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“From ‘The Weak Sex’ to ‘The Devout Sex’: Women, Gender, and Official Church Discourses in Early Nineteenth-Century Mexico City”

“Disgraceful women! You conspire to your own ruin, to the dishonor of your husbands, to the desolation of your homes: you and all those who foment your lust and caprices conspire to expel our Holy Religion from this realm.”¹

“Devout sex, interesting sex: give to the world a testimony of your piety, of your zeal, and of your religious devotion.”²

Addressed to the women of Mexico City in the differing contexts of the tumultuous first decade of the nineteenth century and the first years of independence in the 1820s, these words of the city’s archbishop, don Francisco Xavier Lizana y Beaumont, and of an official church publication approved two decades later, provide a sense of the very different purposes to which church discourses about women could be put in the period framing Mexico’s independence in 1821. If gendered discourses were a key means by which the Church sought to promote social reform and moral renewal, the specifics of these discourses could vary significantly depending on the preacher, the audience, and the socio-political circumstances of the time.

In the context of the threat to religion posed by the French Revolution, Lizana and other clerics increasingly conveyed the message that, in addition to the promotion of “dangerous” new philosophies, the transgression of gendered social norms was an important part of what had gone wrong in Europe and was leading in a perilous direction in America as well. Of special concern was the behavior of women. Excoriating the vices of “the weak sex,” clergymen scolded women for their purported moral laxity, which the priests identified with their recent adoption of “Frenchified” modes of dress, speech, gait, and social customs. According to the preachers, these habits among European women had

already been instrumental in provoking divine wrath—manifested in the anti-religious excesses of the French Revolution—and, barring moral reform, would in short order lead to catastrophic social breakdown in New Spain as well.

However, not everything feminine was to be condemned. Even at their most vitriolic, preachers also offered hints of what would develop as a new strain in church discourses following independence—one in which women increasingly came to be celebrated as “the devout sex,” specially ordained by Providence to renew society from within through their piety. This paper examines the evolution of these gendered discourses in published, officially sanctioned church sermons and other writings from the opening decades of the nineteenth century in Mexico City. In studying these discourses, I argue that they constitute a significant, as yet little studied dimension of the history of the Catholic Church in nineteenth-century Mexico, offering instructive clues about how the institution evolved and adapted itself to changing political and social contexts in the years preceding and following independence.

Among church leaders and preachers, Archbishop Lizana’s published output stands out as particularly focused on women and gendered norms. For Lizana, if the Church—and therefore Spain’s dominion in America, too—were to be preserved it would happen by reversing the trends that had led to moral dissolution in France—that is, largely through moral and ethical renewal embodied in right behavior among men and women. Precisely because it was in gendered terms that society had gone astray, for Lizana and other preachers, gendered conventions and expectations were not merely incidental means by which to frame their sermons and other writings; rather, they formed

the very essence of what was at stake in the fight to the death in which they believed the Church and civilized society were engaged.

According to Lizana, women's behavior in particular stood in need of reform. Calling women's tendency to embrace luxury "diabolical," he condemned "that nakedness...that transforms each woman into...a phantasm of Hell."³ Many elite women in early nineteenth-century Mexico had adopted French fashions, including dresses which featured cuts deemed provocative by religious authorities. Addressing these scandalous women, Lizana queried, "How do you defend yourself, impudent woman, when...with provocative dress...or all but naked, you present yourself at the foot of the Altar...with excessive adornment of your criminal body, with elevated neck, breathing lust...releasing flames of impure love?"⁴ In another letter Lizana did not hesitate even to accuse women of spiritual homicide: "Do not doubt that each of you who adorn yourself provocatively and provoke souls to burn in lasciviousness is crueller than if you mercilessly stabbed tender children, elderly folk, and priests to death."⁵

In 1808, after unprecedented news of the abdication of Ferdinand VII and the accession of Napoleon's brother Joseph to the Spanish throne had reached New Spain, Lizana issued a lengthy missive dedicated exclusively to the "custom by which wives wear their chests and arms uncovered."⁶ Opening with a reference to the desperate nature of the times, Lizana wondered out loud why women, if they refused to dress in clothes of mourning and moderate their spending on "galas and dresses," could not at least cover their bodies and reform their "shameful nudity." For these offenses against modesty Lizana blamed the French—"impious" traitors and an "abominable abortion from the abyss." For him and other church leaders, the logic of their argument was clear:

corruption of morals came first, facilitated by women, who were innately weaker and more prone to temptation; along with “atheistic” philosophical ideas, this trend then lead to the abandoning of religious faith and the rapid dissolution of the commonweal.

As in Lizana’s writings, sermons given by other preachers during this period constitute a similarly rich source for historians. Like Lizana, members of the high clergy in Mexico City offered clear evidence in their sermons of the turmoil and uncertainty facing the Church. While the emphasis on women’s moral weakness seen in the archbishop’s writings continued in other sermons, the beginnings of a new trend also emerged. Specifically, while many preachers characterized women as lacking in strength or virtue, some began to suggest ways—especially through pious practices—in which women could overcome their native weakness and benefit their families, society and the Church. For example, addressing the young women in his audience, one preacher warned his listeners to resist temptations and conform their lives to the example of the early Christian saint, Monica.⁷ In contrast to contemporary women’s habits of attending the theater and promoting “pomp and vanity,” the preacher emphasized that Monica strengthened her resolve with “silence, mortification...and continual communication with God.” Thus, despite the “delicacy proper to her sex,” Monica rose to the challenges before her with “submissions” and “victorious meekness.” Although the possibility that contemporary young women might follow in Monica’s example likely seemed more theoretical than practical to the preacher given his references to their “pomp and vanity,” it is nevertheless instructive that he and other preachers were beginning to emphasize that it might be possible for women among their audiences to rise to the occasion of the current crisis and renew their lives of piety and devotion.

In another sermon, on the occasion of a nun's profession in 1806, the preacher likewise noted the weakness of contemporary women, prone as they were to imitating the nefarious example of the French.⁸ Unlike the professing nun, most women were expected by the world to participate in an "inexplicable labyrinth of impertinent ceremonies, noisy dances, indiscretions, fashions, vanities, caprices, and other trinkets...of their age and sex."⁹ As members of a "sex idolized by men," women who eschewed worldly temptations were to be commended for resisting the "attractions of luxury, vanity and fashion." Overcoming the "weakness of their sex," these women—again, likely more theoretical than actual at this stage—would form the vanguard of a new population of women in Mexico City prepared to atone for the ill effects of other women's sins and, by their heroic virtue, promote moral and religious renewal.

In the years of internecine warfare following the advent of open rebellion against aspects of colonial rule by the parish priests Miguel Hidalgo and José María Morelos, church leaders in Mexico City responded with continued attacks on the vices of women, which they saw as contributing to the social unrest and disorder. However, many preachers also continued to develop the more positive strain within earlier discourses that had begun to lift up some women as exemplars. For example, one preacher gave his 1816 sermon the following significant title: *Liberalism and the Rebellion, Confounded by a Tender and Delicate Damsel*.¹⁰ Opening with a strong affirmation of the role of women in defending the Church, the author reminded his audience that women, the same as men, were "equally individuals of the human species" and that therefore they too "enter in the plan of religion." Hinting at how women's help could be instrumental in the current crisis, the author pointed to recent verbal and physical attacks against nuns and concluded

that the episodes in fact manifested the Church's triumph through women's piety. Why else, the preacher wondered, would the perpetrators have felt compelled to attack these women—"pusillanimous because of their sex" and therefore in no way a threat—if not because of the unique strength afforded them by their practices of devotion? Therefore, renewal and reaffirmation of piety—led in particular by women—was to be the Church's authentic source of strength in combating the many foes of the age.

In short order a confirmation of this assessment appeared to arrive in the form of Mexico's independence under the leadership of the erstwhile royalist Agustín de Iturbide. Affirming the Church's traditional place of social prominence, the mode of independence secured by Iturbide quickly won the backing of the high clergy. However, in the wake of the rapid fall of Iturbide's empire and the advent of a republic, Mexico City's church leaders would once again need to refine their discursive strategy in opposing what they perceived to be mounting attacks on the rights and privileges of the Church. To do so, preachers once more turned to the rhetorical potential of gendered language.

Continuing to develop the emphasis on women's piety seen in earlier sermons, preachers following independence sought to harness the spiritual practices of "the devout sex" in order to reaffirm the Church's place in society. For instance, in the example cited at the beginning of this paper, one officially approved document from the mid-1820s cited the special role that a religious confraternity's female members were to play in the group's mission. According to the document, women, as members of "the devout sex" were called to offer an edifying example in society with the "glorious fatigues" of their piety and religious zeal; their good works, done with proper devotion, could embody the goodness of God and secure their place among the blessed in heaven.

The generalized sense of the importance of piety for daily life grew gradually more codified by the 1830s with the advent of publications directed primarily toward women, including a series of pious calendars and magazines. Preachers likewise continued to highlight women's virtues. One sermonizer spoke with gratitude of the Virgin Mary's closeness to those devoted to her "through her sex," while others, with an increasingly feminized tone, emphasized the importance of promoting the "sweetness," "tenderness," and "affection" of religion, bolstering the cult of a Savior no longer associated with war but with "perpetual peace."¹¹ Unlike earlier sermons, therefore, by the 1820s and 30s preachers in Mexico City were offering a message tied less to women's moral failings and more to the inculcation of habits of piety that women embodied and which, in their view, would help fortify the Church against its enemies.

As these later sermons and other sources demonstrate, one of the priorities of Mexico City's high clergy in the aftermath of independence was to respond decisively to what they perceived as burgeoning attacks on the Church. However, what was different by the 1830s was that preachers were now equating the duty to which they called their audiences with practices of pious devotion, frequently associated with women. In contrast to earlier iterations, the authentic solution for society's problems now rested with strengthening its foundations in the piety of the faithful. Promoting a kind of feminization of religion meant to be inclusive of both men and women, the Church emphasized that the surest way forward lay with summoning courageous responses to reigning importunities precisely through celebration and cultivation of virtues traditionally associated with women—that is, by way of renewed participation by all in practices associated with members of "the devout sex."

¹ See Francisco Xavier de Lizana y Beaumont, *Carta pastoral que el Ilmo. Señor D. D. Francisco Xavier de Lizana y Beaumont, por la gracia de Dios, y de la Santa Sede Apostolica, Arzobispo de México, del consejo de S. M. etc. Dirige á sus Diocesanos sobre la santidad de nuestra sagrada Religion, y las obligaciones que nos impone* (Mexico City: Oficina de la Calle de Santo Domingo, 1807), 21: “¡Desgraciadas mugeres! vosotras conspirais á vuestra ruina, al deshonor de vuestros maridos, á la desolacion de vuestras casas: vosotras y todos los que fomentan vuestro luxo y caprichos conspiran á que nuestra Santa Religion transmigre á otras partes y á que falte la fé de este dichoso Reyno.”

² See *Estatutos para las señoras archicofrades de la muy ilustre archicofradia de ciudadanos de la Santa Veracruz: Mandados observar en Junta general de la misma, y aprobados por las potestades eclesiástica, política y civil, en el presente año de 1825* (Mexico City: Imprenta del ciudadano Alejandro Valdés, 1825), 9-10: “Sexô devoto, sexô interesante, dad al mundo un testimonio de vuestra piedad, de vuestro zelo, y de vuestra religion[.]”

³ See Francisco Xavier de Lizana y Beaumont, *Carta pastoral que el Ilmo. Señor doctor D. Francisco Xavier de Lizana y Beaumont Arzobispo de Mexico, del Consejo de Su Mag. etc. dirige á los fieles de su arzobispado sobre la grandeza de nuestra Santa Religion, en lo que enseña, manda creer y practicar.* (Mexico City: Imprenta Madrileña, 1803), 26-27: “¿Vuestra carne y miembros son de Jesu Christo ó del mundo y del diablo? ¿Podeis decir sin mentir, que no habeis adorado mas que al Señor y seguido su Evangelio? ¿Qué quiere decir ese luxo diabólico en las Señoras, y esa desnudez en la gente comun que transforma á cada una de las mugeres en una deidad, ó en un fantasma del Infierno?”

⁴ See Lizana, *Carta* (1803), 27-28: “¿Qué me dices á esto muger atrevida, que ó con un trage provocativo, si tienes con que adornarte, y eres Señora de calidad, ó casi desnuda, si eres de la clase comun, te presentas al pie de los mismos Altares? Tú, que con el adorno excesivo de tu criminal cuerpo, con la cerviz erguida, respirando luxuria, no satisfecha con circular y vaguitar por las calles, plazas, paseos y otros sitios, despidiendo llamas del amor impuros, vas al templo á desafiar á tu Dios, y te vuelves á casa llena de orgullo, por haber robado las atenciones de todos.”

⁵ See Francisco Xavier de Lizana y Beaumont, *Carta pastoral que el Ilmo. Señor D. D. Francisco Xavier de Lizana y Beaumont, por la gracia de Dios, y de la Santa Sede Apostolica, Arzobispo de México, del consejo de S. M. etc. Dirige á sus Diocesanos sobre la santidad de nuestra sagrada Religion, y las obligaciones que nos impone* (Mexico City: Oficina de la Calle de Santo Domingo, 1807), 25-26: “[N]o dudéis que cada una de vosotras adornada provocativamente es mas cruel abrasando en la lascivia á las almas, que si destrozara á puñaladas los cuerpos sin perdonar ni á los tiernos niños, ni á los ancianos, ni á los sacerdotes[.]”

⁶ Francisco Xavier de Lizana y Beaumont, *Instruccion del Ilmo. Señor Don Francisco Xavier de Lizana y Beaumont, Arzobispo de México, del consejo de S. M. etc. Sobre la costumbre de llevar las Señoras el pecho y brazos desnudos* (Mexico City: Oficina de Doña María Fernandez de Jauregui, 1808).

⁷ Rafael Antonio de Puga y Araujo, *La Judit de la ley de gracia. Elogio que en obsequio de la gloriosa viuda, Santa Monica, Madre del Gran Doctor San Agustin, dixo en la*

iglesia de la Real Congregacion del Oratorio de esta corte el R. P. D. Rafael Antonio de Puga y Araujo, Presbítero de la misma Congregacion, el dia 4 de mayo de 1804 (Mexico City: Don Mariano de Zúñiga y Ontiveros, 1804).

⁸ Dionicio Casado, *Sermon que en la profesion religiosa, que en el Convento de la Encarnacion de Méxcio hizo el dia 6 de julio la R. M. Sor Maria Genara de Santa Teresa, hija del Señor Don Felix Quijada y Ovejero, Oidor que fué de esta Real Audiencia* (Mexico City: D. Mariano José de Zúñiga y Ontiveros, 1806).

⁹ See Casado, *Sermón* (1806), 8: “¿[Q]ué fines podrá haber tenido [la] Providencia en dotaros de una alma naturalmente sencilla y tímida, de un carácter genialmente pacífico y enteramente opuesto á aquel inexplicable laberinto de ceremonias impertinentes, etiquetas bulliciosas, charlatanerías, modas, vanidades, caprichos, y otras fruslerías que en vuestra edad y sexô pide la vida del mundo?”

¹⁰ José de San Bartolomé, *El liberalismo y la rebelion confundidas por una tierna y delicada doncella. Sermon predicado el dia 15 de mayo de 1816 en la profesion solemne de la R. M. Maria de la Encarnacion, religiosa de velo negro en el observantisimo convento de Santa Teresa la Antigua, hija de los señores D. Diego Garcia Fernandez, capitan retirado, y de su esposa Doña Maria Dolores Quintanar* (Mexico City: Oficina de la calle de Santo Domingo y esquina de Tacuba, 1817).

¹¹ See the following: Manuel de San Juan Crisóstomo, *Sermon que en la festividad del patrocínio de Señor San José, en 24 de abril de 1831, predicó en la iglesia del Colegio de San Angel Fr. Manuel de S. Juan Crisóstomo, en accion de gracias por el capítulo de los carmelitas, celebrado por la provincia de San Alberto, en aquel año* (Mexico City: Imprenta de Galván, 1836), 11-12; Manuel Gómez Marín, *Oracion panegírica, que en la funcion, con que el oratorio de S. Felipe Neri de Mexcio solemnizó la beatificacion del venerable siervo de Dios Sebastián Valfré, presbítero y prepósito del Oratorio de Turín, pronunció, con asistencia del exmo. Ayuntamiento, el R. P. Dr. y Mtro. D. Manuel Gomez Marin, Presbítero y Director de egercicios del dicho Oratorio de Méxcio, Catedrático jubilado de Prima de Sagrada Teología, y Deacano de esta facultad en la Nacional y Pontificia Universidad* (Mexico City: Imprenta de Luis Abadiano y Valdés, 1836), 9; José María Sánchez de Espinosa, *Himno dedicado a la Divina Providencia, ó arrepentimiento de un pecador para alcanzar los auxilios divinos. Dispuesto por el Bachiller D. Jose Maria Sanchez de Espinosa* (Mexico City: Imprenta del Finado Valdes, 1836).