

Introduction



The fascination that women's convents and conventual life exercise in today's students and readers seems at odds with the highly secular orientation of our daily life. However, very few contemporary women would choose a life of strict enclosure and total dedication to the discipline of prayer and concentration on the salvation of the soul. The interest seems to be based on the appeal elicited by the centrality of faith of those women who chose conventual life, and the realization that convents were the only gender-specific institutions in the past that allowed women to carry out an almost independent life in niches created for their exclusive use. While not all the mystique of religious life corresponds to the reality of how nuns lived their own lives, it still had an inner strength that sustained it for centuries and maintained it as an option for thousands of women throughout centuries. In Mexico, these institutions began to be founded in the mid-sixteenth century. By the end of the colonial period, there were fifty-seven convents, the last founded in 1811, as the political process that led to independence from Spain had already begun.¹

Women's convents were part of the Spanish and European cultural transfer to the New World. Christianity in its Roman Catholic expression was represented by these architectural symbols of a religion imposed over a partially evangelized land. They also represented an understanding of assumed gender qualities that made women repositories of a special form of spirituality, regarded as desirable in the building of a new society. There was a place for convents in the social and economic milieu of towns in Spanish America and New Spain—as Mexico was then called. With the foundation of cities, and specifically a capital for the new viceroyalty, the new settlers sought the establishment of women's convents as a mark of spiritual and social distinction, as well as a place for the protection of those women whom they considered endangered by the

new social circumstances. As convents were founded, built, expanded, and embellished, they graced the streets of Mexico City, and the growing number of provincial cities, with their sometimes austere, sometimes ornate architecture. Throughout two and a half centuries, they employed myriads of skilled and unskilled workers, artisans and artists, who left behind tangible expressions of a period's religious sensibility. As institutions, they survived through an astute combination of economic donations and investments. Many devotions and religious rituals centered on their churches, where altars dedicated to patron saints, Mary, and Jesus Christ became the emblematic inspiration of the faithful. The physical but hidden proximity of the women living in the adjacent cloisters infused nunneries with an aura of respect and mystery that was lacking in male convents, inasmuch as monks were part of the world, and their own visibility in the streets made them familiar and accessible.

Before the twentieth century there was no general history of these institutions. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some of them had their own chronicles. The foundational process and the lives of notable nuns were the core of those narratives, while in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, local historians created a corpus of information centering on some orders or given convents.² When Josefina Muriel published her *Conventos de Monjas en Nueva España* in 1946, she opened a new chapter in academic history.³ Muriel's work addressed all nuns and the nature of the institutions in which they lived and created a world of their own, although her work was centered on the city of Mexico. In 1994, Muriel published another landmark with her *Cultura femenina novohispana*, a survey of the works written by women in colonial Mexico. She successfully demonstrated that women wrote in many genres and that they had a place in the construction of viceregal culture.⁴

More recently, a significant number of articles and several books in Spanish and English have begun to fill gaps in these women's histories. In Mexico, Rosalva Loreto López and Manuel Ramos Medina have written monographs on the nuns of Puebla and the Carmelite Order, respectively, while Nuria Salazar has worked indefatigably in the archives of the convent of Jesús María, its material culture, and other aspects of its conventual history.⁵ Their work is based on careful research covering the foundation and material life of women in the convents, as well as the symbolic and religious meaning of their writings and devotional lives, and anchoring these institutions firmly in the social and economic life of New Spain. Sister Pilar Foz y Foz has written an in-depth study of the teaching Order of Mary, which opened its first convent-school in Mexico in 1754.⁶ More recently, Asunción Lavrin and Loreto López have explored nuns' devotional and spiritual lives and the religious culture of the viceroyalty.⁷

Jacqueline Holler has surveyed the entire institutional and social landscape of nuns and *beatas* in the sixteenth century.⁸ Margaret Chowning turned to a provincial convent and has followed the complex political negotiations and eventual outcome of the attempt to reform the observance of the convent of La Purísima Concepción, in San Miguel el Grande.⁹ The effort to establish common grounds with Spanish conventual tradition has crystallized in several international conferences, and in monographs that have added depth to the history of nunneries, although comparative studies are yet to be produced.¹⁰

In English and Spanish, the lion's share in the writings on nuns has been done by literary critics, who have mostly focused on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. The vast number of works dedicated to Sor Juana precludes any generalization, but I wish to acknowledge the foundational works of Georgina Sabat de Rivers.¹¹ Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau gave the literary field a broad vision of the conventual writing ties between Spain and Spanish America with the publication of *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works* in 1989, in which they took a sweeping look at nuns' writings in Spanish America and Spain, addressing their specific qualities as expressions of professed women's sensibilities and aptitudes. The analysis of religious sensibilities as expressed in nuns' writings is also the concern of Kristine Ibsen.¹² Recent publications indicate a new direction toward the study of lesser known conventual writers. Kathleen Myers' and Amanda Powell's intense study of Augustinian Sor María de San José's life and work benefits from literary and historical analysis, revealing the possibilities open to mixing textual analysis and its historical context.¹³ Elisa Sampson Vera Tudela has reviewed and analyzed the meaning of several historical events and personal writings as venues for understanding their cultural meaning.¹⁴ Biographies of nuns and institutions offer much promise to historians and literary critics, as indicated by Kathleen Ross's study of Sigüenza y Góngora's history of Jesús María convent.¹⁵

Another figure recently rediscovered is that of Sor María Anna Agueda de San Ignacio, a prolific writer of devotional works in eighteenth-century Puebla. Jennifer Eich has aptly traced the literary biography of Sor María Anna, underlining the interest in the expression of personal spirituality in the eighteenth century. Nuns' writings are part of the broader analysis of the Mexican feminine intellectual ethos carried out by Jean Franco.¹⁶ The impetus gained by this focus on religious women as subjects and objects of the biographical genre has injected new life into colonial literature and history. Following that trend, Lavrin and Loreto have edited two volumes of writings by nuns and *beatas* in Mexico and Spanish America.¹⁷

The preceding brief survey of the historiography of women's convents in colonial Mexico indicates a growing interest in the topic; there are numerous areas of historical and literary interest that bear further investigation and interpretation. Regional archives contain important documentation waiting for institutional study, as illustrated by Margaret Chowning's work on the convent of La Purísima Concepción in San Miguel el Grande. In Mexico City, Alicia Bazarte Martínez, Enrique Tovar Esquivel, and Martha A. Tronco have recovered important materials from the Hieronymite convents in Mexico and Puebla.¹⁸ I have published many articles on the analysis of conventual finances and their ties to the communities. It is a topic that I chose not to treat in depth in this work, and I trust that readers interested in it will find these articles elsewhere.

Of the areas in need of further historical development, those of life within the convent and the spiritual meaning of conventual life for the professed nuns are critical to complement the new wave of historical and literary studies. As a historical subject, nunneries pose a multiplicity of questions. This work addresses some of them, but from the very specific angle of the inner sanctum of the convent. My intention in this work is to follow a different and as yet understudied aspect of nuns' lives: the path of their lives, beginning with the decision to profess, to become part of the religious community. I seek to understand the rewards they expected to receive, or believed they had received; the routines of their daily and material life; and their interaction with spiritual directors, with each other, and with their ecclesiastical superiors. Their devotional practices were an intrinsic part of their lives and should not be neglected, whether expressed as rituals or in their writings. I also delve into the internal hierarchy and government of the convent and their confrontation with sexuality, sickness, and death. In other words, I am interested in the overall experience of being a nun.

This ambitious goal poses several challenges, and perhaps the most demanding is to avoid being anachronistic in interpretation. As much as possible, I have tried to see the nuns' world through their own eyes and in their own terms. This has meant using their own writings, the works of their hagiographers and ecclesiastic authorities, and those of their contemporaries. While being analytical, I have treated with empathy the views that the historical actors held as valid and truthful for themselves. I understand and expose the "inscripting" and encoding that sermons, biographies, and autobiographies carried within themselves, and hope to have made them clear to the reader while remaining respectful of their worldview.

This study focuses mostly on the convents of the cities of Mexico City and Puebla. The rules that governed nunneries established inescapable

uniformities from which we can infer that the features of daily and personal life here described and analyzed were common to most convents in New Spain. I cover mostly the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with a much smaller input for the sixteenth century, because most conventual foundations were carried out after 1600. Archival sources for the mid- and late-colonial period and the central areas of the viceroyalty remain the core of historical research. Students of colonial Mexico know that the archives of nunneries were appropriated by the state in the 1860s, and while a considerable part of them was deposited in the National Archive of the Nation, many were lost forever. The holdings of the convent of Jesús María in Mexico City are available, although not in their entirety, in the archives of the Secretariat of Health and Welfare. Parts of the materials of Franciscan nunneries of the city of Querétaro are preserved in the Franciscan archives in Celaya; other Franciscan nunneries' papers are available at the National Library and the library of the Museum of Anthropology and History. Provincial archives conserve important collections of regional convents. There are still a significant number of untapped historical materials available for study, especially in the provincial cities.

The spiritual prestige of convents was based on the projection of the image of nuns as privileged persons. The brides of Christ, the chosen ones, were those who could stand the rigor of a disciplined life without sex, and devote themselves not only to their own personal salvation, but also to help and benefit others with their prayers. Such prayers had a special value in the period under review, and people understood their relation to nunneries as one of exchange of material support for the spiritual benefits derived from the salvific mediation of the brides of Christ. This mystique was in the minds of those who helped create these institutions and those who wished to profess in them. Chapter 1 defines the social and economic milieu in which female convents developed. As Christianity was transported to a non-European environment, it underwent a transformation that marked those who aspired to live its message as members of a very special devotional community. The convents became a social and economic filter that rejected the newly converted indigenous women and benefited a relatively small number of chosen females of Spanish descent. The exaggeration of the qualification of purity of race and legitimacy of birth left an indelible mark on the development of these institutions, and was wholly absorbed, accepted, and enacted by the families of the professants and the professants themselves. The spiritual motivations for profession developed within that peculiar socioeconomic framework as a hothouse flower available only to those of impeccable pedigree.

Chapter 1 also tackles the difficult questions of understanding why a woman would like to become a nun. Because we live in a highly secular world, the reasons behind the decision to profess are a puzzling issue to us. Is there any logical explanation for a choice that entailed living the rest of one's life behind walls, engaged in pious devotions in expectation of the salvation of one's soul? Put in those terms alone, the distance in sensibility and the great changes that have affected the quality of women's lives make it hard to explain or understand the existence of nunneries or the wish to become a nun. Traveling back in time and placing ourselves in a period still infused with a profound belief in the proposition that a celibate and enclosed life, dedicated to prayers and matters of the spirit, was as important and possibly a better life than in the secular world, eases our mind into an appreciation and acceptance of a worldview that regarded that choice as respectable and even desirable.

Accountability for life in the convent mixes social and personal factors. At the personal level we must acknowledge religious vocation. It is wrong to assume that all women who professed as nuns did so as a result of family or social pressures. We cannot ignore the educational, social, and economic circumstances that pointed to the convent as a valid option for those women who could access it. The emotional draw of religion in the early modern world involved individuals and countries. Wars of religion were waged in Europe while a spiritual "conquest" was waged in Spanish America. Reform, attack, and defense of religion were hot issues and buzz words in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. More than simple figures of speech, they were issues lived intensely at the personal level.

This cultural baggage was transferred from Spain to its overseas possessions. Female convents, as institutions emblematic of a new triumphal faith, offered a venue to express the reality of Roman Catholicism, as well as the reality facing women of Spanish descent in a period of struggle and new beginnings. Convents offered solutions appropriate for their times and the circumstances of the New World. They were not meant for the neophytes but, rather, for those who would represent Spanish culture in the construction of a new society. They reinforced not only the self-esteem of the European settlers, but also their plans to create a new society, which, albeit different from the one they left behind, would be built on similar cultural foundations. Thus, the arguments expressed to found new convents and to restrict admittance to the socio-racial elite were a response to the Spanish-oriented mentality confronted with a world still somewhat unintelligible, but felt as threatening enough to demand protection to those regarded as vulnerable.

The theme of protection runs deeply in the petitions for new foundations and did not seem to run dry even in the late-eighteenth century, because

attitudes about the so-called intrinsic weakness of the female sex did not change much through two centuries. On the other hand, it is not naïve to accept the religious motivations voiced by those who professed and those who helped them to carry out their ambition by founding convents and endowing novices. In fact, only by paying close attention to the spirituality of the sixteenth century, and especially the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, can we hope to come close to understanding the lives of nuns. While I focus on spiritual, devotional, and ritual practices in Chapters 1, 2, 3, and 10, this work is entirely based on the assumption that spiritual meanings imbued all personal and communal activities within the cloisters.

In New Spain, all social life was permeated by the spirit of practiced religiosity. For a woman, the acquisition of faith and piety was a process based on a multiplicity of sources: home prayers and observance, the practices of devotion demanded by the Roman Catholic Church through the ministration of confessors, and learning about the living examples of saints and holy persons through the teaching imparted by preachers and confessors. Community celebrations, such as processions and saints' feasts, also created a naturalized atmosphere of religiosity. As convents for women were founded, their mere presence was a constant reminder of the opportunities they offered for those who wished to live a life fully committed to religion. Some examples of miscarried vocations are summoned here, but they are not brought to disprove piety; rather, they are to reaffirm it in the majority of those who professed, as well as to illustrate the misuse of social and familial forces.

Chapter 2 addresses the period of novitiate or apprenticeship of religious life. Little attention has been paid to this crucial period in the formation of the religious life. Testing the novice's vocation and her ability to adjust to the discipline of the convent were necessary steps before she took the final and irrevocable vows. Because proving herself to be a "good" nun took any professed sister an entire lifetime, the novitiate served as a trial run of what awaited her and as an opportunity for the community to learn of her potential. From all accounts the novitiate was a tough experience. The physical and spiritual discipline inflicted on the novice was aimed at detaching her emotionally and intellectually from her previous life and the world. Teaching the new life may have been a compassionate process, but the few narratives from teachers and students that have reached us suggest that the intensity of focus demanded by conventual life was not easy to acquire or to impart. Obedience and humility were essential elements of the novitiate, but affective bonds were also possible, especially because it was important to establish an understanding that the "family" of professed nuns was the only family that really mattered in this world. In Chapters 4 and 5 we will encounter some of the

problems that made this ideal difficult to achieve, but the purpose of the novitiate was to train the future nuns in the pursuit of the model life believed to be achievable in the cloisters. It was also during this period that the relationship with confessors and spiritual directors began to take shape. As the most meaningful and fundamental associations in a nun's life, the relationship with them is traced throughout different stages in her life, with a variety of nuances and personal significance for both.

Chapter 3 develops several of the spiritual themes that permeated and guided life in the convent. While a full book-length manuscript would be necessary to explain the many nuances of spirituality within the convent, it is essential to analyze the meaning of vows, devotional practices, and the extraordinary power of the faith that sustained the nuns' piety. The foundational promise of conventual life was the vows made in the final profession. They contained the initial spiritual message of the uniqueness of women dedicated entirely to religious life and the discipline of their commitment. Clausturation was gender-specific, as it did not apply to men. The vows of celibacy, obedience, and poverty had been developed throughout the Middle Ages and reiterated at the Council of Trent, which also made clausturation a nonnegotiable qualifier of life for women in religion. The immutability of the vows defied the challenge of change, and defined what was the essential message that bound women to their expected behavior within the convent.

The vows ensured the permanency of key aspects of religious life essential to its survival. The expectation that conventual activities and worship would not change abruptly sustained the discipline prescribed by the rules of each order. Discipline meant order and regularity as the bases of higher pursuits expressed in the great variety of devotional themes sustaining the spiritual life of nuns and convents. I was obliged to focus on a small number of those that appeared fundamental in most convents for more than two hundred years. The centrality of the love of God and the worship of the Passion of Christ and his sacred heart is evident in the writings of the nuns themselves, not just in the prescribed ceremonial and worship activities. The revitalization of the concept of being the bride of Christ in a holy marriage is also an important feature of the period under review.¹⁹ Christ the groom and object of unrequited love was the companion of all his brides. They were expected to enjoy his commitment to them, as well as suffer for him and with him. The depth of this relationship should not be underestimated. It was the backbone of female spirituality, as taught, received, believed, and expressed in nuns' writings. Mary, understandably, also occupied an important place in Counter-Reformation Catholicism. She had a special resonance in communities of women who saw a gender affinity in her multiple roles of mother and intercessor. Many

of the nuns were also visionaries. Visions are no longer castaways in the history of mentalities or culture. One does not need to believe that the visions actually happened to understand that they were embedded in the expression of the spiritual experience. Their verifiability of visions is less important than their meaning as personal and social assumptions about the sensitivity of women to experience them, and today we can use them as metaphors that open our understanding of the religious *gnosis*.

Life within the convent unfolded into many discrete units, each one dedicated to specific activities and all of them carefully inscribed in time. Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 address a variety of daily life occurrences. It is hard to capture all the fine details of conventual life, but in these chapters I strive to cover some key issues, such as the establishment of order and hierarchy among the sisters, the mundane but real issues of community management, the painful experience of sickness and the conceptualization of death, and the surreptitious presence of sexuality within the cloisters.

The internal structure and order of the religious community is followed in Chapter 4. At the ring of daily bells, the community knew what activities to perform and what routine to follow. Hierarchy and obedience were the twin pillars that sustained the social framework of the convent. The internal discipline of the convent was built on tasks and responsibilities assigned to the members of the community through a system of periodical elections and appointments. The rules of governance and the ties established among nuns, however, were ultimately dependent on their male authorities, who while mostly exercising a watchful eye on the convents without much interference, could, and did, exercise their power to change the course of observance in the convents. Among the male authorities, the spiritual director was a very strong influence on the life of the nun, and personal governance began with him. These male figures exercised control over the nuns' spiritual lives in ways that transcended their role as a source of religious guidance. They were the repository of the nuns' innermost thoughts, and they were trusted and valuable advisors in all that mattered in religion. The bond between confessor and spiritual daughter unfolded in many ways. His advice was addressed to her observance of the rules; her behavior as a person within the convent, and her adjustment to religious life; the benefits of religious practice; and the eventual salvation of her soul. Such a charged relationship was sometimes satisfactory and sometimes painfully uncomfortable for the nun. Their spiritual writings reveal the complexities of their relationship with their confessor about which there is still much to be explored, far more than can be hinted in Chapter 10.

For the nun, however, her community and her own female superiors were the most immediate reality, and in Chapter 4 I have dwelled on the

role of the abbess as the most important authority figure in the community and a good yardstick to measure the degree of worldliness and power involved in the government of a convent. "Worldliness" is not meant as a lack of spirituality, but an affirmation of the capabilities that women could develop once they were given free reign over their daily lives. When nuns assumed the tasks that were largely denied to women outside the convent, their competence in performing them demonstrated how contemporary restraints on the majority of women stymied their ability to engage in meaningful occupations. The much touted "freedom" experienced in the cloisters was not altogether focused on spiritual objectives. It was also freedom to undertake responsibilities. Keeping the accounts of the convent, administering and governing a body of sometimes several hundred individuals, and observing its ceremonial life were learned activities that became natural to nuns as they exercised them. As well, rituals and ceremonial acts help us to understand how through their metaphorical meaning convents and nuns rose above the mundanity of daily life.

In Chapter 5, I pursue other details of daily life that speak to the permeability of the cloisters and its interdependence with the community outside its walls. Prohibitions to engage with the world were ineffective in keeping a strict separation of the presumably closed gardens of virgins and the seculars beyond their walls. In fact, such separation was theoretical, a fact acknowledged in the very core of religious teachings, which warned of the struggle and perils involved in the coexistence of spirit and flesh, cloister and lay community. Beyond the abstractions of the spirit lay the human needs of the institution and its inhabitants. It was not totally incongruent to understand the humanity of Christ when humans devoted to his worship had to bear the infirmities of the body and the needs of their daily existence. The latter involved surviving times of economic stress, allocating funds for the needs of the professed as well as the needs of worship, procuring a personal space of their own by purchasing and furnishing cells, dealing with the convent's administrator, and litigating over property with seculars for the benefit of the community. The administration of income was of the utmost concern for prelates as well as for the nuns, and an occasional point of friction between them. All the details of conventual life such as cuisine and needlework were not only part of prescribed chores, but were also means of spiritualizing those "womanly" activities as they were performed. The femininity of nuns pervaded their activities in ways not present in male communities.

Daily life could not be carried out in most convents without the aid of servants and even slaves, whose lives remain largely in shadows, reflecting the social distinctions that separated the brides of Christ from their helpers in this world. Although the personal lives of servants are difficult to recover,

their presence became a bone of contention among prelates who wished a return to imagined simpler Christian lives. The disputes over servants and protégées stretched into the late eighteenth century and were never resolved. In general, the assumed different “nature” of the New World and its female elite was the argument wielded by the nuns to defend the large number of servants that remained an irritant to the ecclesiastical authorities. As stated, a codification of class and ethnic separation prevailed in the cloisters, and it is somewhat ironic that, in a fascinating twist of colonial piety, some of these humble women gained respectability as embodiments of a sanctity they were not expected to possess.²⁰

In Chapter 6, I address the issue of health, sickness, and the meaning of death as part of the human experience of nuns. The rudimentary understanding of the source of diseases, and the knowledge that sickness would most likely be followed by death, presented the nuns and their confessors with the issue of how best to prepare the soul to cope with both, and life beyond death. As spiritual diaries show, concern for the souls of the departed and their own occupied an important place in the prayers and rituals of nuns, but material comfort for those affected by sickness was part of the charity they were assumed to exercise. Nuns suffered from diseases similar to those of the rest of the population, and while the status of medical knowledge did not guarantee them a better diagnosis and treatment, the care they received in the infirmaries was possibly superior to those of the population at large. While not confirmed, a trend toward a longer life among nuns is apparent.

Not surprisingly, disease was regarded as God’s test to try one’s character. The sickness and the suffering of these virginal brides of Christ became a theme of discussion in their biographies, which exposed their weakened bodies to the curiosity of the readers of conventual chronicles, as a source of inspiration to those who read them. The use of the body as a venue to construct piety suggests how important links between the physical and the spiritual were in Counter-Reformation lore. It is under that light that flagellation of the body and denial of the flesh must be understood. However, the rhetoric of body flagellation and the debasement of the body were part of the pious rituals of some extraordinary nuns, and they were not the customary practices for most professed women. Death, on the other hand, was common to all—and was understood as the final redemption of worldly ties and the return to the beloved spiritual motherland where the soul would meet its redeemer. A firm belief in purgatory as an intermediate place where souls paid for their sins supported an intensive apparatus of prayers on their behalf. Death and the afterlife were surrounded by the most solemn liturgies and were the source of legendary stories on the supernatural qualities of relics left by the most

exemplary sisters. The interlocking of sickness, death, and the fate of the soul is one of the richest facets of colonial spirituality.

The body of the virginal bride of Christ was also the locus of contention of the nuns' spiritual caretakers. Masculinity, femininity, and the sexuality emerging from the close relationships forged between nuns and their confessors is the theme developed in Chapter 7. The celibacy imposed upon the clergy, translated into chastity vows for friars and nuns, was a hotly contested and debated issue throughout the Middle Ages. The Council of Trent reiterated the principle of celibacy, but effective control over the sexual behavior of clergy and the male regular orders in the New World was lacking. While it was easier for a recluse woman to sustain her vow of chastity and remain physically virginal, her sexuality could emerge through unchaste thoughts and behavior, and the most likely occasions of that emergence were those shared with confessors. Potentially subversive situations could also develop from "devotional" visitations of men to nuns, a fashionable "courtly" behavior in the seventeenth century, but in this chapter I study several forms of courtship and sexually charged situations of "solicitation" of favors from nuns by their confessors that challenged the mystical marriage to Christ. If the details of the many ways of courtship are in themselves of social interest, one should not forget that the foundational concept of love between Christ and his bride, explained in Chapter 3, was under siege whenever a male member of the church approached a nun. This behavior elicited condemnation and punishment from ecclesiastic authorities, as it was their duty to punish each other for such transgressions; but no amount of denunciation succeeded in uprooting such practices. Female monastic sexuality will always remain half hidden under the veils of modesty, but it existed, either repressed or demurely expressed. There is no base, however, for popular lore about unbridled sexuality in the nunneries. Real transgressions resulting in sexual encounters were few and have been documented. It is the more subtle forms of sexual expression that we must address, as they emerge from the relationship of "father" and daughter in the spiritual realm. The corruption of this relationship took many forms, and I explore several of them in an attempt to highlight the human context of what was assumed to be a spiritual relationship. The connection between spirit and flesh is nowhere more evident than in the very personal expression of physical attraction between the sexes that could flourish in the convents.

Having enforced racial discrimination against indigenous women—and all mixed bloods—the foundation of several convents for indigenous women in the eighteenth century marked a notable departure from social practice covered in Chapter 8. Were the foundations due to the changing winds of the Enlightenment or any other intellectual change in this century?

Founded in 1724, the first convent for indigenous women does not seem to represent any social shift in the vision of the Indian as a potential pious and spiritualized human being. The Church remained indifferent to this possibility throughout the seventeenth century, and the foundation of Corpus Christi for Indian noblewomen seems to have been the result of a fortuitous and sudden viceregal impulse. However, once founded, both elite white males and noble Indians seemed to have found a strong cause to espouse while, at the same time, the possibility of Indian nuns released the anxiety of those who opposed the elevation of indigenous females to the exalted position so far occupied solely by the white brides of Christ. The debate about the appropriateness of Indian women for the religious state was based less on any natural or rational rights owed to them as Christians than on their having achieved the maturity and exemplarity of behavior, as well the mettle required to observe the most stringent rules of monastic life. Disregarding the fact that many transgressions to the assumed exemplarity of white nuns had been quoted and criticized by male ecclesiastical authorities in the preceding centuries, the intellectual and religious bar for the admission of Indians to the cloister was raised high by those who claimed that Indians lacked it. Conversely, those who supported the aspirations of Indian brides for Christ relied heavily on the assumption that they could achieve traditional virtues expressed by the monastic female vows. There was nothing "revolutionary" in the acceptance of indigenous nuns from a spiritual viewpoint. As nuns, indigenous women aspired to, and exercised in practice, the Iberian hagiographical models without any hint of orthodox deviation. Nonetheless, the opening of a space in the Church so long denied to them marks a departure from the past and shows the willingness of the Church to become a more inclusive institution. To the extent that religious profession was still regarded as a privilege, the indigenous women who acceded to it brought honor and distinction to their communities. It was this circumstance that the indigenous elite accepted with joy.

Another important chapter in the history of Mexican nunneries took place in the second half of the century over the acceptance of *vida común*. Under this form of observance, nuns would eat in a refectory sharing communal meals, give up their personal servants, and dismiss girls and seculars living in the cloister. In Mexico, the diocesan authorities engaged in a process of ecclesiastical reform under the assumption that *vida común* was inspired in earlier and "truer" forms of Christianity. The attempt to overhaul the organization, administration, and observance of nunneries began in 1765 in the bishopric of Puebla, initiated by Bishop Francisco Fabián y Fuero. He was later joined in the effort by the Archbishop of Mexico and several other bishops and received the support of

Viceroy Marquis de Croix and Antonio María de Bucareli. For the next fifteen years, nuns and their male prelates engaged in a battle of wills, mostly carried out in the key cities of Puebla and Mexico, but affecting most nunneries in the viceroyalty.

I present this process as one of gender contestation because even though the reform was understood as a religious issue, it was characterized by the explicit use of gendered terms by all those involved. It was a plan designed by men and followed a masculine understanding of the duties and needs of cloistered women that totally disregarded the voice and feelings of the women involved. These men intended to dismantle the religious identity and cloister culture that nuns had developed throughout two hundred years, alleging that they offered a rational plan to clean up the perceived deviations of monastic observance. Their plan denied the women's arguments that their form of observance had been blessed by previous religious authorities and nurtured and sustained their form of spiritual needs. To be sure, some of the deviations criticized by the prelates were real and contradicted the nunneries' own rules, but many of the "irregularities" criticized by the male prelates represented adaptations to the lifestyle of a different continent and a different society—at least, the nuns argued that they did.

Given the abundance of official documentation generated by this prolonged contest and the many nuances in the positions assumed by the clergy, the regular prelates, the royal officials, the viceroys, and the nuns themselves, I offer a tight summary of events. Other historians have rendered local accounts and more may do so in the future, given the fact that this is the best-known defiance of women in colonial Mexico. My emphasis is on the assumption of unconditional obedience that the men expected, their surprise at not receiving it, and their relentless persistence in securing it. This reform plan was the brainchild of a small group of male ecclesiastics, and once they were transferred elsewhere, the milder royal interpretation of the desirability of changes prevailed. Subsequent prelates simply reminded the nuns of their obligation to follow *vida común*, but there was no real transformation of the style of observance in most convents. Thus, what this rather ephemeral, although intense, event allows us to understand is how, under duress, the brides of Christ could deploy tactics of resistance that belied the docility their spiritual fathers ascribed to them. This outburst was short and not at all revolutionary, despite all the energy spent on it by adversarial groups. All these nuns desired was to continue living in their traditional fashion and remain in control of their own institutions.

A history of nunneries should not be without personal narratives or writings that create a spiritual tradition in the body of the community.

The importance of women's own narratives is paramount to understanding how they perceived their own world, especially when that world was, by definition, a community that had enclosed itself to perpetuate a lifestyle in the pursuit of a spiritual objective. In Chapter 10, I focus on some of the personal works of nuns to encourage the reader to meditate on some of the previous chapters and return to some of their themes guided by the written words of the sisters themselves.

While reading was an obvious practice for the professed, what we can say about this practice is limited due to the scarcity of inventories of the books they owned or read. On the other hand, writing has left enough tracks to guide us into the multiple facets of their thoughts. Writing "business" letters was an institutional practice still in need of academic evaluation. Collections of personal letters are harder to come by. In Chapter 10 I focus on the writings of a spiritual nature because they enrich our understanding of the most personal aspect of religious life. Nuns had to be careful of what they said about themselves and their spiritual experiences, given the supervision exercised by male ecclesiastics. The same authorities, however, encouraged them to write about their innermost feelings as religious beings. There was no contradiction in these positions. Only by examining the written word could a confessor or spiritual director assess its orthodoxy; thus the importance of considering the nature of the relationship between nun-writer and confessor as one that lends itself to a variety of interpretations, and about which there will be many more comments in the future. The personal intimacy created by a nun's introspective analysis and the process of sharing it with a member of the opposite sex are the departing points for analyzing the writings. For nuns, writing diaries of their inner spiritual universe was a process so personal that only a few examples remain because many of these testimonies of the soul were burned or destroyed by their own authors. Those that have survived tell us about faith, doubt, observance, daily life, and reflect the nature of piety practiced throughout the colonial period, because it changed little in terms of the spirituality they expressed.

Other forms of writing receive attention in this chapter, such as plays, poems, and history. The latter is of particular interest to historians insofar as it is the counterpoint of the spiritual diaries, and a much-used tool for the construction of emblematic and inspirational conventual figures. Biographies and chronicles of the orders were authored mostly by men, who had the traditional authority of writing. However, by the middle of the eighteenth century, nuns were appropriating it openly and publishing under their own names. In fact, they had been training themselves in creating an institutional and personal memory since the seventeenth century, but men blocked the freedom of their voice until the mid-eighteenth

century. This was not the situation in Spain, and thus, here we can also see an imprint of gender control as a colonial practice whereby women were denied authorial persona. These narratives are only now emerging from archival obscurity. Fame was showered on one nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, but it is time to include the choir of muted voices that sang other tunes, perhaps less perfect in their expression but just as worthwhile in their message. Ending with the nuns' own writings, this book seeks to complete a full circle insofar as they will help elucidate questions about vocation, decision making, and perception of a destiny within the cloisters posed in Chapter 1. When nuns wrote, they recovered their voice and articulated their highest as well as their most mundane thoughts, telling us what really mattered to them and inviting us to share with them their material and spiritual concerns.

While there is still much more to be learned about the brides of Christ in colonial Mexico, I hope that throughout the following pages the doors to their convents will finally open to us and encourage a visit in their own terms. I have sought to become better acquainted with the brides of Christ as women facing the complexities posed by the desire to overcome their humanity and still defined by it. If I stimulate the reader to see in these women more than esoteric, distant expressions of womanhood, then I will feel rewarded for all the effort demanded by the task of instilling life into their memories.