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Black Catholicism: The Formation of Local Religion in Colonial Mexico

Krystle F. Sweda

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

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BLACK CATHOLICISM: THE FORMATION OF LOCAL RELIGION IN COLONIAL MEXICO

By

KRYSTLE FARMAN SWEDA

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2020
Black Catholicism: The Formation of Local Religion in Colonial Mexico

by

Krystle Farman Sweda

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

Black Catholicism: The Formation of Local Religion in Colonial Mexico

by

Krystle Farman Sweda

Advisor: Herman Bennett

“Black Catholicism: The Formation of Local Religion in Colonial Mexico” examines the emergence of Catholicism and its local expressions among Africans and their descendants in seventeenth-century New Spain. In that century, New Spain (the Spanish term for colonial Mexico) was home to the second largest enslaved population and the largest free black population in the Western Hemisphere. My research studies the intricate, generational process of Catholic conversion among Mexico’s black population and how that process affected the formation of local religion. Previous scholars have largely overlooked early Catholic efforts of African conversion in Latin America and presented Afro-Christianity as a superficial religion that competed with African traditions or deviated from Spanish Catholic norms. I instead offer a new perspective on Christian indoctrination and black religiosity in the New World by highlighting how traditional forms of Catholic instruction – notably confessional moments and clerical interventions – initiated religious exchanges that informed black religious knowledge. My work draws from Inquisition cases, ecclesiastical records, and confraternity constitutions to show how the Catholic Church shaped by the Tridentine reforms of the early modern era offered a space for multigenerational blacks to pursue personal relationships with clergymen, mendicant brothers, and the lay devout that enriched their Christian experience. With a focus on the daily
interracial social interactions in parochial centers, I argue that black parishioners with a profound knowledge of the Catholic faith became prominent lay figures who molded Christian practices. They navigated a complex social formation, composed of slaves, free blacks, Indians, Spaniards, and *castas* (racially mixed, non-Spanish persons), communicating their conceptions of the faith to their fellow parishioners. My findings broaden the scholarly depiction of Catholicism in the early modern Iberian world by recognizing black Catholics as engaged participants, active shapers, and, most importantly, cultural agents.
Acknowledgements

The monumental work of a dissertation can at times feel daunting and rather isolating. But, at other times, the act of researching and writing a doctoral thesis can bring together a vast array of people, both inside and outside of academia. As such, the completion of this dissertation requires a recognition of the profound gratitude that I hold for all the individuals who supported me and assisted me over the proceeding years. However, that said, the following acknowledgements cannot possibly shed light on all individuals who helped me through graduate school and the dissertation writing process. Regardless, it should serve as a start.

Without the help of my adviser, Herman Bennett, this project would not have succeeded in its initial stages. Through class work, independent studies, and the random drop-ins during my first three years of CUNY, he offered me direction and critical feedback that many graduate students would be jealous to receive. My committee members, Amy Chazkel, Sarah Covington, and Amanda Wunder supported the completion of the dissertation, offering me perspectives that pulled me out of the intense study of Afro-Mexico and into the history of modern Latin America and early modern religion. Collectively, I received the best professional training from the professors of the Graduate Center, City University of New York.

I could not have succeeded in writing this dissertation without the generous contributions of various libraries, foundations, and institutions. In the spring of 2017, the Huntington Library opened its doors to me with the Msgr. Francis J. Weber Fellowship, allowing me to complete a month of uninterrupted research in their Inquisition collection and to concentrate on the secondary readings that eventually shaped the direction of this project. Each summer the Graduate Center offered me fellowships through the Advanced Research Collective, the Early Research Initiative, the Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies, Renaissance Certificate Program, and the Office of Educational Opportunity and Diversity that took me to the
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Archivo General de Indios in Seville, Spain and the many archival sites in Mexico. Finally, the Graduate Center and the PhD Program in History awarded me with two consecutive years of dissertation writing fellows, the Florence Bloch Fellowship and the Paul Naish Dissertation Fellowship, that allowed me to concentrate on writing the dissertation without the distractions of other obligations. A final dissertation award from the Mellon-Sawyer Seminar on Cultures and Histories of Freedom offered a substantial amount that took me into the fall defense.

My time abroad in the archives of Spain and Mexico remains to this day some of my most memorable moments in academia. Travel in Seville, Mexico City, and Puebla introduced me to the rich culture, history, and culinary wonders the cities had to offer. During this travel I also encountered a number of people who quickly became supportive friends and colleagues. My gratitude especially goes out to Scarlett MacPherson and the Muñoz family for opening their doors to me during the five and a half weeks I spent at the archives in Mexico City and Puebla.

My graduate career at the City University of New York and the University of Kentucky gave me friendships that will last regardless of where life may lead us. Amanda Bozcar, my dearest friend from my early days at the University of Kentucky, kept me honest through the masters’ thesis and dissertation with page-a-days, helped me work through newly-formed ideas, and provided a much-needed editorial eye. Thank you, eternally, for the wonderful conversations, the endless encouragement, and the reminders to “just finish the damn thing.”

Bridget Ash has spent the last few years serving in the invaluable position of personal muse. Her conversations, words of reassurance, and pointed questions never ceased to inspire me. During our time teaching at Lehman College and through our final years of dissertating, Scott Ackerman quickly became an intellectual sounding board and a dear friend. We commiserated, celebrated, and sometimes just grabbed a beer in the hopes of making it through the rest of the program in
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one piece. To him I say: “Behold! The dissertation.” Finally, a writing group formed by myself, Scott Ackerman, John Winters, and Luke Reynolds not only made the writing process less isolating with our boisterous video meetings, but also gave me the chance to talk through ideas and receive decisive and intellectually-sound comments on each chapter of this dissertation.

Words cannot adequately express the support I received from friends and family outside of academia. Owen and Christine Richetti showed me the importance of taking time to enjoy the happiness family has to offer, which helped me sustain the rigors of academia. Emily Sward-Williams and Andrew Williams, as best friends to my husband and me, never failed to remind me of the intellectual vigor I possessed and the great opportunities yet to come. Space requires me to neglect a number of important friends, including Emily Harmon, Brian Orem, Coleen Dixon, Joanna Lile, Lizzie Moore, and Alex Simon, among others, but it does not mean they hold a less significant place in my heart.

From my childhood until today, my parents, Ken and Beverly Farman, have pushed me to excel in all my endeavors, encouraging me even when my excitement over the mundane seemed a bit misplaced to them. I would not be where I am today if it was not for their love and desire to see me succeed. My aunt Mary Harmon has proved my strongest cheerleader throughout my academic career. She reviewed my applications, encouraged me to apply to the University of Kentucky, toured schools with me, consistently told me about the expansive opportunities education has to offer, and continually assured me that graduate school was 80% perseverance and that I would not fail. My in-laws, Maribeth and Jeff Sweda, opened their arms to me from the moment I entered their lives, always encouraging me and making me feel like a daughter of their own. A final commendation goes to my entire family – my parents, my brother Chris Farman, and sister Stephanie Orem. Through the continual flood of family pictures, discussions
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of great adventures, and celebration in all of life’s experiences, they kept me grounded, reminding me that family always comes first.

The love and support I received from the two most important people in my life, my sister Stephanie Orem, and husband TJ Sweda, could fill an acknowledgements section in their own right. Even though they appear last, they remain, by far, the most important. During my years in graduate school, they dropped everything the minute I needed their attention. My sister, my best friend and closest companion, has listened to my mundane problems, concerns, and excitements with an outsider’s perspective for my entire life, often providing a voice of reason when I needed it most. My husband taught me how to look at life with an engineer’s perspective, critically analyzing the world around me and reminding me to always ask ‘why?’ five times before moving forward with an idea. He has supported me in every single crazy endeavor I have had, sometimes pushing me further than I had even known possible, and always guaranteed I had the wherewithal to succeed. It is to both of them that I dedicate this dissertation.
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Introduction: Writing Black Catholic History

In Mexico City on July 26, 1629, the free black Juan Roque laid on his death bed “sick with the illness God had chosen to give him.” Concerned about the afterlife and hoping to minimize his soul’s stay in purgatory, he called upon a local notary to record his last will and testament before his close friends and family. He affirmed his belief in “all that the Holy Mother Church preaches and teaches,” requesting the intercession of the “always glorious Virgin Mary, Mother of God”\(^1\) before carefully outlining his wishes for a Christian burial. Juan asked to have his body interred in the church of the local Hospital of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. If this church was “unable to accommodate” him, he wished to be buried in the Santa Veracruz parish church, where he was a lifelong parishioner. For the funeral service, he requested that “twelve persons accompany [his] body” alongside members of the “confraternities where [he was] a brother.”\(^2\) With his funeral planned, complete with a “solemn mass with the presence of a deacon and a subdeacon,” he turned his attention toward outlining the requiem masses said for his soul and the pious bequests to the church that would aid in his salvation. He instructed his executors to pay for “ten prayed masses in the Church of Santa Veracruz in the Altar of Indulgences,” as well as forty intercessory masses said between the Convent of Our Lady of Carmen, the Hospital of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, and the Hospital of the Holy Spirit.\(^3\) To assist the poor, he requested three pesos be distributed among persons “that he does not know.” Finally, he donated the rental income from his house to the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception, where he served as a founding member. In outlining his various requests, Juan Roque curated his will around his personal desires for a Christian burial.

\(^1\) Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter, AGN), Bienes Nacionales, “El Mayordomo y los diputados de la Cofradía de la Concepción,” 1634, 1175, expediente 11, folio 6r.

\(^2\) AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “El Mayordomo y los diputados,” folio 6r.

\(^3\) AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “El Mayordomo y los diputados,” folios 6r-6v.
Taken together, the charitable donations, funeral plans, and complement of masses for his soul show Juan Roque’s piety and intricate involvement in the practices of the Catholic faith. In the context of the seventeenth century, when Catholics expressed their devotion through opulent displays of piety, Juan’s list of carefully-crafted burial and pious bequests reads as an ordinary Catholic will. He publicly proclaimed his faith in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, asked for forgiveness for his sins and transgressions, and offered a variety of pious works to aid in the salvation of his eternal soul. He also called upon his extensive ties with local churches, religious hospitals, and lay brotherhoods – known as confraternities – to aid him in improving his standing before God. Comparable to the devotion of colonial Mexico’s Spanish Catholic elite, he drew from his personal wealth to pay for a full complement of masses for his soul and donated extensive gifts to religious institutions and the poor. In his desires for a Christian funeral, Juan Roque engaged in popular religious practices surrounding the preparation for death and the afterlife.

In describing his pious bequests, elaborate funeral processions, and dedication to religious organizations, Juan revealed which interactions and spiritual choices were central to his religious expression. He selected the specific religious traditions that held significance for his personal beliefs. For his masses, he chose the Altar of Indulgences in the parish church where he had likely spent a significant amount of his life offering personal devotions. His selection for burial in the Hospital of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, which housed his confraternity of the same name, or in the parish church where he attended regular festivities and weekly masses reveals the personal significance that these particular spaces occupied in his religious imaginary. The communal settings of the confraternity or the parish church where he interacted with his fellow parishioners and clergy played a comparable role in his life as a Christian. He
maintained memberships in the confraternities of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, located in the hospital, and of the Most Holy Sacrament, founded in the Santa Veracruz parish. Together, the confraternities offered regular religious gatherings to specific saints and provided financial and spiritual assistance to the brothers upon their passing. Within the parish church, Juan maintained a close connection with the parish priest. He requested that Don Benavides, the church’s presbyter, along with the deacon and the subdeacon, conduct his funeral services, complete with a sung Requiem.⁴ Throughout his life, Juan participated in the religious culture of his local communities, but he did so on his own terms. Juan chose the people, places, and practices based on his interpretations of the Catholic faith.

Throughout the seventeenth century, blacks like Juan Roque participated in the religious practices of their local communities. In preparation for their death, they appeared before notaries to situate their worldly possessions in preparation. During their lives, they regularly attended mass in a parish church, where they also experienced the most important moments of their Christian practice – baptism, confirmation, marriage, and burial. They gathered with others to conduct pilgrimages to local sacred sites, participate in private devotional prayers, or establish religious brotherhoods dedicated to a patron saint. In short, many black persons embraced the various forms of Christian worship that were prominent in their local communities. But they were also key in the very reproduction of these forms. In their local parishes, they discussed their interpretations of religious practices with the neighbors, conducted private devotions with their friends and family, and attended feast-day celebrations with casual acquaintances from the workplace. In the process they contributed their conceptions of Christian practices and, in time, influenced local expressions of the Catholic faith.

⁴ AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “El Mayordomo y los diputados,” folio 6v.
This dissertation argues that persons of African descent, like Juan Roque, participated in and shaped religious culture in colonial Mexico through their own interpretations of devout Christian practices and daily interactions with the Church and laity. Throughout, this project focuses on the social relationships black individuals forged in their parishes and how they contributed to their understandings of the Catholic faith. As individuals who were born and baptized in a particular social environment, specifically the parochial centers of New Spain, persons of African descent interacted with a diverse group of people who had a direct effect on their daily religious practices. After the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521, a steady importation of enslaved Africans started to augment central Mexico’s early black population. By the early decades of the seventeenth century, the majority of enslaved blacks and their increasingly free descendants had settled in New Spain’s capital, where they labored as domestic servants, in obrajes (textile mills), or as day laborers alongside other colonial subjects. Despite the continual threat of sale, a patron’s shifting fortunes, or changes in economic opportunities, enslaved and free blacks formed families and made friends with natives, Spaniards, and other people of African descent. They created specific social networks that gradually coincided with the parochial boundaries of their childhood homes.

The social networks forged by black parishioners were fundamental to their understanding of and introduction to the Catholic faith. In their parish churches, altars, and chapels, blacks established intimate connections with the secular priests who guided their understandings of religious practices, private devotions, and public rituals. During discussions or chats on spiritual matters, local clergy made suggestions on their personal devotions, assisting in their pious worship, correcting errant beliefs, or assigning penitential acts for any transgressions. Personal relationships with devout friends, neighbors, and lay parishioners merely extended their
understandings of local religious practices, private devotions, and public rituals. In the local settings of the parish center – the streets or the marketplace – blacks conversed with their fellow parishioners about spiritual matters, discussing the examples of saints’ lives, the importance of mental prayers, or devotion to sacred images. As Africans, but especially their descendants, navigated these diverse social webs participating in a shared Christian spirituality, they created specific forms of Catholic practices that shaped expressions of Catholicism in their communities.

My emphasis on the importance of social interactions in the construction of black Catholicism draws from the cultural examination of African-American communities presented by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price in *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective*. Writing in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement and the emergence of Black Studies programs in the United States, Mintz and Price created a conceptual model for the study of black culture. This model focused specifically on “process in the development of African-American cultures” by “examining different kinds of blends and mixtures” based on the creative choices of enslaved blacks. To do “full justice to the complexity” of the subject, they argued, scholars must consider the evolution of the social and cultural forms that touched on “the everyday experience and perceptions of African-Americans,” specifically social conditions, structures, personal relationships, and patterns of interaction. This focus on the social elements of cultural behavior provides a methodological foundation for my own analysis. In the context of New Spain, specific social interactions formed the basis of black Catholic development. They served as the foundation for the Christianization of Afro-

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descendants, the creation of black Catholic practices, and the shaping of the black religious experience.

At the same time, my analysis differs drastically from their own conclusions. Instead of focusing exclusively on the cultural and social interactions among the various African ethnic groups imported into the New World, my project expands the definition of social formations to include the daily communications Africans and their descendants held with their Spanish, native, and castas (non-Spanish, mixed-descent) neighbors. The diverse nature of these social interactions was foundational to the development of black Catholicism. Africans and their descendants interacted with secular clergy and ecclesiastical authorities, acquiring a familiarity with orthodox behavior in the process. Black parishioners established personal relationships with the laity to creatively select the Catholic practices that formed their everyday religious experience. My analysis of these various social elements recognizes the complexity of the personal interactions that affected the creation of black Christian faith in colonial Mexico.

Despite rich sources, like Juan Roque’s will and testament, our historical understanding of how blacks shaped colonial Catholic practices remains rather provisional. Newly imported bozales, unhispanized Africans, arrived in Mexico without any knowledge of the Spanish language or the Catholic faith. Gradually, enslaved Africans learned to navigate Spanish society and culture, learning the basic rudiments of the Catholic faith. However, their understandings were limited to their minimal introduction into Catholicism. The majority of scholars writing on Afro-Mexican Catholicism have started their studies from this perspective, choosing to highlight the lack of religious education afforded enslaved Africans upon their arrival in the New World. Because religious authorities “put very little energy into Africans’ religious education,” notes
historian Joan Bristol, their efforts at evangelization were “sporadic and their effects uneven,” leaving Africans and their descendants unfamiliar with the holy commandments, unable to appropriately observe the sacraments, and unaccustomed to the rites of the Church. Without proper instruction in the faith, scholars like Bristol concluded, persons of African descent would be limited in how they could engage with Christian practices or how they incorporated Catholicism into their lives. On the basis of this assumption, persons of African descent appear in scholarship as having little effect on how Catholic practices developed in colonial Mexico outside their incorporation of African traditions or unorthodox behavior into their religious life. This perspective does not fully attend to the religious experiences of men and woman, like Juan Roque, who practiced and contributed to the daily rituals of the colonial Catholic Church as devout Christians.

When scholars discussed a few archival examples where Africans and their descendants were instructed in Catholic tenets, they marked their religious instruction as “unconventional” and limited to the individual experience. Writing on the religious life of Afro-Peruvian mystic Ursula de Jesús, Nancy van Deusen noted how the Afro-descendant woman accessed “an unconventional religious education” as slave to renowned holy woman Luisa Melgarejo Sotomayor. While living in the Melgarejo household, she argued, Ursula learned to venerate religious objects, read hagiographic texts, and gather for collective devotionals. Despite her extensive, informal tutelage in Catholicism, van Deusen concluded, Ursula represented a unique exception among Afro-descendants in the colonial capital. Bristol similarly portrays the

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religious life of the enslaved African Juana Esperanza de San Alberto as an exception among non-Spanish women. For her, Esperanza’s upbringing in the Convent of San José in Puebla introduced her to the religious practices that shaped her virtuous life, but her experience and “repute for her religious piety and mystical abilities” was “unusual.”  

The religious experiences of blacks like Ursula de Jesús and Juana Esperanza de San Alberto, for scholars, were exceptional instances that occurred primarily in an individual household environment. Apart from the few who received this “unconventional” instruction, they contend, Africans and their descendants remained unfamiliar with the majority of Christian practices that composed their daily lives.

However, Ursula de Jesús and Juana Esperanza de San Alberto were not an exception. Multiple persons of African descent acquired an in-depth familiarity with Catholicism, and subsequently contributed their own conceptions of the faith to their Christian practices. As this dissertation shows, men and women of African descent received an introduction to the Catholic faith through the same methods Church clergy used with Spaniards. In confessional moments, clerical interventions, and casual “chats on spiritual matters,” persons of African descent became familiar with Catholic practices. With this familiarity, they in time exhibited a personal choice in the spiritual practices and beliefs that affected their daily lives. Juan Roque, for example, chose the religious organizations who would receive his donations, constructed altars dedicated to particular saints, and made decisions on how he would experience a Christian burial. By engaging in popular religious rituals, Juan Roque and countless other blacks directly affected which beliefs and practices were observed in their communities and how they engaged with them.

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10 Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*, 51.
To be sure, previous scholars of the black colonial experience have long recognized Catholicism as a complex system of rituals and beliefs that informed the everyday social and cultural practices of people of African descent. From the earliest studies on the black presence in colonial Mexico, the Catholic Church appeared as fundamental to Afro-descendants’ integration into colonial society, offering enslaved subjects and their descendants legal rights as subjects of the crown and persons with souls. In these initial scholarly investigations, historians addressed how blacks used their status as baptized Christians to access a juridical space and challenge their status as enslaved subjects. As highlighted by historian Colin A. Palmer in his 1976 pioneering study of blacks in colonial Mexico, *Slaves of the White God*, and by subsequent generations of historians, the juridical locations within the institutions of the Catholic Church afforded a space for enslaved blacks to employ the law to their benefit, enact their rights as Christians, and access juridical protections.\(^{11}\) This scholarly analysis of the legal personhood underscored the power struggles between masters, slaves, state officials, and church authorities. However, scholars did little to address how persons of African descent engaged with specific aspects of the Catholic faith, instead focusing on how enslaved blacks took advantage of the different forms of authority afforded by the Catholic Church to negotiate or resist their position within the institution of

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slavery. From this perspective, Afro-Mexican Catholicism emerged as an ideological tool used in the individual lives of various people of African descent.

As a result, a secularized perspective of religious knowledge drove the field toward a framework that limits how scholars approach the issue of faith and belief. Catholicism appears as a form of resistance to the institution of slavery rather than a religious formation meaningful to Africans and their descendants. Works by scholars, such as historians Joan Bristol and Javier Villa-Flores, view the adoption of Christian practices by slaves and free blacks as a means to redress wrongs committed against them. Under the officially sanctioned power and authority of their masters, enslaved Africans, and occasionally free blacks, endured excessive violence and mistreatment as an element of their daily life. An audience with the Inquisition, often a result of a blasphemous statement, offered at least a moment of reprieve. “As victims of cruelty and mistreatment,” Villa-Flores writes, “black slaves renounced God and His saints to provoke the intervention of the Inquisition as a way to be freed, at least for a moment, from the harsh working conditions they endured.” Acts of blasphemy, therefore, allowed Afro-Mexicans to report abusive or negligent masters to higher authorities. According to Bristol’s study, a self-denunciation by a slave or servant functioned as a powerful tactic in which the person before the

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inquisitors not only could “complain about their supervisors’ treatment to a powerful institution,” but also “established the serious Christian character and pious nature of the person appearing before the inquisitors.”

Even though an audience with senior inquisitors did not guarantee legal freedom or better treatment – in fact, a blasphemous statement at times resulted in worse treatment by a master and further punishment by the Holy Office – the Inquisition still served as an official space to air grievances. Catholicism, therefore, merely appeared in these studies to highlight master-slave power struggles and the role the Church could play in mitigating violence and domination.

In studies where scholars recognize Catholicism as a system of religious beliefs and practices that structured daily life for black subjects, they have relegated their discussion to an analysis of the continuation of African traditions or blacks’ participation in unorthodox behaviors. Utilizing a rich source base of Inquisition records and confraternity registries, such scholars highlight how an African heritage continued to influence black religious practices during the first half of the seventeenth century, calling these remnants a “survival.” Historians, anthropologists, and ethnologists of the survivals tradition, building on the anthropological work of Melville Herskovits and Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, argue for the retention of African traditions and religious beliefs, which often resulted in a syncretic religion that draws from both African practices and Catholic traditions.

For the case of Mexico, the intellectual genealogy produced by Aguirre Beltrán guided historians, historical anthropologists, ethnologists, and sociologists toward a research agenda that

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focuses almost exclusively on the “footprint or trace left by Africans.” Recently, historians, such as Nicole von Germeten, have suggested that African religious traditions, including the predominance of women in religious rituals or a strong association with African communal forms, thrived during the sixteenth and early part of the seventeenth century, initially allowing Afro-Mexicans to maintain an African heritage under the auspices of Christian processions and community meetings. The incorporation of African traditions into Spanish religious practices resulted in “an intricate mix and intertwining of people and religion from Spain, Africa, and Mexico that led to a new interpretation of public piety.”

In studies outside of Mexico, scholars have contended that enslaved Africans and their descendants specifically adopted Catholic practices, especially in institutionalized forms such as confraternities or marriage, as a way to maintain their traditional African beliefs. “We,” writes historian James Sweet, “can still find elements of the African religious past operating alongside Christian practices” even when confronting an archive devoted to Catholic traditions. Historian David Wheat agrees, stating that “the acquisition of Iberian languages and the appropriation of Iberian religious practices did not necessarily signify the loss of African identities, loyalties, beliefs, or memories.” Instead, Catholicism became a way for Africans and their descendants to incorporate themselves into Spanish Catholic society, gaining “access to resources, social networks, and other opportunities” while continuing the African traditions brought with them to

the New World. In the end, many Afro-descendants at most observed “modified Catholic devotional practices” that were influenced by an “[African] cultural heritage.”

A viewpoint highlighting the continuation of an African worldview through Christian practices ultimately characterized early Afro-Mexican Catholicism as a superficial expression that constantly competed with African traditions. Africans appear as nominally Christians, and little more. Because of their interest in how Africans re-established “culturally diluted” connections to Africa within a Spanish religious context, these scholars have framed religious traditions, beliefs, and practices in a manner that overlooks the demographic and social specificity of the New Spain colony, resulting, as Laura Lewis claims, in seeing Africa where Africa simply did not exist.

Some historians have recognized that people of African descent increasingly incorporated Christianity into their lives, through marriage, compadrazco (godparenthood), adherence to the sacraments, and establishing confraternities. Historian Herman Bennett suggests that by the seventeenth century black creoles had begun to internalize Christianity as a belief and ritual by assigning meaning to Christian practices, specifically marriage, that immediately shaped their private lives. In her study, Bristol aptly describes Afro-Mexicans negotiating their responsibilities and rights as colonial Christian subjects by presenting themselves as fully participatory “in mainstream Christianity.” But their scholarly analysis always begins from a perspective that emphasizes a spectacle of conformity, where Africans and their descendants

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22 van Deusen, Souls of Purgatory, 13.
24 Lewis, Chocolate and Corn Flour; Sweet, Recreating Africa, 1-2.
25 Bennett, Colonial Blackness, 33.
outwardly performed the Christian practices expected of them without truly internalizing the faith. “It is thus hard to determine,” historian Matthew Restall writes in his work on the Afro-Yucatan, “whether professions of faith were sincere or whether African slaves paid lip service to the religion of their masters – a religion that, like the Spanish language, they were obliged to adopt.”27 Outward participation brought individual Africans and creoles into the Catholic Church, making them loyal Christian subjects, but their religious behavior appeared as performances that regularly deviated from Spanish Catholic norms.

In fact, every scholar writing on Afro-Mexican Catholicism has started their study from the assumption that black practitioners merely performed Catholic practices rather than engaging with Christianity in a meaningful manner. In his discussion of Catholic absolutism, Bennett noted that “Christian compliance literally represented command performances in which the body, but not necessarily the soul, adhered to the colonial script.”28 For him, along with Bristol and other scholars, people of African descent simply learned about religious practices in order to “perform Christianity in orthodox ways,” but did not always interpret these rituals as part of their faith. Within their performances of religious expressions, Bristol continued, Africans and their descendants ascribed personal meanings to the religious practices that diverged significantly from the “mandates of church and state.”29 In her discussion of black confraternities, Nicole von Germeten suggested that Africans and their descendants embraced the religious organization “in their own ways.”30 Historian Frank Proctor similarly stated that black individuals adopted Christian practices in a manner that differed from ecclesiastical expectations. “Despite the

28 Bennett, Africans in Colonial Mexico, 42.
29 Bristol, Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches, 91.
30 von Germeten, Black Blood Brothers, 11.
powerful acculturative force of Christianity,” he wrote, “Afro-Mexicans proved more than able to manipulate Catholic institutions.” Africans and their descendants, they concluded, learned to outwardly comply to Catholic practices, but maintained their own personal beliefs that differed greatly from clerical expectations.

Such conclusions about deviant Christian behavior contrast starkly with the lived religious experiences of Juan Roque and the black friends, neighbors, and family members of his local community. Initial generations of blacks may have outwardly complied with the mandates of the Church, thus avoiding a denunciation to the Holy Office. However, later generations of black and mulattos encountered a lived Christianity that differed greatly from their predecessors. Catholicism was more than a “superficial veil” that allowed them to practice deviant behavior or African religious traditions. The Catholic faith was their prime religion since birth. They entered the church with their baptism, continued to learn necessary practices from their first communion and lifelong confessions, and participated in various popular religious practices. Black parishioners actively took part in orthodox Catholicism. This dissertation, therefore, will illustrate how black Catholics not only became familiar with orthodox Catholic practices, but also how they incorporated them into their daily religious lives, participating with their neighbors in public devotions and shaping the practices that brought meaning to their faith.

Scholarly discussions on blacks’ appropriation of Christianity eventually drove the historical analysis of black Catholicism toward an understanding of the Christian social practices created by African descendants as they endeavored to recreate a personal life destroyed by the violent process of enslavement. Presented as a reconfiguration of Orlando Patterson’s model of

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31 Proctor, Damned Notions of Liberty, 39.
33 Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
social death, these studies have emphasized how Africans formulated new kinship groups, real and fictive, based on the shared experiences of living in a world dominated by the violent institution of slavery and a racialized society. As an organizing metaphor for the slaves’ cultural experience, social death aptly characterized an important component of the black existence where enslaved individuals were allegedly prevented from asserting a social existence independent from their masters or their masters’ dominant culture. In his work on re-creating African kinship groups in the colonial Portuguese world, historian James Sweet describes how the process of social death and natal alienation forced enslaved Africans to face the “markers that define the human life space – birth, childhood, adolescence, marriage, child-rearing, old age, and dying…without the collective support and shared understandings of the natal network of kin.”

But, as he argued, the destruction of kinship did not completely circumscribe the creation of a black social experience. Africans were not vanquished. Instead, enslaved Africans “began formulating new alliances and kinship grouping based, in part, on the shared experiences of enslavement and the Middle Passage.”

As scholars became interested in how enslaved Africans, upon surviving the violent, dehumanizing Middle Passage, arrived in the New World to re-establish kinship networks, express cultural traditions of an African past, and develop a sense of corporate identity, they produced studies that highlighted Christianity as a foundation to black social life. As argued by

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34 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.  
Bennett, enslaved individuals acquired “legally recognized identities as husbands, wives, parents, and legal minors.” 38 These legally recognized identities, especially in canon law, allowed Africans and their descendants to create kinship ties that “challenge the ideological construction of social death.” 39 “Through Christian marriages,” he states, “Africans inaugurated and sustained the processes of ethnogenesis, the creation of social networks inside the structure of domination.” 40 Frank Proctor offers a similar analysis. For him, the creation of families under the Catholic institution of marriage “served as the first line of defense against the dehumanizing effects of slavery.” 41 Enslaved Africans had the legal rights “to marry in the church, to select their potential spouses free from interference from their owners, and to cohabitate with the spouse one night per week,” allowing slaves to choose their real and fictive kin in a way that was “both defined and reflected [by] their cultural and communities’ identities.” 42 From moments of enslavement, the Middle Passage, and their arrival in the New World, Africans who entered the slave trade continuously formed social lives and re-created various forms of kinship. 43 As Africans and their descendants navigated the institutional expectations of church officials, including marriage, baptism, compadrazco, or the daily participation in Christian practices, they acquired opportunities provided by Christianity to form meaningful associations within their communities. 44 Baptism into the Catholic community offered individuals of African descent

38 Bennett, Colonial Blackness, 1.
39 Bennett, Colonial Blackness, 76.
40 Bennett, Colonial Blackness, 76.
41 Proctor, Damned Notions of Liberty, 39.
42 Proctor, Damned Notions of Liberty, 39.
43 Stephanie Smallwood, Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Sweet, Recreating Africa; Proctor, Damned Notions.
44 Bennett, Africans in Colonial Mexico and Colonial Blackness; Bristol, Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches; Proctor, Damned Notions of Liberty; von Germeten, Black Blood Brothers; Restall, The Black Middle.
institutionalized spaces to make claims as subjects of the Christian faith, and thus overrode the oppressive nature of the institution of slavery and the racialized colonial order.  

Scholars further recognized how participation in Catholic institutions served as a way to incorporate Africans and their descendants into Spanish Christian society. Joan Bristol noted that religious communities, like confraternities, “gave their members knowledge about Catholic practice and Ibero-American social practices” necessary to “integrate [them] into these societies.” They learned about the importance of venerating saints, commissioning masses for the deceased, offering the last rites of the dying, and providing financial assistance for a Christian burial. As Africans and especially their descendants participated in this “mainstream Christianity,” she stated, they “expressed their identities as Christians and colonial subjects” in a way that facilitated “their cultural integration into the colonial population.” Restall similarly suggested that Africans and their descendants in the Yucatan were motivated to adopt Christian practices, “at least outwardly,” because they “provided them admittance into local society.” He concluded that as Afro-descendants settled in small Mayan villages, they founded religious brotherhoods to participate in local festivals, showing “their concern was with integration and participation in colonial society.” Von Germeten echoes this point. She states that men of African descent formed confraternities in Mexico City as a way “to emulate Hispanic norms or familiar behavior” and show their “greater concern for Hispanic society and religious practice.”  

However, their conclusions often highlighted how Afro-descendants created a social community that functioned separate from the daily lives of the Spaniards, natives, and castas.

45 Patterson, Social Death.
48 Restall, The Black Middle, 235.
49 Restall, The Black Middle, 236-237.
50 von Germeten, Black Blood Brothers, 4.
who lived, worked, and worshipped alongside them. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Christian practices observed by Africans and their descendants exemplified the complex manner in which individuals used Catholic symbols to create spiritual rituals meaningful to their separate social existence under colonial Christian dominance.¹¹ Scholars, including Nicole von Germeten and Ben Vinson, III, have illustrated how the corporate institutions of religious brotherhoods – also known as cofradías (confraternities) – and the militia afforded various individuals of African descent an opportunity to cultivate communal ties around a shared sense of identity often associated with an African ethnicity or New World racial identity.¹² Confraternities, von Germeten contends, were “always connected” to some kind of social or racial division, and therefore offered a space for Africans and their descendants to attain “acceptance and social improvement with the dominant system of Hispanic values.”¹³ Militias, according to Vinson, similarly granted corporate privileges to “free-colored companies” that served as “possibilities for rearranging the social and legal restraints of race.”¹⁴ Historians, such as Frank Proctor and Sherwin Bryant, have also demonstrated how personal choices for the godparents of creole children expanded black kinship networks to include friends, family, and neighbors, revealing the deeply intimate practices that connected enslaved blacks.¹⁵ The sacramental rite of baptism, writes Bryant in his study on colonial Quito, “allowed racialized subjects to develop local affinities, form associations with specific aspects of Christian veneration, and perform colonial religiosity that naturalized Castilian Christian heritage as normal and sacred.”¹⁶ Their arguments

¹² Von Germeten, Black Blood Brothers; Vinson, Bearing Arms for His Majesty
¹³ Von Germeten, Black Blood Brothers, 2-3.
¹⁴ Vinson, Bearing Arms, 4.
¹⁵ Proctor, Damned Notions of Liberty; Bryant, Rivers of Gold, Lives of Bondage.
¹⁶ Bryant, Rivers of Gold, Lives of Bondage, 89.
ultimately stood that Africans and their creole descendants embraced a unique form of Christianity that functioned within the boundaries of Catholic orthodoxy but remained detached from the social universe of their parochial centers.

A perspective that privileges the distinct nature of black Catholicism, presenting it as merely an appropriation of specific behaviors without the internalization of the Catholic faith, ultimately places black Catholics perpetually outside the religious practices of their local communities and the Spanish Catholic Church, more broadly. In short, this perspective only tells part of the story. Instead, the locally determined nature of religion throughout the early modern world drove the active participation of persons of African descent as they increasingly became familiar with the routine rituals they performed.\(^{57}\)

After Indians, blacks constituted the largest population group in the seventeenth-century Christian commonwealth, the república Christiana. Persons of African descent represented the majority who participated in the various observances of communal worship practiced within the local parishes of colonial Mexico’s religious landscape. For the religious processions during Holy Week, for festivities in honor of a patron saint, and for royal spectacles announcing the birth of a prince or the crowning of a new monarch, black parishioners composed a significant portion of the persons who participated in the pious displays. In their festivities, they determined their religious standards, engaged in self-mortification of the flesh, and commissioned masses for all members of the faith. For personal devotions, including novenas (extensive devotionals in honor of a feast day) or the recitation of penitential prayers, they navigated the religious landscape, discussing appropriate religious behavior with their fellow parishioners and trusted

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spiritual advisers, to determine the specific Christian traditions they practiced alongside their friends, family, and neighbors. They attended mass where they received the holy sacrament of the Eucharist, prayed in chapels and altars that they constructed with funds from their religious brotherhoods, and discussed the exemplary lives of saints with their fellow parishioners. In their parochial centers, they conducted pilgrimages to local holy sites, donated funds to the ostentatious displays that adorned the colonial churches they frequented, and participated in elaborate celebrations for holy festivals and saint-day feasts, including processions organized by parish churches and confraternal organizations. Put another way, by the opening decades of the seventeenth century, black Catholics appeared at the center of the development of local expressions of the Catholic faith.

The república Christiana in New Spain covered the physical boundaries of colonial parishes composed of slaves, free blacks, Indians, Spaniards, and castas, serving as the central location for the cultural lives of the colony’s diverse inhabitants. In the sacred spaces of the parochial center – in the local chapels, the altars, or the confraternities – persons from differing legal status and cultural backgrounds gathered for communal devotion that fulfilled their spiritual needs. Interactions in the secular spaces of the urban centers – in the marketplace, homes, or neighborhood streets – similarly drew together the diverse inhabitants of colonial Mexico, affording them a space to build familiarity and relationships rooted to a particular place. Since the colonial parish centered, above all, on the relationships maintained by the individuals living within its boundaries, as they prayed, worshiped, received the sacraments, and conversed on spiritual matters, such intimate connections of familiarity mirrored the demographic diversity found in the colonial parish.58

By the very nature of their baptism and confirmation, black Catholic parishioners were attached to this diverse social universe of their colonial parishes. They maintained intimate ties with people of “various status and calidad,” held conversations on the specific ideas, beliefs, and practices with their fellow parishioners, and engaged in public acts of Christian veneration on a daily basis. In time, they navigated their close personal connections with the Catholic clergy and the devout laity to engage in meaningful spiritual practices. Black Catholics practiced their religious beliefs within the dynamic of the cultural and social milieu of the colony, not as a cultural formation distinct from it. As black Catholics acquired an extensive knowledge of the theological significance of appropriate Christian behavior, they exhibited a personal choice in the spiritual practices that would govern their religious lives and the lives of those around them. In the personal relationships they maintained with the Catholic clergy and their friends, family, neighbors, and even casual acquaintances, they shared the elements of the Catholic faith that spoke to their spiritual worldview, eventually contributing to the local expressions of the Christian faith with their own spiritual choices.

On a final historiographical note, the dissertation also offers a re-periodization of Afro-Christianity in the New World, more generally. For the early period of the seventeenth century, the New World encounter between Catholicism and enslaved Africans and their descendants remains largely undocumented by historians. Rather, scholarly discussions on Christian conversion and the growth of Afro-Christianity among African peoples in the Americas appears as a Protestant phenomenon that occurred in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1978,

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59 The Huntington Library, Huntington Manuscript Collection 35168 (hereafter, HM 35168), “El Señor Fiscal de este Sancto Oficio contra Isidro de Peralta, mulatto, [por fundar a su modo una religión de San Agustín],” 1699, Mexico City, fol. 16r.
Albert J. Raboteau published his foundational work, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, generating an extensive field of study on the development of African American religions in the Americas. Dedicated to the understanding of the creation of an Afro-Christian faith founded on an African spiritual worldview, scholars, including historians Sylvia Frey, Jon Sensbach, and Katharine Gerbner, have exposed how enslaved Africans in the Americas overcame the pressures and hardships of slavery to build new forms of religious practices that provided meaning to their lives, eventually melding Protestantism with African understandings of the world. With the concerted efforts of Protestant missionaries, ranging in denominations from Moravians and Anglicans to Quakers and Puritans, and the egalitarian messages emerging in the Great Awakening of the 1740s, enslaved and free blacks, these scholars argue, converted to the Protestant faith. After they converted, they joined institutional churches, participated in the spread of Christianity in the British colonies, and created a “community of faith” with “a body of values” that served as the primary source for cultural identity. The scholarly argument stood that the establishment of a form of Afro-Protestantism

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that resulted from these missionary activities represented the “single most significant event in African American history.”

This Protestant religious experience still constitutes the analytical framework through which scholars understand Christian conversion and the subsequent formation of black Christianity in the Americas, even though the historical development of Afro-Protestantism occurred nearly three centuries after the Catholic Church first interacted with the inhabitants of Guinea off the coast of Africa. By the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church had experienced nearly a full century of interaction with persons of African descent, both in Guinea and steadily in the New World. Nearly two centuries before Protestant missionaries arrived in British colonies, Africans and their descendants had already encountered Catholic missionaries, received baptism in the church, learned the complex intricacies of Christian practices, and had fully established themselves as devout Catholics. To this day, black Catholics outnumber black Protestants or practitioners of African religions throughout the Americas.

Despite this long, complex history of Catholicism among Africans and their descendants, the process of how this Afro-Catholicism developed in the seventeenth century still remains one of history’s best-kept secrets. This dissertation, as such, reevaluates how scholars have approached the development of Afro-Christianity in the New World by illustrating the profound devotion Africans and their descendants exhibited toward the Catholic faith. The project uncovers the process the led to Catholicism emerging as a central aspect of the black religious experience in the New World, and, therefore, pushes a discussion of black Christianity back two centuries earlier, when enslaved Africans first encountered European religious structures. In

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short, the dissertation illustrates that Christianity among persons of Africa descent was channeled almost exclusively through Catholicism.

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The scope of the dissertation covers the chronological context of the long seventeenth century, ranging from roughly 1575 to the 1730s. During this period of a little more than a century, two major developments affected how enslaved Africans and their descendants connected with the Catholic Church. The first occurred in 1575 when the colonial Catholic Church, under the direction of Archbishop Pedro Moya de Contreras, implemented the Tridentine Reforms, which would remain in effect until the middle of the eighteenth century and would ultimately shape how the Church functioned in New Spain. The reforms focused on the revival of the Catholic faith among the laity, when the Church focused more on the indoctrination of Europe’s common folk, the training of new clergy, and combatting the popular superstitions that undermined the orthodoxy established at the Council of Trent (1545-1563), a church synod convened to oppose the rising Protestant threat in Europe. In New Spain, because Christianization remained a pressing concern, the reforms directed how the clergy interacted with and educated the Catholic laity. Since the Catholic clergy failed to separate recently converted slaves and black creoles from Spanish Catholics already familiar with the faith, they subjected individuals of African descent to the same methods of indoctrination they used with Spaniards. In the everyday interactions between clergy and parishioner, members of the reform clergy introduced Africans and their descendants to the matters of faith through the

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administration of sacraments, moments of confession and penitential requirements, and greater vigilance over lay customs.

The second development in the seventeenth century revolved around various demographic shifts and how those changes affected the daily interactions of black Catholic parishioners. Throughout the second half of the sixteenth century and the early decades of the seventeenth century, the New World witnessed the extensive migration of Spanish settlers, the importation of thousands of enslaved Africans, and the growth of castas populations, completely altering the demographic composition of Spain’s largest colony. By the middle decades of the seventeenth century, Africans and their descendants not only constituted the largest non-indigenous population in New Spain, but they also lived as colonial subjects intimately linked to Spaniards, natives, and castas. They worked alongside persons of various hues on rural estates, in obrajes (textile mills), in workshops, and in elite Spanish households. They lived in neighborhoods where they established close ties of friendship, developed romantic connections, and maintained casual acquaintances. Therefore, individuals of African descent increasingly interacted with persons of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds as they participated in the intensely local communal forms of worship in their parochial centers. Such interactions fundamentally affected how they engaged in the Christian practices of their local communities.

Since the institutional mechanisms of the Catholic Church resided in major urban centers, including Mexico City and Puebla de los Angeles, and their immediate surrounding areas, this dissertation draws on sources involving black individuals who resided in or near the central valley region. With the headquarters of the Inquisition, the presence of ecclesiastical courts, and the greatest concentration of secular priests located in Mexico City and its surrounding environs, the urban residents served as the recipients of the Church’s most adamant attempts to reform the
ever-expanding Catholic laity. At the same time, the capital city and the countryside, as cosmopolitan centers where the majority of Spanish colonists settled with their African slaves and black servants, additionally contained the highest concentration of Africans and their descendants – both free and enslaved – who fell under the watchful eye of Catholic authorities. They lived in Spanish households in the central traza, resided in the parishes that continually altered their boundaries to fit demographic changes, and travelled outside the city to find work on surrounding haciendas. The very interstices of the city – the specific plazas, parishes, neighborhoods, marketplaces, and residences – functioned as sites for the social interactions that supported black Catholic practices and knowledge.

Writing the history of seventeenth-century black Catholicism presents multiple challenges. With low literacy rates among the colonial population, written works by individuals of African descent remain rare, if not nonexistent, offering little perspective into their own thoughts or their own, unmediated words on Christian beliefs. In primary sources where black voices on spiritual practice do appear, they tend to arise from accusations brought before the Inquisition or in lawsuits in the ecclesiastical courts emphasizing the unusual, deviant, or unorthodox. Such a restriction in documentation has limited historical studies of black Catholicism to the analysis of deviant behavior as resistance to colonial Christian domination. But it also only tells part of the story. Even when individuals of African descent appear before the inquisitor to comment on their behavior or the beliefs of an accused friend or acquaintance, their testimonials offered evidence that went beyond simple deviancy. Rather, their descriptions of religious rituals, feast-day processions, devotional prayers, or contact with the divine illuminated the cultural practices and customs that their communities determined as appropriate, or, in other cases, inappropriate. Their testimonials represent conceptions of the faith that often
corresponded closely with orthodoxy. As ecclesiastical and inquisitorial proceedings shed light on countless relationships and social networks where black Catholic practices spread, thrived, or caused a “scandal,” scholars gain access to a rich understanding of the Christian spirituality shared between black Catholics and their fellow parishioners.

Before presenting an analysis of the social interactions that contributed to the creation of black Catholic practices, I address in chapter one the various ecclesiastical and royal policies that indirectly affected enslaved Africans' introduction into the Catholic faith. By the closing decades of the sixteenth century, when the majority of enslaved Africans entered the Spanish colony, the Catholic Church did not produce a distinct conversion policy that would introduce individuals of African descent to the basic tenets of the Catholic faith. Without the missionary complexes, confessional literature, or catechisms in native African languages, recently arrived Africans and their descendants were baptized in a faith without receiving adequate instruction in Christian practices. However, just because the Church did not institute a process for the evangelization of enslaved Africans did not necessarily mean black individuals remained ignorant of Christian practices. Instead, over the course of the sixteenth century, the Church implemented a series of policies geared toward the spatial separation of recently converted indigenous populations and the Hispanic sector of society, composed of Spaniards, enslaved Africans, free blacks, and the growing numbers of castas that indirectly offered an introduction to Christian practices. Through the spatial policies, ecclesiastical and state authorities placed persons of African descent within the república de españoles (Spanish commonwealth) where traditional forms of religious instruction introduced Afro-descendants to the innerworkings of the Catholic faith.

The following chapter undertakes an analysis of how the social interactions maintained between the Catholic clergy and their black parishioners contributed to the formation of black
Catholicism in seventeenth-century New Spain. The chapter addresses the social elements of the conversion process with the endeavor to answer the integral question of how Afro-descendants accessed a Christian education outside the institutional framework of missionary complexes and catechisms in their native languages. The Christianization of Afro-descended populations continued beyond the initial moment of a forced conversion at enslavement, instead manifesting as a multigenerational process nurtured by the personal relationships established between Church officials and black parishioners. With the growth of clerical interventions, confessional moments, and private interactions with secular priests, creole blacks cultivated a cultural landscape where they determined their own intellectual connections with theological knowledge. As an inherently creole experience, the Christian upbringing of black creoles expanded their Catholic knowledge to fortify the social connections that became central to their religious practices under colonial Christian dominance.

As black Catholics forged personal relationships with members of their colonial parishes, both clerical and lay, they navigated a social network where their knowledge of the Catholic faith thrived. Clerical authorities supported the religious practices articulated by their black parishioners, ensuring that they complied with expectations of orthodox behavior in the process, and fellow parishioners participated in the devotions observed by their black neighbors. The remaining chapters shift away from the specific development of social interactions to engage with this circulation of black religious practices, arguing that familiarity with the Catholic faith within their local communities served as a path for black Catholics to achieve recognition for their devout Christian identities. With reputations as “very good Christians”\(^{65}\) and a profound

\(^{65}\) AGN, Inquisición, “Contra Pedro Antonio,” 1694, 693, 2ª parte, expediente 11, folio 541r.
comprehension of religious practices, they eventually acquired positions of lay leadership in their local communities composed of diverse colonial inhabitants.

Chapter three, in particular, places black Catholics at the center of New Spain’s religious cultural formation by examining their spiritual authority in institutionally recognized organizations known as *cofradías*, or confraternities. As a form of communal worship encouraged by ecclesiastical authorities, approved by church officials, and overseen by members of the secular clergy, leadership in lay religious brotherhoods provided black Catholics with a social space to act upon their conceptions of the Catholic faith without breaking the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy. Functioning within the complex social formation of the colonial parish, where black parishioners maintained intimate connections with men and women of “various status and *calidad,*” their spiritual direction of appropriate forms of confraternal worship directed a religious organization composed of free blacks, slaves, Spaniards, natives, and *castas.* With a focus on the black leadership of racially-diverse confraternities, the chapter moves beyond the traditional scholarly depiction of black brotherhoods as sites of distinct cultural formation separate from Spanish, indigenous, or *castas* conceptions of sacred communal organizations. Instead, it argues that sacred communities, based on a shared Catholic spirituality framed by black expertise in Christian practices, functioned as part of the dynamic cultural and social milieu of the colony not as a social organization distinct from it.

Focusing on the patterns of interaction that occurred within the colonial parish – in the sacred and secular sites of the marketplace, neighborhood streets, parish churches, and chapels and altars – chapter four builds on the Catholic practices and personal interactions established in the previous chapter to illustrate how the social experiences in the Catholic parish mediated the formation of black creole Christianity. For black creoles with a sense of Christian piety, it
argues, the specific religious experiences and spiritual relationships with the diverse devout laity offered a space to display their internal commitment to a shared Catholic spirituality and discuss their conceptions of the faith, ultimately transferring their knowledge of the Catholic practices to various members of their local parishes. Black Catholics acquired spiritual authority in their social settings as they expressed their personal religious choices to friends, family, neighbors, and even casual acquaintances.

The final chapter addresses how the intimate nature of the social relationships established in the diverse colonial parish contributed to the production of the spiritual reputations of New Spain’s black Catholics. Reputations as devout Catholic subjects would in time come to form the basis of their claims to lay religious leadership. In a colonial society dominated by clerical oversight, ecclesiastical regulation, and the threat of denunciation to the Inquisition, a broader acceptance, or at times denunciation, of the personal spiritual practices of black Catholics by the parishioners of their local religious communities directed their recognition as persons with spiritual authority. At the same time, their broader acceptance in colonial religious society as informal, albeit officially-recognized persons of lay leadership, allowed black Catholics to negotiate the discriminatory and exclusionary practices that circumscribed their religious lives.

By the end of the sixteenth century, as church officials established ecclesiastical policy regarding residents, any persons defined as black, mulatto, or mestizo had officially been prohibited from occupying important positions within the ecclesiastical order, including posts as secular priests, professed members of the mendicant orders, and appointments to other minor offices. Compounded with their non-Spanish status, or their lack of limpieza de sangre (purity of blood), Afro-descendants secured few opportunities for recognition as official religious figures throughout the colonial period. As the chapter demonstrates, in their local communities where
they maintained reputations as devout spiritual persons, black Catholics navigated their social networks to maintain informal positions of spiritual authority that allowed them to communicate, discuss, and implement their conceptions of the faith despite their racial heritage, thus shaping local expressions of Catholicism.

In the final analysis, “Black Catholicism: The Formation of Local Religion in Colonial Mexico” offers a layered investigation into one of the New World’s earliest and largest black Christian communities, encouraging scholars to fundamentally rethink how we conceive of the history of Afro-Catholicism and colonial Catholicism, more broadly. More than an examination of a black religious practices that remained distinct from Spanish Catholic society, the dissertation provides an analysis of how black parishioners exhibited a strong Catholic faith, while contributing to the social and cultural reproduction of colonial Catholicism.
Chapter One: Ecclesiastical Policies in the República de Españoles

On August 18, 1518, Charles I of Spain granted Laurent de Gouvenot, the governor of Bresa, license to import 4,000 enslaved Africans directly from the coast of Guinea to the Spanish territories in the New World. The king’s concession represented a significant divergence in royal policy. Spain’s sovereigns had originally restricted the importation of enslaved individuals to Iberian-born blacks or ladinos, persons who could speak Spanish or Portuguese and had at minimum a rudimentary understanding of the Catholic faith – in short, persons familiar with Iberian languages, traditions, and religious practices. By means of his decree, Charles altered course, approving the importation of ethnic Africans without knowledge of Iberian culture into lands “already discovered or to be discovered.” To facilitate the incorporation of these “four thousand black slaves” into Hispanic society, Charles ordered Gouvenot to ensure that each “male and female become Christian upon reaching each island.” Charles offered little insight into how enslaved Africans would receive instruction in the Christian faith prior to or after their baptism. To be sure, the king implemented an ordinance in 1545 commanding all slaveowners to “baptize and Christianize [African slaves]” within six months of their arrival in the New World. But, in general, royal and ecclesiastical policy neglected to specify the process of conversion for Africans and their descendants.

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1 “Permission granted to the Governor of Bresa for four thousand slaves,” in Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America, ed. Elizabeth Donnan (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1930), vol. 1: 41-42. The crown sold slave licenses called asientos to various Portuguese merchants that dictated the precise number of slaves permitted to enter the Spanish colonies legally. Of course, an undetermined amount of illegal slavery occurred outside of the asientos.
2 “Permission granted,” 41-42.
This chapter discusses the ecclesiastical and royal policies that affected Africans’ introduction into the Catholic faith. Over the course of the sixteenth century, the Catholic Church did not produce a distinct conversion policy for Africans. Ecclesiastical authorities did not create catechisms in African languages that would teach the importance of the sacred rites, establish missionary complexes dedicated to religious instruction, or educate the clergy in African dialects. As a result, Africans and their descendants did not receive extensive instruction in the Christian faith. But as the sixteenth century progressed, the Spanish Crown and Catholic Church implemented other policies that had an indirect impact on how this population engaged with Christianity. In their efforts to establish dominion in the recently discovered lands, ecclesiastical and royal authorities divided the colonial landscape into two separate commonwealths, known as the república de españoles and the república de indios. Through these spatial policies, Church officials situated individuals of African descent firmly within the jurisdictional boundaries of the Spanish commonwealth, subjecting them to the traditional methods of religious instruction experienced by Spaniards. In the república de españoles, persons of African descent attended mass where they heard sermons, offered confession to parish priests, received absolution and penitential acts for transgressions, and held conversations on spiritual matters with members of the Church hierarchy. In short, as members of the Spanish commonwealth, Africans and their descendants received a traditional introduction to Catholicism.

The spatial policies instituted by the Spanish crown and the Catholic Church additionally affected how individuals of African descent learned about the popular religious practices of their local communities. Initial divisions separated enslaved Africans, Spanish settlers, and the growing castas populations from indigenous communities as missionaries endeavored to provide spiritual administration for native groups. Colonial parishes designated for the Hispanic
population placed Africans and their descendants in the religious centers where Spanish practices were dominant. Confraternities composed of fellow parishioners organized celebrations in honor of a local patron saint and altars decorated by church attendees became places of personal devotion. As the colony’s demographics changed in response to the migration of Spanish settlers, importation of enslaved Africans, and the increase of *castas* and free blacks, the boundaries of the parochial centers shifted to include an increasingly diverse group of people. Neighborhoods originally established for indigenous communities were subsumed under new parochial centers for enslaved Africans, free blacks, and Spaniards, melding the varied populations. In the neighborhood streets, at parish churches, or at local altars, black parishioners interacted among progressively more diverse groups to discuss religious practices, attend mass, or found confraternities. Through these discussions with fellow parishioners, blacks learned the intricacies of local religious practice. Put another way, in the constantly shifting boundaries of the parochial landscape, persons of African descent accessed an informal introduction to the Catholic faith by engaging in the popular religious practices of their diverse local parishes.

**Evangelization in the *República de Españoles***

From the outset of the Spanish colonial project, evangelization and religious conversion offered a justification for both the conquest of the indigenous populations and the importation of African slaves into the American colonies. As Christian explorers encountered diverse peoples in the Americas and along the coast of Africa, they carried a canonical worldview shaped by centuries of theological tradition on cultural, religious, and ethnic difference. By the end of the fifteenth century, Catholic Iberians had constructed hierarchies of diverse categories of Christians that firmly established supremacy of “Old Christians,” or Catholics untainted by a
Jewish or Muslim genealogy. Christian notions of *limpieza de sangre*, or purity of blood, gradually associated cultural practices, religion, and ancestry with the purity of Spanish descent. Such an association provided Spanish Christians with the tools to discriminate against particular groups of people, specifically recently converted Jews and Muslims, or “New Christians.” Historian María Elena Martinez notes that, by the time of Spanish expansion into the New World, a rhetorical framework around Christian superiority, fears of the sincerity of a religious conversion, and the right to enslave persons deemed enemies of Christianity had connected slavery, infidelity, and paganism.6

As Iberian Christians established domination and enslavement as a right rooted in Christian thought and law, the Spanish crown, ecclesiastical authorities, lawyers, and theologians were forced to grapple with contradictory concerns of the exploitation of labor and the perceived necessary Christianization of forced laborers, both indigenous and African. Debates regarding the legality of conquest, the process of conversion, and the scope of Christianization emerged over the sixteenth century, influencing how Catholic officials approached the religious instruction of non-Christian groups in the Americas. Convening in a series of ecclesiastical synods, held in 1524, 1532, 1539, 1544, and 1546, Church officials attempted to refine the

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multiplicity of evangelizing methods employed throughout the colony and determine how best to convert new populations to Christianity. While the synods primarily addressed the jurisdictional boundaries of the newly Christianized lands, establishing the beliefs and practices that would prevail, the Church councils implemented the policies that endeavored to incorporate non-Christian persons into the Church. During this early period of disagreement and debate on the process of evangelization, ecclesiastical authorities developed separate approaches to the religious indoctrination of indigenous communities and African slaves.

As the native populations diminished from war, Old World diseases, and harsh treatment by the Spaniards, supporters of the evangelical methods employed by the Church and state started to question the legitimacy of Spanish conquest based on religious matters. Critics expressed grave concern over the protection and salvation of native peoples, speaking out against the abuses indigenous groups endured under the *encomienda* and *repartimiento* labor systems while largely ignoring the comparable abuse of enslaved Africans. Within the initial decades of the Spanish-American presence, religious persons spoke out against the atrocities endured by the New World inhabitants, most famously Bartolomé de las Casas, who became a prominent critic of the forced labor arrangements between Spanish settlers and native inhabitants. Since natives demonstrated a potential willingness to convert to Christianity, theologians argued, they could not be justifiably enslaved as if captured in a “just war,” a war fought against an infidel who had openly rejected the Catholic faith.

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7 Bartolomé de las Casas’ famous treatise denounced Spanish settlers’ treatment of the Caribbean natives and eventually called for the greater importation of Africans to replace indigenous laborers, an opinion that he would come to regret later in life. For more see Barolomé las Casas, *A Brief Account on the Destruction of the Indies*, trans. by Nigel Griffin (London: Penguin Classics, 1999).

8 Concepts of a just war emerged during the medieval period as the Iberian kingdoms sought to expel the Muslim kingdoms from the peninsula. Since Islamic groups explicitly rejected the Catholic faith, Spanish law established their enslavement during war as a just cause. As the Spanish and Portuguese kingdoms expanded into the Atlantic, they took the concept of the “just war” with them, applying them against indigenous and African peoples encountered on their journeys. For more on the debates regarding the just war against New World natives, see
Pressure by Spanish clerics decrying the exploitation of natives in the recently conquered Mexican territory prompted Charles I to outlaw indigenous slavery in the New Laws of 1542. Charles reiterated the appropriate treatment of indigenous persons that had first appeared in the 1512 Laws of Burgos, but explicitly banned the enslavement of the native peoples. The crown’s law to protect natives and end their enslavement rested on paternalistic notions that necessitated the Christianization of indigenous communities for the benefit of their souls and the improvement of their lives. According to the law’s clerical supporters, the conversion of indigenous groups would fail under their continued enslavement in large part because of the mistreatment of “these innocent people” by settlers. Their conversion, as jurist Juan de Solórzano y Pereira stated, could only occur through gentle means and persuasion in their own lands and under the respect of their liberty, not through forced enslavement. By the end of the sixteenth century, the theological debates, royal laws, and papal decrees had decisively established rights of indigenous communities as free, civilized humans who would willingly and fully commit to the Catholic faith and Spanish cultural customs.

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Nesvig, “The ‘Indian Question’ and the Case of Tlatelolco,” in Local Religion in Colonial Mexico, 69-70; Lewis, Hall of Mirrors, 16-19. Debra Blumenthal discusses the role of de Bona Guerra (Just War) in the making of African slaves in the Iberian Peninsula. She argues that by the end of the fifteenth century, Spanish lawyers in Valencia had started to determine if a captive was enslaved in a “good war” by the color of their skin rather than by specific testimony. Their assumptions stemmed from a lack of knowledge of African languages and a paucity of translators who could convey the legal spectacle of turning a captive of a just war into a slave. See Blumenthal, Enemies and Familiars, 9-45; Bristol, Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches, 34-36.

9 Lewis, Hall of Mirrors, 48; Bristol, Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches, 37. It should be noted that illegal enslavement of the native peoples continued for some time following the passing of the New Laws. However, here I wish to emphasize that fact that the law existed for natives, since no equivalent existed for African slaves until abolition centuries later.

10 The Laws of Burgos were issued by King Ferdinand in 1512 in response to reports of the encomenderos exploitation of the native populations that had reached the Iberian mainland. The laws restricted the authority encomenderos held over native persons, by providing legal requirements for religious education, better work conditions, adequate food, and restrictions on punishment. However, the laws largely went unenforced, subjecting natives to continued abuse while preventing missionaries from achieving their mission to convert natives to the Catholic faith.


As Spanish theologians, lawyers, and state officials debated the methods for the evangelization of the indigenous populations, ecclesiastical and royal authorities constructed ideologies of difference that upheld negative conceptions of African people and their readiness for conversion. Beginning in the middle of the fifteenth century, Portuguese exploration along the west coast of Africa expanded Iberian knowledge of African peoples and their religious traditions, contributing to preexisting associations of slavery, infidelity, paganism, and blackness. Framed around the necessity to convert the “land of infidels” to the Catholic faith, initial characterizations presented African pagans as barbarians who “had no understanding of good, but only knew how to live in bestial sloth.” In his account of Prince Henry of Portugal’s expeditions to West Africa, Gomes Eanes de Zurara described a society living in “great ignorance” whose residents, without exposure to Christianity, would continue on “like beasts, without any custom of reasonable beings – for they had no knowledge of bread or wine, and they were without the covering of clothes, or the lodgment of houses.” His equivalence of “reasonable beings” with the cultural practices of eating bread or the use of European-style clothing and architecture simultaneously denigrated sub-Saharan African peoples, depicting them...
as culturally primitive and highly irrational, while highlighting the necessity of Christian conversion.

Supported by the pope, who in 1433 issued a papal bull, *Romanus pontifex*, declaring European expansion a Christian endeavor to “destroy the errors and wickedness of the infidels,” the continued interaction between European explorers and Guinea inhabitants perpetuated Iberian beliefs about the cultural inferiority, primitive nature, and irrationality of African practices, often depicting them as superstitious rituals in honor of false idols. In his letter from Tuat in 1447, Antonio Malfante, a Genoese merchant, described the inhabitants of today’s Mali as “all blacks and idolators, continually at war with each other in deference to their law and their faith of their idols.” Without the introduction of Christianity, he claimed, they would continue to “worship the sun, others the moon…others a mirror which reflects their faces, which they take to be the images of gods; others groves of trees, the seats of a spirit to whom they make sacrifice.” In the late fifteenth century, Duarte Pacheco Pereira, a Portuguese explorer, portrayed the practices of the residents of Kingdom of Benin on the coast of West Africa in a more sinister light, chronicling how they lived a life “full of abuses and witchcraft and idolatry.” But, as he assured his patron, he believed “many of these people would be saved by the sacrament of Holy Baptism.” More than a century later, Duarte Lopes, the Portuguese trader in West Central Africa, echoed these depictions by portraying the ritual objects of the residents of the Kingdom of Kongo as “demons of strange and frightful forms.” He explained to his readers how he witnessed the deceptive tricks of Kongo’s ritual practitioners, sharing that

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17 “Letter from Antoine Malfante,” in *The Voyages of Cadamosto*, 87-88.
they “had also their sorcerers, who told these simple people that the idols spoke to them, and deceiving them so far that if any sick presented themselves and were healed, the sorcerers ascribed the cure to the idols, but if they were not healed they said the idols were angry.”

Lopes concluded that despite their participation in superstitious rituals dedicated to false idols, “many became Christians, and so great a number of nobles and others asked for baptism that there were not found priests sufficient to perform the service.”

In reiterating the belief that African populations could easily be swayed to convert to Christianity, Iberians voiced the opinion that Africans remained culturally, morally, and intellectually inferior, maintaining no legal structures, religious convictions, or evidence of civilization that would hinder their acceptance of the Catholic faith. As the Portuguese and, later, the Spanish, ventured farther down the African coast, the information they gathered contributed to the construction of Iberian notions of the cultural inferiority of African peoples that eventually characterized forced enslavement as a Christian undertaking.

Utilizing negative characterizations of African peoples, civil and ecclesiastical writers launched the argument that an introduction to Christianity through slavery was preferable to a life without salvation. Unlike the situation with native groups, the recognition that African peoples would readily adopt Spanish religious practices failed to ignite a concern among civil and ecclesiastical authorities over the legitimacy of the transatlantic slave trade and the effects enslavement would have on African conversion. Utilizing the concept of de bona guerra, just

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23 Cadamosto, for example, described the residents of the African kingdoms he visited as “exceedingly idolatrous, have no laws, and are the cruelest of men.” “The Voyages of Cadamosto,” in *The Voyages of Cadamosto*, 54.
war, Spaniards perpetuated an image of slavery as a legitimate consequence of aggression toward the Christian faith. Applied to African peoples, Iberians employed the concept to declare that blacks could be justifiably enslaved because they rejected the Catholic faith and waged wars against other Christians in Africa, marking them as enemies of the Church. The concept of a just war against black infidels connected slavery and blackness in a manner that legitimized Iberian actions on the coast of Africa and in the Americas.

Writing in the early decades of the seventeenth century, Spanish Jesuit Alonso de Sandoval explained to the reader that “it is very common to justify slavery by arguing that it gives them the chance to learn how to go to heaven through our good example.” To expound on his point, Sandoval relayed an anecdote that framed the moral justification of slavery entirely around Christian conversion. While in conversation with a captain of a slave ship who wanted reassurance to clear his guilty conscience, the captain asked Sandoval if “the slave trade was moral” because he feared that he would “bring [enslaved Africans] to live the rest of their lives in Christian lands, but they never become Christian,” thus rendering their enslavement immoral and illegal. In response, Sandoval relieved his concerns, stating, “Your trade is not immoral, and you will not be punished, because you say you bring the blacks here in good faith and for a good reason” – Christianity.

On another occasion, when asked about the potentially illegal enslavement of certain Africans, specifically through kidnapping, Sandoval further supported the moral justification of their enslavement on religious grounds. He stated that, “because so many souls are saved through

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25 Martinez, Genealogical Fictions, 156-157; Blumenthal, Enemies and Familiars, 267-268. For a larger discussion of the medieval meaning of de bona guerra and its evolution in its application to the transatlantic slave trade, see Blumenthal, Enemies and Familiars, 9-45.
26 Alonso de Sandoval, Treatise on Slavery, 72.
27 Alonso de Sandoval, Treatise on Slavery, 52.
enslavement, we serve God better if we save all those who were captured legitimately instead of not saving any of them for the sake of a few that were enslaved unjustly.”\textsuperscript{28} By presenting slavery as a Christian endeavor with the view that enslavement was preferable to a life without salvation, Spanish theologians, lawyers, and civil authorities employed language of Christian superiority and negative conceptions of African people in a manner that contributed to their association of blackness, infidelity, and paganism.

Certainly, a few theologians strongly opposed the enslavement of blacks over the course of the colonial period. In 1560, Alonso de Montúfar, the Archbishop of Mexico, wrote to King Philip II adamantly condemning the transatlantic slave trade on religious grounds. Referencing Charles I’s honorable decision to abolish indigenous slavery in favor of their Christianization, he questioned why the crown viewed blacks from the coast of Guinea any different. He pointed out that Africans introduced to Christianity appeared to fully accept it in good faith, and therefore should not be considered enemies of Catholicism nor infidels who freely rejected it. 

Undermining Spanish justifications of slavery further, he continued to remark on how African slavery, like the enslavement of indigenous peoples, proved detrimental to the Church and crown’s efforts to save the souls of blacks “because in such captivity they are often times or routinely subject to harms that are contradictory to their salvation.”\textsuperscript{29} Therefore, if the Spanish crown truly wished to introduce Africans to the Catholic faith, he asserted, then missionaries should instruct them in the Holy Gospel in their own lands where they remained free from the oppressive system of enslavement and thus more receptive to God’s word, an argument reminiscent of Juan de Solórzano y Pereira’s suggestions for the natives of the New World.

\textsuperscript{28} Alonso de Sandoval, \textit{Treatise on Slavery}, 51.
\textsuperscript{29} Francisco del Paso y Troncoso, \textit{Epistolario de Nueva España, 1505-1818}, vol. 9, 53-54.
Apart from the opposition posed by Montúfar, the majority of Spanish theologians viewed the enslavement of African peoples as a Christian endeavor, even if they at times took issue with the process of Christianization. Throughout his treatise, Sandoval’s concerns on the enslavement of African peoples revolved primarily around the church’s evangelization efforts, specifically the failure of his Jesuit brethren to dedicate adequate energies to the catechization of enslaved Africans, rather than the “arduous and difficult business” of justifying slavery as a Christian act in the first place.\footnote{30 Alonso de Sandoval, Treatise on Slavery, 50.}

In his treatise \textit{De instauranda Aethiopum salute, or On Restoring Ethiopian Salvation} (1627), he questioned the Spanish ideology that Africans lacked the intellectual capacities to fully understand Catholicism, arguing that if Africans appeared deficient in their abilities to convert it was because missionaries failed to provide them with adequate instruction. To defend the intellectual capacities of African populations and justify their inclusion in the Catholic Church, he criticized his Jesuits colleagues for failing to defend slaves as they had the natives:

“Many churchmen work to bring Christianity to the Indians, and I envy them for working on such a glorious task, but their enthusiasm also discourages me, because our work with the blacks is just as important. No one speaks in their defense and no one runs to help them. I believe I am not exaggerating in saying that the poor blacks are more desperate than the Indians.”\footnote{31 Alonso de Sandoval, Treatise on Slavery, 79.}

The lack of consideration shown Africans in the Spanish empire, especially compared to that shown to native communities, greatly disturbed Sandoval who feared that the overwork and abuse of slaves by their owners would deny them salvation in the faith and the potential to learn Christianity.

\textbf{Notwithstanding the few Spanish voices critical of African enslavement, the system continued to exist, unlike indigenous slavery, in part because of the crown’s economic interests...}
in the transatlantic slave trade. With the Spanish state’s monopoly on the importation of Africans through the sale of licenses to the Portuguese, known as *asientos*, the slave trade remained an important source of revenue for the crown. Combined with the economic interests of individual slaveowners and Church authorities who profited from slave labor, the undertaking of missionary work of African slaves became a secondary concern in a short period of time.

Differences in how Spaniards conceptualized the diverse indigenous and African populations engendered distinct juridico-theological statuses that would ultimately affect each group’s association with the Catholic Church. In the various *juntas*, theologians and jurists convened to determine the jurisdictional boundaries of their authority in the new territories and how best to convert native peoples without disregarding the rights and statuses afforded them under the Laws of Burgos and the New Laws. The acknowledgement of native peoples as free and in their own lands remained a central concern to these discussions of evangelization efforts, which stressed throughout the sixteenth century that Indians would better receive the Holy Gospel if their freedom and political rights were respected. As stated in a 1594 letter from Franciscan missionaries, who first arrived seventy years earlier, the native peoples were “in their own lands, where they were taught the Holy Gospel, which they received with great enthusiasm, and for having accepted it, they should not be treated like slaves but remain free as before, and [in] their republic with its permanent set of privileges.”

32 “Parecer de los frailes Franciscanos sobre repartimientos de Indios,” *Boletín del Archivo General de la Nación* vol. 9 (1938), p. 176. The Franciscans first arrived in New Spain in 1524, three years after Cortes’ defeat of the Aztecs, as part of the crown’s first sponsored missionary effort of the new territory. Known at The Twelve, the friar initiated what became known as the “spiritual conquest” of the native inhabitants through methodological evangelization. Shortly after their foundation among the Nahuas, the Dominicans and Augustinians arrived to aid in the administration to the native communities. Combined with special dispensation from the pope to conduct religious functions reserved for the secular clergy, the mendicant orders provided the foundation for the Christianization of the Americas. For more see Robert 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).
collectively welcome Christianity taught in their communities, missionaries should respect their freedom, communal existence, and rights to their own lands.

Through the debates about the efficacy of evangelizing methods and their connections to indigenous rights as free vassals, the Spanish crown and church authorities gradually, and imperfectly, installed a sociopolitical system premised on a notion of a dual model of social organization. At the insistence of the mendicant orders who believed the presence of Spanish settlers would be counterproductive to indigenous conversion, the crown implemented a policy that separated the colonial social order into two distinct entities: the república de indios for the native communities, and the república de españoles for everyone else. The system of two commonwealths, or repúblicas, guaranteed the native communities rights to their own laws and institutions while ensuring easier access to religious education for the new converts.33 Within the república de indios, the mendicant orders acquired jurisdiction over the spiritual wellbeing of the indigenous populations, overseeing the administration of the sacraments, especially baptism, marriage, and penitence, and the creation of catechisms in native languages.34

With the support of the Spanish crown, ecclesiastical and civil authorities in New Spain implemented the spatial segregation policies that largely left the rest of colonial society,  

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33 Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest*, 135-137.
34 For a more complete analysis of the evangelizing mission in New World indigenous communities, see Ibid. Although the maintenance of two hermetically isolated commonwealths proved fairly impossible to achieve, as evident by repeated laws prohibiting “Spaniards, blacks, mestizos, and mulattoes from living in Indian villages,” the policy supported advocates in the evangelization enterprise. Members of the mendicant orders feared the social contamination of native communities by the corrupting influences of Spaniards and their African slaves. Julián Garcés, the first bishop of Puebla, which at the time included the states of Puebla, Veracruz, and Tlaxcala, voiced his concern over the unruly behavior of Spanish settlers, whom he considered “spoiled, lazy, and prone to violence and sexual deviance.” Their behavior, he contended, would prevent the prompt conversion of the impressionable native peoples, and therefore, complete separation would be the only measure to guarantee their successful education in the Catholic faith. For the law, see Konetzke, Colección de documentos, vol. 2, pt. 2, 533. The Crown repeated the law against Spaniards and castas in the native villages throughout the colonial period beginning around 1578 and continuing through the eighteenth century. The repetition of the law implies that colonial residents failed to acknowledge the restrictions. Natives continuously relocated to the Spanish urban centers to find better economic opportunities, while Spaniards, blacks, mulattoes, and mestizos took up residence in the pueblos de indios for various reasons.
including the growing African population, to the secular clergy composed of parish priests, pastors, and ecclesiastical judges. In placing enslaved Africans under the jurisdiction of clergymen assigned to maintain orthodoxy in the república de españoles, Spanish lawmakers did not create a separate juridico-theological status for Africans and their descendants equally unfamiliar with the Catholic faith.\(^3\) Instead, they subjected bozales to ecclesiastical regulations of religious practices without granting them the status of neophytes in need of religious instruction. Under this jurisdiction, authorities left slaves to the scrutiny of ecclesiastical courts and the Inquisition where authorities could hold them accountable, thus preventing them from receiving the limited protection from Catholic rituals and regulation accorded their native counterparts. Following the public execution of indigenous nobleman Don Carlos de Texcoco in the late 1530’s for his inconstancy in the faith, the crown and Church authorities removed the native populations from the oversight of ecclesiastical courts and, later, the Inquisition. To address native heterodoxy, they established a separate juridical apparatus that allowed native populations to present complaints directly to the crown, bishops, and archbishops, claiming that their status as neophytes deemed it inappropriate to subject them to inquisitorial prosecution.\(^3\) Without a comparable apparatus for the black populations, the crown placed them firmly under the direction of the religious institutions that addressed the orthodoxy and heresy of Spanish settlers. Because Spaniards acknowledged Africans as “reasonable beings,” albeit culturally and morally inferior, they expected African slaves to perform in religious rituals as Old World Catholics long familiar with the basic tenets of the faith.

\(^3\) Scholars contend that the difference in juridico-theological status emanated from the Spanish’s failure to recognize Africans as free persons associated with their own lands, as they had the indigenous populations. Martínez, Genealogical Fictions, 156; Bristol, Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches, 46-47.

\(^3\) Richard E. Greenleaf, Zumárraga y la Inquisición mexicana (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988), 86-93; Martínez, Genealogical Fictions, 101-102.
Without a methodological process for the religious indoctrination of Africans, the initial conversion of slaves was limited to traditional patterns that required the first generations to adapt quickly on their own. For *bozales*, conversion often meant a meaningless baptism prior to their forced departure from the coast of Africa, followed by minimal direction in religious practices upon their arrival in the Americas. Extensive historical discussions of early religious indoctrination of Africans and their descendants in New Spain remains clouded by a lack of documentary evidence, reflecting, as some scholars have claimed, a general lack of concern for the Christianization of slaves. Still, a few sources provide descriptions of early evangelical work among Africans and their descendants.\(^\text{37}\) Sandoval, for example, supplies the most detailed accounts of baptism and early efforts, or lack thereof, to educate slaves in the Catholic faith. As he described in *De instauranda Aethiopum salute*, slaves generally received the sacrament of baptism from a priest who “[went] to the ship and ask[ed] the black brutes if they want[ed] baptism.” After responding affirmatively, “because,” as Sandoval claimed, “of course they know what the word ‘yes’ means,” they were baptized without learning their responsibilities as members of the Catholic collective.\(^\text{38}\)

In other instances, Sandoval lamented how the slaves endured a careless baptism *en masse* through the sprinkling of holy water immediately before their departure to the Americas, again without adequate indoctrination to assure that slaves understood the significance of the holy sacrament. Referencing a letter he received from a Jesuit priest in Cordoba de Tucuman in December 1622, he stated that:

“[I have testimony from the slave merchants themselves that in the Angolan port called Luanda, black slaves are simply lined up in the plaza one day before they set sail. This is done by ministers or priests. Up until this point they have been in prison. They do not learn the catechism and do not even know anything about

\(^{37}\) Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*; Sandoval, *Treatise on Slavery*.

\(^{38}\) *Alonso de Sandoval, Treatise on Slavery*, 112.
God. The priests tell the slaves their names and give them pieces of paper with their names written on them so that they do not forget them. After this, the priests put salt in all the slaves’ mouths. Next, they throw water on them several times with an aspergillum to do it as quickly as possible. Then the baptism is done.”

Without obtaining pre-baptismal instruction, a requirement in canon law, Africans arrived in the Americas labeled as Christians, thus adhering to Charles’ 1518 decree, but had deficient knowledge of Christian orthodoxy.

Upon their arrival to the New World, Africans’ immediate religious instruction depended on where they arrived and who became their masters. The 1545 ordinances decreed by Charles V placed the burden of responsibility firmly in the hands of slave owners in an attempt to guarantee the very conversion that justified black enslavement without providing the same institutional resources as indigenous communities. The decree stipulated that owners instruct African slaves in the Spanish language and Christian doctrine within the first six months of their arrival, symbolically converting them from bozales to ladinos. However, many owners did not fulfill these spiritual responsibilities, forcing slaves to work on Sundays, neglecting their access to churches with priests or altars, and denying their participation in mass for the Eucharist. Such neglect eventually reached the king’s ears. In 1569, the crown responded to a petition from Juan de Peña, who wrote on behalf of “the mulattos of New Spain.” The crown claimed that, “because of spending most of their time busy in the labor of mines and … haciendas, cattle ranches and other things [these mulattos] are not indoctrinated nor instructed in the things of our Catholic faith,” causing their “souls and consciences [to] suffer.” The situation improved little by the

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39 Alonso de Sandoval, Treatise on Slavery, 112-113.
40 Canon law explicitly forbade forced conversion, requiring that the person receiving baptism prove their knowledge of the basic Catholic tenets prior to the sacrament.
41 Colección de documentos, vol. 1, p. 237-.
42 Colección de documentos, vol. 1, 449.
seventeenth century. Sandoval describes masters’ treatment of their slaves’ religious education, albeit biased, as trivial. He observed that “masters believe it is a waste of time to try to teach slaves the catechism, that baptism is pointless, having slaves make their confession is a joke, and giving slaves communion is blasphemous,” and therefore contributed to the “spiritual plight” of enslaved Africans.  

To be sure, a few particularly pious slaveowners ensured their slaves adhered to Christian orthodoxy by arranging, at minimum, their attendance at weekly masses. Multiple Inquisition cases reference the presence of black slaves at masses while other documents, including wills and testaments and confraternity records, indicate at least a passive effort by owners to grant regular access to religious services. In Mexico City, where the majority of enslaved Africans lived in Spanish households, convenient access to parish churches and regular religious functions made it easier for slaveowners to comply with their religious responsibilities. Domestic slaves often accompanied their masters to church, where they heard sermons and took part in mass. In 1655, for example, Adriana Ruíz de Cabrera, a slaveowning woman accused of witchcraft, explained to the inquisitors that her religious endeavors proved the accusations against her were false. She mentioned how she arrived punctually to church every week and ensured her family and slaves arrived with her to hear mass. As further proof, she requested two priests to testify on her behalf. They informed the inquisitors that she guaranteed her family and slaves regularly heard mass, confessed, and took communion.  

While the case does not elaborate on other religious services Adriana provided her slaves, her testimony illustrates that she took her religious responsibilities toward her family members and slaves seriously, ensuring that they, at minimum, accompanied her to church every week.

43 Alonso de Sandoval, Treatise on Slavery, 72.
The Jesuits, as the New World’s largest slave-owning institution, demonstrated a sincere concern for the fate of the souls of their slaves, providing some of the most extensive religious education to recently-arrived slaves. Throughout the colonial period, enslaved Africans and their descendants were often donated, willed, or deposited to religious institutions, where they served as personal servants, cooks, artisans, or jornaleros (day laborers) who brought in supplemental income. On rural estates and in these urban institutional settings, the Jesuits followed baptism with the provision of basic religious instruction after baptism and held mandatory services for their slaves. Each slave was further required to confess and take communion each Sunday and on all major feast days. Members of the Jesuit order in Veracruz detailed their efforts of religious instruction among the black population in their report back to their superiors in Rome. Apart from their practice of preaching in churches, convents, prisons, and plazas throughout New Spain, they had also “done much with the blacks (of whom there are many here), the most forsaken people of all.”45 They stated that “they have been diligent in teaching them the Christian doctrine, informing them and making them capable of understanding what, as Christians, they must believe. They have done this in the town as well as outside, in the ranches and the estates.”46 Even though the Jesuits, as owners of slaves, demonstrated a sincere concern for “the most forsaken people of all” under their ownership, such devotion to slaves’ spirituality seldom occurred.

The lack of a methodological evangelization process for Africans and their descendants does not necessarily mean religious indoctrination remained impossible or marginal. Rather their status as members in the república de españoles initiated a gradual exchange of spiritual

46 *Monumenta Mexicana*, 189.
knowledge. In the early moments of enslavement, the Catholic clergy interacted with black parishioners to guide their religious behavior.

As previous scholars have suggested, Catholic regulation and ecclesiastical intervention offered another way for Africans to acquire familiarity with Christian expectations. In the ecclesiastical courts and the Inquisition, authorities corrected deviant behavior of enslaved Africans, indicating the beliefs and practices tolerated as appropriate Christian customs. Adjudicating over Africans’ religious behavior and demanding their adherence to Christian mores, ecclesiastical officials subjected Africans and their descendants to a disciplinary process complete with public displays of ecclesiastical power. For historian Herman Bennett, the spectacle of the Inquisition’s *auto de fe*, a procession of guilty penitents sentenced by the Holy Office that ended in their public sentencing, magnified the authoritative reach of the ecclesiastical arm, signaling to newly arrived African slaves and subsequent creole generations the magnitude of the Church’s desire for social and cultural conformity. As the largest population sector in the *republica de españoles*, Africans and their descendants regularly fell subject to the scrutiny of the inquisitorial process. Indeed, of the extant 1,553 inquisitorial cases held at the Archivo General de Nación in Mexico City, nearly fifty percent involved an Afro-descendant as the accused. Over the course of the colonial period, senior inquisitors issued sentences for crimes, ranging from bigamy to serious charges of heresy, as a means to supervise the moral behavior of black residents, clearly marking the degree of punishment for any violations regardless of the defendant’s familiarity with Catholic obligations.

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47 For more on Catholic absolutism and the church’s regulation of Afro-Mexican bodies, practices, and rituals. See Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico* and *Colonial Blackness*.
48 Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico* and *Colonial Blackness*.
Still, ecclesiastical vigilance over black morality only provides part of story behind the introduction of enslaved Africans to Catholicism. As members in the Spanish commonwealth adhered to clerical expectations, recently-converted slaves gradually discovered alternate routes to learning the boundaries between orthodox and unorthodox behavior. Through observation of public practices, including feast day celebrations, confraternal processions, sermons, and participation in mass, Africans imitated outward performances of piety that allowed them to acquire an underlying familiarity with the Catholic hierarchy, clerical expectations, and appropriate institutional practices. For historian Joan Bristol, mimicry or imitation became the primary and most effective form of religious education for Africans and their descendants. Their proximity to Spanish religious culture introduced blacks to religious paintings and other images that depicted biblical stories, saints’ lives, and proper devotional practices.\(^{49}\) As enslaved workers or free artisans, persons of African descent worked on the construction and decoration of their local churches, chapels, and altars, acquiring a familiarity with the ornate decorations that composed Christian veneration. In their complete immersion into colonial religious practices replete with public worship, Iberian architecture, and special religious functions, argues historian Nancy van Deusen, enslaved Africans and especially their creole children acquired lessons in orthodox religious behavior.\(^{50}\) Imitation served to introduce Africans new to the faith to basic Catholic tenets, creating a space where they could assign new meanings to outward practices.

As later generations of black creoles and mulattos – both enslaved and increasingly free – built upon the foundational familiarity established by their ancestors, they developed a

\(^{49}\) Bristol additionally argues that the act of mimicry simultaneously educated African slaves in orthodox behavior and acted a threat to imperial power. Citing Homi Bhabha, she argues that mimesis blurred the categories of difference necessary for the maintenance of colonial power. Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches* and “Afro-Mexican Saintly Devotion,” 121-122.

spirituality that functioned firmly within the confines of the república de españoles. They attended mass at churches established for non-indigenous parishioners and offered their confession to members of the secular clergy. By the seventeenth century, a growing majority of the Afro-Mexican population who appeared before inquisitorial commissioners could recount the details of the names of priests who provided their confirmation instruction and their latest confession, suggesting at least a marginal significance in their religious lives. In his testimony before the Holy Office in Mexico City, for example, Gasper Riveros Vasconcelos, an Afro-Portuguese man, informed the inquisitor commissioner that he had his first confession “in order to comply with the church” when he lived in Havana, adding that he went to a “clergyman in the Cathedral” and later confessed regularly to the diocese’s bishop, Don Leonel de Servantes. Since his first communion, he continued, he had “heard mass every day, and confesses and takes communion when it is commanded by the Holy Mother Church.”\(^{51}\) Gaspar’s testimony suggests that he was instructed in the theological significance of the routine customs of the Catholic Church by the very nature of his Christian upbringing.

Combined with the secular clergy’s intention to regulate the Catholic laity in the New World following the implementation of reforms of the Council of Trent, alternate opportunities to obtain a comprehensive religious education gradually emerged, paving the way for blacks to obtain a more profound understanding of the Catholic faith.\(^{52}\) To ensure sacramental conformity, secular clergy with proper training in doctrine and the liturgy instructed the laity in appropriate religious behavior – in devotionals, prayers, pilgrimages, or confraternal organizations –

\(^{51}\) AGN, Inquisición, “Contra Gaspar Vasconcelos,” 1650, 435, 2a parte, expediente 249, folios 526r-526v.

\(^{52}\) As part of the Counter-Reformation, the Council of Trent implemented a series of reforms to address the concerns raised during the Protestant Reformation. In the process, they firmly defined the rights, obligations, and orthodox practices of Catholicism and the indicated how secular and regular clergy should ensure its enforcement. For more see Hsia, The World of Catholic Renewal. For a more comprehensive examination of the effects of the Catholic Renewal in how ecclesiastical authorities manifested their control of the African body, see Bennett, Colonial Blackness.
emphasizing the need for clerical oversight. Since oversight and regulation occurred primarily at the local level, Church officials worked to channel all religious life through the parochial centers. The Catholic laity attended mass in their parish church, where they received the sacraments, proclaimed their first confession, and were later confirmed in the faith, allowing for routine interaction between priest and parishioner. In time, the parish became “the primary and normative institution for the ministry of the church.” Parish priests interacted with black parishioners, holding chats on spiritual matters that initiated the exchange of theological knowledge of beliefs, rituals, and practices beyond the routine. As highlighted in the following chapter, in moments of clerical interactions, confessional communication, and informational exchange, conversion to Catholicism occurred through conversation in trusted relationships, which became a powerful tool for individual clergy concerned about the souls of the burgeoning black population.

The Colonial Parish

From the earliest moments of ecclesiastical presence, the colonial parish emerged as a central location for the development of a new social and cultural landscape. As the Spanish Crown, backed by the Catholic Church, acted to secure its authority over the recently conquered territories of New Spain, royal officials and ecclesiastical authorities initiated a process that

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55 Hsia, “Translating Christianity: Counter-Reformation Europe and the Catholic Mission in China, 1580-1780,” in *Conversion: Old Worlds and New*, eds. Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 87-108. Hsia contends that the early Christian missions in China succeeded, in part, because they approached Chinese converts from an intellectual perspective, viewing the best way to achieve indoctrination would be through sincere, formal, and informal dialogue between a trained individual and the potential convert. The conversation method of conversion, in the Chinese instance, required an immense knowledge of the Chinese language which proved difficult for many of the Jesuits present in China. For this project, I aim to apply Hsia’s concept of conversion as a form of confession to later black creoles and mulattos who still needed guidance in their spiritual lives from trained, knowledgeable individuals. It served as educational points in the black religious experience.
inaugurated the foundations of the episcopal church. Operating under the rights granted by the *Patronato Real*, a collection of laws and privileges assigning Spanish monarchs significant jurisdiction over the Church in its territories, the Castilian crown erected the secular dioceses that designated the initial boundaries of parochial worship. With the establishment of these early dioceses, the administrative structures of the new colonial Church took shape. The episcopacy centered on the Cathedral, staffed by a bishop elected by the king, and several parishes composed of pastors, priests, vicars, and ecclesiastical judges. Through the administrative structure of the parish and its priest, the church expanded its jurisdiction over the colony’s Spanish and African populations, implementing regulatory practices, such as marriage, baptism, and funeral rites, that eventually elevated the status of the parish church in the spiritual lives of the colony’s various inhabitants. As the physical sites where members of the Catholic Church enacted their entrance into the Christian commonwealth, the boundaries of the parish, the churches and the chapels became a defining feature for the communal devotions of individuals of “all calidades.”

Early contests between the mendicant orders and the episcopal hierarchy, however, initially divided the parochial landscape into two coexisting systems: native *doctrinas* for the spiritual administration of indigenous populations and *parroquías* for everyone else. Armed

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56 Due to several papal dispensations over the course of the sixteenth century, the Spanish held significant authority over the direction of the Catholic Church in the new colony. Under the *Patronato Real*, the Crown maintained the rights to appoint ecclesiastical officials, including bishops and archbishops, draw the boundaries of dioceses, and approve the endowment of churches and monasteries. In 1574, the king signed into law the *Ordenanza del patronazgo real*, which codified these rights and privileges. The *Ordenanza del patronazgo real* would remain the legal codification of royal authority over the church until the eighteenth century, when the Bourbon Monarchs implemented reforms aimed at altering the relationship between the Church and Crown. For more see Poole, Pedro Moya de Contreras, 29 and Schwaller, *Church and Clergy*, 2-8.


59 Schwaller, *Church and Clergy*, 70.
with papal dispensations that provided special privileges to administer the sacraments to the native inhabitants – normally a function of the secular clergy – members of the regular clergy acted independently of the episcopacy, gradually implementing a conversion policy that encouraged the spatial separation of indigenous communities and the growing Spanish sector of colonial society. Once episcopal officials arrived to structure the administrative mechanisms of the colonial church, a power struggle between the two groups ensued. Debates over the jurisdiction of the native *doctrinas*, which by the middle of the sixteenth century were comprised mostly of recently-converted Indians, attempted to place the jurisdiction of indigenous communities firmly within the hands of the secular clergy. The episcopal hierarchy perceived these *doctrinas* as congregations in the “intermediate stages on the way toward being parishes,” which would fall subject to the supervision of the secular clergy. But the mendicant orders refused to yield, invoking their rights under the papal dispensations that provided them with apostolic authority to carry out the religious obligations of the indigenous communities under their jurisdiction. Despite efforts by powerful bishops to centralize the Church under episcopal control, and by extension the crown, the secular clergy would not fully obtain administration over the mendicant’s native *doctrinas* until the eighteenth century with the secularization laws of the Bourbon reforms. As the presence of the secular clergy rapidly extended over the course of the sixteenth century, coupled with the arrival of the Jesuits in 1572, the episcopacy turned their

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60 In 1522, Pope Adrian VI issued the papal bull *Exponi nobis feciste* authorizing the Franciscans and other mendicant orders “to do everything they might think necessary for the conversion of the Indians, wherever there were no bishops, or wherever the bishops should be two days’ journey distant, except for those acts that required episcopal consecration.” The papal dispensations provided the friars with extensive authority in the new church, which eventually led to a power struggle between the regular and the secular clergy. Ricard, *Spiritual Conquest*, 22.

61 Scholars have placed the power struggle between mendicant orders and the episcopal hierarchy in the context of the crown’s attempts to control the church in its dominions. As highlighted by historian Stafford Poole, the power struggle then became “a struggle of papal privilege versus royal patronage” – a struggle between the papal dispensation of the *Omnímoda* and the *Patronato Real*. Poole, *Pedro Moya de Contreras*, 80-81, 85.

attention to the república de españoles, which had grown to include any person identified as non-indigenous.

By the middle of the sixteenth century, Spanish colonists along with their African slaves and servants had settled in densely populated areas in close proximity to indigenous communities, raising further concerns among religious authorities who feared the potential contamination of native communities by the corrupting influence of the Hispanic laity. Many of the early Franciscan missionaries voiced their concern that the presence of the Hispanic laity in native communities would prove counterproductive to Christianization efforts. The Franciscan Gerónimo de Mendieta became one of the most vocal proponents for the geographical separation of indigenous neophytes and the Spanish settlers, arguing that Spaniards and Indians should “never live together.”

Concerned over the exploitation and moral corruption of native inhabitants, Mendieta contended that without the separation of indigenous groups from the rest of colonial society, the population risked complete destruction since “the Spaniards have all the evil desire and strength to destroy all the Indians of New Spain, if they were given the chance.” The first Bishop of Puebla and the surrounding regions of Veracruz and Tlaxcala, Julián Garcés, agreed with Mendieta. He emerged as a prominent voice against what he perceived as the unruly behavior of Spanish settlers, whom he considered “spoiled, lazy, and prone to violence and sexual deviance.” Their behavior, he contended, would prevent the prompt conversion of the impressionable native peoples, leaving complete separation as the only measure to guarantee the success of the Spanish missionary objectives.

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63 As discussed in the previous chapter, scholars have associated the emergence of the dual republics with the Crown’s efforts to secure its authority over the recently conquered natives and to curb the power of local encomenderos. Martínez, Genealogical Fictions, 98-99; Lewis, Hall of Mirrors, 50-51.
64 Quoted in Laura Lewis, Hall of Mirrors, 50.
65 Ibid., 49-50.
In their efforts to maintain the social and cultural separation of New Spain’s native inhabitants, representatives of the crown and Church gradually instituted policies that divided the parochial landscape. Through the policy of *congregaciónes*, a program designed to segregate place native peoples from Spaniards until they were sufficiently exposed to Christianity, state officials and ecclesiastical authorities founded temporary parishes located in separate towns for native peoples with the intention of introducing residents to Christianity and transforming the communities into Spanish municipalities. Perhaps the most striking example of this efforts resulted in the almost simultaneous foundation of Puebla de los Ángeles, a city exclusively for the Hispanic sector of society, and Santa Fe for the native communities of Michoacán.  

Similarly, in the reconstituted urban center of Mexico City, the *congregación* program divided the social landscape of the city’s various populations along distinct *barrio* (neighborhood) lines that extended from the city’s center, or *traza*, with the city’s cathedral and central plaza. Under this model, the Sagrario Metropolitano, as the cathedral’s main parish, primarily served the wellbeing of the elite Spaniards and their households, while two smaller parishes, Santa Catalina Martir and SantaVeracruz, ministered to the needs of the growing numbers of Spaniards, Africans, and *castas* living outside the *traza*. In the areas immediately surrounding the Spanish center, royal officials had designated the four preconquest districts of Moyotlan, Cuepopan, Atzacualco, and Teopan as the native parishes of San Juan Baptist, Santa María la Redonda, San Sebastián, and San Pablo, respectively.

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68 Poole, *Pedro Moya de Contreras*, 32.

69 Cope, *Limits of Racial Domination*, 16; Poole, *Pedro Moya de Contreras*, 22.
In order to maintain the seclusion of native parishes from the influence of colonial settlers, state officials issued several decrees aimed at restricting Spanish colonists, enslaved Africans, free blacks, and *castas* from making their homes in areas designated as indigenous. In 1563, for example, Philip II signed into law a decree that prohibited “Spaniards, blacks, mulattoes, and mestizos” from taking up residence in native villages in an effort to prevent the “poor treatment and harm” caused by persons who “go to live among [the indigenous groups].” The king reissued his decrees in 1578 and again in 1580, stating that persons of African descent be forbidden to reside in native pueblos because “being universally ill-inclined” they “teach them bad customs and vices,” and thus endangered the evangelization efforts. In Mexico’s major cities, Spanish laws attempted to segregate native residents to their own barrios, work places, and hospitals, preventing the settlement of non-indigenous persons in areas outside the *traza* and its immediately surrounding neighborhoods. For the Church authorities and state representatives, the rapid expansion of the colonial population, in contrast to the precipitous decline of indigenous groups, and their settlement in close proximity to native communities threatened to undermine the colonial project and the crown’s authority over its new territories.

Further concerns over the increased African presence in the colony’s rural areas and urban centers led to additional laws aimed explicitly at Afro-descended populations. Colonial officials consistently depicted blacks and mulattoes as potential threats to the security of the social order, often construing them as dangerous, disloyal, and subversive. In 1590, Viceroy Villamanrique wrote to his successor, Luis de Velasco, about the “great numbers of dangerous

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71 AGN, Reales cédulas duplicados, VI, fol. 277. See also, Palmer, *Slaves of the White God*, 182.
and pernicious free Africans and mulattos,” stating that “they are only capable of living as vagabonds, robbing and causing violence.” Villamanrique’s anxieties about the prevalence of violent black vagabonds living outside Spanish control called attention to the government’s need to limit the movement of the colony’s Afro-descended populations by confining blacks to Spanish settlements. Failure to remedy the potentially dangerous situation risked the mistreatment from “violence and robberies” of the vulnerable native inhabitants. A few decades later, Viceroy Juan de Mendoza y Luna, the Marqués de Montesclaros, brought the matter before Philip III. He informed his majesty that the black inhabitants of New Spain, being “more powerful,” would “oppress [the Indians]” and “do anything they want to [them],” in some cases even treating them as their slaves. He argued that strict regulation remained the only remedy to the allegedly harmful presence of Afro-descendants in the commonwealth.

The colonial association of blackness with religious infidelity only strengthened the fears of Spanish officials for the safety of indigenous peoples. Spanish laws may have required that all slaves received an introduction into the basic principles of the Catholic faith and baptism into the Christian commonwealth, but many ecclesiastical and civil authorities remained persistent in the belief that Africans retained their infidel and pagan practices, a concern shared by the crown. In 1603, King Philip III of Spain signed a royal decree aimed at addressing the

74 Advertimientos generales que los virreyes dejaron a sus sucesores para el gobierno de Nueva España, 1590-1604, eds. France V. Scholes and Eleanor B. Adams (Mexico City: Parrúa, 1956), 100; von Germeten, Black Blood Brothers, 76; Bennett, Colonial Blackness, 115; Palmer, Slaves of the White God, 182.
75 Advertimientos generales, 100; Bennett, Colonial Blackness, 115-116; Palmer, Slaves of the White God, 182.
76 Archivo General de Indias (hereafter AGI), México Correspondencia Vierrein al, leg. 25, no. 26-A, 1603.
77 Martínez, Genealogical Fictions, 154-161; Schwaller, Géneros de Gente, 4-5; Ben Vinson III, Before Mestizaje: The Frontiers of Race and Caste in Colonial Mexico (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Bristol, Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches, 47-53; Lewis, Hall of Mirrors, 17.
78 As discussed at length in chapter one, in 1545, Charles V implemented a series of ordinances aimed at addressing the treatment of enslaved Africans and their descendants and the need for their education in the Catholic faith. In addition to decent treatment, “including giving [slaves] food and clothing according to reason, and not punishing them with cruelties, nor putting their hands on them without evident reason,” Charles ordered that owners convert all slaves to Christianity within the first six months of their arrival in the Americas, “as all blacks are inclined to be friendly toward Christianity and easily converted to it.” For more see, Colección de documentos, vol. 1, 238.
inconstancy of the colony’s black subjects, stating that “more blacks come from Guinea, and they are the people of most unenlightened by doctrine that are known.” Without proper oversight of their behavior, including attempts to educate slaves in the Catholic faith, he insisted that they “[fled] from the doctrine to go to their dances and drunken brawls, and most remain without confession and almost none take communion.” Their status as subjects under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition, despite their initial unfamiliarity with the basic tenets of the Christian faith, merely amplified Spanish concerns over their adherence to orthodoxy. Africans and their descendants proved their insincerity of their Catholic conversion with “their dances and drunken brawls” and therefore were not successful members in Spanish Catholic society.

Spanish officials’ persistent assumption that Africans and their descendants resisted conversion, choosing instead to retain their “infidel” ways, facilitated the state’s efforts to define the rights and obligations of the colony’s black subjects while restricting their interaction with natives. Relations between the natives and Africans, officials contended, threatened the objectives of Christianization, since blacks could easily persuade the highly impressionable natives. To combat their concerns, ecclesiastical and state authorities implemented a series of policies and laws that restricted blacks’ participation in the colonial Church. Debates over the possibility for the ordination of natives, blacks, and persons of mixed decent, for example, quickly came to the forefront of church policy as mendicant missionaries feared the social defect of tainted blood or the potential for inconstancy in private beliefs might prove a hindrance to the

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80 Martínez, Genealogical Fictions, 165. Martínez discusses the connection of Africans and their descendants with the New Christians of the Old World at length, eventually arguing that this association in addition to their enslaved status that prevented persons of African descent from providing their genealogical “proof” of their Old Christian status prevented their full incorporation into Spanish Catholic society.
81 Martínez, Genealogical Fictions, 157; Bristol, Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches, 65-66; Bennett, Africans in Colonial Mexico, 62. I discuss Spanish ideologies on the perceived infidelity and paganism of Africans and their descendants at further length in chapter three.
success of their ministry. As early as 1555, with the convention of the First Provincial Council, representatives of the colonial church had moved to expressly forbid the ordination of mestizos, mulattos, and “others not suitable” for the orders, a list which also included illegitimacy, notable physical defects, status as a slave, recent converts, or those condemned by the Holy Office. Although the text of the council decrees did not explicitly prohibit the ordination of blacks, only those defined as mulattos, the incorporation of slave status and recent converts in the list of individuals “not suitable” for ordination attempted to include most of the people who would have fallen under this category. Such legislation effectively prohibited most of the colonial population – natives, Africans, and, because of Iberian distrust of New Christians, their descendants – from holding an official religious position within the Church and ultimately restricted their interactions with indigenous communities.

In 1568, the Spanish crown reiterated the policy establishing Spanish control over ecclesiastical posts in the Americas that was signed into canon law by the First Provincial Council more than a decade earlier. Writing to the Pedro Moya de Contreras, the Archbishop of Mexico, Philip II informed him that rumors had reached him in the metropole concerning the appointment of various individuals “who are unsuitable” to the office of the ordained clergy, which caused him great concern. Worried about the inevitable “inconveniences” their presence in the colonial ministry might cause in the Spanish efforts to convert indigenous populations to the Catholic faith, the king insisted the archbishop should desist in the ordination of such persons, and instead elect to bestow the orders on other prelates or, at minimum, use the “greatest caution” in his decisions. If the archbishop failed to heed his advice and continued to

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82 Poole, “Church Law,” 647.
83 Poole, “Church Law,” 639-643.
84 Poole, “Church Law,” 642.
permit the ordinations of persons with questionable heritages, the crown explained, their presence would result in various “inconveniences” in the quality of people found in Mexico, implying their presence in the church hierarchy would prove detrimental to the religious character of those living in the colony, Spanish and non-Spanish alike.

Despite the passage of the Church decree in the provincial council nearly thirteen years earlier, Philip’s issue of the royal decree additionally suggests that archbishops in the American colonies continued to issue exceptions to the ecclesiastical policy, which allowed persons of non-Spanish descent, especially mestizos, to gain the privileges of the priesthood. In the subsequent decades royal policies dictating the necessary limitations on the ordination of any non-Spanish persons extended beyond the Archdiocese of Mexico with royal decrees addressed to the Archbishops of New Granada in 1576, Quito in 1575, and Lima in 1578. The repetition of the decrees indicates that archbishops on the ground in the Americas saw the benefits to having mestizos and mulattos, who in all likelihood knew the native and African dialects of the colonies’ inhabitants during a time of a shortage of secular priests, and opted to ordain those they believed most adhered to the Catholic faith. But the archbishops’ decisions to appoint persons deemed “not suitable” to the orders was short lived. By the convocation of the Third Provincial Council in 1585, ecclesiastical authorities officially prohibited any persons defined as black, mulatto, or mestizo from taking their vows, leaving little room for exceptions. Combined with the spatial segregation policies, these restrictions aimed to prevent the potentially harmful effects the presence of Afro-descendants caused.

85 For the decrees see Colección de documentos, vol. 1, 490-491, 506, and 514.
86 The decrees issued by the Third Provincial Council in 1585 would remain the law of the Archdiocese of Mexico until 1896 and of Mexico, Guatemala, and the Philippines until 1918. For a lengthier discussion of individuals of African descent who received their orders in the church in the later part of the eighteenth century, see Ann Twinam, Purchasing Whiteness: Pardos, Mulattos, and the Quest for Social Mobility in the Spanish Indies (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015). Twinam argues that the clerical ranks remained the most difficult hurdle of upwardly mobile Afro-descendants with few ever taking their vows.
Despite these legal measures, the spatial separation of native inhabitants from the expanding Spanish, African, and castas populations proved impossible to maintain. By the end of the sixteenth century, a series of demographic shifts had unfolded in the colony that blurred the already porous parochial districts. New Spain, as the political, social, economic, and cultural center of Spain’s extensive American empire, attracted a large number of Spanish immigrants who desired to tap into the vast wealth and resources of the colony. Within the first decades following the destruction of Tenochtitlán, a steady flow of Spaniards had relocated to the colony’s capital, re-christened Tenochtitlán-Mexico City, where they settled along the central traza.87 Alongside the growth of the capital, elite Spaniards migrated from the city center into provincial areas, where they established rural commercial enterprises, structured initially on the encomienda system, before the most successful settlers returned to make their permanent homes in Mexico City or the nearby provincial cities of Puebla, Veracruz, and Antequera. After a few generations, the Spanish population in the colonial society, upheld by continual immigration, by natural growth, and by internal migration, had outgrown the initial districts reserved for Spanish occupancy, resulting in a second wave of parishes carved from the preexisting native barrios and provinces.88

Beginning in the second half of the sixteenth century, the arrival of thousands of enslaved Africans to satisfy New Spain’s demand for labor fueled the expansion of the república de españoles, further complicating the social landscape of the colonial parish. As Spanish commercial activities throughout New Spain intensified, in both the urban domestic and the rural economies, enslaved Africans came to fill a distinct labor niche by working as domestic slaves,

87 James Lockhart, Provinces of Early Mexico: Variants of Spanish American Regional Evolution (University of California Latin American Center Publications, 1984); Cope, Limits of Racial Domination, 10.
88 Lockhart, Provinces of Mexico, 108; Cope, Limits of Racial Domination; Poole, Pedro Moya de Contreras.
artisans, day laborers in obras (textiles), in the mining industry, or on rural estates.\textsuperscript{89} By 1570, the colony had imported an estimated 36,500 Africans to meet these demands. In the following years, the trade in enslaved Africans accelerated throughout New Spain, reaching its peak in the first half of the seventeenth century. Between 1595-1640, the importation of slaves, facilitated by the union of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns in 1580, had grown to an average annual rate of 1,871 persons, reinforcing the colony’s sizeable African presence.\textsuperscript{90} By 1646, the year associated with the decline of the slave trade in New Spain, Spaniards had already forcibly relocated nearly 110,000 ethnic Africans to the colony.\textsuperscript{91} Since the Spanish neglected to recognize a distinct social space for Africans and their descendants comparable to the república de indios, this constant stream of bozales entered into the social milieu of the república de españoles as an extension of Spanish expansion.\textsuperscript{92} As their Spanish masters migrated beyond the central traza into the native barrios and surrounding provinces, Africans and their descendants – enslaved but increasingly free – accompanied them, facilitating opportunities for their increased contact, culturally and physically, with native groups.

The rise in both formal and informal unions between Africans, Spaniards, and natives led to an astonishing growth of the creole and mixed – and primarily free – populations through the second half of the sixteenth century. As enslaved African men and women formed families despite the hardships of enslavement, their surviving offspring and the offspring from less formal unions constituted the core of this extensive group. In a period spanning from 1570 to 1646, the

\textsuperscript{89} Bennett, Africans in Colonial Mexico, 20-32.
\textsuperscript{90} In his discussion of the slave trade in Mexico, Palmer indicates that the union of the Spanish and Portuguese crown under Philip II resulted in an increased amount of asientos, or contracts, to slave traders alongside the waiving of the traditional licenses that had supported the importation of enslaved Africans. Palmer, Slaves of the White God, 12.
\textsuperscript{91} Palmer, Slaves of the White God; Bennett, Africans in Colonial Mexico, 20-23; Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, La población negra de México: Estudio etnográfico (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972).
\textsuperscript{92} Bennett, Africans in Colonial Mexico, 31.
population of Afro-descended persons grew fifty-fold, rising from 2,437 to 116,529. By 1646, black creoles and mulattoes constituted nearly 70 percent of the colony’s black population with a majority of them either being born free or later obtaining their freedom. With this rapid emergence of a free black population came an increasingly mobile black population, where could entered communities voluntarily or as laborers in search of economic opportunity in urban centers, commercial zones, or in rural areas in close proximity to native and Spanish communities. Since slavery in New Spain was primarily an urban institution, Afro-descended peoples remained mostly attached to the colony’s major city centers of Mexico City, Puebla, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. By 1646, nearly half of the African-descended populations resided in the archdiocese of Mexico, with approximately 62,814 of Mexico’s total 151,618 population living in or near the viceregal capital. This rapid expansion of blacks and castas living outside of the central *traza* resulted in the foundation of the smaller parishes of Santa Catalina Mártir and Santa Veracruz mentioned above.

The increasing mobility of blacks and other populations throughout the colony further blurred the well-defined limits and boundaries of the various parochial districts, launching a significant change in the social dynamics at play in the lives of black Catholics. Suddenly, by the middle of the seventeenth century, persons of African descent – rivaling, if not outnumbering, Spaniards in the commonwealth – composed the majority of individuals who settled in close proximity to native communities. They toiled on Spanish estates in the provinces, worked in


obrajes, and were employed in the urban market alongside indigenous laborers. This interaction increased in the second half of the sixteenth century and initial decades of the seventeenth century as individuals from native communities migrated to urban centers in search for better economic opportunities. By the end of the sixteenth century, more natives had established residence in areas that had been legally designated for Spanish, African, black, and casta inhabitants. In response to the movement of both groups, ecclesiastical authorities and state officials tried to reinstate the parochial boundaries that previously segregated native residents from everyone else. They redefined the limits of the Spanish center, including the incorporation of former native barrios into the Hispanic sector, prohibited Indians from settling there, and required natives from outside the area to return to their original communities. But their efforts largely failed, paving the way for a greater interaction between the colony’s diverse populations.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, the complex, ever-changing social formation continued to affect who Africans and their descendants interacted with during their daily religious functions. As will be discussed further in chapter three, black parishioners created and maintained complex social networks with the various people they resided alongside in their parochial neighborhoods and worked with in the markets and plazas of Mexico City. In the sacred sites of the colonial parish, black individuals congregated with natives, Spaniards, and castas in parochial churches to hear mass and receive the sacraments. They participated in parish-based celebrations to honor local saints or the high holidays observed by the Catholic Church.

In a small town south of Mexico City, for instance, the denunciation made by Spaniard Gaspar Tellez de Nieto against the free mulatto Juan de Miranda illustrates the diverse

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96 Gibson, Aztecs Under Spanish Rule; Poole, Pedro Moya, 23; Lockhart, Provinces in Colonial Mexico, 108-109; Cope, Limits of Racial Domination, 20.
interactions black individuals maintained within their local parishes. Over the preceding weeks, Juan de Miranda had attended the weekly mass with Gaspar Tellez Nieto, María de Cardenas and her brother Diego de Cardenas Mancebo – all Spaniards from the village. Following the service of a particular Sunday, the group returned to the house of María de Cardenas where they proceeded to discuss the reading of the Bull of the Holy Crusade, which had occurred prior to the offering of the holy sacrament. Over the course of their conversations, Juan de Miranda stated that he had heard “through the Bull of the Holy Crusade a priest could absolve whatever sin incurred in the general censures of the church.” Scandalized by the claim, his friends told him to present himself before the Holy Office of the Inquisition to ask for absolution. Throughout the case, Juan de Miranda discussed the interactions he had with Gaspar and the Cardenas siblings surrounding their regular religious practices, specifically attending mass at the local parish church.

Through their participation in these spiritual events, persons of African descent gained an introduction into the local Christian practices of their individual parishes. They learned the lore of patron saints in parochial celebrations, gathered information about appropriate spiritual behavior through their confraternal organizations, and discussed religious beliefs in the neighborhood streets and local chapels. The Confraternity of the Holy Spirit and Our Lady of Sorrows, for example, introduced black members of the Santa Catalina Mártir parish to the religious obligations expected during local feast day celebrations. Originally founded by officers in the local militia and the parish priest “in the name of all the parishioners of the parish of Santa Catalina Mártir” regardless of their “state, calidad, or condition,” the confraternity brought together the district’s diverse populations for the “betterment of the Cult of God and all the good

97 AGN, Inquisición, “Contra Juan de Miranda,” 1650, 435, expediente, s.n., folio 34r.
98 AGN, Inquisición, Juan de Miranda, folio 35r.
Souls of the said parish. Once accepted into the brotherhood, which required a small donation of two tomiñes, a new member was obligated to adorn the order’s altar in the parish church and attend the “title feast of the said Confraternity on the Day of Our Lady of Sorrows,” as well as “a sung mass every Wednesday of the year, the three days of Pentecost, and the Tuesday or any other day of the celebration for the dead.” By establishing these spiritual obligations for all parishioners, including black individuals, the founders believed the confraternity would serve as a way to “remove the mortal sin of the living and teach the Christian Doctrine to [the parishioners and] their families.” In their participation of local practices, similar to those established by the Confraternity of the Holy Spirit, individuals of African descent acquired a familiarity with the Christian beliefs and rituals that would structure their daily lives.

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The various policies instituted by ecclesiastical officials and royal authorities had an indirect impact on how enslaved Africans acquired an introduction to the Christian faith. As the sixteenth century progressed, efforts to establish dominion over native populations and the expanding Spaniards, Africans, and castas led royal officials and ecclesiastical authorities to implement a series of policies aimed at the spatial segregation of native communities from other colonial groups. Such policies placed enslaved Africans and their descendants in the jurisdictional boundaries of the república de españoles, unwittingly altering the ways Afro-Mexicans engaged with Catholic practices. Subjected to the jurisdiction of the república de españoles, Africans and their descendants accessed traditional forms of religious instruction extended to the Spanish residents of the colonies. In moments of confessional intervention,

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99 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Cofradía de Espíritu Santo y Nuestra Señora de los Dolores,” 1694, 1028, expediente 40, folio s.n.
100 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Cofradía de Espíritu Santo.”
101 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Cofradía de Espíritu Santo.”
parish priests corrected deviant behavior, offering an education in religious obligations. During chats on spiritual matters, black individuals asked parish priests about spiritual practices, gaining insight on how to properly abide by religious expectation. Though at times informal, this traditional form of Christian instruction, discussed in further detail in the next chapter, introduced Africans and especially their descendants to the intricacies of the Christian faith.

The spatial policies segregating native communities from the Hispanic sector of society additionally altered how Africans and their descendants engaged with the popular religious practices of their local communities. Demographic changes in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – from Spanish migration, the importation of enslaved Africans, and the growth of castas populations – resulted in a series of decisions that changed the parochial boundaries of colony. The Hispanic sector of society gradually extended beyond the central Spanish traza into the surrounding native barrios, resulting in increased interaction between diverse groups of peoples. Within the complex, constantly shifting boundaries of the colonial parish, this increasingly diverse population gathered for religious functions. At parish churches for mass, in confraternities founded in local chapels, and for parish-wide celebrations, blacks participated in dominant Christian practices with their fellow parishioners composed of free blacks, enslaved Africans, Spaniards, natives, and various castas. In the process, black parishioners learned the intricacies of local religious practices that influenced how they engaged with the Catholic faith.
Chapter Two: Clerical Intervention and Confessional Moments

María de Avendaño, a Spanish woman of some means, appeared before the inquisitorial commissioner of Antequera, the provincial center of Oaxaca, on October 30, 1693. She responded to the commissioner’s initial question, stating that she presumed she had been called before him “for knowing a man named Pedro Antonio and what she knew of him and what had happened since the day of Saint Lawrence.”\(^1\) With this opening, María divulged her interactions with Pedro Antonio. She had first met the mulatto man from Puebla, a few days after her grandson José de Guzmán and his colleague at the local Franciscan college spoke of a virtuous man. José wished to introduce María and his cousins to Pedro because he “was a very good Christian who does exercises and disciplines.”\(^2\) He believed Pedro could share his knowledge with María’s family and servants. María agreed. In the following weeks, she invited Pedro Antonio into her home to conduct spiritual exercises described as “a talk of the Passion of Christ, Our Lord,” a brief discipline, a prayer to the Virgin Mary in which he “entrusted [his] soul to her,” acts of contrition, and singing a miserere, a sung prayer asking God for mercy.\(^3\) When asked by the commissioner if any of Pedro’s books, conversations, or mortifications seemed contrary to the Catholic faith, María assured him “that everything appeared very good and that all of the things he spoke about were in walking with God our Lord… and conformed with our Holy faith.”\(^4\)

María’s depiction of Pedro Antonio as a “very good Christian who does exercises” corresponded with the testimony provided by her family members, their neighbors, and the students at the Franciscan college, who all regularly interacted with Pedro during the preceding

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\(^1\) AGN, Inquisición, “Contra Pedro Antonio,” 1694, 693, 2a parte, expediente 11, folio 541r.
\(^2\) AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 541r.
\(^3\) AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 541r.
\(^4\) AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 543v.
weeks. The inquisitor commissioner called each witness to give their account of the spiritual chats with the mulatto man. Their testimony painted a picture of Pedro’s reputation among his fellow parishioners as a holy man whose words and deeds were “all in accordance with the Holy Faith.” Pedro appeared to publicly practice a collection of spiritual exercises and penitential devotions, similar to those described by María. For the Avendaño family, he conducted pilgrimages to a local holy site to venerate an image of Christ, regularly discussed the lives of saints as personal models, and organized novenas, group devotional prayers, dedicated to Saint Lawrence. In his interactions with the Franciscan students, Pedro engaged with the men in mental prayers, recited the Ave Maria and the Pater Noster, and demonstrated the mortification practices he learned from a Jesuit. During his spiritual chats, he regularly spoke about his confessions to his spiritual fathers, two Jesuit priests who carefully directed his devotional practices with extensive conversations and published manuals. At the end of each testimony, the witnesses answered the commissioner’s question in a similar fashion: that Pedro Antonio’s actions were in accordance with the teachings of the Catholic Church and the Holy Faith.

From the testimony provided by the witnesses, Pedro Antonio was clearly a man of faith. He lived and worshiped as a devout Catholic, garnering a reputation for his pious practices among his Christian neighbors. As they worshiped alongside each other, these devout Christians invited Pedro into their lives and homes to learn from him and to be guided into a deeper religious experience. However, the testimony provided by María and her family about Pedro’s spiritual practices also raises a series of fundamental questions. How did Pedro, as a creole...

\[\text{\textsuperscript{5}}\ AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 545r. Francisco García informs the commissioner that Fray Nicolás de Vera served as Pedro’s first confessor, who initially provided him with copies of Saint Ignatius of Loyola’s \textit{Spiritual Exercises} and a small book entitled \textit{Piensa Bien}, both popular devotional materials throughout the colonial period. Following the departure of Fray Nicolás from Antequera, Fray Tomás de Linares assumed the position of spiritual father to Pedro Antonio. Neither man appeared before the commissioner during the investigation and were only mentioned in Francisco García’s testimony.\]
mulatto in the seventeenth century, acquire such an extensive religious knowledge? What processes or circumstances brought him and countless other black Catholics more tightly into the Christian fold?

Drawing from Pedro’s case and others like it, this chapter explores the intricacies, processes, and circumstances that introduced individuals of African descent like Pedro Antonio to Christian practices and beliefs in seventeenth-century New Spain. Since early ecclesiastical policies remained ambiguous, inconsistent, and marginal, at best, the exposure of Africans to the specifics of the holy commandments, the sacraments, and certain rites of the Catholic Church happened almost entirely in informal avenues. Daily communication with their parochial clergy, interactions that occurred in households, and religious discussions with neighbors, gradually introduced black individuals to the spiritual obligations that directed their religious beliefs. Social interactions with local clergy merely deepened their exposure. During black parishioners’ regular attendance at mass and in their visits to the confessional, members of the church hierarchy administered the faith. Local clergy discussed orthodox practices with their parishioners, assigned penitential acts for moral transgressions, and guided their flock through personal devotions. For men and women like Pedro Antonio, the daily interactions with secular clergy, mendicant brothers, and the lay devout served as informal points of religious instruction.

In their focus on the early Christianization efforts of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, historians have examined evangelization as a grand conversion act that occurred exclusively at the moment of enslavement. Rather than view Christianization as a moment in the long history of African-descended peoples in the Catholic Church, I want to highlight Christian instruction as a lengthy process that continued into the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Driven primarily by an informal instruction based on the personal
relationships between black creole parishioners, clergymen, and select members of the mendicant orders, Christianization occurred in the daily interactions throughout a parishioners’ lifetime. Treating the black members of their parish churches similar to their Spanish counterparts, secular priests administered the faith to people of African descent through traditional means of confessional moments or informal “chats on spiritual matters,” thus indirectly serving as a point of indoctrination. Such a traditional, at times informal, approach from the Catholic Church occurred over the course of an individuals’ life time and resulted in Afro-Mexicans’ layered introduction to the faith. As individual clerics continuously intervened in the spiritual lives of their black parishioners, themselves increasingly familiar with Catholic tenets, they initiated the intercultural religious exchanges that informed black knowledge of Christianity. Members of the church hierarchy guided black parishioners through devotional exercises, offered theological explanations behind the mysteries of the faith, and assigned penitential acts for their transgressions. In short, local clergymen introduced people of African descent to Catholic practices that shaped their religious lives.

The growth of clerical interventions, confessional moments, and private interactions between secular priests and Afro-descendants cultivated a cultural landscape where black creoles and mulattos chose their personal connections with Christianity. Individual clergymen may have directed the discursive boundaries of religious knowledge, determining the limits of orthodox behavior and serving as points of informational exchange. But people of African descent chose

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6 Throughout the inquisitorial records utilized in the dissertation, priests and the black lay alike speak to moment of “spiritual chats” where knowledge of a particular practice was discussed, explained, and incorporated into the daily religious practices of the Afro-Mexican penitent.
7 Charles Beatty-Medina refers to Christianization by individual priests as “clerical interventions.” Even though his work refers to the specific context of the Esmeraldas maroon society, his recognition of a more informal approach to Christianization not sustained or reliant on the mendicant orders provides insight into the complex ways the Catholic Church attempted to deal with the growing African populations. Charles Beatty-Medina, “Between the Cross and the Sword: Religious Conquest and Maroon Legitimacy in Colonial Esmeraldas,” in Africans to Spanish America, 100.
the forms this Christian education and the subsequent spiritual relationships would take. Through social interactions premised on religious beliefs and practices, they exhibited a personal choice in deciding the people, secular priests and mendicant orders alike, who would inform their perceptions of the profound spiritual piety that characterized their deeply lived Christian experience. By acknowledging cultural agency in the hands of Afro-descendants, an examination of their decisions to pursue personal relationships with members of the Catholic hierarchy who would enrich their Christian knowledge refocuses the process of their religious instruction as, in part, driven by their desires. As they determined the elements of the Catholic faith that spoke to the colonial realities of their daily life, they endeavored to find individuals who could instruct them in the finer details of the faith. Within their existing relationships, they designated which ideas, concepts, and practices they incorporated into their understanding of Catholicism, and determined how it would affect their interactions with the Catholic Church.

Afro-Mexicans’ ability to act on a personal spiritual choice occurred precisely because of their familiarity with specific institutional practices, the clergy’s expectations, and the Church hierarchy. Creoles maintained a familiar connection with the administrative structures of the Catholic hierarchy that allowed them to maneuver in a manner that extended their access to religious instruction. They recognized structural constraints imposed on them by the institutional Church and its representatives, perceiving the requirement for official oversight and clerical supervision in their participation in dominant Christian practices. In this recognition, various people of African descent displayed an acute awareness of the restrictions and opportunities that became central to their negotiation of personal choice in their religious practices under colonial Christian dominance. They learned to express a profound spirituality without necessarily breaking the boundaries of official and unofficial authority.
To maintain autonomy over their access to specific knowledge of theology, rituals, and practices, Africans and their descendants capitalized on clerics’ interest in their salvation, and in the process, transformed their association with Catholic dogma. With their basic understanding of the innerworkings of the Church – one learned from previous generations of Africans’ initial interactions with and gradual internalizations of Christianity – people of African descent in the Spanish colony moved beyond an imitation of Christian practices and toward a Catholic belief that structured their everyday lives. They maintained the foundational basics of outward performances and moral underpinnings established by previous generations who remained distant from the faith. At the same time, they drew from their own experience with the Catholic hierarchy to expand those foundations into theologically-driven religious practices that altered their cultural and social worldview.

A recognition of black and mulatto creoles as complex colonial subjects with different understandings and proximities to Spanish religious beliefs ultimately calls for a careful investigation into the position of black Catholic knowledge in the making of Christian creoles. The cultural agency expressed in Afro-Mexicans’ development of spiritually-minded interactions contributed to an expansion of Catholic theological knowledge that served as a foundation of their Christian practices. Rather than merely imitating or reinterpreting Christian rituals, black creoles and mulattoes engaged intellectually with theological discourse. Through their expanding proficiency in the finer details of Catholicism, they internalized the faith in a manner that sanctioned their identities as devout Christian subjects. For black creoles and mulattos, Christianity no longer served as a “superficial veil” predicated on an ambiguous instruction in the faith. Instead, their Catholic belief was founded on their own conceptual framework of religious practices learned through their decision to build meaningful relationships with the
clergy and lay devout. Such an argument inevitably highlights moments of Afro-Mexicans’ intellectual inquiry that eventually touched on the theological foundations underlying various forms of Catholic rituals. Black individuals pursued members of specific mendicant orders to learn about their devotional practices and sought out secular clergy to guide them through the mysteries of the faith. Through these moments, I aim to shift the scholarly focus from the Church’s regulation of the black Catholic practices to Afro-Mexicans’ construction of their own identities as pious Christian subjects. Black creoles and mulattos who internalized Christian concepts acted as cultural agents in the shaping of their creole Christian identity.

**Clerical Interventions and Confessional Moments**

By 1572, with the arrival of the Jesuits in New Spain and the expansion of the secular clergy, the colonial Church increasingly occupied itself with the education and spiritual guidance of members of the creole society, both African and Spanish. In the aftermath of the Council of Trent, ecclesiastical authorities in Spain and the New World called for a greater vigilance over the Old World settlers in the Americas. While inconstancy among the indigenous population remained a pressing concern for the mendicant orders, the Jesuits and secular clergy, alarmed at the prospect of Protestant interlopers, conversos, and heretics, turned their attention toward the república de españoles to ensure loyalty to orthodoxy established by Tridentine reforms.

Following the close of the synod, members of the Council of Trent had designed a method for diocesan reform that addressed the proper dissemination of indoctrination, liturgy, and worship of parishioners who remained tied to popular practices that contradicted orthodoxy. To assure

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9 During the Protestant Reformation and the era of Catholic reform, various religious denominations held religious councils that explicitly outlined the doctrine of their religion. Referred to by scholars as confessionalization, this consolidation of church doctrine, be in Lutheran, Calvin, or Catholic, established the underpinnings of the various emerging churches in a form that could easily be recognizable today. See Hsia, *Social Discipline in the Reformation: Central Europe, 1550-1750* (Routledge, 1989) and Heinz Schilling, *Confessionalization in the Empire: Religious and Societal Change in Germany between 1555 and 1620*. 

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doctrinal unity, proper training of parish priests became indispensable as secular clergy continued to flood the colonial centers of expanding empires, encountering the additional problems of the pastoral care of an ethnically diverse, largely ignorant, congregation.

The Jesuit order emerged as an essential player in the operation of clerical and lay education in Europe and the Americas. Members established colleges for the training of priests, while observing religious orders that prioritized preaching, ministering “in streets, hospitals, prisons, and in foreign lands,” and teaching against folk beliefs. Corresponding to Tridentine legislation that promoted the use of various established institutions, including shrines, chapels, itinerant preaching, collegiate churches, and confraternities, ecclesiastical authorities, secular and Jesuit, attempted to enhance the spiritual vigor of the Catholic laity. Yet, since the clergy’s preoccupations rarely, if ever, distinguished between the Old Christian Spanish laity and the new generations of African converts, they expected first generation blacks and mulattos to have a similar understanding of these Catholic institutions as their Spanish neighbors.

With a greater diligence shown to the personal spirituality of individual Catholics, opportunities for religious indoctrination of black creoles and mulattos that moved beyond an imitation of public displays or the regulatory arm of the Inquisition fell into this realm of the secular clergy and the Jesuit order. Individual parish priests, pastors, and Jesuits continuously intervened in the religious behavior of their black parishioners, demonstrating a sincere responsibility for their spiritual lives. By the turn of the seventeenth century, the black population, African, creole, and mulatto, constituted the demographic majority of the Catholic

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flock assigned to local parishes. If parish priests concentrated on the spiritual wellbeing of their local flock, principally through the administration of sacraments such as confession and communion, their attention fell primarily on the religious education of people of African descent. Clerical interventions with “chats on spiritual matters” offered a dialogical exchange where black parishioners learned the intricacies of the Catholic rituals they incorporated into their daily practice. Such chats fell in line with the program of Catholic renewal focusing on attempts to reform the Catholic faith and restore Christian morality within the spiritual lives of the individual. Personal spiritual renewal, or an inner renewal of religious observance through prayer, penitence, and works of mercy, spiritual and corporeal, became the indispensable means for individual priests and clergymen to shepherd the spiritual practices of their primarily black Catholic flock.¹⁴

For initial generations of black creoles, the clerical concern for religious orthodoxy targeted basic misunderstandings of the Catholic tenets: when to take communion, how to give confession, or the appropriate steps to contracting a marriage within the church. Such introduction to and corrections on the basic tenets of the faith often occurred in the Holy Office of the Inquisition, where Africans and first-generation creoles appeared before senior inquisitors to disclose their religious behavior and, ultimately, their inexperience with Catholic doctrine. In 1607, a young African slave name Esperanza appeared before the inquisitorial commissioner of Veracruz to denounce herself for having taken communion without confessing or fasting beforehand, a serious crime in the eyes of ecclesiastical authorities. In her testimony, she stated that her owner had heard of her grave error and insisted that she denounce herself to the Holy Office, but she emphasized that she had not understood the requirements for communion before

attending mass. She drew on her status as a *bozal* to highlight that she had not yet received the necessary instruction in the faith and remained uneducated in the behavior expected of her.\(^\text{15}\) The case appears to end after her self-denunciation, implying that the inquisitors did not view her offense as serious enough for a full investigation.

Regardless, Esperanza’s presence before the commissioners indicates her limited knowledge of Catholic ritual, and the role the process of denunciation played in correcting basic misunderstandings in the faith. When her owner required her to appear before the Holy Office, he indirectly informed Esperanza of her error in understanding, specifically for failing to adhere to the requirements of fasting and confessing before the holy sacrament. With this information in hand, Esperanza explained to the inquisitors that that she had taken the communion without having first confessed or fasted because she had presumed “[the sacrament] was something that was distributed among all,”\(^\text{16}\) but now recognized that she had been wrong and asked the court for mercy. Even though the inquisitors did not pursue the case further or require specific religious instruction, as they did in other cases, Esperanza’s presence before them led to her introduction to the specific rituals of the basic tenets of the Catholic faith.

Esperanza’s experience, which resulted in her appearance before the commissioner, represented a familiar tale for many of the recently arrived slaves and their offspring. Multiple cases occasionally identified the defendant’s knowledge of basic prayers, such as the Ave Maria, the Pater Noster, and the Rosary, suggesting a simple understanding, but their testimony often highlighted their lack of familiarity with the Catholic faith and the need for a fundamental literacy in religious rituals. Even though Esperanza, for example, could recount her prayers and knew the “the commandments of the law of God, the general confession, and the sacraments of

\(^{15}\) AGN, Inquisición, “Contra Esperanza,” 1607, 467, expediente 19.

\(^{16}\) AGN, Inquisición, Esperanza, folio 83r-83v.
the church,” her confession of her crimes indicates her knowledge of Christian rituals remained quite limited. However, as the black creoles and mulattos – second, third, or fourth generation – gradually outnumbered African-born blacks, the individual interaction between parish priest or local mendicant and a black parishioner evolved to include a more in-depth conversation of theological matters and Catholic discourse within the confines of trusted relationships.

In the early years of the colony, personal connections to Spanish patrons underscored the important role that select secular clergy occupied in the development of black Catholic knowledge, indicating that indoctrination among African-descendants remained slow to start and was initially associated with pious masters or important family members. As early as 1604, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, a second-generation free mulatto, indicated in his discurso de vida that he had received a rather extensive religious education at the behest of his father, Gaspar de Santa Olalla de Castro, a Spanish gentleman and priest from San Juan de Puerto Rico. His mother, a free black in San Juan, rarely appeared in his discussion of his religious upbringing, implying that she did not influence his spiritual direction despite being an important presence in his life. Instead, Gaspar’s position as a priest in San Juan offered personal connections in the church that presented Fernando with the opportunities to pursue his education.

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17 AGN, Inquisición, Esperanza, folio 83r.
18 In the formulaic questioning custom to the Inquisition, the defendant would be asked to provide a discurso de vida to the inquisitor that consisted of a brief description of their life movements. The inquisitors began the cases with the discurso in the hopes that the defendant would confess to whatever crime brought them before the Holy Office.
19 The case discusses very little about the life of his mother. In his genealogy, he mentions that his mother was a free black, but did not indicate whether she had earned her freedom or had been born free. Other information emerges in two letters confiscated by the commissioner of Veracruz, who had arrested Fernando. However, written by the inquisitorial hand, marginal notes indicated that a letter written by his sister, Juana Bautista de Castro, and another letter written by his father were forged by Fernando to highlight his association with important people on the mainland. No evidence exists in the case to suggest how the inquisitor came to this conclusion. Yet, the letters suggest that his mother remained a devoutly pious woman in the Catholic faith, which would add another layer to my argument that later generations of blacks and mulattos born into the Americas profited from a Christian upbringing and subsequent education in the faith. But since the inquisitor has declared them a forgery, I have decided to refrain from using them as evidence of his mother’s religious leanings. The letters can be found in AGN, Inquisición, “Contra Fernando Rodriquez de Castro,” 1605, 275, expediente 14, folio 45r-47v.
beyond basic grammar and literacy, an already impressive schooling for persons of African
descent.

Shortly after completing his lessons he joined the entourage of Don Antonio de Calderon,
Bishop of Puerto Rico, where he received personal instruction from the bishop and his inner
circle on spiritual matters. When he accompanied the bishop to Santo Domingo the next year for
the holy man’s consecration, Fernando established a working relationship with Father Luis de
Rivera, who continued Fernando’s instruction in grammar and literacy while expanding it to
include theology.\textsuperscript{20} Father Luis’ tutelage in doctrinal matters provided the foundation for
Fernando to receive minor orders in the church when he reached the age of twenty-one, the
minimum age for obtaining religious orders as stipulated by canon law. Upon his return to Puerto
Rico, he stayed in the house of the Archbishop, Alonso Lopez Davila, for a year before leaving
for the Spanish mainland, specifically Cartagena, with a teacher named Antonio Perez. During
his sojourn in the company of the Archbishop and his retinue, he finished his education and
received his ordination in the minor orders of \textit{grados} and \textit{corona} at the insistence of Father
Manuel de Mescado, who later became the Bishop of Puerto Rico. For the next twenty-eight
years, according to his \textit{discurso}, Fernando joined his various instructors as they travelled across
the recently conquered territories in the Mexico Valley, extending his education through personal
experience alongside the spiritual conquerors. Even the inquisitors, despite their suspicions of the
veracity of Fernando’s life story, admitted that he “knew more about the Christian doctrine” than
the traditional prayers of the Ave Maria, Paternoster, Credo, and Salve Regina, suggesting at
least some formal education.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez, folio 116r.
\textsuperscript{21} AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez, folio 115v.
Fernando’s association with powerful members of the Catholic hierarchy, it should be noted, occurred precisely because his father, a Spanish gentleman, initiated the contacts who favored his indoctrination in Catholic theology. As such, his powerful connections, though extensive for the time, represented a small minority among Afro-descended populations. To be sure, other people of African descent occasionally received a formal education within Spanish institutions in New Spain. In 1650, Gaspar Rivero Vasconcelos, a free mulatto of Afro-Portuguese descent had entered the royal university in Mexico City, where he remained a student until his arrest by the Inquisition for associating with an underground Portuguese Jewish community in the colonial center.22 Prior to his imprisonment, Gaspar had received a rather extensive education in grammar and literacy at the university. He was even a tutor for local Spaniards who wanted a basic education, arriving at their houses “to offer lectures and lessons for study.”23 As another example, Antonio Romientos appeared as a mulatto student in a witness testimony in 1699 for an illicit confraternity when the testifier indicated his attendance at feast celebrations for Saint Augustine and Saint Nicholas of Tolentino. The witness neglected to expand on the specifics of his education, merely stating that he held “the profession of student,” nor did the inquisitor request further information. But in the testimony, he served as the educated member of the confraternity who read devotions from a book dedicated to Saint Dominic.24 More often, however, people of African descent had to rely more closely on local clergymen concerned with lay Christian practices.

In most instances, local clergymen served as the first point of contact for individuals of African descent who sought further understanding about their Christian beliefs. During yearly

22 AGN, Inquisición, Gaspar Rivero Vasconcelos, folios 473-653.
23 AGN, Inquisición, Gaspar Rivero Vasconcelos, folio 492r.
24 HM 35168, fol. 6v.
confessions or in spiritual chats, black parishioners turned to their local parish priests for religious guidance and instruction. On September 7, 1750, for example, the mulatta Juana Juliana Rodriguez appeared before her local clergyman to offer a confession about her spiritual doubts. She admitted to Father Juan Curiel that she had doubted the “existence of God in the highest mystery of the Holy Trinity, in the incarnation of the Holy Word, and in the most Illustrious Sacrament of the Eucharist.” Because of her disbelief, she confessed, she had on multiple occasions “received the Most Holy Sacrament” without “any belief in the highest mystery.” After spending roughly five years in her sinful state, she had realized that her doubts “were all fictions and tricks” from the devil and appeared before the priest to beg forgiveness and absolution for her “error of understanding.”

Since her crime of mixed heresy prevented him from offering absolution without the permission of the Inquisition, Father Curiel immediately wrote to his superiors. He explained to the senior inquisitors that he believed he could properly instruct Juana Juliana in the mysteries of the faith before offering her absolution. Curiel explained how he had already intervened in her daily practices to “instruct her in the mysteries of our Holy Faith, especially in the existence of God and Mystery of the most Holy Trinity, in the mystery of the Holy Eucharist, in the Most Holy Sacrament of Penitence, and in the existence of Mary, our most Holy Lady, in the incarnation of the Divine Word.” During his instruction, he stated, Juana Juliana had proven herself an ample student, even though she “did not have special talent or capacity” in understanding the faith. The senior inquisitors eventually permitted Curiel to absolve Juana

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., folio 14r.
29 Ibid., folio 15r.
Juliana of her sinful errors, but not before he guaranteed she fully comprehended the mysteries of the faith. Through her initial confession to Father Curiel and their subsequent interactions, Juana Juliana received a detailed education in the theological importance behind the Christian practices she incorporated into her religious life.

In a similar example, a mulatta woman named Berta turned to a Franciscan priest to offer guidance in her own misunderstandings of the Christian faith. On May 25, 1750, she stood before Fray Andres Fernando Picaro to confess her transgressions. She stated that she “doubted the real presence of Christ in the Sacrament, and was in the end persuaded that his Majesty was not in the Eucharist.”\(^\text{30}\) She declared her convictions to “five or six persons” on multiple occasions, “who afterwards corrected her in her proposition and reprimanded [her].”\(^\text{31}\) In a more serious declaration, she announced “there was no God” because “he would have punished her” for her transgressions.\(^\text{32}\) The same individuals who reprimanded her on her first blasphemous statement told her she needed to find a confessor immediately to confess her sins or risk denunciation to the Inquisition. She heeded their warnings, walking “from convent to convent in this city in search of a confessor to whom she could discharge her conscious.”\(^\text{33}\) Fray Picaro suggested that the inquisitors absolve her of her sins after she received instruction in the faith, which Picaro would provide. He stated that her errors stemmed entirely from her limited “intelligence and her ignorance” in the faith. The inquisitors agreed with Picaro’s assessment. They granted him permission to absolve her, but only after he “saw her many times in the confessionary, where he instructed her in what seemed necessary in the conviction of Our Holy

\(^{30}\) AGN, Inquisición, “Contra Berta,” 1750, 948, expediente 3, folio 59r.
\(^{31}\) Ibid.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., folio 59r-59v.
\(^{33}\) Ibid., folio 59v.
Catholic Faith.” Confessional moments with a local clergyman, like Berta’s, served as a point of religious instruction, offering a deeper understanding of the Christian rituals of her daily life.

For much of the seventeenth century, members of the Jesuit order offered spiritual direction to their black parishioners, electing to intervene in their religious decisions in order to guide them more closely to Catholic orthodoxy. Such a process occurred slowly over the next two centuries, but provided an essential foundation for black knowledge of popular practices and theological doctrine. Returning to Pedro Antonio, whose case opened the chapter, the Jesuits appear as influential figures in the shaping of his various practices of self-mortification, mental prayer, novenas, and devotional readings. According to María de Avendaño’s testimony, in 1687 Pedro’s wife passed away, leaving him a widower with children. During his period of mourning, Pedro sent his children away because “God had touched his heart to leave the world and choose the life of a hermit.” He left Puebla “walking in the manner of a pilgrimage through the different parts of the land, mountains, and caves.” Pedro’s decision to embark on a hermitage in the secluded mountains bears witness to his personal investment in Catholic observance, and his crucial knowledge of the significance behind his spiritual journey. His connection to Christian traditions drastically changed when he encountered a Jesuit priest who played a defining role in the expansion of his spiritual knowledge. During their conversations on

34 Ibid.
35 It should be noted that a few scholars have written about the earliest conversion efforts of Jesuits among African populations, especially those recently arrived in the Americas. Unlike their histories, I aim to provide an analysis of the Jesuit efforts for creole populations who knew the basic understanding of Catholic tenets. For more on the Jesuits evangelizing among recently enslaved Africans, For more, see Bristol, Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches, 81-86, van Deusen, The Souls of Purgatory, 19 and “The ‘Alienated’ Body: Slaves and Castas in the Hospital de San Bartolomé in Lima, 1680 to 1700,” in The Americas 56:1 (July, 1999): 1-30.
36 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, 1694, 693, 2a parte, expediente 11, folio 541v. Each witness who had spoken with Pedro about his wife’s passing and his subsequent decision to embark on a hermitage mentioned his children. However, the witnesses never discuss what happened to the children once he left Puebla, only suggesting that he placed them in the care of someone he trusted. Since Pedro died imprisoned before he appeared to give his testimony, the case offers no more insight into the fate of his children, or any particular details about them.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
“all spiritual matters,” Pedro maintained a personal relationship with this unnamed spiritual father from the Jesuit order, allowing him access to knowledge of theological doctrine, penitential practices, and spiritual devotions. As explained in Francisco García’s testimony, Pedro learned about penitential belts, crowns of thorns, and iron clamps, and how to incorporate them into his daily devotionals from these personal moments of religious education. Until he met the Jesuit priest, Pedro revealed to Francisco, “he had never used the spiked belts and disciplines, nor prayed the rosary, and he did not know of mental prayer.” The Jesuit priest had explained the spiritual benefits of enduring the penitential acts of self-mortification, stating that they would remind him to “give thanks to God . . . contemplate the most Holy Passion,” and “abhor his sins.”

As part of this spiritual relationship with the Jesuit, Pedro’s informal education of religious practices additionally included the acts of observation, inquiry, and application. While the case did not elaborate on the specific practices of the unnamed Jesuit, apart from his imparting knowledge, Pedro more than likely learned of the penitential acts through an observation of the Jesuit’s own practice. More than merely mimicking or imitating the Jesuits’ habits, Pedro doubtlessly learned explicit steps on how best to carry out acts of contrition in honor of the Passion of Christ without raising concern among the ecclesiastical authorities. Following his observance, Pedro would have inquired further about the religious man’s actions and discussed the process with the Jesuit, learning how to apply the practices, discerning the theological significance of such acts, and implementing a regime based on his own understandings. Teresa de Avendaño, María’s daughter, informed the commissioner in her testimony that on multiple occasions Pedro Antonio showed her the penitential items that he had

39 Ibid., folio 544-544v.
incorporated into his own practices. She explained how he wore a “spiked belt that cut into the flesh, composed of small points of wire or pins, and an iron chain as a belt, and a wooden cross,” a description supported by the other witnesses. Pedro eventually explained to Francisco Garcia that he opted to wear these penitential devices after he “had been given one by a religious man,” presumably the unnamed Jesuit priest from his pilgrimage. Through the clerical intervention of a willing clergyman, Pedro accessed a comprehensive knowledge of theological significance behind Catholic lay practices of self-mortification within the context of the Church hierarchy.

Beyond spiritual chats or observation, the Jesuit model of piety composed of printed devotional materials offered to educate the Catholic laity through spiritual direction and mental contemplation. Created as a set of directives and suggestions to guide a person through a spiritual journey, *The Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the sainted founder of the Company of Jesus, offered the reader a structured course through mental prayer for “seeking and finding God’s will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul.” The spiritual exercises, prescribed for all novices in the company, intended for people to seek a closer relationship to God by preparing the soul for the contemplation of sin, prayers, observations, and spiritual rules, even if the person remained outside of the religious order. With a Jesuit serving as a spiritual father, a clergyman who selected a penitent to guide through meditations on the Lord, a prepared participant could discover the necessity of God’s grace in determining their future. Jesuit priests applied this immensely spiritual process to the religious lives of their parishioners to

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40 Ibid., folio 539v.
41 Ibid., folio 544v.
instill a sense of love for “God above all things, with all their heart, all their mind, all their soul, and all their strength.”

Pedro Antonio’s case offers a glimpse into the application of Jesuit devotionals in the lives of black penitents. Pedro returned to Antequera from his hermitage in the mountains, which he ended “in order to have a place to confess and take communion” on a regular basis. Upon his arrival, he promptly visited the College of the Company of Jesus “in search for a spiritual father,” which he found in the person of Father Nicolás de Vera. After hearing Pedro’s confession of his time on his spiritual journey, Father Nicolás ordered Pedro to remain nearby, “not to travel outside and to stay in the city,” for he wished to oversee his participation in the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius. Pedro would later inform Francisco Garcia that Fray Nicolás expressed his desires to “instruct him in the mode of mental prayer for which he gave him a small book with the title Ejercicios de San Ignacio.” For the next few years, Pedro Antonio invested in his relationship with Nicolás and the motivational disciplines that would eventually serve as the foundation for his reputation as “a very good Christian” in Antequera. Pedro mentioned the spiritual exercises to each group of people for whom he conducted novenas and holy exercises of his own, always ending a set of devotionals by exhibiting his copy of the saint’s work. An introduction to the Spiritual Exercises to Pedro Antonio, as a black parishioner, indicates a level of Christian comprehension encouraged by members of the clerical orders. The decree of intellectual understanding necessary for the participation in the mental contemplation utilized by a powerful religious order demonstrates how members of the clerical orders.

44 Quoted in O’Malley, The First Jesuits, 39.
45 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, 1694, 693, 2a parte, expediente 11, folio 541v.
46 Ibid., folio 545r.
47 Ibid., folios 544v, 545r.
orders intervened in the lives of black parishioners they thought spiritually prepared to undertake such a journey.

A final example of Jesuit intervention comes from the mining region of San Luis Potosí where in 1715 a mulatta slave named María Xavier recovered from a life-threatening illness. In the aftermath of a miraculous healing that created a spiritual fervor in the mining town, the Jesuits intervened to provide an authoritative voice, while utilizing the visionary experience as an educational tool in a town composed primarily of black and native residents. María had caught the Inquisition’s attention after they received an account of how the Virgin Mary appeared before her when she had taken ill in her master’s house. A few days earlier, the doctors had declared her illness, described as “the flow of blood from the mouth,” as terminal. Following the placement of an image of the Virgin Mary, known for its healing power, on her chest, María recovered her strength, claiming that the Virgin Mary had appeared before her to say, “I have come to cure you.”48 Her descriptions of the Virgin Mary and her association with the religious images in her master’s household suggests a rather intimate connection with the Christian divine prior to the revelations, which may have been influenced by the piety of her master and his family.

As the news of her visions spread throughout San Luis Potosí, a local division of the Jesuit order arrived at the house to receive her personal report of the appearance for a published account of the miraculous events at their central church. Following the publication, Jesuit preachers gave empowering sermons during Sunday mass that featured the mulatta’s vision of the Virgin Mary and her special connection with the divine. By placing her story into their sermons, they exalted María’s spirituality in a manner that served as a didactic purpose for the local community: belief in the Virgin Mary’s miraculous powers could save even the most

48 AGN, Inquisición, “Contra María Xavier,” 1715, 760, expediente 8, folios 135v-136r.
helpless creatures, an enslaved woman, from death. The mulatta’s experience eventually became
the subject of multiple “learned endorsements” throughout San Luis Potosí, disseminating
beyond the circles of the Jesuit order. As the news continued to spread, “the commotion
magnified to such a degree that they attributed many other miracles to the effigy, to which, they
say, they touch their rosaries.”49 The Jesuit’s intervention in the miraculous healing prompted a
conversation between the Jesuits and María concerning the authenticity of her visionary
experience, which they eventually confirmed, placing it within the boundaries of acceptable
religious behavior. Once considered a divine connection, the religious order could utilize the
example of an Afro-descendant woman saved by the grace of the sacred to encourage members
of the community to devote themselves to the image of the Virgin Mary.

By the eighteenth century, the trusted relationships forged between clergy and parishioner
advanced beyond the exchange of information regarding everyday rituals, festivities, or
devotions to local holy figures, and toward a theological understanding of intimate connections
to the divine, an intellectual arena that proved dangerous for priest and penitent alike. In 1744,
inquisitorial commissioner Miguel Bernardo de Quiros received a letter of self-denunciation
from a Franciscan friar located in Puebla de los Angeles. The friar, José de la Encarnación,
wished to recount in detail the nature of a spiritual relationship he had established with a mulatta
woman, whom he kept unnamed throughout the letter. This “hija de confesión,” or daughter of
confession, had arrived at the confessional one afternoon concerned about the state of her soul.
While undertaking mental prayer, she had received a series of visions that left her disturbed with
uncertainty of their malicious or divine origins. She requested his discernment to assure that she
had not been tricked by the devil through the visions. If he determined the visions came from

49 Ibid., fol. 136v.
God, she then hoped he would provide her guidance on how to best handle the, at times, troubling spiritual scenes. After a couple of conversations where the woman described her mystical encounters, José concluded that she had connected to souls in purgatory, who sought assistance to ascend to heaven. He explained to her the troubling scenes came to her with such violence because she had only begun to reach the purgative way, or the transition to a passive reception of God’s will, in this case her interaction with purgatory.50

Multiple mystical writings and treatises argued that the purgative way remained an imperative step for any interior connection with sacred world, which was viewed by authorities as a controversial theological topic. As indicated by Spanish mystical writers, including St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Ávila, the purgative way served as the first of three steps toward the mystical union with God, often described as a marriage between the individual and the divine. This traditional threefold structure would begin with mental prayer, spiritual exercise, and quiet contemplativeness to prepare the soul for the mystical process. Because the purgative way started the process, the individual had not yet subjugated their passions, desires, and association with evil, making the soul more susceptible to temptation, tricks from the devil, and demonic torment, all of which were described by José’s mulatta daughter of confession. Early in their spiritual relationship, the woman arrived at the confessional with “a melancholy complexion” concerned about a vision she had during her evening prayers. She described the spiritual scene to José, where souls from purgatory appeared before her seeking her assistance to ascend into heaven. Following her account, “she told him that she did not believe them to be souls from purgatory,” but instead demons who tormented her soul. Despite her reservations, José instructed her to continue with her spiritual contemplation in order to receive the visions

50 AGN, Inquisición, “Miguel Bernardo de Quiros,” 1744, 900, expediente 4, folios 48r, 49r-49v.
because “he believed that they were [from purgatory].” The visions, for him, merely represented her current path in passive purgation.

In his letter, José de la Encarnación wrote often about his efforts to guide the mulatta woman toward a closer connection with God through their continual conversations during which he could better direct her mental prayers associated with her various visions. Evidence of José’s desires to direct a mulatta woman who received favors from the divine appears throughout the letter. On the first page of the denunciation, he admitted to the inquisitor general that over the course of a few years he “had guided the soul [of the mulatta woman who] came to believe so many visions and revelations that passed before her in prayer and outside of her” for various reasons. During his time with her in the confessional, he realized the purity of her interior state, which led him to believe that her soul “is not given to the devil” and rested “assured in the good and most just life of the penitent.” At this moment he opted to accept her as a spiritual daughter in need of his continual guidance. He immediately started to conduct his own research that would allow her to cultivate a more personal relationship with the Lord, which he believed occurred as she assisted souls in purgatory. He informed the inquisitor that he continued to “verify if [each of the visions] were effects of melancholy, or imagination, natural or supernatural” because she “would recount the vision in the most minute [detail] that gave the effect that [the visions] were...

51 Ibid.
52 His actions, by no means unique to their interaction, speak to a larger tradition common in mystical theology, especially among female mystics: that of spiritual direction. In reaction to the expansion of piety among lay women in the medieval and early modern periods, church authorities and theologians increasingly sought a way to regulate female mystical or visionary encounters through the direct supervision of a spiritual father. Unlike local priests who solely offered absolution of sins through confession, these spiritual guides merged the process of sacramental confession and spiritual advisement. As the church increasingly questioned the authenticity of mystical experiences, female visionaries actively searched for confessor-spiritual directors to obtain church-sanctioned spiritual counseling, advice, and institutional approval of their visions. For more see Patricia Ranft, “A Key to Counter Reformation Women’s Activism: The Confessor-Spiritual Director,” in Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 10:2 (Fall, 1994): 8; Jodi Bilinkoff, “A Spanish Prophetess and Her Patrons and Her Patrons: The Case of María de Santo Domingo,” in The Sixteenth Century Journal, 23:1 (Spring, 1992): 21-34; Alison Weber, “Spiritual Administration: Gender Discernment in the Carmelite Reform,” in The Sixteenth Century Journal 31:1 (Spring, 2000): 123-146.
53 AGN, Inquisición, Miguel Bernardo de Quiros, 1744, 900, expediente 4, folio 50r.
not the gravest of sins.” As expected of spiritual directors, he studied her behaviors as she detailed the spiritual scenes that appeared before her. In retrospect, he realized that his efforts only threatened the soul of his “little mulatta daughter of confession,” stating that perhaps his errors came through “his madness” or “his ignorant pride, or affected malice, or in the case that [a demon] attached itself to her person and that it is a subtle demon.” However, at the time, he had perceived a woman with a “special light,” who, through his guidance, would undergo a process with “pure effects, clarity, [and] light,” which he encouraged despite her adamant hesitations. In adopting the manner of a spiritual direction, José de la Encarnación initiated the exchange of theological knowledge on mystical practices that this unnamed mulatta woman applied to her own visionary experience.

**The Making of Christian Creoles**

Over the course of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, creoles created and reinforced components of their Christian identification in the context of a colonial religious landscape replete with individual devotions and ostentatious displays of worship. As creoles interacted with members of the New World clergy concerned about their salvation, they underscored the ways that Catholic knowledge of appropriate customs shaped the construction of their Christianity. They navigated colonial institutions, demonstrated their adherence to clerical expectations, and established their familiarity with the church hierarchy. Through their confessional moments, they broadened their knowledge of Christianity, popular practices, and religious rituals. As an inherently creole experience, the expansion of their Catholic knowledge fortified the social connections that became central to their negotiation of personal choice in their

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54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., folio 49v.
56 Ibid., folio 50r.
57 Ibid., folio 49v.
religious practices under colonial Christian dominance. They displayed a subtle form of agency in their decisions to observe the principles of specific religious orders, seeking out guidance from their clerical members, or to practice select Christian traditions within their own neighborhoods, among friends and family.

Familiarity with the colonial religious order enabled black creoles and mulattos to organize important forms of their Christian practices within the boundaries of orthodoxy. To hold public displays of Catholic rituals indicative of their participation in sanctioned practices, these members of the creole communities called upon personal relationships with local clergy or students of theology to acknowledge the authority of the church within their intimate spirituality. In 1699, the Holy Office of the Inquisition received a letter denouncing a group of blacks, mulattos, and “men of all types” who convened in an alley in Mexico City in honor of Saint Augustine. Lucas Mercado, the inquisitor’s first witness, testified that the group conducted processions through the town before gathering around an altar with an image of the saint complete with “a post like a pulpit and preacher.”

Organized by a mulatto man named Isidro Peralta, also known as Isidro the Sweet Maker, the confraternal order met regularly at the home of a fellow congregant Juan Baptista, where neighbors reported that they “read from a book of devotion for more than a half an hour. . . and at last they prayed the rosary.” They furnished the room like a chapel dedicated to the saint, whose image appeared in the center with benches

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58 The Huntington Library, Huntington Manuscript Collection 35168 (hereafter, HM 35168), “El Señor fiscal de este Sancto Officio contra Isidro de Peralta, mulato [por fundar a su modo una religion de San Agustin],” 1699, Mexico City, folio 6v. Another analysis of Isidro’s illicit confraternity can be found in Joan Bristol, “Afro-Mexican Saintly Devotion.” In her analysis, Bristol examines how the black and mulatto members of the confraternity negotiated the religious opportunities afforded them by colonial officials to create a distinct group within colonial society. While she recognizes that the confraternal organization represents the participation of Afro-Mexicans in “mainstream Christianity,” she argues that their particular forms of Christian practices corresponded to their imitation of Spanish cultural norms to define their own, alternate form of authority.

59 HM 35168, folio 12v. The case involved two separate denunciations and spanned the years 1699 and 1702. It appears that the inquisitors did not follow up on the denunciation of 1699, but raided the congregation and arrested multiple people in 1702 after the second denunciation.
directed in the direction of the altar. On the day of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, a popular saint among black communities, the witnesses reported that the congregants would “sing, like they do in the Church when they sing the mass in Latin” and they “held a great feast and food that they had placed in their room for [the saint] and they heard the litany and smelled incense.”

Although the meetings fell under inquisitorial scrutiny for their failure to obtain a license from the archbishop, a requirement for all confraternities in the colony regardless of racial classification, the congregation conducted ordinary, if imprudent, devotions under the direction of various clergymen and students. When the *promotor fiscal* of the Holy Office raided one of their celebrations, they found in attendance three Spanish clerics who supported the devotionals. One witness declared that the leaders had invited Fray Ramón de Esquival, a religious man from the order of Our Lady of Mercy, to serve as the General of the religious group, though the witness clarified that he did not know if Fray Ramón had received full ordination. The clerical members, who served primarily as marginal figures in the black- and mulatto-led congregation, offered security against the watchful eye of ecclesiastical courts, but they additionally contributed materials and guidance to ensure proper orthodoxy in the congregation’s actions.

By convening in conventional communal worship under the theological direction of educated members of the church, the congregants further demonstrated their self-conscious choice to enact their Christianity and the specific form their participation would take. They acted

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60 Multiple scholars have emphasized the popularity of black confraternal devotions to Saint Nicolas of Tolentino, a thirteenth century Augustinian friar known for his dedication to preaching Christianity in the streets of Tolentino, Italy. Von Germeten suggests that black members of confraternities possibly chose Saint Nicolas for their devotion because of the saint's association with the humble and the poor, or for his dedication to Christian education. She also suggests that Augustinian friars may have chosen the devotion for the confraternities. Von Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers*, 18.

61 The Huntington Library, Huntington Manuscript Collection 35169 (hereafter, HM 35169), “Autor contra diferentes personas que formavan nueva religion de San Augustin, el principal, Isidro de Peralta,” 1702, Mexico City, folio 15v.

62 HM 35168, folio 6v.
upon their desire to form the confraternal group dedicated to various saints replete with sermons, educational direction from Spanish clerics, and actions as penitents of the religious order, i.e. processions and devotional prayers. The religious gathering, composed of nineteen men and two women, determined the saints that remained important to their daily devotion, electing Saint Augustine, Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, and Saint Dominic as their patrons. The two women in attendance further represented a section of the illicit confraternity that provided the female family members and neighbors with the choice to participate in the religious devotions. The initial denunciation informed the inquisitors that they had “seen women, blacks and mulattas, in the assembly . . . and later had heard said that they named themselves the religious women of Saint Iphigenia,” another popular saint among Afro-descendant communities.\(^6\) As members of the congregation determined the materials they would employ as a guide to their devotionals, they framed the extent their own religious knowledge would inform their practices. One witness testified that the leaders of the congregation had studied from a “book of various sermons of Saint Dominic,” presumably obtained from one of the clerics, with Antonio Romientos, a mulatto man and student, serving in the role of who read the devotionals.\(^6\) The testimonies provided by various witnesses and neighbors, who generally speaking did not seem suspicious of the gathering, suggests that the neighborhood’s black creole and mulatto residents formed a religious congregation forged from their familiarity with the church hierarchy and prescribed behavior.

Black creoles and mulattos, who maintained at minimum an elementary understanding of the theological practices of the various religious orders, drew from their familiarity to express a

\(^6\) HM 35168, folio 7v. For a brief discussion of black devotions to Saint Iphigenia in New Spain, see von Germeten,\(\textit{Black Blood Brothers.}\)

\(^6\) HM 35168, folio 6v.
personal choice in the development of their religious devotions. As they mastered Catholic rituals in the colonial setting, they selected the clerical persons who could intervene in their spiritual lives. Pedro Antonio, for example, demonstrated his preference for the teachings of the Jesuits, who remained influential in his religious devotions despite his eventual interactions with students from the Franciscan college. When he arrived to Antequera after his pilgrimage in the mountains and his contact with the unnamed Jesuit priest, Pedro searched immediately for the Jesuit college to find a spiritual father to direct him further. Once he settled into the city, he visited the college to “confess and take communion three times a week” with Jesuit Nicolás de Vera, to whom “he communicated all of his religious matters.”65 Upon Father Nicolás’ departure from the city, Pedro returned to the Jesuit college to begin a spiritual relationship with Father Tomás de Linares, a priest recommended by Father Nicolás. His connection to the Jesuit order suggests a personal choice in which religious order would provide the most support for his spiritual devotions.

When compared to his interactions with the Franciscan college, Pedro’s relationship shifted from one of student with the Jesuits to one of teacher and colleague with the Franciscans. In maintaining the distinction between student and instructor, Pedro demonstrated his connection to Jesuit teachings that he elected to share with the Franciscan students, whom he believed could benefit from the Jesuit discipline. Fernando Vazquez, a Franciscan student with Francisco García, had invited Pedro to their rooms after hearing that Pedro “walked through the city [and] appeared virtuous.”66 On his first day at the Franciscan college, Francisco García informed the inquisitor, Pedro held various “chats on things of virtue like examples and lives of the Saints” with the students. After some time had passed, Pedro Antonio inquired if they wished to join him

65 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 545r., 552v.
66 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 544r.
in exercises of mental prayer that he had learned from the Jesuits, specifically from the *Exercises of Saint Ignatius*. Pedro explained the disciplines to him in the following manner:

First they pray five Ave Marias and five Our Fathers, offering each Our Father and Ave Maria to different Saints, one to Our Lady the Virgin Mary, another to [each person’s] guardian angel, another to Saint John the Baptist, another to Saint Joseph, and another to the name-saint of each person and later to cross oneself and pray a Creed and after ask permission from Our Lord to contemplate whatever happened during his Passion and to ask for grace in order not to sin.  

For the Franciscan students, Pedro’s instruction in the process of mental prayer provided compelling evidence of his virtuous, almost saintly behavior, and the extent of his knowledge in spiritual disciplines.  

Similarly, the subtle show of Christian agency by the unnamed mulatta woman in José de la Encarnación’s denunciation letter manifested itself in her personal choice of a confessor who could guide her through the troubling visions she experienced while outwardly expressing her obedience to the priest. As indicated in the denunciation, José de la Encarnación was not her first confessor, but rather she had initially opted to confess to another local priest, who eventually informed her that he could not help her with the visions. Her search for a new confessor led her to José de la Encarnación, who promptly sought permission from her previous confessor to take charge of her spiritual direction. Despite José’s willingness to direct the young woman, she remained hesitant, notifying her new confessor that she did not necessarily approve of his course of action. In fact, throughout the letter he mentioned how she would voice her concerns about the nature of her visions, explaining to José how they violently appeared before her. During one of the visions she experienced in her time of prayer, she stated that she watched with her inner vision until “it seemed she had reached the ultimate moments of her life.” Following this

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67 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 544r-544v.  
68 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 547.
harrowing experience, she asked Father José for another path because “she did not consent” to the one he sent her down.⁶⁹ He assured her, however, that she should fear nothing because the Lord had chosen her to act as an intercessor for the souls of purgatory. He then explained “his concept [of the purgative way] to her, saying that it was not impossible, but that she could ask the Lord for light in order to reach it.” Continuing her assumptions that she had fallen to the devil’s tricks, she hesitated before deciding that “even though he did not persuade her, his reasons had convinced her.”⁷⁰ She clearly voiced her concerns about the dangers of mystical experiences, but remained obedient to Father José, even if his guidance did not curb her uncertainties.

A similar scenario occurs in a case forty years later, when another mulatta woman, María Cayetana Loria, expressed her frustrations at finding a confessor who would guide her in her communication with the Lord, the Virgin Mary, and various saints. For María Cayetana, her personal choice manifested itself as the desires of God communicated through a visionary experience. Before associating herself with Ángel Vázquez, her confessor immediately prior to her arrest by the Inquisition, María Cayetana portrayed a difficult life as she transitioned from confessor to confessor, searching for one who would listen to her moments of visionary transcendence. Frustrated by the harsh treatment she received from her early confessors, whom she named in her response as Fathers Manuel, Herrera, Villarreal, and Castro, she invoked God for help.⁷¹ When the Lord appeared and inquired into the “quality of her state,” she complained about how her confessors neglected and scorned her for the extraordinary graces she received. She requested for the Lord’s assistance in finding a confessor who wanted to assist her on the

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⁶⁹ AGN, Inquisición, “Contra Miguel Bernardo de Quiros,” 1744, 900, expediente 4, folio 49v.
⁷⁰ AGN, Inquisición, Miguel Bernardo, folio 51.
mystical way, “because here there are no others who what to direct anyone.” In response, the Lord told her to remain patient, for at the moment “the Devil is who impedes it” and she would soon find a confessor worthy of her station. Shortly after this vision, she received a second communication from God that led her to Father Vázquez. During one Sunday morning mass, Christ appeared in the church where he seated himself in the front row while two altar boys knelt before Vázquez in preparation for communion. As Vázquez lifted the host, a golden sunbeam swallowed the altar where it remained until the service concluded. The image of the heavens shining down on Vázquez while he conducted mass served as an indication of the Lord’s favor. After this vision, she abruptly left Father Villarreal, her previous confessor, for Ángel Vázquez. Through the friendship that followed, though not explicitly recorded in the accusation or the response, María received the authorization and protection of a male clergyman. As an unprofessed mulatta, without institutional support or formal status, María was especially vulnerable to accusations of fraud, heresy, and demonic possession, all of which appear throughout the case.

Mobility of free persons played an essential role in the ways people of African descent shaped their connection to religious instruction. With the exception of María Xavier, the mulatta slave in San Luis Potosi, the cases examined in this chapter involve exclusively free people who were never slaves. As blacks and mulattos traversed the colonial landscape, their mobility granted them the freedom to receive a religious education in communities outside their local nexus of clergy. Fernando traveled from Puerto Rico to Santo Domingo before leaving for the

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72 AGN, Inquisición, María Cayetana Loria, folios 205r, 213v.
73 AGN, Inquisición, María Cayetana Loria, folios 207-207v.
74 Jodi Bilinkoff, Related Lives: Confessors and Their Penitents, 1450-1750 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 78. References of fraud and heresy appear throughout the entire accusation. For the one reference to demonic possession see specifically AGN, Inquisición, María Cayetana Loria, folio. 201.
Spanish mainland, where he proceeded to Cartagena, and eventually settled in Veracruz, Mexico. His travels as a religious man in the entourage of powerful clerics took him as far as Guatemala for a short stay before he returned to the Veracruz area, journeying to various outlying towns. With each of his travels, he received instruction in theological matters from various priests in the company of bishops and archbishops. In Puerto Rico, he received training in grammar from Diego Barrado, Francisco Muñoz, and Diego de Cisneros as a necessary foundation for theological instruction. In Santo Domingo, Father Luis de Rivera developed his education in Catholic doctrine, allowing for his ordination. To Cartagena he accompanied the teacher Antonio Perez before he returned to the Caribbean, staying in Havana for a short period of time. At the end of his discurso, he listed Bishop Hervias of Verapaz as his final instructor before he notified the inquisitor that he left the company of bishops, preferring to travel alone or with a trusted family member. By the time the inquisitorial commissioner of Veracruz placed him under arrest, he had traveled alongside instructors and clergyman to towns across the central valley of Mexico, broadening his comprehension of the religious doctrine employed during the spiritual conquest.75

A similar pattern occurred in the case of Pedro Antonio. Pedro indicates in the account he provided María de Avendaño and Francisco Garcia that during his pilgrimage he travelled to Guatemala where he became friends with an alcalde mayor that introduced him to the life story of a fourth-century hermit saint, Saint Onuphrius. While on his pilgrimage, he came across “some Indians from a town in the mountains” who imprisoned him and threatened to kill him for taking water from their community. After some time, however, the alcalde mayor spared Pedro’s life. The alcalde explained to Pedro how he had always desired to live a life similar to Saint

75 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez, folios 115v-116r.
Onuphrius, but his position in his community prevented him from realizing this lifestyle. Instead, he encouraged Pedro to continue his life of contemplative prayer and devotion by setting Pedro free and giving him a “piece of blue cloth” to carry with him on his pilgrimages. Both Fernando’s and Pedro’s personal experiences characterized a religious education predicated on mobility as free men. Through their freedom of movement within the colonial borders they embarked on a spiritual journey that gained them personal relationships with priests, mendicant clergy, and lay devout, and an expanding knowledge of the Christian terrain.

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Multiple generations of clerical interventions, confessional moments, and personal relationships between the creole descendants of enslaved Africans and members of the Catholic hierarchy had offered a dialogical exchange where black parishioners learned the intricacies of the Catholic rituals they incorporated into their daily practice. Such informational exchanges, which corresponded to the program of Catholic renewal, accorded black creoles with the Catholic knowledge of spiritual practices that served as a foundation for their creole Christian identity. As an inherently creole experience, the expansion of their proficiency of appropriate Christian behaviors cultivated a cultural landscape where they determined which ideas, concepts, and practices they incorporated into their religious expressions. For black creoles, their Catholic belief was founded on their own conceptional framework of spiritual practices. In their negotiation of a personal choice under colonial Christian dominance, they displayed a subtle form of agency as they decided to observe the principles of specific religious orders, seek out guidance from their clerical members, or to practice select Christian traditions within their own neighborhoods. As pious Catholics who carefully selected the Christian customs that fostered

76 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 541v.
their religious expressions, they initiated the cultural mechanisms that further insinuated the Catholic faith into their lives and the lives of their friends, family, and neighbors.
Chapter Three: Black Confraternities in a Colonial Parish

In the seventeenth-century New Spain, black parishioners joined other members of the parish in sacred communities that gave meaning to their local religious existence. Confraternities or lay brotherhoods, as an important form of Christian practice, offered formalized space for Christians to cultivate collective devotions that fulfilled their spiritual needs. Since salvation in the seventeenth century centered on public expressions of a community-centered devotion, membership in a confraternity helped black parishioners work toward their salvation through collective prayers, masses, and processions performed alongside their confraternal brothers. In lay brotherhoods dedicated to specific saints or one of the more intangible elements of the Catholic doctrine, such as the Holy Trinity, black parishioners structured collective acts of Christian veneration to publicly honor God and the saints, calling upon divine assistance in moments of crisis or publicly repenting the community’s sins. They conducted devotional processions through the city streets, held festivals in honor of patron saints, maintained religious images and altars, and organized funeral masses for the deceased members of their congregations. Through the fundamentally collective nature of these religious activities, black *cofrades* (members of a confraternity) integrated their conceptions of confraternal worship into the local practices of their fellow believers.

At the same time, the deeply rooted connections held by black creoles in the parishes where they were born, baptized, and worshiped fostered a sense of Christian unity that emerged in the formation of confraternal orders. Brotherhoods maintained their closest affiliations with parish churches, chapels, and altars where black Catholics gathered on a daily basis to enact their intimate spirituality alongside their fellow parishioners. Neighborhood processions honored the patron saint of the parish, individuals prayed in chapels adorned by donations from confraternal
members, and cofrades commissioned anniversary masses held in local altars to memorialize the deceased. As a central feature of these confraternal devotions, the sacred sites of the colonial parish served as an organizational space that tied confraternities founded by black parishioners to the spiritual practices of those who composed their religious social and cultural worlds. For black creoles with extensive, intimate connections to the colonial parish, participation in the parochial processions and feast-day celebrations connected them to their friends, family, neighbors and fellow Christians in a manner that strengthened the communal components of their identities as devout Christian subjects.

Building on an argument that places black creole Christians at the center of New Spain’s Catholic cultural and social formation, this chapter examines black communal Christianity through the lens of formal religious organization. As a form of communal worship encouraged by ecclesiastical officials, approved by Church authorities, and overseen by parish priests and local clergy, confraternities provided black Catholics with a social space to act upon their conceptions of community-driven Christianity without transgressing the boundaries of Catholic orthodoxy. Colonial Church authorities advocated for the formation of fraternal organizations regardless of racial classification, deeming the institution an essential element for the regulation of lay religious practices. Through the formal ties established between confraternities and the parochial system, specifically the location of the order’s meetings and the presence of a member of the church hierarchy, ecclesiastical authorities acted to regulate and improve the beliefs, worship, and basic education of the laity.¹ Despite the church’s mandates for clerical supervision,

confraternities generally functioned as self-governing institutions with limited ecclesiastical control, allowing the confraternity’s officers and brothers a degree of freedom in how they enacted their devotions. As *mayordomos* (administrators), deputies, rectors, and founders, black brothers of New Spain’s various confraternities determined the religious activities required of the members by establishing constitutions with specific spiritual obligations, managing the brotherhood’s finances, and organizing the various public processions and devotions for the congregation. Since these everyday decisions occurred with minimal oversight from ecclesiastical authorities, creole Christians were able to implement their well-informed conceptions of confraternal piety in a manner that placed their personal religious choices at the front of the congregation’s devotional practices.

Black confraternal piety functioned almost entirely within the social environment of a diverse colonial parish where black creoles maintained spiritual connections with men and women of “various status and *calidad.*” In the local churches, altars, and chapels, parish residents from disparate social backgrounds assembled in lay brotherhoods to discuss appropriate exercises for collective devotions based on their conceptions of a shared Catholic spirituality. Parish-centered processions and feast-day celebrations brought together separate social classes and various confraternities to express the spiritual sentiments that drove the religious life of their neighborhood. Within a single confraternity, the brotherhood’s membership often mirrored the demographic diversity that resulted from the shifting boundaries of the colonial parish. Even in confraternities that restricted positions of authority – *mayordomos*, rectors, deputies, or treasurers – to a certain racial or social classification, membership remained open to residents of an entire

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2 Larkin, “Confraternities and Community,” 194.
parish or individuals “of all type of calidad or color.”³ To be sure, select congregations placed social restrictions on membership, requiring participants to be of a particular class, race, or occupational status, or at times demanding such a high entrance fee as to bar specific individuals.⁴ But in confraternities founded by persons of African descent membership tended to reflect the very social interactions that sustained the parochial elements of black collective worship. The routine interactions that occurred in the colonial parish where black parishioners addressed their conceptions of appropriate religious behavior with their friends, family, neighbors, and casual acquaintances fostered the sacred social bonds that formed the foundation of their confraternal membership.

For the growing population of black creoles, confraternities offered a formal space where they could publicly voice their ideas, beliefs, and practices to a diverse congregation without breaking the boundaries of orthodox and unorthodox authority. Since sacred organizations remained connected to ecclesiastical authorities, through their approval by Church officials, their location in sacred spaces, and the presence of a clergyman at their official gatherings, black brothers in influential positions over confraternal piety could organize public worship and

⁴ Multiple confraternities founded by elite Spaniards restricted membership to the town’s wealthy elites or maintained an open membership policy with a high membership fee, thereby restricting members of a lower social class. In other confraternities, acceptance into the brotherhood required membership in an artisan guild, such as cobblers, tanners, or blacksmiths. For more, see Maureen Flynn, Sacred Charity: Confraternities and Social Welfare in Spain, 1400-1700 (London: Macmillan Press, 1989); Clara García-Ayluardo, “Confraternity, Cult, and Crown in Colonial Mexico,” PhD Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1989; Larkin, “Confraternities and Community” and Very Nature of God. Only one black confraternity, the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception, explicitly restricted leadership and membership to certain individuals. The brotherhood, founded at the Hospital of the Immaculate Conception in the early seventeenth century, restricted all members to persons “de la nación sake,” or the Zape nation, referring to Africans from coastal Sierra Leone. For more on the confraternity see von Germeten, Black Blood Brothers and “Black Brotherhoods in Mexico City,” 248-268.
devotional life while ensuring they conformed to clerical expectations. Creole founders wrote constitutions sanctioned by local authorities that outlined the mutual spiritual commitments required of the brotherhood’s diverse members, including alms for their religious devotions, regular attendance at masses and processions, and charitable acts for their members or persons residing in the parish. In these social positions of confraternal leadership supported by Church officials, black officers and members exercised a formal, officially recognized form of spiritual authority over a congregation comprised of men and women from disparate social backgrounds. Composing a self-governing body of the faithful, black *mayordomos*, rectors, and deputies possessed the authority to discipline their members for neglecting their spiritual obligations or failing to uphold certain moral or behavioral expectations, all often with limited clerical intervention. Within a colonial Christian society, where participation in Iberian Catholic practices integrated individuals into all aspects of colonial life, such positions of leadership placed black Catholics in a structural role that guided proper religious conduct on the local level. As black Catholics joined or founded confraternities, articulating their personal spiritual choices within the constitutions of the Catholic institution, they produced a mode of sacred organization that inherently affected the cultural landscape of New Spain’s confraternal piety.

An examination of black brotherhoods as an organizational space for members of various social and racial backgrounds diverges considerably from scholarly characterizations of black brotherhoods in the New World. As sacred organizations founded by persons of African

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5 Most constitutions listed the requirement that a clergyman, whether priest or sacristan, remained present at all official gatherings, including celebrations, processions, and election meetings. For examples, see AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Cofradía de Espíritu Santo y Nuestra Señora de los Dolores,” 1694, 1028, expediente 40; AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Constitución de la Preciosa Sangre de Cristo,” 1713, 444, expediente 4; AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Constituciones de la Cofradía del Transito,” 1686, 1028, expediente 6; AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Morenos de la Cofradía de Nuestra Señora,” 1600, 78, expediente 81.

descent, confraternities have traditionally appeared in historical studies as pivotal places for enslaved Africans to cultivate communal ties around a shared sense of corporate identity often associated with either an African ethnicity or a New World racial identity. In the early era of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as Church authorities encouraged the foundation of confraternities by individuals of African descent, enslaved Africans utilized their cultural awareness of the rituals and institutions of the Catholic Church to organize meaningful community associations within the dominant Christian system. Such associations mitigated the effects of social death by creating fictive kinship networks and corporate webs of relationships that would form the foundation for black social life in the Americas. In his work on the Afro-Portuguese world, James Sweet notes that religious brotherhoods “provided Africans with the opportunity to forge their own social spaces within the repressive slave society.” They restricted membership to persons of “particular African nations,” allowing for the brotherhoods’ activities to include “the perpetuation of African religious and social forms.” Since confraternities served as an institutionally-recognized space where persons of African descent had the opportunity to gather without the watchful eye of their masters, enslaved Africans established corporate entities with individuals who expressed similar social, cultural, or ethnic ties.

Even in confraternities founded by first generations of black creoles and mulattos, these scholars argued, the ethnic-based relationships established in former generations initially guided


8 Patterson, Slavery and Social Death; Sweet, Recreating Africa; Vinson, Bearing Arms for His Majesty; von Germeten, Black Blood Brothers; Bennett, Colonial Blackness; Bryant, Rivers of Gold; Vinson, Before Mestizaje.

9 Sweet, Recreating Africa, 207.
the development of their sodalities. Only as black creoles gradually formed a larger part of the overall population did black *cofrades* start to deemphasize their connections to African ethnicities or geographical locations, instead electing to designate their confraternities around a shared sense of racial corporate identity – as confraternities of blacks, mulattos, or morenos.\(^\text{10}\) Considered by historians a result of the demographic and cultural transformation that occurred in the seventeenth century, this gradual transition away from the African-influenced religious and social expressions and toward an identity founded entirely in the New World experience corresponded to black creoles’ integration into Catholic society on terms relevant to their socioracial status.\(^\text{11}\)

Under the New World social and economic conditions, identification with a particular racial category – whether black, mulatto, pardo or moreno – associated individuals with a specific social and personal identity recognized by both colonial authorities and the people who composed their social networks. As Nicole von Germeten argued, since racial identification functioned entirely within the fluid, at times ambiguous *sistema de castas*, an association with a racial designation remained contextual, relating to the local manifestations of social divisions that emphasized how individuals of a certain racial classification figured into colonial structures.\(^\text{12}\) Premised on a person’s *calidad*, the racial terms of this flexible social hierarchy could be adapted by individuals or groups depending on its usefulness in a particular setting. Within the religious institution of the confraternity, an association with a racial corporate identity offered Afro-descendants the possibility to forge a group solidarity that provided protection in

\(^{10}\) Von Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers* and “Black Brotherhoods in Mexico City”; Bristol, *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches*; Vinson, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty*.


the repressive society of a racialized social order. As a result, the designation of a sacred organization in racial terms presented black *cofrades* with a means to express a racial identity that held significant meaning to their daily lives, ultimately establishing who belonged in their religious community. This scholarly focus on the *sistema de castas* and the resulting formation of a racial corporate identity has presented a remarkable specificity to the position of confraternities in the creation of black social networks, cultural formation, and racial solidarity.

However, the scholarly focus on race relations and the formation of blackness has resulted in a discussion of black social life that ignores the intergenerational and interracial relationships held by black parishioners. The personal connections they maintained with their neighbors or coworkers were foundational to their religious communities, both inside and outside of the confraternity. As they maintained these personal, multiethnic interactions, their decisions on who entered the brotherhood and who could hold positions of authority were shaped by the very people they interacted with on a daily basis. My recognition of the diverse nature of black confraternities alters their function in colonial religious society. Black *cofrades* occupied positions of leadership over a diverse congregation. They actively organized public devotions and communal worship that held significance to the ritual life of their friends, neighbors, and colleagues. Based on a shared Catholic spirituality framed by black expertise in Christian practices, black sacred communities functioned as part of the dynamic cultural and social milieu of the colony not as a social organization distinct from it.

**Confraternities in the Spanish Colony**

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Confraternities, from their inception, promoted elements of public religious expression that the church fathers deemed necessary for lay Catholic piety: they upheld the sanctity of charitable works in obtaining salvation, codified in the Council of Trent to combat Martin Luther’s *sola fides* (justification by faith alone), and they provided an education in proper devotional practices essential for the recently baptized New World populations, including Africans and their descendants.\(^{14}\) At the same time, the laity’s confraternal activities, including the distribution of charity, the patronage of religious festivals, and the promotion of the cult of saints, encouraged the active participation of a lay population considered by church fathers to be largely ignorant of doctrine. Because of their concerns over orthodox practices among Spanish and African populations, ecclesiastical authorities endeavored to establish a form of direct regulation over confraternities.

For centuries, the collective nature of confraternal devotions, from paying special veneration to a common patron saint to praying for each other in shrines cared for by the religious community, had created a universal brotherhood of believers kept largely out of reach of ecclesiastical authorities. Shortly after their creation in Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the religious institutions established an important role in determining how lay members could participate in and manage their connection to the church’s liturgical functions, at times competing with the parochial activities led by church authorities.\(^{15}\) They

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created ordinances that scheduled when their community should observe masses, how often they should take communion, and how frequent each member should confess their sins. On a regular basis, they financed celebrations on their own and, if possible, appointed their own *cofrades* as presiding chaplains, making it impossible for the church to thoroughly supervise their activities.\(^{16}\) Prior to their arrival at Trent, Church authorities feared that the extensive devotional practices independently observed in confraternal orders pushed individuals further from the parish churches where episcopal authority was held.\(^{17}\) Despite early attempts at reform that would allow local ecclesiastical supervisors to regulate spiritual devotions, the sacred organizations remained firmly in the hands of their lay members, transforming the institution into an important organization for individuals to enact their own religious activities to ensure their eternal salvation.

This unfettered universal brotherhood of believers proved a significant threat to a Church struggling to centralize its power around the episcopacy and doctrinal unity. The potential threat to orthodoxy was merely amplified in the American colonies, where the Church had to contend with a Spanish population seemingly outside its control and the new populations of natives and Africans. In the colonial Church’s First Provincial Council in 1555, officials complained about how the various confraternities already established in the colony remained outside the offices of either the parish or bishop, despite, in some instances, holding their congregations in the parish church.\(^{18}\) Fears of their complete independence in devotional matters permeated the colonial Church hierarchy as individual clergymen suggested that without close scrutiny of constitutions,


\(^{17}\) Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, 118; In his study on the precursors to the Council of Trent, John O’Malley indicates that the devotional practices embraced by lay confraternities became much “more important for their practice of the faith than the parish church, even though some confraternities were parish-based.” O’Malley, *Trent*, 47.

\(^{18}\) Larkin, *Very Nature of God*; Poole, *Pedro Moya de Contreras*, 156-158.
the lay orders could prove counterproductive to their mission in the New World, specifically their attempts to convert native populations. They noted that the founders of sacred organizations were “moved by great zeal,” but had “ordained and established their confraternities” without assistance from the secular clergy, and “they make statutes” that the church had not carefully examined, which caused “much harm and poor example.”¹⁹ For these Church officials, a confraternity’s failure to have their statutes or constitutions examined risked their potential for perpetuating unorthodox behavior, a serious problem for ecclesiastical authorities concerned with the Christianization of the indigenous populations. With their mounting fears about the potential contamination of recently-converted native communities from the corrupting influence of the Hispanic laity, which included Africans and their descendants, efforts to maintain greater vigilance over confraternal aspects of religious practices remained of the utmost importance.

To combat the independence of the confraternal structure in New Spain, the bishops of the First Provincial Council implemented a series of decrees directed at confraternal compliance to the episcopacy and a regulation of their moral behavior. In previous years, the foundation of a confraternity merely required the mutual agreement of its members to gather at regular intervals, follow certain rules, and promote a spiritual life, all solidified by an oath to the orders’ statutes. Rarely ever did they require the presence of a priest, chaplain, or other members of the Church hierarchy with the exception of when the community celebrated masses or required the administration of the sacraments, a problem continuously voiced by the secular clergy.²⁰ The holy synod “wanting to remedy [these many inconveniences],” commanded that “from here

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¹⁹ Concilio provinciales primero y segundo celebrados en la muy noble y muy leal ciudad de México, presidiendo el Ilmo. y Rmo. Señor D. Fr. Alonso de Montúfar, en los años de 1555 y 1556 (Mexico: Joseph Antonio de Hogal, 1769), 166-167. Flynn, Sacred Charity; 117-118; Poska, “From Parties to Pieties,” 222-224; Larkin, Very Nature of God, 110-111.

²⁰ O’Malley, Trent, 46-47; Black, Italian Confraternities, 1.
forward in our Archdiocese and Provinces, that they do not make nor establish any new Confraternities, if they do not have our special and express license,” prohibiting them from “mak[ing] Statutes, Constitutions, nor Ordinances” without prior permission. The council further instituted that under no circumstances should a confraternity adhere to any regulations “without first being all seen, examined, approved, and confirmed by [diocesan authorities].”21 If a congregation acted to the contrary, the bishop could annul their constitution and sentence each cofrade to a “fine of ten pesos.”22 Once the constitutions obtained appropriate approval, however, confraternities could function under their own directives as long as its members upheld the moral and religious ordinances established under the statutes. Concern over transgressions encouraged the council to include a clause that gave the faculty to the parish priests to implement “any moderate sentence against transgressors.”23 With such regulations, the council installed measures for a degree of clerical oversight that would ensure orthodoxy in all religious activities practiced by sacred organizations, thus alleviating the concerns of unorthodox behavior.

Further reforms initiated by the Council of Trent reinforced the fundamental need for the episcopate to regulate the devotional activities of all confraternities. Concerned with moderating the Protestant threat in Europe, the Church fathers in Trent addressed confraternities, along with hospitals, charity organizations, lay pious places, or any institution considered the “fabric of any church,” as well-established realities central to the success of Catholic Reform.24 Since the institutions defined the lay religious landscape of any given city or neighborhood, the council reasoned that effective reform required the strengthening of the ties between cofrades and

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21 Concilio provinciales primero y segundo, 166.
22 Concilio provinciales primero y segundo, 166.
23 Concilio provinciales primero y segundo, 167.
24 The Canon and Decrees of the Council of Trent, ed. Theodore Alois Buckley (Aeterna Press, 2015), 158; O’Malley, Trent, 47.
diocesan officials, specifically parish priests and bishops, who could monitor their activities by correcting potentially dangerous social and religious practices.25

In the final sessions of the council, church fathers issued a series of canons that channeled all lay religious life into the parochial center, specifically focusing on the ambiguous status of confraternal religious functions. To guarantee orthodox behavior, the council decreed that confraternities would be subject to ecclesiastical visitation where bishops “as delegates of the Apostolic See” would “take cognizance of and see to the performance, according to the ordinances of the sacred canons, of all things that have been instituted for God’s worship.”26 Under the leadership of a resident parish priest with direction from active diocesan bishops, the council decrees ensured that daily functions of the confraternity, “even though the care of the aforesaid institutions appertain to laymen,” remained subject to episcopal authority.27 On December 7, 1604, Pope Clement VII solidified the control of the diocesan structure over sacred organizations with a final piece of legislation specifically outlining the role of the episcopal hierarchy in supervising confraternal activity. Similar to the First Provincial Council in Mexico, the papal bull Quaecumque reasserted that each confraternity must receive permission from diocesan authorities prior to presenting their constitutions for examination. Upon their approval, the bishop retained the authority to examine, correct, and approve all corporate statutes or constitutions issued by a new confraternity and to verify all spiritual favors and indulgences conceded to the organization before their publication.

Legislation that consigned the internal affairs to direct clerical supervision, severely curtailing lay control over their organizations, significantly impacted the development of

26 The Canon and Decrees of the Council of Trent, 158.; Poska, “From Parties to Pieties,” 223; Flynn, “Baroque Piety and Spanish Confraternities,” in Confraternities and Catholic Reform, 235-236
27 The Canon and Decrees of the Council of Trent, 158; O’Malley, Trent, 218.
confraternal piety in the colonial context. As a major proponent in the colonial Church’s struggle to consolidate their presence in the New World, the Catholic reforms expanded the administrative structure that governed the religious life of New Spain’s Spanish and African populations.\textsuperscript{28} Parish centers, as the central place of worship, and the presiding priests became vital to implementing the regulatory practices that addressed the beliefs and rituals in the \textit{república de españoles}. Through the reforms aimed explicitly at confraternal piety, a major aspect of communal lay worship, colonial officials acted to strengthen the formal connections between the parish offices and \textit{cofrades}, eventually elevating the status of the parish in the formation of confraternities.\textsuperscript{29}

The importance church authorities placed on the routine interactions between priest, parish, and parishioner ultimately concentrated confraternal life in the altars and chapels of the parish churches, often at the expense of other local sacred sites. Even though \textit{cofrades} retained the option to establish their sacred organizations in convent churches and chapels, the majority opted to associate their institution with the parochial centers where they enacted their spirituality on a daily basis. By the end of the seventeenth century, a record of all confraternities in Mexico City commissioned by the archbishop indicated that over half of the organizations were parish-based institutions. Each parochial house hosted roughly a dozen confraternal orders composed of all racial classifications, compared to most convent chapels that only supported a single

\textsuperscript{28} The Second Provincial Council in 1565, under the direction of Archbishop Alonso de Montúfar, initially implemented the reforms of the Council of Trent. However, the attempt largely failed, as the council neglected to obtain approval for the convocation from the pope and the documents were lost in the bureaucratic pipeline of the Council of the Indies. Not until the Third Provincial Council (1585) under the direction of Archbishop Pedro Moya de Contreras were the reforms fully implemented in the colonial church. Poole, \textit{Pedro Moya de Contreras}, 29; Schwaller, \textit{Church and Clergy}, 2-8; Gibson, \textit{The Aztecs Under Spanish Rule}; Hsia, \textit{The World of Catholic Renewal}.

\textsuperscript{29} Flynn, “Baroque Piety and Spanish Confraternities”; Black, “Confraternities and Catholic Reform”; Hsia, \textit{The World of Catholic Renewal}. 
confraternity. By strengthening these parochial ties for confraternal worship, specifically through location of the order’s meetings and the presence of a member of the church hierarchy, ecclesiastical officials guaranteed clerical oversight and regulation at the local level. For confraternities organized by blacks, mulattoes, and pardos, such clerical oversight and regulations impacted how, where, and with whom they founded their organizations.

**Clerical Oversight in Black Confraternities**

In the daily functioning of black sacred congregations, the provisions for a parochial presence filtered into the ordinances that determined collective practices. Most constitutions explicitly discussed the pastoral presence in their religious activities. In the constitutions of the Confraternity of the Most Precious Blood of Christ, founded in the parish church of Santa Catalina Mártir, the black and mulatto founders dictated “that all cabildos [elections] that the said confraternity celebrate should be held in the Sacristy of the said Parish…with the assistance of one of the priests.” Only in the event that neither priest could attend would one of their assistants preside over the proceedings, retaining the same privileges afforded the parish priests. The constitutions of Confraternity of the Holy Spirit and Our Lady of Sorrows, located in the parish of Santa Catalina Mártir, similarly required that all cabildos “should be held in the Church or the Sacristy of the said Parish and in no other part,” only “proceeding…with the assistance of the Parish Priests.” From the church’s perspective, the parochial presence

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30 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Memorial de todas las cofradías de españoles, mulatos, e indígenas,” 1706, 574, expediente 002.
31 Multiple confraternities claimed to have been founded in the early part of the seventeenth century; however, most documentation, including new constitutions or the reproduction of constitutions already lost, comes from the second half of the seventeenth century.
32 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, “Cofradía de la Sangre de Cristo,” 1686, 3231, expediente 002, folio 5r.
33 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Cofradía de Espíritu Santo y Nuestra Señora de los Dolores,” 1694, 1028, expediente 40, folio s.n.
officially connected the daily functions of the confraternities to the ecclesiastical hierarchy since presiding priests could intervene at any moment.

Both constitutions, it should be noted, limited this clerical presence to an adherence to the requirement for ecclesiastical oversight or their administration of sacramental obligations, stipulating that the presence of the parish priest should not interfere with their self-governing and, for this reason, the priests “only should vote in the case of a tie or disagreement, and in no other manner.” However, despite their limitations, the presence of ecclesiastical offices produced an effective means of regulation: they retained the power to intervene in moments of unruly behavior, as defined by the Church hierarchy, the right to veto, and the possibility to step into positions of authority if practices appeared to threaten orthodoxy.

To be sure, as subjects under the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical courts and the Inquisition, black *cofrades* knew that failure to comply with the church’s ordinances about communal celebrations could result in punishment – corporeal, financial, or spiritual. As early as 1601, a congregation of enslaved and free blacks and mulattos came under the scrutiny of the ecclesiastical courts for “meeting and congregating in the monastery of Saint Augustine” without the required license. In his denunciation to the ecclesiastical court, Luis de Quiros, the secretary for the archbishop of Mexico, detailed how the group of mulattos and blacks determined to “go out on Holy Thursday afternoon, with a procession of many mulattos carrying a standard, trumpets, bell and a *paso* [an effigy carried in a religious procession] of the passion and marking in procession before the confraternity of the Holy Name of Jesus.” He noted how

34 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, Cofradía de Espíritu Santo, folio s.n.; AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, “Cofradía de la Sangre de Cristo,” 1686, 3231, expediente 002, folio 5r. Throughout the constitutions, both confraternities outlined the specific masses they wish to celebrate for the entire year, noting when a priest should be present and the price the brotherhood should pay each priest for their assistance.
35 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Contrar algunos mulatos que han formado cofradía y salido en procesión sin licencia,” 1601, 810, expediente 28, folios 1r-3r.
36 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, Contra algunos mulatos, folios 1r-3r.
the congregation remained determined to participate in the celebrations even though they were a “confraternity [that] does not have a license” and, as such, “[had] committed an offense deserving punishment,” a point that “was noted and talked about among the people here.” The archbishop appeared to agree, calling in individuals as witnesses to the events. Unfortunately, the extant documentation about the congregation does not provide the outcome of the case nor detail the specifics of what “deserving punishment” was allotted. But the decision by the archdiocese office to investigate the confraternity’s offenses suggests that immediate action against the offenders proved necessary to ensure proper adherence to ecclesiastical regulations.

A similar scenario occurred when the congregations developed by Isidro de Peralta, a mulatto street vender, fell under scrutiny by the Inquisition for gathering “with the title of confraternity, or religion of Saint Augustine” and celebrating “without license” from the archbishop. After three months of investigation, the inquisitors determined that they did not “find any formal error in what was executed by the mulattos.” The group merely operated as “an indiscrete devotion to the Saints, Saint Augustine and Saint Nicolas.” Despite their findings in the proceedings, the inquisitors still sentenced Isidro and Juan Bautista, who they determined were the leaders, for their failure to obtain the mandatory license. The inquisitors required the two men to remain in Mexico City “under pain of major excommunication and two hundred lashes and forty years in the Philippines.” To ensure that they did not flee from the city, the inquisitors additionally commanded that they “come every Saturday to the gates of this Tribunal in the morning and say to one of the porters the house and street where they live.”

37 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Contra algunos mulatos, folios 1r-3r.
38 HM 35169, folio 7v.
39 HM 35169, folios 94r-94v.
The potential for such punishment by ecclesiastical authorities certainly drove some sacred congregations to maintain minimal connections to Church authorities, like the Confraternity of the Most Precious Blood of Christ mentioned above, simply representing their acknowledgement of the power of Catholic authorities. By convening under the theological direction of educated members of the church, black cofrades demonstrated their compliance with ecclesiastical regulation in conventional communal worship. But most congregations supported more intimate connections with the Spanish clerics who intervened in their communal devotions.

Black cofrades, who maintained personal relationships with local secular clergy in their daily religious activities, for example, selected the clerical persons who would intervene in matters concerning their brotherhoods, moving the parochial presence beyond an obligation and toward an intimate part of their religious practice. In the constitutions of the Confraternity of Our Lady of Tránsito, established by mulattsos in the church of Querétaro’s Convent of Santa Clara de Jesus, cofrades remarked on the strong ties they maintained with their parochial center despite their location in a convent, writing ordinances that guaranteed clerical intervention in their religious governance. The founders stated in their second constitutional item that “in order for us to better rule and govern in the spiritual and temporal matters touched upon in this Holy Confraternity” the cabildo, “with the assistance of an ecclesiastical judge” should elect “a secular priest…as our protector whose title should be held for life.”40 Their personal choice in the election of a clerical presence, especially as a position held for life, determined the development of the spiritual devotions in the brotherhood. The cofrades’ decision for the selected priest “to have a voice and a vote in all elections, proposing subjects” to discuss and suggestions on “who should be elected as Rector and Mayordomo” further placed the presiding priest in a position to

40 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Constituciones de la Cofradía del Tránsito,” 1686, 1028, expediente 006, folios 1v-2r.
direct their communal worship, contribute to the governing board, and serve in a similar capacity as a founder or brother.\textsuperscript{41} The presence of a trusted clerical adviser proved essential to their daily functions, since the priest contributed to the development of their communal worship in a manner that moved beyond security against the potential of heterodox practices and acknowledgement of the authority of the diocesan officials in their community.

In a similar example, the congregations organized by Isidro de Peralta represent the fundamental role of secular and the religious clergy in the daily functioning of New Spain’s black confraternities. Although the meetings fell under inquisitorial scrutiny for their failure to obtain a license, which represented the official connection to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the congregation maintained personal ties to clerical authorities who provided the brotherhood with a sense of legitimacy. In the raid on the celebration, the\textit{promotor fiscal} discovered at least one Spanish theology student and several ordained clerics who served as officials in the celebrations, providing sermons, reading devotionals, and attending all festivities.\textsuperscript{42} Of the ordained clerics, two wore the habit of a secular clergy, implying a connection to the administrative structure, another served as a sacristan at a local monastery, and a final clergyman maintained a connection with the religious house of Saint Augustine.\textsuperscript{43} One witness described how the secular clergy contributed to the spiritual direction of their devotions to Saint Nicolas of Tolentino, stating that he had witnessed “before the said procession that [Isidro] had come to the house [where the devotions occurred] talking with a secular priest named Pedro García,” who then led the procession from the Convent of Saint John the Penitent to the house of devotion.\textsuperscript{44} The attendance of Spanish clerics, despite their appearance as relatively marginal figures, signifies

\textsuperscript{41} AGN, Bienes Nacionales, Cofradía del Tránsito, 1v-2r.
\textsuperscript{42} HM 35169, folio 6v.
\textsuperscript{43} HM 35169, folios 5r-5v.
\textsuperscript{44} HM 35169, folios 37r-37v.
the congregation’s efforts to adhere to ecclesiastical regulations in a manner that represented their personal choice in clerical interventions. With their familiarity with the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the black *cofrades* delimited who would represent the Church authority in their congregations, deciding to observe the principles of specific religious persons, seeking out guidance from their clerical members, or practicing select Christian traditions with a specific Church official in their congregations.

Ecclesiastical authorities focused on the religious beliefs, practices, and worship of the Hispanic laity in the New World, bringing into the relief the customs of confraternal worship. As a fundamental aspect of conventional communal devotion, regulation of their daily functions through a greater connection with the parochial structure provided a means for the Church hierarchy to maintain a cultural and social control over their religious practices. The presence of a member of the diocesan hierarchy at confraternal function attempted to prevent the spread of unorthodox behaviors and ensure doctrinal unity. Within this context of ecclesiastical regulation, black confraternities emerged as an official form of communal worship closely associated with the Catholic hierarchy. The association with parish churches, chapels, and altars, the presence of Spanish clerics, and the Church approval of religious devotions structured black confraternal piety, but it did so in a way that supplied black Catholics with a social space to act upon their conceptions of community-driven Christianity without the risk of transgressing the boundaries of Catholic orthodoxy. Black *cofrades* emerged as leaders in their confraternities with the full support of parish priests and clergymen.

**Black Confraternities in the Colonial Parish**

The social space of the confraternity functioned almost entirely within the parochial landscape, shaping the composition of its members, leadership, and devotional practices. Black
cofrades with emotional attachments to the religious experiences and personal relationships of the colonial parish founded sacred organizations more tightly connected to the social formation of parochial centers. The sacred spaces of the parish emerged as fundamental aspects to the spiritual choices in the religious world of black creoles. The churches and the chapels connected individuals of African descent with the communal devotions of the men and women who composed their everyday social networks. In the altars of parish churches or the side chapels maintained by the various sacred orders, black cofrades gathered with their fellow parishioners composed of slaves, free blacks, Indians, Spaniards, and castas to publicly express the spiritual sentiments that drove the religious life of their neighborhood. By the seventeenth century, Mexico City’s three main parochial centers, Santa Catalina Mártir, Santa Veracruz, and the Sagrario Metropolitano, housed black confraternities that administered to the spiritual needs of the growing diverse population living in the city. Black creoles maintained the spiritual connections with men and women of “various status and calidad” that eventually influenced how they observed devotions for their collective worship and who composed their sacred organizations. In the routine interactions that occurred in the colonial parish, black parishioners fostered the social bonds with their friends, family, neighbors, and casual acquaintances that formed the foundation for their confraternal membership.

The religious experiences that black cofrades created with fellow parishioners underscored the spiritual significance of a particular parish chapel or altar in the intimate spirituality within their communities. As the center for the public manifestation of confraternal devotions, these sacred sites brought together various confraternities founded by separate social classes to express a shared Catholic spirituality. The Confraternity of the Most Precious Blood of Christ, for example, remained closely tied to the Spanish confraternity of the same name.
Initially founded in the early seventeenth century as a single religious brotherhood in the service of the entire parish of Santa Catalina Mártir, the confraternity eventually split into two separate orders toward the middle of the century— one under the leadership of the parish’s Spanish elite and another under the leadership of blacks and mulattos.\textsuperscript{45} In the constitutions of the new organization, the founders highlighted the symbolic importance of maintaining the parish altars and their associations with the Spanish confraternity. The founders indicated that the confraternity would remain “for perpetuity” in the “altar of Santo Eccehomo of the said Parish and the chapel of the Confraternity of the Spanish with the same title of the Most Precious Blood of Christ, Our Lord” because they desired to celebrate their title feast for the Discovery of the Most Holy Sacrament alongside the Spanish cofrades as “it has always been since [the original] foundation.”\textsuperscript{46} For the two sacred organizations, congregating in the shared altar and chapel displayed the physical embodiment of a mutual Catholic spirituality that had originated in their foundational statutes and ordinances and continued in spite of their separation.

Rather than creating mutually exclusive entities, the separation of the confraternity into two distinct organizations did not prevent their close association during celebrations, festivities, and everyday practices of prayer, masses, and other devotional rituals. In the parish-centered processions and feast day celebrations in honor of the Corpus Christi, Santa Catalina Mártir, and the Purification of Our Lady the Virgin Mary, the sacred organizations, despite remaining under the direction of distinct leadership, gathered together to participate in the spiritual activities as a parochial community in pursuit of collective salvation. In the constitutions for the new black and mulatto organization, the founders stipulated that the confraternity’s officials “should be

\textsuperscript{45} For the constitutions of the confraternity founded by the blacks and mulattos, see AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, “Cofradía de la Sangre de Cristo,” 1686, 3231, expediente 002. For more on the foundation of the confraternity, see AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, “Cofradía de la Preciosa Sangre de Cristo,” 1673, 1586, expediente 032.

\textsuperscript{46} AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, “Cofradía de la Sangre de Cristo,” 1686, 3231, expediente 002.
obligated to assist with their standard in the [religious] works as they have always been observed in the said parish,” elaborating that they should process in the festivities immediately after the Spanish confraternity and before the Confraternity of Our Lady of Guadalupe.\(^{47}\) For the celebrations of Holy Thursday, a commemoration of the Passion of Christ, the founders further outlined how the *cofrades* should participate in collective worship alongside their Spanish brothers. Each *cofrade* of both confraternities should arrive at the parish church on the evening of Holy Thursday for a procession of disciplines, a ritual of public flagellation in remembrance of Christ’s sufferings on the cross. For the procession, the two confraternities would divide the tasks “as has always been observed.”\(^{48}\) The members of the black confraternity would carry the congregation’s standards, *pasos*, and other devotional items, departing immediately before the Spaniards who “left with the cross, *capas*, and ministers.”\(^{49}\) Such an elaborate procession in celebration of Holy Thursday required the explicit coordination between the two confraternities, suggesting at minimum a personal connection in the directions of the spiritual life of parochial functions.

In a similar scenario, the black Confraternity of Our Lady of Consolation, located in the parish church in the city of Veracruz, detailed their active participation in the religious activities of a diverse colonial parish. In the summer of 1659, the confraternity entered into a legal dispute with the pardo Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception, established in the same parish center, over their right to proceed first in the parish’s processions and feast day celebrations. Making claims for their preference over the *cofrades* of the Immaculate Conception, the officials of Our Lady of Consolation explained to the ecclesiastical judge how they “have shown such

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\(^{47}\) AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Sangre de Cristo, folio, 7v.

\(^{48}\) AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Sangre de Cristo, folio, 7v.

\(^{49}\) AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Sangre de Cristo, folio, 7v; AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, “Cofradía de la Preciosa Sangre de Cristo,” 1650-1660, 5106, expediente 027.
affection and such reverence in the divine cult” by organizing different festivities for “the anniversaries and masses that they say in the said Parish,” which have afforded them “the more general favor of the Spaniards and residents” of their neighborhood.⁵⁰ In addition to their spiritual devotions for the parish community more broadly, the cofrades of Our Lady of Consolation stated that they directly served in the festiveties of Corpus Christi “as assistants from the confraternity and cofrades of the Holy Cross,” a well-known Spanish confraternity at the same parish.⁵¹ Through the descriptions of their religious activities, the cofrades of Our Lady of Consolation highlighted how their religious brotherhood acted as an intricate part of the social and cultural practices of their neighborhood, which included individuals beyond their immediate organization.

Black confraternities participated in parish-centered devotions that brought together separate social classes around a shared conception of the Catholic faith. The personal relationships that black creoles forged in this diverse social environment influenced where they established their confraternities and who composed their religious community. In 1694, a diverse group of parishioners arrived at the parish church of Santa Catalina Mártir to “gather in the said Parish with the assistance of the priests in order to form the constitutions” for the Confraternity of the Holy Spirit and Our Lady of Sorrows. They informed the archbishop in their letter of request how they desired to found the group for “the major benefit of the Cult of God, Our Lord and the wellbeing of the souls of the said parish,” specifically noting that it would serve “for those who are [in a state of] mortal sin.”⁵² As such, they determined that “all persons of whatever state, calidad, or condition that they may be, men as well as women” can enter as brothers of the

⁵¹ AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Nuestra Señora de la Humildad, folios 17v-18r.
⁵² AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Cofradía de Espíritu Santo y Nuestra Señora de los Dolores,” 1694, 1028, expediente 40, folio s.n.
confraternity as well as serve as one of its officials. Their only restrictions on the cofradas who entered the confraternity referred to the parochial center itself. In order to participate in the daily functions of the brotherhood and receive the benefits of their obligations, each individual had to reside within the boundaries of the parish, which would, they claimed, ensure their assistance in the “adornment of the altar [of Our Lady of Sorrows] … for her honor and glory” and their attendance at weekly masses for the souls of the parish. This emphasis on the parish as the terms for membership in the confraternity resulted in a group with a composition that reflected the demographic diversity of the parish of Santa Catalina Mártir, a parochial district founded in response to the expansion of the república de españoles, and by the seventeenth century, included any person designated as non-indigenous. For the cofradas of the Holy Spirit and Our Lady of Sorrows, the very social interactions in the parish, where they were born, baptized, and participated in an intensely localized communal worship, sustained their confraternal piety.

The intergenerational and interracial interactions that occurred between black creoles and their fellow parishioners affected how black cofradas determined who could join and who could lead their brotherhoods. In the majority of confraternities examined for this chapter, the constitutions written by black founders indicated how membership could draw from residents “of all type of calidad or color.” Only one black brotherhood, the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception in the Hospital of the Immaculate Conception, chose to explicitly limit membership to a single classification of people, stipulating that brothers should be “blacks from the Zape nation,” an ethnic label in the early modern Iberian world that referred to Africans from coastal

53 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, Espíritu Santo y Nuestra Señora de los Dolores, folio s.n.
54 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, Espíritu Santo y Nuestra Señora de los Dolores, folio s.n. The Congregation appears to have maintained a diverse group of membership that included individuals referred to in the documentation as “don” as well as individuals who belonged to the local militia. Despite the presence of elite individuals, the confraternity did not prevent the membership of people of non-Spanish descent either explicitly or through the restrictive nature of high entrance fees. Rather, they placed the fees at a reasonable price, allowing anyone of a lower social class to pay.
Sierra Leone.\textsuperscript{55} Even though extant documentation remains limited to a legal dispute over the income from a house donated by Juan Roque, a free black \textit{cofrade}, rather than a constitution, details indicate that the brotherhood remained in the hands of individuals identified as Zape for a significant amount of time. By the time the conflict over Juan Roque’s donation escalated in 1644, the brotherhood had started to accept Africans of various ethnicities, including black creoles and mulattos, which remained a point of contestation for the officials of the organization. Despite this broader acceptance of a diverse Afro-Mexican population, the officers appeared to have limited the brotherhood’s membership explicitly to Afro-descendants, prohibiting the presence of any person of Spanish or indigenous descent.\textsuperscript{56}

Unlike the Confraternity of Immaculate Conception, most brotherhoods founded and led by black creoles accepted members regardless of their racial classification with membership eventually representing the changes of racial composition of their city, town, or neighborhood. In the city of Valladolid, the colonial capital of Michoacán, the Confraternity of Our Lady of the Rosary shifted its membership qualifications and leadership in response to the population changes of the seventeenth century. Originally founded under Spanish direction in 1586 for residents of all racial classifications, the confraternity officially split in 1681 into two entities to administer to the growing populations of Africans, blacks, and \textit{castas} who had entered in as members.\textsuperscript{57} Similar to the Confraternity of the Precious Blood of Christ in Mexico City, the brotherhood separated into a congregation for the Spanish elite of the town and another under the

\textsuperscript{55} AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Mayordomo y los Diputados de la Cofradia de la Concepción,” 1634, 1175, expediente 11.
\textsuperscript{56} AGN, Bienes Nacionales, Mayordomo y los Diputados, For a more detailed analysis of the legal dispute, see von Germeten, “Black Brotherhoods of Mexico City” and \textit{Black Blood Brothers}
\textsuperscript{57} It should be noted that the official separation of the two confraternities occurred in 1681 even though later documents reveal that the black confraternity had its own constitutions as early as 1633. Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de Michoacán, Casa de Morelos (hereafter, CM), “Libro de Cofradía de Nuestra Señora de Rosario,” 1681, 1, expediente 1.
direction of blacks and mulattos. Unlike its Spanish counterpart, which explicitly specified that members had to be of Spanish descent, the black confraternity maintained a membership requirement open to any individual of all types or *calidad*. Since the confraternity functioned entirely on alms and rental income, the founders suggested that new members who wished to receive the order’s benefits should make a humble donation of whatever they could afford, furthering the possibility that membership included individuals of all statuses (free and enslaved) and of various *calidad*. By the early decades of the eighteenth century, documents suggested that leadership included individuals identified as blacks, mulattos, and mestizos with a membership base of all racial classifications, eventually earning the sacred organization a designation as a *casta* confraternity.58

On occasion, black *cofrades* restricted positions of authority – as *mayordomos*, rectors, deputies, or treasurers – to individuals of African descent. The Confraternity of the Most Precious Blood of Christ in Mexico City stated that their “confraternity should perpetually have a Rector, a Deputy mayor, a *mayordomo*, and thirty-three founders, [all free] blacks and mulattos, who rule and govern.” In 1694, the brotherhood received permission from the archbishop to alter their constitutions to include an official known as the *mayoral* “who should be black” like the other officials in the organization.59 But membership for the confraternity still remained open to “all persons, women as well as men, of whatever state, *calidad*, or condition” as long as they kept their “obligation of giving as their entrance a *real* and a half *real* each week.”60 Similarly, the Confraternity of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, founded in the *ermita* of Santa Barbara in

60 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, “Cofradía de la Sangre de Cristo,” 1686, 3231, expediente 002.
Amilpas, restricted its leadership to “all blacks and mulattos, men as well as women” who lived in the Valley of Amilpas. They stipulated that “if other persons of whatever calidad want to sit as brothers of this Holy Confraternity that, [upon] giving the alms necessary to enjoy the graces and indulgences,” they could enter, but only “under the condition … that they cannot be elected to any office of this our Confraternity nor can they interfere in any matter of governing.”

Restrictions on positions of governance in black confraternities and the general constitutions that maintained policies of open membership at times lead to conflict within the sacred organizations. In most cases, these situations of conflict further underscored the diverse nature of the congregation despite any specific rules the constitutions contained about the racial designations of its membership or founders. In 1700, Ambrosio Nieto Galindo, a black founder of the Confraternity of Saint Benedict of Palermo petitioned the ecclesiastical authorities for permission to enter a new constitution for the spiritual benefit of the brotherhood. He informed the authorities that “the confraternity, according to its foundation, is for blacks and mulattos by whom it has always been governed.” But, in the previous year, “the mayordomo and the deputies have admitted Spaniards who have voted,” an act that he complained risked the conservation of their order. As such, he requested the permission to add a specific regulation on membership, prohibiting any non-Afro-descendant person from entering the confraternity or having a vote in the organization.

Shortly after the ecclesiastical judge extended permission for the new ordinance, the court received another petition from the brotherhood’s officials, Nicolás Flores, Tomás de Esquivel, Manuel de la Cruz, and Augustin Francisco de Herrera, who desired to have the new constitution annulled based on the ordinances and customs that had always been observed. To

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62 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, “Cofradía de San Benito,” 1700, caja 0665, exp. 009, fol. 1r-2r.
support their claims against Ambrosio’s petition, they presented to the court two registers from their confraternity that included the constitutions from their original foundation in 1672. They demonstrated how in the twelfth constitution the founders ordered that they “receive Spaniards in the said Confraternity” and the third constitution further dictated that the brotherhood should “recognize the openness of receiving whatever person.” More to their point, they informed the ecclesiastical judge that the confraternity had accepted Spaniards in important positions from the very beginning, and many of these people consisted of “the first and principle persons of this City as well as ecclesiastics such as secular [priests].” They noted that at its formation Fray Cristóbal de San Diego served as the Rector, that multiple “Spaniards were also founders,” and that according to the statues the “Treasurer of the Confraternity should be a Spaniard.”

Speaking on behalf of the brotherhood’s entire membership, they pleaded with the ecclesiastical authorities to “recognize the bad intent” of Ambrosio Nieto Galindo, who “wanted to cause disturbance and unease among the brothers.” As a countermeasure, they requested permission “to add and put as a new constitution that the said Spaniards can be founders and exercise the charges in which they were elected and vote in all the cabildos and gatherings.” The ecclesiastical judge, along with the promoter fiscal, agreed with the officials, determining that the original statutes permitted Spaniards since “there is no constitution that prohibits [them] as founders and officials of the said confraternity,” and therefore upheld the diverse membership of the sacred organization.

63 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, San Benito, folio 3v.
64 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, San Benito, folio 3v.
65 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, San Benito, folio 3v.
66 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, San Benito, folio 3v.
67 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, San Benito, folio 3v.
68 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, San Benito, folio 3v.
69 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, San Benito, folio 3v.
70 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, San Benito, folio 3v.
A final example representing the diverse congregations founded by individuals of African descent comes from the confraternity founded by Isidro de Peralta in the San Juan de la Penitencia neighborhood. Documentation on the various organizations founded by Isidro provides detailed information regarding the racial classifications of all individuals who participated in the devotionals, unlike most extant sources on New Spain’s confraternities where membership records typically only contain names without racial designations. In libros maintained by the colony’s confraternities, such as the book of accounts by the Confraternity of the Most Precious Blood of Christ, officials listed all members but simply specified the names and location of each individual, leaving it difficult to identify their racial background. At times, the list of names indicates individuals of a specific socioeconomic class through the use of don or doña and their dependents, which potentially included slaves or servants of a separate race. But often more specific documentation appears in court cases or ecclesiastical petitions rather than the confraternity’s governing texts. When the promotor fiscal raided Isidro de Peralta’s celebrations to Saint Augustine, he arrested a total of sixteen persons for their illicit devotions. Among those detained in the inquisitorial prisons, seven individuals were identified as mulatto or black, six were categorized as Spanish, and another three were characterized as mestizo. Taking into consideration the racial classification of the witnesses brought before the inquisitor, primarily Spanish and mulatto, merely amplifies the remarkably varied group who attended the celebrations. The interactions that Isidro forged as a creole member of a particular neighborhood, parish, and marketplace guided the composition of the congregations. In such a social

69 HM 35169, folios 4r-6r.
environment, black *cofrades*, as leaders of confraternities, invited a diverse membership that shared their Catholic spirituality and conceptions of communal worship.

Brotherhoods designated as black, pardo, or moreno functioned alongside confraternities and *cofrades* of diverse racial classifications in the spiritual practices that drove the religious life of their neighborhood. Within the specific brotherhoods founded by individuals of African descent, this association with the devotional life of their local parishes rested on their emotional attachment to the personal relationships they forged in the shifting dynamics of the parochial boundaries – in local chapels, the marketplace, or neighborhood streets. Black creoles founded religious brotherhoods closely attached to the colony’s parish centers where they enacted their Catholic faith with their friends, family, neighbors, and acquaintances of various status and *calidad*. Even in confraternities where constitutions restricted positions of authority to individuals of African descent, membership remained open to the intergenerational and interracial relationships they had forged in the sacred and secular spaces of the parish.

**Black Mayordomos**

Black parishioners navigated a formal religious space where they could publicly voice their ideas, beliefs, and practices without the risk of rendering their actions heretical. Since black confraternities maintained a close association to ecclesiastical authorities in the colony’s parochial centers, black brothers ensured that their conceptions of communal worship and public devotional life conformed to clerical expectations of appropriate religious behavior. This official or institutionalized relationship with the church provided an authoritative space for black *cofrades* to conduct their personal spiritual choices that was fully recognized by clerical officials. They communicated their well-informed conceptions of communal worship and public devotional life to the vast world of a socially diverse parish. They articulated their personal
choices in devotional practices, including the reading of religious texts, processions for feast day celebrations, moments of communal prayer, and when the community should gather for masses to honor of the living and the dead. The presence of ecclesiastical authorities, especially those who maintained at least a minimal voice in the confraternity’s gatherings, sanctioned their choices. In these officially-recognized positions of spiritual authority, black cofrades determined the boundaries of conventional confraternal worship in their local communities, playing a structural role in what constituted proper religious conduct.

Positions of authority in confraternities enabled black cofrades to express their personal religious choices in communal worship as long as they demonstrated an adherence to the clerical expectations of orthodox behavior. In many instances, conformity necessitated an explicit connection of their ordinances to the teachings of the Catholic Church or their adherence to clerical interventions in their religious gatherings. In the constitutions of the Confraternity of Saint Nicolas of Tolentino, approved by the archbishop in 1634, the black and mulatto founders detailed the spiritual obligations for the conventional worship of their sacred community in a manner that defended their commitment to the teachings of the Catholic Church. The organization itself remained dedicated to “the miraculous Saint Nicolas of Tolentino,” who served as their patron and intercessor with the Holy Family, and to the True Holy Cross. To demonstrate their devotion to the saint and their commitment to the Church, each member, official, and founder remained obligated “to make a solemn feast to the Most Holy Saint Nicolas, our patron, conforming to the strengths” of the festival as dictated by the church fathers. They requested that “the ministers hold a sung mass [with] solemnity” and provide a sermon during their feast, requiring all members to attend with “much solemnity.”

70 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, “Cofradía de San Nicólas de Tolentino,” 1634, 5109, expediente 007, folio 5v.
celebrations to honor the Holy Cross, their secondary title feast, the rectors and *mayordomos* explicitly dictated that each member should “confess and profess” to the Catholic faith on a regular basis, indicating that every *cofrade* adhered “to the determination of the Holy Mother Church of Rome” and that they never “go against them.” By commanding their members to maintain a close connection to the teachings of the Catholic Church throughout their daily lives, they demonstrated their commitment to clerical expectations and thus skirted the risk of rendering their ordinances heretical in the eyes of ecclesiastical authorities.

As black parishioners created ordinances for their sacred communities that corresponded to ecclesiastical regulations and oversight, they communicated their personal religious choices that contributed to the formation of the social and ritual life for the men and women in New Spain’s diverse confraternities. The constitutions, statutes, and ordinances of black religious brotherhoods designated which ideas, beliefs, and practices they determined necessary for their everyday spiritual functions, thus illuminating the important components of their local communal worship. In the Confraternity of the Most Precious Blood of Christ, for example, the founders Simon de los Santos, Miguel Real, Ignacio de Vera, Antonio Maldonado, and Pedro de la Cruz, among others, delineated the spiritual obligations of the brotherhood and its members. Each *cofrade* upon their entrance received the right to “a doctor and a surgeon to cure them of their attacks and illnesses” and in the event of their passing, received a “good Christian death,” a burial with a coffin, two prayed masses, and ten *pesos* to “pay for the parochial rights,” all common benefits in confraternities regardless of racial classification. In return for their care in life and death, the brothers were obligated to participate in a host of communal activities.

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71 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, San Nicolás de Tolentino, folio 5r.
72 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, “Cofradía de la Sangre de Cristo,” 1686, 3231, expediente 002
73 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Sangre de Cristo, folio 6r.
sanctioned by the founders. In addition to their financial contributions “to help with the expenses of the said confraternity,” the founders expected all members to participate in the “title feast [of the Ascension of Our Lord], an anniversary, and a procession of disciplines on Holy Thursday” where they would hear a sung mass accompanied by music, a sermon preached by the local priest, and prayers at the altar decorated “in all decency, ornamentation, care, and veneration” with wax candles and flowers. The “general anniversary,” an offertory mass said in remembrance of “the souls of the officials, brothers, cofrades…and the souls of Purgatory,” required the attendance of all the brothers for vespers, a vigil, an offertory, twenty masses, and a sermon preached by the sacristan mayor in the parish church. The black founders of the confraternity selected these spiritual obligations based on their conceptions of communal worship, deeming them essential elements of collective salvation and appropriate religious behavior as they “serve God, Our Lord [and] wait for his infinite mercy.”

In the constitutions established for the Confraternity of Our Lady of Tránsito, the black founders Nicólás de Sierra, Pedro Segundo de Luna, Marcos Moreno, Diego Ramirez, and Miguel Sanchez similarly provided the proper communal devotions that guided their sacred organization. They dictated to the notary that each member, upon their acceptance into the brotherhood, contribute to an annual celebration “on the second Sunday of the month of October for the title feast of Our Lady of Tránsito” and the observations for Holy Wednesday, where they would attend the festivities carefully planned in a cabildo held six months earlier. They prescribed that the celebration should follow a specific plan of events for the gathering of all the

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74 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Sangre de Cristo, folio 6r.
75 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Sangre de Cristo, folio 6v.
76 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Sangre de Cristo, folio 6v-7r.
77 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Sangre de Cristo, folio 7r.
78 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Constituciones de la Cofradía del Tránsito,” 1686, 1028, expediente 6, folio 2v.
members of their brotherhood. The first item required each member to assist in the adornment of the confraternity’s altar before attending a sung mass and a sermon in the same location, indicating that all brothers remained under the strict obligation to join the celebrations unless they “were with a legitimate impediment.”

Upon completing the mass with prayer for the living and the deceased, the members would “leave in a procession of discipline, light and blood, with the banners of insignias and a bell in memory of the passion and death of Our Lord, Jesus Christ.” At the end of the procession, members designated in the previous cabildo would “carry at last the paso of the effigy of Our Lady of Tránsito.”

Each element of the celebrations – attendance at the masses, the decoration of their communal altar, and a procession “of light and blood” on Holy Wednesday – was carefully selected by the confraternities black officials as important components to Christian veneration that determined the direction of their sacred organization.

Through the choices they made, black cofrades disseminated the cultural practices and customs that shaped communal worship in their local neighborhoods and parishes. Their celebrations of the liturgical calendar, located in the parish streets, the public chapels, or the private altars, publicly displayed their conceptions of a Catholic spirituality that resonated with the spiritual worldview of the diverse members of their congregations. As their devotionals gained notoriety within their social world, individuals of “various status and calidad” elected to join their confraternities, considering the sacred organizations founded by individuals of African descent a valuable means to participate in the collective efforts toward divine favor and eternal

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79 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, Cofradía del Tránsito, folio 2v.
80 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, Cofradía del Tránsito, folios 2v-3r. In a discipline procession that included “lights and blood,” select members would perform acts of contrition, typically a form of flagellation, while other members solemnly carried candles. Often confraternities would be divided the tasks on a gendered basis with male members performing the self-mortification and women carrying the candles. For more see von Germeten, Black Blood Brothers, 41-70.
81 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Constituciones de la Cofradía del Tránsito,” 1686, 1028, expediente 6, folios 2v-3r.
salvation. They supported the practices by paying entrance fees, donating time, money, and material objects to celebrations, and attending all festivities and devotions. A broader communal acceptance of the devotional practices by fellow parishioners, various *cofrades*, and Church officials strengthened the authoritative space afforded to black *cofrades* and their confraternities.

The religious gatherings organized by Isidro de Peralta, for example, reveal the cultural practices and customs determined by its black leadership that gained ground in the religious life of the San Juan de la Penitencia neighborhood. Even though the congregations lacked an official constitution, where elected members of leadership strictly dictated appropriate spiritual behavior for all members in attendance, the daily spiritual activities of religious processions, devotional altars, readings of religious texts, and sermons functioned in much the same manner of an official confraternity. The first congregation, which met in 1699 in a house on the Calle de las Cuadrillas, established the practices surrounding the altar that held their image of their patron saint of Saint Augustine, rituals that would continue into the second congregation described in the testimony from three years later. According to the witness María López, who provided the initial denunciation to the inquisitors, the congregations had occurred for at least a year during which time it gained notoriety among the street’s residents. Multiple neighbors had indicated that the “religion [confraternity] left often with much virtue” for their spiritual processions, giving them impression that “what they practiced appeared to be very true” to the Catholic faith.82 Over the course of the year, word about the congregations spread through various social networks, as individuals shared their experiences in the congregations with their friends and family, encouraging them to attend the ceremonies.83 Isidro de Peralta’s congregation, in time, gradually

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82 HM 35168, folios 4v-5r.
83 HM 35168, folios 12r-12v.
took a lead in the communal devotional practices that defined the religious life of the San Juan de la Penitencia neighborhood.

Functioning within the authoritative space afforded by confraternal piety – in the influential positions as mayordomos, rectors, deputies, and treasurers – cofrades of African descent governed diverse confraternities with only occasional clerical intervention. Despite the church’s mandates for ecclesiastical supervision, confraternities generally operated as self-governing institutions with the power to administer to the specific needs of their confraternities as long as they conformed to clerical expectations. With such provisional independence, they determined the constitutions of their organizations, removing those that negatively affected their community or adding others that would better serve their spiritual endeavors. They controlled the finances that drove their spiritual practices, entered into litigation to defend their organization’s rights, and disciplined the moral transgressions of their members.84 In positions of leadership sanctioned by Church authorities, black officers drew from an officially recognized form of spiritual authority to define the boundaries of confraternal piety for their immediate congregations and the neighborhoods and parishes where they enacted their spirituality.

Eight years after their foundation, the officers of the Confraternity of the Most Precious Blood of Christ, located in the parish center of Santa Catalina Mártir, petitioned the ecclesiastical authorities with the request to alter the constitutions and ordinances that governed their brotherhood. They informed the vicar general, Don Antonio de Aunzibay y Anaya, that such changes proved imperative to their effective operation because “without the changes that [they]

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present [they] cannot comply” with the ordinances that honored God. Upon receiving ecclesiastical approval, the mayordomo Nicólas de la Ygera, the deputy mayor Miguel Real, and the rector Luis Montaño amended five ordinances from the original constitution, redefining crucial elements of their communal worship. They resolved, for instance, that the organization needed another officer, known as the mayoral, who would oversee the devotions practiced by the confraternity’s sisters. As mayoral, the elected official selected the mother mayores who arranged the pasos of Our Lady, of the Santo Eccohomo, and of Jesus of Nazareth for the discipline of light and blood on Holy Thursday, placing their devotional practices directly under his control. As a central feature for the procession of discipline on Holy Thursday, a restructuring of the pasos lead by the brotherhood’s women determined who could participate in the sacred devotions and delineated how those devotions took place. Combined with the other four amendments that addressed the masses held for the major celebration to the Ascension of Christ and financial obligations of the mayordomo and the rector, the officers’ decision to reform the ordinances centered on their personal choices about the operation of confraternal piety within their brotherhood.

Beyond the constitutions, black leaders of New Spain’s brotherhoods delimited the cultural practices exhibited in their neighborhood processions by assigning roles to specific individuals within the community and designating any consequences for their failure to comply. In 1671, the elected officials and founders of the Confraternity of the Expiration of Christ gathered in the city’s Dominican convent to “address and confer about…the procession that is accustomed to leave on Holy Friday.”

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86 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Preciosa Sangre de Cristo, folios 3r-3v.
87 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, “Cofradía de la Expiración de Cristo,” 1671, 0651, expediente 024, folio 1r.
procession primarily encompassed the self-mortification of the brotherhood’s cofrades with the pasos of light, individuals who solemnly carried lighted candles alongside the flagellant procession, under the charge of the mother mayores. The officers and founders determined that this year’s celebration should not differ but that “the said procession of blood should leave according to and in the form that has been accustom in previous years.” As such, they assigned the mayordomo, Gaspar Hurtado, with the preliminary task of gathering “the cofrades in the service of God in order that they can conduct the procession with as much light as is possible.”

With all the brotherhood congregated for the procession, Diego de Monroy, a cofrade, would then have the responsibility “to collect the [required] wax [donation] from the brothers” while the Rector, Martin de Ynol, and the regidor mayor, José Merino, organized the standards and insignias of Jesus Christ, Our Lord and the Most Holy Virgin Mary. As a final measure to ensure that the cofrades and officials followed all obligations outlined in the cabildo, they designated Nicólás de la Trinidad and Pedro Gutierrez as commissioners with the task of guaranteeing all cofrades “come to serve the said confraternity in conformity with their obligation.” Failure to attend, according to their constitution, could result in financial punishment or expulsion from the brotherhood. In delineating the specific spiritual obligations for their confraternal procession, the leaders of the Expiration of Christ navigated the authoritative space of confraternity to shape the sacred devotions carried out in their brotherhoods.

More than merely dictating the spiritual obligations of the confraternity’s members, black leaders of local brotherhoods maintained the power to discipline the moral transgressions of their fellow brothers or even expel individuals for their failure to uphold confraternal statutes. Often

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88 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Expiración de Cristo, folio 1r.
89 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Expiración de Cristo, folio 1r.
90 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Expiración de Cristo, folios 1r-1v.
91 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Expiración de Cristo, folio 1r-1v.
without major clerical intervention, this moral policing of black confraternal piety remained fully in the hands of the black *mayordomos*, rectors, and deputies who determined appropriate spiritual devotions for communal worship. As leaders of the self-governing body of the faithful with the power to police moral behavior, black *cofrades* shaped the definitions of appropriate communal religious behavior.

On May 2, 1696, the *mayordomo*, Diego Real, of the Confraternity of the Spilling of the Blood of Christ, Our Lord and Our Lady of Consolation, petitioned ecclesiastical authorities for permission to hold their *cabildo* the following day, as was the custom. In his request, Diego begged the Cathedral’s vicar general to issue a ban against one of their *cofrades*, José de Loaiza, who had proven to the officers to be unworthy of the spiritual graces offered by the brotherhood. During previous *cabildos*, processions, and celebrations, Diego explained how José arrived at the festivities in a drunken state and with a poor disposition, “disrupting and disquieting” the procedures.92 As a punishment for acting “to the contrary of [the] disposition” of their brotherhood, they wanted José banned from “having a vote or a voice…in the said election.”93 For the officials of the Confraternity of the Spilling of the Blood of Christ, José could remain a member of the confraternity, receiving its spiritual benefits, but until he improved his behavior, he would lose the rights to have a say in the brotherhood’s religious proceedings. By prohibiting José from participating in the election, which went against the confraternity’s constitutions that gave the right to a “vote and a voice” of every member in all *cabildos*, the *cofrades* acted to curb the moral indecency exhibited by José in the previous gatherings.

In another instance, members of Confraternity of Saint Nicolás Tolentino of Mount Calvary acted swiftly to quell any immoral behavior following a series of disturbances that

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92 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, “Cofradía del Derramamieneto de Sangre,” 1696, 5173, expediente 050, folio 1r.
93 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Derramamiento de Sangre, folio 1r.
resulted from financial concerns. In 1668, three of the brotherhood’s officials claimed that while working on the records at the house of Juan Galindo, the mayordomo, they had discovered a discrepancy in the amount of alms spent on wax for their altar and celebration. To understand what happened to the brotherhood’s funds, the officials confronted the confraternity’s rector, Antonio de Bruselas, about the discrepancy. However, the confrontation quickly turned sour, causing a scene that one witness described as a “noisy disturbance or riot.” Juan de Medina, a cofrade of the confraternity, hoped to avoid any association with the commotion and went straight to the authorities, looking for a solution.94

Four years later, the confraternity’s financial troubles surfaced again. But instead of another public confrontation, two of the brotherhood’s members, Nicolás Gallego and Francisco Maldonado, petitioned the Cathedral’s vicar general in an attempt to forcibly remove Juan Galindo from his office of mayordomo. They made the argument that Juan had failed to adhere to the obligations for mayordomo put forth in the brotherhood’s constitutions. He mishandled the finances of the sacred organizations, neglected to present an account of the group’s financial standing at the end of his term, and was re-elected as mayordomo despite “being consumed with malice.”95 As such, they requested that the ecclesiastical authorities void the previous election, forcibly removing Juan from office. Juan Galindo defended himself, asserting that Nicolás Gallego and Francisco Maldonado made “malicious and sinister” claims that he could verify as false.96 With proof of his dedication to the confraternity, Juan Galindo alleged that Nicolás and Francisco, as members not founders, sought to disturb the “peace and quiet of the elections” and

94 AGN, Matrimonios, “Antonio de Bruselas rector de la cofradía y hermandad de San Nicolás Tolentino se querella criminalmente,” 1668, 9, expedientes 11 and 12, folios 303-308.
95 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, “Fundadores de la Cofradía de San Nicolás de Tolentino Monte Calvario,” 1672, 079, expediente 001, folios 2r-2v.
96 AGN, Bienes Nacionales, San Nicolás de Tolentino Monte Calvario, folios 4r, 8r.
their petition should, therefore, be nullified.\textsuperscript{97} The case continued for six months before the ecclesiastical judge ruled in the favor of Juan Galindo, declaring that “he had complied with his obligations” as \textit{mayordomo}.\textsuperscript{98}

On August 12, 1697, the officials of the Confraternity of the Most Precious Blood of Christ appeared before the ecclesiastical court making similar claims about the moral ineptitude of its confraternity members and officials. \textit{Mayordomo}, Nicolás Real, and treasurer, Francisco de Orense, requested permission from Church authorities to nullify their previous \textit{cabildo} based on the disturbances that occurred during the election. They informed the court that the hurried manner in which \textit{cabildo} took place resulted in the election of multiple individuals “who are not useful [to the confraternity] and cannot exercise [their obligations].”\textsuperscript{99} Without the election of morally upstanding persons, they claimed, the confraternity would fall into ruin. In response to their petition, deputy mayors Manuel de San Pedro, José Elias, and Juan de la Cruz wrote to the ecclesiastical court to defend the \textit{cabildo} and the election of José Elias as the confraternity’s new \textit{mayordomo}. They asserted that they held the \textit{cabildo} on August 11, 1697, which appeared hurried to Nicolás and Francisco, because the previous officers of the confraternity had neglected their obligations to the spiritual organization, failing to hold annual elections and \textit{cabildos} for the organization of feast-day celebrations.\textsuperscript{100} They emphasized to the court that their actions “were in service of God, Our Lord, and to the obligation of [the Church] because they only wanted officials that were beneficial” to the confraternity.\textsuperscript{101} A few months after the petitions, the vicar general settled the conflict in the confraternity by declaring void all \textit{cabildos} and commanding

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\item \textsuperscript{97} AGN, Bienes Nacionales, San Nicolás de Tolentino Monte Calvario, folios 8r-8v.
\item \textsuperscript{98} AGN, Bienes Nacionales, San Nicolás de Tolentino Monte Calvario, folio 13r.
\item \textsuperscript{99} AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, “Cofradía de la Preciosa Sangre de Cristo,” 1697, 3207, expediente 007, folios 1r-1v, 3v.
\item \textsuperscript{100} AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Preciosa Sangre de Cristo, folio 6r.
\item \textsuperscript{101} AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Preciosa Sangre de Cristo, folios 7r-7v.
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that another be held with the attendance of all the brotherhood’s eligible members. Against the backdrop of the ecclesiastical courts, the officials of the Most Precious Blood of Christ acted to maintain what they perceived as a morally upstanding religious brotherhood. Without individuals that they considered useful to the spiritual obligations of the confraternity, the confraternity would fail in the “service of God, Our Lord, and the obligations” of the Catholic Church.

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Confraternities founded by persons of African descent served as an integral aspect of the social and cultural landscape of New Spain’s parochial centers. They maintained an intimate connection to the fellow parishioners, cofrades, and parish priests who formed the social foundation of their communal religious practices. Individuals who composed their parochial social networks, men and women of “various status and calidad,” entered their sacred organizations, paying entrance fees, donating time, money, and material objects to the spiritual devotions sanctioned by the black founders, and attending all festivities and celebrations. In positions of leadership – as mayordomos, rectors, deputy mayors, and treasurers – black cofrades delineated the boundaries of conventional communal worship for their friends, family, neighbors, and acquaintances. They wrote constitutions, ordinances, and statutes that outlined appropriate religious behavior, maintained financial control over the spiritual obligations of the organization’s members, and policed the moral transgressions of any individual associated with their brotherhood. The intimate connection the confraternities held with parish seats of ecclesiastical authority sanctioned their decisions. Through the officially recognized authoritative space afforded by confraternities, black cofrades fashioned parish-centered devotions that brought together separate social classes around a shared conception of the Catholic Faith.

102 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Preciosa Sangre de Cristo, folio 9r-9v.
103 AGN, Indiferente Virreinal, Preciosa Sangre de Cristo, folio 9r-9v.
short, black confraternities situated in the complex, every-changing social dynamics of the colonial parish functioned as part of the colony’s social and cultural milieu not as a social organization distinct from it.
Chapter Four: The Social World of Black Parishioners

In August 1698, José de Santa Marfa, a Spanish tobacco trader in Mexico City, received an invitation to accompany Isidro de Peralta to a confraternal organization in the nearby neighborhood of San Juan de la Penitencia. Isidro, a mulatto street vendor, had founded the religious brotherhood for the communal devotions in honor of Saint Augustine. He indicated to José that he would learn to “practice devotions and matters of the spirit” from a local instructor at the gathering. Intrigued by the devotions, José decided to attend. “On one Sunday or feast day in the afternoon,” he would later testify, he arrived at a house “where different men of all calidades” sat before an altar with “an image of Saint Augustine and some burning candles.”¹ He stayed at the gathering for “about a quarter of an hour,” listening to “a chat or sermon” given by one of the attendees before everyone departed “for their own homes.”² During the following year, he continued to assist in the festivities in San Juan de la Penitencia for most feast days until for “no reason good or bad” he left the confraternity. Later he would inform the inquisitor that he enjoyed the devotionals and did not believe “these gatherings could be bad since they pray to the Rosary of Our Lady.”³

Around the same time, Gabriel de Sanabria, another tobacco trader in the central plaza, received a similar invitation from an acquaintance, a young Spanish man named Lucas de Mercado. Lucas, Gabriel declared, had informed him about a confraternity of “different men who, in the said gathering, address matters of devotion” to Saint Augustine. Lucas himself had

¹ HM 35168, folio 16r. Bristol’s analysis examines how the blacks and mulattos associated with the illicit brotherhood negotiated the opportunities afforded them by colonial officials to practice Catholicism “on their own terms.” Her analysis, while imperative to my own, focuses on the question of imitation or “mimesis” and its relation to power structures, rather than theological knowledge, placing it within the historiographical trend that centers on racial classification as the determining factor of cultural production. See Bristol, “Afro-Mexican Saintly Devotion,” 114-135.
² HM 35168, folio 16r.
³ HM 35168, folio 18v.
visited a previous gathering organized by the same person, Isidro de Peralta, “who put together” the various devotions. Deciding that “it was better than wandering around the city,” Gabriel accompanied Lucas to the meeting. At the house, the two men joined a gathering of “multiple men of various status and calidad” who all sat before a post “like a pulpit,” listening to a sermon given by a clergyman for about a quarter of an hour. After the homily, a member of the confraternity “read from a book of devotions for more than a half an hour” before they all “prayed the rosary of the crowns.” Pleased with the devotions, Gabriel accompanied Lucas to the meetings for three months, during which time he learned about two similar brotherhoods founded by Isidro, one also in honor of Saint Augustine and another held at the house of a clergyman in devotion to Saint Francis. For the next year, Gabriel attended the two confraternities until he stopped for “the precise reason of needing to attend to his occupation in the [tobacco] store.”

At the center of the multiple religious brotherhoods composed of men of “various status and calidad” rested the spiritual direction of one man: Isidro de Peralta, the mulatto street vender. Isidro acted as a devout Christian and a religious lay leader as he organized a variety of spiritual exercises for the men and women who attended the devotions. He invited local clergymen to give sermons, encouraged students at the university to recite devotional materials, guided prayers to the rosary, and, for special feast days, organized processions from a local church to the house of devotion. All of his exercises spoke to his personal Christian devotion and the communal religious practices observed by the diverse individuals he invited to

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4 HM 35168, folio 12v.
5 HM 35168, folios 14r, 12v.
6 HM 35168, folio 12v.
7 HM 35168, folio 14v.
8 HM 35168, folios 6r-6v.
participate. Gabriel de Sanabria attended the confraternities in honor of Saint Augustine and Saint Francis precisely because “they had prayed the rosary and read for a book of devotions and made chats or sermons on virtuous matters.”\textsuperscript{9} José de Santa María participated in the confraternity dedicated to Saint Augustine for similar reasons. José explained to the inquisitor that the confraternities celebrated “most of the feast days together” with sermons and devotional prayers, which he considered “exercises of virtue.”\textsuperscript{10} Through the communal worship of the confraternities, Isidro de Peralta brought together individuals of “all calidades” around a shared set of religious practices. He organized the confraternities’ devotions around his personal spiritual beliefs, inviting the people he interacted with on a daily basis to attend his celebrations.

This chapter examines the creation of communal Christian practices in local parishes by Isidro de Peralta and countless other black parishioners. They participated in communal worship alongside their fellow parishioners, attending mass, assisting in feast-day processions, conducting pilgrimages to popular shrines, and partaking in group devotional prayers known as novenas. They embraced various forms of Christian worship as a commitment to a Catholic spirituality shared by the persons who composed their daily social interactions. As they expressed their religious choices to their friends, family, neighbors, and even casual acquaintances, black parishioners in time contributed to the creation of Christian practices that resonated with the spiritual view of their fellow parishioners. They selected the saints for their celebrations, discussed appropriate veneration of the cross, and adorned altars and chapels with religious objects of spiritual importance. For the men and women of “various status and calidad” who worshiped alongside black parishioners, their religious choices exemplified a fulfilling spiritual life.

\textsuperscript{9} HM 35168, folio 13r.  
\textsuperscript{10} HM 35168, folios 17r, 18v.
An image of black parishioners directing communal devotion for “different men of all calidades” appears in stark contrast to traditional characterizations of how black individuals engaged with the Christian community. In previous studies, scholars have focused primarily on how Christian institutions offered a space for individuals of African descent to forge a distinctive communal life. As highlighted by Matthew Restall on his study of Afro-Yucatecans, the “many social aspects of Catholicism” played “important roles in Afro-Yucatecan community formation.” Religious brotherhoods, he stated, offered “economic and political networks approved by colonial authorities” while the importance placed on Christian marriages allowed Africans and their descendants to form families, an “institution destroyed by the transatlantic slave trade and often denied to African slaves in the Americas.”

In his study on colonial Quito, Sherwin Bryant similarly argued that baptism into the church played a significant role in the formation black spiritual communities. “The social worlds of kith and kin the enslaved forged,” he contended, highlighted “important moments of official black social life” as the individual preferences in marital partners or choices in the godparents of their children connected enslaved blacks” in “overlapping communal affiliations.”

For the majority of scholars, these distinctive social communities coalesced around a variety of black identities – as blacks, mulattos, or pardos. Frank Proctor indicated that marriage in the Catholic Church “defined and reflected [the] cultural and community identities” of slaves. An Afro-Mexican community, he stated, was grounded “largely in a racialized identity” separate from men and women of different racial designations. Since confraternities, according to Nicole von Germeten, “were always connected to some kind of social division,” the religious

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11 Restall, The Black Middle, 236.
12 Bryant, Rivers of Gold, Lives of Bondage, 91, 94.
13 Proctor, Damned Notions of Liberty, 39, 64.
organizations founded by Afro-Mexicans were “based on identities formed both before and after enslavement.” Some “confraternities characterized their members as from a specific African place of origin” while “others extended membership only to mulattoes or blacks.” On the basis of this perspective, scholars recognized that individual blacks actively participated in the Christian practices of Spanish colonial society, but they characterized marriage, baptism, and confraternities, like those organized by Isidro, as distinctive forms of black communal life. Black spiritual communities emerged in scholarship as religious formations perpetually separated from the various persons who composed black parochial networks.

This perspective does not attend to the full reality of black social life in colonial Mexico. Instead, scholars need to recognize the various ways the personal relationships, the friendships, and the family connections in diverse parochial communities contributed to how and with whom black parishioners participated in communal religious practices, the primary focus of this chapter. The very complex relationships Africans and their descendants forged with the Spaniards, natives, and castas who lived, worked, and worshiped alongside them were foundational to their engagement with Christianity. For black creoles, specific experiences and relationships were tied to their neighborhoods, streets, chapels, and parishes. The familiarity that resulted from these experiences and relationships inevitably brought together black parishioners with persons of “various status and calidad” in sacred sites and around moments of religious innovation. Such moments underscore the centrality of Afro-Mexicans’ personal choices in how they created and reinforced the communal components of their Christian identities. They actively engaged in the social and cultural worlds of the colonial parish by interacting with their neighbors, friends, and acquaintances who shared in their religious beliefs.

As pious Catholics, black creoles navigated their connections to the social world of the colonial parish to carefully select the communal forms of worship that fostered religious expression. In the process, they initiated the cultural mechanisms that further integrated Christianity into the cultural logic of their daily lives and the lives of those around them. In the boundaries of the parish, black parishioners drew from the religious knowledge they obtained by the very nature of their Christian upbringing to contribute to the Christian worship in their local communities.

In maintaining more than a superficial understanding of Catholic beliefs, practices, and rituals, black creoles gradually produced various forms of communal worship based on their own conceptions of the Catholic faith. As they discerned which elements of the Catholic faith spoke to their unfolding spiritual view, they sought out others who shared in their beliefs, practices, and rituals. Turning to the secular and sacred spaces found within the colonial parish – in the local chapels, the confraternities, the marketplace, the home, or the streets of a neighborhood – they met with others to discuss their well-informed conceptions of Christian veneration. In these conversations, or “chats on spiritual matters,” black persons indicated the specific ideas, beliefs, and practices that they determined necessary for a fulfilling spiritual life. By communicating their personal choices of spiritual practice, they initiated an exchange of religious information.

This transfer of their Christian practices, occurring within the daily casual interactions of the parish, in turn, affected how parishioners approached the spiritual observances practiced within their community. In response to the public iterations of Catholic veneration by black creoles, fellow parishioners could participate in the devotions observed by black Catholics, bolster their familiarity with appropriate exercises, challenge the spiritual choices made by black parishioners, or even denounce individual blacks to the Inquisition. Through their discussions,
the Christian practices molded by black Catholic knowledge were woven into the daily fabric that structured the spiritual lives of men and women of “all calidades.”

The Social World of Black Parishioners

The personal connections black creoles and mulattoes created in their local parishes would eventually inform with whom and how they would extend their conceptions of communal devotions.\(^{15}\) Natives of a specific parish, where, in many cases, they were later baptized, confirmed, and married, black parishioners spent their entire adult life participating in an intensely localized communal worship. They attended mass, founded brotherhoods, or participated in feast-day processions at the same parochial churches as their family, childhood friends, lovers, colleagues, or casual acquaintances. In their homes or the homes of friends, family, and neighbors, they gathered with individuals who shared in their faith to celebrate the feast day of a patron saint or participate in extensive devotionals. For creoles, the sacred spaces of the parish, where they had formed an emotional attachment to religious experiences and personal relationships, became important to their choices in spiritual devotion and in who composed their religious world. Within the colonial parish, the churches and the chapels connected individuals of African descent with the communal devotions of men and women of “all calidades.”

The formative experiences of Christian rituals that incorporated creoles of African descent into the Christian commonwealth, specifically baptism and confirmation, centered around the sacred spaces of the parish churches and local chapels. As sites with symbolic importance to the development of a fulfilling spiritual life, these sacred spaces served as vital components to the formation of a sacred community where black creoles created an emotional

attachment at an early age. A majority of the Afro-Mexican population could recount the specific
details of the parish where they had received baptism and confirmation, even in the cases where
they could not remember the names of their godparents, suggesting at least a marginal
significance of the location in their spiritual development. As early as 1604, Fernando Rodriguez
de Castro, a second-generation mulatto, recounted in his discurso de vida that he had received
the sacraments of baptism and confirmation from Fray Diego de Salamanca in the main parish of
San Juan, Puerto Rico, where he had spent the first years of his life. Despite the details he gave
surrounding the event, implying the symbolic importance to his spiritual development, he could
not name the individuals who stood as his compadres (godparents), stating that he did not know
their names.16

Similarly, Gaspar Riveros Vasconcelos, an Afro-Portuguese man born in Tangier who
eventually settled in Mexico City, informed inquisitors that he had been baptized by a priest,
whose name he did not remember, in the central parish of Tangier and later confirmed by Bishop
Leonel de Cervantes in Havana’s main parish upon his relocation to the colony to live with an
uncle. Unable to remember the names of the individuals who served as his compadres, he merely
stated that his baptism was witnessed by “some man named de Tejela and another person he does
not know.”17 As a requisite for participation in the rituals of a Christian life, baptism in a local
parish signified an individual’s entrance into the Christian commonwealth, placing the individual
within a specific community of the faithful where they would collectively enact their
commitment to the Christian faith throughout their adult life.

As adults, black creoles with intimate ties to their local parish increasingly shaped their
public devotions around their neighborhood sacred sites. They assembled in small groups of

16 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodrigues de Castro, folios 115r-115v.
17 AGN, Inquisición, Gaspar Riveros Vasconcelos, folio 526r.
intimate friends and family to celebrate important sacramental events, such as the baptism of their children or godchildren or the marriage of two members of their community.\footnote{Scholars have utilized marriage records, including court cases and petitions for marriage, to illustrate how individuals of African descent carefully selected their marriage partners and sponsors from their local networks. Rather than highlight the personal connections that Afro-descendants made around their own blackness and status as racialized subjects, I wish to highlight the centrality of the parish for their communal expressions of worship. For more, see Bennett, \textit{Africans in Colonial Mexico and Colonial Blackness}; Bryant, \textit{Rivers of Gold}; Proctor, \textit{Damned Notions of Liberty}; Palmer, \textit{Slaves of the White God.}} In Don Antonio Pisana’s account of the arrest of Alejandro Chinchilla, a Spanish man accused of desecrating an image of Christ that belonged to three mulatta women, he detailed the marriage celebration he witnessed at the house of mulatta Juana Rosales, the matriarch of the Rosales family. He stated how earlier in the evening the entire family went to the parish church to witness the marriage of her daughter, María Rosales, to a local man, who remained unnamed throughout the case. Juana had returned immediately following the ceremony with her son, described by Pisana as “lame,” while the rest of the wedding party remained at “the collegial church” in town where they “celebrated the wedding party” until nearly “one o’clock in the morning.”\footnote{AGN, Inquisición, “Contra Alejandro Chinchilla,” 1772, 121, expediente s.n., folio 7v.} For the Rosales family, the celebration of the couple’s nuptials centered around the church where the ceremony occurred with their friends, family, and neighbors before it extended to the private home with a smaller group of “six or seven men and women.”\footnote{AGN, Inquisición, Alejandro Chinchilla, folio 7v.}

As the center for public expression of a communal religious life, the sacred sites located within the churches and chapels of the parish were incorporated into the spiritual choices of individual blacks and mulattos. As they formed religious experiences with their fellow parishioners at those sites, they underscored the spiritual importance of a particular place to their intimate spirituality within their community. In 1627, Juan Bautista, a mulatto goldsmith at the monastery of San Lorenzo in the small, native village of Tlalmanalco, designated a plaza at the
chapel *de visita*\(^{21}\) of the religious house as the congregating place for the feast-day celebrations for the day of the Holy Cross. In the days leading up to the festival, news had circulated that Juan had desired the presence of “many people” to witness the erection of a wooden cross in honor of Christ. According to Martina Ruiz, a native *ladina* who witnessed the festivities, Juan had specifically chosen the plaza of the *visita* because it represented a central location in the village where his fellow parishioners could “come to give adoration to this cross that is in this said church.”\(^{22}\) On the feast day, an estimated 500 native parishioners gathered at the monastery to participate in the celebrations, where Juan Bautista spoke to the crowd about the spiritual care of the cross and the community more broadly. To emphasize the importance of the chapel *de visita* and the crucifix it housed, he conducted a “procession around the entire patio of the said ermita”\(^{23}\) with the large crucifix that he had left “in the place of the said church where it usually stays.”\(^{24}\) In the days following the celebration, reports circulated that various parishioners had returned to the monastery to further their education in the care and adoration of the cross.

Pedro Antonio, the mulatto man whose case opened a previous chapter, similarly revealed the spiritual importance of sacred spaces to the religious choices he made for the development of his communal devotions. According to the testimony of Teresa de Avendaño, Pedro Antonio had visited the house of her mother, María de Avendaño, for multiple weeks in order to conduct extensive devotionals, known as *novenas*, in honor of San Lorenzo. During

\(^{21}\) Chapels *de visita* referred to secondary churches within a parish, typically attached to a monastery, that did not have a resident priest, but were instead visited periodically by the priest of the parish’s main church. In the historical development of the Catholic church in New Spain, the chapels *de visita* often appeared in the colony after the main church of a village or parish could no longer serve the entire population. For more see, Lockhart, *The Nahuas After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 206; Poole, *Pedro Moya de Contreras*, 32.

\(^{22}\) AGN, Inquisición, “Contra Juan Bautista,” 1627, 362, expediente 1, folio 11r.

\(^{23}\) Ermitas referred to chapels of ease attached to monasteries. Similar to the chapel *de visita*, they did not regularly have access to a priest who would remain in residence. Instead, priests would visit the chapel to perform the sacraments. For more see Poole, *Pedro Moya de Contreras*, 32.

\(^{24}\) AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folios 10v, 14v.
these “chats on spiritual matters,” Pedro Antonio demonstrated to the Avendaño family his extensive familiarity with an intimate spirituality and proper devotional practices as he instructed them in public recitations of prayers “in memory of the Passion of Christ” and adoration of an image of Christ and Virgin Mary. While the majority of the spiritual exercises had occurred at her mother’s house, suggesting the importance of devotions in the private home, Pedro decisively selected holy sites throughout the city where the Avendaño family could publicly show their devotion to a particular saint or sacred image. Teresa would later explain to the inquisitor how on the Wednesday prior to her appearance at the Holy Office she had accompanied her mother, her sister María, and two native ladin as who lived with her sister, on a pilgrimage with Pedro “to make a visit to the miraculous Image of the Living Christ, Our Lord.” When they arrived at the ermita that housed the image, they collectively “prayed all of their devotions” to the image of Christ before Pedro led them “in another exercise asking God for mercy” where they knelt before the image with “their arms in the form of a cross [and] eyes closed” for “almost a quarter of an hour.” For Pedro Antonio and the Avendaño family, this conventional act of embarking on a pilgrimage to a holy site, even one located nearby, displayed the spiritual importance of sacred spaces for their internal dedication to the Catholic faith.

A final example of the importance of sacred spaces to the spiritual devotions of black parishioners comes from the congregations formed by Isidro de Peralta, the mulatto street vender whose case opened the chapter. Even though the participants congregated in a small adobe house in the barrio of San Juan de la Penitencia, instead of a local church or monastery, the chapel they created from their personal objects of devotion was no less important to their spiritual worship.

25 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, 1694, 693, 2ª parte, expediente 11, folio 538v.
26 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 539r.
27 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 543v.
According to the inventory collected by the Inquisition upon their investigation, the participants of “various status and calidad” had erected a small altar in the middle of the room decorated with “Chinese cloth of various colors” and holding a small statue of San Nicolás Tolentino, or Saint Nicolas the Penitent. To the sides of the altar rested two images, “one of Saint Peter the Apostle with his small cushion at his feet dressed as the Pope and the other of Saint Augustine in the vestments of the Archbishop.” In addition to the “well-organized” altar, the participants had erected a lectern, “like the lecterns used by the ecclesiastical choirs,” that held various books of psalms and hymns, including the book of devotions originally described in the testimony of Gabriel de Sanabria.29 As highlighted by Joan Bristol in her analysis of the illicit confraternity, the participants of the congregations traveled significant distances to attend the devotional services held by Isidro in the personal chapel, at times referring to the congregation as occurring “outside this city.”30 In fact, the majority of the attendants did not live in the San Juan de la Penitencia neighborhood, located to the southwest of the cathedral, but instead traveled from areas to the north and west of the traza to attend the devotions.31 Despite the distant location, the chapel created at the house remained spiritually significant for the individuals who traveled to participate and contributed personal items for the altar. In constructing the confraternity’s chapel along the lines of a sanctuary located in a local church, complete with sacred images and books of devotion, the participants led by Isidro created a sacred site for their personal expressions of communal religious life where they could enact their dedication to the Christian faith.

28 HM 35169, folios 14r-14v.
29 HM 35169, folios 14r-14v; HM 35168, folio 12v. In her analysis of the material objects found at the altar of Isidro’s illicit confraternity, Joan Bristol discussions how the participants’ efforts of “jury-rigging and borrowing” represented an “acts of mimesis,” where they assigned a new meaning to the specific devotions and objects that were used in convention devotion. This act of imitation provided the participants with a sense of “authority to define their own devotional environment,” undermining the clerical authority of the church. Bristol, “Afro-Mexican Saintly Devotion,” 126.
30 HM 35169; Bristol, “Afro-Mexican Saintly Devotion,” 128.
The sacred nature of the churches, chapels, and holy sites were clearly important to the spiritual practices of black parishioners. However, the social connections they formed with the various people who prayed, rejoiced, confessed, received the sacraments, and worshiped in those sacred spaces were more foundational to their construction of a shared Catholic spirituality.32 As creole members of particular neighborhoods, marketplaces, and parishes, black parishioners navigated their extensive social networks of friends, family, neighbors, and even casual acquaintances to discuss, among other things, a common spirituality and appropriate exercises for Christian veneration, contributing to their conceptions of a Christian identity. Within these social spaces, both sacred and secular, they engaged in conversations with their fellow parishioners in which they articulated their personal choices for their religious practices. But the social landscape constantly changed as individuals from all racial and social backgrounds entered into or moved from their communities in search for better opportunities. In time, black creoles who maintained a personal connection to their local parish responded to the shifting social dynamics to construct new meaningful relationships in the social spaces of their daily routines that had always informed their spiritual development.

In the everyday contours of colonial life, black parishioners encountered the shifting social dynamics of an urban landscape where the marketplace, work spaces, and plazas enabled a remarkably varied group to interact with increasing familiarity. This familiarity, a result of the spatial proximity of marketplace stalls, artisan workshops, and routine interaction in the streets, afforded black Catholics a social environment to converse on spiritual matters with individuals who shared in their religious practices, individuals of “all calidades.” Returning to Isidro de Peralta’s various congregations, the marketplace figured prominently in the transmission of his

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plans to form the communal devotions. While none of the witnesses explicitly stated that Isidro spoke to them about religious matters while in the central plaza, the fact that each of them mentioned their proximity to the Isidro at the marketplace and their neglect to mention a more intimate relationship suggests their social connections remained tied to their shared work space.

In his testimony, José de Santa María, the Spanish tobacco merchant in the plaza, highlighted the various patterns of interaction engaged by multiple men who worked at stands in the marketplace. He informed the inquisitor that he had first heard about the gathering from Isidro de Peralta, “who sells foodstuffs in the plaza,” specifically noting that he knew no other information about Isidro besides his place of employment and his role in founding the multiple religious brotherhoods.33 After the first house of devotion dispersed for an unspecified reason, José received an invitation from Isidro to another gathering dedicated to “the same order of Saint Augustine,” after he approached him one day in the market. As he attended the devotions, José explained to the inquisitor, he started to recognize the other participants who also maintained an occupation in the central plaza. He stated on one occasion that he recognized Gabriel de Sanabria, a Spaniard from a village in Michoacán, as “the man who sells tobacco near the gates of the central plaza,” a store front not too distant from the stand occupied by Isidro.34 He would later accompany Gabriel, and his friend Lucas de Mercado, to another one of the congregations also dedicated to Saint Augustine. On another occasion, he recalled the regular presence of Antonio de Alarcon, “who usually assists his father in a stand in the plaza that sells wool,” and Lazaro, a master swordsmith, at the services.35 Throughout his interrogation, José continually

33 HM 35168, folio 19r. José’s exact words were “the solicitor of the expressed Religions is the said mulatto Isidro de Peralta, that he does not know on what he street he lives, only that he sells foodstuff in the plaza.”
34 HM 35168, folio 16v.
35 HM 35168, folio 17v.
referenced the importance of the market located “at the gates to the plaza” in the social connections Isidro maintained with his fellow participants.

Similarly, Gabriel de Sanabria noted the routine interaction of the multiple participants in the marketplace. His friend, Lucas de Mercado, a Spanish man who “had a small shop of merchandise near the gates of the plaza,” had first introduced him to the gatherings after he had been invited by Isidro de Peralta, who maintained a stand near Lucas in the plaza. Gabriel informed the inquisitor that he had no prior knowledge of Isidro, only that he “ha[d] noticed that he sells goods in the plaza,” suggesting that their contact occurred solely in the context of brief interactions of the marketplace. He maintained a similar relationship to the other individuals he recognized at the various congregations that he attended over the course of the year. He recognized José Bravo, a man who was employed in his father’s wool shop, when the people in attendance at the gathering referred to him as “the commissioner,” implying that he held an important position within the congregation. Apart from José Bravo, Gabriel informed the inquisitor that he “only remembered some Spanish man named de Santa María [José de Santa María],” who worked in front of the “new gates” of the plaza, and two brothers “named Juan and Gabriel Rodrigues,” who held occupations as a chairmaker and a goldsmith, respectively. He remembered little more about all four of the individuals apart from their place of employment and proximity to Isidro’s stand near the gates to the central plaza, again suggesting that their familiarity remained tied to the marketplace.

Word had quickly spread through their various social networks, as individuals from outside the immediate neighborhood or marketplace started to attend the services, signifying a

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36 HM 35168, folio 6r, 12v.
37 HM 35168, folio 14v.
38 HM 35168, folio 14r.
39 HM 35168, folio 13v.
sense of a shared Catholic spirituality and conceptions of communal worship. José de Santa María indicated that men including José Zapata, a mulatto man who lives on the Calle de Corchero, and Francisco de Ugalde, a mulatto musician at the convent of Regina, attended the devotions to Saint Augustine without maintaining any apparent connection to Isidro de Peralta or the marketplace. Lucas de Mercado similarly noted that a musician at the convent of Jesus of Nazarene named Marco (no last name given), and a student at the university, Antonio Romiento, remained involved in the congregations during the year that he had attended. But the initial invitations for the various congregations occurred within the context of Mexico City’s central plaza, where the participants of “various status and calidad” worked, socialized, and discussed their preferences for communal devotions. Within the context of their familiarity, however limited it may have been, Isidro had discussed his plans to form the confraternities, inviting individuals he conversed with on a daily basis. Those individuals then extended an invitation to the people they presumed would be interested in the devotions.

Through a transmission of information about the gatherings – when they would meet, what they would discuss, and which saint they worshiped – implies that Isidro’s choices for a communal devotion spoke to the spirituality of the various parishioners he had invited. In fact, by the end of the interrogations, each of the witnesses informed the inquisitors that they stopped attending the gatherings for no other reason than to return to their occupation at the marketplace. José de Santa María indicated that he did not believe the congregations to “be bad” since “together they pray the Rosary of Our Lady and do many other exercises of virtue.”40 Gabriel de Sanabria informed the inquisitor that “the times that he had attended and assisted in the said gatherings and religious meetings he had judged them to be legal,” adding as a precaution that if

40 HM 35168, folio 18v.
the inquisitor found “something criminal he asks for forgiveness and mercy from the Holy Office and that he would comply with whatever penance that they give him.”\textsuperscript{41} Both José and Gabriel implicated themselves in their testimonies by choosing to stand behind the Christian devotions of Isidro’s congregations. For them, the gatherings’ devotions were common forms of worship that they practiced in their neighborhoods, and, therefore, did not necessarily warrant the concern shown by the authorities.

Local connections to the social spaces located in neighborhoods granted black creoles with personal ties to the urban landscape the ability to interact with friends, family, and neighbors with increasing regularity. In 1650, Gaspar Riveros Vasconceles, the Afro-Portuguese student who had settled in Mexico City, had established a personal connection with a Spanish family where he arrived each day to give lessons in grammar to their youngest son. Throughout his time with the family, he spoke often with the student’s father, Bartolomé Benitez Palomino, and his neighbors in the street in front of Palomino’s house. On one such occasion, Bartolomé Benitez recounted for the inquisitor, Gaspar Riveros had arrived at the house while he spoke with his neighbor, Alférez Juan Santo y Villanueva. In the discussion that followed a short prayer they said together, the three men spoke about the spiritual significance of saying “Good evening from God to you” as a greeting, debating whether or not such a saying represented “God’s commandments” and served as a “good custom for Christians.”\textsuperscript{42} The discussion eventually evolved into an exchange over understanding grammar well enough to comprehend the Bible. In the end, Gaspar Riveros informed Bartolomé Benitez that such a decision remained “with the men who are priests.”\textsuperscript{43} In the Calle de San Francisco, where he met with his friends and their

\textsuperscript{41} HM 35168, folio 14v.
\textsuperscript{42} AGN, Inquisición, Gaspar Riveros Vasconceles, folio 488v.
\textsuperscript{43} AGN, Inquisición, Gaspar Riveros Vasconceles, folio 488v.
neighbors, Gaspar Riveros held conversations on spiritual matters that represented his personal conceptions of appropriate Christian behavior, including his deferment of comprehending the Bible to the Church hierarchy.

Familiarity with the local streets and neighborhoods played an important role in the chats on spiritual matters that Pedro Antonio, a mulatto man “of great virtue,”\textsuperscript{44} held with the Franciscan students of the royal college of Santa Cruz in Antequera. In his testimony, Francisco Garcia recounted how he initially met Pedro ten months prior to his interrogation. He informed the inquisitor how he had “heard from another student of the said college” about a “man of virtue who walks throughout the city” speaking “on spiritual matters.”\textsuperscript{45} Francisco and his colleague José de Guzmán were intrigued by these rumors that Pedro was a virtuous man who might offer insight into religious practices. After indicating that they wished to meet this virtuous man, their other colleague, Francisco Duran, informed them that he could bring him to the college because he knew which neighborhood he frequented on his spiritual walks. Within a few days, Francisco Duran accompanied Pedro Antonio into the college, where he met with Francisco Garcia, José de Guzmán, and another student also named Francisco. Over the course of the evening, Pedro introduced the students to the spiritual conversations that guided his walks throughout the city, including the devotional exercises and chats he conducted in the homes of prominent members of the city.\textsuperscript{46} In time, the Franciscan students viewed Pedro’s spiritual work as worthy of emulation, as evident by Francisco Garcia and José de Guzmán’s choice to join Pedro in his spiritual exercises throughout the city. Though the majority of the chats that Pedro held with the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[44] AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 544r.
\item[45] AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 544r.
\item[46] At one point in her interactions with Pedro Antonio, María de Avendaño asked him how many other families he assisted in devotional exercises. He responded that he attended to a different family each day of the week, but “only named the house and family of Cosme Sanchez.” AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 542r.
\end{footnotes}
Franciscan students occurred within the confines of the college, their familiarity with Pedro as a virtuous man had occurred precisely because Pedro Antonio “roamed the streets” as a way to speak about “things of virtue, like the examples and the lives of Saints.”

Fernando Vazquez, a clergyman of the minor orders at the city’s cathedral, recounted a similar experience the first time he had met Pedro Antonio. One day about eight months earlier, Fernando visited the house of Catalina Fajardo where “the aforementioned Catalina and her family told him about the said man Antonio who was virtuous.” They informed him that they had originally learned about Pedro after they had witnessed him “in the mornings bring flowers to an Image of Our Lady that is in the house of Don Francisco del Pelon” in order “to pray to [the Virgin Mary].” For Catalina and her family, Pedro’s public devotional act of carrying flowers through the streets to the image encouraged them to approach him in the hopes that he would assist them in their own spiritual devotions. They decided to contact him in the streets one day as he left Don Francisco’s house. Following their conversation on “things of the spirit,” Pedro agreed to assist them in their devotional exercises. After learning about his worship of the image of the Virgin Mary and the exercises he shared with the Fajardo family, Fernando asked Catalina and her family members if they could introduce him to Pedro “because he desired to speak with him…on spiritual matters.” Throughout Pedro’s case, the witnesses underscored the relevance of the public spaces in the neighborhoods, streets, and prominent homes where Pedro engaged in spiritual devotions and conducted chats on religious matters. This public nature of Pedro’s local familiarity to Christian veneration served as a foundation for his reputation as “a very good Christian” in Antequera.

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47 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 544r.
48 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 553r.
49 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 553r.
50 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 553r.
For black creoles, the personal ties they forged in the urban landscape, where they lived, worked, and worshiped, cut across racial divisions to bring together individuals defined as Spaniards, mulattos, Indians, and mestizos. Amplified by the residential proximity of the diverse neighborhoods of the colonial parishes, these meaningful roots linked black parishioners to a specific community boundary that, over time, constructed distinct notions of familiarity. In the neighborhood of Saint Sebastian, a story of unrequited love resulting in a series of false accusations to the Inquisition exposes the intergenerational familial ties and interracial connections held by the Rosales family. Shortly before the nuptial celebrations of María Rosales, a mulatto woman who lived in her childhood neighborhood with her mother Juana, the commissioner of the Holy Office of the Inquisition received a note detailing supposed crimes against the faith committed by María and her entire extended family. For multiple weeks, the denunciation stated, María, her mother Juana, her aunt Dora, a few men, who remained unnamed throughout the testimony, and “other relatives” gathered together to “whip [an image of Christ] each night, renouncing His Majesty, and invoking the Devil.” 51 If the commissioner arrived at the Rosales household later that evening, the accuser explained, he would uncover an abused image of Christ in the tomb “interred in certain place” in the house alongside a jug of chicha, a fermented alcoholic beverage outlawed by the authorities. 52 “Moved by zeal,” the commissioner gathered a few men to visit the Rosales home, where they found Juana Rosales at home with her son awaiting the return of her daughter’s wedding party. Upon his arrival, he quickly searched the house, uncovering the “interred sacred image” and immediately arresting Juana, María, her husband, and the family members who had attended the wedding.

51 AGN, Inquisición, Alejandro Chinchilla, folio 4r.
52 AGN, Inquisición, Alejandro Chinchilla, folio 7r.
Throughout the investigation, the denunciation and the testimony highlighted the extensive familial connections María maintained with her and her husband’s extended families. Within the same neighborhood, María lived with her mother and her brother within a short distance from her aunt and cousins, who all attended her wedding ceremony prior to their arrest. By including “other relatives of hers that were named in the said letter” in the description of the supposed events, implicating more than María and her mother, the accuser, a Spanish man named Alejandro Chinchilla, underscored the intimate connections and almost daily interaction María maintained with her family, providing a degree of credibility to the description of their supposed heretical practices. Her relationship with her aunt, in particular, appears throughout the case as quite meaningful. As the investigation into the desecration of the image of Christ continued, María appeared before the inquisitor commissioner to identify the image as belonging to her. A personal favorite, she informed the inquisitor that “she had given [the image] to her aunt, the expressed Dora to guard.” Dora, who lived in the same house as Alejandro at the time, kept watch over the holy image until “it had been robbed” shortly before the events surrounding their arrest. After her wedding, María’s familial relations further included her husband’s extended family, who appeared in the testimony as accomplices to a second false denunciation regarding a robbery at the Casa de Moneda in the city center. Even though his family, whose name and racial classification remain absent in the extant testimony, appears sparingly throughout the case, their regular interaction, like María and her extended family, added credibility to the accusations made by Alejandro Chinchilla.

As the case unfolded, the intricacies of the elaborate conspiracy enacted by Alejandro brought into relief the interracial interactions that occurred within the intimate lives of the

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53 AGN, Inquisición, Alejandro Chinchilla, folio 4r.
54 AGN, Inquisición, Alejandro Chinchilla, folio 2r.
Rosales family. Following the second denunciation brought against María’s husband and his family, the inquisitor commissioner started to question the truth behind the accusations, turning his investigation toward Alejandro Chinchilla, who maintained a lengthy relationship with the accused.\footnote{AGN, Inquisición, Alejandro Chinchilla, folio 3v.} In the months prior to the events surrounding the sacred image, Alejandro, himself a Spanish resident of the neighborhood, had resided in the home of Dora Rosales, where the image remained for her devotional practices. Through his personal contact with the Rosales family, he met María for the first time, eventually falling in love with her despite her engagement to her future husband. The arresting official noted in his testimony that it had become evident to him that Alejandro “had only made the denunciation with the object of impeding the marriage [of María Rosales] (which had happened the other day).”\footnote{AGN, Inquisición, Alejandro Chinchilla, folio 2r.} Despite the differences in racial background, the testimony given in the case indicates that Alejandro remained intimately connected with the Rosales family, staying with Dora for a significant amount of time before he eventually departed roughly “twenty-one days before [the initial denunciation] occurred” to reside with a Spanish woman, left unnamed throughout the case.

The family’s familiarity with \textit{chicha}, an indigenous beverage, further indicates the cross-racial interactions they held within their neighborhood. As residents of a multiethnic colonial parish, they more than likely maintained friendships with various neighbors of indigenous descent, who potentially offered an introduction into the traditional brewing processes of the native alcoholic drink or they possibly even heard of it through information spread in the colony. Conversely, the Rosales’ familiarity with the beverage potentially stemmed from their connections to their own family members of indigenous descent. Even though the inquisitorial case neglected to provide any genealogical information on the Rosales family, since they quickly
dismissed the case against María and her family, their classification as mulattos suggests a possible Afro-indigenous heritage. As illustrated by Robert Schwaller in his impressive study on the development of géneros de gente, a precursor to the sistema de castas, the demographic diversity of the Spanish colonies resulted in a significant population of mulatto children born in Afro-indigenous unions, a population which greatly outnumbered the descendants of Afro-European relations.\textsuperscript{57} With possible indigenous parentage or grandparentage, María and her mother could have learned the importance of the certain indigenous traditions from native family members who lived in the same neighborhood. In either case, the family’s knowledge of the native beverage suggests a minimal familiarity and interaction with indigenous persons.

A similar case in the household of a Portuguese resident reveals the intimate nature of the interracial interactions that occurred in the close proximity of the domestic household. In 1650, Domingo Nieto, the black slave of Capitan Rodrigo Nieto Palomino, a resident of Mexico City, appeared before the Holy Office of the Inquisition to “discharge his conscious” about a conversation he had a few days earlier. One day while working at the mill of his owner, located “a quarter of a league from this city,” his close companion, Diego Nieto, a black ladino slave of Capitan Nieto, arrived with a piece of gossip he had received from Juan Ilario, a ladino Indian and close friend of the two men. Diego informed Domingo that Juan had heard from their mutual acquaintance, Francisco, a mulatto slave of Portuguese Pedro Alvares de Seto, that his owner “whipped an image of Christ on Fridays in the evening.”\textsuperscript{58} Shocked by the news, Domingo decided to visit Francisco himself to learn more information on the heretical nature of Pedro Alvares’ actions. Upon his arrival, he asked Francisco “to tell him the truth” behind what Juan had conveyed in his conversation with Diego, sparing no details on the practices of his owner

\textsuperscript{57} Schwaller, Géneros de Gente, 115-123.
\textsuperscript{58} AGN, Inquisición, “Domingo Nieto contra un Portugués,” 1650, 435, expediente s.n., folio 78r.
because “we are of the same land.” Francisco responded that he did not believe his owner “whipped an image of Christ,” but that he noticed “on Fridays and Saturdays [while] he was sweeping and passing through his room” his owner would have “flowers and orange leaves arranged about [the room and] the bed…and that all night he did not sleep but that he heard him speaking alone enclosed in his room.”

He explained to Domingo that his owner “did not decorate [his room] except only on Fridays and Saturdays,” an action that implied he observed the Jewish Sabbath. Diego Nieto, in his testimony, provided similar details, explicitly informing the inquisitor that Pedro Alvares de Seto “was a Jew who whipped an image of Christ that he keeps in a drawer.”

Throughout their testimonies, Domingo, Diego, and Juan indicated the intimate relationships they maintained in and around Capitan Rodrigo Nieto’s mill. In addition to the friendship between Domingo and Diego Nieto, who described each other in the testimony as “companions,” Juan had connections with Felipe, another ladino native,” who had originally heard the rumors directly from Francisco, the mulatto slave. His choice to divulge the information to his friend, Diego Nieto, since “we are both ladino” with an understanding of “some sin,” further highlights the companionship the men had while working on the mill together. When Domingo spoke with Francisco, he informed inquisitor that he had “spoken in his [native] language,” implying that Francisco held a minimal understanding of Spanish, a fact that did not prevent Domingo from keeping his acquaintance. All three men appeared to remain in rather consistent contact with each other, easily travelling the distance to speak with one another when the occasion warranted it. Their additional familiarity extended to the actions and

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59 AGN, Inquisición, Domingo Nieto, folios 78r-78v.
60 AGN, Inquisición, Domingo Nieto, folio 78v.
61 AGN, Inquisición, Domingo Nieto, folio 78v-79r.
practices that occurred under the roof of their owners’ private homes. In Francisco’s experience, his simple act of cleaning the house provided him with insight into the private actions of Pedro Alvares de Seto as he stayed in his personal quarters.

Patterns of interaction in the social spaces of a daily routine did not remain confined to the urban landscape. Black parishioners navigated the social environments located on rural estancias and in obrajes outside the city limits, where conversations on religious matters occurred daily. An inquisitorial case from a rural estancia in a small town in Michoacán underscores how the social dynamics experienced in the countryside informed the various ways that black parishioners shared their conceptions of the faith. In 1652, Nicolás de Mesa a black slave voluntarily appeared before the inquisitorial commissioner of Tulancingo, a town to the northeast of Mexico City, to clear his conscious about a pact he made with the devil, a result of a supposed interaction with Juan Manuel, a free mulatto ranch hand on an estancia in Michoacán. According to Nicolás, he had first encountered Juan about seven years earlier after he had arrived at the estancia as a runaway slave in search of employment.\(^62\) Over the course of the next few years, Nicolás worked alongside Juan, helping him tend to the cattle on the estancia, where he “maintained a friendship with the said mulatto.”\(^63\) Within the context of this friendship constructed around a shared work space, Juan Manuel communicated with Nicolás in a “very familiar and intimate” manner, eventually sharing with him how to obtain the assistance of a man “who would help [him] and show [him] favor.”\(^64\) After Nicolás had discovered that the man, dressed with “ruffles, a cap and a sword,” was the devil in disguise, he promised that he “would

\(^{62}\) The Huntington Library, Huntington Manuscript Collection 35129 (hereafter HM 35129), “Contra Juan Manuel, Mulato Libre, Michoacán, por pacto con el Demonio con Apostacia de la fee Catolica y se Maestro de este delicto,” 1652, folio 3r.

\(^{63}\) HM 35129, folio 7v.

\(^{64}\) HM 35129, folio. 3v.
not hear mass, nor assist in spiritual conversation, and that he would not take holy water when he entered a Church, nor in other parts where they have it” in exchange for the devil’s help.\textsuperscript{65}

Nicolás then returned to the estancia where he communicated with Juan about his experience. By the end of the case, however, Nicolás had made it apparent to the inquisitors that he had fabricated the entire story, revealing that he had merely wished to tarnish Juan’s reputation by having him sentenced by the Inquisition.\textsuperscript{66} Even though Nicolás had fabricated the account about Juan’s association with the Christian devil and the deviant nature of his spiritual beliefs, his description of how Juan supposedly communicated those conceptions underscores the social spaces of familiarity that individuals of African descent maintained on the cattle ranches, haciendas, and villages of New Spain’s countryside. As they labored on Spanish estates alongside enslaved Africans, free blacks, mulattos, and indigenous persons, black parishioners navigated their spatial proximity to fellow parishioners to discuss their religious beliefs.

In the rural regions of the colony, the parish churches attached to village monasteries, the ermitas and chapels de visita, remained essential to local social interaction forged by individuals of African descent. Within the familiarity afforded by the spatial proximity of worship, black parishioners navigated a social environment where they could converse on elements of a shared spirituality that connected them to their fellow parishioners. Returning to the case of Juan Bautista, the mulatto goldsmith at the convent of San Lorenzo in Tlalmanalco, the patio of the monastery of San Lorenzo served as a social space where he could communicate with various villagers who desired to broaden their communal worship. In preparation for the feast day celebrations, Juan had carefully called upon individuals in the village to inform them of the following day’s festivities. According to Martina Ruiz, a “very ladina” native woman, her sons

\textsuperscript{65} HM 35129, folio 4r.
\textsuperscript{66} HM 35129, folios 79r-79v.
has received an invitation from Juan to come assist him at the visita of San Lorenzo by “collecting a cross that the said mulatto goldsmith [had requested] and by his command had put it in the patio of the church in the said visita.” 67 Upon their return to the house, her sons, who remained unnamed throughout the interrogation, recounted the conversations they had with Juan Bautista, who informed them of “a miracle and apparition that he had had of Jesus Christ, our Lord.” Throughout the interrogation, Martina Ruiz neglected to highlight a more intimate familiarity with Juan Bautista, suggesting that her connections remained tied to his position as the goldsmith at the monastery. Her familiarity of the visita as a place to congregate for devotional matters provided a social setting where Juan could highlight the celebrations for the following day.

Madalena Francisca, a ladina woman, corroborated Martina’s testimony about the conversations that occurred the day prior to the feast of the Holy Cross. She informed the commissioner that she “had received notice that this said mulatto goldsmith had commanded that a cross be made to put in the patio of the church of San Lorenzo.” 68 To learn more about the devotions, Madalena went to the chapel on Sunday afternoon where she saw Juan “at the base of a cross” with “many native men and women congregated” around him, listening to him describe proper devotions to show the crucifix located inside the chapel. 69 Similar to Martina, Madalena stated that she did not know Juan by name, only that “she knows him as the mulatto goldsmith,” suggesting that her familiarity with the Juan Bautista remained confined to the context of the visita. 70 Prior to this interaction, Madalena assured the commissioner, her communication with Juan Bautista had not extended beyond his position at the monastery as the town’s goldsmith,

67 AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folio 9r.
68 AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folio 13v.
69 AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folios 13v-14r.
70 AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folios 13v-14r.
and that their only interaction had occurred in the patio surrounding the festivities.\footnote{AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folio 9r.} For Madalena, comparable to Martina and her sons, the casual interactions with Juan that occurred in the patio remained central to the conversations on devotional procedures for a feast-day celebration. Within the spatial setting of the chapel de visita, Juan circulated his conceptions, beliefs, and practices of communal worship to the various individuals, primarily from the local native community, who returned on the Day of the Holy Cross to broaden their practices.

The acquaintances formed by Juan in Tlalmanalco additionally demonstrated his integration into the native community where he, in all likelihood, spent the majority of his life. Even though the extant documentation does not include Juan’s genealogy, since the inquisitor commissioner never interrogated him, evidence of his familiarity with the principle native inhabitants of the town and his extensive use of Nahuatl throughout the day’s festivities suggests a rather intimate connection with the indigenous community.\footnote{Schwaller, Géneros de Gente.} Witnesses indicated how he called upon the six prominent members of the community for the spiritual care of the erected cross, speaking to them all “in [their] language.”\footnote{AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folio 8r.} Martina Ruiz informed the inquisitor that she had heard Juan’s demands for spiritual devotion, stating “that all that she has referred to the said Juan had said in the Mexican language with a great presence and as if he was a great preacher.”\footnote{AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folio 10v.} Melchor de Herrera, an Spanish creole who attended the festivities with Martina Ruiz, similarly informed the inquisitor commissioner of Juan Bautista’s linguistic fluency. He assured him that he had understood all that Juan had said in the “Mexican language” because “he is a creole who grew up on a hacienda and always interacted with Indians.”\footnote{AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folio 12r.} For Juan Bautista, his fluency in

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\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folio 9r.}
\item \footnote{Schwaller, Géneros de Gente.}
\item \footnote{AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folio 8r.}
\item \footnote{AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folio 10v.}
\item \footnote{AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folio 12r.}
\end{itemize}
the native language and his connections to the prominent members of the Tlalmanalco community helped foster personal relationships in the primarily indigenous town regardless of his African heritage, eventually paving the way for his position as a trusted spiritual adviser.

In the rural regions of New Spain, living in close proximity on the large haciendas or in small villages brought black creoles in constant contact with the people who lived, worked, and worshiped alongside them. As they interacted in the intimate spaces offered by their social environment, black creoles forged personal relationships that cut across racial barriers. An investigation into the scandalous behavior of Francisco de la Cruz, an enslaved creole on a small hacienda in San Miguel Zinacantepec, exhibits the daily interactions that occurred between the sugar mill’s black, indigenous, and mixed-descent inhabitants. In October 1660, rumors surrounding the theft of the missal, a book containing the sacred rites of the Catholic mass, from a nearby church quickly spread through the sugar mill’s diverse inhabitants. Witnesses informed their friends how they had known Francisco de la Cruz to have previously stolen the missal in the hacienda’s chapel, implicating him in the most recent theft. Marcos Antonio, a castizo resident of the hacienda, had spoken privately with Juan Ponce, Nicolás Ortiz, Gabriel Serón, and Diego Sánchez, all Spaniards in the town, about how the missal to the chapel had previously been found in the creole’s possession, adding how he heard that Francisco had “adorned the sacred vestments of the hacienda chapel.”

Others corroborated Marcos’ testimony. Diego de Fragua, a mulatto slave on the hacienda, informed Diego de Espinoza, the mill’s mestizo mayordomo that the creole slave José de Salamanca had seen Francisco “dressed in the priestly vestments for the celebration of the Holy Sacrament.” Upon José’s interrogation, he informed Diego de Espinoza that he had not

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76 AGN, Inquisición, “Contra Francisco de la Cruz,” 1660, 586, expediente 7, folio 417r.
77 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folios 418r-418v.
personally seen Francisco “dressed like that,” but had instead discussed the matter with Mónica and Gerónima, two indigenous women living on the hacienda, who had witnessed the event alongside their companion Domingo Hernandez. On this particular occasion, the women testified, Domingo Hernandez, a black slave described as “more bozal than ladino,” had additionally relayed to the two women in their native language how he had seen Francisco in a ravine “kneeled before a cross and a lit candle and a colored jar with a host…opening and closing [his hands] and later putting his hands together with opened palms on top of the jar, reading from the book or missal.” After witnessing this sacrilegious act, especially since Francisco “had not adorned in the priestly vestments, but was dressed in his ordinary clothes, Domingo concluded that “he is a deceiver.”

Information surrounding the supposed events of Francisco’s private masses continued to circulate as the diverse inhabitants of the hacienda gathered together to exchange rumors they had overheard, underscoring the degree of familiarity they shared. Regardless of their difference in legal status – enslaved, free, indigenous, Spanish, or castas – each witness maintained close connections with the individuals they conversed with about the scandal. In the conversations held between the sugar mill’s various black and indigenous inhabitants, potential cultural divides, whether through language barriers or cultural understandings, did not prevent their personal relationships as they worked alongside each other. Diego de Fragua, a mulatto, informed the inquisitor commissioner that he had spoken with Francisco de la Cruz regularly “as friends” prior to his arrest, adding, however, that he knew surprisingly little about his heretical behavior. His information, instead, stemmed primarily from the close connections he maintained with José de Salamanca, the black creole, and the two indigenous women, who spoke such little Spanish that

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78 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folio 419r.
79 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folio 423r.
the inquisitor noted he had to “examine [them] in [their] native language.” For Domingo Hernandez, the linguistic divide did not prevent his own connections with the two native women. Despite his classification as “more bozal than ladino” who needed to be examined “according to his capacity” in the Spanish language, he communicated the details of Francisco’s masses in the ravine to Mónica and Gerónima without misunderstanding. As black creoles who labored on the hacienda alongside natives, castas, and Spaniards, they navigated the social spaces of familiarity to forge close relationships that transcended racial and cultural divides.

The physical mobility of free blacks as they searched for work or new opportunities played an essential role in the ways people of African descent shaped their connections to communal Christian devotion. Unlike individuals who remained in the local parishes where they had spent their childhood, migrant blacks had to react to the locally specific dynamics of Christian practice. As they relocated to provincial cities, rural estates, or in new neighborhoods, they incorporated themselves into the religious life of their new community, creating personal connections with the diverse members of the Catholic laity. Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, for instance, traveled throughout the colony initially as an attendant to the Bishop of Verapaz before he temporarily settled in the port of Veracruz, where he maintained a personal connection to Juan de Padilla, a priest at the main Cathedral. Since Fernando had received ordination in the minor orders from the Bishop of Puerto Rico, Antonio de Calderon, when he was younger, he “served the clergyman in Old Veracruz” as he said mass, “gave sacraments to the sick,” and collected alms. One of the witnesses, Pedro Ramírez, stated he had seen Fernando in the Cathedral with Juan de Padilla at least “forty times, more or less.”

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80 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folio 424r.
81 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folios 115v-116r.
82 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folios 24v, 53r.
83 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folios 24v-53r.
Fernando traveled to the surrounding villages to preach to the native inhabitants. According to the testimony of Juan Bautista, a mulatto resident of San Cristóbal de Alvarado, Fernando had visited the village for roughly a month, providing his services to the local church. In the religious setting of the church, Juan had interacted with Fernando on multiple occasions, even donating “four *reales* as alms” to the church for masses. A similar scenario occurred before Fernando arrived in Veracruz when his travels took him to Guatemala. Once there he received permission from the Bishop, Fray Juan Ramírez, to accompany him through the surrounding countryside to visit the recently conquered indigenous villages. With each of his travels, Fernando entered into a new social dynamic that formed around the local church where he created a new connection to the individual members of the parish.

Fernando’s powerful connections with local bishops, however, represented a unique interaction that most free blacks who traveled throughout the colony did not enjoy. More often, people of African descent had to rely on a local network of fellow parishioners to construct relationships within their new parishes. Pedro Antonio, for example, had previously lived in Puebla de los Angeles before he embarked on a pilgrimage that took him to a small indigenous town in Guatemala, where he hoped to “leave the world and choose the life of a hermit.” After the pilgrimage, he settled in Antequera where his only connection remained his confessor at the local Jesuit college. Upon his arrival in the region’s capital, Pedro gradually gained a reputation among various residents as a “very good Christian.” His reputation, as mentioned above, eventually caught the attention of students at the Franciscan college, who invited him to join them for “chats on spiritual matters.” After a few visits, one of the Franciscan students, José de

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84 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folio 24v.
85 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folios 116v-117r.
86 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 541v.
Guzmán, alongside Francisco García started discussing Pedro’s the spiritual capabilities with their friends and family, who desired to meet the mulatto man in the hopes that he could help them with their devotions. According to the testimony of María de Avendaño and her daughter Teresa, they had initially heard of Pedro Antonio from José, María’s grandson, who had informed her that he “was a very good Christian who does exercises and disciplines.”

Following their successful interactions with Pedro, María notified her daughter and son-in-law, Sebastiana and Don Pedro de Escobar, about Pedro’s spiritual knowledge. Shortly thereafter, Don Pedro invited him alongside Francisco García into his home to “have spiritual conversations.” As Pedro’s familiarity with communal devotional practices garnered him a reputation as a “very good Christian” among the families of Antequera, he navigated the locally specific social dynamics to incorporate himself into the spiritual practices of a new community. Since Pedro Antonio practiced a universal set of Christian devotions, including his imitation of the saint’s lives or the Jesuit exercises, he was able to shed his status as an outsider to the spiritual communities of Antequera. This universal nature of Christian worship, which remained fairly consistent from town to town, ultimately served as a way for devout men and women, like Pedro, to further integrate themselves into the religious lives of their fellow parishioners.

**Black Congregants**

Black creoles created local networks composed of friends, family, neighbors, and acquaintances that sustained their intimate connections to a shared Catholic spirituality. Attached to the sacred spaces of the parish church, local chapels, and holy sites or the secular spaces of the marketplace, work space, and neighborhood streets, these networks enabled black parishioners to

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87 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 541r.
88 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folios 550r, 555r.
89 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 555r.
voice the ideas, beliefs, and practices that best displayed their internal commitment to the outward practices of the Catholic faith. Based on their familiarity of the Catholic faith, obtained through their interactions with local priests, clergymen, and members of the mendicant orders, their personal choices in religious practices resonated with the spiritual worldview of members of local parishes. Gradually, black parishioners with personal connections to the local parish started to occupy positions of relative influence over the production of Catholic practices fundamental to a fulfilling spiritual life.

The religious practices conveyed by black parishioners in their personal conversations closely corresponded to the ambitions of Church officials heavily invested in the religious observances of the Catholic laity. As ecclesiastical authorities focused their attention on structuring the spiritual life of the Catholic laity, they defined what constituted orthodoxy and by maintaining greater vigilance over individual practices. Their efforts at spiritual renewal in religious observances ultimately defined the ways that black parishioners could express their conceptions of communal worship. Individual clericalmen directed the discursive boundaries of communal worship within their local jurisdictions. They promoted specific saints, adopted appropriate devotions, and confirmed which Christian customs would be tolerated and which risked being judged as heterodoxy. But the clergy also had to accommodate intensely local iterations of Christian veneration. The Catholic laity practiced their devotions in a variety of forms and institutions, including pilgrimages, shrines, manor chapels, and confraternities, that conformed to their specific spiritual needs. They invoked particular saints for the protection of their community or called upon the Virgin Mary to heal the infirm.

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By 1715, for example, the famed mining town of San Luis Potosí had formed a devotion around an image of the Virgin Mary that had appeared in a piece of wood in the Royal Mines of Sierra de Pinos. According to the legend, a native man had discovered the effigy of Christ’s mother after his failed attempts to manipulate the piece of wood in any manner. He immediately took the statue to a priest who verified the effigy, before he sent it to a silversmith to have it adorned with “rays of silver on the head, a crown of silver, and a pedestal.” Rumors quickly spread through the town about the effigy’s miraculous healing powers, and followers started to conduct elaborate processions from the chapel to houses “where there was a sick person.” Initially, the clergy in San Luis Potosí acknowledged the local devotion to the image of the Virgin Mary, assisting in the elaborate processions, for multiple years. However, in 1715, their approval changed after news circulated about the miraculous healing and visionary experience of María Xavier, a mulatta slave. The clerical concern, in this instance, centered around the supposed revelation experienced by María rather than the popular practice of delivering the effigy to cure the ill. In accommodating local practices, in which priests often participated, the clergy provided the laity with the ability to take a greater lead in the direction of the practices they chose for their personal devotion and for their community. As congregants in the Christian commonwealth, black Catholics were no different.

The Church clearly imagined Africans, blacks, and mulattos as members of the laity. As long as they conformed to clerical expectations, watchful officials allowed for a degree of autonomy and some choices in religious matters. In many instances, conformity necessitated the physical presence or direct participation of clerical members or students of theology. Isidro de

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92 AGN, Inquisición, María Xavier, folio 135r.
93 AGN, Inquisición, María Xavier, folios 135r-135v.
94 AGN, Inquisición, María Xavier, folios 135v-137v.
Peralta elicited the assistance of several clergymen at his various congregations, even holding one of the devotional meetings in honor of Saint Francis at the home of a local Spanish cleric.\(^{95}\) According to the descriptions of the communal forms of worship provided by witnesses, the participants invited a young friar named Francisco Duran, an Augustinian, who “in addition to [preaching] the sermon, sang the epistles and the gospels,” an act that required a minimal ordination in the *epístola*.\(^{96}\) Without the presence of ordained clergy, even in the minor orders, Isidro’s practices risked violating church law and undermining the authority of the Catholic Church. In the congregations where the participants conducted lay forms of worship, such as the reading of printed devotionals, they still requested the presence of a clergy member or student of theology to ensure their practices corresponded to clerical expectations of orthodox behavior. In his description of the gatherings, Gabriel de Sanabria informed the inquisitors that “they named as General a young Augustinian religious named Francisco Duran, who plays in the choir in the College of San Pablo,” and mentioned how “he found in the said gatherings other religious men of Saint Augustine, who were [Duran’s] companions.”\(^{97}\) By requesting the presence of several Spanish clerics at his public devotionals, Isidro exhibited his personal choices for communal devotion in a manner that conformed to the clerical expectations.

In time, black parishioners gradually took a reasonable lead in the spiritual devotion of their friends and family of “all *calidades.*” Black parishioners, for example, often drew from their varying degrees of wealth to decorate the sacred spaces that formed the foundation of their collective worship, bequeathing material objects of personal significance or funds for the construction of the devotional sites. Upon her death bed in 1678, María de la Concepción, a free

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\(^{95}\) HM 35168, folio 14r. Bristol, “Afro-Mexican Saintly Devotion,” 117.

\(^{96}\) HM 35168, folios 12v-13r. Ordination in the *epístola* refers to individuals permitted to chant the epistle, but unable to conduct a full mass.

\(^{97}\) HM 35168, folios 13r-13v.
parda resident of Mexico City, commanded the executors of her will to sell one of her slaves, a girl named María de la Concepción, to the highest bidder before offering the sum for “the ornamentation of the said chapel of Our Lady of Solitude located in the said Holy Catholic Cathedral to whom I give it as alms for ornaments and other necessary things…for the devotion [she had] for the said chapel and its holy image.”98 She additionally bestowed various strands of pearls as “an alms to the Most Holy Virgin of the Advocation of Health whose chapel is in the Church of the Most Holy Trinity.”99 Teresa de Losada, a former mulatta slave of Melchor de Losada, requested that “upon her death” the executors of her last will and testament give “some articles of clothing of gold with five small strings of pearls” for the adornment of the Image of Our Lady of la Bala located in the Hospital of Saint Lazarus.100 A free mulatta daughter of Don Fulgencio de la Vega y Vique, Gerónima de la Vega y Vique, similarly donated the remainder of her wealth to the construction of the sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe, stating that “if it is already finished then they should apply it there for whatever is necessary for the adornment of the said Sanctuary.”101 In a religious society centered around the visual components of the divine worship, black parishioners’ individual desires for the objects of devotion contributed to an ostentatious display where various members of the church or confraternity arrived for their prayers, heard mass, and contemplated the sacred, offering a degree of direction in how their fellow parishioners approached the divine.

As black parishioners created religious observances, they articulated their well-informed conceptions of the Catholic faith in a manner that formed the spiritual boundaries of communal

98 Archivo General de Notarías, Mexico City (hereafter, AN), “Testamento de María de la Concepción,” 1678, Jiménez de Siles, notaría 326, folio 15r.
99 AN, María de la Concepción, folio 15r.
100 AN, “Testamento de Teresa de Losada,” 1690, José de Castro, notaría 119, folio 38v.
101 AN, “Testamento de Gerónima de Vega y Vique,” 1702, Francisco Solís y Alcázar, notaría 636, folio 293v. For more examples, see AN, “Testamento de José de Valle,” 1693, José Díaz de Rivera, notaría 199, folios 6r-6v; AN, “Testamento de Juan Ramírez,” 1690, Sebastián Sánchez de la Fraguas, notaría 639, folios s.n.
worship in their local parishes. Since this transfer of black knowledge of theological practices occurred under the watchful eye of church officials who espoused the need for the careful regulation of lay practices, the personal choices made by black congregants constantly came under the scrutiny of ecclesiastical authorities, fellow parishioners, and, at times, concerned family members.\footnote{Hsia, World of Catholic Renewal, 221-223; Poole, Pedro Moya de Contreras.} With the exception of Juan Bautista, each of the cases examined in this chapter appeared before the inquisitorial court following an initial denunciation made by a witness in response to the defendant’s public iterations of the conceptions of the Catholic Church. As witnesses stood before inquisitorial officials to challenge the conceptions of faith articulated by black creoles, conveying hearsay, gossip, rumors, or eye-witness accounts, they disseminated the cultural practices and customs that circulated among the social networks of black parishioners.\footnote{Bennett, Africans in Colonial Mexico, 70-71; Irene Silverblatt, Modern Inquisitions: Peru and the Colonial Origins of the Civilized World (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 88-89.}

In 1650, testimony against Juan de Miranda appeared before the inquisitorial commissioner of Chapa de Mota, a district to the northwest of Mexico City. Gaspar Telles Nieto, a Spanish resident of the town, had provided the damning report against Juan as he came to discharge his conscience. Four months earlier, he recalled, Juan de Miranda had spent the evening at the house of María de Cardenas in the company of Gaspar and Diego de Cardenas Mancebo, María’s brother.\footnote{AGN, Inquisición, Juan de Miranda, 1650, 435, expediente s.n., folio 34r.} As their casual conversations circled around to a discussion on the Edict of Faith that had recently been read in their local parish church, Juan de Miranda made a comment that “by virtue of the Bull of the Holy Crusade, any confessor can absolve any sin,” adding that “no one is obliged to tell the truth against their own opinion.”\footnote{AGN, Inquisición, Juan de Miranda, folio 34r.} Gaspar, Diego, and
María were scandalized by Juan’s blasphemous statement which undermined the serious nature of confession. As a caution, Gaspar forewarned Juan that “he would have to be accused before the Holy Office” for such a statement. When Juan failed to denounce himself to the commissioner, Gaspar brought forth his own accusation. Gaspar’s eye-witness account to Juan’s blasphemous statements indicate the laity’s role in the regulation of appropriate religious behavior. In his account, Juan spoke candidly before Gaspar, María, and Diego about his personal beliefs that contradicted the others’ understanding of about the Edict of Faith and the priests’ role in absolution. By informing Juan that he should denounce himself to the Holy Office before someone else provided their own account, Gaspar and his friends indicated to Juan the beliefs and practices that were acceptable in their spiritual community.

In a similar scenario, the casual conversations held by Antonio Moreno, a mulatto cart driver, in 1611 landed him before the inquisitorial commissioner of Antequera. According to the initial denunciation, Juan Navarro, a local priest, had visited the hacienda of Diego Gonzalez Calderon where he first met Antonio as he passed through on his return trip to Guatemala. During their time together on the hacienda, Antonio engaged in spiritual chats with Juan, the owner Diego, Juan Salgado, and Pedro Gil that left Juan Navarro with the conclusion that “[Antonio] was an enemy of all types of priests.” In one conversation in particular, Antonio had implied that he “does not maintain some of the feast days” required by the Catholic Church. When Pedro Gil’s wife, Isabel, asked him why he neglected to attend mass on those days, he merely responded that such a claim “was a lie and that he would hear mass” on each feast day as required by the Church. His ambiguous responses suggested to Juan that he had picked up a

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106 AGN, Inquisición, Juan de Miranda, folio 34r.
107 AGN, Inquisición, “Contra Antonio Moreno,” 1611, 473, expediente 7, folio 98r.
108 AGN, Inquisición, Antonio Moreno, folio 98r.
heretical standpoint on his trips from Guatemala back to Antequera, even implying that he “was a Lutheran because he returned [to the city] with [known] Lutherans.” Even though Isabel had informed Juan how she had witnessed Antonio “address an act of Christian devotion,” he still considered Antonio’s practices as actions against the teachings of the Catholic faith, and promptly denounced him. Similar to the case against Juan de Miranda, Juan Navarro’s denunciation and the supporting testimonies of Pedro Gil and his wife, Isabel, indicate their role in regulating the behavior of their fellow parishioners. For the witnesses, the serious charges brought against Antonio Moreno, specifically the accusations of Lutheranism, countered the beliefs and practices that were acceptable in their community.

As part of Catholic Church’s distinctive approach of self-discipline and surveillance, church officials encouraged the Catholic laity, including individuals of African descent, to confess any behavior that potentially transgressed clerical expectations. This internal process of review, complete with their own conceptions of guilt and sin, facilitated self-denunciations by Afro-descendants who hoped the Inquisition would relieve their spiritual burden. When individuals appeared before the inquisitors to discharge their conscience, they expressed more than potentially errant behavior or beliefs. Through their confessions, they provided a glimpse into the religious practices and beliefs that their sacred communities deemed appropriate. In 1692, María de la Navidad, a mulatta resident of the convent of Misericordia, wrote to the inquisitors of the Holy Office in Mexico City about a blasphemous comment she made to her religious sisters. One day while working on her daily tasks, she “had become impatient,” asking her sisters “if Our Lord would not remove [her] from this prison, [she] should not have been redeemed, [Christ] should not share a drop of his blood with [her].” Such a noticeably

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109 AGN, Inquisición, Antonio Moreno, folio 98r.
blasphemous statement caused an uproar among her sisters, who warned her that she should “confess and ask mercy from the Holy Tribunal.”\textsuperscript{111} By the time she appeared before her confessor, who wrote the letter to the Holy Office for her, she had scrutinized her conscience to determine other thoughts and actions that her sisters at the convent would find heretical. She expressed concern over the doubts she had on “the mercy of God, Our Lord,” contemplating renouncing God for his failure to “take [her] from the prison,”\textsuperscript{112} but deciding against it. She concluded by begging the Holy Office “to rectify her wrongs,” allowing her to leave the convent to appear before the inquisitors for a complete judgement.\textsuperscript{113} By turning to her confessor, who acted as a proxy to the inquisitors, María de la Navidad expressed her familiarity with the appropriate Christian beliefs that formed the spiritual practices of her fellow religious sisters.

A similar example comes from the major mining center of Pachuca where in 1750 a free mulatta named Juana Juliana Ramírez approached her confessor for absolution for the doubts she maintained against the Holy Faith. She informed her confessor, who wrote to the Holy Office on her behalf, that she had harbored “various heretical errors, which she had uttered with words.”\textsuperscript{114} According to her testimony, the “errors in understanding” started five years earlier after she had a falling out with her local priest who had provided her with basic knowledge of the Catholic faith. Following the disagreement, which remained undisclosed throughout her interrogation, Juana Juliana stopped attending mass, taking the sacraments, or giving her confession. In the intervening years, she started to question the truth behind the mysteries of the Catholic faith, stating “she had denied with persistence the presence of God, the Highest of the Holy Trinity, the

\textsuperscript{111} AGN, Inquisición, María de la Navidad, folio 401r.
\textsuperscript{112} AGN, Inquisición, María de la Navidad, folio 401r.
\textsuperscript{113} AGN, Inquisición, María de la Navidad, folios 401r-401v.
\textsuperscript{114} AGN, Inquisición, Juana Juliana Rodriguez, folio 18r.
Incarnation of the Divine Word, [and] the Sacrament of the Eucharist.” In short, she stated, “she had believed it was all fiction and a trick.” She finally decided to return to the church after she envisioned a “strange man,” who she presumed was an image of the devil who had come to take her soul if she did not recant. Throughout the case, she emphasized that her heretical statements, which she had uttered when she was “always, always alone,” came from her own misunderstandings that resulted from the terrible impression she had of the priest from her childhood. Her confessor agreed. In the end, the inquisitors decided against a more serious punishment for the crime of mixed heresy under the condition that her confessor, Fray Juan Curiel, provide her with a complete education in the mysteries of the faith.

In other instances, black practitioners, with their substantial knowledge of sanctioned Christian practices and beliefs, appeared before the inquisitorial commissioners to bring to the fore the illicit behavior of the individuals that composed their social networks. Their voluntary denunciations against members of their parish, regardless of the status of the accused, illuminated the Christian practices and beliefs that they considered appropriate religious behavior. In 1699, the mayordomos of four black confraternities in Puebla de los Angeles submitted a petition to the Holy Office in Mexico City, voicing their complaint against a fine imposed upon them by the city’s inquisitorial commissioner, Don Onofre del Castillo y Villegas. In the weeks prior to the feast day of San Pedro Mártir, Don Onofre had commanded that “they attend with the insignias of the said confraternities in a claustral procession” for a celebration at the Church of the Patriarch Saint Dominic. As early as 1656, the celebrations in honor of San

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115 AGN, Inquisición, Juana Juliana Rodriguez, folio 18r.
116 AGN, Inquisición, Juana Juliana Rodriguez, folio 18r.
117 AGN, Inquisición, Juana Juliana Rodriguez, folio 18r.
118 AGN, Inquisición, Juana Juliana Rodriguez, folio 18r.
119 AGN, Inquisición, Juana Juliana Rodriguez, folios 19r-19v.
120 AGI, Cartas de la Inquisición, “Petición Bartolomé Dominguez y Geronimo de Robles, mayordomos de la Cofradía de Nuestra Señora la Virgen María de Guadalupe,” 1699.
Pedro Mártir at the Dominican convent had consisted of an elaborate festivity funded by the prominent members of the inquisitorial staff, including commissioners and familiars.121 This year the event unfold differently. As plans for the festivities circulated, the *mayordomos* of the confraternities expressed an apprehension about the details of Don Onofre’s expectations for the day. According to José Camacho, a free mulatto and *mayordomo* of the Confraternity of the Expiration of Christ Our Lord, Don Onofre demanded that the black confraternities participate in the observances “as if they were assisting in the procession that is celebrated in the Holy Cathedral of this said city on the day of Corpus Christi.”122 To the petitioners, led by the free mulattos Bartolomé Domínguez and Geronimo de Robles, the procession in honor of a saint comparable to the Corpus Christi celebrations held each year to honor the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist represented a serious transgression.

Since the demands caused them “such change and concern,” Bartolomé, Geronimo, José, and Miguel de Santa Cruz, another *mayordomo* of a black confraternity, promptly requested the assistance of Don Carlos Lozano, the *promotor fiscal*, of the Bishop of Puebla. Upon hearing the requests made by Don Onofre, Don Carlos ascertained that the brotherhoods should refrain from participating, stating that “the confraternities were under the ordinary jurisdiction” and as such the demands were “contrary to [Don Onofre’s] rights.”123 In the aftermath of the festivities, however, the *mayordomos* received a declaration from the commissioner’s office, wishing to “know the motive for having broken his decree.”124 They mentioned in the petition to the Holy

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121 Details referring to the 1658 celebrations can be found in an inquisitorial dossier, AGN, Inquisición, “Autos sobre Haver faltado a la costumbre los religiosos de S.to Domingo de la Puebla en la celebración de la fiesta del S.or S.t P.o Martir,” 1659, folio 316-r-367v. For more on the inquisitorial brotherhood in honor of San Pedro Mártir, see Richard Greenleaf, “The Inquisition Brotherhood: Cofradía de San Pedro Mártir of Colonial Mexico,” in *The Americas* 40:2 (October, 1983): 171-201.
122 AGI, Cartas de la Inquisición, Bartolomé Domínguez y Geronimo de Robles.
123 AGI, Cartas de la Inquisición, Bartolomé Domínguez y Geronimo de Robles.
124 AGI, Cartas de la Inquisición, Bartolomé Domínguez y Geronimo de Robles.
Office that the declaration attempted to instill “fear and threats from the said commissary.”

Despite the threats, the *mayordomos* remained firm in their decision that the procession would have represented a transgression against the sacred honor bestowed upon the Corpus Christi celebrations. For this reason, they wrote to the senior inquisitors to call their attention to the wrongful demands made by the commissioner.

Taken as a whole, the denunciations given by black congregants, their friends, family, and neighborhood residents, offer a glimpse into the Christian practices and beliefs that formed the spiritual world of their communities. With their extensive familiarity with appropriate Christian practices, black congregants learned to express a profound spirituality, guiding the devotional rituals of their social networks, without necessarily breaking the boundaries between the orthodox and unorthodox behavior established under the reforms of Catholic renewal. As they navigated the expectations of ecclesiastical authorities, black Catholics voiced their beliefs, ideas, and practices in a manner that constituted the spiritual boundaries of their deeply lived Christian experience. In turn, witnesses responded to the religious observations displayed by black congregants by either participating in the devotions or denouncing them to the Inquisition, further outlining the contours of a sacred community. These complex dynamics at play in the reception and transmission of black Catholic knowledge resulted in the creation of Christian practices that individuals of “all calidades” considered normal and sacred.

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Black parishioners created multiple networks around their extensive familiarity with Catholic practices, beliefs, and conventional communal worship. As an inherently creole experience, black creoles with personal ties to the colonial parish drove the production of various

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125 AGI, Cartas de la Inquisición, Bartolomé Dominguez y Geronimo de Robles.
forms of Christian rituals that connected them to the larger Catholic community. In the confines of this república Christiana, composed of Spaniards, Africans, free blacks, natives, and various castas, they drew from their intimate relationships and casual interactions to share their well-informed conceptions of the Catholic faith. These social interactions, which occurred in the parochial churches, the chapels, neighborhood streets, and the marketplace, underscored the intricate process of black cultural formation based on the personal choices made by individuals of African descent. They selected devotional materials for their public expressions of Christian veneration, conducted opulent processions on feast days, and constructed private chapels for the intimate worship of their immediate communities. In embracing these various forms of communal worship, creole practitioners reinforced their internal commitment to a shared Catholic religiosity that structured the spiritual lives of men and women of “all calidades.” Rather than performing a black religiosity detached from the social and cultural universe of their parish, black Catholics pursued a personal, local, and deeply lived experience that further integrated Christianity into their daily lives and the lives of those around them.
Chapter Five: The Spiritual Authority of Black Parishioners

In the early months of 1605, Juan Bautista, a mulatto resident of San Cristobal de Alvarado, attended his parish church to hear a sermon given by a visiting priest. In the days prior to his arrival, Juan had heard about the itinerant clergyman’s reputation as a devout Christian who could provide spiritual services for the remote village. Without a permanent priest in the village, the clergyman’s arrival must have been a welcome sight to Juan and his neighbors who wanted to take the sacraments and hear the word of God. The visiting priest, a mulatto man named Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, stayed in San Cristobal for a number of weeks, administering to the spiritual needs of Juan and his fellow residents. According to Juan, Fernando conducted mass “four or five times” in the town’s main church, offering the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist and a sermon. Following one particular mass, Juan approached Fernando to offer “four reales as alms for the mass,” at which point Fernando asked him about his life in the town. Impressed by the mass and Fernando’s reputation as an itinerant priest, Juan endeavored to establish a spiritual relationship with the visiting priest, holding conversations with him, offering alms, and continuing to attend his services.

Fernandez Luis de Avendaño, a Spanish resident of the town, had a similar experience with Fernando. He had heard the mulatto priest “say mass three or four times” at the nearby Pueblo of Tacotalpa, where on at least one occasion he had given him alms for the quality of his service. Following the masses, Fernandez held a number of conversations with his neighbors about the priest’s Christian devotion and sacred administration. Speaking with an indigenous man, whom he left unnamed in his testimony, he learned how the man had given him “two reales

1 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, folio 24v.
2 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, folio 24v.
3 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, folio 25r.
in alms for having said an *evangelio* to a sick man” in his neighborhood. In another discussion with a Spanish woman named Mariana, Fernandez discovered that Mariana’s admiration of Fernando extended to include her own donation “four *reales* in alms” for his masses, which she deemed a spiritual necessity for her religious life. As Fernandez would eventually explain to the inquisitor commissioner, the people of San Cristóbal de Alvarado held a deep respect for Fernando as a priest and a Christian. Fernando offered the residents regular access to a priest, who could administer the sacraments, give sermons on the faith, and take confessions. In the town, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, as a mulatto man, had acquired a reputation as a devout Christian and an itinerant priest.

From the testimony given by Juan Bautista, Fernandez Luis de Avendaño, and other residents of San Cristóbal de Alvarado, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro had lived an exceptional life as a mulatto priest, a missionary, and a devout Christian. When authorities finally ordered his arrest on the grounds that “although he is not a priest, he says mass,” his reputation and the “public knowledge” of his priestly obligations and religious devotion complicated the accusations brought against him. Ecclesiastical authorities involved in the investigation were initially concerned that a mulatto man and the bastard child of a San Juan clergyman had falsified his claims to priesthood, committing a serious crime and a challenge to the church hierarchy. Under ecclesiastical policy, persons defined as “black, mulatto or mestizo” or “those who suffer from some natural defect,” such as illegitimacy, were unable to receive ordination in the church. Despite this ecclesiastical apprehension, the majority of witnesses interrogated by

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4 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, folio 25r.
5 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, folio 25r.
6 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, folios 6r, 24r.
the commissioner appeared unconcerned about Fernando’s racial background and social status. Instead, each witness discussed Fernando’s devotion to his priestly obligations and pious Christian nature. When they did question his status as a priest, their concern rested on the fact that he “lived scandalously” with an enslaved woman, a life unbecoming of a clergyman. Race appears to have little effect on their opinion of Fernando.8

Fernando’s unique experience underscores a fundamental aspect of how black Catholics navigated their status as racialized subjects to express their conceptions of the Catholic faith. In the towns he visited, his familiarity with popular Catholic practices, reputation as a pious person, and his personal ties with the church clergy all outweighed potential concerns about his racial background. During his time in Veracruz, for example, Fernando maintained a close connection with Juan de Padilla, the priest at the city’s main cathedral. At Juan’s encouragement, Fernando conducted mass for the residents of Veracruz and assisted in the daily functions of the parish. Upon his death bed, Juan de Padilla trusted Fernando to say his last rites and the sacrament of extreme unction, a ceremony which prepared the soul for its ascension into heaven.9 The residents of the villages surrounding Veracruz similarly held Fernando in high regards. Manuel de San Pedro, a black slave in service at the cathedral, attended his mass “every day at the same time” to receive the holy sacrament of the Eucharist.10 A Spanish resident of Veracruz, Leonora de Torres, also elected to have Fernando take her confession and offer her the “most holy sacrament in her home.”11 The local, intimate connections with the Catholic clergy and lay

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8 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folio 56r.
9 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folio 52r.
10 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folio 77r.
11 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folio 77r.
devout established by Fernando, like countless other black creoles, afforded him an authoritative space where he acquired a social standing as a lay religious leader.

This chapter draws from cases like Fernando’s to discuss how notions of familiarity and intimacy directed the reception of the personal religious choices of the community’s black parishioners. Everyday interactions, which included more intimate connections that revolved around the lifelong friends and formative ties, provided their fellow parishioners with an intimate knowledge of black Christian practices. In the social spaces associated with the barrio of their childhood, black parishioners discussed their conceptions of appropriate Catholic behavior and participated in extensive forms of communal worship, interacting on a daily basis with a remarkably varied group of people. These social interactions served as a means for persons of African descent to construct religious lives premised on familiarity, intimacy, and shared spirituality. Familiarity granted black parishioners reputations as “very good Christians” that, in turn, affected their reception as spiritual leaders of their religious communities, regardless of their racial heritage.

Favorable reception among a laity who served as the eyes and ears of the Holy Office remained a necessity for black Catholics. An informant’s familiarity with black private lives and religious practices, through rumors, gossip, or firsthand accounts, fueled denunciations that led to lengthy interrogations that immediately called into question the personal religious choices adopted by black Catholics. Arrest by ecclesiastical officials and, in some cases, public sentencing at the auto de fé only further discredited black parishioners’ claims to religious knowledge in their local communities. But familiarity and intimacy with the religious lives of black parishioners also contributed to a broader acceptance of their personal spiritual choices, eventually leading to their recognition as lay religious leaders.
In the sacred and secular spaces of their parochial centers, parishioners of various hues assessed the spiritual devotions of their black neighbors. They witnessed public communal devotions, discussed the specific ideas, beliefs, and practices that formed their conceptions of worship, and eventually judged the religious behavior of their fellow black parishioners, at times considering it virtuous and worthy of emulation, even almost saintly. In time, this intimate social formation cultivated a cultural landscape where creoles of African descent recognized as devout, knowledgeable Christian subjects occupied informal social positions of lay religious leadership despite differences in legal status. For colonial parishioners, familiarity with the religious behavior and intimacy with the private lives of their black neighbors overshadowed concerns about racial heritage that otherwise would have prevented black parishioners from occupying positions of leadership within their communities.

Even though ecclesiastical policies forced their exclusion from official positions of spiritual authority – as priests, mendicant brothers, or deacons – blacks engaged in a popular religious experience with their fellow parishioners that tempered the effects of these discriminatory practices. In the secular and sacred spaces of the colonial parish, individuals of African descent discussed their conceptions of the Catholic faith with the people they interacted with on a daily basis. Black individuals, like Isidro de Peralta, spoke with various Spaniards, natives, and persons of mixed descent about their efforts to form confraternities in devotion to Saint Augustine. Others, including Pedro Antonio in Antequera, conducted spiritual exercises or devotional prayers with their neighbors and friends. Returning to Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, he administered the holy sacraments to the Spanish and Africans individuals who attended the local churches in the Veracruz countryside. Put another way, as their friends, family, neighbors, and casual acquaintances learned about their personal religious choices, electing to participate in
their communal and private devotions, black parishioners acquired a reputation as a person knowledgeable in the Catholic faith. With reputations as “very good Christians” who maintained a comprehension of appropriate religious behavior, black individuals became trusted spiritual advisers who shaped local expressions of the Catholic faith regardless of their racial classification.

The extensive legislation directed toward limiting the rights and obligations of the colony’s black population did not necessarily preclude persons of African descent from acting as active participants in the cultural formation of New Spain’s religious landscape. Ecclesiastical authorities may have prevented Africans and their descendants from occupying influential positions within the ecclesiastical order, reserving official positions of religious power and spiritual authority for Old Christian Spaniards. But black Catholics deeply rooted in their parochial centers engaged in a popular religious experience with their fellow parishioners in a manner that mediated their racial existence in the república Christiana. In their intimate connections with friends, family, neighbors, and casual acquaintances, they communicated their personal religious choices that shaped the various forms of communal worship in the colonial parish centers. As their fellow parishioners acknowledged their profound spirituality, noting their reputations as buen christianos (good Christians), black Catholics created informal, albeit officially recognized, spaces in the colonial Christian culture where they maintained positions as trusted spiritual advisers.

**Buen Christianos**

In the social spaces of familiarity in the urban landscape and the rural regions of New Spain, the interracial and intergenerational relationships forged by black creoles formed the foundation of a specific community boundary intrinsically attached to religion. Their
participation in communal devotions, including feast day celebrations or confraternal processions, and their attendance at specific religious functions, such as mass or Holy Week festivities, demonstrated their internal commitment to the outward practices of a shared Catholic spirituality that connected them to all parochial members. Through their connections, black parishioners expressed their personal spiritual choices of communal devotions in a manner that incorporated the various individuals who composed their parochial social networks.

Conversations on religious matters, participation in communal practices, and the unwitting observances of private devotion, in turn, all provided members of the diverse Catholic laity with a detailed knowledge of the religious practices and personal lives of their black friends, neighbors, and family members that shaped their reputations as buen christianos, eventually outweighing racial differences. As black Catholics articulated their identities as devout Christian subjects committed to the communal worship necessary for a fulfilling spiritual life, their fellow parishioners observed their personal devotions, directing their reception in their local communities. Whether through rumors, gossip, or firsthand accounts, a parishioner’s familiarity with the private lives and religious practices of their black neighbors fueled the broader acceptance of or opposition to black religious choices, ultimately shaping their reputations as buen christianos.

In her extensive study on the development of the early modern concepts vecindad and naturaleza (native), Tamar Herzog contends that Catholicism remained one of the essential defining features of communal belonging, in addition to a perceived participation in the rights and obligations that were associated with members of Spanish community. She, however, ultimately concludes that Africans and their descendants remained perpetually outside of the rights of vecindad and naturaleza, and therefore the Spanish community, because they were perceived as “foreigners. They belonged to a group whose progenitors – slaves – were said to have never expressed their intentions to become natives.” Here I draw from her discussion of participation in Catholic practices as essential to communal belonging, but I differ drastically from her conclusion, as I contend Africans and their descendants, through their religious practices, gain a degree of acceptance in their local communities. Tamar Herzog, Defining Nations: Immigration and Citizens in Early Modern Spain and Spanish America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 12-13.
Public reception of communal practices remained essential. From the moment of its instillation in the New World, the Holy Office of the Inquisition relied heavily on the denunciations provided by individual members of the parochial networks to gain knowledge of the laity’s practices. Edicts of the Faith read in all sacred and secular spaces of the parish called on parishioners to clear their conscious by declaring all potentially heretical or illicit behavior to ecclesiastical authorities. Whether confessing their own actions or drawing from idle gossip, various rumors, or firsthand experience, informants familiar with the religious practices of their fellow parishioners revealed incriminating evidence to inquisitorial officials that called into question the personal religious choices adopted by black Catholics. Denunciations that led to lengthy interrogations, arrest, and, in some cases, public sentencing at an *auto de fé* only further discredited black parishioners’ claims to religious knowledge in their local communities. In the context of familiarity and intimacy, the private lives and religious practices of black Catholics came under the scrutiny of their fellow parishioners, who determined their position within their religious communities.

Returning to Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, whose case opened the chapter, his familiarity with the various parishioners in the towns he visited ultimately contributed to his eventual denunciation to the Inquisition. In the years prior to his arrest, Fernando visited the small towns surrounding Veracruz where he gained a reputation as “a mulatto clergyman.”\(^{13}\) Few witnesses questioned his post as an itinerate priest. Pedro Ramirez, a Spanish resident of Veracruz, relayed to the inquisitor commissioner that “he knew [Fernando] very well.”\(^{14}\) Roughly five months earlier Pedro had “seen him a few times in the city and had heard him say

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\(^{13}\) AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, folio 3r.  
\(^{14}\) AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, folio 53r.
mass and sing in the major church of [Veracruz] more than forty times.”\textsuperscript{15} On numerous occasions, he spoke with Fernando following the services, leading him to believe that the mulatto man was a devout Christian. Pedro additionally reported that he believed Fernando an ordained clergyman because he “serves the old priest [Juan de Padilla],” who had Fernando “say mass and give the sacrament for the sick.” He even noted that “many other people” believe that he is a priest “because he has said mass for many years.”\textsuperscript{16} Lucas Nieto, a priest at the main Cathedral of Veracruz, provided similar testimony, stating that he had known Fernando for “five months, more or less and had communicated and chatted with him many times during the said time.”\textsuperscript{17} During his chats, he decided that Fernando was a spiritual man, knowledgeable in his religious obligations to the Church and the laity. Each witness who appeared before the inquisitor commissioner following Fernando’s arrest stated how they initially “understood him to be a clergyman because it is public knowledge that he says mass.”\textsuperscript{18}

In the early months of 1605, however, rumors started to circulate that altered Fernando’s position in the towns he visited. Shortly after his arrival in Tacotalpa after a brief visit to Otatitlán, news spread throughout the village that he had “brought with him a runaway black [woman],” with whom “it was publicly said that he was amancebado [in an illicit relationship].”\textsuperscript{19} When asked by the inquisitor commissioner why he started to doubt Fernando’s ordination, Fernandez Luis de Avendaño responded “that he appeared bad” for having assisted an enslaved woman in her escape from her owner, a serious crime that merited justice. For fear of her recapture in Tacotalpa, Fernandez reported, Fernando attempted to “take the woman to the

\textsuperscript{15} AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, folio 53r.
\textsuperscript{16} AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, folio 53v.
\textsuperscript{17} AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, folio 59r.
\textsuperscript{18} AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, folios 24r, 23r.
\textsuperscript{19} AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, folios 25r-25v.
lieutenant of the Capitan of the Black Cimarrones,” a maroon community outside of Veracruz, but Francisco Luis de Alcancó arrested them before they could leave the town.  

Miguel de Cuellar, a Spanish resident of San Cristóbal de Alvarado provided similar testimony. He informed the inquisitor commissioner that he had not personally heard the masses conducted by Fernando but “had understood him to be a clergyman” because “it was public knowledge.” But, like Fernandez, Miguel started to question his claims to priesthood after he heard “how poorly he walks about,” specifically noting that word had reached him that “[Fernando] brought with him an enslaved woman who had fled from Old Veracruz.”

Corroborating Fernandez’s testimony, Miguel added that he had heard how Fernando had attempted to deliver the woman to the “Capitan of the Cimarrones” prior to their joint arrest. Fernando’s supposed assistance in the runaway woman’s escape represented a serious crime in the eyes of Spanish authorities and the colony’s lay, a crime that warranted immediate justice. Combined with his efforts to safely deliver her to the maroon community outside of Veracruz merely amplified this perceived need of justice. Through his actions, Fernando not only exhibited actions that appeared unbecoming of a clergyman, but he also supported a community that actively resisted the colonial government.

For the witnesses interrogated in the initial investigation, Fernando’s actions raised concerns over his ordination only after rumors circulated that he “led a bad life” unbecoming of a clergyman. Throughout the testimony, his racial heritage, which by 1605 should have barred him from the priesthood, had little effect on his reception in the various rural villages. One witness, the Spaniard Gaspar Alonso, questioned Fernando’s priestly status on the basis of his African

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20 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folio 25r-25v.  
21 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folios 23v-24r.  
22 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folio 24r.  
23 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folios 25r-25v.
heritage. Gaspar, a resident of San Cristóbal de Alvarado, reported how he had witnessed Fernando conduct mass “four or five times” in the pueblos of Amatlán and Tacotalpa in the previous months. Immediately following one of the masses, Gaspar approached Fernando to speak with him on various matters surrounding his rights and obligations as a priest because it “appeared bad to him that he was a mulatto and, he had heard, the son of a clergyman.”24 During the course of the conversation, he openly asked Fernando “how are you still able to say mass being a bastard and a mulatto?”25 Unphased by the question, Fernando simply responded that he “had dispensation for everything,” a reference to his dimissorial letters that would have granted dispensation for any obstacles to the priesthood.26 Apparently satisfied with Fernando’s answer, Gaspar raised no further objections to the masses until he appeared before the inquisitor commissioner to give his account of the events.

In fact, the inquisitors initially appeared more concerned with his status as a bastard child of a clergyman than they were with his African background. Throughout the investigation, they received conflicting information on the birth of Fernando and his sisters. Multiple witnesses mentioned how the news of Fernando’s father had caused a great scandal when it arrived in Veracruz, where Fernando lived at the time. They informed the Veracruz commissioner that they had heard that Fernando was a bastard child of a Spanish priest from Puerto Rico, and should therefore be stripped of all recognition and privilege afforded religious men. Contradicting the testimony, Fernando responded to the inquisitor’s questions that his mother was a free black in

24 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folio 23r. Debate over Fernando’s parents appeared throughout the case, with inquisitors neglecting to make a final ruling on the matter. Multiple witnesses indicated that they had heard rumors that Fernando’s father had served as a priest in San Juan, Puerto Rico for some time, implying that he had already taken his vows when Fernando was born. According to his testimony, however, Fernando informed the inquisitors that his father entered the priesthood after him and his siblings had already reached adulthood. Regardless, all testimony agrees that Fernando was, in fact, illegitimate since his father and mother never formally married before the church, marking him as illegible for ordination.
25 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folio 23r.
26 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folio 23r.
Puerto Rico who bore his father multiple children. Only after Fernando had come of age did his father return to receive his orders and take his position as canon in the Cathedral of San Juan. It should be noted, however, that Fernando did not mention a marriage between his father and mother, simply that she bore him children prior to his father’s ordination, which would still classify him as an illegitimate child. A social designation as a bastard automatically barred Fernando from ordination, which would require special permission to overlook. In the end, the inquisitors never verified whether his father entered the priesthood after Fernando reached adulthood as the defendant claimed, or prior to his conception as suggested by the witnesses. Instead, Fernando’s reputation in the communities he visited, combined with his titles of ordination and dimissorial letters signed and sealed by the Bishop of Oaxaca, determined his reception as a priest, not his racial heritage or social status.

In a similar case, witnesses’ familiarity and intimacy with the religious practices of their black neighbors was essential to the denunciation brought against Francisco de la Cruz, an enslaved creole on the hacienda in San Miguel Zinacantepec. In the years prior to the theft of the missal and resulting investigation into his practices, Francisco de la Cruz maintained a reputation among the diverse inhabitants of the sugar mill as “a devout man who prays a lot.” In his testimony, Diego de Fragua, an enslaved mulatto, informed the inquisitor commissioner how, having spoken with him regularly “as friends,” he had always considered Francisco “a devout [man] and a person who prays a lot, who ordinarily serves in the chapel of the said hacienda to pray some prayers and the rosary that he had.” He assured the inquisitor that he “had never

27 For Fernando’s account, see AGN, Inquisición, “Contra Fernando Rodríguez de Castro,” 1605, 275, expediente 14, folio 116r. For the witnesses, see Ibid., fol. 63v. For other examples of literacy among Afro-descendants, see AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, 1694, 693, 2a parte, expediente 11 and AGN, Inquisición, “Contra María Cayetana Loria,” 1778, 1173, expediente 1.
28 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folio 419v.
29 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folio 419v.
seen him dress in the priestly vestments nor conduct any other ceremony,” as other witnesses had claimed, but had “only seen that he was devout.” Francisco, an indigenous resident of the hacienda who guards the keys to the chapel, provided similar testimony. He informed the inquisitor in his native language that on multiple occasions he had “opened the chapel very early on feast days for Francisco to enter into it” to pray. On a few of the mornings, Diego noted that he saw Francisco “enter into [the chapel] and light the candles, collect the missal, and open it and read it without doing any ceremony, and afterwards he stepped down from the altar and knelt and was praying and later he would leave.” In the eight months that he had known Francisco, Diego had never seen him dress in the sacred vestments nor conduct mass, but had only known him to “have the missal” as he had already described in his testimony. Apart from his reading of the missal, an act reserved for the ordained clergy, the witnesses had always viewed Francisco as a devout man who believed that “in this land one cannot be without the sacrifice of the mass.”

As news about the missing missal spread through the hacienda, familiarity with Francisco’s spiritual practices in the chapel added fuel the accusation that he “superstitiously said mass” without being a priest, eventually leading to his arrest by the inquisitor commissioner. In his testimony, Juan Manuel, an enslaved African from Angola, relayed how he had assumed Francisco had taken the missal because he knew that on another occasion “he had taken the missal from the chapel [of the hacienda] which he hid.” In an attempt to rectify the situation, he spoke directly with Francisco as they walked to a nearby town for their confession during Holy Week. He mentioned to Francisco “look, you have come to confess and

30 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folio 419v.
31 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folio 424v.
32 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folio 424v.
33 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folio 425r.
34 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folio 419r.
35 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folio 411v.
36 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folio 420r.
declare if you have taken the missal that had been stolen from the benefice…and other things that are mentioned in the censures [Edict of Faith].”37 If he failed to confess the truth, he beseeched Francisco as friends, “he would be excommunicated” from the church and therefore he needed to “swear by the Holy Sacrament which he was about to receive and to God on the Cross and in the presence of another black [man] named José” that he would confess the truth of the matter.38

Convinced by his promises that he “would not take communion without first declaring if he had taken it,” Juan Manuel did not pursue the matter further, assuming that his devotion to the faith would compel him to speak the truth. A few days later, when news circulated that Francisco had tried to flee from the hacienda, resulting in a search of his room that unveiled the missing missal, Juan Manuel started to question his other practices, noting that he had heard from Mónica, the wife of Francisco, who kept the keys to the hacienda’s chapel, that “she had seen the said black Francisco one night before dawn inside the chapel of the said hacienda at the foot of the altar with a lit candle…praying at the altar.”39 Uncertain of whether or not he attempted to consecrate the host, Juan Manuel simply remarked that he had always believed Francisco to be “a holy black” because “every feast day he would not leave the chapel, praying and reading some [books of] hours that he had,” but now doubted his observations. Juan implied in his testimony that he had believed Francisco acted as a devout lay man, as a santo negro (holy black or black saint), conducting appropriate devotions within the chapel. Only after he heard about the serious accusations brought against Francisco, specifically that he acted as a priest without being ordained, did Juan question whether Francisco was a santo negro or a usurper of priestly

37 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folios 420v-421r.
38 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folio 421r.
39 AGN, Inquisición, Francisco de la Cruz, folios 421r-421v.
authority. In the end, the witnesses’ familiarity with Francisco’s religious devotions contributed to a lengthy denunciation that undermined his reputation as a *santo negro*. No longer did they see him a devout black Catholic, but instead someone who practiced unorthodox behavior and challenged the Church.

As parishioners of various hues assessed the personal spiritual choices made by New Spain’s black Catholics, bolstered by rumors, gossip, and firsthand accounts, they unwittingly advanced Church policies to regulate the laity’s practices, revealing incriminating evidence that called into question the religious behavior of their black friends, family, and neighbors. At the same time, their observations also contributed to a broader acceptance of black spiritual devotions, eventually strengthening their recognition as *buen christianos* or *santos negros* regardless of differences in legal status. In the spaces of familiarity created in their parochial network, expression of a shared Catholic identity, participation in meaningful religious observances, and knowledge of important theological discourse within limits replaced the racial distinctions present in other elements of colonial life.

For Pedro Antonio, the mulatto man whose case opened chapter two, his personal connections to the parochial center of Antequera directed the reception of his spiritual choices among a primarily Spanish laity. In particular, his friendships with the students at the Franciscan college guided how others would receive his devotions and who he would speak with “on spiritual matters.” As soon as Francisco Garcia, a Spanish student at the college, invited Pedro to his rooms to “chat with his colleagues on matters of virtue like [the holy] examples and lives of Saints,” he determined that he “was a knowledgeable man on spiritual matters.” Pedro’s familiarity with the book *Piensalo Bien*, a popular devotional book on mental prayer, his practices of self-mortification, and his spiritual exercises completed in lengthy *novenas* signified
to Francisco that he should impart his knowledge to his friends and family in a series of devotional observances. Initially requesting his presence at the college to discuss spiritual matters with his colleagues, which included some simple exercises of “some prayers…praying twelve creeds and finish[ing] with the exercise with an act of contrition,” Francisco along with José de Guzmán, another Spaniard at the college, in time started to encourage their friends and family to invite Pedro into their home, stating that “he is a very good Christian and a man of the third order [of the Franciscans]…who would speak on spiritual matters.” Francisco and José first accompanied Pedro to José’s grandmother’s house, where he attended their spiritual needs for a couple of weeks. During their conversations, Pedro admitted that he provided his services to Cosme Sánchez, but he offered little more information on the family. With encouragement from María de Avendaño, José’s grandmother, Francisco accompanied Pedro to the homes of Don Pedro de Escobar, María’s son-in-law, María de Prada, Francisco’s acquaintance, and her sister Josefa de Prada over the course of ten months, assisting him in his devotionals. As Francisco García, José de Guzmán, and María de Avendaño acquired a distinct familiarity with Pedro Antonio and his personal spiritual choices, they cultivated his reputation in Antequera as a buen cristiano.

Throughout the testimony, Pedro’s racial heritage rarely appeared to affect the witnesses’ decisions to follow his religious practices. Each witness categorized him as a mulatto man and two of them described him as “very tall in body, a very dark-skinned face, somewhat hunchbacked, black haired with some white hairs, and bearded.” Otherwise, concerns over his racial classification did not surface throughout the testimony. Instead, as his reputation as a buen

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40 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 544r.
41 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folios 544v, 545v.
42 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 542r.
43 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 544r.
christiano spread through Antequera, various witnesses to his spiritual devotion spoke only of his saintly nature. In his testimony, Francisco Garcia informed the inquisitor commissioner that “on one occasion while speaking with Manuel de Campos student of the said College of Santa Cruz about the said Pedro Antonio for knowing that they were friends,” Manuel said to him that they “all believe that this man should be a Saint because I begged him to commend me to God and he responded that he would and later after he came to this college” and told him his devotion to “Saint Francis Xavier who, by his intercession, has commended his life to God.” He agreed with Manuel’s assessment, assuring the inquisitor that he had not “seen Pedro Antonio do anything dishonest or other [thing] that was or appeared against Our Holy Catholic Faith.” For the various individuals he interacted with on a daily basis, the various spiritual devotions Pedro expressed outweighed any potential concerns that resulted from his racial heritage.

In the case against María Xavier, a mulatta slave in San Luis Potosí, the reception of her mystical visions of the Virgin Mary depended entirely on her owner and his family, the neighbors who visited her bedside, and the Jesuit priests who published her account as a holy example. Combined with the already-pervasive popularity of the Virgin’s effigy as a healing image, few members of the mining town questioned her authenticity, viewing the mulatta woman as a holy connection to the divine. Shortly after word spread through San Luis Potosí of the miraculous recovery of María Xavier, who days earlier had received a terminal diagnosis from her doctor, the residents of the town clamored to home of her master, Don José de Luna, to experience the sacred presence for themselves. The initial testimony described how “each of the residents of this city judged one another” as less devout if they “had been unable to obtain a sight

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44 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 547r.
45 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 547r.
of the stamp that they say is on the chest of the mulatta.” Similar to Pedro Antonio, the individuals who fought to visit her bedside, “especially the women among whom there is some competition,” appeared unconcerned by her status as an enslaved mulatta. Rather, the miraculous events surrounding her recovery promoted a public devotion “promulgated from the pulpit” of the local Jesuit church. Father Matias de Esguerra, one of the Jesuit priests, even praised the healing powers of the statue by relaying the information about “the painted effigy on the chest of the mulatta” as “some acts of devotion.”

A final example of how familiarity of the personal religious choices made by black Catholics strengthened their reputations as buen christianos comes from Puebla de los Angeles where Friar José de la Encarnación submitted a written self-denunciation to the inquisitor commissioner for the “fictions and illusions he had with a little mulatta daughter of confession.” Even though Friar José eventually denounced himself to the Holy Office after determining he had misguided “a soul who had arrived to believe such visions and revelations that passed before her in prayer,” his descriptions of his decision to act as a spiritual director of the mulatta woman, who remained unnamed throughout the denunciation, indicates his reception of her devout nature despite her racial heritage. In his denunciation, he stated how “the young woman of the age of 22” appeared before him “with a melancholy complexion and weak of corporeal strength,” seeking guidance on visions that had plagued her during her time in mental contemplation. Concerned that she had been tricked by the devil through the visions, she requested that Friar José provide spiritual guidance through the, at times, troubling scenes that

46 AGN, Inquisición, María Xavier, folio 135v.
47 AGN, Inquisición, María Xavier, folio 136v.
48 AGN, Inquisición, María Xavier, folio 136v.
49 AGN, Inquisición, Miguel Bernardo de Quiros, folio 48r.
50 AGN, Inquisición, Miguel Bernardo de Quiros, folio 49r.
51 AGN, Inquisición, Miguel Bernardo de Quiros, folio 49r.
passed before her. During their relationship as spiritual director and penitent, José continually believed her to be a woman of “special light” who maintained an intimate connection with the divine through “the good visions that this soul had.”

Throughout the denunciation, her racial heritage only served as a replacement for her name, because he felt she did not deserve to be brought before the inquisition, claiming that due to her “short capacity of an ignorant woman” she “did not know” that he had guided her down a path of “idolatry.” Early in the denunciation, he referenced her mixed-descent heritage, stating that she “had noble heritage on the part of her Mother but on the part of her Father had the blood of a mulatto.” But the remainder of the case he focused exclusively on her obedient behavior, even though at times she voiced that “she did not consent” to the path he directed her down, her shortcomings as “an ignorant woman,” and his unwavering belief in the purity of her interior state. Despite her status as a mulatta, albeit one of partial noble birth, he received her as a devout “daughter of confession” who maintained a mystical encounter with the souls of purgatory.

Through their participation in communal devotions, where they outwardly displayed their internal commitment to the Catholic faith, black parishioners conveyed the intimate details of their personal religious lives, situating them in a public theater for their friends, family, and casual acquaintances to assess. Acting within this realm of familiarity, members of the Catholic laity determined the reception of the spiritual observances of their black neighbors, opting to recognize their spiritual knowledge in spite of their status, calidad, or racial classification. To be sure, the laity’s observations at times undermined black Catholic’s claims to knowledge in their local communities, fueling lengthy denunciations and public sentencing that further called into

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52 AGN, Inquisición, Miguel Bernardo de Quiros, folios 50r-50v.
53 AGN, Inquisición, Miguel Bernardo de Quiros, folios 49r, 50r.
54 AGN, Inquisición, Miguel Bernardo de Quiros, folios 49r-50v.
question their personal religious choices. But notions of familiarity and intimacy in the parochial networks established by New Spain’s diverse inhabitants contributed to a broader acceptance of the personal religious choices made by their black friends, family, and neighbors. Through the same rumors, gossip, or firsthand accounts that often lead to denunciations, various parishioners judged the religious behavior of black Catholics as virtuous and worthy of emulation, ultimately cultivating their reputations as buen christianos or santos negros.

**Black Lay Leaders**

Black creoles’ reputations as “very good Christians” with a profound familiarity of the Catholic faith served to mediate the discriminatory effects of ecclesiastical policies. As they navigated their deeply rooted parochial networks to engage in a shared Catholic experience, persons of African descent articulated their personal spiritual choices in a manner that afforded them unofficial positions of leadership within their local communities. Their fellow parishioners, as they gained a familiarity with black religious practices, approached black parishioners they deemed knowledgeable in Christian piety to guide their devotional observances. With support from members of the diverse Catholic laity, black parishioners influenced the communal Christian observances at the center of the religious landscape, serving as informal, officially recognized, lay leaders.

To be sure, ecclesiastical authorities granted a few exceptions to their exclusionary policies, providing an limited opening for black Catholics to obtain minor positions in the Church hierarchy.55 On March 10, 1762, for example, María Eusebia de Aguilar, a free mulatta, wrote to the senior officers of the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Mexico City to obtain a position as “a nurse to the prisoners of the Secret Cells.”56 In her letter of application, she

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55 Twinam, *Purchasing Whiteness*, 119-121, 156.
56 AGN, Inquisición, “Nombramiento de María Eusebia de Aguilar,” 1762, 1063, expediente 5, folio s.n.
informed the inquisitors that she had previously served in the Inquisition’s public cells “without incident” for multiple years, but upon hearing of the “vacancy of the post of nurse in the Secret Cells of the Prison of this Holy Office” wished to seek the new position. The senior inquisitors saw no objections. By the end of the day, those present for the morning’s audience voted in favor of granting her the “title of nurse” as long as she “promised her loyalty and customary secrecy and swore to comply with and keep secret anything she sees and understands could happen with the prisoners who are in the secret cells.” According to the extant documentation, she retained the post for the remainder of the year, receiving a yearly salary of fifty pesos. Apart from the few exceptions, most of which occurred in the later part of the eighteenth century or in remote regions of the colony, ordination remained unattainable for persons of African descent throughout the colonial period.

Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, as a mulatto clergyman, offers the most intriguing exception to the exclusionary policies passed in the second half of the sixteenth century. Receiving his ordination in the minor orders in 1578, seven years before the passage of the council decrees prohibiting such an act, Fernando entered the preparatory posts for the priesthood with the support of Manuel de Mercado, the Bishop of Puerto Rico, and Antonio de Hervias, the Archbishop of Verapaz, despite his classification as a mulatto. According to his testimony, Fernando eventually received ordination in the major orders from Archbishop Hervias, allowing him to “administer all seven sacraments, saying mass, hearing confession, and giving communion, baptizing, marrying, and giving the last rites” for roughly fifteen years in the diocese of Honduras at the ports of Caballos and Trujillo and in Old Veracruz and its

57 AGN, Inquisición, María Eusebia de Aguilar.
58 AGN, Inquisición, María Eusebia de Aguilar.
59 AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodriguez de Castro, folio 115v.
surrounding countryside. Even though the senior inquisitors would eventually rule his ordination in the major orders counterfeit, declaring that he had falsified them in order to say mass illegally, for the majority of his time on the Spanish mainland, he traversed the colony as an ordained priest with the support of New Spain’s highest ecclesiastical officials.\textsuperscript{60} During his time in Guatemala, for example, he accompanied Don Juan Ramírez, the Bishop of Guatemala to Sonsonate, located today in El Salvador, “where he was seven or eight months” administering to the indigenous villages that “were not yet conquered,” adding that after two and a half months of consistent occupation “they conquered them.”\textsuperscript{61} He then returned to Guatemala for a day before traveling to Oaxaca, Puebla, and Veracruz, where he was enthusiastically received by the church officials.\textsuperscript{62} Despite the ecclesiastical policies that had prohibited the ordination of “those of mixed blood, whether from Indians or Moors, nor mulattos in the first degree,” episcopal authorities welcomed him as an ordained priest who assisted in the evangelization process of indigenous communities.\textsuperscript{63}

Fernando’s experience as a mulatto priest, in spite of his eventual sentencing at the hands of the Inquisition, represents a unique exception to the Church’s policies that most black Catholics did not enjoy.\textsuperscript{64} Instead, people of African descent had to rely on the informal spaces that surfaced in the daily interactions with their fellow parishioners to articulate their conceptions.

\textsuperscript{60} AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folios 174r-178r. In his testimony, Fernando eventually declared that he had received ordination in the minor orders from the Archbishop of Verapaz, as originally stated, but that he had never received the major orders that he carried with him. Instead, after he ended up on an English vessel off the coast of Veracruz, where the crew robbed him of his possessions, including his minor ordination papers, he falsified the titles for all orders, major and minor, electing to forge the signature of the Bishop of Oaxaca because he could not remember the Archbishop of Verapaz’s signature. Ibid., folios 130r, 155r.
\textsuperscript{61} AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folios 116v-117r. Today’s archdiocese of San Salvador remained under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Guatemala until 1841, when Pope Gregory XVI erected the Diocese of San Salvador in 1842.
\textsuperscript{62} AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folio 117r.
\textsuperscript{63} Quoted in Poole, “Church Law on the Ordination,” 644.
\textsuperscript{64} AGN, Inquisición, Fernando Rodríguez de Castro, folios 178v-179r, 180r. On February 26, 1606, the senior inquisitors relaxed Fernando over to the secular arm for his punishment. They sentenced him to “be carried through the public streets of the city” before being burned at the stake “until there is no memory of him.”
of appropriate religious behavior, at times demonstrating a subtle form of agency in the direction of their personal religious experiences. In the sacred sites of the parochial church, for example, black parishioners gathered to participate in a communal worship where they collectively adorned the holy altars that stood at the center of their collective devotions. On February 4, 1698, as Nicolás González, a free mulatto resident of Mexico City, laid in bed “sick with the illness that God had given [him],” he requested his last will and testament for all posterity. After “commending his soul to God,” he declared that he wished “to be buried in the habit of the Seraph Saint Francis and interred in the Church of Our Lady of Mercy below the Altar of the Expiration [of Christ]” because he had served as the altar’s founder, offering various religious items for its adornment. As a founder of the altar, in all probability a collective action of a confraternity where he served as a founding member, Nicolás González had a personal voice in the religious objects that embellished the sacred space.

Black parishioners articulated their personal religious choices in a manner that gradually afforded them an unofficial role in the spiritual direction of their friends, family, neighbors, and casual acquaintances. They determined the boundaries of their shared parochial spirituality in a manner that allowed them to remain at the center of the Catholic social and ritual life for men and women of “all calidades.” During the feast day celebrations in Tlalmanalco Juan Bautista outlined the direction of the spiritual care for the cross in the monastery patio and the community more generally. Following his lecture to the crowd, in which he explained how “Christ, our Lord, was very angry with them,” he advised the parishioners that if they “softened their hearts” by devoting themselves to the spiritual care of their community and the physical care of the cross,

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65 AN, “Testamento de Nicolás González,” 1698, Miguel Ortíz, notaría 473, folio 98v.
the Lord would show them favor.\textsuperscript{67} To ensure the continuation of appropriate practices, Juan called upon six prominent members of the community to oversee the devotionals, assigning each person with a specific task. According to Martina Ruiz, he charged Diego Molina, a native man from Tlalmanalco, to “see that he cares for the church and always assists in it” by serving the priests and guaranteeing it remained “very clean.”\textsuperscript{68} He then proceeded to appoint three natives, Diego Hernandez, his wife Catalina, and Juan de Galicia, with the task of “car[ing] for the sick, and not tak[ing] anything for [their] work”; Catalina received the additional orders to attend to the sick children of the town, making sure “she cures and visits [them].”\textsuperscript{69} Combined with a processional around the patio and his discussion of his vision of Christ, Juan’s guidance in proper reverence of the cross installed a collection of local practices that reinforced components of their Christian veneration.

At the festivities for the Day of the Holy Cross, Juan articulated his personal choices for the communal devotions in a manner that guided the native town of Tlalmanalco. For him, the physical care of the cross and the individuals in the community indicated the prescribed behavior that would result in a fulfilling spiritual life. His fellow parishioners agreed. Upon conclusion of his instructions, Juan de Galicia stood before the crowd “saying in a clear voice that everyone who could hear that they should believe everything that the said Juan mulatto told them as if Christ, Our Lord had said it.”\textsuperscript{70} In response to these words, the folks nearest Juan “fell to their knees and put their hands up, spilling tears” because they believed that “all [of his words] were commandments from God.”\textsuperscript{71} Such a reception indicates that the congregation at the chapel

\textsuperscript{67} AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folio 14v.  
\textsuperscript{68} AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folios 10v, 12v, 15r.  
\textsuperscript{69} AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folio 15r.  
\textsuperscript{70} AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folios 14r-11v.  
\textsuperscript{71} AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folios 9v, 11r.
regarded Juan’s suggestions for devotional practice worthy of consideration, and in the subsequent days members attempted to apply them to their ritual lives. In the immediate aftermath of the celebrations, reports circulated that various parishioners visited his workshop at the monastery to further their education in the care and adoration of the cross. Multiple witnesses even referred to Juan as a teacher, though Melchor de Herrera, a Spaniard from Tlalmanalco, informed the inquisitors that “he did not know if they called him teacher for being a painter and goldsmith or for another reason.”\(^{72}\) In creating a form of worship that spoke to the intimate spirituality of the Tlalmanalco parishioners, Juan gained a reputation as a trusted spiritual leader who could convey important forms of Christian traditions.

For Juan Bautista, a debate over the potential heresy of his spiritual devotions, specifically his mystical revelations of Christ, gradually led to the abrupt conclusion of his case. Immediately after his arrest on May 10, 1627, the inquisitor commissioner, Friar Francisco Infante, forwarded the testimony he had collected over the previous seven days to the central office in Mexico City requesting advice on how to proceed. He informed his superiors that his careful consideration of the information at hand led him to conclude that “[Juan Bautista] is a scandalous deceiver in matters of the faith,” who “faked revelations [of the Lord] and with them has caused a great scandal among many natives and Indian men and women.”\(^{73}\) The senior inquisitors in Mexico City appeared to disagree. On May 17, 1627, a mere seven days after his arrest by the inquisitor commissioner, senior inquisitor Don Francisco Bajan de Adornos commanded that Francisco Infante immediately “release the said Juan Bautista, mulatto of the office of goldsmith, from the prison where he [currently] is and that they return all of the goods

\(^{72}\) AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folio 12r.
\(^{73}\) AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folio 18r.
that were sequestered to him.”74 Unfortunately, the conclusion of the case, which permitted Juan Bautista to return to the monastery where he previously lived, provides no further information regarding the spiritual devotions he vocalized during the feast day celebrations, since the Inquisition no longer maintained an interest in them. But his release from prison without a trial or a public sentencing suggests that the inquisitors judged his spiritual directions as acceptable iterations of a local observance.

Black Catholics’ connections with the local clergy who oversaw their public rituals merely added weight to their claims to lay leadership, providing a degree of legitimacy. With the support from members of the Catholic hierarchy, black parishioners guaranteed their practices adhered to clerical expectations of orthodox behavior. Pedro Antonio’s reputation as a member of the third order of Saint Francis, a lay person associated with the monastic order, and his devotion to the spiritual exercises of the Jesuits granted him an authoritative space to serve as the informal spiritual director of the various families of Antequera. When Don Pedro de Escobar y Grijalva, the uncle of José de Guzmán, first heard about Pedro Antonio, his nephew accompanied by Francisco Garcia spoke “very well of a tertiary” who could speak with him “on spiritual matters.”75 After informing his nephew that he “desired to see the said man for the good they spoke of him,” Pedro arrived at his home where he conducted multiple exercises “they disciplined themselves with acts of contrition and singing sacred songs.”76 On other occasions, they gathered together for Pedro to guide them in a series of “prayers for the souls of purgatory and to contemplate the punishments of hell.”77 In his response to the inquisitors question on whether any of his actions appeared against the teachings of the Catholic faith, Pedro de Escobar

74 AGN, Inquisición, Juan Bautista, folios 18v, 20r.
75 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 555r.
76 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folios 555r-555v.
77 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 555v.
assured him that all “appeared in accordance with the Holy Faith.” As a tertiary with the Franciscans and the Jesuits, Pedro Antonio associated himself with the religious orders that offered him an authoritative voice in appropriate religious behavior, allowing him to acquire an unofficial position of lay leadership within his local community.

In a manner not quite dissimilar to Juan Bautista, concerns over the potentially heretical nature of Pedro’s spiritual devotions appeared rather limited. In addition to the support he retained by the Franciscan students and his Jesuit confessors, who never appeared as witness in the case, the inquisitor commissioner, Don José Ramírez de Aguilar, eventually agreed with the witnesses. By the end of the interrogations, José forwarded the testimonies to his superiors with his recommendation that “it appears convenient to me to cease [the investigation] and not proceed forward.” He explained to the inquisitors at the Holy Office that the “eight witnesses along with the accuser” had provided enough information regarding Pedro’s devotional practices that “there was nothing in particular in what was said” to warrant his continued arrest or sentencing. Instead, he recommended to release Pedro Antonio from the care of the Dominicans at their local convent and return the few goods left in his possession. In the two years following José’s recommendation to the senior inquisitors, Pedro Antonio remained “in custody at the convent of Saint Dominic” without word from Mexico City, until he died before a trial could take place. Even though Pedro’s case before the Inquisition ended prior to a full trial, a common occurrence in the slow inquisitorial proceedings, the testimony collected from his followers and the support he received suggests a general acceptance of his spiritual practices that shaped the everyday devotions of diverse individuals.

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78 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 556r.
79 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 537r.
80 AGN, Inquisición, Pedro Antonio, folio 559r.
The interracial and intergenerational social connections black Catholics maintained in their parochial centers enable them to engage in a popular Catholic experience with their fellow parishioners. Alongside their friends, family, and neighbors, they attended mass, participated in parochial celebrations, formed lay religious brotherhoods, and conducted private devotional acts to specific saints. As their fellow parishioners of various hues assessed their religious behavior, judging it as virtuous and worthy of emulation or heretical and deserving of denunciation, they acquired a popular reputation as *buen christianos* or *santos negros* who could provide spiritual guidance in important communal devotions. Their notoriety as “very good Christians” gradually integrated them into the larger colonial Christian community, the *república Christiana*, as religious lay leaders who shaped the popular religious expression throughout the colony regardless of their racial classifications. Within these informal positions, as spiritual directors, speakers at feast day celebrations, or members of the third order of the mendicants, black parishioners exhibited a subtle form of agency in how they articulated the spiritual practices, ultimately placing them at the center of New Spain’s Catholic cultural and social formation.
Conclusion: Black Catholics in Colonial Mexico

Over the course of the proceeding pages, this dissertation has endeavored to illustrate the centrality of black Catholics to the social and cultural formation of the colonial devotional landscape. More than a distant faith characterized by forced conversion, limited religious instruction, and Catholic regulation, Christianity represented the central cultural force in the everyday spiritual lives of countless enslaved Africans and their descendants. Through the ostentatious displays adorning the colonial cathedrals, chapels, and altars, the elaborate public devotions littering the parochial streets, and the clerical regulation of private devotions, enslaved Africans and their descendants encountered Catholicism in its richest formation. They also encountered a church in transition. Colonial ecclesiastical authorities in the sixteenth century endeavored to establish the jurisdictional boundaries of the nascent colonial church while adhering to the reforms instituted by the Council of Trent. Fears of the rising Protestant threat in Europe encouraged members of the church hierarchy to initiate a mass Christianization of the laity by monitoring common devotions and providing appropriate religious instruction. Concerns over orthodoxy among the colony’s diverse Catholic laity, which by the end of the sixteenth century included Spaniards, Africans, black creoles, and various persons of mixed descent, only strengthened Church officials’ pressing endeavors to manifest greater vigilance over colonial lay practices. In the routine interactions of devotional practice – in the church chapels, masses, sermons, and the obligations of confession – ecclesiastical authorities intervened in the religious rituals observed by their parishioners. Since church officials rarely, if ever, distinguished between the Old Christian Spanish laity and the recently baptized enslaved Africans, their attention fell primarily on New Spain’s expanding black populations. Through their interventions
and in confessional moments, ecclesiastical authorities initiated an exchange of cultural religious information that served as the foundation of the black Catholic faith.

African descendants, black creoles who were born, baptized, and worshiped in this transitioning cultural formation, drew from previous generations’ understandings of Catholic tenets to gradually internalize the significance behind the various forms of Christian veneration that structured their daily lives. By the second, third, or fourth generation, black creoles, as colonial Christian subjects, expanded their familiarity with the Christian practices that promoted a fulfilling spiritual life. Connections with secular clergy and members of the Jesuit order, who had arrived in the New World to address proper orthodox behavior among the Catholic laity, granted black parishioners access to an introduction in the finer details of the Catholic faith. The transfer of religious knowledge did not stop with black parishioners. As individuals of African descent navigated the complex social formation of the colonial parish, maintaining intimate connections with persons of “various status and calidad,” they communicated their personal choices for religious practices with their friends, family, neighbors, and casual acquaintances. Their reputations as buen Christianos in their communities afforded them an authoritative space where they served in informal positions of spiritual authority. In their religious discussions, chats on spiritual matters, and their public observances of Christian veneration, black Catholics molded the Christian practices observed by the members of their local parishes. In short, black knowledge of the Catholic faith shaped the local expression of colonial Catholicism, placing black Catholics at the center of New Spain’s cultural formation.

Through an argument that recognizes the profound Catholic knowledge held by New Spain’s black Catholics, the dissertation also sought to revise how scholars should approach the history of black Catholicism in Spanish America. The Catholic faith among black communities
remained more than a manipulation of Catholic institutions, the superficial observance of Christian rituals, or deviations from orthodox customs. Their ambiguous introduction to the basic tenets of the Catholic faith, a result of royal and ecclesiastical policies, did not prevent their profound familiarity with Catholic theological discourse. Instead, the intergenerational interactions that occurred in context of the colonial parish with the secular clergy and devout laity gradually introduced Africans and their descendants to Christianity in a manner that sanctioned their identities as devout Catholic subjects. With their religious knowledge they determined the personal religious choices that resonated with their spiritual worldview, observing the principles of certain religious orders, seeking out guidance from clerical members, or practicing select traditions within their neighborhoods. They attended mass, participated in feast-day celebrations, conducted pilgrimages to local shrines, and partook in devotional prayers in honor of a patron saint. For black creoles, Christianity no longer served as a superficial belief predicated on an ambiguous familiarity with the basic tenets. Rather, their Catholic belief was constructed by their own conceptual knowledge of the Catholic faith, and thus shaped the formation of their own Christian identity.

Writing the history of black Catholicism in seventeenth-century New Spain additionally necessitated a reevaluation of how scholars have understood the development of Afro-Christianity in the New World – a reevaluation this dissertation has sought to offer. To this day, black Catholics represent the largest adherents to any set of religious beliefs in the Western Hemisphere, participating in the local iterations of Catholicism across the Latin American region. But, the development of a black Catholicism among this significant Afro-descendant population has remained largely unexamined by historians, anthropologists, and ethnologists. Instead, a preponderance of studies has associated black religiosity with the Christianity of
Protestant denominations, especially in the history of the U.S. South and British Caribbean, or with the syncretic Afro-American religions of Haitian Voodoo, Brazilian Candomblé, or Cuban Santeria.\textsuperscript{1} Even in studies on black religiosity that reference black Catholic practices, their focus has tended to highlight the deviant nature of their rituals or the “footprint or trace left by Africans.”\textsuperscript{2}

As such, this dissertation has endeavored to offer new insights into the process of Catholic conversion among Afro-descendants in the New Spain, contending for an earlier periodization in the development of black Christianity in the New World and a recognition of the centrality of Catholicism to the black religious experience. From the earliest moments of Spanish settlement, Africans and their descendants in colonial Mexico had engaged in an intimate connection with the sacred principles of the Catholic faith. They navigated the social relationships they forged with church authorities and the lay devout to delimit the boundaries of their Christian education and their subsequent devotional practices, initiating a cultural religious formation that scholars had yet to fully explore. Catholicism in the seventeenth century emerged as a central, opposed to marginal, force in the lives of Afro-descendants. They internalized the religious beliefs of the Christian faith not as a syncretic belief system that reiterated their African


traditions or maintained an African spiritual core, but as a series of beliefs, practices, and rituals that represented an opportunity to serve God, Christ, and the Virgin Mary through a deeply lived Christian experience.

As this dissertation has suggested, the considerable populations of enslaved Africans, black creoles, and persons of mixed descent living in colonial Mexican society had a profound effect on how individuals of various hues interacted with their fellow colonial subjects, the Spanish crown, and the Catholic Church. Though centered on the specific relationships that emerged in the context of Catholic renewal and the ostentatious religious displays of the seventeenth century, the argument presented in the proceeding pages offers an insight into how scholars can approach the rich, diverse history of the black colonial experience – a history that would ultimately move beyond a discussion of the effects of slavery and the racialized colonial order and toward the rich repository of black creoles and mulattos who shaped the everyday structures of colonial life. By situating persons of African descent at the center of early modern Spanish expansion, as colonial settlers, members of the devout laity, artisans, upwardly mobile persons, itinerants, and laborers, it may be possible to render a richer understanding of the social and cultural development of colonial Mexico outside the confines of the Catholic Church.
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