For the Good of Their Souls: Sacred Justification for Colonial Violence in Mexico

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During the fifteenth century, the Spanish conquistadors conquered Central Mexico and West Mexico. In the second letter to Emperor Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, Hernán Cortés described the conquest of the Mexica. They replaced the Indigenous idols like Huitzilopochtli with Catholic symbols of the Saints and the Virgin Mary and burned down temples.[1] This violence and destruction were sanctioned by the Spanish Crown and backed by the Roman Catholic Church. The Catholic Church and Spanish Crown presented this as a civilizing mission, but they stood aside and justified the violence done to the Mexica in Central Mexico and the Indigenous groups in West Mexico.[2] Consequently, the Church became a symbol and tool for religious and colonial power.

This article will examine how colonial institutions maintained their authority over Indigenous people by forcing conversion and suppressing spiritual practices throughout Central and West Mexico. Religion became a tool to reshape Indigenous populations and sustain Spanish authority. During the fifteenth century, the Spanish Crown used the Roman Catholic Church as a colonial institution of control throughout Central and West Mexico by utilizing religious ideology as a means for forced conversion, violence, and justification of enslavement. This was done using three strategies: destroying Indigenous sacred places, suppressing spiritual practices, and clerical enforcement.

The primary sources used for this research include a collection of letters, government documents, and first-hand accounts from both Spaniards and Natives from the regions in Mexico.

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[1] Oliver J. Thatcher, ed., *The Library of Original Sources*, vol. 5, 9th to 16th Centuries (Milwaukee: University Research Extension Co., 1907), 319.

[2] "Requerimiento," in *The Schlager Anthology of Hispanic America: A Student's Guide to Essential Primary Sources* (2023), 1.

They were all written in the fifteenth to early sixteenth century and include friars, conquistadors, Indigenous people, and Spanish captains to give a well-rounded understanding of the events. The *Requerimento* by the Spanish Crown, Nuño de Guzmán's letter to the king of Spain, and Hernán Cortés' second letter to Emperor Charles V bestow evidence of religious justification for the violence and force used during both conquests. Cristobal Flores' account on Nuño de Guzmán's campaign in West Mexico, book twelve of the *Florentine Codex* titled "The Conquest of the Mexica", and the chapter "New Spain, Panuco and Jalisco" from Bartolomé de Las Casas' book *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* contribute criticism and proof of the Spanish Crown using the Roman Catholic Church as a tool for colonialization, fear, and violence. The primary sources are a vital component of the research paper because they provide understanding and context to the violence and coercion done by the Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church.

The Spanish conquest of Central Mexico is commonly known as the conquest of the Mexica. Led by Hernán Cortés, it was characterized by the destruction of temples and idols, bloody massacres, and conversion. To understand the level of disruption and destruction caused by the conquest on the lives and spiritual traditions of the Mexica, we must first look at pre-conquest Tenochitlan. The article, "Archeology and Symbolism in Aztec Mexico: The Templo Mayor of Tenochitlan," by Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, gives insight into pre-conquest society. Before the arrival of the Spanish, the region was divided into complex city-states, and there was often war for control over the valley and the resources it offered.[3] The Mexica were the last to arrive in the valley region in Central Mexico, but they eventually gained control over the region through expanding territorial influence and tribute collection.[4] Their rise to power was linked to the god

[3] Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, "Archaeology & Symbolism in Aztec Mexico: The Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53, no. 4 (1985): 797-813, 802.

[4] Matos Moctezuma, "Archaeology & Symbolism," 809.

Huitzilopochtli, a god represented by conquest, strength, and war.[5] Spiritualism played an important part in everyday life for the Mexica; they built two shrines for the God of Water and the God of War.[6] The shrines, or Templos, represented sacred mountains, and the higher the level, the closer to Omeyocan, the source of creation, they were.[7] Spiritual practices were integrated into the governing classes and were taught alongside art, philosophy, and ideology.[8] Religion and economy were interconnected in pre-conquest Central Mexico; the gods and deities reflected the need for agricultural production, water, and tribute through conquest.[9] Thus, making the Great Temple and its Gods central to economic power, political power, and spiritual power.

When the Spanish arrived in the capital, there was no immediate war; instead, festivities were held to showcase their spiritual practices to the Spanish. There was a festivity held for Huitzilopochtli, but that soon turned into a massacre as Spaniards began to cut the heads off musicians and kill villagers in the square.[10] Hernán Cortés described in his second letter to the Holy Roman Emperor how he attempted to convert the Indigenous populations by destroying temples and idols.[11] They protested the replacement of their idols with the Virgin Mary and other Christian images.[12] The Indigenous population expressed how they feared that if the idols were destroyed, they had lost the gifts bestowed upon them.[13] Eventually, Moctezuma and the other citizens accepted the replacement, and they were ordered by Cortés to stop all human sacrifices and all spiritual practices.[14] With the order of their daily lives and spiritual lives destroyed and

[5] Matos Moctezuma, "Archaeology & Symbolism," 800.
[6] Matos Moctezuma, "Archaeology & Symbolism," 812
[7] Matos Moctezuma, "Archaeology & Symbolism," 813
[8] Matos Moctezuma, "Archaeology & Symbolism," 800.
[9] Matos Moctezuma, "Archaeology & Symbolism," 800.
[10] Bernardino de Sahagún and Arthur J. O. Anderson, *Florentine Codex: Book 12: The Conquest of Mexico* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2012) 32v.
[11] Thatcher, *Library of Original Sources*, 319.
[12] Thatcher, *Library of Original Sources*, 319.
[13] Thatcher, *Library of Original Sources*, 319.
[14] Thatcher, *Library of Original Sources*, 319.

disrupted, they had no choice but to convert to Christianity. Patricia Lopes Don's article titled "Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers, and the Inquisition in New Spain, 1536-1543" examines how the spiritual practices and idol worship of the Mexica had to be done in secret. This led to an informal inquisition called the Indian Inquisition that took place from 1536 to 1543.[15] Bishop Fray Juan de Zumarraga established an Episcopal Inquisition in Mexico City and held nineteen trials for religious crimes against native leaders. Native leaders suffered from a range of punishments from flogging to jailing and even burning at the stake.[16] The outcome of this informal inquisition was disastrous for the relationship between the Indigenous population and the Spanish Crown, making it Spanish authorities undermined the bishop's campaign and eventually removed Zumarraga's inquisitorial powers.[17] Before the conquest, the Mexica had their culture, but the Spanish were not accustomed to their practices and thought of them originating from the devil. This was met with violence and forced conversion. The Indian Inquisition, although short-lived, went on to serve as an example of what can happen to those who did not conform to Spanish Catholic ideals.

The conquest of West Mexico took three entradas, including the Mixton War to succeed, and throughout those years, the Spanish Conquistadors used religious rhetoric to justify their violence and the informal inquisition in Michoacan. Nuño De Guzmán is the focus of this paper because he arguably had the most effect on the region of West Mexico, and his campaign can be found as a contributing factor in the Mixton Rebellion. Guzmán launched his initial entrada into New Galicia in the 1530s.[18] He had conquered regions like Colima and Michoacan through brutal force and violence. He had used the Cazonci, the leader in Michoacan, as a bargaining chip to

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[15] Patricia Lopes Don, "Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers, and the Inquisition in New Spain, 1536–1543," *Journal of World History* 17, no. 1 (2006): 27–49, 27.

[16] Don, "Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers," 27.

[17] Don, "Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers," 49.

[18] Ida Altman, *The War for Mexico's West: Indians and Spaniards in New Galicia, 1524–1550* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2010), 4.

exploit tribute from the population in Michoacan and then ended up executing him after gaining control over that territory.[19] His entrance was infamously known for its slaving extraction. He carried out multiple slaving campaigns to acquire the necessary free labor needed for generating resources in the mines.[20] The Spanish settlers in Central Mexico and West Mexico often supported these slavery campaigns and saw it as a necessary act to improve their economic situation.[21] His captains also shared the same desire for violence during the entrada and at one point even killed approximately 130 locals in one pueblo.[22] Guzmán ordered for entire pueblos to be burned down and attacks on the local communities if they did not give tribute.[23] He also used humiliation to spread doubt on lords and religious leaders by making them perform menial labor and physically abusing them. This was done to empower the Spanish Crown's claim to the land and the Roman Catholic Church's authority.[24] The Mixton War began in 1540 and ended in 1541 while Guzmán was still in the territory of New Galicia .[25] It was a large-scale Indigenous rebellion for liberation from Spanish colonial rule.[26] The main causes of the Mixton War were the ethnic tensions, seizing and killing local Indigenous leadership, enslavement, and the destruction of the pueblos.[27] He eventually left New Galicia in 1542 after establishing some ecomendias and other Spanish governing structures that did not fare too well.[28] Guzmán was tried for his excess in violence and was sentenced to spend a year and a half in Mexico City's jail. He also lost all the potential rewards of a noble title and the encomiendas.[29] His departure and imprisonment did not mean the end of

[19] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 28-34.
[20] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 96.
[21] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 43.
[22] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 40.
[23] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 43.
[24] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 32.
[25] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 140.
[26] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 140.
[27] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 34, 96, 216.
[28] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 55, 59.
[29] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 56.

violence for Indigenous people in West Mexico; religious persecution in the shape of an unofficial inquisition came to Michoacan. The Indian Inquisition was informal and served as a precursor for the official Inquisition that had come to New Spain in the later fifteenth century. It was led by Bishop Vasco de Quiroga, who sought to test conversions and suppress Indigenous spiritual practices.[30]

Extensive research was done by historians on how the Catholic Church was used as a tool for colonial power in Central and West Mexico. Researchers focused on the role conversion played, violence, and the suppression of Indigenous practices. Ida Altman is a leading force in the research of West Mexico, and her book, *The War for Mexico's West: Indians and Spaniards in New Galicia, 1524-1550*, tackles the history of violence that came with every entrada and how it led to the Mixton War. Altman mentions how missionaries and the conquistadors often collaborated to establish control over newly acquired pueblos and how they were complicit in the violence. Richard Greenleaf's chapter titled "The Inquisition in Michoacan" explains how the court system was set up to instill fear through trials and punishments. This was done to enforce conformity to Catholic norms and suppress Indigenous practices. "Producing Idols" by Byron Elliswoth Hamann investigates the destruction of idols in early colonial Mexico and how they were replaced by Catholic iconography. These are a handful of the historians who illustrate for us how the Catholic Church is complicit in the violence, colonial dominance, and spiritual erasure of Indigenous people.

Altman's book examines the Spanish conquest of West Mexico and how it is characterized by violent strategies such as seizing rulers, enslaving the Indigenous population, and the destruction of Indigenous life. Jose Francisco Gutierrez explores the religious and cultural

[30] Richard E. Greenleaf, "The Inquisition in Michoacán, 1536–1537," in *The Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), 46.

dynamics of Guzmán's reign in Nueva Galicia and explains the long-term consequences of it. Chapter two of *The War for Mexico's West: Indians and Spaniards in New Galicia, 1524-1550,* goes into Nuño de Guzmán's entrada into Nueva Galicia. Altman characterizes Guzmán's campaign as brutal and insecure and was a direct reflection of its leader.[31] He was able to establish a Spanish presence in the region, but due to the atrocities he committed, it was not a secure hold over the region.[32] Guzmán wrote to the Spanish king about his efforts to initiate peaceful contacts and to bring Christianity to the people he tried to subjugate but also described how he disciplined them in brutal ways.[33] The disciplinary actions that he took in the name of Christianity and the Spanish Crown were the enslavement of men, women, and children.[34] He even executed the native ruler of Michoacan, which led to more disruption, violence, and flight from the Indigenous populations in West Mexico.[35] The long-term consequences of Guzmán's actions were widespread disruption in the Indigenous lifestyle; he caused significant dislocation due to the violence he inflicted in the region.[36] His own violence led to his downfall; many critics, like Bartolomé de las Casas and other Spanish authorities, led him to be investigated, and he lost all his rewards and high political office.[37] Gutierrez examines the Indigenous resistance in Nueva Galicia during Guzmán's campaign and governing.[38] Gutierrez delves deeper into the religious aspects of the conquest of West Mexico and how the suppression of religious practices prompted rebellion. He also touched on the Mixton War that took place from 1540 to 1542, as a rebellion that sought to revitalize the

[31] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 25.
[32] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 25.
[33] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 23.
[34] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 59.
[35] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 59.
[36] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 19.
[37] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 56.
[38] José Francisco Román Gutiérrez, "Indigenous Space and Frontier in Sixteenth-Century Nueva Galicia," in *From Tribute to Communal Sovereignty*, ed. Julie Adkins, Robert V. Kemper, and Andrew Roth-Seneff (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 145.

cultural and spiritual identities of the Indigenous population.[39] The Indigenous population rejected Christianity and conversion and sought to preserve their traditional religious practices.[40] For example, they rejected Christian baptism and made a mockery of it by coloring their hair and faces with black ash.[41] He argues that the war and other small rebellions that came before it did not just come from resistance to forced labor and territorial occupation but also from forced conversion and as an effort to revitalize tradition.[42] Altman also touches on this subject, although it is not directly mentioned to Guzmán, it can be linked to his past campaigns and efforts to convert. Altman mentioned how the Tezoles did not respond well to the Spanish conversion and rejected Christianity. This rejection provided the Spanish with additional justification to make war on the Indigenous population.[43] The clergy were brought in, and they were essential to resettle and pacify the Indigenous populations.[44]

Greenleaf and Warren both researched how religion changed in Michoacan and the role that the Roman Catholic Church had in the change. Warren's chapter titled "Christian Beginnings in Michoacan" focused on the proselytizing during the conquest of Michoacan.[45] Warren discusses how the arrival of the Spanish was characterized by the destruction of idols and idol offerings, signaling the violence to come.[46] The Spanish publicly burned native religious artifacts and forced the natives to watch.[47] This was used as a fear tactic, and friars taught that the first duties of the natives were to detest the adoration of idols, destroy their temples, and cleanse themselves by

[39] Román Gutiérrez, "Indigenous Space and Frontier," 153.
[40] Román Gutiérrez, "Indigenous Space and Frontier," 154, 160.
[41] Román Gutiérrez, "Indigenous Space and Frontier," 157.
[42] Román Gutiérrez, "Indigenous Space and Frontier," 160.
[43] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 206.
[44] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 192.
[45] Benedict J. Warren, "Christian Beginnings in Michoacán," in *The Conquest of Michoacán: The Spanish Domination of the Tarascan Kingdom in Western Mexico, 1521–1530*, 1st ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 81.
[46] Warren, "Christian Beginnings in Michoacán," 82.
[47] Warren, "Christian Beginnings in Michoacán," 96.

baptism.[48] The friars then coerced the natives to attend mass, and if they did not, they were subjected to whippings and other maltreatment.[49] This violence and coercion led the natives to retreat into the mountains and practice their spiritual practices in secret.[50] This insistence on keeping their traditional spiritual practices alive made them difficult to fully convert. This is similar to the rejection of Christianity mentioned in Altman's book; in both instances, the natives fled their pueblos and took refuge from the violence in the wilderness.[51]

The continued practice of idolatry proved to be a threat to the Spanish authority and the authority of the Church, and as we see in Greenleaf's chapter titled "The Inquisition in Michoacán, 1536–1537" it led to the unofficial inquisition.[52] The inquisition was led by Bishop Vasco de Quiroga during the fifteen century, and its purpose was to protect the spiritual purity of the natives and punish those who threatened to subvert the Christian faith.[53] The violence was framed as a necessary step to eradicate the remnants of idolatry from Michoacan.[54] The trials ordered the burning of idols and the punishment of those who were keeping them.[55] The punishments were often public humiliation rituals or corporal penalties, but the most common punishment were public whippings.[56] These punishments were public to demonstrate the consequences if the natives chose to resist Christianity, and the Church used whatever force was required to ensure obedience from the natives.[57] Their justification for all the coercion, imprisonment, and corporal punishment was that the former religion of the natives was "works of the devil" and their influences must be

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[48] Warren, "Christian Beginnings in Michoacán," 92.
[49] Warren, "Christian Beginnings in Michoacán," 100-101.
[50] Warren, "Christian Beginnings in Michoacán," 101.
[51] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 154.
[52] Richard E. Greenleaf, "The Inquisition in Michoacán, 1536–1537," in *The Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1969), 45.
[53] Greenleaf, "The Inquisition in Michoacán," 45.
[54] Greenleaf, "The Inquisition in Michoacán," 46.
[55] Greenleaf, "The Inquisition in Michoacán," 55.
[56] Greenleaf, "The Inquisition in Michoacán," 61.
[57] Greenleaf, "The Inquisition in Michoacán," 63.

eradicated for the salvation of their souls, once again framing their mission as one of salvation.[58] The same themes of religious rhetoric and justification can be seen in the Indian Inquisition in Central Mexico.

In "Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers, and the Inquisition in New Spain, 1536-1543", Patricia Lopes Don focuses on the Indian Inquisition in Mexico City and adds to the discussion of religious violations on the Indigenous communities and their mark on the Indigenous population.[59] In 1536, Bishop Fray Juan de Zumarraga established the Episcopal Inquisition in Mexico City. Zumarraga and the Franciscans argued that the Indigenous population needed aggressive religious enforcement and conducted nineteen trials. Those trials ended with punishments ranging from whippings and imprisonment to execution.[60] The Indian Inquisition aimed to combat what the Franciscans believed to be pagan practices and religious recidivism.[61] They wanted to enforce conversion and believed that sending noble sons to convents and destroying Indigenous religious artifacts were not enough; they needed corporal punishment.[62] The notable case that Don discusses in detail is the case of Martin Ocelotl, a self-proclaimed shaman and prominent Indigenous figure at that time.[63] The friars saw his practices as a potential threat to their Christian civilizing mission, and Fray Antonio de Ciudad Rodrigo charged him with paganism.[64] Throughout the trial, Ocelotl challenged Christian teachings and asserted himself as an alternative spiritual leader; this resonated with the discontent that the Indigenous community felt and became a threat.[65] His trial was swift and ended with Ocelotl being convicted of sorcery, paganism, and challenging Christian teachings,

[58] Greenleaf, "The Inquisition in Michoacán," 72.
[59] Don, "Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers," 27.
[60] Don, "Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers," 27.
[61] Don, "Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers," 31.
[62] Don, "Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers," 31.
[63] Don, "Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers," 39.
[64] Don, "Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers," 35.
[65] Don, "Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers," 47.

and ultimately, he was executed by the Inquisition.[66] The execution of Martin Ocelotl and of another prominent Indigenous figure, Don Carlos of Texcoco, caused civil unrest in the Indigenous population, and the Council of the Indies was forced to reprimand Zumarraga and remove his inquisitorial powers.[67] The Indian Inquisition was short-lived, but it left long-term effects on the native population in Central Mexico. Many stopped practicing their spiritual practices altogether in fear that they might be punished. By the 1540s, the Spanish government realized that using the Inquisition on new converts and the Indigenous population caused more resentment and was dangerous for colonial security.[68] This realization ended the Indian Inquisition, but clerical violence was still present and did not disappear altogether.

Henry Kamen's article, "Clerical Violence in a Catholic Society: The Hispanic World 1450-1720", examines how missionaries are agents of colonial power, and they participated in violence during the colonization of the Indies. Although his article focuses on the whole of New Spain, it highlights evidence of the Catholic Church's violations of Indigenous populations during colonization. Kamen argues that the Church viewed violence as "a normal and logical relationship between the Church and society" because natives were believed to be incapable of being fully rational.[69] The missionaries claimed that violence was a disciplinary tool that was traditional to the Indigenous population but ignored the fact that it had already been a precedent in the conquest.[70] Bernardino de Sahgun, a friar in Mexico, roused up the natives at night and beat them "towards heaven by blows".[71] Acts like these were common and were approved by the church because they believed the faith must be preached, and if force was necessary, then those steps must

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[66] Don, "Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers," 36.
[67] Don, "Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers," 49.
[68] Don, "Franciscans, Indian Sorcerers," 28.
[69] Henry Kamen, "Clerical Violence in a Catholic Society: The Hispanic World 1450–1720," *Studies in Church History* 20 (1983): 201–16, 201, 209.
[70] Kamen, "Clerical Violence," 209.
[71] Kamen, "Clerical Violence," 209.

be taken.[72] Kamen mentions that in Michoacan, the clergy were in a quarrel with the clergy of New Galicia in 1550, and they armed the Indigenous population and force them to kidnap other priests and ransack and destroy churches. They used the Indigenous populations as personal troops to spread even more violence and destruction.[73] The use of violence and force by the clergy helped to support the racial and religious superiority systems imposed by the Spaniards. As a result, the Indigenous populations were believed to be people without rationality, and this was used to excuse the arrogance and violence of the clergy.[74]

This collection of letters, government documents, and personal accounts from Central and West Mexico illustrates the violence Indigenous populations endured during the conquest of the Mexica and West Mexico. It also gives insight into the justification used for the use of brutal force and forced conversion. The Requerimiento of 1510 was an official government document that was made to assert the authority of the Spanish Crown and the Roman Catholic Church over colonized land and highlights the justification for the use of force.[75] As stated in the introduction, Hernán Cortés' letter to the Holy Roman Emperor provided not only justification but also the atrocities committed against the Mexica in the name of God and the mission to civilize the Mexica.[76] There were also voices of protest against the excess of colonization, like Bartolomé de las Casas. He was a Franciscan friar who wrote *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* to protest the violence in the colonization of the Americas.[77] These sources demonstrate the atrocities committed in the name of the Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church. Some of them served as self-justification, and others served as criticism of the excess of violence.

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[72] Kamen, "Clerical Violence," 208.
[73] Kamen, "Clerical Violence," 208.
[74] Kamen, "Clerical Violence," 209-210.
[75] "Requerimiento," 1.
[76] Thatcher, *Library of Original Sources*, 319.
[77] Bartolomé de las Casas, "New Spain, Pánuco and Jalisco," in *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, ed. and trans. Nigel Griffin (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), xiii.

The conquest of Mexico did not occur as one united campaign, but it unfolded under a series of events and campaigns. West Mexico included various campaigns that led to the Mixton War and violence. The one thing that did unite all these campaigns was the requirement to recite the Requerimiento when entering a new pueblo. The Requerimiento was written in 1510 by the council of Castile and served as justification for Spaniards to assert their authority with the permission of the Spanish Crown and the Roman Catholic Pope.[78] The language used in the document shows the use of religious rhetoric like "the Lord, Our God, Living and Eternal"[79] It is used to assert their religious justification for global authority by claiming that the ruler and superior of the whole world is the Pope and it is proclaimed by God that all should obey him.[80] To obey him, those in the region must receive priests in goodwill and let them preach and teach the Holy Faith.[81] They must also accept and serve their Highnesses as lords and kings.[82] The latter half of the document goes into what should happen if those who are conquered do not obey without any resistance. The consequences for resisting were war, violence, and enslavement.[83] The document also made sure to mention that the Spanish Crown "protest the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault" to rid themselves of any accountability but ignores the fact that it was read in Spanish, a language unknown to the indigenous populations.[84] The Spanish Crown made it clear that they are supported by the Holy Roman Pope and thus ties the Catholic Church to the conquest and violence that occurs during it. It justified the acts of enslavement of women and children, war, death, theft of goods, and damage to pueblos as an assertion of religious and political

[78] "Requerimiento," 1.
[79] "Requerimiento," 1.
[80] "Requerimiento," 1.
[81] "Requerimiento," 2.
[82] "Requerimiento," 2.
[83] "Requerimiento," 2.
[84] "Requerimiento," 2.

authority. It also served as a warning to the Indigenous population as to what happened if they did not obey the Roman Catholic Church and the Spanish Crown.

These threats of the Requerimiento come into fruition in book twelve of the *Florentine Codex*. *The Florentine Codex* is a manuscript created by the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagun and a group of Nahua authors, elders, and artists.[85] The codex is divided into twelve books, and book twelve is solely on the Conquest of the Mexica. It was completed in 1977 in Tlatelolco, present-day Mexico City. The codex adds the Nahua's voice into the perception of the conquest and gives us important Indigenous insight into the violence they endured. Chapters nineteen and twenty discuss a portion of these atrocities. It depicts the massacre that occurred during the festivities for Huitzilopochtli, the god of war. The Spaniards had asked Moctezuma to sit in for the festivities as they were curious to see what it included.[86] The people played music and did their spiritual snake dances in horror of the god of war and made a statue in his image.[87] Then the Spanish soldiers, with their Indigenous allies the Tlaxcalans, blocked the exit gates and began the massacre. One Nahua author described the violence as "blood ran through the square…heads were cut off, and the hands were cut off the musicians.".[88] The Spaniards also destroyed the shrine dedicated to Huitzilopochtli during the massacre to destroy the devil[89] It does not make mention of a reason for all the bloodshed, but chapters thirty-eight through forty do make mention of temples being destroyed and idols being torn down and burned in houses. Once the Spaniards gained control over Tlatelolco, they burned down houses and sacred temples in their search for gold .[90] The Mexica warriors tried their best to stop the Spaniards, but they kept burning

[85] Getty Research Institute, *Digital Florentine Codex / Códice Florentino Digital*, ed. Kim N. Richter and Alicia Maria Houtrouw, accessed November 18, 2025, https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/

[86] Sahagún and Anderson, *Florentine Codex, Book 12*, 29v.

[87] Sahagún and Anderson, *Florentine Codex, Book 12*, 30v-32r.

[88] Sahagún and Anderson, *Florentine Codex, Book 12*, 32v.

[89] Sahagún and Anderson, *Florentine Codex, Book 12*, 32r.

[90] Sahagún and Anderson, *Florentine Codex, Book 12*, 74v-75r.

down houses and "setting fire to images of the devil".[91] The Spaniards justified the burning of houses and the spiritual temples by claiming it to be the devil's work, and although this source is written by Nahua speakers, that same religious rhetoric can be heard throughout the book. The last chapter makes mention of the Spanish soldiers seizing sacred objects that were made of gold and forcing the leaders to give tribute and hand over all the gold. This proves that although there is religious rhetoric to justify the violence, the underlying motives for this were riches and resources.

The second letter of Hernán Cortés, which was briefly mentioned in the introduction, was written in 1520, during the conquest of the Mexica.[92] This letter was written for Emperor Charles V, and it is important to note that Cortés's goal was to look accomplished in the eyes of the Crown. He describes his observations of Tenochtitlán and interactions with Moctezuma.[93] It provided a first-hand account, but most importantly, it provides insight into how the Spanish conquistador viewed the Mexica and their practices. His cultural observations were contradictory; he described the Mexica as a sophisticated society with advanced organizational and architectural achievements, but they were also barbarous when it came to their spiritual practices.[94] He expressed that the Indigenous people needed godly intervention due to their practices and the idols that were made of seeds, legumes, and human blood.[95] He went on to explain how he replaced idols from their pedestals with images of the saints and the Virgin Mary.[96] Cortes then purified the "chapels in which they had stood, as they were polluted with human blood". Using words such as barbaric and polluted lets the reader know the degree of disgust Cortes has when it came to the religious practices of the Mexica. Cortes justified his actions and feelings by explaining to

[91] Sahagún and Anderson, *Florentine Codex, Book 12*, 76v.
[92] Thatcher, *Library of Original Sources*, 317.
[93] Thatcher, *Library of Original Sources*, 319.
[94] Thatcher, *Library of Original Sources*, 320.
[95] Thatcher, *Library of Original Sources*, 321.
[96] Thatcher, *Library of Original Sources*, 319.

Moctezuma and the inhabitants that there is only one true God and he is the universal lord of all creation.[97] Cortes then claimed that Moctezuma and the people believed him, thinking that their long migration into Central Mexico must have led them astray, and Cortes was there to instruct them on the true faith.[98] If Moctezuma and the Mexica readily accepted this is questionable since the *Florentine Code*x shows that the Mexica distained evangelization and fought to keep not only their kingdom from the Spanish but also their religious practices. Cortés did implement a prohibition on human sacrifices and idolatry, citing the Royal Spanish law and religious abhorrence.[99] Hernán Cortés expresses through his letter his intentions to evangelize the population, planning to state, "I said everything to them I could to divert them from their idolatries and draw them to a knowledge of God our Lord".[100] He used his intention to convert the Mexica to Catholicism as an excuse to conquer them.

Another Spanish conquistador who used his religion to justify violence was Nuño de Guzmán. He was one of the most brutal conquistadors who campaigned in West Mexico and was responsible for many deaths. J.H. Parry calls him a "natural gangster as he was ambitious, ruthless, and unyielding.[101] His letter to the Spanish Crown, which was written on July 18, 1503, is a self-absorbed account of his entrada into New Galicia.[102] In this account, he used religious rhetoric to justify his excessive use of violence and destruction on the Indigenous people. The terminology used throughout the letter when he refers to the Indigenous populations of New Galicia expresses his disgust. He calls the natives "devils" and "faithless idolaters"; the use of this terminology is

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[97] Thatcher, *Library of Original Sources*, 319.
[98] Thatcher, *Library of Original Sources*, 323.
[99] Thatcher, *Library of Original Sources*, 319.
[100] Thatcher, *Library of Original Sources*, 319.
[101] Altman, *War for Mexico's West*, 38.
[102] Ida Altman, "Spaniards Conquer the West," in *Contesting Conquest: Indigenous Perspectives on the Spanish Occupation of Nueva Galicia, 1524–1545* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 50.

later used to justify his campaign.[103] He expresses his efforts in evangelizing the people in the service of God and the Spanish crown and says that when they disobey, he must punish them.[104] This is seen when he discusses his entrance to Michoacan, he claims he was forced to enslave a large number of people, burn towns, and torture leaders because of their obstinacy and idolatry. He accuses the Cazonci of Michoacan of starting a rebellion, withholding tribute, and practicing pagan rituals, and executes him.[105] This is a common theme throughout the letter; he justifies the enslavement and violence done by claiming that they are devils and need to be civilized. Like Hernán Cortés' letter, he uses religious rhetoric to appeal to the Spanish Crown and talks about the violence almost like an afterthought.

Nuño de Guzmán's atrocities in New Galicia did not go unseen; he had many critics, and two of them were Bartolomé De las Casas and Cristobal Flores. Cristobal Flores offered his account to the judges of the audiencia in Mexico and criticized him for disturbing peaceful pueblos.[106] He argued that Guzmán was too excessive with his use of force and violence, and as a result, caused many rebellions and unrest during his entrada.[107] Flores claims that Guzmán's actions violated Catholic faith teachings and that the violence inflicted upon peaceful pueblos undermined the conversion efforts.[108] He said that Guzmán "made slaves of those who received him in peace" and "Indians fled from us not because of faith, but because of our cruelty," and this is a direct contradiction to Guzmán's letter.[109] Guzmán claimed that he was forced to enslave and use violence in order to bring peace and order to New Galicia, but Flores's account proves that it was, in fact, the opposite. His entrada brought forth destruction that undermined conversion efforts

[103] Altman, "Spaniards Conquer the West," 51.
[104] Altman, "Spaniards Conquer the West," 55.
[105] Altman, "Spaniards Conquer the West," 52.
[106] Altman, "Spaniards Conquer the West," 35.
[107] Altman, "Spaniards Conquer the West," 35.
[108] Altman, "Spaniards Conquer the West," 59-62.
[109] Altman, "Spaniards Conquer the West," 62.

and colonization efforts, forcing the Indigenous population to retreat into the wilderness. Bartolomé de Las Casas had similar critiques and was very vocal about his contempt for Guzmán. He was a Franciscan friar who was famously known as the Defender and Apostle to the Indians and advocated for Indigenous rights in his book *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*. The chapter "New Spain, Panuco, and Jalisco" focuses on West Mexico and Nuño de Guzmán's campaign and the destruction he left. Las Casas calls Guzmán just another butcher who committed outrage upon outrage.[110] He scrutinizes Guzmán, saying that he saw to the depopulation of the entire province of New Galicia and branded free people as slaves to be used in mines and shipped off to slave markets.[111] He describes in detail the torture of the Cazonci, who was tied to a plank, and fire was lit under his feet, and how oil was sprinkled onto him. He goes on to describe how Guzmán sent dogs to tear him apart, and other nobles were tortured and murdered similarly.[112] He brought destruction to Jalisco and ravaged the province for gold by burning down towns, seizing lords, and enslaving the Indigenous population.[113] Bartolomé De Las Casas goes into further detail throughout this chapter about various other sexual assaults on young women, from rape to cutting off hands, and stabbing to death if the girls resisted.[114] He argues that the Spaniards claim God had sanctioned their tortures, destruction, massacres, and war, but the Indigenous population did nothing to deserve it, and as such, the Spanish are the true aggressors.[115] His account is important because he directly destroys the argument that the war was defensive and justified, using the same religious rhetoric that the Spanish used.[116] He uses scripture such as Zechariah 11:4-5, which

[110] Las Casas, "New Spain, Pánuco and Jalisco," 65.
[111] Las Casas, "New Spain, Pánuco and Jalisco," 65.
[112] Las Casas, "New Spain, Pánuco and Jalisco," 66.
[113] Las Casas, "New Spain, Pánuco and Jalisco," 67-68.
[114] Las Casas, "New Spain, Pánuco and Jalisco," 68.
[115] Las Casas, "New Spain, Pánuco and Jalisco," 69.
[116] Las Casas, "New Spain, Pánuco and Jalisco," 69.

proves that their justification is false and it is condemned by God, not sanctioned by God.[117] The Spanish had abandoned all of their Christian sense of what is right and wrong for economic motives of gold, land, and the slave trade.

Although the conquest of Central Mexico and West Mexico were different in many ways, they both included a great deal of violence against the Indigenous population, and the Catholic Church was an integral part of asserting Spanish Colonial rule over those conquered areas. During the fifteenth century, the Spanish Crown used the Roman Catholic Church as a colonial institution of control throughout Central and West Mexico by utilizing religious ideology as a means for forced conversion, violence, and justification of enslavement. This was done using three strategies: destroying Indigenous sacred places, suppressing spiritual practices, and clerical enforcement. It is important to research how religious institutions can become politically inclined for the wrong reasons. Historically, the Catholic Church has been part of many controversies, and it was also a tool used for violence, coercion, and the erasure of the Indigenous identity. Although this paper focuses primarily on Central and West Mexico, future researchers can examine how this type of religious justification for violence against the Indigenous people of Mexico can be connected to the rest of the Indigenous people of the Americas.

[117] Las Casas, "New Spain, Pánuco and Jalisco," 69.