

The San Fernando College's Sierra Gorda Missions

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A multitude of small, ancient buildings lie like minuscule stones at the bottom of glens, surrounded by majestic mountains, next to streams that sometimes pierce the rock itself to form deep cavities, amidst fabulous scenery. Whether it be on the leeward side, with meager rainfall and more arid landscape, or on the windward side or in the depths of the valleys, humid and full of waterfalls and vegetation, the Sierra Gorda mountains are one

of the treasures that still exist in Mexico, thanks to their isolation and difficult access.

Few areas in Mexico have remained as secluded as this part of the Western Sierra Madre with its ill-defined limits, named the Sierra Gorda by the first European colonizers in the sixteenth century. Located in the northeastern part of what is today the state of Querétaro, its mountainous terrain facilitated indigenous resistance to European colonization until well into the eighteenth century. Pames, Ximpecs and Jonaces resisted attempts by the first Spaniards to subdue them and change their way of

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Modeled after sixteenth-century convents, the atrium of San Francisco Tilaco is fenced in and has two *posa* chapels in the corners.

life. These groups, whose cultures were not very developed, were generically called Chichimecs by Nahuatl speakers.

Spanish domination of the region to the north of the Zimapán and Pachuca royal mining roads was imposed following the course of the rivers that led the conquistadors to a large hill that they called the *cerro gordo* (fat hill) or *sierra gorda* (fat mountain range) according to documents dating from 1579.¹ The first *encomenderos* tried to subdue the indigenous inhabitants into a work force, but they met with fierce opposition that required other means: together with the sword, they used the cross. Soon, friars began to preach to the indigenous population. The first to do this were the Franciscans, followed by the Augustinians in the second half of the sixteenth century. Although not very effective, they did manage to establish the first fragile missions in the Sierra Gorda.

Well into the seventeenth century the Franciscan Friar Antonio de Jesús María Linaz promoted a reform in his order to renovate its missionary work. He proposed the foundation of apostolic colleges, destined to give a second spiritual, academic and practical course of training to friars who wanted to work as missionaries for a minimum of 10 years; they would be independent of the provinces and only obey the prior general and the *Propaganda Fide* Sacred Congregation. His idea came to fruition

in the foundation of the first Apostolic College for the Propagation of the Faith of the Holy Cross in Querétaro in 1683. The aim of the college was to spread the Gospel in the nearby mountains, but it had to concentrate on other areas because other religious were there first. Inspired by the Franciscans' example, the Dominican Friar Felipe Galindo obtained authorization to found a college for missionaries in Querétaro, making it possible to establish two more missions in 1686. The Franciscans of the Holy Cross made two expeditions into the mountains in 1683 and 1686, but they had to withdraw because royal decree gave priority to the Dominicans. The Dominican missions continued to be established in the eighteenth century while the Franciscans built two more colleges in Guatemala and Zacatecas.

By 1739, the San Fernando de México Franciscan College, founded by royal decree in October 1733, and the Apostolic College of San Francisco de Pachuca, turned into a missionary college by the Descalced Franciscans (or *dieguinos*, as they are known in Mexico), turned the Sierra Gorda into the center of their attention; both had a royal decree that allowed them to do missionary work in it.

The fragility of the establishments in the Sierra Gorda was clear given the resistance of the indigenous people. José Escandón y Helguera (1700-1770), a colonel of the Querétaro mili-



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The mountainous terrain facilitated indigenous resistance to European colonization until the eighteenth century. Atrium and detail of the Tilaco doorway.



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The Jalpan doorway was designed by an architect who knew of the golden section, but executed in stucco by unknown craftsmen.

tia, made one expedition in 1743 in which he saw the lamentable state of the missions, particularly the Augustinian ones. His report to the viceroy was the basis for the decision to establish five missions on the left side of the Moctezuma River under the aegis of the San Fernando College and three on the right hand side, under the aegis of the San Francisco College, between April and May 1744. Escandón, accompanied by Friar Pedro Pérez de Mezquía, proceeded to establish the missions that were to come under the authority of the San Fernando College: Santiago Apóstol (Saint James the Apostle) in Jalpan, San Miguel (Saint Michael) in Concá, La Purísima Concepción de Nuestra Señora del Agua de Landa (the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady of the Water of Landa), San Francisco (Saint Francis) in Tilaco and Nuestra Señora de la Luz (Our Lady of the Light) in Tancoyol, in which 10 friars had 3,840 natives under their care. The friars of the San Francisco College, for their part, established the missions of San Juan Bautista de Pacula (Saint John the Baptist of Pacula), San José de Fuenclara (Saint Joseph of Fuenclara) and Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de Cerro Prieto (Our Lady of Guadalupe of Cerro

Prieto), in addition to having received a short time before the mission of Tolimán from the Augustinians.

This new stage for the missions was by no means easy at first. Of the 10 original Franciscans, four died and three soon became ill; the missions survived with support from the friars from the Querétaro and Zacatecas colleges during the first few years. In addition, the indigenous people revolted in Vizarrón and Tolimán between 1744 and 1745; Escandón put down the rebellion; the repression culminated at the Media Luna Hill on October 22 and 23, 1748 when he practically exterminated the Jonaces in battle. He was rewarded for his efforts with the titles of Count of Sierra Gorda and Viscount of the Casa Escandón in 1749, in addition to being named a knight of the Order of Santiago.²

The consolidation and prosperity of the San Fernando missions were the work of another missionary, Friar Junípero Serra. When he became a Franciscan friar in 1731, Miquel Joseph Serra y Ferrer (1713-1784) took the name of Junípero, the most patient and humble of Saint Francis of Assisi's followers. He arrived in New Spain in December 1749; in June 1750,

Friar Junípero entered the mission of Jalpan, the most important of all. A short time later, he was joined by more missionaries. These friars' work radically transformed the settlements. In addition to instructing the indigenous in the Christian faith, they imparted to them intellectual, practical and even artistic knowledge. The fields produced as never before; the women learned manual skills whose products were sold in several cities; there were singers and musicians; and they built wonderful churches with baroque facades full of stucco reliefs and interiors with golden altars and multicolored walls.

Using as a model the convents of the sixteenth century and based on plans by still-unknown architects, the San Fernando missions in the Sierra Gorda were built in the time of Friar Junípero. Next to churches with a Latin cross floor plan covered with vaults and a dome in the transept, they built the mission's rooms around the cloisters on a single floor; in the front they organized the atria decorated with crosses and *posa* chapels³ surrounded by a wall. Access to the missions reminds us of the open chapels already in disuse by Junípero's time. The well-thought-out proportions of the floor plans and

facades denote the specialized knowledge reminiscent of designs by expert architects, not amateur friars.

SANTIAGO JALPAN

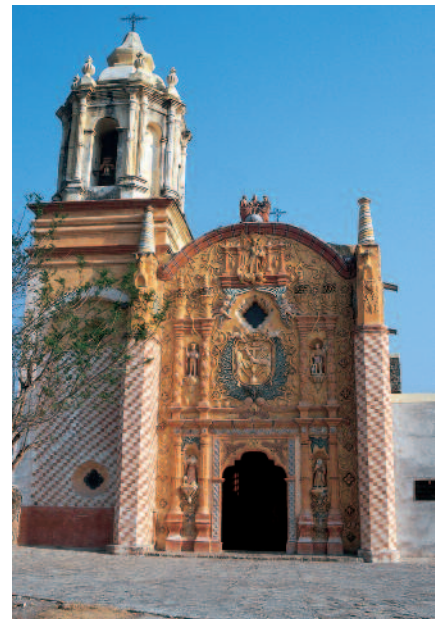
The mission of Santiago Jalpan was built under the direction of Serra and probably Friar Francisco Palóu from 1751 to 1758. The church includes a side chapel and furnishings which no longer exist: golden altarpieces, oil paintings, multicolored carved wooden pieces, vestments and silver ornaments. The doorway still has most of its original carvings except the relief of Saint James that has been replaced by a clock; the sculptures of Our Lady of Guadalupe and Our Lady of Pilar, as well as reliefs with two-headed eagles holding serpents in their beaks are details worth noting.

SAN MIGUEL CONCÁ

Friars José Antonio Murguía and Joaquín Fernández de Osorio were in charge of the San Miguel Concá Mission between 1750 and 1754.



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The Concá Mission is the smallest and the only one with a representation of King Fernando of Spain, later made a saint.



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Specialists agree that the doorway of the Landa Mission is the most iconographically complete.

It is the smallest of the missions, but not the least attractive. It had a golden altarpiece, as well as wooden carvings, rich ornaments and beautiful decorations on the walls. It retains an exquisite baptismal font in multicolored clay. The top of the church's doorway has an innocent but beautiful effigy of San Miguel (Saint Michael) defeating Satan; it is the only one that dedicates a place to the patron of the founding college, San Fernando, among many other sculptures and images.

NUESTRA SEÑORA DEL AGUA DE LANDA

In contrast with these missions, the mission of La Purísima Concepción de Nuestra Señora del Agua de Landa was built in a spot where there had not been a previously existing Augustinian mission. No one is certain who built what turned out to have the most carefully done and elaborate of all the facades. It may have been built after Serra's departure, between 1760 and 1768, with Friar Miguel de la Campa y Cos' involvement. The doorway boasts sculp-

tures or reliefs of the immaculate conception, flanked by incense-bearing angels, two different types of Franciscan coats-of-arms, Saint Francis, Saint Dominic, Saint Peter, Saint Paul, Saint Lorenzo, Saint Vincent, Saint Steven, Saint Michael the Archangel with a dragon, Saint Jacob de la Marca, Saint Bernardino of Siena, Saint John of Capistrano, the blessed Alberto de Sarzana, Juan Duns Escoto and the blessed María de Jesús de Ágreda, in addition to the Descent, the Flagellation and several mermaids. The church vaults are also decorated with reliefs of four archangels and Saint Buenaventura.

SAN FRANCISCO DE TILACO

In a beautiful valley with a previous Augustinian presence, Friar Juan Crespi supervised the building of the San Francisco de Tilaco mission between 1754 and 1758. The atrium was built on two levels to conform to the disposition of the land and it has two *posa* chapels. The church has a very slender tower and a most capricious doorway; it originally had a golden

altarpiece with multicolored sculptures, an organ, oil paintings and good silver ornaments, all of which have disappeared. The sculpture of Saint Francis, flanked by angel musicians, and little sirens on the entablature at the level of the first floor are outstanding features of the doorway. Today, this is the only one of the missions still inhabited by a Franciscan, Friar Francisco Miracle from Tarragona, Spain, who has lived there since 1963.

NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LA LUZ TANCOYOL

The last of the San Fernando missions was Nuestra Señora de la Luz Tancoyol. Friar Juan Ramos de Lora resided there between 1761 and 1767 and probably took part in its construction. Friar Junípero went through Tancoyol in 1766 before leaving for Baja California and may have participated in the church dedication. The old furnishings included an organ and a lectern that no longer exist. Though the relief that represented Our Lady of the Light has been obliterated, the doorway retains others

of merit like the central naked cross flanked by incense-bearing angels, the Franciscan and Dominican coats-of-arms or the reliefs of little angels with symbols of the Passion on the sides in addition to full sculpted figures. The atrium has the remains of two *posa* chapels and a wall set off by a cordon and singular twisted torch-holders.

In the eight years that Serra lived in the Sierra Gorda, he learned the Pame language and garnered great experience for the next missionary tasks in the Northwest. In September 1758 he left Jalpan. After wandering through several regions of New Spain, he was commissioned to attend to the missions of Baja California that had just been left by the Jesuits, expelled in 1767. So, he left for the peninsula and shortly thereafter began the colonization of California accompanied by Don Gaspar de Portolá.⁴ The 21 Californian missions plus their visits or “assistants,” established between 1769 and 1823, were the result of the work begun in Querétaro’s Sierra Gorda. Nevertheless, none of these northern establishments ever equaled the architecture of the ones in Querétaro.



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The clay baptismal font at the Tancoyol mission (left). The atrium wall at Tancoyol flanked by twisted torch-holders (right).



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The Franciscan shield with the crossed arms of Christ and St. Francis adorn the doorway of the Jalpan Mission (left). Detail of the doorway of Landa with the Immaculate Conception in the niche (right).

The five missions were handed over to the secular clergy in 1770, putting an end to the *boyanza*. The indigenous people now had to pay tributes, support the designated priests and cover the cost of all religious services. The immediate result was their indignant protests, followed by the gradual abandonment of the parishes. The missions under the aegis of Pachuca were not secularized until 1777. Centuries later, when the paved road that crossed the Sierra Gorda was being finished in 1961, the indigenous population was smaller than in the time of Friar Junípero.

All these missions look like small pebbles nestled in the extraordinary surrounding scenery, but they symbolize the strength of will and dedication of little recognized individuals. **NMM**

NOTES

¹ This Cerro Gordo is known today by the name Cerro del Doctor and is perfectly visible from the western heights of the Toluquilla archeological zone. Its enormous base explains its name, which was then applied to the entire mountain range.

² Escandón is buried alongside his wife in the side chapel of the church dedicated to the Five Lords in the state of Tamaulipas, in the town of Santander de Jiménez. This town also boasts a building called the House of the Count, used today as the city hall, originally the home of Don José and his family.

³ *Posa* chapels were small chapels built into the corners of the atrium (usually four), which were used to “pose”

(hence the name *posa* chapel) the consecrated Host in monstrances during special processions on Corpus Christi.

⁴ Friar Junípero established the presidency of the California missions at the San Carlos Borromeo del Carmelo (Saint Charles Borromeo del Carmelo) Mission which he founded in June 1770, after founding the San Fernando Velicatá and the San Diego Missions the year before. He died there August 28, 1784, and is buried at the foot of the chancel of the current, renovated church next to the remains of Friars Juan Crespí and Fermín Francisco de Lasuén, his illustrious companions.

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