

The five missions of Father Junípero Serra

*James Olsen**

The most remarkable thing about the five missions established by the Franciscans in the 18th century, in the central part of Mexico called the Sierra Gorda, is that they are still alive and well today. More than two hundred years later, these churches are community centers throbbing with births, deaths, marriages and masses, artisans making wool and cotton garments, children playing, people talking, tourists taking pictures, and workmen restoring the churches' facades. The five missions are not museums. Rather they are living, pulsing tableaux, part of the warp and woof of their rich and vibrant physical and social environment.

The man responsible for this incredible achievement was Father Junípero Serra, who was born at Petra on the island of Majorca, in the year 1713. He was a well-educated Franciscan who took his holy orders at the age of 25 and his doctorate in theology at 30. During his doctoral studies, he read about the great Franciscan missionaries and said that he wanted to be like San Francisco Solano, who while walking the length of Peru, Chile and Argentina baptized almost 100,000 natives.

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Photos by Pastor Ojeda.

When he arrived in Mexico, he was soon sent to the Sierra Gorda region, and for the next 35 years he and his group of ten missionaries devoted themselves to the missions of this region as well as Upper California. The missionaries engaged in direct physical work such as clearing the land, building houses, cisterns, reservoirs and barns. They planted gardens and orchards, raised livestock, and taught the women to spin and weave. In effect they transformed these nomadic tribes into the sedentary agricultural societies that remain there through the present. In addition, of course, in the evenings they taught the message of Christ, the liturgy and singing. Thus they not only founded these five missions, they created communities.

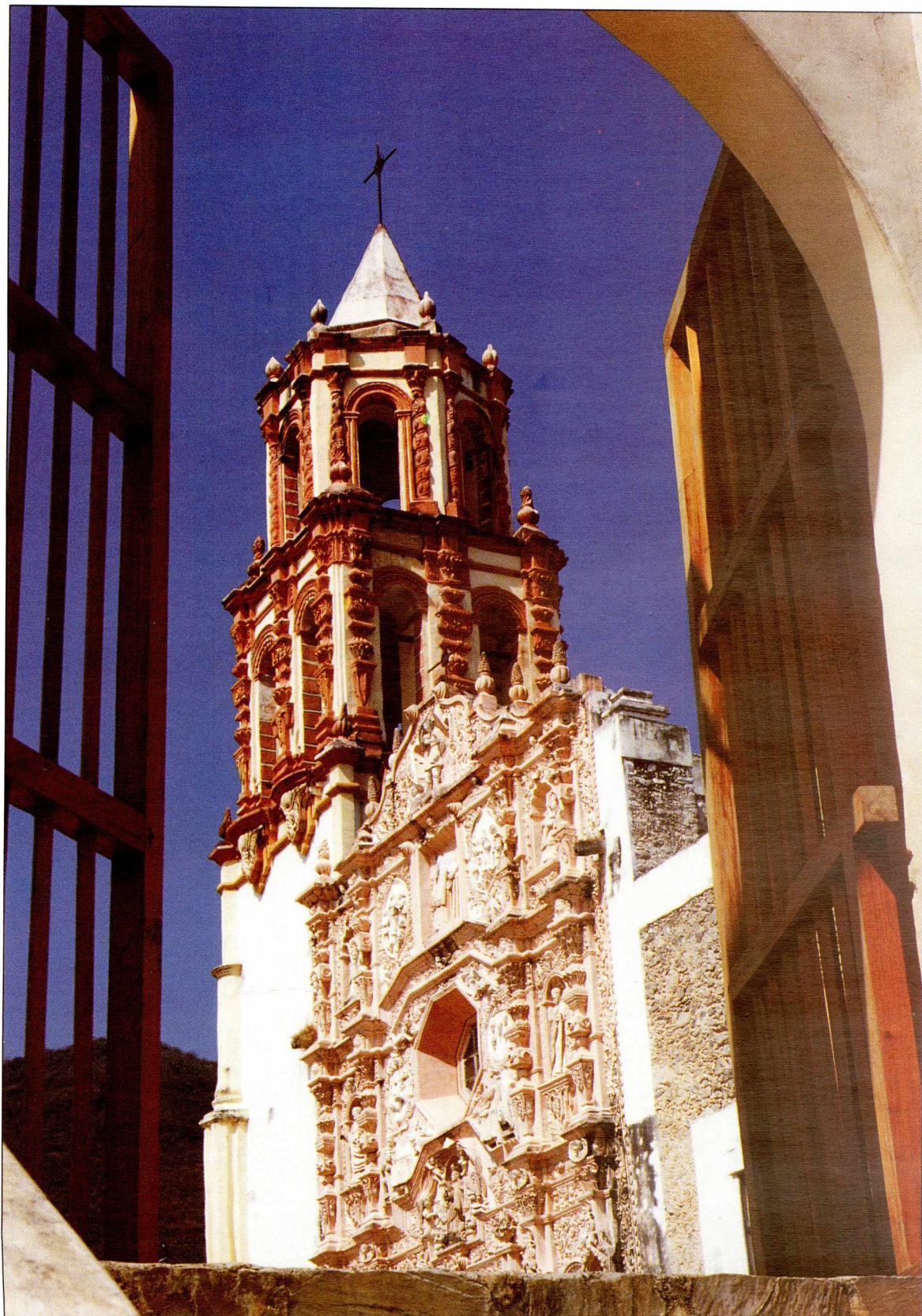
Tancoyol

Start with Tancoyol which, if you are driving in the region, is the furthest away and the best place to begin. The name itself comes from the Huastecan language and means "the source of wild dates." You enter a small town square with shade trees and benches and a fountain in the middle of it all. Then you see a wall with a serrated top and a simple elevated entrance. You go up five stairs and through a wooden gate. You will notice what seems to be a

stone snake on the top of the wall, but may also represent the ceremonial cord of the Franciscan robe, without the knots. The ledges feature two sculptures: one of St. Peter with his keys and the other with St. Paul with his sword. You will also see a placard dated May 1994, which states: "This work was made possible through our ancestors' sacrifice and abnegation."

This church is dedicated to Our Lady of Light and was founded in 1744 by Colonel José Escandón. The Franciscans worked on it for seventeen years. The church was rebuilt later and its front coruscates with angels, saints and shields in high relief. The atrium has a yard embellished with a cross of iron. The lines of the cross repeat the form of the tower's spire. Your eye is drawn to the main altar and its raised pulpit, with two small flanking side altars. The old cracked stone floor is strewn with tinfoil-covered cans containing water.

A mother and daughter enter the church to light a holy candle. A campesino family comes in to pray. Near one of the side altars, a priest is preparing a group of boys and girls in their catechism lessons, to make their First Communion. An old lady in the back is quietly saying her rosary. On the bulletin board there is a notice reading: "Everyone is



Landa de Matamoros.

invited to life's banquet. Let us distribute the fruits and wealth of the earth so that we can all participate in the benefits of creation."

Tilaco

Tilaco is a Nahuatl word for "black water." There are three sections to the frontispiece at Tilaco. At the lower base are pedestals. They support four spiral columns with Corinthian capitals. In the front of these are vaulted niches containing the images of St. Peter and St. Paul. The entrance is semi-circular with two angels framing it. Above them are two cherubs. There are two more sections above.

This church is truly a marvel of 18th-century Baroque architecture.

Indeed, this may be the most beautiful spot in the Sierra Gorda. Certainly the setting is extraordinary, with its church, a convent, an atrium and an open chapel. Near the church entrance are two small confessionals, a worn tile floor and a simple altar with Christ on the cross. The day we were there, singing birds were temporarily trapped inside and one had the sense that time had come to a complete stop...that we had returned to a more tranquil, simpler day in this small, fertile valley.

Across the way there is a grocery store with children buying ices and sodas and people milling around near a bench on the outside. Young adolescent boys and girls are standing

around and quietly talking, and suddenly the church's bells start tolling. The sun is starting to set now and the last light is reflected off the huge, old wooden doors of the church. A boy of about seven comes up to me and says in English, "Hello." He then proceeds to count in English from one to ten. There are still innocent places in the world.

Landa

Landa comes from the Chichimeca word meaning "swampy." The facade of this church, like the others', has three sections and a pinnacle. At the base there are no ornamental features and the main entrance is in the form of a semi-



Tancoyol.



Relief of Franciscan shield, church of San Miguel Arcángel, Conca.



Conca.



Jalpan.



Tancoyol. Facing page: Tilaco.

circular arch over a panel between four Baroque pilasters. Within the arch itself, there are two spiral columns where St. Dominic and St. Francis appear on ledges, each carrying a crusader's banner containing the escutcheon of their orders.

The church at Landa is the largest and perhaps the most profusely decorated of the group. Over the entrance there is a statue of the Virgin Mary, joining her hands in the posture of the Immaculate Conception; under her there are two vases. Above are two playful angels. The facade contains sculptures of the founding fathers Domingo (St. Dominic) and Francisco (St. Francis). Then there are the Franciscan shields, on top of which

sit niches for San Pedro (St. Peter) and San Pablo (St. Paul). The top sculpture on the facade portrays San Miguel dramatically and decisively slaying the Devil. This is a replica of the statue in the Conca mission and the two-part tower is similar to the one at Jalapan.

There is a town park contiguous to the church, with a monument to Benito Juárez. The stonework of both church and park is extraordinary, because flat, round, rough, dull, smooth, shiny, short and long stones are juxtaposed in complex patterns. There is a funeral in progress with a group of perhaps fifty people following the coffin. The crowd has its best clothes on and all carry lit candles as they trod in a long line. A young boy, who has escaped being part of the

funeral procession, breezily rides by on a bike and quickly looks away from the spectacle.

Conca

The smallest of the Serra missions is the church of San Miguel Arcángel de Conca (St. Michael Archangel). The word *conca* itself has several possible etymological origins: from the Nahuatl, meaning "the place where pots are kept," or the Pame word for "with me," or from the Chichimeca for "the place where frogs are found." The portal has a low elliptical arch and on either side are four mixed Doric columns; in the middle are two semi-circular niches with ledges. The one on the left contains a statue of St. Francis, and that on the right a statue of St. Anthony of Padua.



On the facade there is a giant Franciscan shield with crossed arms coming up from the world, that are pierced by a sword and a scepter. The whole is framed with a knotted Franciscan friar's cord. Once again the Devil is being vanquished by Saint Michael, but this Devil is missing a horn. At the apex of the church are three young people talking. They represent the Trinity. The tower has only one section with simple paired columns and semi-circular arches. Some are open while others are blocked. There is also a tiny cupola and a pinnacle. Four of the ten missionaries worked on this mission for seventeen years.

Some children are riding their tricycles while others are playing

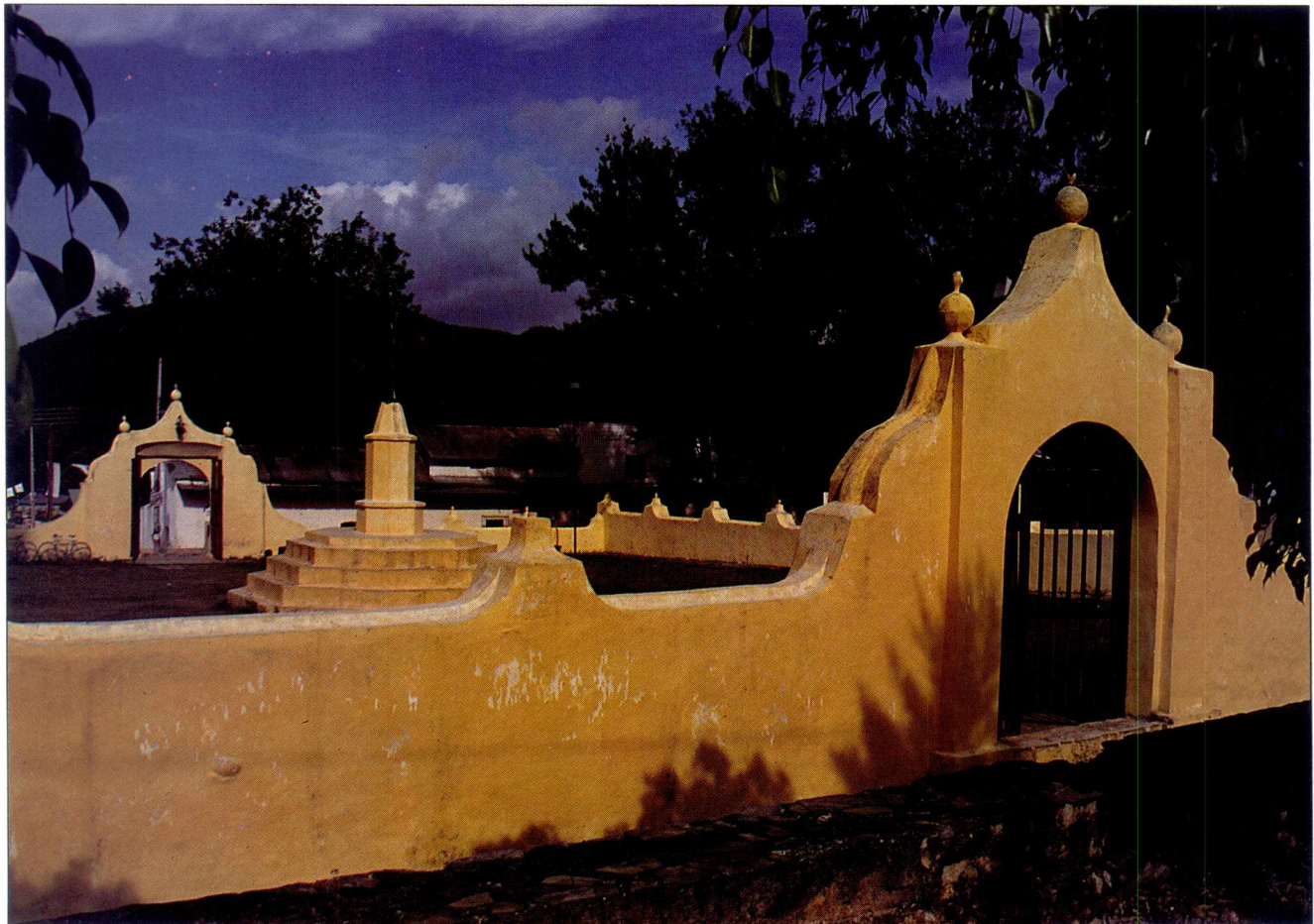
soccer, in the stone courtyard near the seminary attached to the church. Today is Sunday but the mass is over, and the children are gathered around flavored ice vendors near the church. They shave the ice, pour syrup onto it and thrust the cup into eagerly waiting young hands. The restaurant across the street is crowded with people who are drinking coffee. A young girl in the churchyard is getting water from the open tap, and as it fills the orange plastic pail, she allows it to flow through her open hands. She is going to water the flowers. Meanwhile flowers from the altar are being placed in the church's entrance.

The doors to the houses in the village are open today and families are

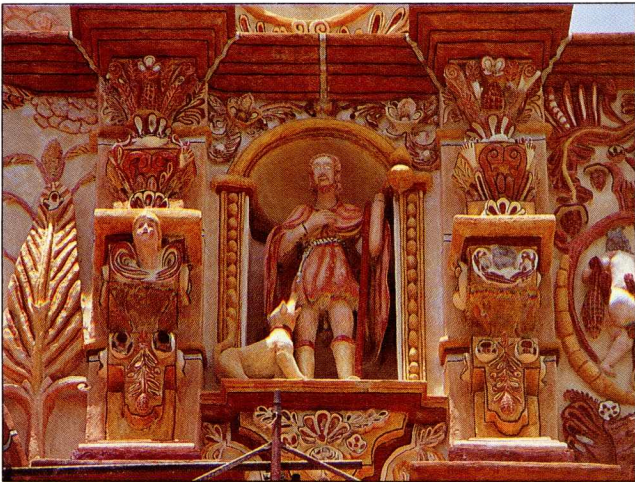
visiting one another. The orange trees are in bloom and the color and light of the day are having a riotous union. Shriill children's shouts rend the calm from time to time. Voices of the few remaining people in the church echo across the stone courtyard.

Jalapan

Jalapan comes from the Nahuatl word meaning "on the sand of the hill." On either side of the entrance on the base of the foundation the Mexican eagle devours the serpent. At the foot of the pilasters above it, there are four pomegranates which is a typical detail of eighteenth century Baroque architecture. The frieze has garlands and flowers and inset above the entrance there is a shell



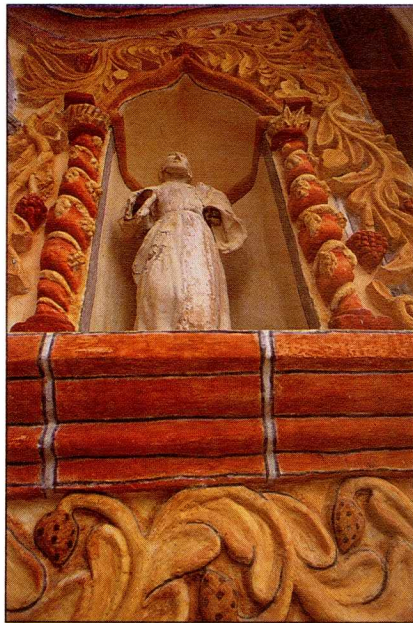
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containing two niches with sculptures of St. Peter and St. Paul. The entrance itself is an escutcheon with five wounds, a symbol for the Franciscan order. Above this shield is another Franciscan coat of arms which shows the crossed arms of Christ and St. Francis. The facade's third section holds a clock which was placed there at the end of the last century.

The church of the apostle Santiago of Jalapan (St. James) was built over an approximately twenty-year period from 1750 to 1770. This church starkly represents the union of the Indian and Spanish cultures in the unique social amalgam called Mexico. Spanish sensibilities and Indian craftsmanship are beautifully conjoined. The church tower has two

parts with semi-circular arches, spiral columns and a polyhedral prismatic pinnacle as the roof, topped with a beautiful wrought-iron cross. To the right is a patio with a fountain enclosed by iron gates.

There is a banner in the church proclaiming: "God is my pastor, he never fails me." Fluorescent lights mar the ambience for me, but Mexicans have a way of taking modern things like that and making them their own. They have an incredible capacity to absorb the new and transmute it, through the alembic of their own culture, into something entirely different. I start thinking about how extraordinary this all is, and how tired yet incredibly exhilarated Father Junípero Serra, this Franciscan born

in Majorca, must have felt as he walked down the mountains to Jalapan. Did he look back toward what he had built? Today we have the heritage of these five 18th-century Baroque missions in what is still an untamed and sparsely populated part of the country.

The day of my visit, government workmen are repairing the facade. I read that the church was completed in 1768 and then repaired in 1895. Now, almost one hundred years later, here they are repairing again. Working within the cultural and intellectual traditions of 16th-century utopian humanism, these friars not only built marvelous churches; they created a whole social reality that as yet has not been destroyed by modernity.

Clearly, Mexico will endure. ✕