

JERÓNIMO DE MENDIETA (1525–1604)
HISTORIA ECLESIAÍSTICA INDIANA (1571–1596)

Although on the one hand these servants of God were heartily content at seeing how the people attended their sermons and listened to their doctrine, on the other hand they suspected that the Indians might be attending church merely to comply superficially with the orders given them by their nobles in order to deceive the friars, and that this might not be a sincere movement by the people to seek the remedy for their souls by renouncing the worship of the idols. And the friars persuaded themselves that this was indeed the case, for they were told that, while in public the Indians no longer made their old sacrifices, which usually involved the killing of men, in the secret spaces of the hills and in fearful, remote places, and at night in the temples of the demons which were still standing, they continued to make their sacrifices, and in the temples they performed their old ceremonies, chants, and drunken celebrations.

Seeing this, the friars wrote to the governor Don Fernando Cortés . . . asking him to give rigorous orders that the sacrifices and services of the demons be stopped, because as long as they went on, the preaching of the ministers of the church would be in vain. The governor very swiftly did as they asked. But the secular Spaniards, who had to execute the punishments and search out the delinquents, and who were occupied in building their houses and in taking their tribute from the Indians, were satisfied as long as no one committed a public homicide before their eyes; as to the rest, they cared nothing about it.

So business went on as usual, and the idolatry continued . . . [so] the friars agreed to begin destroying the temples, and not to stop until they were all burned to the ground, and the idols likewise destroyed and eradicated, even though in doing this they would place themselves in mortal danger. They carried out their plan, beginning in Texcuco, where there were very beautiful temples with fine towers, and this was in the year 1525, the first day of the year. And then they destroyed the temples of Mexico, Tlaxcala, and Guexozingo. The friars took with them the children and young men they had raised and instructed, the sons of the Indian lords and nobles . . . and they also received help from the common people who were already converted and wanted to prove that they were confirmed in the faith.

[H]ad there been no friars . . . there would have been no people in the world poorer and more miserable than the Spaniards who lived in New Spain, once the Indians had been finished off. And they would have had no Indians were it not for the tenacity of the friars in defending those Indians: otherwise, how many years would it have been before all of the Indians died, just like the Indians of the islands had done? . . . [T]he friars have been the cause of the conservation of the Indians wherever they have been. Because it is only in those places where they have had charge of indoctrination that there are Indians in large numbers; elsewhere, they have been consumed by forced servitude.

Taken from Jerónimo de Mendieta, "The Spiritual Conquest," in *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, eds. Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 117–118, 120–121.