

Lengua de los indios, lengua española: *Religious Conversion and the Languages of New Spain, ca. 1520–1585*

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This article examines the language policies of sixteenth-century Mexico, aiming more generally to illuminate efforts by Mexican bishops to foster conversions to Christianity. At various points throughout the colonial era, the Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church propagated the use of Castilian among Amerindians; leaders of these institutions, however, also encouraged priests to study indigenous languages. That Spanish authorities appear to have never settled on a firm language policy has puzzled modern scholars, who have viewed the Crown and its churchmen as vacillating between “pro-indigenous” and “pro-Castilian” sentiments. This article suggests, however, that Mexico’s bishops intentionally extended simultaneous support to both indigenous languages and Castilian. Church and Crown officials tended to avoid firm ideological commitments to one language; instead they made practical decisions, concluding that different contexts called for distinct languages. An examination of the decisions made by leading churchmen offers insight into how they helped to create a Spanish-American religious landscape in which both indigenous and Spanish elements co-existed.

IN the Spanish Crown’s Laws of the Indies, all missionaries were ordered to “know the language of the Indians.” The next law, however, orders churchmen to ensure that the native peoples learn Castilian Spanish.¹

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¹*Recopilación de leyes de los reynos de las Indias. Mandadas imprimir y publicar por la Magestad Católica del Rey Don Carlos II*, 4 vols. (Madrid: Andrés Ortega, 1774), Lib. I, Tit. XIII, Ley. IV–V. Law four, issued by King Philip III in March 1619, reads: “Ordenamos y mandamos á los Virreyes, Presidentes, Audiencias y Governadores, que estén advertidos y con particular cuidado en hacer que los Curas Doctrineros sepan la lengua de los Indios, que han de doctrinar y administrar, pues tanto importa para el cumplimiento de su obligación y salvacion de las almas de sus feligreses.” Law five, issued by Philip IV in March 1634, reads: “Rogamos y encargamos á los Arzobispos y Obispos, que provean y den orden en sus Diocesis, que los Curas y Doctrineros de Indios, usando de los medios mas suaves, dispongan y encaminen, que á todos los Indios sea enseñada la lengua Española, y en ella la doctrina Christiana.” Though seventeenth-century monarchs promulgated these specific laws, earlier monarchs had made

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Taken together, these two laws seem rather curious. This essay explores the logic behind the Crown's apparently contradictory legislation related to language.

The general subject of language and communication between Native Americans and Europeans has proven a fruitful field of study for years among students of Latin American history. Among the first modern scholars to devote attention to this broad topic was Robert Ricard, in his seminal work, *La conquête spirituelle du Mexique*.² Approximately fifty years after the publication of Ricard's work, the discussion intensified, with multiple monographs addressing the related topics of language, evangelization, and conquest.³ In recent decades, a growing cadre of scholars has enhanced the field by examining indigenous-language sources with great energy.⁴ Some of the latest fruits of their efforts have resulted in a sophisticated discussion examining language use in different contexts within colonial Mexico.⁵

Despite the extensive literature devoted to language and communication in colonial Mexico, scholars have been bewildered by the Spanish Crown's official legislation related to language. In a landmark study on language policy in Mexico published in 1972, Shirley Brice Heath noted, "The Conquistadors walked into a solution and made it a problem. . . . Despite recognition by Isabella and later Spanish monarchs of the use of language as an instrument of empire, the Conquistadors failed to perpetuate Nahuatl as the standard tongue or to introduce Castilian in its place."⁶ In Heath's view,

similar, apparently contradictory, efforts. See Juan R. Lodaes Marrodán, "La contradictoria legislación lingüística americana (1500–1770)," in *Actas del VI Congreso Internacional de Historia de la Lengua española*, eds. J. L. Girón Alconchel and J. J. de Bustos Tovar (Madrid: Arco Libros, 2006), 2235–2242.

²Robert Ricard, *La conquête spirituelle du Mexique* (Paris: Institut d'ethnologie, 1933). See also, Ricard, *La conquista espiritual de México. Ensayo sobre el apostolado y los métodos misioneros de las órdenes mendicantes en la Nueva España de 1523–24 a 1572*, trans. Ángel María Garibay K. (Mexico: Editorial Jus, 1947) and Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: an essay on the apostolate and the evangelizing methods of the mendicant orders in New Spain, 1523–1572*, trans. Lesley Byrd Simpson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966, 1974).

³For a summary of many of these contributions, including work by Louise Burkhart, Inga Clendinnen, Serge Gruzinski, and Tzvetan Todorov, see Daniel Wasserman-Soler, "Language and Communication in the Spanish Conquest of America," *History Compass* 8, no. 6 (2010): 491–502.

⁴See Matthew Restall, "A History of the New Philology and the New Philology in History," *Latin American Research Review* 38, no. 1 (2003): 113–134.

⁵Robert C. Schwaller, ed., "A Language of Empire, a Quotidian Tongue: The Uses of Nahuatl in Colonial Mexico," Special issue of *Ethnohistory* 59, no. 4 (2012): 667–790. The volume includes contributions by Mark Z. Christensen, Laura E. Matthew, Martin Nesvig, Caterina Pizzigoni, Sergio F. Romero, John F. Schwaller, Robert C. Schwaller, and Yanna Yannakakis.

⁶Shirley Brice Heath, *Telling Tongues: Language Policy in Mexico, Colony to Nation* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1972), 1. See also Heath, *La política del lenguaje en México: De la colonia a la nación* (Mexico City: SEP Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1972).

therefore, the Crown had two options and did not execute either one effectively. Following the publication of her work, there has been no systematic attempt to revisit the subject.⁷ Recent work on colonial Mexico has echoed her general assessment, indicating that the Spanish Crown had two options: using indigenous languages or propagating Castilian. Given these choices, Spanish monarchs and their officials adopted conflicting positions, vacillating between Castilian, on the one hand, and Nahuatl and other indigenous languages, on the other.⁸ Unlike the Crown, churchmen were more uniform in calling for the use of indigenous languages.⁹ But they also had their share of tension over linguistic politics, as the last half of the sixteenth century witnessed significant hostility toward native tongues.¹⁰ Nonetheless, both the Spanish Church and the Crown continued to push the use of indigenous languages during the seventeenth century.¹¹ At the same time, the Crown attempted to propagate the use of Castilian among indigenous peoples.¹² Altogether, it is commonly thought that the Spanish Crown swung from one side of the language debate to another.

This article suggests a different vantage point for considering the Crown's legislation related to language. It posits that the so-called debate over whether to implement Castilian or to use indigenous languages is a historiographical red herring. To be sure, sixteenth-century sources do demonstrate different opinions regarding exactly how Europeans should communicate with natives. However, those references are scattered throughout different documents, and they do not reveal a coherent debate between two opposed sides (for example, advocates of Castilian vs. backers

⁷The subject of royal legislation related to language arises frequently, as important contextual information, in the extensive scholarship related to evangelization in sixteenth-century Mexico. But it has not been examined as a subject of study in itself since Heath's work. It also should be noted that Heath's book emphasizes the post-independence period of Mexico.

⁸Mark Z. Christensen, "The Use of Nahuatl in Evangelization and the Ministry of Sebastian," *Ethnohistory* 59, no. 4 (2012): 691–711. See also John F. Schwaller, "The Expansion of Nahuatl as a Lingua Franca among Priests in Sixteenth-Century Mexico," *Ethnohistory* 59, no. 4 (2012): 675–690.

⁹Christensen, "The Use of Nahuatl," 691–692; Schwaller, "The Expansion of Nahuatl," 675–677.

¹⁰Martin Austin Nesvig, "The Epistemological Politics of Vernacular Scripture in Sixteenth-Century Mexico," *The Americas* 70, no. 2 (2013): 165–201.

¹¹Leticia Pérez Puente, "La creación de las cátedras públicas de lenguas indígenas y la secularización parroquial," *Estudios de historia novohispana* 41 (2009): 45–78. Fluency in indigenous languages continued to be a desirable skill for Mexican priests throughout the eighteenth century as well. At the same time, the Crown and its churchmen intensified efforts to instruct natives in Spanish, especially during the second half of the century. Their attempts, however, met with some opposition both from churchmen as well as indigenous communities. William B. Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred: Priests and Parishioners in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 95–96, 334–340.

¹²Linda King, *Roots of Identity: Language and Literacy in Mexico* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 45–47.

of indigenous languages). Calling these sporadic recommendations a debate leads to viewing Spanish authorities in an overly ideological light, engaged in a battle between open-minded advocates of indigenous cultures and inflexible defenders of Castilian, Christian expansionism.

To understand the Crown's legislation related to language, it is helpful to examine the recommendations made by New Spain's leading churchmen. In Iberia, when King Philip II considered the future of Arabic for the Islamic community of Granada, he paid attention to the advice of the bishops.¹³ Similarly, for New Spain, the recommendations of leading churchmen appear to have inspired the royal orders to support both the use of Castilian and of indigenous languages.

The following pages emphasize that the Spanish monarchs permitted a kind of linguistic coexistence between indigenous languages and Castilian. The Crown's approach reflected the practical mindset of Mexico's churchmen. Church officials dealt with language questions on an ad hoc basis, making numerous pragmatic decisions that served specific problems. In some contexts, Castilian or even Latin seemed a suitable choice to Mexican clerics.¹⁴ And the same men simultaneously deemed indigenous languages more appropriate for other situations. This article highlights that Mexico's churchmen did not see Castilian and indigenous languages as two exclusive options. Calling for the use of Castilian was not necessarily a vote against indigenous languages; by the same token, emphasizing the study of native tongues did not exclude acknowledging Castilian as a useful language for Indians to learn. Instead, the choices to be made were far more complex and reflected the realities of dealing with a diverse population.

I. RELIGIOUS CONVERSION AND THE VERNACULARS

It was by no means a novelty of the sixteenth century to suggest that the use of vernaculars could aid missionary efforts to foster conversion.¹⁵ For centuries,

¹³Patricia Giménez-Eguibar and Daniel I. Wasserman-Soler, "La mala algarabía: Church, Monarchy, and the Arabic Language in Sixteenth-Century Spain," *Medieval History Journal* 14, no. 2 (2011): 239.

¹⁴In its use of 'cleric' and 'clergy,' this article follows the usage apparent in the decrees of the Council of Trent (1545–1563). Those documents speak of 'clergy' and 'laity' as the two estates of Christendom. Thus, the clergy includes not only priests, but also members of religious orders, both male and female. William Fanning, "Cleric," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1908). It is important to note, however, that in some sixteenth-century Spanish documents, 'cleric' could refer specifically to a secular cleric, that is, a diocesan priest, who did not belong to a religious order (for example, the Dominicans or Jesuits).

¹⁵In doing so, churchmen took their cue from an ancient tradition of Christian accommodation of local cultures. In a letter to the Abbot Mellitus, Pope Gregory I (590–604) famously advocated the accommodation of local cultures within Christianity. For an English translation of the letter, see

Christian authorities had contemplated the place of the vernacular as a means of communicating doctrine. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215), for instance, required local churchmen to provide religious instruction in the languages of the people.¹⁶ While this decree enabled the inclusion of diverse languages and rites within the Catholic Church, the ideal did not always translate into practice.

In thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Aragon, for example, leaders of the Order of Friars Preachers (the Dominicans), sought to establish programs of study for both Arabic and Hebrew. Just a few centuries later, some Dominican historians celebrated their order's early efforts to facilitate preaching through foreign language study. But these plans, however well-intentioned, apparently did not produce extensive or long-lasting results in language proficiency among Dominican friars. At least a few Dominicans, such as John de Podio Ventoso, Dominic Marrothini, Raymond Martini, and Peter Scarramat, did learn Arabic and/or Hebrew, but on the whole, these campaigns of language study seem to have produced only informal and temporary initiatives.¹⁷

Beyond Iberia, the Council of Vienne (1311–1312) also called for language study, particularly Hebrew, Arabic, Chaldean, and Syriac/Aramaic, in order to facilitate preaching throughout the Mediterranean world.¹⁸ Such programs of language study were to take place at Europe's leading centers of learning—Oxford, Paris, Bologna, and Salamanca. The council's plans, however, produced no tangible results.¹⁹

Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 13, trans. James Barmby (Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature Publishing, 1898), 84–85. In the prologue to his Nahuatl grammar, the Franciscan friar Alonso de Molina cited the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 14:6–11), in order to justify preaching in the local language. Molina, *Aquí comienza vn vocabulario en la lengua castellana y mexicana* (Mexico: Juan Pablos, 1555).

¹⁶H.J. Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation, and Commentary* (London: B. Herder, 1937), Fourth Lateran Council, Canon 9: "Since in many places within the same city and diocese there are people of different languages having one faith but various rites and customs, we strictly command that the bishops of these cities and dioceses provide suitable men who will, according to the different rites and languages, celebrate the divine offices for them, administer the sacraments of the Church and instruct them by word and example."

¹⁷The discussion on the study of Arabic and Hebrew in medieval Aragon comes from Robin J.E. Vose, *Dominicans, Muslims and Jews in the Medieval Crown of Aragon* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 104–115. Vose also notes that Ramon Llull, the famous Franciscan missionary and polymath, unsuccessfully sought the Dominicans' help in learning Arabic. Having struggled to find a medium for studying Arabic, he finally decided to hire a Muslim slave.

¹⁸Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees*, Council of Vienne, Canon 11: "We earnestly desire that the Church abound with Catholic men possessing a knowledge of the languages used by the infidels [and these scholars] will be able to instruct [the infidels] in Catholic doctrine and by holy baptism form them into a body of Christians."

¹⁹Vose, *Dominicans, Muslims and Jews*, 110.

Altogether, medieval clerics considered the challenges posed by a Catholic Church whose people spoke multiple languages. In some cases, they took action toward addressing these differences. In the sixteenth century, the language problem reached a new phase, following the exploration of a continent previously unknown to continental Europeans. For the Spanish monarchy, the ‘New World’ raised a plethora of questions related to religion and governance, not least of which concerned how to spread the Gospel to people who spoke different languages.

II. CONVERSION, LANGUAGE, AND CONQUEST IN MEXICO: THE CURRENT CONSENSUS

For decades now, scholars have demonstrated an increasing interest in studying colonial Latin America from the vantage point of indigenous peoples.²⁰ Consequently, research from a variety of disciplines has convincingly challenged the notion that Spaniards dominated the conquest and the colonial period, more generally. In its place, this scholarship has highlighted the ways in which Amerindians weaved many of their own traditions into the fabric of what became Latin American societies.²¹ As a whole, the field

²⁰Though words such as ‘America,’ ‘Mesoamerica,’ and ‘Amerindian’ did not become common until a later period, this article uses them because, in many cases, they serve as the most specific and/or concise terms.

²¹Just a few of the many distinguished works in this field include Louise M. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahuatl-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989); Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517–1570* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Serge Gruzinski, *La colonisation de l’imaginaire: Sociétés indigènes et occidentalisation dans le Mexique espagnol* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988) [see also Gruzinski, *The Conquest of Mexico: the Incorporation of Indian Societies into the Western World, 16th–18th centuries*, trans. Eileen Corrigan (Cambridge: Polity, 1993)]; James Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1992); Sabine MacCormack, *Religion in the Andes: Vision and Imagination in Early Colonial Peru* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991); Matthew Restall, *The Maya World: Yucatec Culture and Society, 1550–1850* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997); Kevin Terraciano, *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca: Ñudzahui History, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003).

Within the last ten years, another wave of scholarship has continued to examine the ways in which indigenous peoples shaped the societies in which they lived. See, for example, Mark Z. Christensen, *Nahuatl and Maya Catholicisms: Texts and Religion in Colonial Central Mexico and Yucatan* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013); Laura E. Matthew, *Memories of Conquest: Becoming Mexicano in Colonial Guatemala* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Caterina Pizzigoni, *The Life Within: Local Indigenous Society in Mexico’s Toluca Valley, 1650–1800* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012); Julia J. S. Sarreal, *The Guarani and their Missions: A Socioeconomic History* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2014); Pete Sigal, *The Flower and the Scorpion: Sexuality and Ritual in Early Nahuatl Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011); David Tavárez, *The Invisible War: Indigenous*

now emphasizes that the *mestizo* (“mixed”) cultures of colonial Latin America developed through the confluence of several different actors: Amerindian, African, and European.²²

In addition to the field’s increased attention to indigenous perspectives, students of colonial Latin America have also made advances in examining the Catholic clerics who spent most of their time “on the ground” with native peoples. Some of the best work has explored how missionaries and native peoples collaborated, with both showing flexibility in accommodating new ideas.²³ Though scholars have devoted their attention fruitfully to Catholic churchmen, the highest ranking clerics of Mexico—its archbishops—have received surprisingly limited attention, given their position of influence.²⁴ This essay focuses on the records of the provincial councils called by Mexico’s archbishops in the sixteenth century, in addition to other early assemblies. Other sources exist for the study of language use and religious instruction, but the records from these assemblies have the benefit of providing an overview regarding the perspectives of leading clerics.²⁵ These

Devotions, Discipline, and Dissent in Colonial Mexico (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011); Yanna Yannakakis, *The Art of Being In-Between: Native Intermediaries, Indian Identity, and Local Rule in Colonial Oaxaca* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

²²The question of how to characterize the religious history of Latin America (for example, “syncretic” vs. “hybrid,” etc.) has provoked a lasting debate. For a helpful summary of some important contributors to this discussion, see Reinaldo Román and Pamela Voekel, “Popular Religion in Latin American Historiography,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American History*, ed. José C. Moya (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²³A classic example is Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth*. For the late colonial period, the magisterial study is William Taylor’s *Magistrates of the Sacred*, examining the contributions of both “priests and parishioners” to the Mexican Church.

²⁴Scholarship related to Mexico’s second and third archbishops—Alonso de Montúfar and Pedro Moya de Contreras—is relatively limited, given that each man served as archbishop for over 15 years during the heavily studied sixteenth century. The online catalogs of the Library of Congress and Biblioteca Nacional of Mexico reveal only one English monograph on Montúfar: Magnus Lundberg, *Unification and Conflict: The Church Politics of Alonso de Montúfar OP, Archbishop of Mexico, 1554–1572* (Uppsala, Sweden: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 2002). Alberto Carrillo Cázares has translated Lundberg’s work into Spanish. See Lundberg, *Unificación y conflicto: la gestión episcopal de Alonso de Montúfar, OP, arzobispo de México, 1554–1572* (Zamora, Mexico: Colegio de Michoacán, 2009). See also Ana Ruiz Gutiérrez, *Fray Alonso de Montúfar: Loja y la formación de la iglesia indiana* (Granada, Spain: Fundación Ibn al-Jatib de Estudios de Cooperación Cultural, 2007). The only English monograph on Moya de Contreras is Stafford Poole, *Pedro Moya de Contreras: Catholic Reform and Royal Power in New Spain, 1571–1591* (1987; repr., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011). Carrillo Cázares also has translated Poole’s work. See Poole, *Pedro Moya de Contreras: Reforma católica y poder real en la nueva España, 1571–1591* (Zamora, Mexico: Colegio de Michoacán, 2012). See also Julio Sánchez Rodríguez, *Pedro Moya de Contreras* (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain: José Sánchez Peñate, 2006) and Francisco de Icaza Dufour, *Pedro Moya de Contreras* (Mexico: Planeta DeAgostini, 2003).

²⁵Scholars of colonial Mexico know well that bishops often struggled to exercise their authority over influential mendicant friars. For that reason, it is worth noting that the records of church

documents rarely form a subject of study in themselves, perhaps because one might argue that they explain only the clerics' ideals and not the reality of their actions. But the contrary is true. In discussing how to proceed, these churchmen often candidly explained the real problems that they faced.

Reading these sources reminds us that leading churchmen made significant contributions to the dynamic, multifaceted cultures of colonial Mexico. The *mestizo* societies of Spanish America emerged not only from the resilience and adaptability of people "on the ground." Rather, the process was reciprocal, as this flexibility also manifested itself in high-ranking churchmen.²⁶

III. PRAGMATIC COMMUNICATION AFTER THE ENCOUNTER

In 1519 Hernando Cortés arrived in present-day Mexico with four clerics. Second-hand sources claim that his chaplain, Juan Díaz, learned a number of Mesoamerican languages.²⁷ But during the first years of contact, only a few priests were available to carry out the duty of preaching to the natives. Given the shortage of priests, the duty of both evangelizing and "civilizing" the natives theoretically fell to the *encomenderos*, the men who took advantage of indigenous labor with the backing of the Spanish Crown. The Crown charged them with teaching European customs, the Castilian language, and Catholic doctrine to the natives. For the final task, they were to rely upon the assistance of indigenous interpreters who would instruct other natives in doctrine via the local language. These initiatives, however, produced little success and underscored the need for sending more churchmen to New Spain.²⁸

councils did not necessarily become the point of departure in the everyday practices of the mendicant friars (Dominicans, Franciscans, and Augustinians), who have formed the basis of a robust historiography in colonial Latin American studies. Still, the provincial council records provide insight into the ideas of leading churchmen from both the mendicant orders and the secular clergy. Members of the mendicant orders attended the councils, and at the opening of the First Provincial Council, three of the five bishops present were mendicant friars. For more information about the individuals who attended the first and second councils, see Lundberg, *Unification and Conflict*, 81.

²⁶This essay primarily considers churchmen from religious orders (that is, regular clergy). On the secular clergy of colonial Mexico, see John F. Schwaller, *The Church and Clergy in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987). See also, Schwaller, *The History of the Catholic Church in Latin America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

²⁷Catholic Church, *Concilios provinciales. Primero, y segundo, celebrados en la muy noble, y muy leal ciudad de México, presidiendo el Illmo y Rmo Señor Don Fr. Alonso de Montúfar: En los años de 1555, y 1565* (Mexico: Joseph Antonio de Hoyal, 1769), 12.

²⁸Heath, *Telling Tongues*, 7–8.

In 1524 the famous band of twelve Franciscans arrived in Mexico, ready to propagate Christianity. But prior to learning the local languages, how did they manage to communicate their faith to the Mesoamerican natives? Some Indians managed to learn Spanish quickly and thus made themselves essential collaborators of European missionaries and conquistadors.²⁹ Throughout the colonial period, native interpreters would remain key figures in the evangelization of indigenous communities.³⁰

In addition to working with interpreters, natives and missionaries utilized other methods besides spoken language in order to communicate. An early Franciscan source indicates that some natives used painted images of their sins in order to receive the sacrament of confession. The friars understood that Mesoamerican peoples had image-based writing systems (the Franciscan author here called them forms of writing), and they also managed to utilize them: “Some confessed by taking painted images with certain characters, with which they were able to be understood, and they proceeded to declare [their sins], as this was the method of writing that they used, as Gentiles. Others, who had learned how to write, brought their sins written down.”³¹ The passage here suggests that while natives and their missionary priests communicated verbally with each other, they also used writing systems—both image-based and alphabetic. Whether these particular natives used the alphabet to write in Castilian or in an indigenous language (for example, Nahuatl or Otomi), remains unclear. Still, this limited information could suggest at least two conclusions about natives’ and missionaries’ linguistic abilities in this early context: first, some confessors had acquired sufficient knowledge of local languages to make sense of something written in the Roman alphabet; second, some natives had learned enough Castilian in order to make themselves understood through a combination of speaking, writing, and/or painting.

Just as natives conveyed their sins through their image-based writing, Catholic priests may have used images to communicate basic Christian

²⁹The most famous example of these interpreters is Doña Marina, also known as Malintzin or La Malinche. The sixteenth-century conquistador Bernal Díaz wrote a very brief account of her story. See Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, trans. J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1963), 85–87. For a more recent, detailed study, see Camilla Townsend, *Malintzin’s Choices: An Indian Woman in the Conquest of Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006). On the use of interpreters in Mexico during the early years after the European arrival, see Heath, *Telling Tongues*, 9–10.

³⁰For a study of several individuals who served as interpreters and cultural intermediaries in the colonial Americas, see Frances E. Karttunen, *Between Worlds: Interpreters, Guides, and Survivors* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

³¹Primera Junta Apostólica de Mexico, 1524 (in *Concilios provinciales*, 3–4): “Unos se confesaban llevando pintados los pecados con ciertos caracteres, con que se pudieran entender, y los iban declarando, pues este era el modo de escritura, que usaban en su Gentilidad, y otros, que habían aprendido á escribir, trahían sus pecados escritos.”

teachings to natives. Several pictographic catechisms survive to this day, such as one attributed to the Franciscan friar Pedro de Gante.³² Altogether, natives and Christian missionaries utilized some combination of interpreters, images, and other forms of writing in order to communicate during the early period of contact. While the missionaries had instructed the natives in the Roman alphabet and, presumably, in the Castilian language, they did not seem concerned primarily with imposing their own language to the exclusion of native tongues. Rather, they sought any means possible in order to communicate with natives and thus further their desire to build a Christian new world.

IV. “A LAND OF ONE LANGUAGE”? MARTÍN DE VALENCIA AND THE FIRST FRANCISCANS

Shortly after the fall of Montezuma, King Charles I and Pope Leo X commissioned the Order of Friars Minor (the Franciscans) to send men to preach in the new territories. Francisco de los Ángeles, the Franciscans’ minister general, chose Martín de Valencia to lead the group. A seasoned servant of the order, known for his *gravitas*, tranquility, self-effacement, and moderation in words, Valencia had worked as the superior of the province of St. Gabriel in Extremadura. Following the precedent set by Jesus Christ and his twelve apostles, the Franciscans sent Valencia and twelve of his confreres to the New World.³³

Before their departure, Valencia and the twelve friars received directions from their minister general. Since he knew little about the situation abroad, Francisco de los Ángeles recognized that the friars themselves would know best how to proceed in the duty of preaching to the native peoples. Thus, his directions contained few specifics regarding how to foster the conversion of indigenous communities. Nevertheless, he did underline what he considered as their fundamental duty: to teach the Gospel. The Franciscans’ minister

³²Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, VITR/26/9. Pedro de Gante, *Catecismo de la doctrina Cristiana*. See also Luis Resines, *Catecismos pictográficos de Pedro de Gante, incompleto y mucagua* (Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, 2007). Recently, Louise Burkhart has called into question the widely accepted conclusion that pictographic catechisms originated in sixteenth-century evangelization efforts in Mexico. Burkhart, “The ‘Little Doctrine’ and Indigenous Catechesis in New Spain,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 94, no. 2 (2014): 167–206.

³³Gerónimo de Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana*, ed. Joaquín García Icazbalceta (Mexico: Antigua librería, 1870), 197–202. For a short overview of Valencia’s life, see Zephyrin Engelhart, “Martin of Valencia, O.F.M.,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 9 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1910). On the historical organization of the Franciscans in Extremadura, see Sebastián García, OFM, “San Francisco de Asís y la Orden Franciscana en Extremadura,” in *El culto a los santos: cofradías, devoción, fiestas y arte* (El Escorial, Spain: Ediciones Escorialenses, 2008), 759–780.

general showed confidence that Valencia and the twelve friars would succeed as long as they “studiously safeguarded the rule [of St. Francis], which is based in the Gospel, observing it purely and simply.”³⁴ In exhorting his men to conduct themselves according to the established Franciscan rule, Francisco de los Ángeles highlighted the friars’ behavior as the key to the success of their mission. In a similar vein, he added that “the order and good example that [the Indians] will see in your life and conversation will help their conversion as much as words and preaching.”³⁵ Altogether, Francisco de los Ángeles made no suggestions regarding language study; instead, he essentially exhorted the friars to preach through their actions.

Shortly after arriving in the new Spanish kingdoms, Valencia convened a meeting to determine how the friars would approach the task of preaching to the natives. At the *Primera Junta Apostólica de México* (first apostolic assembly of Mexico), Valencia advocated teaching Castilian to the natives. He argued that all ministers ought to take care to “advance and propagate the Castilian language and ensure that the Indians know how to read and write in it.”³⁶ Valencia added that any ministers who failed to teach Castilian to the natives “allowed them to stay closed in their own native language. They are, in my opinion, declared enemies of the well-being of the Natives, of their good order and ability to reason. They intend to disturb the best ecclesiastical government, which is impeded by so many languages that are so different, and they provoke idolatry, which is more apparent in the Indians that do not know Castilian.”³⁷ At this early meeting, thus, Martín de Valencia clearly upheld the Castilian language as advantageous to the natives.

Valencia offered several reasons for teaching Castilian to the natives. He argued, for instance, that the use of Castilian would protect the good order and rationality of the Mesoamerican peoples. Thus, on some level, he associated Castilian with desirable cultural or social qualities. But overall, his justification for Castilian seems more rooted in practical concerns than in a sense of cultural superiority. In his view, “so many languages that are so different” would impede the growth of “the best ecclesiastical government” in Mexico. Instead of a multiplicity of

³⁴Mendieta, *Historia eclesiástica indiana*, 201: “Y esto haréis si veláredes estudiosamente en la guarda de vuestra regla, la cual está fundada en el santo Evangelio guardándola pura y simplemente.”

³⁵*Ibid.*, 202: “El concierto y buen ejemplo que viesen en vuestra vida y conversación seria tanta parte para ayudar á la conversión como las palabras y predicaciones.”

³⁶See the note below for the original quotation. “Minister” generally referred to a cleric.

³⁷Primera Junta Apostólica de México, (in *Concilios provinciales*, 7–8): “Los Ministros Eclesiásticos, que no procuran adelantar, y extender el Idioma Castellano, y cuidar de que los Indios sepan leer, y escribir en él, dexandoles cerrados en su nativo Idioma, son en mi concepto enemigos declarados de el bien de los Naturales, de su policía, y racionalidad; intentan perturbar el mejor Gobierno Eclesiástico, que se impide con tantos, y tan distintos Idiomas, fomentan las Idolatrías, que se vén mas en los Indios, que ignoran el Castellano.”

languages, the natives needed to have one language. Why, then, did he not advocate the use of Nahuatl, the already established common language of the Aztec Empire? Valencia had concluded that the natives who did not know Castilian seemed most prone to idolatry. Remaining “closed in their native language,” it seems, hindered them from leaving their idolatrous past and embracing Christianity. Castilian, thus, seemed ideal for two practical reasons: first, it would serve as a common language for people of different backgrounds and thus facilitate “the best ecclesiastical government,” and second, it would distance the natives from their past.

Despite Valencia’s support for propagating Castilian, the records from the same meeting indicate that some missionaries had acquired a level of skill in using indigenous languages. In fact, individuals with knowledge of native languages had received some preference for appointments as pastors. But Valencia did not consider proficiency in an indigenous language as the most important quality for a good minister to the Indians. In fact, he discouraged fellow clerics from placing an excessive emphasis on knowledge of local tongues, writing: “Because they lack the language of the Indians, prelates see themselves almost forced to appoint to the position of curate a less-learned, less-prudent individual of low birth only because he knows the language of that village. I think that if pastors insisted for fifty years that their faithful learn Castilian, it would be accomplished, and all New Spain would be *Terra labii unius* [a land of one language].”³⁸ Some members of the clergy, like Valencia, felt strongly that formal education and desirable personal qualities ought to determine the selection of pastors.³⁹ For Valencia, proficiency in an indigenous language seemed less crucial to the success of a Christian pastor.

Several years later, in 1537, the first bishops of Mexico offered a description of the primary characteristics necessary for clerics in the New World. Like Valencia, they did not consider knowledge of an indigenous language as essential:

It seems to us that your majesty ought to exercise great care in recommending clerics for these new churches, ensuring that they be men of doctrine and good habits, who lead by positive example, such that these natives will be edified by their ways and their honesty. Along these lines, we inform your majesty that it would be appropriate to award the two

³⁸Primera Junta Apostólica de México, (in *Concilios provinciales*, 8): “Por falta de el Idioma de los Indios se ven casi precisados los Prelados á proponer para un Curato á un Sugeto menos docto, menos prudente, y de bajo nacimiento, unicamente porque sabe el Idioma de aquel Pueblo. Creo que si los Párrocos instaran por cincuenta años, en que sus Feligreses aprendieran el Castellano, se lograría, y sería toda Nueva España: *Terra labii unius*.”

³⁹Some of the frustration here may have originated in the fact that many priests at mid-century lacked adequate theological training. “Concilio primero,” in *Concilios Provinciales* (1555), 108 also states: “we have found some priests who do not know the basics of Christian doctrine” (Se han hallado algunos Sacerdotes no saber los principios de la Doctrina Christiana).

principal positions of each church to a theologian and a canonist, who can be found in Salamanca and other universities. It would not be inappropriate to increase for them the benefits of the positions because in these lands, little has been shown to them by the establishment, and here, we have more need of letters than in Castile.⁴⁰

For several influential churchmen, thus, personal qualities and education (not necessarily including training in indigenous languages) constituted the primary needs for the establishment of the new Catholic Church in New Spain.⁴¹ Indeed, the letter above identifies the most destructive problem faced by churchmen in the New World not in communication obstacles, but in “religious and laypersons having no desire to remain here, and having no other goal but making themselves rich and returning to Castile.”⁴² While Mexico’s bishops may have desired at this time that their clerics know an indigenous language, they highlighted personal qualities and formal education of the cleric as fundamental.

In spite of downplaying the centrality of indigenous languages, Valencia still considered them as useful instruments in the conversion of native peoples. In a 1532 letter, he explicitly indicated that the study of native languages by the earliest Franciscans played a crucial part in the conversion of “one hundred thousand” natives.

We dare to say that each one of us brothers, principally the first twelve companions, have until today baptized more than one hundred thousand, the majority of them being children. And because divine providence wished it so, these brothers of mine were so learned in the languages of the natives that in a very brief time—after much work and care—they [the friars] were able to guide them and teach them to understand the blindness and error of their customs and ceremonies, offering them many sermons in

⁴⁰Madrid, Archivo Histórico Nacional (hereafter, AHN), *Diversos*, Colección Documentos de Indias #22, no. 22, fol. 2v: “Yten nos parece que v. m.+ deve tener gran cuydado en que los clerigos que presentare para estas yglesias nuevas sean tales personas de doctrina vida y exemplo que estos naturales sean hedificados con su vida y onestidad y para esto avisamos a v. m.+ conviene presentar en cada yglesia a las dos dignidades principales un theologo y un canonista que se hallaran tales en Salamanca y en otras universidades y no sera inconveniente acrescentarles las prebendas siendo tales personas porque para esta tierra es muy poco lo que les esta señalado por la erection, y ay mas necesidad de letras que alla en castilla.”

⁴¹An original copy of this letter is available at Chicago’s Newberry Library, MS Ayer 1539, “Report of a council meeting of bishops and priests in Mexico City to discuss their ministry to the Indians,” fol. 2r. The following eighteenth-century transcription with largely the same wording also exists: “Carta original de los ill[ustrisi]mos señores obispos de Mexico, Goatemala, y Oaxaca, sobre la ida al Concilio General, y piden sobre distintos puntos, así de Diezmos, como otros para la buena Planta, y permanencia de la Fé en este Nuevo Mundo.” (1537), 3–4. In *Apendice á los concilios primero y segundo mexicanos* (1770), 1–22.

⁴²AHN, *Diversos*, Colección Documentos de Indias, #22, no. 22, fol. 3r: “Lo que mas destruye a esta tierra es que las personas eclesiasticas y seglares no tienen voluntad de se perpetuar y permanecer enesta, y no tienen otro fin sino de buscar modos para hazerze ricos y bolverse a Castilla.”

the plazas and markets and wherever else they converged and could produce [sermons] in their own language.⁴³

For Valencia at this point, indigenous languages served a highly valuable purpose. In the hands of the friars, they helped to facilitate conversions.

How did Valencia reconcile his appreciation for indigenous languages in 1532 with his strong support for Castilian at the 1524 meeting? Perhaps, over time, he grew to appreciate the difficulty of making New Spain a “land of one language” and thus increasingly saw the value of having clerics who knew indigenous languages. It is also possible that Valencia viewed missionaries’ use of indigenous languages as a temporary measure, which would eventually give way to Castilian.⁴⁴ Regardless of how he made sense of them, his thoughts on language represented what many—if not most—influential churchmen in New Spain eventually would uphold. Churchmen did not divide clearly along pro-Castilian or pro-indigenous lines; clerics who favored Castilian-language instruction among Indians did not necessarily oppose the use of native tongues. Valencia, for instance, upheld the value of teaching Castilian to the natives, but he did not do so because he considered it as an intrinsically significant task. Rather, he viewed Castilian as a useful tool for fostering the religious conversion of indigenous peoples; in doing so, he did not necessarily exclude the use of indigenous languages. Valencia seems less invested in the particular language itself, and more concerned with adopting any approach that might increase conversions to Christianity.

V. “IN LATIN, IN CASTILIAN, AND FOR THE INDIANS, IN THEIR OWN LANGUAGE”: LINGUISTIC POLITICS AT THE FIRST PROVINCIAL COUNCIL (1555)

When Martín de Valencia held his 1524 meeting, Mexico had very little ecclesiastical hierarchy. Not until 1527 would Charles I recommend the

⁴³AHN, Diversos, Colección Documentos de Indias, #22, no. 14, fol. 1r: “Osaremos afirmar q[ue] cada uno de n[uest]ros h[e]r[man]o[s] mayormente los doze prim[er]o[s] mis compañeros tienen hasta oy bapuzados mas de acada cient mil los mas dellos niños y q[ue]riendolo ansi la p[ro]videncia divina estos h[e]r[man]o[s] mios fueron tan do[c]tos en la lengua de los naturales q[ue] en muy breve t[ie]m[p]o aunq[ue] no sin muchos trabajos e bigilias les pudieron encaminar y enseñar dándoles a entenderla ceguedad e yerro de sus hitos y ceremonias haciéndoles muchos sermones por las placas y mercados y por doquiera q[ue] concurian y podian[?] aver *en su propia lengua*.” Emphasis added.

⁴⁴While Valencia did not explicitly say that he viewed the use of indigenous languages as temporary, several clerics in Spain supported the use of Arabic as a temporary measure, looking to the eventual religious and linguistic assimilation of Islamic communities. See Giménez-Eguibar and Wasserman-Soler, “*La mala algarabía*.”

Franciscan friar, Juan de Zumárraga, as the first bishop of Mexico. During most of Zumárraga's tenure, Mexico remained officially part of archdiocese of Seville in Spain. Only in 1546, shortly before Zumárraga's death, did Pope Paul III name Mexico as an independent archdiocese.⁴⁵

Over 30 years after Valencia's 1524 meeting, the bishops of Mexico held their first provincial council, led by the Dominican friar Alonso de Montúfar, the second archbishop of Mexico.⁴⁶ Montúfar held the council together with Bishop Vasco de Quiroga of Michoacán, Bishop Fray Martín de Hojacastró of Tlaxcala, Bishop Fray Tomás de Casillas of Chiapas, and various other local colonial and ecclesiastical officials.⁴⁷ The 93 chapters (*capítulos*) of this first provincial council included discussions of subjects ranging from the teaching of Christian doctrine and the administration of the sacraments to regulations concerning the construction of buildings and the roles of doctors, judges, and notaries in ensuring adherence to ecclesiastical feasts and rites. In keeping with the contemporary European discussion of reform at the Council of Trent, Montúfar's council contained a substantial number of sections that clarify duties and appropriate behavior for clerics. Altogether, the council's official record included an extensive list of topics.

Like Martín de Valencia and his band of twelve Franciscans, the bishops considered their work as an extension of the first apostles' efforts. Accordingly, they stated their goal as, "desiring to imitate their predecessors

⁴⁵Camillus Crivelli, "Juan de Zumárraga," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 15 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1912). The Library of Congress online catalog lists no English-language monograph of Juan de Zumárraga's life. Spanish-language work on Zumárraga is also surprisingly limited. The most recent Spanish biography is Vicente Zavala, *Fray Juan de Zumárraga* (Durango, Vizcaya: s.n., 1985). Besides other Spanish biographies from the first half of the twentieth century, see Joaquín García Icazbalceta, *Don Fray Juan de Zumárraga: Primer Obispo y Arzobispo de Mexico* (Mexico: Andrade y Morales, 1881). A few recent historians have examined specific, though important, aspects of Zumárraga's work: for his role in the controversy related to the Virgin of Guadalupe, see Stafford Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Origins and Sources of a Mexican National Symbol, 1531–1797* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995); for his role in the infamous Indian inquisitions, see Richard E. Greenleaf, *Zumárraga and the Mexican Inquisition, 1536–1543* (Washington, D.C.: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1961); on his work related to early catechisms, see Fernando Gil, *Primeras doctrinas del nuevo mundo: estudio histórico teológico de las obras de fray Juan de Zumárraga* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Católica, Facultad de Teología, 1993).

⁴⁶On Montúfar, see Lundberg, *Unification and Conflict*.

⁴⁷The meeting convened by the Franciscan friar Martín de Valencia in 1524 differs in important technical ways from the meeting held in 1555 by the Dominican friar Alonso de Montúfar. As the archbishop of Mexico, Montúfar called not just a meeting, but a provincial council, an assembly in which bishops vote on issues related to their archdiocese (the archdiocese of Mexico at the time included the dioceses of Chiapas, Guatemala, Mexico, Michoacán, Oaxaca, and Tlaxcala). Another kind of meeting is a diocesan synod, in which one bishop serves as the only voter and lawgiver. Martín de Valencia, for example, could not have convened a provincial council or a synod because he was not a bishop. See William Fanning, "Synod," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 14 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1912). Bishop Juan de Zárate of Oaxaca died while at the council.

[the apostles] . . . in these Western Lands that have gone for so many years without knowledge of the Holy Gospel, an innumerable, barbaric, and idolatrous people now called in recent years to knowledge of our Holy Catholic Faith.”⁴⁸ The bishops here highlighted their fundamental role as bringing the Gospel to the natives. Although they described the Indians as “innumerable, barbaric, and idolatrous,” they did not hesitate to call for using indigenous languages (as well as other native cultural practices) as tools for promoting conversion to Christianity. Thus, when they described the Indians as innumerable and barbaric, they seem less intent on issuing a cultural judgment; perhaps they wished to emphasize the difficulty of their task. In using native tongues, they did not cast Latin and Castilian aside. Like other churchmen before them, the bishops did not seem bound to a particular language as valuable in itself. Rather, they used whatever approaches they could in order to further the evangelization of New Spain.

VI. SPOKEN LANGUAGE

Throughout the records from the first council, the Mexican bishops repeatedly encouraged the use of indigenous languages among clerics who wished to minister to the *Indios*. They ordered them, “to learn the language of the *Indios* within a certain time, and he who does not wish to learn shall not receive the duty [of ministering to] the *Indios*.”⁴⁹ The bishops’ desire that priests use indigenous languages marks a departure from Martín de Valencia, who strongly advocated the instruction of the natives in Castilian. But just as Valencia acknowledged the value of both indigenous languages and Castilian, the Mexican bishops also adopted a kind of linguistic coexistence.

⁴⁸“Concilio primero,” in *Concilios Provinciales* (1555), 36: “Y Nos deseando imitar á nuestros Predecessores, y en cumplimiento de lo que por los Sagrados Canones nos es mandado, en estas Partes Occidentales tantos siglos pasados sin conocimiento de el Santo Evangelio, y agora llamados en la ultima edad al conocimiento de nuestra Santa Fé Cathólica tan innumerable gente barbara, y idólatra.” Emphasis added.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, Cap. LX, 133: “Mandamos, que los Clérigos, que se proveyeren para administrar los Sacramentos, y doctrinar á los Indios, se les mande aprender la lengua de los Indios dentro de cierto tiempo, so pena, que el que no la quisiere aprender, no sea proveido en cargo de Indios.” It might be argued that, in referring to the “*lengua de los indios*” (singular) here and elsewhere, the bishops meant Nahuatl. However, if they meant to say Nahuatl, they might have said “*la lengua mexicana*,” as several contemporary churchmen did. Furthermore, John F. Schwaller has argued convincingly that the sixteenth-century Mexican Church actually did not lack priests who knew Nahuatl, but it did have a shortage of priests who knew other, less widely spoken languages, such as Matlatzinca or Huastec. See Schwaller, “The Expansion of Nahuatl,” 678–679. Given Schwaller’s research, it seems more likely that the requirement here that ministers learn the “*lengua de los indios*” actually means something like “the language of the land,” implying that ministers needed to know the language of the specific people they served, not that the ministers needed to know Nahuatl.

In the very first chapter of the council record, the bishops addressed how clerics should communicate Christian doctrine to the natives. Specifically, they explained how to teach the sign of the cross to the Indians. The bishops concluded that ministers, “were to be diligent in teaching their parishioners and that, in particular, they were to teach them how to bless and sign themselves with the cross, saying it to them in Latin and in Romance [Castilian], so that they might better understand and learn it.”⁵⁰ Therefore, in describing how ministers should teach key aspects of Christian doctrine, the Mexican bishops advocated using not only indigenous languages but also Latin and Castilian. Their words above also indicate that they did not make sweeping recommendations only in favor of one language over another. Instead they made more specific proposals, taking particular cases into account when determining the most appropriate language to use.

The bishops also called for churchmen to use Latin and Castilian in conveying several other aspects of Christian doctrine. They directed ministers to use these languages to instruct the faithful in the commandments of the Catholic Church,⁵¹ the saints, and the sacraments, the ten commandments, the seven mortal sins, the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, the theological and cardinal virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the basic prayers (*Pater Noster*, *Ave Maria*, *Credo*, and *Salve Regina*), as well as in how to serve the Lord with each of the five senses. But the bishops’ position for these teachings departed in one significant way from their thoughts regarding the sign of the cross. They instructed ministers to convey these teachings not only in Latin and Castilian, but furthermore, “to the Indians, *in their language*, so that they might be able to better know and retain [the teachings].”⁵² For these particular teachings, the bishops appear to

⁵⁰“Concilio Primero,” in *Concilios Provinciales* (1555), Cap. I, 39: “Sean diligentes en enseñar á sus Parroquianos; especialmente les enseñen, como se han de santiguar, y signar con la señal de la Cruz, diciéndoselo en latin, y en romance, porque mejor lo puedan entender, y aprender.”

⁵¹The commandments of the Catholic Church are distinct from the more well-known ten commandments of the Hebrew Scriptures, which are also mentioned here. The former included fasting at certain times, paying tithes, going to confession once a year, and receiving communion at Easter. J. Melody, “Commandments of the Church,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1908).

⁵²“Concilio Primero,” in *Concilios Provinciales* (1555), Cap. I, 39–41: “Otroși, que los instruyan en los Mandamientos, y Santos Sacramentos de la Iglesia, y en los diez Mandamientos de nuestra Ley Christiana, amonestándoles se guarden de los traspasar, y venir contra ellos. Assimismo les digan, quales son los siete Pecados mortales, para que mejor sepan guardarse de caer en ellos: Amonestándoles, que con mucho cuidado procuren de cumplir las Obras de misericordia, declarándoles quales son espirituales, y corporales, de las quales ha de ser demandada estrecha cuenta á cada uno en fin de sus días, y les enseñen la Confesion general, y las Virtudes Theologales, y Cardinales, y los Dones de el Espíritu Santo, y *todo lo sobredicho enseñen en latin, y en romance, y a los Indios en su lengua, porque mejor lo puedan saver, y retener*; y assimismo les informen, como han de servir á nuestro Señor con todos sus cinco sentidos naturales, y que les digan las Oraciones de el Pater noster, Ave Maria, Credo, y Salve Regina en

have intended that creoles (Spaniards born in America) receive instruction in Latin and Castilian while Indians learn in their own languages. The bishops also may have intended that natives learn both in their own language, as well as in a European language.

Montúfar and the other bishops thus drew a distinction between the languages that ministers should use for the sign of the cross and for other essential teachings.⁵³ Why did they differentiate between the sign of the cross and other points of doctrine? The sign of the cross consisted of just a few words, and the crucial words—"Father, Son, and Holy Spirit"—referred to specific persons unknown in pre-Columbian religious traditions. The bishops, therefore, might have resisted using indigenous terms for these particular words. By using Latin and Castilian for the sign of the cross, they could emphasize the difference between the Christian God and indigenous deities.⁵⁴

Catholic theology, furthermore, put a high premium on ritual language (for example, the sign of the cross, the parts of the Mass, and other sacramental rites).⁵⁵ In order to retain the universality of its rites, the Catholic Church gave preference to its primary liturgical language (Latin). While several mendicant friars puzzled over the best way to *explain* the concept of the Trinity in Nahuatl, at least some of the same friars chose Latin when it came to *invoking* the Trinity. Both Spaniards and Indians could use the same words: *In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. Amen.*⁵⁶

latin, y en romance, y á los Indios en su lengua." Emphasis added. The pagination in the edition used here skips pages 38 and 40.

⁵³The bishops elaborated somewhat on their language choices. For teaching the sign of the cross, they noted that using Latin and Castilian would help the faithful "to better *use and learn*" (for the full quotation, see the references above). For the long list of other teachings, they stated that using Latin, Castilian, as well as native tongues would help parishioners "to better *know and retain*." It is possible that the bishops purposely chose these different words to describe the results of using distinct languages. They may have wished to suggest that using indigenous languages would aid in moving beyond memorization and onto a deeper comprehension of the teachings.

⁵⁴Accordingly, the Dominican friar Domingo de la Anunciación included the sign of the cross in Latin in his catechism, though he also provided more detailed explanations of it in Nahuatl. See Domingo de la Anunciación, *Doctrina xpiana breue y co[m]pendiosa por via de dialogo entre vn maestro y vn discipulo, sacada en le[n]gua castellana y mexicana* (Mexico: Pedro Ocharte, 1565), fol. 4v–8v. Published in dialogue format, the text included one column in Castilian and another in Nahuatl. When the time came for the master to teach the disciple the words of the sign of the cross, fray Domingo included it in Latin on both sides of the text (fol. 5r).

⁵⁵*The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, ed. and trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848). See Session 22, Doctrine on the Sacrifice of the Mass, Chapter VIII.

⁵⁶On the diversity of approaches taken in explaining and translating the concept of the Trinity, see David Tavárez, "Naming the Trinity: From Ideologies of Translation to Dialectics of Reception in Colonial Nahua Texts, 1547–1771," *Colonial Latin American Review* 9, no. 1 (2000): 21–47.

The bishops frequently recommended using more than one language in order to cultivate accurate knowledge about Christian teachings. They knew that many adults who sought to convert (here, they included Indians as well as Africans) received baptism without sufficient instruction.⁵⁷ To encourage instruction in Christian doctrine, the bishops proposed that every parish church assemble a display board summarizing the essential Christian teachings both in Castilian and in “the language of the *indios*” and place it in a central location so that these fundamentals of the Catholic faith “could be seen and read by all.”⁵⁸ Probably to assist the many individuals who could not read, the council encouraged all pastors to take time during the Mass to read aloud the contents of this display board.⁵⁹ Whether pastors actually read the contents in both Castilian and the local native language remains unclear. But by calling for the use of both languages, the bishops highlight once again that they did not actively seek to propagate one language over another. The bishops seem to have advocated the use of indigenous languages to a greater degree than Martín de Valencia did. Yet both Valencia and the bishops had common ground in that they attributed value to more than one language.

VII. WRITTEN LANGUAGE

The Mexican bishops also mirrored Martín de Valencia in another way. Though they encouraged churchmen to use the local languages, the bishops expressed some suspicion regarding indigenous languages as used by natives. For instance, Montúfar and the bishops declared that Indians could have neither

⁵⁷“Concilio Primero,” in *Concilios Provinciales* (1555), Cap. I, 42–43: “Porque somos informados, que los Adultos, que *se quieren convertir á nuestra Santa Fé Catholica, assi de los Indios Gentiles naturales de la tierra, como de los Negros de Guinea*, y otras sectas, que á esta Nueva España concurren, no son instruidos suficientemente en las cosas, que han de creer, antes de ser bautizados, y en otras, que el Derecho dispone, antes sin saber los Negros, y los demas nuestra lengua, ni entender bien lo que hacen, se les da el Sacramento de el Bautismo.” Emphasis added.

⁵⁸The reader will note that having display boards in indigenous languages probably did not help Africans. It seems that the bishops at this point advocated teaching Africans in Castilian. In the record of the third council, the bishops addressed the matter explicitly but briefly.

⁵⁹The bishops suggested reading the contents of the display board especially during the weeks that preceded the celebration of Easter. “Concilio Primero,” in *Concilios Provinciales* (1555), Cap. I, 41: “Y porque lo sobredicho mejor sea guardado, mandamos, que en cada una de las Iglesias Parroquiales de todo nuestro Arzobispado, y Provincia, se ponga una tabla, que Nos mandamos ordenar, assi en romance como *en la lengua de los Indios*, en que se contengan sumariamente las cosas susodichas; la qual mandamos, que esté colgada en lugar manifiesto, porque *sea vista, y leida por todos*. Otrrosi mandamos á todos los Curas, que agora son, ó seran de aquí adelante, que en todos los Domingos de el Adviento, y desde el Domingo de la Septuagesima hasta la Dominica *in Passione inclusive*, lean, y declaren al Pueblo las cosas contenidas en la dicha tabla en la Missa mayor después de el Ofertorio.” Emphases added.

sermons (*sermones*) nor catechisms (*doctrinas*) in their own languages, unless a cleric or a religious with advanced knowledge of the given language first examined it.⁶⁰ The bishops' comments imply that some natives possessed illicit texts (that is, without official approval from the viceroy and the Church), probably in manuscript form.⁶¹ The bishops had two concerns with these texts: not only that the natives might have misunderstood the content, but also that the translation might have contained errors or gaps. While the bishops ordered the confiscation of sermons in the possession of Mesoamerican natives, they did not close the door on producing texts in indigenous languages. They approved the distribution of "good" catechisms or sermons for the Indians, texts that they believed natives could understand and that had received approval by the appropriate authorities (to avoid falsification of content).⁶² The bishops took a similar stance when considering natives' use of traditional, indigenous-language songs: they could sing them as long as the relevant authorities had examined them to guard against profane content.⁶³ Altogether, the bishops demonstrated suspicion regarding indigenous-language media, but they did not advocate the use of Castilian to the exclusion of native tongues.

The bishops expressed concerns not only about indigenous-language texts, but also regarding Castilian ones. They requested that all "suspicious" books be examined by ecclesiastical authorities and also, more specifically, that certain books "composed in our Castilian vernacular be shown and presented to us." Individuals who sold such books to natives, furthermore, "caused God a major offense."⁶⁴ The bishops' position implies that proficiency in Castilian among natives had grown significantly by 1555. Of primary interest here, though, the bishops do not seem to have preferred Castilian-language books over indigenous-language ones. Rather, they extended suspicion to books in both European and indigenous languages. Rather than

⁶⁰Because the text mentions sermons together with catechisms and makes references to translation and inspection by a learned cleric, the reference to "*sermones*" concerns not spoken sermons but written texts.

⁶¹For a useful overview of the different kinds of religious texts that circulated in colonial Mexico, see chapter two of Christensen, *Nahua and Maya Catholicisms*.

⁶²"Concilio Primero," in *Concilios Provinciales* (1555), Cap. LXIX.

⁶³*Ibid.*, Cap. LXXII. These policies (especially the one regarding the use of indigenous songs) mirror those of Hernando de Talavera, the archbishop of Granada (1493–1507), and indicate that his attempts to use Islamic songs were not entirely unique.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, Cap. LXXIV, 149–150: "So pena de Excomunion mandamos á todos los que tuvieren un Libro, que dicen de las suertes, compuesto en nuestro vulgar Castellano, lo exhiban, y presenten á Nos y á los Diocesanos, dentro de seis dias, despues que esta nuestra Constitucion fuere pronunciada, y viniere á su noticia, y so la dicha pena de Excomunion, y de cinquenta pesos de minas, nadie venda el dicho Libro á los Indios, porque de ello se ofende Dios gravemente." Emphasis added.

propagate one language over another, the bishops seem primarily concerned with ensuring orthodoxy.⁶⁵

Similar to their concerns regarding translation and popular comprehension of doctrine, Mexico's bishops expressed worry over variation in religious instruction. In the fourth chapter of the council, the bishops noted that: "All variety ought to be avoided because it can bring confusion in the catechesis and instruction of the *indios*."⁶⁶ Recognizing the variety of methods for instructing the native peoples, the bishops ordered the production of two uniform catechisms, "the first one abridged, without gloss, containing all the things described above in the first constitution, and the other one containing a substantial exposition of the articles of faith, the commandments, the mortal sins, as well as the Our Father, and let them be translated into many languages and printed."⁶⁷ That the bishops ordered multiple translations of the two catechisms is striking, for they desired to avoid variation at all costs. Here, they departed from Martín de Valencia, who viewed the existence of multiple indigenous languages as an impediment to church governance. The bishops expressed relatively less concern. That is not to suggest that they entertained the notion that translation did not affect the meaning of a text.⁶⁸ Instead, it seems that the bishops considered it possible to maintain the essential uniformity of doctrine in spite of the process of translation.⁶⁹ While both Valencia and the bishops acknowledged the value of having churchmen who used indigenous languages, the bishops seem less anxious about the multiplicity of native tongues.

⁶⁵It is possible that the bishops' concern with Castilian-language texts may have had to do with a certain paternalism regarding the native peoples. Shirley Heath has noted that some Spaniards opposed teaching Castilian and Latin to the Mesoamerican natives. In this line of thought, making sure that the Indians only knew their native language would keep them in a separate social class. Heath, *Telling Tongues*, 28–31.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, Cap. IV, 45: "Evitarse debía toda variedad, que puede traer confusión en la Doctrina, y enseñamiento de los Indios."

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, Cap. IV, 45: "La una breve, y sin glosa, que contenga las cosas arriba en la primera Constitucion señaladas, y la otra con declaración substancial de los Artículos de la Fé, y Mandamientos, y Pecados mortales, con la declaración de el *Pater noster*."

⁶⁸Montufar and two other bishops (Tomás de Casillas of Chiapas and Martín Sarmiento de Hojacastro of Tlaxcala) were mendicant friars and thus had conferees engaged deeply in linguistic work. Furthermore, by the time that the 1555 Provincial Council met, translation work had been underway for decades in a variety of indigenous languages. Thus, it seems unlikely that the bishops would have underestimated the challenges of translation.

⁶⁹Recent, erudite work by Mark Christensen, for instance, partially bears out this discussion. He has argued that Nahuatl and Maya religious texts, "all preached Catholicism to be sure but different versions of Catholicism." See Christensen, *Nahua and Maya Catholicisms*, 3. Despite these "different versions," Christensen notes, "Generally speaking, most texts—even unofficial ones—prescribed similar translations of the basic doctrines, including the Decalogue, the Lord's prayer, and the Creed." See *ibid.*, 123. Though the texts generally agree on the key tenets, Christensen aptly suggests that Maya and Nahua natives probably understood some of those core teachings, such as baptism, in very different ways given their distinctive cultural heritages.

VIII. "IF THE MINISTER IS NOT PROFICIENT IN THE LANGUAGE":
CONTINGENCY PLANS AT THE SECOND PROVINCIAL COUNCIL (1565)

Approximately ten years after the First Provincial Council, Archbishop Montúfar convened the Second Provincial Council.⁷⁰ Given that the Council of Trent (1545–1563) had come to a close, Philip II ordered each archbishop in his kingdoms to convene a provincial council in order to implement the decrees from Trent.⁷¹ Compared to the 93 capitula produced at the first council, the second council left behind a shorter record, with 28 capitula. The bishops developed a shorter document because they wished to reaffirm the first council, adding to and not replacing the previous capitula. Brevity aside, the second council adds further complexity to language practices in the early colonial period.

Like the bishops at the first council, the Mexican bishops in 1565 exhorted priests to learn the local languages: "For the conversion of the natives, it is necessary to know their languages, for without understanding them, [clerics can offer] neither effective catechesis nor the administration of sacraments. Thus, we order and command that all pastors put great diligence into learning the languages of their regions, and should they be negligent in this duty, they will be removed from their village and will not be sent to another."⁷² Although they reiterated the value of having clerics who know indigenous languages, the bishops at the second council made a slight change in their position this time around. They did not order all clerics to learn indigenous languages; instead, the bishops specifically referred to pastors.⁷³ While the bishops now required language study from a marginally

⁷⁰Lundberg, *Unification and Conflict*, 94–95. Also present at the Second Provincial Council were Fr. Tomás de Casillas, Bishop of Chiapas; Fernando de Villa Gómez, Bishop of Tlaxcala; Fr. Francisco del Toral, Bishop of Yucatán; Fr. Pedro de Ayala, Bishop of New Galicia; and Fr. Bernardo de Albuquerque, Bishop of Oaxaca.

⁷¹The Council of Trent, the most significant council in the early modern Catholic Church, took place partly as a reaction to the criticisms of Martin Luther and other reformers and partly in response to generations of internal calls for reform. The delegates at the council initiated a wide range of reforms, many of which aimed to reform the clergy. See John W. O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁷²"Concilio Segundo," in *Concilios Provinciales* (1565), Cap. XIX, 199: "Necesario es para la conversion de los Naturales saber sus Lenguas, pues sin entendellas no pueden ser bien doctrinados, ni administrados en los Santos Sacramentos, S.A.C. ordenamos, y mandamos, que todos los Curas pongan gran diligencia en deprender las Lenguas de sus distritos, so pena, que siendo negligentes en esto, seran removidos de el Pueblo en que estuvieren, y no seran proveidos en otro."

⁷³Pastor "denotes a priest who has the cure of souls (*cura animarum*), that is, who is bound in virtue of his office to promote the spiritual welfare of the faithful by preaching, administering the sacraments, and exercising certain powers of external government." Hector Papi, "Pastor," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 11 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911). The pastor differs from the normal parish priest mainly in that the pastor holds administrative authority over

smaller portion of the clergy, they adopted a more rigorous position, threatening to remove delinquent pastors and not reassign them.

The bishops' repeated exhortations related to indigenous languages—as well as the threat of removing non-compliant pastors—should not be taken as suggesting that all or even most priests failed to learn indigenous languages. In fact, the opposite seems to be true. Recent research has indicated that in parishes where natives constituted the majority of the population, they did have priests who could function in an indigenous language. But not all indigenous languages were equal. Finding priests who knew Nahuatl or Otomi did not present a major obstacle. Many young men during the second half of the sixteenth century would have known Nahuatl, in particular. But the indigenous communities that used less common languages—like Huastec or Chontal—were likely to struggle in obtaining a priest who could communicate in the local tongue.⁷⁴ It is plausible, thus, that when the bishops insisted that pastors know indigenous languages, they actually were most concerned with providing competent pastors to the communities that spoke languages other than Nahuatl or Otomi. In finalizing the decrees of the council, therefore, the bishops demonstrated the geographical range of their concerns, establishing practices not only for the central valley of Mexico, but for all of their constituencies.

When they ordered pastors to study indigenous languages, the bishops seemed aware that they needed a contingency plan. Even if every pastor did learn a native tongue, he still might not have known the language of each of his parishioners. The bishops, therefore, expected that situations would arise in which the only cleric available might not know a person's language. Accordingly, the bishops made provisions for such cases. For instance, they allowed—in limited cases—a cleric to administer the sacrament of confession through an interpreter:

If the minister is not proficient in the language, we order that he visit the sick person with an interpreter and, through the interpreter, encourage [the sick person] to die well. If, by chance, the sick person asks for confession by interpreter, understanding that he is not required to do so but would take advantage of increased security for his conscience, the minister may in

the parish. That said, the distinction between a pastor and a parish priest probably did not matter for most of New Spain. Most people probably had just one priest (their pastor), and many only would have seen him occasionally. A report from the diocese of Tlaxcala attests to the fact that priests regularly traveled from one village to another, with upwards of 1,000 and even 2,000 people assigned to one priest. "Relación del distrito y pueblos del Obispado de Tlaxcala," in *Epistolario de Nueva España: 1505–1818*, vol. 14, ed. Francisco del Paso y Troncoso (Mexico: Antigua Librería Robredo, 1939–1942), 70–101.

⁷⁴The information in this paragraph is indebted to Schwaller, "The Expansion of Nahuatl," 679.

this case confess him via the interpreter, as long as the interpreter is a religious or a well-trusted Spaniard of good conscience.⁷⁵

The notion of administering confession by an interpreter seems, of course, inimical to the confidential nature of the sacrament. For this reason, the cleric could only encourage—not oblige—the dying person to take confession. Despite the less-than-ideal nature of confession by interpreter, the Mexican bishops clearly wanted to have back-up plans for when priests and Indians did not speak the same language.⁷⁶

Although evidence suggests that priests who spoke Nahuatl and Otomi were relatively abundant compared to those who spoke Chocho or Tzendal, for example, the bishops' record from the council still suggests a more general problem related to all indigenous languages. According to the bishops, clerics sufficiently proficient to preach or hear confessions in native languages could be hard to find:

When the prelate, some vicars, or pastors and their parishioners ask and plead with clerics to go and preach or hear the confessions of the natives of the villages where they live, it is a highly meritorious and necessary duty to which they are accustomed; we beg and entrust them to do so, especially where the vicar or pastor does not know the language, for it is known that we do not have the abundance of ministers necessary for these needs.⁷⁷

The bishops had exhorted—and in some cases, required—priests to learn the local indigenous language. But some clerics had learned it well enough only to teach (that is, to read) basic Catholic doctrine. Their minimal facility with

⁷⁵“Concilio Segundo,” in *Concilios Provinciales* (1565), Cap. V, 191: “Y si el tal Ministro no fuere Lengua, mandamos, que con un Intérprete visite al dicho enfermo, y anime por el dicho Intérprete á bien morir, y si por ventura el tal enfermo pidiere Confesion por Intérprete, entendiendo, que no es obligado á ello, pero que aprovecha para mas seguridad de su conciencia, que en tal caso lo confiese por el dicho Intérprete, siendo el Intérprete Religioso, ó Español de buena confianza, y conciencia.”

⁷⁶It is worth noting here that if the interpreter were not a religious, the bishops preferred a “well-trusted Spaniard” and not just a person of any background. Probably because Spaniards came from a long Christian heritage, a “well-trusted Spaniard” seemed more dependable than someone who had converted relatively recently. Other churchmen also discussed alternative methods of administering the sacrament of confession. For a later source, see Fr. Juan Bautista, *Advertencias para los confesores de los naturales*, 2 vols. (Mexico: Pedro Ocharte, 1600–1601). He would indicate that confession could, in the absence of an interpreter, be administered to a dying person through sign or body language.

⁷⁷“Concilio Segundo,” in *Concilios Provinciales* (1565), Cap. VII, 192: “Item, que quando el Prelado, ó algunos Vicarios, ó Curas, sus vecinos pidieren, y rogaren á los Clérigos, que vayan á predicar, ó confesar á los Naturales de los Pueblos, donde ellos residen, pues es obra tan meritoria, y necesaria, y de las que ellos acostumbran, les rogamos, y encargamos, que assi lo hagan, y en especial donde acaece el tal Vicario, ó Cura no ser Lengua, pues consta, que no hay la copia de Ministros, que hemos menester para la tal administración.”

the given language prevented them from using it to preach or administer the sacrament of confession. The bishops did not clarify whether this problem arose more frequently with regard to less common languages. But it does seem that those clerics who did know a native language very well might receive requests to serve as itinerant priests, for not every parish would have someone with a high level of linguistic facility.

This reliance upon interpreters and itinerant preachers recalls another situation, which the bishops discussed in the first council, ten years earlier. At that meeting, the bishops present recommended that natives could provide instruction in Christian doctrine when priests were not available. The bishops called for “two or three well-instructed, trustworthy *Indios* to teach Christian doctrine to children and to other individuals who do not know it.”⁷⁸ In suggesting that natives serve as teachers, the bishops sought a contingency plan, hoping to ensure that as many indigenous people as possible would receive instruction, regardless of whether a priest was present. Besides wanting to cover more ground, it also seems possible that the bishops expected that some priests simply would not comply with the order to learn native languages. Thus, instead of relying entirely upon potentially delinquent priests, the bishops sought to provide religious instruction by as many parties as possible.⁷⁹ Therefore, when the bishops allowed for confession-by-interpreter and for itinerant preachers, they acted according to precedent. The leading figures of the Mexican Church already had experience in making recommendations and developing back-up plans in case their ideals did not come to fruition.

Although the bishops encouraged priests to learn local languages, they also implied that clerics did not have to know an indigenous tongue in order to serve the natives. For instance, the bishops set the expectation that priests would celebrate Mass every day in the mornings so that the natives could participate: “We order that all those who have the duty of catechesis and of overseeing some native villages in our archbishopric and province celebrate Mass early in the morning in their assigned locale, so that the natives can listen to it and put themselves in the hands of God, and having heard the Mass, they can tend to their jobs and labors.”⁸⁰ Given the Council of Trent’s

⁷⁸“Concilio Primero,” in *Concilios Provinciales* (1555), Cap. LXVI, 141: “*Donde no obiere Ministros, que tengan cuidado de las dichas Escuelas, que no las haya, mas de que en cada Pueblo se pongan dos, ó tres Indios de confianza bien instruidos, que enseñen la Doctrina Christiana á los niños, y á los que no la saben.*” Emphasis added.

⁷⁹The bishops recognized an already-existing practice in which priests who primarily spoke Castilian relied upon the help of indigenous Christians.

⁸⁰“Concilio Segundo,” in *Concilios Provinciales* (1565), Cap. VIII, 192–193: “Gran cuidado deben tener los Ministros de la Iglesia, en especial los Curas, en que sus Feligreses sean devotos, y buenos Christianos, y ayudarles, quanto pudieren á ello, especialmente á estos Naturales, que tienen mas necesidad por ser Gente nueva en la Fé: Por tanto, S.A.C. ordenamos,

protection of celebrating the Mass in Latin and the frequent difficulty of finding priests who knew the local languages, the sources above give no reason to question that the Mass was celebrated in Latin. Despite the fact that only a very small number of natives would have had training in Latin, the bishops still expected that Mesoamerican Indians could meaningfully participate in something celebrated in a foreign language, listening and putting “themselves in the hands of God.” Therefore, although the bishops consistently encouraged and often required priests to study indigenous languages, the individuals who did not comply still played a key part in the Mexican Church, whether by collaborating with interpreters or in celebrating the Latin Mass. Finally, by supporting the study of indigenous languages and celebrating the Mass in Latin, the bishops further encouraged the linguistic coexistence of New Spain.

IX. “IN THE VERNACULAR TONGUE, IF NEED BE”: ADAPTING PRACTICES AT THE THIRD PROVINCIAL COUNCIL OF MEXICO (1585)

In 1585 Archbishop Pedro Moya de Contreras convened the Third Provincial Council. He probably did so for a combination of reasons: first, several years had passed since the last council, and thus, Moya wished to address new circumstances within the Mexican Church; second, the first two councils had not received official approval from the papacy. Compared to the two previous provincial councils, the third seems to have elaborated the most long-lasting set of guidelines for the Mexican Church (the next provincial council would not take place until 1770).⁸¹

The council simultaneously set out to evangelize New Spain while promulgating the decrees of the Council of Trent.⁸² Taking Trent as its point of departure, though, by no means implied to churchmen that they were unequivocally imposing European norms on a New World Church. Accordingly, Juan de la Serna, a later archbishop of Mexico, wrote in 1622

y mandamos, que todos los que tuvieren cargo de doctrinar, y administrar algunos Pueblos de los Naturales, en nuestro Arzobispado, y Provincia, temprano en sus Partidos, digan Misa de mañana, que los dichos Naturales la puedan oír, y encomendarse á Dios, y oída, irse á sus trabajos, y labores.” Emphasis added.

⁸¹Stafford Poole, *Pedro Moya de Contreras: Catholic Reform and Royal Power in New Spain, 1571–1591* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 154–155.

⁸²Like the Council of Trent (1545–1563), which promulgated teachings that would remain largely intact for the Catholic Church as a whole until the First Vatican Council (1869–1870), scholars recognize the Third Provincial Council of Mexico as having a similarly long-lasting influence. The Fourth Provincial Council of Mexico would not take place until 1770. See Poole, *Pedro Moya de Contreras*.

that the decrees of the Third Council, “corresponded to the doctrine of the ancient Church Fathers, conformed to the decrees of the holy councils and common law, and also were very much adjusted to the customs of this region and the condition of its people.”⁸³ In taking into account the local conditions of Mexico, the bishops present at the council followed the precedent set by their predecessors and encouraged priests to use indigenous languages. But again, the bishops demonstrated a practical mindset, advocating different languages depending upon the situation.

The bishops at the Third Provincial Council affirmed much from the first and second councils.⁸⁴ For instance, bishops continued to call for priests to preach in the indigenous languages: “For the Indians, Christian doctrine shall be delivered in their own mother tongue.”⁸⁵ While some scholars of colonial Mexico generally view the idealism of the early missionaries as waning in the late-sixteenth century, bishops continued to call for instruction in the local tongues. Yet the rule would vary, depending upon the particular audience that Catholic ministers sought to evangelize.

At the council, the bishops adopted a different strategy to foster the study of indigenous languages. The bishops at earlier councils had sustained their position by indicating that priests who did not study native tongues either would not serve the Indians (first council), or that a pastor would lose his position and not receive another (second council). At the third council, the bishops concluded that priests who study native tongues should receive benefits for the time they invested: “Weighing carefully how much need there is in this province for ministers well-versed in the mother tongue of the Indians, this synod determines that those who know some language of the Indians be promoted to Holy Orders, even if they have not obtained a benefice, assets, or a salary that suitably provide for their sustainment.”⁸⁶

⁸³Catholic Church, *Concilio III provincial mexicano, celebrado en Mexico en el año de 1585, confirmado en Roma por el papa Sixto V, y mandado observar por el gobierno español, en diversas reales ordenes* (Mexico: E. Maillfert, 1859), Pastoral del Illmo. Serna, 4: “Municipales leges fuerunt conditae, consonantes quidem Patrum antiquorum Doctrinae, Sacrorum Conciliorum Decretis. juri communi conformes, maximeque regionis istius moribus, et hominum conditioni aptatae.”

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, Titulus II (De Constitutionibus), De Auctoritate Decretorum et Publicatione eorum, Cap. I (Decreta praecedentium Synodorum abrogantur), 26–27.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, Titulus I (De Summa Trinitate, et Fide Catholica), De Doctrina Christiana Rudibus Tradenda, Cap. III (Cura Parochorum in tradenda et explananda Doctrina), 16–17: “Hispanis autem, et servis Aetiopibus, iis etiam, qui ex altero parente Aetiope nascuntur, et Chichimechis Doctrina Christiana, lingua Hispanica, tradatur; Indis vero propria sua materna.”

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, Titulus IV (De Aetate, et Qualitate Ordinandorum et Praeficiendorum), De Titulo Beneficii aut Patrimonii, Cap. I (Nullus clericus secularis ad ordines admittatur, nisi beneficium habeat), 42–43: “Perpendens tamen haec Synodus, quanta in hac Provincia sit necessitas Ministrorum, maternam indigenarum linguam callentium, decernit, ut qui linguam aliquam Indorum noverint, ad Sacros Ordines promoveantur, etiamsi beneficium, Patrimonium, vel pensio ab eis obtenta talia non sint, quae congrue victum suppeditare possint.”

Secular clerics (those priests who belonged to no religious order and answered directly to the bishop) who knew an indigenous language would receive permission to skip one of the normal requisites for receiving the sacrament of Holy Orders. With knowledge of the local language, then, came privileged status for secular clerics. The bishops thus developed something like an incentive-based system to encourage clerics to learn indigenous languages.

Just as the bishops at the third council continued to exhort priests to study local languages, they also maintained the previous support extended toward catechisms in native tongues. In line with prior practice in Mexico and with the Council of Trent, Moya de Contreras and the bishops required the translation of the catechism into the primary indigenous language of each diocese.⁸⁷ In the decades following the council, members of different religious orders continued to produce indigenous-language catechisms and other doctrinal texts.⁸⁸ These volumes contained several of the basic prayers and tenets of the Catholic faith, including but not limited to the Apostles' Creed, *Salve Regina*, *Pater Noster*, *Ave Maria*, and Ten Commandments, generally printed in Latin in one column and in the relevant indigenous language in another. These texts served as crucial aids to churchmen (and to natives) who instructed Mesoamerican peoples in Catholic doctrine. Adults who presented themselves to receive the sacrament of baptism, in principle, had to recite in their own language at least the *Pater Noster*, the Apostles' Creed, and the Ten Commandments, as well as demonstrate some contrition for their sins.⁸⁹ The catechism thus provided a foundation for studying Christian doctrine. By publishing these texts in indigenous languages, the bishops demonstrated their ongoing support both for the instruction and the recitation of basic doctrine in native tongues. By often including Latin and/

⁸⁷Ibid., Titulus I (De Summa Trinitate, et Fide Catholica), De Doctrina Christiana Rudibus Tradenda, Cap. I (Doctrina Christiana uniformiter doceatur ad normam Catechismi Concilii Auctoritate dispositi), 15: "Episcopi etiam admonentur, ut quam primum Catechismum hunc in eam Indorum linguam transferri faciant, quam singuli in suis Diocesisibus usitatiorem noverint." In making this statement, the Mexican bishops followed the Council of Trent, Session XXIV, Decree on Reformation, Chapter VII. See *The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent*, ed. and trans. J. Waterworth.

⁸⁸Prior to the third council, Archbishop Moya de Contreras ordered the publication of the following catechism: Fray Melchior de Vargas, *Doctrina christiana, muy vtil, y necessaria en castellano, mexicano y otomí: traducida en lengua otomí* (Mexico: Pedro Balli, 1576). Among the many later catechisms are Francisco Vergara, *Cartilla de la doctrina cristiana en lengua matlatzinga* (Mexico: Diego López de Avalos, 1602); Alonso de Molina, *Doctrina cristiana traducida en lengua mexicana* (Mexico: s.n., 1606); Diego de Ledesma, *Tres catecismos de la doctrina cristiana* (Mexico: Jerónimo Balli, 1609); and Juan Coronel, *Doctrina christiana, en lengua de maya* (Mexico: Diego Garrido, 1620).

⁸⁹*Concilio III provinciali mexicano*, Titulus I (De Summa Trinitate, et Fide Catholica), De Sacramentis Doctrinae Christianae Ignaris non Administrandis, Cap. I (Ad Baptismum nullus admittatur, nisi Doctrinam Christianam bene calleat), 20.

or Castilian together with the relevant indigenous language, authors underlined the continued status of the Mexican Church as a multi-lingual one.

The ideal of preaching in the languages of the people, however, did not extend to all of the communities that inhabited Mexico. The bishops at the third council made some exceptions: they concluded that priests ought to use Castilian when teaching doctrine to African slaves and to the “Chichimec” peoples.⁹⁰ To provide a historical reference point for these policies, council leaders pointed to the twenty-fourth session of the Council of Trent:

In order that the faithful people may approach to the reception of the sacraments with greater reverence and devotion of mind, the holy Synod enjoins on all bishops, that . . . they shall first explain, in a manner suited to the capacity of those who receive them, the efficacy and use of those sacraments . . . by every parish priest; and this even in the vernacular tongue, if need be, and it can be conveniently done . . . in a catechism which the bishops shall take care to have faithfully translated into the vulgar tongue, and to have expounded to the people by all parish priests; as also that, during the solemnization of mass, or the celebration of the divine offices, they explain, in the said vulgar tongue, on all festivals, or solemnities, the sacred oracles, and the maxims of salvation.⁹¹

The decree’s reference to “the vernacular tongue” suggests that priests had to use the language of the people. But the delegates from Trent only *encouraged* the use of the vernacular “if need be and it can be conveniently done.” Thus, they allowed a loophole, as it were, for difficult situations. Something about the Africans and Chichimecs, therefore, led the bishops to suggest a different approach.

Why did the bishops wish to use the vernaculars of most communities yet not those of the Chichimecs or Africans? Taking their cue from the Nahuas, Spaniards viewed the Chichimecs as fierce, itinerant peoples; they only managed to achieve *some* level of peace with them in the early seventeenth century.⁹² Given the difficulties that the Chichimec communities posed to the Spaniards, it seems likely that churchmen had a difficult time engaging with them, let alone learning their languages. Furthermore, “Chichimeca” functioned as a blanket term for individuals from several different groups (the principal ones were the Pames, Guamares, Zacatecos, and Guachichiles). Thus learning one language may not have helped churchmen to

⁹⁰The Nahuas coined the term “*Chichimeca*” (“barbarian”) to refer to indigenous communities that inhabited the area coinciding with present-day northern Mexico. See Frances Karttunen, *An Analytical Dictionary of Nahuatl* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992). See Fernando Operé, *Indian Captivity in Spanish America: Frontier Narratives* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 139.

⁹¹*Council of Trent*, J. Waterworth, Session XXIV, Decree on Reformation, Chapter VII.

⁹²Operé, *Indian Captivity in Spanish America*, 139.

communicate with all the “Chichimecas.” The evangelization of African slaves seems to have posed similar problems. As the property of Spaniards, Africans generally had limited contact with missionaries. Furthermore, African slaves often did not live with other slaves who spoke their native languages. Thus, learning one African language would not necessarily have enhanced communication with other African slaves in the same area. Therefore, for both the “Chichimecas” and for African slaves, Mexican bishops considered Castilian as the most practical option for communication.⁹³

While Moya de Contreras and the other Mexican bishops generally called for preaching in indigenous languages, this approach applied largely to adults. To receive baptism, adults had to demonstrate at least that they could recite basic Catholic prayers in their own language: “This synod establishes that no pastor—whether secular or regular—bestow the sacrament of baptism to adults if beforehand they have not been instructed in the Catholic faith or have not at the very least learned in their own language the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, the Ten Commandments of the Law, and show some sign of grief concerning their own sins.”⁹⁴ The bishops implied here that adult Indians would do better to go beyond the basic requirement of learning prayers in their own language. Perhaps the bishops hoped that the natives would also learn additional prayers in their own language, or maybe they viewed the memorization of the same prayers in Latin as a better practice. Nonetheless, reciting the fundamental prayers in their own language remained a licit practice. In a similar vein, the bishops indicated that: “To use songs that bring back memory of their old history and of false religious practices shall never be permitted, with the exception that they may sing only those which are approved by their pastors and vicars.”⁹⁵ Indigenous songs, then, remained permissible as long as they contained no content that priests deemed redolent of “idolatry.” The Church’s desire to use indigenous languages within a circumscribed space reveals, on the one hand, a desire to extirpate “idolatrous” indigenous practices, yet on the other hand, it also

⁹³Their discussion about how to approach these populations indicates that in 1585, Mexico’s bishops followed their predecessors in attempting to meet the needs of all of their jurisdictions, not only for the “core area” of the central valley, but also for the peripheries of New Spain.

⁹⁴*Concilio III provincial mexicano*, Titulus I (De Summa Trinitate, et Fide Catholica), De Sacramentis Doctrinae Christianae Ignaris non Administrandis, Cap. I (Ad Baptismum nullus admittatur, nisi Doctrinam Christianam bene calleat), 20: “Statuit haec Synodus, ut nullus Curatus, sive Secularis, sive Regularis, Sacramentum Baptismi adultis tribuat, si prius Fide Catholica instructi non fuerint, aut saltem lingua sua familiari non didicerunt Orationem Dominicam, Symbolum Apostolorum, decem Praecepta legis, ac de peccatis suis aliquod doloris signum praebeant.”

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, Titulus I (De Summa Trinitate, et Fide Catholica), De Impedimentis Propiae Salutis, ab Indis Removendis, Cap. I (Circa Indorum saltationes, ac ludos observanda), 23: “Cantiunculis, etiam veteres suas historias, falsaeque Religionis impietates referentibus uti, nequaquam permittantur, sed ea solum cantent, quae á suis Parochis, et Vicariis fuerint approbata.”

betrays a conviction that within the right context, Amerindian languages could become Catholic ones.

Adults could use their native languages to demonstrate their Christian identity, but the bishops adopted a different approach for indigenous children. They expected these younger ones to learn Castilian: “The pastors of Indians—both seculars and regulars—ought to diligently pursue that schools be established in those cities, districts, or villages where they reside, so that the children of Indians may learn to read and write, receive instruction in Christian doctrine, and be taught the Spanish language. For [Spanish] is most helpful for their Christian and civil education.”⁹⁶ For the bishops in 1585, the purpose of teaching Castilian to native children lay primarily—if not exclusively—in facilitating their conversion to Christianity. They noted, accordingly, that: “When children have attained basic literacy, school teachers must strive to give them elementary instruction in doctrine and Christian customs.”⁹⁷ The bishops’ decree on the subject of children’s education, however, did not constitute an entirely new development. Rather, it mirrored a statement from the First Provincial Council, when the bishops indicated that instruction of children in reading and writing should not be taught apart from Christian doctrine.⁹⁸ Still, the emphasis on learning Castilian seems stronger in the third council.

The children who learned Castilian could provide important assistance to missionaries in evangelizing their parents through their own languages. One letter from a Jesuit in western Mexico indicated, “[The natives] go to church, singing ‘Te Deum laudamus [We praise you, God].’ When they eagerly pursue prayer during some space of time, the native boys, whom the Fathers brought with them to the service, teach their parents Christian doctrine in a brief declaration, through a sermon in the dialogical, vernacular style of the Indians.”⁹⁹ In this case, the children had learned an aspect of Christian

⁹⁶Ibid., Titulus I (De Summa Trinitate, et Fide Catholica), De Doctrina Christiana Rudibus Tradenda, Cap. V (Parochi Scholarum erectionem promoveant), 18: “Indorum Curati, tam Seculares, quam Regulares omni diligentia procurerent, ut in illis oppidis, pagis, seu vicis, in quibus ipsi resident, Scholae [sic—Scholae] instituantur, ubi Indorum pueri legere, et scribere discant, Christianae Doctrinae documenta accipiant, Hispanamque linguam doceantur. Id enim maxime conveniens est ad Christianam, ac civilem eorum institutionem.”

⁹⁷Ibid., Titulus I (De Summa Trinitate, et Fide Catholica), De Doctrina Christiana Rudibus Tradenda, Cap. IV (Id etiam Ludi Magistri exequantur), 17–18: “Ludi Magistri studeant, pueros cum primis litterarum rudimentis Doctrina, Christianis moribus imbuere.”

⁹⁸*Concilios provinciales primero y segundo: celebrados en la muy noble, y muy leal ciudad de México, presidiendo el ill[ustrissi]mo., y rmo. señor don fr: Alonso de Montúfar, en los años de 1555, y 1565* (Mexico: Joseph Antonio de Hoyal, 1769).

⁹⁹*Monumenta Mexicana*, ed. Félix Zubillaga, vol. 1, 1570–1580 (Rome: Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu, 1956), 147: “Mox ad ecclesiam se conferunt, Te Deum laudamus modulantes. Cumque per aliquod temporis spatium orationi institerint, pueri, quos Patres ad id munus secum ferunt, christianam doctrinam cum eius brevi declaratione, dialogistico stylo vulgari indorum sermone eos docent.”

doctrine from their Jesuit teachers and then imparted the same lesson to their parents. As speakers of both Castilian and their own language (in this case P'urhépecha), the children could serve as intermediaries between their parents and the Jesuits.

In the last quarter of the sixteenth century, churchmen continued to rely upon the assistance of natives as part of efforts to evangelize the indigenous communities of Mesoamerica. At the same time, however, they also proceeded with the production of new indigenous-language texts, providing additional aids to their fellow churchmen who sought to attain some facility with the local native tongues. Altogether, the bishops continued to encourage the use of indigenous languages, but they did so while calling for the use of Castilian among certain groups (for Africans, Chichimecs, as well as for all indigenous children).

X. CONCLUSION

In sixteenth-century Mexico, leading churchmen generally did not think about language in terms of a debate between two exclusive options: indigenous languages or Castilian. While churchmen did see themselves as part of a battle, pitting Christianity against indigenous “idolatry,” they did not engage in a parallel conflict between European and native languages. It is true that Mexico’s clerics largely advocated the study of native tongues, but their approaches were more complex. Given that concerns about language connected with a range of other issues—including theology, liturgy, race, and ethnicity—churchmen could not craft one or even a few fixed practices. Instead, because of the variety of language-related problems that arose, churchmen had to address specific problems first and then develop solutions that they considered appropriate to each situation. It is probably for this reason that the linguistic practices of the Spanish Church and Crown have seemed contradictory to many scholars. Churchmen could not separate language from other concerns, and thus, they had to adopt a practical decision-making process that eludes binary categories. It seems highly plausible to suggest that this kind of flexible thinking characterizes ecclesiastical thought in other areas.¹⁰⁰ Mexico’s churchmen often took each case as it came, and as a result, a uniform language policy did not take root in the sixteenth century. In fact, many would have thought it undesirable.

The bishops at Mexico’s provincial councils exhorted their fellow churchmen to study indigenous languages; at the same time, they

¹⁰⁰Lu Ann Homza’s work on early modern Spain supports this suggestion. Homza, *Religious Authority in the Spanish Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

acknowledged situations where other approaches might be necessary. Similarly, the Franciscan friar Martín de Valencia called for the introduction of Castilian among Mesoamerican Indians, indicating that New Spain could become a “land of one language,” if its pastors insisted for fifty years on having their parishioners learn Castilian. But even he also valued the contributions made by other friars who facilitated the conversion of natives by learning indigenous languages. Valencia’s original position, calling for the propagation of Castilian as the sole language of New Spain, seems an outlier among Mexico’s most influential churchmen. But when he acknowledged the value of studying native tongues, he shared ground with other leading clerics, making space for more than one language. Through a series of ad hoc decisions, churchmen encouraged a *de facto* coexistence between Castilian and indigenous American languages. It was, therefore, not an unintended accident or a contradiction that the Spanish Crown wanted churchmen both to study indigenous languages *and* to instruct native peoples in Castilian. Variations on that outcome actually were desired by influential churchmen. The Crown seems to have taken its cue from them, incorporating this linguistic coexistence into the Laws of the Indies.

But why did Mexico’s churchmen generally not prioritize the establishment of one language above all others? Why, as Shirley Heath asked several decades ago, did the conquistadors fail either “to perpetuate Nahuatl as the standard tongue” or “to introduce Castilian in its place”? The answer to the latter, as other scholars have suggested, probably lies in the fact that Europeans did not have the numbers to successfully propagate Castilian among the millions of Mesoamerica’s native peoples.¹⁰¹ The evidence discussed throughout this essay suggests an additional part of the puzzle, namely, that many—probably most—sixteenth-century Europeans did not conceive of linguistic communication in terms of two exclusive options (that is, Castilian or indigenous languages). Having lived in the Iberian peninsula, among or near people who spoke different languages (for example, Arabic, Basque, Castilian, Catalan, Galician, Ladino), they would not have considered the simultaneous existence of multiple languages as unusual. Many sixteenth-century Iberians would have used one language (for example, Castilian, Galician) for most day-to-day purposes, would have heard another at church (that is, Latin), and could have heard yet another—or more—when they encountered people from other parts of Iberia or the Mediterranean.

When considering the decades that followed the initial contact between native Mesoamericans and Europeans, it is worth reconsidering the notion that Europeans debated over whether to communicate in one language or another. Instead, the reader might reflect upon how pre-modern Europeans

¹⁰¹For example, see Schwaller, “The Expansion of Nahuatl,” 675–676.

thought about communication. Though many national governments eventually would foster linguistic unity among their people, that goal may not have seemed so urgent for many of the individuals examined here. Though a monolingual, Castilian America indeed did appeal to a number of churchmen (and Spanish monarchs), it did not become the leading priority of conversion efforts in the sixteenth century. Instead, many—if not most—churchmen sought the conversion of the Indians with such zeal that no other agenda could trump their God-given task.

Scholars of the early modern world are well aware that the sixteenth century by no means witnessed a neat transfer of Christian religious ideals from European churchmen to Indians. Native peoples responded to Christianity in a variety of ways, often adapting the new religious teachings and practices within their own, existing worldviews. Accordingly, scholars of the early modern world have studied with much enthusiasm the myriad ways in which Amerindian communities understood and appropriated Christian doctrine.¹⁰²

Still, historians know only part of the reason why the sixteenth-century Spanish kingdoms witnessed such a diversity of religious practices “on the ground.” In investigating the highly complex world of early modern global Christianity, students of Latin American history must operate on the conviction that diversity existed not only among the masses, but also, crucially, among officials of the Crown and the Catholic Church. These individuals had their own complex ideas about how to communicate Christian doctrine.

Existing scholarship has revealed, of course, that early modern religious leaders had differing visions. The Reformation made the existence of difference abundantly clear. In the Spanish kingdoms, however, scholarship often has considered religious authorities in a dualistic framework: those who sympathized with evangelical reform and those who opposed it; the individuals who sought to educate the people, and those who seemed content with an ignorant congregation; those who saw the vernaculars as an opportunity, and those who feared them, associating them with heretics, infidels, or pagans. However, the leaders of the Spanish Church—including clerics at all levels, as well as the Crown—adopted surprisingly intricate positions when considering how to communicate Christianity to Spanish subjects. The complexity of their views is evident in the ways that they discussed language policies. I contend that those subtle differences played no small part in shaping the diverse landscape of religious belief and practice in the Spanish Americas.

¹⁰²For a survey of some important works that highlight this point, see Wasserman-Soler, “Language and Communication.”