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SEAFARING NUNS

The Journey of Six Capuchin Sisters from Toledo to Mexico City, 1665

Frieda Koeninger and
Raquel Gutiérrez Estupiñán

In the medieval city of Toledo, Spain, with its narrow, winding streets, Abbess Josefa Lucía watched over with caring eyes her flock of about thirty sisters of the Order of Capuchin Poor Clares. The convent was twenty-three years old, having been founded by members from Madrid as a female branch of the reform of the Franciscan Friars.¹ These Minor Capuchin sisters strictly followed the Rule of Saint Clare. Before entering, a prospective nun had to dispose of all her property and give all material gains to the poor. Inside the convent in Toledo, they lived a totally cloistered life. Thus, they rarely, if ever, set foot outside again. As befitted a cloister, the portress and the abbess each held one key to the two different

¹ Emilia Alba González, "Presencia de América en Toledo: Aportación cultural y social: El establecimiento de las Capuchinas toledanas en Nueva España" (PhD dissertation, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1998), 9–10.

locks that secured the door. The portress stayed in a cell near the door during the day. Next to the door was a wheel, through which objects could be passed back or forth, and a speak-window through which one could communicate.² The sisters heard mass from behind a lattice or grill that was covered by a curtain on the inside. Their main contact with the outside world was through their confessor. No one outside of the convent saw their faces, not even the confessor, for their veils completely hid their faces. As Saint Clare had expressed, all were to “cover their heads in all humility, decency, and religiosity, without any curiosity, or vanity. . . in such sort that none may ever see them in the full face.”³ The nuns wore a habit of black wool, and a black wool cape and wimple that reached to the tips of their hands. Their undergarments were made from a coarse fabric; the color was not specified, but these “two undercoats are granted them, only for warmth and for the decency of the body.”⁴ Sisters were also instructed to remain “barefoot in sign of humility, poverty, and mortification of the sensuality,” following the examples of Christ and Saint Clare, although they sometimes might wear wooden clogs.⁵ All slept in the same room, on straw mats. Because of their austere piety, their prayers wrought miracles, according to some. They followed a ritual of prayers, meditation, confession and penitence. The penitence, or “discipline,” as it was euphemistically called in the Rule, was practiced twice a week, except during Advent and Lent, when it was practiced three times a week.⁶ This probably consisted of self-flagellation with nettles, and the purpose was “to keep the body better subject to the spirit, and in remembrance of the Passion.”⁷ They normally ate only one meal a day, mostly vegetarian, unless a sister was ill or weak.⁸ The sisters might labor on their needlework, but as a group endeavor and only for charitable purposes. They were instructed to have no concern for money, as God would provide.⁹

That year, 1654, they received unusual news: King Philip IV bestowed an honor on their confessor. The king appointed him as the new archbishop of Mexico City. Matheo Sagade Bugueiro had been their confessor for four

² Saint Clare of Assisi, *Declarations and Ordinances Made Upon the Rule of Our Holy Mother, Saint Clare*, translation Elizabeth Evelinge (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002), 112–14.

³ Saint Clare of Assisi, *Declarations*, 46.

⁴ Saint Clare of Assisi, *Declarations*, 32.

⁵ Saint Clare of Assisi, *Declarations*, 37.

⁶ Saint Clare of Assisi, *Declarations*, 46.

⁷ Saint Clare of Assisi, *Declarations*, 46.

⁸ Saint Clare of Assisi, *Declarations*, 47–48.

⁹ Saint Clare of Assisi, *Declarations*, 52.

years, and they evidently thought highly of him. Always optimistic, they saw the loss of their dear confessor as a marvelous opportunity: they would send a group of sisters along with him to found a convent in Mexico City, the capital of New Spain.¹⁰ Little did they know at that time the obstacles that awaited them: the bureaucracy involved in obtaining the appropriate permits, the finances necessary to carry out this proposal, the complicated travel arrangements, and especially the arduous journey that eventually lay ahead. As women, many restrictions limited their ability to act, and, especially, they were dependent on the will and assistance of males at every point, although a few women helped them at critical moments. Their situation as members of a cloistered order necessitated special arrangements. It was not until eleven years later, on 10 May 1665, that six women departed Toledo at last. This article tells their extraordinary story.

There are several sources of information on the Capuchins' project. Francisco de Villarreal, Bugueiro's successor as their confessor, wrote a book, *La Thebayda en poblado*, published in 1686, in which he related the history of the founding of the Toledo convent as well as the one in Mexico City, including chapters about all of the Toledo abbesses and many of the nuns.¹¹ Villarreal's work reads like a hagiography, because he describes the women in idealistic terms, usually as angels, and certain events as miraculous. Other works tell the history of the Mexican convent after their arrival: Diego de Ribera's *Breve relación*, 1673,¹² and Fray Ignacio de la Peña's *Trono Mexicano*, 1728.¹³ Josefina Muriel includes fourteen pages on the Mexico City convent in her *Conventos de monjas en la Nueva España*, 1946, but bases it largely on *Trono Mexicano*.¹⁴ There is also brief information on the voyage in the contracts for ships, found in the Archivo General de Indias, in Seville: their names were not specified, only a reference to "six nuns."¹⁵

¹⁰ González, "Presencia de América," 13–15.

¹¹ Francisco de Villarreal y Aguila, *La Thebayda en Poblado: El convento de la Concepción capuchina en la Imperial Toledo: Su fundación, y progressos, y las vidas de sus anacoretas religiosas que con su santidad le han ilustrado* (Madrid: Imprenta de Antonio Román, 1686).

¹² Diego de Ribera, *Breve relación de la plausible pompa y cordial regocijo, con que se celebró la dedicación del templo del inclito Mártir S. Felipe de Jesús, Titular de las Religiosas Capuchinas en la muy Noble y Leal Ciudad de México* (México City: B. Calderón, 1673).

¹³ Fray Ignacio de la Peña, *Trono Mexicano, en el convento de religiosas pobres capuchinas, su construcción y adorno en la insigne ciudad de México* (Madrid: Francisco del Hierro, 1728).

¹⁴ Josefina Muriel, *Conventos de monjas en la Nueva España* (Mexico City: Editorial Santiago, 1946).

¹⁵ Archivo General de Indias, Contratación, Papeles de Armada, Legajo 3150, folios 18^r and 21^r, cited in González, "Presencia de América," 50.

Most important are a series of letters written by the voyagers themselves back to their sisters in Toledo. These letters were discovered by Emilia Alba González and revealed in her dissertation, "Presencia de América en Toledo" (1998). The personal letters were found in a bundle of 264 documents, including a number of letters to authorities requesting license to make the journey and found the new convent. There are 124 letters from the founders to the Toledo convent, written between 1666 and 1676.¹⁶ These are significant because we can hear the direct voices of the sisters, unfiltered by their male confessor. Also, females' narrations of their experiences crossing the ocean are valuable because, in spite of the migration of thousands from the Old World to the New, starting in 1492, mostly men wrote about these early voyages.¹⁷

This source allows us to respond to Susan Bordo's call for more "concrete, material analyses of the female body as a locus of practical cultural control," taking into consideration cultural representations with "relation to the practical lives of bodies."¹⁸ In her feminist theory, inspired by Foucault, she distinguishes between the *intelligible* body and the *useful* body:

The intelligible body includes our scientific, philosophic, and aesthetic representations of the body—our cultural *conceptions* of the body, norms of beauty, models of health, and so forth. But the same representations may also be seen as forming a set of *practical* rules and regulations through which the living body is "trained, shaped, obeys, responds," becoming in short a socially adapted and "useful body."¹⁹

Following this theory, in the case of our sisters from Toledo, the *intelligible* form to which they aspired was an ideal of femininity that symbolized chastity, especially, but also humility, austerity, poverty, and other virtues related to saintly perfection. In order to achieve the specialized look that went with this aesthetic form, they were required to adjust their appearances so that the

¹⁶ González, "Presencia de América," II.

¹⁷ An interesting collection of writings by Spanish voyagers across the Atlantic, all male, is found in José Luis Martínez, *Pasajeros de Indias: Viajes trasatlánticos en el siglo XVI* (Madrid: Alianza Universidad, 1983).

¹⁸ Susan Bordo, "The Body and Reproduction of Femininity," in *Gender/Body/Knowledge Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 27.

¹⁹ Bordo, "The Body," 25–26.

body hid behind certain clothing and behind closed doors. This was the *useful* body trained to adhere to the *intelligible* body. From one point of view, we could confirm that the intelligible and the useful bodies "mirrored and supported each other,"²⁰ almost in a parody, for the sisters' routine was a saintly image of the body carried almost to the extreme. However, we shall see also, that these six sisters from the Toledo convent, working within the feminine ideal expected of them and within the patriarchal system that limited them in many ways, were able to break the stereotypes of cloistered nuns of their times. Also, while Villarreal's discourse expresses the *intelligible* ideal that he aspired for them, their own letters reveal very human sentiments of fear, affection, humor, and determination.

✱ Preparations ✱

At first the process involved in traveling to Mexico seemed easy. They spoke with Pascual de Aragón about their idea. Aragón, at the time, was a member of the clergy at the cathedral of Toledo and had been their devoted patron since 1647. He eventually would become a cardinal and then archbishop of Toledo until his death in 1677. Aragón promised them that he would do all in his power to help them through the bureaucratic process, first with the king and then with the Council of the Indies. They also approached their new confessor, Francisco Villarreal, who encouraged them. With these important blessings, they then wrote to Archbishop Bugueiro, who had departed for Galicia to say farewell to his relatives and finish arrangements for his journey. Bugueiro answered that he was favorable to their proposal and promised that he would support their request to his majesty, the king. The abbess sent a formal request to Philip IV and, at the urging of Aragón, another request to the Council of the Indies. Indeed, within thirty days, the king issued the license.²¹ We can observe that, although they were working within the patriarchal system, the sisters' initiative and determination drove the process. On the one hand it would not have occurred to them to journey to Mexico had they not been following the lead of a male, their confessor; on the other hand, the women began the process and pushed it along through Abbess Josefa Lucía and her correspondence.

²⁰ Bordo, "The Body," 26.

²¹ González, "Presencia de América," 11-12.

However, many bureaucratic procedures awaited them. King Philip IV appointed Archbishop Baltasar Moscoso Sandoval, of Toledo, to oversee the process. The Archbishop urged the nuns to go ahead and choose the ones who would make the journey, but he also advised them to find financing for their travel expenses. Not accustomed to expending any energy on money, the nuns had neglected to plan a means for financing the journey. Meanwhile, the bishop of Puebla, Mexico, Diego Osorio, was visiting Madrid. When he learned of their plans, he wrote to them and pointed out an additional measure: they should obtain a permit from the civil authorities in Mexico City before embarking on this enterprise.²² It seemed that the king's permission had been the least of their worries, but none of these obstacles discouraged the missionary zeal stirring inside the little convent. They hurried to choose the six founding nuns, so that they would be ready to depart for Mexico City with Bugueiro. However, when he returned to Toledo from Galicia, he told them that they should not plan to journey with him, and he reiterated the need for permission from the municipal government of Mexico City before leaving. But he promised that he would write to the viceroy of New Spain (Mexico), Francisco Fernández de la Cueva, Duke of Albuquerque, requesting his support, and also that after his arrival at his new post, he would continue to aid them in every way that he could.²³

Archbishop Bugueiro's trip was delayed more than a year for various reasons, but he finally left in the spring of 1656. Two more years went by without any news from him, so Abbess Josefa Lucía wrote to the wife of the viceroy, the Duchess of Albuquerque, hoping for her patronage. The Duchess replied with an encouraging letter of support, assuring her that "as long as I am in this Kingdom,...I will seek to assist you with all fondness; and you will never lack a house as long as the Duke and I are here....You must come to us quickly, as the devotion in this Kingdom for my father Saint Francis is so great you will never lack alms."²⁴ Even so, these promises were not sufficient to begin the journey. Again, the sisters, through the abbess, were actively promoting their plan, and were able to obtain the moral support of an important woman, but still they were tied to a patriarchal hierarchy. Soon, another female would support them in a critical way.

Archbishop Bugueiro had not forgotten the humble Capuchin nuns of Toledo and had been seeking financial aid for them, while carrying out

²² González, "Presencia de América," 13.

²³ González, "Presencia de América," 14-15.

²⁴ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 203; all translations from Spanish are Koeninger's.

his duties in Mexico City. At last, his efforts bore fruit: Isabel de la Barrera, a wealthy widow in Mexico City, made out her will, granting ten thousand pesos and several of her houses in a central area of the city for the Capuchin nuns to use for the establishment of a convent, dedicated to the Mexican saint Felipe de Jesús, to whom she was devoted. She stipulated that this gift would be canceled and granted to the convent of the Immaculate Conception, which she and her husband had founded, if the Capuchin convent were not established within ten years of her death. A few months after signing the will, on 1 October 1659, the generous lady died.²⁵ One might imagine that ten years would be enough time for the mission to be carried out. However, the process for arranging such a journey continued to pose so many complications that less determined people would have been disheartened and given up.

In the first place, four more years went by and the Capuchin sisters still had heard nothing from the archbishop nor had they learned of their inheritance. Bugueiro had sent several messages to them by different means, with copies of the will, urging them to hasten the arrangements. Nevertheless, they received none of these letters. Finally, he was called back to Madrid and left his post in Mexico. Prudently, he took with him copies of Doña Isabel's will. As soon as he arrived in Spain, he went to Galicia, and when he traveled to Madrid, he realized that he had forgotten the papers in Galicia. From Madrid, he wrote to the convent and to Archbishop Sandoval, of Toledo, informing them of the good news. But, since Sandoval had not yet seen a copy of the will, he would not act on it. His action was crucial.²⁶

So it was now 1663, and the sisters had only six more years to arrive in Mexico City, or they would lose the inheritance. Finally, they received letters from the executors of the will, Doña Isabel's two brothers, both friars. They encouraged the nuns to act promptly before more time passed. Friar Alonso wrote: "In my brother and in me..., honorable mothers, you will find servants who will serve you and will be the first to beg for your sustenance from door to door."²⁷ The other brother, Friar Fernando, wrote in a less florid style but, fortunately, in a more practical spirit. He notified them that he had remitted one thousand pesos to the captain of the port of Cádiz, Antonio Izquierdo, for the payment of the ship and other expenses that they might incur.²⁸ Early

²⁵ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 204.

²⁶ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 205.

²⁷ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 206.

²⁸ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 207.

in the year 1664, Abbess Josefa Lucía received a letter from Captain Izquierdo confirming that he had received the thousand pesos.²⁹

Now the journey seemed imminent, but so much time had passed that it was necessary to again select the six sisters for this enterprise. Archbishop Sandoval of Toledo appointed the confessor, Francisco de Villarreal, to devise a process of selection.³⁰ Under his plan, four people would vote: Abbess Josefa Lucía, Mother Victoria Serafina (who at different times had also been abbess), a third sister, Mother Vicaria, and Villarreal himself. He proposed that each of the four separately, and in secret, write down a list of six women that they considered appropriate to make the journey as founders of the new convent. When the four lists were unfolded and compared, they had each written down the same six names. Typically, the confessor considered this to be a sign of divine intervention. Villarreal exclaimed that this coincidence was "A strange thing, no less than miraculous...surely manifesting this [selection] to be the will of God."³¹ However, he considered it prudent to make sure these six were willing to make the journey, and the women agreed. Therefore he called the chosen six in and spoke to them:

I reminded them of how arduous was the task, how risky the journey, that there would be a lack of Fatherland and Parents, new obligations would rest on their care, and that if they did not have a vocation for such a long mission, or will to leave their convent, they did not have the obligation to go.... They prostrated themselves, humbled and confused, considering themselves unworthy of being chosen among so many who were better, in their opinion, and they responded that they completely resigned themselves to the will of God and of their Prelates...and that neither their parents nor their Fatherland would detain them, nor did the risks and labors of the pilgrimage frighten them, gleefully offering themselves to death, so that God and their Holy Religion might be served. The conference ended in tears, everyone praising God.³²

They ranged in ages from thirty to forty-eight; all had professed when they were in their twenties. Three were from Toledo; one each from Guadalajara,

²⁹ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 207.

³⁰ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 208.

³¹ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 208.

³² Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 209–10.

Madrid and Cuenca. María Felipa, thirty-nine years of age, was selected as the abbess. The others were María, forty-eight; Lorenza Bernarda, forty-three; Clara, thirty-seven; Jacinta Juana, thirty-two; and Teresa María, thirty. Clara was a lay sister, who would serve the community in domestic chores, especially in the kitchen. She was probably illiterate, whereas the others could read and write. Villarreal compared the chosen six to stars: "Receive, most Noble and August City of Mexico with benignity this voluntary offer, as a service to God and to obey you, six Stars from the Firmament of the Capuchins of Toledo; they will not be erratic, rather firm and stable in esteeming your favors, your alms, your veneration, and upon spreading their light...your glories will shine."³³

Although everything now appeared to be ready, bureaucratic measures continued to delay their departure. Essential was a license from the king's Government Council in Madrid. Villarreal dispatched to the Council the names of the six, a copy of Doña Isabel's will, and a copy of the one thousand peso guarantee in the port of Cádiz. When the Council replied, they noted that an important document was missing: a license from the archbishop of Mexico City. Their friend, Bugueiro, was now back in Spain and ready for his new assignment in León, so obviously he would not be returning to Mexico. A new archbishop of Mexico had not yet been appointed; therefore, who could sign such a permit? After much fretting, Bugueiro decided it would be legal for him to ratify the previous licenses, which he did, and this was accepted by the Council.³⁴

But there were still more problems to surmount. Respectable women could not travel alone on the seas without a protector. The nuns had to travel under someone's responsibility. A new viceroy had been appointed to Mexico, the Marquis of Mancera, Antonio Sebastián de Toledo. The six women planned to travel under the protection of the viceroy and his wife, Leonor Carreto; this had been stated in the license. However, the viceroy departed before the nuns could finish their arrangements. A new license had to be requested, specifying another protector.³⁵ Take into consideration also, that Spanish fleets at that time left Cádiz only about every six months. Therefore, they would have to wait until the next fleet left in June of the following year, 1665. Fortunately, Captain Izquierdo, of the port of Cádiz, was familiar with all the arrangements for the journey on the ship, and he was their diligent

³³ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 211.

³⁴ González, "Presencia de América," 22.

³⁵ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 207.

advocate in this process. At the same time, Abbess Josefa Lucía, characteristically, did all she could to support his efforts. Following Captain Izquierdo's suggestion, she wrote to Admiral José Centeno, who would be in charge of the next fleet, requesting that the six travel under his protection. Meanwhile, she also wrote to the bishop of Cádiz asking for his assistance. The bishop spoke with the admiral, who accepted their request. The bishop also offered to give the women hospitality in a convent while in Cádiz before embarking. Now they could receive a new license to travel.³⁶

Another obstacle was financial. The deposit of a thousand pesos was simply not enough. The normal cost for accommodations of the type that they required to cross the Atlantic was closer to three thousand pesos. And they had not even taken into account the expenses for the trip from Toledo to the port of Cádiz. Although the abbess kept meticulous accounts of any expenses, she literally did not touch money; no money was allowed inside the convent. As their confessor Villarreal wrote, "Capuchins and money are in discord; it does not know them, and they do not esteem it."³⁷ What had not been clear to the nuns was that Centeno, the admiral of the fleet, was in charge of the flagship, and all other ships were under his command, but he did not own any of the other ships. Each other ship had a different owner and captain. The nuns would need to travel on another ship, not his. Captain Izquierdo, understanding the process and knowing the costs, went to the home of the admiral and asked him to help find an owner willing to accept the nuns as passengers for a price they could afford. Together they spoke to several who demanded outrageous amounts. Then, according to Izquierdo, through the influence of the admiral "and through God, who moves men's hearts,"³⁸ Captain Agustín de Ossa, the owner of the largest ship, *Nuestra Señora del Buen Suceso*, agreed to provide the nuns one half of the stern cabin, for 2,400 pesos. Izquierdo gave him 400 pesos as down payment, and the rest would be paid upon arrival at the port of Veracruz. In a letter to the abbess, Izquierdo exclaimed: "This has been the greatest negotiation that has been made since the sea has been navigated, and all of your graces can give infinite thanks to God and esteem to the admiral for such an accomplishment."³⁹

With these definitive arrangements, the nuns asked their confessor, Francisco de Villarreal, to accompany them from Toledo to Cádiz. He ac-

³⁶ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 213-14.

³⁷ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 46.

³⁸ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 214-15.

³⁹ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 215.

cepted and in addition agreed to finance this segment of the journey, which would cost about one thousand pesos. Now Archbishop Sandoval, of Toledo, granted the license, charging Villarreal with all "the preparations and care for the journey, so that it might be with the appropriate religious virtue, decency and authority."⁴⁰

* The Mobile Cloister *

Villarreal decided that the departure from Toledo should be on 10 May, about a month before the fleet would leave Cádiz. Picture now the next problem. The nuns rarely left the convent, and if they did, they were covered from head to toe in black wool veils. What would Villarreal arrange for them? Essentially, they would travel in a mobile cloister: a horse-drawn carriage, large enough for them to all fit together inside, the windows covered with double wooden lattices and curtains drawn over the lattices on the inside. He swore later that during this trip, neither he, nor anyone else along the route, saw their faces.⁴¹ Throughout the trip, they continued with their daily routine of "prayers, meditation and spiritual lessons within the narrow limits of the carriage that formed a convent as if they were in theirs in Toledo."⁴²

Villarreal interrupts his description of their departure from Toledo to reflect on the temerity of the project, concluding that Divine Will facilitated the endeavor, for Human Prudence certainly did not favor it:

Let us stop while the carriage arrives at the convent, in order to inquire of Human Prudence if this resolution was prudent...to take our six Capuchin Nuns from their cloister to pass to Mexico to found a new convent, when there was lacking what was necessary for the foundation, the houses not being in the appropriate form, the ten thousand pesos spent, four on the journey and the ship, without having the license from the City, nor from the present Archbishop, without taking the appropriate letters from the Prelate of Toledo, who was ill and unable to speak, nor from the Cardinal (Aragón) who had not returned from Naples; without

⁴⁰ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 216.

⁴¹ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 220.

⁴² Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 220.

the assurance that the executors would pay the amount committed in Cádiz for their expenses...one would respond that it was imprudent, thoughtless, worthy of note and guilty; thus Prudence voted at that time and many applauded her vote and followed her; but, according to the results, one must accord even more credit to Divine Disposition, in proportion to the strangeness that Human Prudence found it.⁴³

We should also consider that these nuns, in 1665, were very much aware that this was a one-way journey. They would never return to their beloved country, city, families or convent, so their resolve was notable. In their own way, through great effort on the part of all the sisters, always working within the patriarchal system, they had broken cultural barriers that could have kept them inside the walls of their convent. Of course, in their minds, they were only fulfilling the will of God.

When the appointed day came, the parents and siblings of the founding sisters arrived before the crack of dawn to see them off. Their relatives had already felt the separation when the young women went into the convent, perhaps in their early teens; what were their sentiments now, upon seeing them leave, "never to be able to hear their voices again"?⁴⁴ In addition, important dignitaries were present for the departure. A representative of the bishop, an accountant from the government, the mayor of Toledo, the magistrate of Toledo, and "all the ministers who could embrace them" came to bid the six farewell.⁴⁵ According to Villarreal's account, the chosen six prostrated themselves before Abbess Josefa Lucía, but she had them stand up and embraced each one; then each embraced all the sisters they would leave behind. They all cried and at the same time, Villarreal assures his readers, "they rejoiced in the tight and joyous union in which they had lived so many years, a union which they were willing to sacrifice now for God's sake."⁴⁶ They walked out of the convent in single file, covered from head to toe in their black wool veils. The first one in line was carrying a crucifix in her hands. They approached the carriage, where all their relatives were waiting for them. There were more embraces and tears. Villarreal describes the scene as a struggle between Motherly Love and Divine Love. Divine Love triumphed, "lending

⁴³ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 216-17.

⁴⁴ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 217.

⁴⁵ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 217.

⁴⁶ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 218.

wings to the Founding Mothers, flying to throw themselves into the carriage singing praises to God, that they found themselves again in this narrow cloister, having feared for their lives while they were outside it."⁴⁷ Villarreal often portrays the six founders as angels, in this case winged angels flying into the mobile cloister. Again, he is describing them as an ideal, which conforms to a cultural view of femininity as purity personified.

The trip from Toledo to Cádiz took seventeen days. Along the way, Villarreal sent a man ahead to arrive early at each designated inn, or house of an important person, and assure that the accommodations were appropriate and ready for their arrival. At each destination, Villarreal would enter first and examine the room, then the nuns would enter their room, dinner would be delivered to them, and Villarreal would lock their room, not to open it again until the next morning when it was time to continue the journey. He assures us that they never saw along the way anything else but the room where they were lodged, nor did anyone see their faces. Sometimes along the way, they stayed next to a convent, and the sisters would go for them and take them to hear mass and accompany them back to their room.⁴⁸

Villarreal notes that the road proved to be difficult, with dangerous rocks and holes along the way, causing much discomfort in the carriage. The six nuns, however, like angels, "never showed fear, nor did the coach stop on their account, nor did they ever reveal the nausea that it caused, seeming not to be human creations, but Angelical, who did not feel the heaviness nor the weakness of their bodies."⁴⁹ Those who saw the coach as it went by, or the nuns covered in their black garments, "looked at them and admired them, venerated their Religious zeal, their poverty and silence."⁵⁰ Inside their mobile cloister, they continued their daily routines. The weather was hot during this time of the year in Andalucía. Two of the nuns developed a fever after two nights along the way, but by the third night their temperature was normal again, and they were able to rest well at a convent in Córdoba, where they stayed for three days. When they were only four leagues from Cádiz, they stopped at a Franciscan hermitage to give thanks and eat. They continued on their way, but the outskirts of Cádiz proved to be low marshlands, and soon the coach became stuck. The sisters had to get out, walk up to the road in the mud, and wait two hours until men and

⁴⁷ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 218.

⁴⁸ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 220.

⁴⁹ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 220.

⁵⁰ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 219.

mules were able to pull the carriage back onto the road. It was nine o'clock at night when at last they reached the gates of Cádiz, which were closed for the night. But Captain Izquierdo's servant was watching for them, and he ran quickly to call the captain. An order caused the gates to rise up, and there on the other side was Captain Izquierdo, their faithful advocate, in his coach. He tearfully welcomed the Capuchins to his city, giving thanks to God for their safe journey. The sisters were promptly delivered to the convent that the bishop had arranged for them.⁵¹

Within the Conception convent in Cádiz, they made friends with their hostesses, but our six stayed together in a separate room so that they could continue with their daily routines. Sister Teresa María wrote about their stay. With great humor, she mentions mice in the same sentence as self-flagellation: "We have no greater pleasure than when they leave us alone in a room that they have given us with the great company of mice the size of little sparks, but they are so devout that one night making discipline they kept falling on top of us with the noise."⁵² Teresa María has juxtaposed a delightful personification of the "devout" mice, with an offhanded reference to "noisy discipline." By so doing, she has reduced "the flesh" to minimal importance, in accordance with the cultural concept which idealized "the spirit." At the same time, the humor with which she frames the story brings the incident down to a human, not saintly, level.

Villarreal remained in the area for four more days and visited the six founders every day. When he told them goodbye, again emotions revealed their gratitude, "devotion and tenderness upon this separation for always."⁵³ Sor Lorenza Bernarda wrote to Abbess Josefa Lucía in Toledo, expressing their sorrow at Villarreal's departure, saying "Now, at the time of most need, we are left alone and orphaned."⁵⁴

Let us pause a moment to reflect on the fact that these women were from the interior of Spain and had never seen the ocean. This first encounter proved quite imposing. Sister Teresa María wrote to Toledo with her first reaction. Again, she shows a very human side of the sisters by verbalizing the terror that they feel: "They take us to the windows in the galleries, because the sea is very near. It is somewhat terrifying to see it, but God will help us, as he removed us from our Holy convent to do his will. They say there are

⁵¹ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 222-23.

⁵² González, "Presencia de América," 41.

⁵³ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 224.

⁵⁴ González, "Presencia de América," 39.

two thousand and fifty leagues of water and afterwards, by land, one hundred and twenty."⁵⁵ Although they had knowledge of the distance, they were still unaware of the conditions and trials that awaited them.

* The Seafaring Nuns *

They stayed at the convent in Cádiz until 2 July, when they had been away from home for nine weeks. At that time, there was not a dock at the port of Cádiz, so boarding the ship was not simple, and in the case of these nuns, special care was taken in the process. The admiral of the fleet sent his sister and several other important ladies in their coaches to pick up the six, bringing along for the nuns' ride "the governor's coach pulled by four mules with all the decency and decorum that is needed."⁵⁶ After a tearful farewell, at five o'clock in the afternoon, the six founders boarded the governor's coach, which we are assured "had all of its curtains closed so that they could not be seen from any angle."⁵⁷ Two coaches with ladies and two with gentlemen accompanied the governor's coach. When the coaches arrived at the beach, practically the whole city was standing there. On the beach, in front of this crowd, the bishop of the Canary Islands arrived. He kissed the crucifix that the nuns had brought and then blessed each of them with the sign of the cross. The nuns boarded three sedan chairs, and porters carried them to a waiting felucca, a wooden sailing boat. The confessor of the convent where they had stayed in Cádiz had made all these arrangements and, writing to Villarreal, the confessor in Toledo, he stated that "God was served such that I embarked them in a way that even though there were a hundred thousand people on the beach they could not affirm if they were nuns or capuchins or not who boarded the felucca."⁵⁸ It took an hour to sail to the ship, and during that time, two of the women became seasick, "but they felt better after they vomited."⁵⁹ They climbed the ladder to the ship, and again, those who were on board could not see their faces behind their black veils. Two days later, the ship

⁵⁵ González, "Presencia de América," 41.

⁵⁶ González, "Presencia de América," 44.

⁵⁷ González, "Presencia de América," 45.

⁵⁸ González, "Presencia de América," 45.

⁵⁹ González, "Presencia de América," 45.

moved two leagues further out and then finally, on 5 July, the winds were favorable, and the voyage began.⁶⁰

The fleet sailed in formation. First was the admiral's ship, leading the way. It was a 300-ton galleon, armed with eight large bronze cannons, four iron cannons and twenty-four smaller ones. Its flag served as a guide for the other ships in the daytime and its large lantern at night. Fourteen merchant galleons followed. The nuns were in *Nuestra Señora del Buen Suceso*, the closest to the admiral's ship. Three war ships sailed along the sides of this procession to guard the fleet. Bringing up the rear was the vice-admiral's ship. The route was essentially the same that Columbus followed. They sailed south to the twenty-eighth parallel, then westward reaching the Canary Islands after about a week. The fleets did not always stop at the Canaries, though, in order to avoid pirates boarding and sailors deserting. Heading west from the Canaries, after twenty-five or thirty days, they arrived in the West Indies, where they stopped briefly, then turned northeast to Puerto Rico. In Puerto Rico, water and firewood were taken aboard, and after passing by Havana, they would arrive in about thirty more days.⁶¹

The six nuns found that their seafaring cloister was a half-cabin, a space of about five by four feet. Inside this narrow, uncomfortable area, one can only imagine the suffocating heat and the stench. Personal hygiene would have been almost impossible. It was not possible to wash their dark, woolen outer garments, nor their rough undergarments. Rats, fleas, cockroaches, and lice shared their quarters. The movement of the ship continued to cause sea sickness. But they carried on with their routine of prayers as best they could.

Normally, any passengers on these fleets had to carry on board their own provisions, including firewood. Either the passengers or their servants prepared the food. Captain Izquierdo had arranged that the fare for our six nuns would include food. Two members of the crew of *Nuestra Señora del Buen Suceso* guarded their door and handed food and water to them through a turning wheel, much like the one at the convent. But food was the least of their worries, as we can tell from the words that Sister María wrote from Puerto Rico: "We are all a little better from the sea sickness that has been our labor, and we have all been so ill that all of us have vomited as one. And for me that was not the worst of it, but the huge fear that I thought the ship would sink at any instant."⁶² Again, The Abbess later wrote: "I had to listen

⁶⁰ González, "Presencia de América," 46.

⁶¹ González, "Presencia de América," 50-51.

⁶² González, "Presencia de América," 54.

closely to see that the nuns were breathing, to know if they were alive.”⁶³ On 15 July, around midnight, a huge storm came up, and water began to come in the cabin. They were too sick to help each other. “We thought it was our last hour,” wrote the Abbess.⁶⁴ They began to scream, and several men went in to help get the water out with buckets, and to assure them that it was nothing. But their habits were soaked, and they had to let their clothes dry on their bodies.⁶⁵ We can observe, from these comments in letters directed to their sisters in Toledo, the great terror, as well as the physical discomforts, that they experienced on the ocean.

One of their trunks had been misplaced or stolen. It contained linens, handkerchiefs and other cloths, and even a change of clothing, that could have been useful in their distress. As it was, wrote Sister Lorenza Bernarda, they “gave thanks to God for having a piece of brown paper for our noses, from the ones that they gave us to put on our bellies, and we would give this little scrap to our mother abbess with great joy, thinking that we were giving her some alleviation.”⁶⁶ We can see the growing sisterly love among them on a human level. Their admiring confessor, on the other hand, later considered their trials to be steps toward heaven:

Let us pause in this discourse to observe, ponder, admire the six nuns, anguished with fears of the enraged high sea, fighting with death, who with the knife of sea sickness threatened to cut the thread of life, without even the comfort of a discarded rag, in so much need, in so much scarcity, that a piece of rough paper, because it was not enough for all, was not an alleviation. With pleasure, agreeably, grateful, esteeming God the benefit of their suffering, without satisfying their desires to offer many lives for God, because they were experiencing many deaths. Oh, Vessel, without risk of losses, because one will have certain riches in the best known risks! Oh Indies of Heaven, where in shipwrecks one earns riches, and where to suffer is an enterprise that leaves earnings to those who know how to negotiate! Oh what a fortune would that of the Seafaring ones be! it began with the price of the world, that they left behind; it increased with the austerity and

⁶³ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 228.

⁶⁴ González, “Presencia de América,” 58.

⁶⁵ González, “Presencia de América,” 57.

⁶⁶ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 228.

penitent life that they chose; it grew more with the spiritual merchandise that they carried; and lastly.. with the risk of the Vessel, they obtained celestial treasures.⁶⁷

* Disembarkation at Veracruz *

At last, on 8 September, sixty-five days after they had left Cádiz, the fleet arrived in Veracruz. Now, to disembark, they again boarded a felucca. Their feet did not touch the sand, for the wife of the governor, Ana Francisca de Zúñiga y Córdoba, who was the sister of the cardinal of Toledo, had sent sedan chairs to carry them to the governor's coach, "so that they might go with the utmost propriety."⁶⁸ Accompanying them were the admiral and the vice-admiral, as well as those voyagers of the highest class who were on the ships. Also a large number of local people came out and followed this procession. As Sister Jacinta described the welcome, "the whole city attended the disembarkation, showing much devotion. And it would have given much encouragement to these poor nuns after such a long road. But everything comes from God, and to Him thanks should be given."⁶⁹

Ana Francisca de Zúñiga y Córdoba had prepared a room for them in her mansion with everything that they needed. She served their food to them, not allowing her servants to do so. And she gave them sheets so that they could sew garments to wear while they washed their black woolen habits. Many dignitaries paid visits to the brave nuns: the bishops of Oaxaca and Guadalajara, prelates and other religious leaders of the city of Veracruz. According to Villarreal, they all praised the six nuns for "their conversation, affability and their modesty, as well as their country, convent, Religious Order, and their fame; they all left the nuns' presence edified, pleased and envious of Mexico City that it would enjoy the first fruits of their Foundation in the Indies."⁷⁰

They rested two weeks in Veracruz. They were eager to continue their journey, but were hoping that their two patrons, the brothers of

⁶⁷ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 229.

⁶⁸ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 230.

⁶⁹ González, "Presencia de América," 66.

⁷⁰ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 230.

Doña Isabel, would come and fetch them. Governor Diego Largacha decided to go ahead and arrange for their travel. The old city of Veracruz was surrounded by water so they first boarded three carriages belonging to the governor. His wife and other members of high society accompanied them. As they were leaving, the ships from the fleet, especially their ship, *Nuestra Señora del Buen Suceso*, saluted many times with their guns until they were out of sight.⁷¹ Sister Bernarda explained that, presently, they had to cross a large river; "we passed in canoes, which are like boats."⁷² The priest who had been on their ship would travel with them to the capital. Also several Indians went along. The mayor came out to wish them well. When they left this part of the city, they rode in mule-drawn carriages, not a special mobile cloister adapted for them.⁷³ They could look out through their veils. From the outside, people were fascinated to see these six figures, reportedly humble and saintly, all cloaked in black, slowly traveling along. The common people came out carrying palms to bid them farewell, placing them on the streets where they passed. When Sister Bernarda saw all the palms on the ground and forming arches over their heads, she was reminded of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, and she thought they would soon be crucified: "I began to fear, as one of little spirit does, and to say to his Majesty [God]: 'Lord, may your will be done, and give us strength for the passion that awaits us.'"⁷⁴

On the third day of travel, they encountered three servants representing Doña Isabel's two brothers. The friars sent their apologies explaining that their prelates had not allowed them to go past Jalapa. When the carriages were about a league away, the entire city of Jalapa "came out to receive us with such tenderness and devotion that all that was left was for them to throw themselves on the ground."⁷⁵ All the church bells were chiming, and many musicians were playing flutes. Their patron Friar Alonso de la Barrera was waiting for them in Jalapa, and he traveled with them the rest of the way. Each town along the way to Mexico City received them in a similar way, with bells and flutes.⁷⁶

⁷¹ González, "Presencia de América," 69.

⁷² González, "Presencia de América," 69.

⁷³ González, "Presencia de América," 69.

⁷⁴ González, "Presencia de América," 69.

⁷⁵ González, "Presencia de América," 71.

⁷⁶ González, "Presencia de América," 70.

* Mexico: This Much-Desired City *

This was the end of the rainy season, so the narrow roads were still muddy. Two of the carriages bogged down at different points, and one of them was lost for a day and part of a night until it caught up with the rest. (Fortunately the six were not in that carriage.)⁷⁷ On 7 October 1665, five months after leaving Cádiz, they arrived at Tepeyac, the famous site dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe. The next day they made a grand entrance into the beautiful capital of New Spain. Sister Bernarda described their reception in the following way:

The city council came out, and the viceroy's wife with all her ladies. And the whole city came to receive us at the distance of one league. And one could not see the countryside for all the coaches; there were so many, that his excellence [Viceroy Mancera] ordered the guards to be called out to make room so we could pass. All the convents as well as the cathedral chimed their bells....[Thus] we entered the much desired city that had cost us so many labors to reach. But it can be considered labor well employed, upon finding that there is so much charity and devotion for our Holy Religion here. And may God be well served, because these tiny plants have come from that luxuriant garden.⁷⁸

The six filed out of the carriage, the abbess at the head, carrying the wooden crucifix that had led them out of the convent in Toledo and accompanied them on their extraordinary journey.

These six women were proud of themselves for their bravery and zeal for embarking on such a venture. After they were safely cloistered in Mexico City, they received a letter from Admiral Ordóñez that reiterated for them the dangers of the trip. He wrote that while the fleet was still docked in Veracruz, a storm came up like he had never seen before. Three of the ships sank. They broke away from the dock, were blown to the shore and tore into pieces. One of these was the galleon they traveled on: *Nuestra Señora del Buen Suceso*.⁷⁹ In Villarreal's words, "The sea swallowed three ships. It seems that, respecting

⁷⁷ González, "Presencia de América," 71.

⁷⁸ González, "Presencia de América," 72.

⁷⁹ González, "Presencia de América," 61-62.

the Sisters, it contained itself until after they had disembarked."⁸⁰ Villarreal moralized that "our Lord did not want a ship that had served such a spiritual and apostolic purpose be employed for a profane purpose."⁸¹

This was a journey that "at first seemed impossible, as we were so ill and so terrified of the storms."⁸² Afterward they considered the journey a happy one, since they came away alive. Soon after their arrival, they began to call themselves the "seafaring ones" (*las navegantas*); the crucifix that they had brought out of the convent in Toledo, which had accompanied them the whole way and had strengthened their faith and will to survive, they called "the seafaring Lord" (*el señor navegante*).⁸³ The mutual experience of this journey, not surprisingly, bonded them together as no other relationship, and they felt changed forever. Indeed, their triumph over the hardships of the trip caused them to feel that their bodies were blended together into one: "We seafaring ones love each other so much that it seems we are all one body, and we all feel each other's illness."⁸⁴ In a way, they met society's expectation of repressing their bodies, but with the result that their sisterly love united them so tightly that they saw themselves as one body.

The following January, Sister Felipa wrote to their confessor Villarreal, saying how much they missed him, and how they would like to see him in Toledo. Then she added, "but when I consider that it would be indispensable to pass the sea, it is not possible for me to want it, even if I had an archbishop's miter; only because God wills it can one travel the sea. Sister Teresa says that if we had to embark once more, Our Lord would have to shout it out in a clamorous voice. For less than this, we would not do it again."⁸⁵

* Conclusions *

We can observe several factors related to gender in the journey of these nuns. Principally, the context that surrounded this endeavor was completely patriarchal. All of the permits depended on masculine authority: the confessors,

⁸⁰ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 234.

⁸¹ Villarreal, *La Thebayda*, 234.

⁸² González, "Presencia de América," 63.

⁸³ González, "Presencia de América," 63.

⁸⁴ González, "Presencia de América," 259.

⁸⁵ González, "Presencia de América," 63.

the bishop, the archbishops, the king, the Council of the Indies (on which no woman stood). The licenses specified that the nuns would always be accompanied by men. They counted on special advocates, like Captain Izquierdo, to help them sort out their difficulties.

However, these women, from the isolation of their cloister in Toledo, were able to work within this system to quietly urge the process on. Abbess Josefa Lucía, representing the group, wrote letters expressing their intentions and requesting help. They were also aided by other women: the Duchess of Alburquerque, by encouraging them; Isabel de la Barrera, by financing the journey and the foundation of the new convent; the sisters at the Convent of the Conception in Cádiz, by caring for them; Ana Francisca de Zúñiga y Córdoba, wife of the governor of Veracruz, by serving them personally in her home.

Especially, these "seafaring" nuns broke stereotypes of seventeenth-century cloistered women. They were traveling female bodies that contributed to enriching the concept of femininity, of pushing the boundaries of what women were capable of accomplishing. From this point of view, their actions put into question the conventional construction of femininity of their period. Although they did not express themselves in such terms, it is obvious from their writings that they recognized and felt proud of their accomplishment.

We can see also from this study the contrast between the idealized vision of the female, the *intelligible* body, expressed by their confessor, Villarreal, in his descriptions of the six, and their own visions of themselves. Theirs are much more interesting and human, for they express their fears and doubts, readily admitting with humor and humility their shortcomings. In the end, also, their mutual love and shared experience allowed them to envision their separate bodies as one unit, idealizing the body on their own—not saintly—terms. One hopes that more documents can be located that will reveal additional information about the experiences of women who sailed the Atlantic to the New World.