

IMMACULATA

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Possibly the most unusual missionary venture in the long history of Christianity took place in our own southwest. The noted Catholic historian, Dr. Carlos E. Castenaeda, and the eminent Protestant historian, Dr. Charles W. Hackett, record that over a period of eleven years, from 1620 to 1631, Maria de Agreda made over five hundred miraculous visits to America to instruct Indians in what is now Texas and New Mexico. That she truly visited America is attested to in the logs of the Spanish Conquistadors, the French explorers, the identical accounts by different tribes of Indians a thousand miles apart and by the Franciscan missionaries who found the natives so well instructed by their "Lady in Blue" that they did not need further catechizing.

VENERABLE MARY OF AGREDA

Apostle to the American

WHEN THE FIRST Spanish missionaries began penetrating into the vast American southwest, they were taken aback, to say the least, at what awaited them there. It wasn't the terrain, or the climate, or even the heathen tribes and their strange dialects that bothered them. Any good missionary is prepared for these difficulties in untapped territory.

What he is totally unprepared for is finding somebody got there way ahead of him with the Good News he thought he was bringing. This is exactly what happened to the Franciscan Father Fray Alonso de Benavides and the friars working under his direction. To make matters worse, their intrepid predecessor gave every indication of being a woman.

In 1630 the Spanish holdings known as Nuevo Me-jico comprised not only the state we still call New Mexico, but Arizona, California, Texas, Colorado and Mexico proper, their boundaries far from fixed, and overflowing as far north and east as Spaniards could be found to push them. Hardly had the Fathers set up their outposts in this uncharted continent for the Christ who came to save it, than they found themselves suddenly beset by crowds of natives clamoring for Baptism.

Astounded at this rush of unbelievers they had never laid eyes on before, but who were obviously expecting them, they lost no time in asking a few pertinent questions. They were told that a woman who had been travelling around among them for a long time had told them all about Jesus Christ. After explaining the Commandments and the truths of the Faith she had, they said, told them to start looking for the men who would be sent to baptize them. This, apparently, is what they were doing when the unsuspecting Franciscans crossed their path.

Questioning the Indians more closely on the articles of the Catholic religion, the Fathers had to acknowledge that they had indeed been instructed, and that very well. Naturally intent on finding out who the mysterious lady catechist might be who had performed such miracles, they began by inquiring what she wore and what she looked like.

"We never saw anyone like her before," said the Indians.

Asked to describe her dress in detail, however, they gave answers which led their questioners to suspect she might be a nun. One of the Fathers happened to have with him a miniature of Mother Luisa de Carrion, a Franciscan *beata* who enjoyed a great reputation for sanctity in Spain at the time. He showed it to the Indian spokesman, who said the woman who had taught them was dressed the same way.

"But she was much *younger* and *prettier*, not the same person at all!"

There the mystery had to rest for the time being. Fr. Alonso, acting as a sort of field Provincial for Nuevo Mejico in those days, didn't linger for argument. He immediately directed some of his religious to accompany the Indians back where they came from. It was, we're told, a long, hard trip, but the enthusiastic reception given them there was well worth it.

Nothing to Do but Baptize Them

They found everybody so fervent and well instructed in the Faith, there was nothing to do but baptize them all without further ado. Their chief was the first to receive the sacrament, being desirous that he and his family set the example for his subjects to follow. Converts continued

so plentiful in this area, soon Fr. Alonso had to send reinforcements.

Ever more puzzled as to who might be responsible for these continuing conversions, Fr. Alonso left for Spain as soon as his duties permitted. Arriving in Madrid on August 1, 1630, he submitted a detailed report to the Spanish king and the superiors of his Order on the unusual state of their missions in the new world.

The Father General, who had kept abreast of events in Nuevo Mejico, happened to be well acquainted with a

PART I

Indians

By
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certain nun of their Order by the name of María de Jesús. She resided in the little Convent of the Immaculate Conception in Agreda, a provincial town of Old Castile, not far from Soria. It had once been the Father General's duty to inquire into the spirituality of Sor Maria—whose quiet, cloistered existence was fraught with the most extraordinary happenings—and he was convinced of her holiness. He assured Fr. Alonso that beyond the shadow of a doubt she must be at the bottom of whatever was transpiring across the Atlantic.

Too Humble to Reveal

Assuming quite correctly, however, that the humble Maria would never reveal the truth unless compelled to do so, the Fr. General sent Fr. Alonso to Agreda with a special written authorization to question her directly about the whole matter. Accompanied by the Provincial, Fray Sebastian Marcilla and her community's confessor, Fray Andres de la Torre, he arrived at the convent on April 30, 1631 to acquaint her with her Father General's command.

Gradually the whole incredible story came out. Under questioning she was forced to admit that she was indeed the one who had been evangelizing Mexico, all the while remaining obediently in her community in Agreda. Fr. Alonso tested her story mercilessly at every point, but the detailed information she was able to produce under his probing soon convinced the three priests that she could only be telling the absolute truth.

She described vividly the Mexican topography, the people, the kinds of villages they lived in, their strange arts and crafts, their customs and manner of life, as only some one who had been there could have done. She knew



the correct names of all the Indian provinces and tribes. More remarkable still, she revealed that she had seen Fr. Alonso there, and the friars working with him. She could even pinpoint the exact day and hour they had been at any given place.

Under obedience the holy nun wrote everything out in a letter which is still extant. Together with the one Fr. Alonso later wrote on the subject to his superiors in Madrid, it formed part of the formal evidence submitted for her beatification. In an account of the state of her soul rendered later, she says that her concern for the American Indians was inspired in her by our Lord himself:

"That God's creatures and my closest brethren damn themselves has rent my soul with pain since earliest childhood. What I have gone through as a result is beyond thinking. Even then the Lord warned me several times that He wanted me to suffer for his creatures and the good of souls; and the serious illnesses and pain I underwent, His Majesty commanded me to offer up to his good pleasure for the conversion of certain souls.

"It seemed to me that one day after receiving our Lord, His Majesty showed me the whole world . . . and I understood the diversity of created things, how wonderful the Lord is in all the earth. He showed me very clearly how many creatures and souls there are, and how few of these profess the true Faith and enter the door of Baptism to become sons of Holy Church. It was heart-breaking to see his plentiful redemption reaching so few. I saw perfectly the point of the Gospel, that many are called but few are chosen. The Most High created all to know, love and serve Him, and they are very few who profess the Faith as compared with the many heathens, idolators, Mohammedans and heretics there are.

Most Disposed for Conversion

" . . . He told me the segment most disposed to conversion, and towards whom his mercy most inclined, were those of New Mexico and others in that area. The Most High's revelation of his will in this matter moved me to renewed sentiments of love of God and neighbor and to pleading for these souls from the depth of my own.

"Another day . . . His Majesty showed me those Indian nations in greater detail. . . . The information I was receiving was clearer and more distinct on the manners and appearance of the people, their disposition and need for ministers who would set them on the path of knowledge of God and his holy Faith. . . . As for me, it seemed that I was admonishing them, begging them to go look for ministers of the Gospel to instruct and baptize them, and that I knew them, what's more.

"How this was done, I don't think I can say. Whether I went there really and truly in body or not, I can't say for sure. No wonder it's uncertain, since St. Paul had greater light, and confessed that he was raised to the third heaven, yet he didn't know whether he was in the body or out of it. What I can say for sure in all truth is that this was indeed the case in actual fact, and that to my knowledge I had nothing to do with the devil, nor did I suffer any ill effects."

She goes on to say that she was nevertheless fully aware of being in a different country, where the climate was hotter, the food coarser, and where the people used a primitive kind of torch for their lighting. She knew perfectly well that she was catechizing them and that they were accepting it all, "rejoicing in their good fortune and making some kind of genuflection." She brought nothing back with her. She wouldn't have done so in any case, she says, because the Lord had taught her that "neither in thought, word or deed should I be drawn to crave, seek, or touch anything unless it please the divine will.

" . . . Neither was I able to see how I travelled, or whether I was carried. Inasmuch as I was in ecstasy, it wasn't possible. Nevertheless sometimes I seemed to see the world, where it was night in some places and day in others, and fair weather in some and raining in others, and

the sea and all its beauty . . . but all this could have been shown to me by the Lord."

The whole business was so extraordinary she can hardly believe it herself, but "on one occasion it seemed to me I gave those Indians some rosaries. I had them with me and distributed them, and I never saw the rosaries again. . . . Also, I was acquainted with the wars they were engaged in, and that they didn't fight with weapons like those over here, but with instruments for shooting rocks, like slingshots, and with wooden bows and spears, and while the battle was in progress it seemed to me I was praying and keeping my hands raised for them, and that I was sympathizing with their sufferings."

She concludes by saying she had fifty or more such contacts in the New World over the course of three years. As to how it was done, she suggests that maybe an angel did it, assuming her form, all the while she was being miraculously informed of events back in her convent.

She was certainly there somehow. Telling his side of it, Fr. Alonso was thrilled to learn that she had accompanied him in baptizing the Piro. He tells us, "She also helped the fortunate Fr. Cristobal de Queros with some baptisms, describing his actual personal and facial characteristics to the point of saying that although he is old, his hair isn't very gray; that he is long-faced and ruddy-complexioned; and that once when the Father was baptizing in his church so many Indians were coming in they were blocking the doorway. She dispersed them and sent them to their places with her own hands so they wouldn't get in the way. The Indians wondered who was separating them, and laughed at not being able to see who was doing it!

She Gave Very Many Details

" . . . The details she gave were so many that even I had forgotten them, and she had to refresh my memory. When I asked her why she never deigned to let us see her, inasmuch as the Indians saw her, she replied that the Indians needed to and we didn't—that the Lord arranged it all." Like all true mystics, she was very matter-of-fact and concerned only with essentials.

She had seen Fr. Ortega in danger of death on the road from Quivira eastward as a result of the devil's opposition. It seems that Satan had deceived the eastern Indians into believing that they would be enslaved if they became Christians. They wouldn't permit Christian Indians to pass through, much less foreign religious, whom they threatened to kill. Ven. Mary had knowledge of the martyrdom of Christian Indians at the hands of unconverted neighbors; nevertheless conversions always occurred as long as the soldiery gave good example. She later told the Fathers that St. Francis had obtained from our Lord that Indians would be converted at the mere sight of his friars' habits!

(to be concluded next month)