, exp. 3 and Dionisio Victoria Moreno, ed., *El convento de la Purísima Concepción de los Carmelitas Descalzos en Toluca. Historia documental e iconografía* (México: Libros de México, 1979) tomo I, "Lista de Piores", 39.

<sup>xvii</sup> Jodi Bilinkoff, "Confessors, Penitents, and the Construction of Identities in Early Modern Avila", in Barbara B. Diefendorf and Carla Hesse, eds. *Culture and Identity in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 83-102.

<sup>xviii</sup> AGN INQ vol. 1139 exp. 3 f 377v-378; "an exact copy of those of Teresa in sentences and words, without more distinction than the material of hand, pen, ink and paper." Modeling or even verbatim copying of others' works was common in the religious writings of both men and women at the time.

<sup>xix</sup> AGN INQ, vol. 1139 exp. 3 f. 321; "on the actions that they executed with the body, if they treated it with adoration or worship."

<sup>xx</sup> AGN INQ, vol. 1139, exp. 3, ff 350-350v; "many people took [María Josepha] as a servant of God, and that all the People who gathered in her house (that were many) from the hour that she died until the morning of the next day when they took her body to the Church, kissed the body with reverence. Because many had news that Fr. Lorenzo had given her adoration and kissed her feet, hands, and heart."

<sup>xxi</sup> AGN INQ, vol. 1139, exp. 3, ff 338v-339; "like valuables, in the manner that the things of some venerable persons are kept" and "adore those that he has and carries with him, kissing them and bringing them to his chest with reverence."

<sup>xxii</sup> AGN INQ, vol. 1139, exp. 3, ff 330-330v; "would have caused admiration in those gathered there and to the many who would have found out about it."

<sup>xxiii</sup> AGN INQ, vol. 1139, exp. 3, f. 360; "Brother, keep this, it is a relic."

<sup>xxiv</sup> AGN INQ, vol. 1139, exp. 3, ff 358-364; "with respect in view of that which the referenced friars said and did," and "until seeing the end that such opinion has" and "when the Carmelite Fathers have taken them in their hands, kissed them and ordered that they be protected."

<sup>xxv</sup> AGN INQ, vol. 1139, exp. 3, ff 372-373. Questioned further, he admitted that he had indeed found the horse but that he did not attribute it to María Josepha, since "these animals always recognize the nest."

<sup>xxvi</sup> AGN INQ, vol. 1139, exp. 3, f. 140v.

<sup>xxvii</sup> AGN INQ, vol. 1139, exp. 3, ff 164-5, 353.

<sup>xxviii</sup> See Karen Melvin, "Urban Religions: Mendicant Orders in New Spain's Cities, 1500-1800" Ph.D. Diss. University of California, Berkeley 2005, 301-2.

<sup>xxix</sup> The Franciscans managed Toluca's only parish, limiting the presence of diocesan clergy, and, with the exception of the Carmelites, the other orders there had only peripheral roles in the city's spiritual life. The order of Saint John of God focused its energies on running a hospital while the Mercedarian order primarily collected alms for the redemption of captives. Neither house had more than two or three priests in residence.

<sup>xxx</sup> Melvin, "Urban Religions", chapter five.

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<sup>xxxii</sup> AGN INQ, vol. 1376, exp. 15; “to put out the ardor of a fire that, if not suffocated in time, could increase so much that it would be the ruin of this Christian pueblo.”

<sup>xxxiii</sup> AGN INQ vol. 1139, exp. 3, ff 178-187v; “the ignorance or malice of various persons who gossiped about all three.”

<sup>xxxiiii</sup> AGN INQ vol. 1139, exp. 3, f 159v; “the treasure of graces and marvels that the mercy of Our God deposited in her person.”

<sup>xxxv</sup> AGN INQ, vol. 1139, exp. 3, f. 160v; “living temple of the Holy Spirit and one of the most holy, pure and moderate that God has in his Church.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Sebastián de Aparicio (d. 1600), a Franciscan associated with the city of Puebla, had been officially recognized as a venerable person for much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; he was beatified in 1789. The Valley of Toluca had an important Marian shrine at Tecaxic (run by Franciscans, perhaps giving them another reason to oppose María Josepha), but the city of Toluca itself had no major holy person associated with it.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Lewis demonstrates connections between caste and accusations or perceptions of witchcraft, and Jaffary argues that the Inquisition’s judgments of false mysticism were based on a person’s social standing and breaking of gender codes in addition to actual religious practice. Laura A. Lewis, *Hall of Mirrors: Power, Witchcraft, and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) and Nora E. Jaffary, *False Mystics: Deviant Orthodoxy in Colonial Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).