

# Echoes and Reflections Of Franciscan Culture In Sixteenth-Century Tlaxcala

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Photos courtesy of Sector Tlaxcala



Bell-tower of a former Franciscan monastery.

“Tlaxcala is the living bread with which Christ gives us...” These words illuminate the lines of the character Faith as the intermediary for Understanding and Strength in the *auto sacramental*, or one-act religious allegory, also known as the colloquium of the Count of Coruña. In addition to the literal allusion to Tlaxcala as the land of bread made of corn, its meaning is a clear example of the spiritual place that Tlaxcala and its inhabitants occupied in the profound emotions of the sixteenth-century missionaries.

characteristics that model the singularity of its identity.

Sixteenth-century chronicler Father Mendieta states that the Spaniards saw the aid of the Tlaxcaltecs as a divine gift. The Tlaxcaltecs opened up the way for the true spiritual conquest of Mexico: in addition to the strategies imposed by the military treaty, they facilitated the Spaniards the use of local languages and the interpretation of events in an unprecedented scenario.

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Tlaxcala's cathedral and open chapel, the combination of Franciscan austerity and indigenous carving.

While the military and political alliance of New Spain was the work of Carlos V and the spiritual conquest that of Felipe II, both are responsible for the formation of the resulting culture. This endures as part of history because of both institutional and human works and ideas. In Tlaxcala, these factors are crystallized in the essential combination of faith and language with

converting the populace to Christianity and using another language to impart instruction about other ways of understanding life.

According to the enthusiastic accounts of Motolinía, Sahagún, Mendieta and Torquemada, the admirable expression of Tlaxcaltec Christianity was due to the extraordinary reciprocal charisma of the relationship between the friars and the converted people. Their conversion was organized upon the arrival of 12 Franciscan mis-

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sionaries who chose as their first residence the houses offered them by Maxicatzin, the Lord of Ocotelulco.

The missionaries were inspired by the stamp and splendor of their predecessors, whom Don Artemio del Valle Arizpe called “The Three Lilies of Flanders.” Of all of them, it was the teachings of Friar Pedro de Gante, a defender of the indigenous people, apostle of the Gospel and the first educator of the Americas, that spurred his brothers in Tlaxcala to continue imparting Christian doctrine. Understanding the indige-

the management of the sluices to distribute the water sent by the gods combined perfectly with the terrace system on the mountain sides.

The mingling of knowledge was also seen in medicinal herbalism, in raising the *huexolotl* (turkeys) and other fowl in exchange for cattle.

The results of this process can be seen in the sixteenth-century constructions of the monasteries, open chapels, and visiting churches, in which Franciscan austerity is joined to the splendor of the stones carved by Tlaxcaltecs, with which they did inlays of Mudéjar wainscots, carved

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Chapel of Our Lady of the Snows. A vestige of Franciscan influence in the state.

nous’ facility for learning, they taught them the Spaniards’ skills and arts at the same time that the friars learned to admire their extraordinary ability in working stone, ceramics, feathers, wood and vegetable fibers, some of which —like maguey fibers— after working, were as soft as silk.

In this exchange of knowledge, the cultivation of Tlaxcala’s land, eroded and poor, yielded its maximum results thanks to the wisdom with which it was worked. The opening of canals and

Gothic ribs, Renaissance rose-windows, Tuscan capitals, Roman voussoirs, heraldic coats-of-arms and emblems of Christianity they used to decorate the walls and coverings hastily erected over the old ceremonial places of idolatry.<sup>1</sup>

Although much of the success of the mission was due to the personality of Friar Martín de Valencia, who headed up the group, the missionaries immediately won the admiration and respect of the multitudes when word was spread



Banner with the state emblem.

among the indigenous population that Hernán Cortés had welcomed them kneeling in the dust. Also, since their arrival in Veracruz, the Spanish and indigenous nobles had all been seen gathered to kiss the hand of Friar Martín.<sup>2</sup>

Friar Martín de Valencia taught the alphabet and Latin to indigenous children and adults in the high atrium of the monastery dedicated to Our Lady of the Ascension. He also destroyed the idols of the temple to Camaxtli on top of Matlacuáyatl mountain, where he founded a chapel dedicated to Saint Bartholemew.

It was Friar Toribio de Benavente (called Motolinía, the Poor, by the Tlaxcaltecs) who celebrated the first mass in the city of Tlaxcala in 1530. His chronicles tell us that the open chapel was painted with murals and that when mass was said, multitudes congregated in the low atrium. On these occasions the indigenous singers and instrumentalists sang and played flutes and flageolets, oboes and citherns just as solemnly and musically as in many cathedrals in Spain.

Motolinía's story culminates around 1540 when events led to the zenith of the mingling of the Franciscans and the converted, revealed in the description of the collective acts of the Catholic liturgy, from baptism to the processions of Lent. Suffice it to picture the night of torches celebrated on Thursday of Holy Week, when each penitent lashed the back of the penitent in front of him.

Around 1538 and 1539, a series of festivities stemming from the previous decade were performed in the monastery's high atrium; at the same time they are the proud origin of theater in the Americas. To this day, the presentation of the *autos sacramentales* *The Fall of Adam and Eve* and *The Conquest of Jerusalem* continue to amaze the public.

Taking into account the vivacity and tradition of Tlaxcala's fiestas today, it is not difficult to imagine how the processions of indigenous in lines with candles, torches, crosses and images parsimoniously made their way through a thousand flower arches, simulating the form of an enormous three-nave church. Adam and Eve's home was paradise, fashioned from flowers and fruit and other figures made of different sized plumes from owls, birds of prey, small birds and parrots. Motolinía wrote,

In a single tree, I counted 14 parrots, large and small. The rabbits and hares were so plentiful that everything was full of them...

Adam and Eve showed their misgivings going back and forth from the serpent to the forbidden tree three or four times in front of the audience. Eve begged and bothered Adam saying that she thought he did not love her very much and that her love for him was greater than his for her; and, sitting in his lap, she begged him so much that he went with her to the tree. Adam gave in and they both

ate, as we all know, of the forbidden fruit. Recognizing the serpent's guilt, the angels hung down clothed in the skins of animals to cover the shame of those who had won their expulsion from Paradise.

The most interesting thing, says Motolinía,

was to watch them leave, exiled and weeping; three angels bore Adam and another three bore Eve.... This was so well played that no one who saw it but wept very hard; only a cherubim was left guarding the doors of Paradise, sword in hand.

The audience's despair was so great that they took great time in dispersing and when they did, they left with faces mortified by gloom, singing a villancico under their breaths

Why did she eat,  
The first married woman  
Why did she eat the forbidden fruit.  
She and her husband  
Have brought God to a poor resting place  
For having eaten  
The forbidden fruit.

Motolinía's account is moving in that it shows that their catechismal zeal allowed the Franciscan missionaries to touch the deepest feelings in the souls of the indigenous. When they did, they discovered the chords of human pain

and of divine love and with them awakened the desire to discover themselves in the others, the barefoot, the compassionate and the exiled. They exchanged knowledge with the fascination of the illogical, which in the end would converge with respect for nature where primitive simplicity made way for creative contemplation. The spirit of Renaissance humanism had reached land in the heart of New Spain. **MM**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The conversion's solid building euphoria lasted until 1553, a date that is chiseled on a door-jamb of the monastery's high cloister perhaps to mark the end of the original construction. Later, two other stages mark the time between the splendor and the decline of Franciscan activity. One is the transfer of the Tlaxcala cathedral to the neighboring city of Puebla; for the building involved, Tlaxcalan labor was used. The second is the contradictions that emerged with the arrival of the secular clergy and to a certain extent the notorious lack of interest on the part of the friars who replaced the first Franciscans. While they carried out their work, they had lost the extraordinary spiritual drive and humanist involvement that their predecessors had vis-à-vis the indigenous population.

Toward the end of the sixteenth century, demoralization increased because nature's droughts and pests together with political mistakes led to the loss of the privileges that had been won.

<sup>2</sup> The Franciscans founded three monasteries: the first at Ocotelulco, which was made the headquarters for the Tlaxcala bishopric; the second on a site called Cuitlixco; and the third on a hill that had springs south of the banks of the Zahuapan River where there was a long-venerated cross and an indigenous chapel.



The San Francisco Cathedral. The magnificent carved, panelled ceiling and its altarpieces are its main attractions.