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Franciscan Evangelization in America Five Centuries after Its Beginning*

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"Evangelizacion franciscana en America a cinco siglos de su inicio"

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1. Discussions concerning the Quincentenary

Nowadays an impassioned discussion is taking place regarding the significance of the year 1492. It was the year in which the unique relationships between the old and the new worlds began. Historians have not yet come to any consensus as to how to name them. Nevertheless, these relationships are essential factors in achieving a true understanding of the nations that make up the world of America. The discussions about this topic hold a special interest for the whole church, but especially for the Friars Minor, who promote harmony, not dispute. They are of particular interest for the friars, because the Franciscan Order was very involved the evangelization of the American continent. This activity was inseparably united with the coming of the Europeans to these lands.

Obviously, a great multitude of things have changed since Columbus landed on one of the islands of the Caribbean on October 12, 1492. Thanks to these changes, we can propose questions about the whole American enterprise — questions which the people who began it could hardly have foreseen. At the same time, we must remember that in those days there were some very exceptional men who did question the enterprise. In own our times, a greater sensitivity to the value of cultures, to the peaceful approach to other peoples, and to respect for other religions in the world, make us question seriously the role that war, destruction, violence and injustice played in the colonization, and

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consequently, in the planting of the Gospel that accompanied it. It is here that irreconcilable positions arise between those who can see only evil in colonization and those who hold that, notwithstanding the negative aspects, colonization created among the American peoples a culture that made possible their incorporation into the western world.

In a certain way, these discussions are not new. Actually they arose at the very moment the Europeans arrived in America. They can be found in piles of manuscripts and published works. They touch on the rights of Christian kingdoms over pagan nations, on the relationship between conquest and evangelization, and on the freedom of those who were conquered. These discussions have come down to our times embellished by various interpretations — for example, the interpretation of the American Creoles in the beginning of the nineteenth century by which the Creoles based their claim to political independence from Spain on the wrongs that Spain had against "the American people." Or the interpretation of the liberal positivists of the middle of that same century, who accused the institutions of the colonial era (especially the church) of being the major obstacle to the progress of the nations. Or, the interpretation of today's theologians who are concerned about the unjust situations on the continent who seek the origin of present-day evils in the history of colonization.

While these discussions are going on around us, we Friars Minor are gathered together here not with any illusions about finding a solution to these polemics, nor with any intention of denying their existence, but with a desire to reflect upon the events. Such a reflection will help us to understand the significance of the evangelizing presence of the followers of St. Francis in the christianizing of this continent, and in particular to understand implications for our evangelizing efforts today. To attain that purpose we might ask various questions, which include: How did the Friar Minor understand his vocation to evangelize? How faithful was he to it? What helped him to maintain his fidelity to the Gospel? — if in fact he did. If he might have been unfaithful to his vocation, what obstacles impeded him from being faithful? What elements characterized the Friar Minor, gave him his singular place in the church, and impacted in a special way on the conversion of our peoples to Christianity?

Perhaps these are too many questions that are too difficult to answer fully here. Of one thing I am sure — that we can avoid falling into the same common temptations regarding history. We can avoid setting ourselves up as judges of those who have gone before us, and we can avoid becoming defenders of all the causes of our past. This is not a courtroom, but a reunion of brothers interested in facing our evangelizing commitments in a church, which, as the Second Vatican Council says, is inserted in the world and in history. We surely know that the

story of the evangelization of our peoples is abundantly complex, although it has been only superficially studied and emotionally discussed. It is not an easy task, therefore, to cover our topic in all its aspects. Nor should anyone expect us in a meeting like this to do so. My talk has a much more simple objective — to present the more salient points of this whole topic which may help us understand the missionary vocation of our order in America. This understanding can lead us to face up to the great challenges that this continent offers us in its evangelization today.

2. A General Overview of the History of Evangelization

Specialists in the field of evangelization have discovered different forms that it has taken in the course of history. They note the various unique expressions of the proclamation of the message of Jesus that were shaped by the culture of the evangelizing agent and by the culture of the people evangelized. They speak of the great eras of evangelization, like that of the Judeo-Greek peoples in the Roman empire, or the "barbarian" peoples at the fall of the empire, or the Slavic peoples in the Middle Ages, and so forth. So it is that the evangelization of the peoples of America is considered a time of evangelization molded by the Spanish presence, the indigenous cultures, and the evangelizing agents.

An analysis of this period of evangelization will help us see that within the picture of this enterprise as a whole there are many variations that must alert us to the danger of generalizing about it. In the first place, therefore, we must be aware that although we talk about a period of evangelization, in actuality we are talking about a long process, never terminated, and still on-going, in very different geographical, cultural, political, social and religious contexts, which of themselves create an evangelization of many different forms and characteristics. For example, the evangelization carried out in the Caribbean Islands of Santo Domingo, Cuba, and Puerto Rico was very different from that carried out a few years later in Mexico, Peru and Brazil, and obviously, most different from that carried out in Canada, New Mexico, Texas, and Upper California.

In pointing out these differences I am not referring only to geographical or chronological aspects, but to cultural, political and social differences both on the part of the evangelizers and of the evangelized. In other words, we must note that the ethnic groups of the Caribbean, the Hurons of Canada, and the southern Indians of Brazil, are very distinct from each other. Moreover, within what may appear as the same culture, for instance that of central Mexico, there are notable differences between those whom we would describe as belonging to the high cultures of Middle America (Mayas, Nahuas, Tarascos, and so

forth) and those who were still living in a way equivalent to the European paleolithic period as hunters and gatherers in geographic zones very close to those of the high cultures.

Following this same line of thought, it is one thing to recall the motivation and experience of the first Franciscan evangelizers — two French lay brothers who arrived in Santo Domingo in 1493 on the second voyage of Columbus. No doubt they came in the spirit of true Friars Minor and in full accord with the medieval Franciscan missionary tradition of simply announcing the Gospel. They took the first steps in christianizing America without any plan other than a commitment to bring the Good News to all creatures. It is entirely another matter to recall the activity of the brothers sent by Francisco Cisneros in 1500. They came with a well-defined program of work. Or the mission of the twelve first missionaries to Mexico, which took place in a well- defined moment in history, as was the decade of 1520s, in which the spiritual reform of the order, especially in Spain, was combined with the great interest of the minister general, Francisco de los Angeles Quiñones, in the missions of America. All this happened already in the sixteenth century.

The differentiation of this missionary activity will also be marked by the diversity in the colonial policies of Spain. One may not compare the missionary practices of the first twenty years with those of the times of Philip II. During the first twenty years, the Spanish crown, although well intentioned, provided neither the experience nor the political theories necessary to deal with a situation so entirely unexpected as here in America. By the time of Philip II the colonial policies were well defined. All this took place already in the first hundred years, and does not include anything about the interesting comparisons that could be made between the colonizing policies that arose in the times of the *Regalismo*, and the *Ilustración*, which resulted in the missions in Upper California and the jungles of Peru.

These few considerations show us how risky the reflection on our theme can be if we generalize indiscriminately about the characteristics of evangelization in America. At the same time they show how incomplete would be our study of the process of evangelization if we should separate it from the political, social and economic situations in which it took place.

These same considerations also indicate that we must not lose sight of the ones who are evangelized — fortunately a subject that is being given more attention in recent times. Nor ought we forget the agents of evangelization, who have not as yet been given sufficient attention, with the result that they are inadequately understood. I believe that these observations are indispensable in order to give their right place to the following points of our reflection.

3. The Franciscan Evangelizing Project in America: Its Continuity and Uniqueness

To outline a missionary program for a Friar Minor today is a task completely different from what it was five centuries ago, when the church and the Friars Minor lived in a world with theological concerns very different from ours. Today we have the advantage of various documents published by the church and the order regarding evangelization — documents that are the result of years of theological reflection, dialogues, consultations, new experiences, and the openness of the church to questions raised by the social, anthropological and cultural sciences. One might be tempted to see the church at the end of the fifteenth century as the one described in Vatican II, open "from the beginning of its history" to "the ideas and languages of various peoples ... for the purpose of adapting the Gospel ... to the grasp of all." (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 44). However, no vast expertise in history is required for us to realize that, except in the first centuries of Christian expansion, the ideal model of the missionary church was seldom found in history. The evangelization of non-Roman Europe, for example, makes that clear in the case of the Germanic peoples, the Saxons and the Celts.

As a matter of fact, the expansion of Christianity from the beginning of the Middle Ages is characterized either by the monastic movement, with the monastery as the center of learning and piety, as happened for the most part among the Germans, Saxons and the Irish, or by conquest, as happened among the eastern peoples of Germany, or by the campaigns of re-conquest, as happened in the case of the peoples removed from Christianity by the Muslims at the start of the eighth century. It was Francis of Assisi who broke with these medieval schemes by his radical return to the Gospel, his love of peace, his itinerant preaching, and his embrace of the concerns of his times. He returned to the Gospel commitment of announcing the message of Jesus Christ, primarily by his example and then by his words.

In light of all that, the evangelization of America cannot be seen as a kind of unique or isolated event, or as a breaking away from the church's traditional missionary activity. In the concrete, friars in the missions of America were heirs to the spiritual heritage of Francis of Assisi and of the rich tradition and unique evangelizing experiences that began with St. Francis. This legacy was realized in the most divergent environments, starting with the original diplomatic and missionary contacts with the Mongols by John of Pian del Carpine (1245) and William of Rubruck (1252), and continuing to the surprising entrance into China by Odoric of Pordenone (1320—30) and John of

Marignoli (1338), and the intense missionary activity of John of Montecorvino (1279—1328) in the region of Persia, Iran and Armenia. The arduous work of the Franciscans in the Holy Land, their extraordinary missionary labors in northern and eastern Europe in the fifteenth century, and their first advances into northern Africa, round out the picture of the historical antecedents of the evangelization of America.

What, then, are the features that will distinguish the missionary project of the Friars Minor in America? We can make at least a couple of observations.

a) It was the encounter with what is properly called "the New World." Going to the peoples of Asia or China meant going to exotic, legendary and even mythical peoples and lands. But it meant going to peoples and lands known to the Europeans, even though known through legends. The same can be said about going to Africa. On the other hand, the American continent was not only unknown; it was not even imagined to exist by the Europeans. Because of this peculiarity, the training and the missionary experience previous to the "discovery" of America was grossly inadequate for the evangelization of America. The unexpected encounter with America with its cultures so totally foreign to those of the Old World demanded evangelizing programs appropriate to the new realities.

b) Europe had experienced imperial expansion by way of conquest (as in the case of the Roman empire), as well as the experience of Christian expansion prior to conquest (as was the case in the principalities of northern and eastern Germany, among others). Meanwhile in America both came together. The imperial expansion of Spain and Portugal and the expansion of Christianity (evangelization) arrived together at the time when two forces of the modern world, nationalism and mercantilism, were beginning to awaken. Because of all this, the work of evangelization inevitably confronted new challenges of which the medieval world had little or no experience. Nevertheless, there was a positive aspect that also coincides with the discovery of America: the awakening of the Renaissance, with its ardent search for human knowledge, education, and a new society, which also would affect the evangelization enterprise.

We have at least three things, therefore, that distinguished the evangelization project of the Friars Minor in America: the heritage and evangelization experience of the Friars Minor previous to the discovery of America; the uniqueness and independence of the religious and cultural development of the American continent; and the singularity of the historical moment in which the evangelization took place.

4. The Evangelization Project and the Franciscan Heritage

To speak historically of the Franciscan spiritual heritage may be a more complex task than to speak of it theologically. Let me explain. It is an arduous task to gather, systematize and study the ideas of Franciscan writers, thinkers and teachers about any spiritual topic, but it will end in concrete results if one has the will, perseverance and training to do it. To follow and study such thought, not in the writings but in the activity of the Friars Minor, is an equally arduous task, but it ends in less tangible results. Franciscan activity is characterized by a great spontaneity in which the individual's ingenuity more often shines through with greater strength than what we might call characteristic signs of the order.

The outlining of Franciscan spiritual and theological thought regarding mission before the discovery of America is a task still to be accomplished. Nevertheless, there are some important things we can draw upon. We have, for instance, Adam Marsh and his *Tractatus Theologicus Politicus*, or Roger Bacon's *Moralis Philosophia*. Above all, we have the missionary writings of the secular Franciscan, Raymond Lull, who was closely associated with the friars and their activities. From among them all, the latter can offer us the most significant information about the project of evangelization in America, because of his great preoccupation with learning the native languages and the formulation of a common science (mathematics) with universal concepts and arguments as aids in coming to the knowledge of true religion.

To these theologians of mission (and on more than one occasion, in relationship with them, like with Roger Bacon and William of Rubruck), must to add the great missionaries of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, who by their letters, reports and other writings helped create the Franciscan spiritual patrimony regarding the missions.

We can presuppose that the brothers who lived toward the end of the fifteenth century, on the eve of the discovery of America, had access to that spiritual patrimony regarding the missions, either through the study of theology or of the general lore of the order. Not to mention others, we have the accounts that the outstanding missionaries to America, John Zumarraga and Martín of Valencia, made of the missionary experiences in China. Then we have Martín Ignatius of Loyola, nephew of St. Ignatius of Loyola, who with other friars began his missionary experience in the far east toward the end of the sixteenth century in an altogether different historical context.

In general, however, the missionary tradition of the Friars Minor who came to America was influenced much more strongly by their Franciscan background as members of the Observant reform, especially in Spain. However, we do not want to exclude the Observant groups of

the Low Countries, France and Italy. All these groups had in common their struggle to return to the primitive ideal of the order, namely, a simple fraternal life — itinerant, in poverty, in contact with the people but without abandoning an intense cultivation of the contemplative life. There were various levels of commitment to this struggle of returning to the primitive ideal. Some tried to bring it about in an orderly and institutionalized way, like the Observants who were supported and promoted by Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros. From this group came the first missionaries sent to the Caribbean. On the other extreme were the radical reformers, considered vagabonds and extremists, from which came the group known as the "Twelve First Evangelizers of Mexico."

It is this ideal of reform at the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth that forges the first missionary enterprise in America, with its distinctive characteristics — until now little known or discussed. As a result, for the mission of 1500, organized and sent by Cardinal Cisneros with the full collaboration of the vicar general of the order, Oliver Maillard, the mission plan included restoration of freedom to the Indians whom Christopher Columbus had sent to Spain without permission, and the liberation of Hispaniola "from the power of the Pharaoh (Columbus)," since it would be impossible to evangelize the Indians because of his abuses. In fact, Columbus himself, accompanied by a friar, Francisco Ruiz, was returned to Spain as a prisoner. A few years later, in 1517, we find another unique program being carried out on the coast of Venezuela by a group of French Observants (*Picardos*). It was an experiment in evangelization without conquest. Again it was supported by Cisneros, the promoter of the Spanish Franciscan reform, and by the General Chapter of the order celebrated in Rouen in 1516.

One of the most famous groups of missionaries of the sixteenth century, without doubt, was the so-called "Twelve First Missionaries of Mexico." They came from one of the most radical movements of the Observants in Spain, led by John of Guadalupe. His plan for the Franciscan life was begun in Extremadura, land of the conquistadors. Energized by a strong dose of evangelical radicalism, his original group was named after "The Holy Gospel." His plan was converted into a missionary project for Mexico by another great enthusiast for the mission in America, the minister general, Francis of the Angels Quiñones. As minister general, he wrote two documents for this mission in 1523: the *Obedience* and the *Instruction*, which can be considered classical texts in the history of Franciscan thought about evangelization. In them the great hopes of the Observant reform stand out as converted into programs of evangelization. Concern to live the Gospel for the love of God and neighbor, radically and in minority after the example of Francis, in witness of fraternity and Gospel faithfulness — these were

to be the means to bring about conversion to Christianity. He stressed the missionary vocation and commitment of the order, contemplation as the support of that vocation, and the priority of fidelity to the Gospel over the observance of ceremonies and ordinances. Even though these texts were written in the theological language of his time, they are nevertheless of prime importance for understanding the Franciscan mission in America.

In recent times researchers have given much attention to these ideals of the reform and to the return to the original models of the order in the evangelization of America. Attempts have been made to connect them to the millenial movements of the later Middle Ages and to the Franciscan Spirituals of that same time. As a matter of fact, certain elements of those movements can be found among the great evangelizers of America. However, without taking anything away from the importance of efforts at such interpretation, I believe that it is much more important for our consideration to take into account the continual connection that exists between movements of reform and the great moments of evangelization, not just in the early years but throughout the entire history of evangelization. For instance, the schools founded by the Propaganda Fide toward the end of the seventeenth century, which were of undeniable importance in the evangelization of the marginal regions of the Spanish empire, were also intimately related to the return to the ideals of the Observants.

We must add that we have been treating of authentic and sincere reform movements, but there also were some characterized by formalism and legalism. An example of the latter was the establishment of convents of the Recollects in almost all of the American provinces from the middle of the seventeenth century onward, without any worthwhile commitment on their part to evangelization at the time. It also is interesting to note that the only province of the Discalced in America was in San Diego, Mexico. It did not involve itself in evangelization until the end of the eighteenth century, when the colonial era was already coming to an end. The case of the Philippines is different. There the entire mission belonged to the Discalced province of St. George. The conclusion seems to be that one cannot separate the projects for the evangelization of America from the yearning to return to strict observance. When that desire was carried out sincerely and not merely formally or officially, it influenced evangelization.

5. Evangelization Projects and the American Realities.

However rich in spiritual meaning a return to the original ideals of the order may be, it cannot explain by itself the evangelization projects: their bright aspects, their limitations, successes and failures. We need

to return to the realities of the American world of five centuries ago to see in what ways the spiritual heritage of Francis of Assisi and his followers guided the Friars Minor in carrying out their evangelizing activity, in what ways it helped them to comprehend a spiritual world so very different from their own, and what attitudes it fostered in them that helped them to approach those who were the object of their evangelization.

Keeping in mind what we have said about multiplicity of the evangelizing experiences of the Franciscans in America, I would now like to take Mexico not so much as a model but more as a point of reference in response to the questions we have raised. The evangelization of Mexico enjoyed the advantage of having started in 1524, after various attempts in the Caribbean had already given the enterprise a certain amount of maturity and where in those years a province had already been established. On the other hand, at the beginning of Mexico's evangelization there was still enough flexibility in both the political and ecclesial administrations for the Friars Minor to find an opening for their programs of evangelization. Finally, the friars encountered the high cultures of Middle America in Mexico, which gave them the opportunity to acquaint themselves with this rich spiritual world and to face the great challenge of its evangelization.

a) The Friar Minor Evangelized

In reality, the first great challenge that the Friar Minor faced in his evangelization work was to penetrate and understand a culture developed in patterns totally different from his own western culture. The key to this new culture was what Brother John of Tecto in a simple but profound phrase called "the theology unknown to St. Augustine," namely, the native languages. It seems quite clear that in this way the brothers of that time continue to be models for us. Lacking the help of the sciences of ethnography and linguistics, which we enjoy, the Franciscans of Mexico in 1529 spoke Nahuatl well. It is a sort of *koine* of the peoples of Middle America. One of the friars, Peter of Gante, learned it so well that he wrote it better than his own language. Two years later another friar, possibly Louis of Fuensalida, had already reduced this language to an art entirely different in structure from Latin. So it happened that Nahuatl grammars existed many years before those of various modern languages of Europe.

With the help of such grammatical aids, good catechetical compendiums were available in less than ten years. The first ones were ingeniously written in hieroglyphic form. After that, the friars initiated an extensive course of instructions to be given after baptism as an important part of their total missionary method. Seen in the light of today's theology and read in their Spanish translations, these indigenous six-

teenth-century catechisms may seem to be extremely poor reproductions of the contemporaneous European catechisms. But when they are read in the native language as originally intended by the missionaries, they provide an astonishing insight into the native religious world of that era. They did not translate European concepts literally into the native culture. Rather, they called the Christian God *Ipalnemoani* (Giver of Life), *Atlahua* (Owner of the Valleys), or *In Tonan, in Totah* (Our Mother, Our Father). These were purely indigenous concepts. The same is to be said about calling Jesus *Temaquixtiani* (Liberator of the People). They described the Incarnation as *Oquimocuilico in tomaceualnacayo* (He Took unto Himself Our Flesh, — the flesh of the *macehuales*, "the common people"). The Redemption was *Tlatolli in nemaquixtiloni* (the Word, Which Frees the People). Rightly, then, a student of this literature who is not at all in sympathy with the Spanish colonization sees in these writings "the evangelizer evangelized" (Louise M. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*).

b) The Bridge of Comprehension

The gap between the cultural worlds of the Friar Minor and the indigenous Mexican was an abyss. It is no wonder that, especially in the first years, there were misunderstandings, opposition, and a hard fight between the elder indigenous lords (*Tlatoani*, masters of the word) and the evangelizers. Nevertheless, the religious literature of the native Christians shows us that both worlds mutually influenced each other in important ways, as the previous examples and many others yet to be studied demonstrate. Where shall we find the explanation for this fact?

One could think about the Renaissance with its openness to all human values. The first missionaries were educated in that world. However, without rejecting that fact, I believe we should follow the clues that the missionaries themselves give.

Once they began to establish a more intimate contact with the natives, the unanimous opinion among the missionaries was that never was there known a people more amenable to the Gospel message than the Indians. One might think that this is another pious exaggeration so common in the history of the missions. But the facts corroborate this judgment. Recall again the movements for the return to the primitive Franciscan ideals for which the first missionaries fought so hard in the old world, namely, the simple life, a radical stripping away of everything, and poverty, all of which played such an important role in the discussions about "the observance." Everything that was an almost unrealizable ideal in the old world became reality in the new world. Toribio de Benvente (whose name was changed to "Motolinia" [he who

is poor] because that is how he appeared to be in the eyes of the Tlaxcaltecas) wrote:

> These Indians do not have within themselves anything that might hinder them from gaining heaven, unlike the many things that we Spaniards have which are plunging us into vice. They are content in life with very little. What is more to the point, they have come to know God, and so have few impediments for following and keeping the way of life and the law of Jesus Christ. When I think about the entanglements and embarrassments of the Spaniards, I wish I had the grace to feel sorry for them, but much more do I wish I had that grace for myself in first place (*Historia de los Indios da la Nueva España*).

The natural detachment of the Indians inspired another outstanding missionary, Jerome of Mendieta, to share the following profound thought, which is worthy of mission ontology:

> If our father St. Francis lived in this world today and would see these Indians, he would be embarrassed and confounded. He would confess that [in comparison to the poverty of the Indians, his own] poverty was not his sister, and that he had nothing to be proud of with regard to his own poverty.... I'll say this — that just as there are some some people who are eager to lower and despise these Indians, I find that there are many Indians who by their works have shown an enviable scorn for the world and a desire to follow Jesus Christ with such genuine goodness of heart that I, as a poor Spaniard and Friar Minor, would have liked to enjoy what they have in following the life of the Gospel (*Historia Eclesiástica Indiana*). Thus, Gospel radicalism, as understood in the context of the sixteenth century, became a bridge that connected the Friar Minor and the native peoples of Mexico.

c) The Rebirth of the Primitive Church: The Indian Church

The Friars Minor felt this enthusiasm for the native people of Mexico, along with the age-old longing (common among the groups of reformers in the order) to purify the church by returning it to its primitive form. All of this led them to opt for the plan to establish an Indian church on the model of the primitive church. What is more, they became convinced that

they were not only modeling a church in the likeness of the primitive church but that "this Indian church is the primitive church" (Letters of the religious).

The main characteristic of this new church would be that it be a church for the poor, because the church itself is poor. The missionaries said: "This is not something new, but this is doing the same and using the same principles that the church of Christ itself used when it was first founded." According to some documents, their bishops, elected in provincial chapters, were to have neither cathedral churches nor canonries nor presbyteries, because "such things only beget expenses and provide nothing that will benefit the Indians." These bishops were to live without annuities or tithes. To those who thought that this plan

was unacceptable because it was against canon law and the traditions and customs of the church, the friars replied: "It would be harder to say that it is more practical to observe all that the sacred canons have established for the Indies, even though the natives never become good Christians, than to say that the Indians should become genuinely good Christians, even though some of the laws and decrees established by the popes have been bent" (Letters of the religious).

Someone may think that those friars were nonconformists, or that the documents had a limited scope; but that is not the case. These ideas are expressed by a broad group of friars. Some of them, like Jerome of Mendieta, enjoyed the confidence of the Royal Council for the Indies and of King Philip II himself. As a matter of fact, the greater part of these ideas were written in letters to those authorities. At the same time, we are not dealing with the beginnings of our present-day preoccupation with the poor of Latin America, as some might be tempted to think. The theological views of our brothers of the sixteenth century were very different from ours. That, however, does not detract from the importance of those early policies. What they are telling us is that the encounter with the natives of America was necessary so that the Friar Minor might be challenged in his own vocation and then in turn challenge the structures of the church, at least as they related to the native peoples. In this sense, "observance," as foreseen by the minister general Francis of the Angels Quiñones, would not be reduced to a "mere keeping of laws and ceremonies," but, as it faced the American reality, it would be converted into a bold and resourceful search for ecclesial models that would more appropriately bring the Gospel message to the new peoples.

d) The Indian Res Publica and the Spanish Res Publica:

Their Difficult Coexistence The model for an Indian church — different from the church of the old world — was the result of a Franciscan reformism enfleshed in the indigenous reality of America. This church plan, we must add, did not develop in isolation. It was enveloped in various social programs, because the friars, within the limits of their times, did not separate evangelization from social concern for the indigenous peoples to be evangelized. Of course, this topic would lend itself to a long discussion. What I want to refer to here is only one project. It is that of the Indian "res publica," which is very closely united to that of the Indian church. As such it did not remain merely a plan but it attained concrete realization in Indian society. In this plan the Friars Minor, in a certain way, tried to respond to the difficult relationship between the conquered and the conqueror.

Conquest was not an unknown event in the history of evangelization of the peoples of Europe. We must also recall that, contrary to the

general assumption, conquest was not the only means of evangelization in America. In the case of Mexico, to which we are referring here, the beginning of evangelization was connected with its conquest. Paradoxically, however, while in the estimation of the first Franciscans the conquistador Hernán Cortés was the Moses of the indigenous peoples, the other conquistadors were considered their oppressors.

This viewpoint has an explanation. The personal relationship of the first friars with Hernán Cortés was very short — at most four months. It happened in an atmosphere of patronage similar to that of the patrons of the Franciscan foundations so well known to the Observants in Extremadura. The friars encountered the harsh realities of the conquest only with the successors of Cortés, especially with those who made up the first *Audiencia*. Against these latter the friars used the pulpit and ecclesiastical penalties for their abuses against the Indians. In these circumstances arose the idea of an Indian "res publica" independent of the Spanish "res publica."

In accord with this plan, the indigenous "with their quick, nimble, and quiet understanding ... and their great ingenuity and aptitude for learning the sciences, arts and crafts" (Motolinia, *Historia*) should live in a "Christian political order," with independence from the Spanish cities, under Christian vassalage to the king, but with their own native authorities. This plan, already in the minds of the friars from their first contact with the peoples of central Mexico, was converted into a program starting with the great conversions in the 1530s. This explains their efforts in favor of higher education for the natives, on their own land, with their own teachers, which led to the founding of the Colegio de la Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco in 1536, where grammar and the arts, philosophy, medicine, and theology were taught. Indigenous governors, writers, translators, professors, and teachers graduated from this school.

Vassalage to the king, in its most pure medieval tradition, implied, among other things, the payment of tribute. The friars held the most divergent opinions about this, especially because of the close relationship between tribute and the *encomienda* (the system of patronage in vogue in the conquest). What seemed to the first friars to be the only means to maintain peace on earth in 1526 would seem to be the greatest obstacle to it a quarter century later, since they would then say, as did Peter of Gante to the emperor in 1552: "Christ our Lord did not come to shed his blood for the tributes of the Indians but for their souls." The friar Jerome of Mendieta, who probably understood the problem best, penned words about it worthy of the *Little Flowers of St. Francis*. He said that as a result of the discussions going on in Mexico about the New Laws of 1542, which practically abolished the *encomiendas*, one of the twelve first Franciscans, Francis de Soto, signed a

document in favor of them. De Soto did so more because of the pressure of the Spanish than of his own free choice. A little while later, the chronicler goes on to say:

> After thinking about it with more maturely, he began to suffer such a terrible scruple over what he had done. Unable to put up with the disquietude that it caused him, he asked that he be shown the written statement that he had signed in order to be better aware of its contents. It was shown him, and upon seeing his signature he tore up the document, put it in his mouth, and swallowed it, saying that he had been fooled. This became the occasion for a greater persecution of our brothers. In Mexico they took away from them all alms and insulted them when and wherever they saw them. When they asked for an alms of bread, some women said to them, "Now, how come, don't friars eat paper?" (Mendieta, *Historia Eclesiastica Indiana*).

6. Evangelization Projects: Successes and Failures.

Evidently these topics could fill pages and more pages. But we do not want merely to pile up data. Two projects of Franciscan evangelization in Mexico have been mentioned here for the purpose of finding in them signs of the Friar Minor's spirituality becoming reality in his contact with the peoples of America. Of course, these are not the only projects, even though they may be the most notable ones because of the paths they open up to others. I believe, however, that it is necessary not only to mention them but to try for a certain balance; not in an attempt to recount losses and gains, but in a plan of reflection, which, as was stated in the beginning of this talk, would help us understand what the Friars Minor brought to the evangelization of our peoples.

a) Indian Christianity

The beginning of the sixteenth century witnessed feverish activity, both ecclesial and social, under the egis of the Friars Minor. Programs were initiated to gather dispersed native populations into pueblos. Intense catechetical efforts were undertaken. Necessary public works and urban services were provided for the newly-founded pueblos. Monumental churches and convents were constructed. It seemed like the church and the Indian res publica were becoming reality.

Part of the success of these programs was due, no doubt, to the support of the first viceroys, Anthony of Mendoza and Louis of Velasco. However, one must not forget the enormous contribution of the natives, and the openness of the friars, to include into the new Christian pueblos significant elements of the pre-hispanic organization, such as the social hierarchy, the system of land ownership, and the organization of work. Furthermore, notwithstanding the decrees of the Mexican Councils, the Friars Minor spontaneously accepted into their churches modalities of the ancient religion, such as symbols, chants, and dances.

These practices will subsequently provoke serious controversies over the conversion of the natives, as we shall see later.

Paradoxically, it is also in the second half of the sixteenth century that the Friars Minor saw their great ideals begin to come tumbling down. Their failure was not caused by the events of the first half of the century, but by the changes that took place in the second half. The testimony of the friars is very interesting, because they offer us a version very different from the one we generally hear about the obstacles to the development of the new indigenous society.

b) Changes in Colonial Society.

The second half of the sixteenth century brought to Mexico serious readjustments in colonial society which would cause the collapse of a great part of the idealistic programs that the friars had for a native society. A new concept and organization of the colonial government, more centralized for both civil and ecclesiastical affairs, was vigorously promoted by the administrative efficiency of Philip II and the Council of Trent, which rendered almost impossible the development of an Indian res

publica and an Indian church under the protection of the friars. Then too, in the 1540s, that same society, which was just beginning to raise itself up after the trauma of its defeat, saw itself crushed by various epidemics that reduced by half the population of the high plateau of Mexico. As if that were not enough, this same period was witness to the appearance of a new element in the society, namely, the "Creole." Spaniards born in America, they immediately absorbed the human and material resources that were once the proprietary right of the natives. The economic and social disruption that these changes produced in the colonial world are witnessed to by the tenacious disputes between religious, governors and colonizers, all of whom tried to impose their own plans on the indigenous society that was gradually decreasing.

In trying to capture the religious sense of these discussions, at least as a Friar Minor would perceive them, we can single out two great enemies of the Franciscan projects of the sixteenth century, namely, Indian idolatry, and idolatry of the Christians.

c) Indian Idolatry

The plan for the Indian res publica relied on the implantation of Christianity and the disappearance of idolatry. In the first half of the sixteenth century great determination and effort were put forth to attain both objectives. The external fruits of those works were beginning to be seen, namely, the new pueblos, the great number of natives under catechetical instruction, and the sacramental life. Some of the more discerning friars, however, became aware that all was not going

well. The friar Bernardine of Sahagún, possibly one of the more expert in the Nahuatl culture, wrote:

> The first evangelizers in their preaching did not forget the admonition that the Redeemer gave to His disciples and apostles when He said: "Be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves..." Although they proceeded honorably in regard to the second part, they failed regarding the first... We were all told ... that this people had truly come to the faith, that they were almost all baptized, and so firm in the Catholic Faith of the Roman Church that there was no need to preach against idolatry. We took this information to be completely true and miraculous... After a few years we found that most evidently the shrewdness of the serpent had been overlooked in the foundation of the church, because the conspiracy between the native rulers and the native priests to receive Jesus Christ among their gods was not recognized.... (*Historia de las cosas de la Nueva España*).

The "conspiracy" of the rulers and priests made the conversion of the natives doubtful. So it was necessary to put an end to everything idolatrous. According to the theological view of the time, that destruction was not looked upon as a negative. The Friars Minor were convinced, as we see repeatedly in various documents, that the native religions were "the work of the devil," which enslaved a people who "by nature" were good people. In other words, the only thing to remove from the natives was something accidental, that is, the idolatrous, in order to obtain not merely a good Christian, but the best Christian that might exist on earth. A few years later the friars became aware of their erroneous judgment. Around the indigenous religion, which was nothing accidental but very substantial, was built a system of values which disappeared along with it, and which the friars found very difficult to reestablish. The Friars Minor became aware of that, and to their credit, they were the first to recognize their failure. Sahagún writes:

> It was necessary to destroy everyting idolatrous: all the idolatrous buildings, all the customs of the government that were intermixed with idolatrous rites and accompanied with idolatrous ceremonies, all of which was true of almost all the customs by which the government ruled. That is why it was necessary to destroy everything and to replace it with a new political order that would have no tinge of idolatry... It is to our great shame that the Indians themselves — natives [*indios naturales*] who are responsible and wise — knew how to remedy the damage that this earth inflicts on its inhabitants.... If their system of government had not been so infected with idolatrous rites and superstition, it seems to me that it would have been very good. Freed of all its idolatry and made entirely Christian, its introduction into the Indian and Spanish governments would surely have been very beneficial. It would have been an occasion of freedom for both governments, and would delivered those who were in power from the catastrophies and all-consuming work that ensued (*Historia de las cosas de la Nueva España*).

For their time, the Friars Minor demonstrated a great valor and acuteness of perception in recognizing that the Mexicans' ancient way

of ruling, even though replete with "idolatrous rites and superstitions," was a better way of governing than the Christian way which they were imposing.

d) Idolatry of the Christians

The Friars Minor of that period saw another idolatry as dangerous as the one already considered, if not more so, because, notwithstanding their dedicated fight against it, it was beyond their control. It was the pursuit of riches, which in the words of Mendieta, grew in the second half of the sixteenth century into "the great evil, the evil of evils" and the "wild beast that devastated and exterminated the vineyard, demanding (like the beast of the Apocalypse) to be adored as the queen of the universe."

Innumerable official remonstrances reached the Council for the Indies, opposing the economic policies initiated at the beginning of the reign of Philip II for his dominions across the sea. No complaints were as vigorous as those coming from the Franciscans in Mexico. Some of their protests were so radical that they led to the punishment of their authors by the courts, as was the case with the friar Alonso de Maldonado. The criticism leveled by the friars was more severe, because they saw in the new policies the abandonment and destruction of their entire mission plan for the Indians. Riches, which were already considered despicable in themselves by the friars of the Observance, were turned into "the worst of beasts," the destroyer of the fruits of the Indian church and the prosperity of the Indians' res publica. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, Mendieta describes this destruction in the following way:

Would that you could have seen (as I have seen) the roads of this New Spain swarming with people like ant hills.... [I have seen] all the cities and civil officials with an entourage of venerable old chiefs who functioned like Roman senators. [I saw] the patios of churches that were not big enough to accommodate the throngs that flocked there even before dawn especially on feast days.... Would that you could see in the cities and towns what we now see as a result of our sins. There are neither Indian chiefs nor nobles. Their ancient palaces are in ruins.... The roads and streets are deserted... The churches are empty (*Historia Eclesiastica Indiana*).

Mendieta refers in particular to the system of "partition" (imposed but remunerated labor), which he and the majority of Friars Minor considered most damaging to Christianity. He gives the following reflection, seldom cited, but undoubtedly one of the most courageous statements in our missionary history:

> If we were the Indians and they were us, what might we have done and what might we have said? What would have been our thoughts if they had

laid this partitioning on us? I think we would have made a speech something like this: "What kind of law is this that these men preach to us by their words, and then teach to us by their deeds? By what good law is it established that we, who are the natural citizens of this land, should have to serve them by force? They are the immigrants whom we did not offend, but they have offended us. For what reason and by what law do they make us their slaves — we who have accepted without opposition the law that they profess — instead of showing us endearment and giving us gifts (as they say the Moors do with the Christians whom they receive into their religion)? Isn't the service that they impose on us nothing else than enslavement? By what good law and by what good reason do they usurp our lands (which belonged to our fathers and grandfathers) and compel us to work and cultivate these lands for them?" After asking all these questions, they would conclude by saying: "If no reasonable and just law can establish any of these things which we have asked, and yet all of them are in accord with the law of the Christians, then their law is the worst law in the world and worthy only of being abhorred" (*Historia Eclesiastica Indiana*).

Final Reflection

The friar Jerome of Mendieta was witness to two singular stages in the evangelization of Mexico. The first, which he calls the golden period, began with the arrival of the twelve first missionaries and ended with the death of the viceroy Louis of Velasco. The second, which he calls the fall and crumbling of the Indian church, begins with the implanting of the administrative policies of Philip II and ends toward the close of the sixteenth century. His radicalism, which according to some research scholars borders on the apocalyptic, did not allow him to recognize a third stage, which was the last one, in which he lived. It is the stage in which a semi-rural or semi-indigenous society began to appear, in which a central core of the majority of the Mexican people arose and grew until well into the nineteenth century. It is the stage in which the evangelizing activity of the Friars Minor continued to play an important role. As a matter of fact, even today traces of the heritage of Franciscan spirituality can be found in the popular religiosity. However, let us return to the reflections of Mendieta. There can be no doubt that he, together with the other missionaries of his time, like Bernardine of Sahagún, gives us some idea of the anxieties, struggles, successes and errors of the Friars Minor in their evangelizing activities.

At a distance of almost five centuries, should we view the missionary work of our brothers of the sixteenth century with the same pessimism as did Mendieta? Many think we should. Some go so far as to hold the opinion that a great part of those brothers' work gave a negative witness to the Gospel. I would say that certainly it was not a perfect job; but our brothers never thought that it was. They labored as the humble, perhaps somewhat confused, originators of a long process of practi-

cal evangelization in which we are still involved. It would be foolish to deny that various errors were committed in their activity, just as it would be foolish to deny mistakes in our own. But it would be unjust to forget that those brothers had left all in radical Gospel abandonment to surrender themselves and their lives completely and entirely to the work of evangelization. The indigenous peoples themselves saw it that way and have given testimony to it in their literature. They wrote this poem to honor one of the brothers, Peter of Gante, at his death in 1572:

In tlapalomoxtli moyollo
tipalapetolo, in quexquich mocuic,
in toconchuilia Jesucristo,
Zan tocontlayehuecalhui in San Palacisco ya,
ye nemico tlalpictac.
A o anqui yanella nomache,
maya pahpaquihuah
ma ie momalina tlayoli
tectlamacehui
on anqui ye tozcacauhtzin San Palacizco.

Libro de colores es tu corazón
tú, padre Pedro, los quen son tus cantos,
que a Jesucristo entonamos,
tú los haces llegar a San Francisco
el que vino a vivir en la tierra.
Así en verdad él es mi ejemplo,
alegraos
que se entreteja nuestra dicha;
por nosotros haec merecimiento
quien lleva un collar de plumas,
San Francisco
(cantares mexicanos).

Book of paintings — manuscript filled with wisdom — is the heart of brother Peter. Collar of fine feathers — sign of high indigenous dignity — adorns St. Francis. The conquered enriched their own vision of the realities of their times through the presence of the faces and hearts of those who came, the *motoliniahnih*, the truly poor, but masters of great wisdom (Miguel León-Portilla, *Los franciscanos visos por el hombre nahuatl [The Franciscans As Seen by the Nahuatl People]*).

The evangelization of America today still needs these *motoliniahnih*. From them we can learn the true connection between our work of evangelization, the Franciscan charism, and the people to be evangelized. The original ideal of our brothers to have an Indian church is still a challenge in our times. What greater opportunity than the present to face that ancient challenge with intelligence and courage!