

## ARTICLE



# Hope, Fear, Sorrow, and Rage: The Emotions of Death and Dying and the *Ars Moriendi* in Early Colonial New Spain

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## Abstract

The well-known and supposedly “timeless” ludic Mexican attitude toward death exemplified by the Day of the Dead does not reflect the emotional and spiritual attitudes toward death prevalent in the colonial period. Scholars of New Spain have instead established the prevalence of an ideal of European origin rooted in the medieval literary tradition of *ars moriendi* and translated into Spanish lands in the early modern period: that is, the Catholic aspiration to “die well.” Hegemonic among the colonial Spanish and colonized Indigenous elite, *buen morir* (“dying well”) was also aspired to by plebeians. This article assays the hegemonic power of *and* ruptures within the Catholic ideal of “dying well,” in particular through studying the emotions associated with selected deaths in early colonial New Spain (1520–1650). Drawing upon the scholarship of the “good death” ideal, Inquisition documents, and the biography (*vida*) of an early colonial mystic, the paper examines not merely good deaths, but bad ones. While folk saints and kings alike were said to have spoken instructive words, the dying in these cases are voiceless and often even nameless. In these cases, the *moriens* recedes as those around him or her experience, pray about, or debate death. With the focus off the *moriens*, it is possible to see both reflection and contestation of the ideals and emotions associated with the *ars moriendi* as those who were *not* dying gave voice to and embodied emotions and behaviours that were by turns licit and illicit. The paper finds that the emotions associated with death both confirmed and challenged the hegemony of the *ars moriendi*. Anger, shock, defiant grief, longing, and terror coexisted alongside the more appropriate emotions: sorrow and fear, certainly, but tempered by comfort, resignation, and love of

God. The cases discussed here demonstrate how in their emotional responses to death, ordinary people and the clergy alike contested elements of the *ars moriendi*. In that sense, the vignettes captured here may suggest the outlines of a death culture indebted to the *ars moriendi*, but nonetheless *sui generis* and even, perhaps, authentically Mexican.

A study of the emotions associated with death in New Spain may seem like an unnecessary contribution. After all, throughout the world (and in the view of many Mexicans themselves) Mexico is well known as a culture that accepts, laughs at, and even loves death. The emotional content of the “eternally morbid Mexican” (Brandes 2003, 134) stereotype is familiar: “Mexicans live side by side with death and are therefore able to confront death honestly and directly. They scorn death, they mock death, they are disdainful and irreverent in face of death” (Brandes 2003, 128).

The distinctively Mexican approach to death and dying is often traced to both pre-Columbian and Spanish precedents as fused in the colonial era. Evidence of this supposedly quintessentially Mexican response to death, however, tends to be more recent. Arguably the most venerable evidence can be found in the work of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century printmaker José Guadalupe Posada, who used *calaveras* (skull pictures) to lampoon Mexican culture and politics (Rothenstein 1989). Increasingly, however, global attention has been called to the cult of Santa Muerte, or “Holy Death.” Focussed on an image of a feminized skeletal figure and notoriously associated with narcotraffickers, the cult is relatively recent, though its adherents and observers often trace its origins to the Conquest or earlier Indigenous antecedents (Chesnut 2018). Above all, however, the putative “Mexican” attitude toward death is seen in the spectacle of the Day of the Dead, a major festival whose ludic celebration of death has become a major focus of both international and internal Mexican tourism. As Nadine Béliand (2006) has pointed out, the Day of the Dead is a modern phenomenon despite its frequently cited roots in colonial Indigenous and Spanish traditions of death.

Moreover, as Stanley Brandes (2003) notes, the Day of the Dead is essentially a *national* celebration, articulated and amplified in the context of nation-building, and in particular, in dialogue with Anglo-American culture and its commercialized and widely exported Hallowe'en festival.

In his critique of the Mexican death myth, Brandes (2003) notes that the stereotype elides significant variations among Mexico's many Indigenous groups; moreover, he notes, Mexicans tend to be *less* in love with death than Americans if suicide rates are taken as the measure of desiring death. Indeed, Latin Americans' consistent representation at the top of contemporary global happiness surveys would also militate against a view that Mexicans are more lugubrious than others. The apparently ludic attitudes expressed by the Day of the Dead, then, coexist with Mexicans' extensive social connections and high social happiness rooted therein (Rojas 2018). Finally, Brandes points out that North American (Mexican and US) attitudes toward death both "pale" in comparison to "the obsessive concerns about mortality" found in Indonesian, Malagasy, and "other cultures remote from North America" (Brandes 2003, 132). The renowned Mexican love of death, it seems, is at worst a distortion and at best an exaggeration.

More significantly for this article, the attitudes associated with the Day of the Dead and other manifestations of modern Mexican death culture cannot be projected backward in time; nor were the material conditions of early colonial New Spain akin to those of modern Mexico. Notably, the modern and familiar Mexican attitude toward death has been elaborated in the presence of significant declines in mortality relative to historical norms (Brandes 2003). In contrast, it is difficult to imagine a time and place in which death was more ubiquitous than in early modern New Spain. Throughout the post-conquest sixteenth century, successive waves of epidemic disease facilitated by colonial mobility and dislocation shattered Indigenous society, killing as much as 90 percent of the population (Cook 1998; Hosselkus 2011). Though the devastation of the Indigenous population produced by far the most significant mortality in the colony, ocean crossings, childbirth, childhood, disease, and violence claimed the lives of many other colonial subjects. Given the combined effect of high mortality and the cultural

influence of the Catholic church in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, “dying well” was an urgent imperative and shared ideal, since death was the “consummate Catholic experience” (Eire 1995, 5), encapsulating the entire purpose of life and the profoundest cultural beliefs. Over the past thirty years, scholarship on death in New Spain has moved into study of the cultural practices associated with the experience and ideal of the “good death” and the degree to which such practices and beliefs were adopted and modified by Indigenous communities (Pescador 1992; Bastante 2006; Bastante 2013; Hosselkus 2011; Will and Achim 2011).

Most studies of death in New Spain have used either prescriptive sources, such as records of exemplary deaths, or the more “gritty, mundane” (Eire 1995, 10) materials to be found in the wills dictated by the dying. Wills, funerary rituals, and prescriptive and exemplary texts, however, may exaggerate the power of the *ars moriendi*, or at least elide the stories that suggest a more complicated emotional terrain. Seeking to complement rather than supersede studies of such materials, this article assays the hegemonic power of *and* ruptures within the Catholic ideal of dying well, in particular through studying the emotions associated with selected deaths in early colonial New Spain (1520–1650). Drawing upon the scholarship of the “good death” ideal, this paper studies Inquisition documents from the National Archive of Mexico, which have been much used over more than three decades to study everyday life and the cultural history, mentalities, and regional history of colonial New Spain (*inter alia*, Chuchiak 2012; Boyer 1995; Alberro 1988; Corteguera 2012; Nesvig 2018). Indeed, Inquisition records constitute the most robust and complete body of documentation for the early colony. Nonetheless, of course they must be utilized with keen attention to the circumstances of their production, and particularly with an eye to the relative power of the institution and the individuals whose words it recorded in such voluminous detail. However, previous views of the monolithic power of the Inquisition(s) have ceded place to more nuanced understandings of the Holy Office as merely one of many colonial institutions, and one whose power was by no means absolute (Chuchiak 2012; Boyer 1995; Nesvig 2018). New Spain’s vast number of denunciations judged unworthy of follow-up, the number of cases left

hanging, the massive and poorly policed colonial territory, and the small number of death sentences issued all suggest the limitations on the ability of the Holy Office to control thought and deed in New Spain.

Individuals who appeared (willingly or under compulsion) before the Holy Office framed their narratives consciously and unconsciously, as human beings do in any number of situations for which we have records. Therefore, one should not take at face value the testimony of anyone, witness or accused, who testifies in a given case. At the same time, Inquisition records are rich in detail extraneous to religious orthodoxy but valuable for the historian. Moreover, even witnesses' framing of narratives offers relevant information about what individuals believed they were supposed to believe or how they believed they were supposed to behave. As a result, Inquisition records are a rich source for the study of daily life. They have been used less as a source for the study of death. Relatively few scholars of colonial Spanish America have used Inquisition records to study modes of and attitudes toward death and dying (Tortorici 2011; Schaposchnik 2011). This lesser attention to death in Inquisition-based histories likely results from the topic's sporadic rather than systematic presence in the archives of the Inquisition and from the relatively few (approximately 50) death sentences carried out by the Mexican tribunal over more than two hundred years. With Tortorici (2011), Schaposchnik (2011), and others, I argue that the records of the Holy Office, whose *raison d'être* was to monitor and scrutinize compliance with religiously hegemonic conceptions, form an ideal source for the study of the entirety of human life, including its terminus. The cases studied here are all ones in which minor punishment, no punishment at all, or no action beyond receipt of a denunciation ensued. They are thus less dramatic cases than exemplary punishments or treatment of suicides, and they constitute in most cases the only window on humble deaths.

This paper also considers the biography (*vida*) of an early colonial woman mystic which is today held by the University of Texas Library. Like the Inquisition records, religious biographies, often produced in obedience to the order of a confessor, represent both the hegemonic gaze of church authority and the tensions between orthodoxy and

everyday emotional engagement with death. In assessing these sources, this article finds that the emotions associated with death both confirmed and challenged the hegemony of the *ars moriendi*. Therefore, this paper examines not merely good deaths, but bad ones that were brought to the attention of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. While folk saints and kings alike were said to have spoken instructive words, the dying in these cases are voiceless and often even nameless. In these cases, the *moriens* (or dying one) recedes as those around him or her experience, pray about, or argue over death. With the focus off the *moriens*, it is possible to see both reflection and contestation of the ideals and emotions associated with the *ars moriendi* as those who were *not* dying gave voice to and embodied emotions and behaviours that were by turns licit and illicit. Thus this paper hopes to address both the cultural power and the limitations of “the good death.”

### The “Art of Dying” in New Spain

The “art of dying” or *ars moriendi* was, of course, an ideal with origins in European medieval literary traditions (Chartier 1976), in contrast with what have been seen as the “authentically Mexican” expressions of modern Mexican death culture. Originating in medieval concerns with the fate of souls in times of heightened mortality (O’Connor 1942), *ars moriendi* texts proliferated in the fifteenth century to become one of the most popular late medieval genres (Nissi 2014; O’Connor 1942). Translated into various tongues, such texts gave Europeans clear instructions on how to die well as a faithful and repentant Christian and thus earn a place in heaven while minimizing one’s stay in Purgatory (Eire 1995). During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these medieval roots were significantly reshaped by the work of Desiderius Erasmus and in particular three of his works that engaged most with death and the emotions that accompanied it (Raeburn 2020). His *De preparatione ad mortem* (*Preparing for Death*, 1534), a text twice the length of most medieval *ars moriendi* tracts, ran through multiple editions (twenty in Latin alone) within a few years of its publication and informed the subsequent development of the genre in various confessional traditions (Vogt 2004).

The literary manifestations of the art of dying, however, were slow to enter Spain, for reasons that remain unclear. Despite the near-simultaneous (1534–1535) Spanish and Latin publication of Erasmus’ *De preparatione ad mortem* and the success of the volume in other languages, the circulation of the two Spanish editions was slow. Still, Alonso Vanegas’ contemporary text *Agonía del tránsito de la muerte* (The Agony of the Death Crossing, 1537) went through ten editions, superseded only by the proliferation of other Spanish *ars moriendi* texts in the later sixteenth century (Eire 1995). The increasing public appetite for *ars moriendi* texts was evidenced by the success of the Jesuit Robert Bellarmine’s *The Art of Dying Well* (1619), a lengthy text published in 56 editions and multiple languages including Spanish (Vogt 2004). All of these texts promoted the idea not only of dying well, but perhaps even more of *living* well, principally by treating one’s entire lifespan as a “good, constant preparation for death” (Eire 1995, 26; Chartier 1976; Vogt 2004; Bastante 2006).

*Ars moriendi* literature was explicitly emotional. On one hand, the heightening of certain emotions was part of the experience of dying well in early *ars moriendi* texts (Ruys, 2014); on the other, the natural and healthy emotions of fear, anger, and anxiety that accompanied and facilitated the process could also hinder it if excessive or unmanaged, leading to an increasing focus on emotional control in later texts (Raeburn 2020). Good Christians contemplating death and their own sinfulness could expect to be afraid, and the heightening of such fear was a goal of medieval *ars moriendi* literature (Ruys 2014); but the early-modern literature of dying well was also designed to give comfort, to assure faithful Christians that God’s mercy and love awaited the repentant. Today, the *ars moriendi* is often mentioned alongside the *danse macabre*, an allegorical visual representation of the “dance of death,” but this may misrepresent the emotional tone of “dying well.” The grotesque, excessive, and ludic qualities of the *danse* were not part of the *ars moriendi*, whose emotional register emphasized love, grace, and forgiveness (Eire 1995), and in which the control of emotions formed a “central motif” (Raeburn 2020, 159).

Texts on “dying well” circulated widely in Spain after 1550 (Eire 1995), precisely as the Spanish Empire was itself being extended and elaborated. The broadening of the early modern Hispanic world thus coincided with the development of Spanish cultures of *buen morir* (dying well). In the late sixteenth century, the exemplary deaths of St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) and King Phillip II (1527–1598) served as exempla for those of less exalted religious or social status (Will de Chaparro and Achim 2011; Eire 1995). After many near misses, St. Teresa died in 1582 after several hemorrhages caused by tuberculosis or perhaps uterine cancer. Hagiographical and monastic reports of her death emphasized that she died “as the result of a fatal [mystical] ecstasy, so forceful that it thrust her soul out of her body” (Wilson 1999, 219). Her final illness was widely regarded a testament to her faith, her recorded last words asserting her status as a daughter of the Church and welcoming her holy bridegroom.

For his part, Philip II died in 1598 at age 71, suffering terribly in his final illness, which confined him to bed for the last two months of his life. While Spain’s imperial competitors saw the misery of Philip’s demise as a judgment of God, Spanish observers saw the opposite. During the final months of his life, the famously pious king completed pious exercises, bore his suffering with stoicism, and finally uttered his own edifying last words: that he was dying a Catholic, in the faith and obedience of the Holy Roman Church. By 1610, at least 41 separate works circulated through the Spanish world, describing the death and funeral honours of Philip and making him, in James Boyden’s words, “a model of perfection” in the *ars moriendi* (Boyden 2000).

While St. Teresa and Philip II exemplify the European origins of the Hispanic model of “good death,” the model appears to have been transmitted effectively and almost seamlessly to colonial New Spain: first to Spanish settlers, but soon to all colonial subjects. While the manual written by Fray Juan de Zumárraga, first bishop (and archbishop) of Mexico, was primarily aimed at the colony’s Spaniards, Friar Pedro de Gante’s Nahuatl *Doctrina Christiana* (1547) contained the first *ars moriendi* manual produced in that Indigenous language (Hosselkus 2011). In 1611, when Fray Martín de León published his own manual, he clearly anticipated a broader colonial audience and

a more syncretic faith (Bastante 2006). Scholars such as Antonio García-Abásolo (1993) have documented the persistence of the “good-death” ideal not only in such manuals, but also in Mexican sermons, wills, and many other sources, particularly though not exclusively those associated with the elite. At a less rarefied level, the cult of St. Joseph (San José) also became associated in New Spain with the saint’s intercession “above all” to ensure a “good death” (Rubial 2006, 51). Thus, while the *ars moriendi*’s origins may have been European, the associated modes and ideals of death were evidently adopted widely in the colony by 1600, including by Indigenous people. Such adoptions occurred in part because of consonance between the European notion of a “good death” and central Mexican Indigenous conceptions of the same, and in part because evangelizing friars consciously inculcated the Christian idea of “dying well.” Other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century publications emphasized the importance of giving extreme unction to Indigenous people, provided model testaments (including religious bequests), offered techniques for explaining Purgatory in Indigenous terms, and even commenced an Indigenous martyrology (Hosselkus 2011; Bastante 2006).

Certainly, broader Indigenous adoption of the *ars moriendi* can easily be overstated. Citing the work of Eugenio Maurer Avalos on Tzeltal (Maya) religion, Brandes points out that Tzeltal conceptions of death are fundamentally opposed to the concept of “dying well.” The Tzeltal and Tzotzil insistence on death as a calamitous finality rather than the commencing of a (better) afterlife even leads today to the avoidance of the sacrament of Extreme Unction (Brandes 2003). Moreover, the attempt to inculcate a “Catholic” manner of dying confronted differences in death practices. For example, traditional Nahua childbirth practitioners would, when a woman’s death in childbirth was inevitable, seal her inside a *temazcal* (sweat lodge) (Sousa 2017). However symbolically appropriate given the association of the *temazcal* with both womb and tomb, such a solitary death was not consistent with Spanish mores that prioritized accompaniment at death (Rubial 2003).

That said, the Spanish conception of “dying well” nonetheless blended well with at least some Indigenous customs and beliefs, as did the concept of living with a constant

eye on death. Moreover, the centrality of death as a rite of passage was meaningful to many Indigenous people, as is evidenced by the fact that wills make up approximately half of all colonial Indigenous documents (Hosselkus 2011). By the mid-sixteenth century, Indigenous testaments demonstrated awareness and adoption of the Catholic mode of death. Numerous scholars, studying Indigenous wills, have found compelling evidence of the same attention to a good death that marked the wills of colonizers. For example, the Tehuizco widow Catalina Papan made her will in December 1571 as she lay dying of *cocoliztli*, a disease responsible for several devastating colonial epidemics. Like other Indigenous notables, Papan left not only real properties to her heirs, but a substantial list of donations for the good of her soul: one peso “so that the singers from the main church will come here to my home to get me,” and more substantial pious bequests:

Two *reales* will be my offering that I give to Our Lady of the Rosary; and I make an offering of two *reales* for the [confraternity of] the Holy Communion; likewise I make my offering of two *reales* for the home of Holy Saint Francis; likewise I make my offering of two *reales* for the home of the Holy Apostle James; two *reales* for the bells to be rung in the main church; two *pesos* so that I will be buried wherever possible inside the main church. And I am making an offering for two high masses to be said for me; twelve pesos are to be delivered to the home of my Lord God, for which I request two high masses. And I order masses to be said for me for two years. (Olko, Sullivan, and Szeminski 2018, 138)

While such wills represent a complex mix of individual and social interests—including but not limited to ensuring a suitable afterlife, acceding to the suggestions of local clergy, and asserting social status—testaments clearly demonstrate the power of *buen morir*.

The Spanish and colonial churches took “dying well” seriously indeed. Even those who died what Boyden (2000) calls “cautionary deaths”—those punished most severely by the state, for example, sodomites whose bodies were burned after execution—were interred with dignity and sometimes even with pomp (Pescador 1992). In Madrid, the interring of executed criminals was a zealously kept privilege of the Brotherhood of Peace and Charity, a sodality with its seat in the parish of Santa Cruz. In addition to

recovering, cleansing, clothing, and burying the often-dismembered corpses of murderers, counterfeiters, and highwaymen (among others), the brotherhood sometimes intervened with authorities to prevent, for example, the ultimate punishment of burning followed by dispersal of ashes to the winds (Carbajo Isla 2007). The sole exception to this carefully kept duty occurred in the rare case of impenitence, in which case a criminal could expect his remains to fall under the less solicitous care of civil authorities (Carbajo Isla 2007). The same was true of suicides, who were in theory to be accorded only profane burials, though Tortorici (2011) found evidence in New Spain of sacred burials of suicides involving ordained priests and those who had given signs of penitence.

As pious attention to criminals and suicides demonstrates, accompanying the unattended dead was considered a sacred duty and an important act of charity, to the extent that it was the calling of many colonial sodalities. The rich might go to their graves accompanied by tens or even hundreds of people, but even the poorest and most forsaken could count on four or five. Juan Javier Pescador (1992, 285) enumerates cases in which bodies were left or discovered unattended in one seventeenth-century Mexico City parish. He argues that the rarity of these discoveries and the attention paid by parishioners to them demonstrates the general adherence to communitarian norms of death. Solitary death was an exception, the dead formed part of the web of community, and the good death was striven for by all.

Scholars have therefore established that in New Spain, then, the Spanish ideal of the “good death” was hegemonic: modelled by the elite but adopted by the middling and even yearned for by subalterns. The colony, moreover, was not without its own exempla. Antonio Rubial has studied colonial Mexicans’ hunger for folk saints, a hunger that constantly sought not only exemplary lives but exemplary deaths, the working of miracles, relics, and evidence of the incorruptible body (Rubial 1998; 2016). Throughout the colonial period, the beliefs and practices associated with dying well changed little, though the eighteenth century brought significant changes to attitudes regarding the appropriate place of the dead themselves within the urban complex, leading eventually to the expulsion of the dead from the city (Béligand 2006). Perhaps the pinnacle of the

aspiration to *ars moriendi*, the late-colonial religious sodality “Congregation of the Good Death” was founded as late as 1710 (Bastante 2013).

### Longing and Resistance:

#### Madre María Magdalena’s Mystical and Bodily Deaths

The power of the “good death” and the influence of its Teresian version are evident in the manuscript autobiography of Madre María Magdalena Lorravaquio Muñoz (1576–1636), a professed nun who was confined to bed for virtually her entire adult life. Her 160-page autobiography, written at the command of her Jesuit confessors and transcribed into its extant form in 1650, evinces both fear of and longing for death (Lavrin 2005, 26; University of Texas 1636). Madre María Magdalena entered the convent at the age of fifteen after importuning her apparently reluctant parents, and immediately dedicated herself with particular zeal to mortifications. She remembered being particularly influenced by the Jesuit Padre Gaspar Loarte’s book concerning the death and passion of Christ. While Madre María’s spiritual practices continued to grow, her bodily health soon declined, and she began suffering various illnesses not much more than a year after her profession. Her illnesses and the treatments she endured to cure them were welcomed by her as gifts from God that mapped onto the sufferings endured by Christ in his Passion (though others in her convent viewed her visions, illnesses, and incurable tremor as signs of faking or demonic possession).

It can therefore be said without too much exaggeration that Madre María Magdalena, at least from her own retelling, spent 44 years and three months dying, making her biography something of an extended meditation on death. First, she reported numerous experiences in which she nearly died, only to be told that her death was not yet God’s will. “Being another time in a very grave illness,” she stated, “at the end of my life, awaiting the hour of my death, and perceiving and resigning myself in the hands of God, that he do in me His will, I heard an interior voice that said, ‘It is not yet time; you still have much to endure.’ And later I began to get better” (University of Texas 1636, 16). This experience was repeated through her illnesses, as she obediently attempted to

render herself to God, “as my true Father and husband” (18) only to be repeatedly told (by a voice that she believed to be God’s) that it was not yet her time. In these recurring encounters with death, Madre María recounted an emotional process typical of the “normal” Christian effort to die well: contemplation of her sins, fear, and finally resignation to the will of God.

Interestingly, however, Madre María reported a later experience in which her illness was so severe that the doctors gave up on her and she was given the Viaticum. Strangely, perhaps, after her frequent experiences of near-death, this time she felt a “strong resistance to dying, so that she could not subject or conform herself to what His Majesty ordered” (University of Texas 1636, 51); instead, still profoundly ill, she spent a day and night praying in a suspended state before God, once again, decided that it was not yet her time to die. María’s relationship to death was therefore highly ambivalent. On one hand, she had reason to believe that the afterlife would be a place of joy, as many of her visions of other dying and deceased persons suggested—not to mention a relief from the miserable and incurable illnesses that dogged her throughout her adult life. Longing for death and identifying with the death of Christ were consistent themes in her biography. On the other hand, she was fearful of death and her soul’s possible damnation. Christians’ fear in the face of death was regarded as completely natural and acknowledged as such in the formulaic language of testaments (Eire 1995), but the dangers of excessive fear in the face of death were repeatedly acknowledged in the *ars moriendi* literature (Ruys 2014). Madre María, it seems, experienced excessive fear, portraying herself as unable to emotionally conform to God’s will, and reporting her temptation to doubt God’s mercy. Thus, even for a faithful believer, the hope of salvation and joy in the afterlife could be alloyed with fear and doubt. The aspiration of “dying well,” however hegemonic, thus coexisted with unruly emotions that even among the most saintly could derail a good death.

Another aspect of Madre María’s dance with death was that, even when healthy, the nun experienced her spiritual exercises as proximal to death: that is, she experienced a form of “mystical death” (Gálik, Tolnaiová, and Modrzejewski 2020), in which she

identified so deeply with the passion of Christ that she experienced a complete suspension of her own living body. In St. Teresa's terms, this was "delicious death" (Gálik et al. 2020). In one of Madre María's early visions, she reported, she "remained like a dead body, without feeling any power, and after this great suspension when her soul came back it was like a dead woman came to life" (University of Texas 1636, 28v-29). In another vision, she described herself as having spent much time "without seeing or feeling anything, as if she were dead" (30). The experience of being "like a dead woman" (34) was frequently repeated throughout the biography, but generally presented as a state experienced without fear. Indeed, Madre María associated her "dead" state of mystical suspension with pleasure, delight, joy, peace, and tranquility. After her actual death, the editor of Madre María's biography added a striking note: that "because she feared death so much, His Majesty conceded that she die in suspension and prayer" (81). That is, God took her in the peaceful and fearless "delicious death" provided by mystical contemplation to spare her the terror that marked her conscious brushes with mortality. This unusual acknowledgement seems to suggest the challenges of establishing an "uneasy equilibrium between dread and hope" (Eire 1995, 78), and Madre María's tendency to swing between these two emotional poles rather than balancing them.

While her illnesses and spiritual practices provided an intimate relationship with death, Madre María also recounted much time in prayer and visions related to the illnesses and deaths of others, a theme that consumes much of her autobiography. There is, of course, nothing unusual about such a spiritual practice, since holy people customarily spent much time praying for ill and dying people. In Madre María's case, however, the nature of the outcomes she achieved through prayer presents yet more evidence of her ambivalent relationship with death. Frequently, she reported, she sought to intercede with God on behalf of the dying. For example, she documented her success in preventing the death of "a certain person who was suffering a grave illness" (University of Texas 1636, 17). Similarly, when a nun whom Madre María loved very much was on death's door, she experienced much anxiety and prayed for the nun's recovery, happily to be told by God, "she will not die" (75v). On the other hand, sometimes Madre María

prayed for someone who was dying and experienced joy even though the person died. For example, while praying for the soul of a priest who was dying, she saw him lifted into the heavens, clad in a white garment embroidered with gold, green, and silver and “very resplendent and beautiful” (21v). Madre María understood thereby that she had seen the priest at the point at which God had plucked him from mortal life to enjoy the eternal one. Similarly, after prayer for another nun who was dying, Madre María had the similar satisfaction of knowing that God had lifted the nun into heaven (49v). Finally, she prayed for a man’s recovery only to be told by God that it was better that the man die so that his salvation could be attained, whereupon she successfully prayed for the man to be taken out of Purgatory (55v–56). In this manner, Madre María achieved victories over death through prayer, often receiving messages that made clear that her intercessory prayers had prevented death, shortened a stay in Purgatory, or helped someone enter heaven, and experiencing the comfort of seeing with her own (mystical) eyes the mercy of God and the beauty of the afterlife.

In some cases, however, Madre María’s prayers for the dying rendered more troubling results that demonstrated the mysterious workings of God’s providence and, in some cases, the suggestion that *someone’s* death was required to balance the spiritual ledger. For example, Madre María recounted a case involving the illness of a nun who was very ill and “like a dear one and daughter” to her. After days of prayer, God conceded the nun’s life, but advised Madre María that he would take another nun in place of the “dear one” (78–78v). In a sense, then, Madre María had bought the life of the beloved nun with the death of another whose identity she discovered only after the fact. Madre María also narrated her efforts for the soul of a man whose spiritual standing was evidently in some peril. Apparently, the man had left his wife behind some years before when he travelled to New Spain. While the particular danger to the man’s soul was never specified, it may have arisen from bigamy, since the problem was solved when Madre María had a vision in which God informed her that for the good of the man’s soul, it was best that his *wife* die (28). On another occasion, Madre María prayed for the wellbeing of someone who was not sick at all, only to learn from God that it was His will

that the person die; eight days later, the person sickened, and three days after that was dead (74). In a disturbing case, a person of high status for whom Madre María prayed was the subject of a frightening vision that made it clear to her that the *moriens* had passed and been sentenced to “eternal suffering” (23v). These mysterious workings of God’s will and proofs of His punishments, however instructive, illustrate the ambivalent emotional relationship of this holy woman with death. On one hand, her visions of “good” deaths could fill her with joy, while the death of “substitutes” for beloved people in spiritual or physical peril could bring relief. On the other hand, visions of eternal torment and the pure mystery of providence could elicit fear and confusion.

### **On Land and at Sea: Emotions and the Obligation to Help Others Die Well**

A good death, then, was a complicated business even for the most faithful. Moreover, while the emotions associated with “dying well” were generally reckoned to be those of the *moriens*, the emotions of others were enmeshed in the process too. Others, moreover, had an important role to play in the *ars moriendi*. The ideal death involved dying attended by the clergy in all “good-death” manuals. The role of lay onlookers was viewed with some ambivalence by authors of medieval and early modern manuals. While some valued the presence of friends and family, non-clergy were also seen as potentially distracting and even dangerous, as they might incite the *moriens* to avarice (Nissi 2014); many manuals emphasized the need for private conversations between the clergy and the *moriens* (Nissi 2014; Bastante 2006). Still, Erasmus regarded sitting with the dying a salubrious practice for the living (Vogt 2004), while other writers (and common practice) recognized the role of non-clerical onlookers in assisting the *moriens*. Friends, relatives, and neighbours thus had a profound and sombre communal obligation: first, of course, they were the ones who determined when it was time to call clergy (Nissi 2020); moreover, it was their task to exhort, pray with, assist, and encourage the dying, which was noted in the instructions given in many manuals of *buen morir* (Eire 1995). The resultant communal culture of death appears to have been relatively uniform, at least from northern to southern Europe (Nissi 2020). Moreover, onlookers’ duties continued

*after* death, when they were obliged not only to deal appropriately with the body, but more importantly to continue to pray for the soul. However, their own emotions were secondary. Nonetheless, it is clear that the spectacle of death could yield emotional trauma for those around the *moriens*. For example, in the 1650s, a young woman appeared before the Holy Office to denounce the midwife Isabel Hernández. The woman described how Hernández had helped her mother die well, only to climb upon the dead woman and wrench out her teeth for relics shortly after the death. The young woman described how she and her sister wept as they watched helplessly, “stunned by this evil” (*aturbido por el mal*). The “evil,” however, was ironically occasioned at least in part by their mother’s dying so well: that is, by her stoicism and sanctity and the desire of others for contact with such saintly individuals (Archivo General de la Nación [AGN] 1652). Again, then, traumatic deathbed experiences could coexist, however uneasily, with the edification and hope produced by an ideal *moriens*.

The cultural power of “dying well” was also evident in a minor scandal that erupted in Chiapas in August 1626, following the preaching of a sermon by Fray Juan Baptista during the celebration of the funeral rites (*obsequias y honras*) for the Bishop of Chiapas, Don Bernardino de Salazar. The Dominican bishop’s tenure was short; Thomas Gage suggested that he fell victim to poisoning by his unruly parishioners, who refused to abstain from drinking chocolate during Mass (Gage 1658, 102–103). Don Bernardino’s service took place at the Dominican convent in Ciudad Real (today San Cristóbal), Chiapas.

According to Fray Pedro Mártir, who denounced Fray Juan several months later at the urging of a local notable, Fray Juan’s sermon veered off course when he appeared to question a cherished belief associated with the *ars moriendi*: that anyone, no matter how sinful, could achieve and find redemption within a good death. Fray Juan, in contrast, told his audience that “to show how one who has lived badly dies badly, [note that] in all the gospel one finds only one who having lived badly, dies well—and that was the good thief” (AGN 1626, 276). The Good (or Penitent) Thief, as the sermon’s audience would have known, was the second of the two criminals crucified with Jesus

Christ; as a result of his penitence, he was promised Paradise. An example of the power of repentance in the face of death and a saint in the Catholic church, the Good Thief was presented by Fray Juan as far from typical. Warming to his theme, the friar continued to discourse upon the deaths of evil-doers. He told his audience, “when you see one of these sinners at the hour of his death moaning and crying, don’t believe it or heed his tears” (AGN 1626, 276).

On one hand, Fray Juan was simply stating the axiom *como vive muere* (in death as in life), a standard aphorism of Spanish death culture (Eire 1995) and echoing the well-known precept of Erasmus that one who prepares for death on the deathbed is too late (Vogt 2004). Moreover, his hectoring of the gathered parishioners could be read as an attempt to induce the kind of salutary fear that was viewed as necessary for a good life (and death) (Ruys 2014). Nothing he said, therefore, was heterodox. Nonetheless, the audience apparently received the message quite differently, suggesting some gap between clerical and lay understandings of death and dying. According to his denouncer, Fray Juan “scandalized and disquieted” his audience with these statements, which seemed to them to deny the mercy of God—and which suggested that as a confessor, Fray Juan would be cold deathbed comfort indeed. The listeners were even more offended when Fray Juan reflected upon how God had sent “such a holy and chaste” bishop to a city “so fallen into sensuality and lust, fornications, rapes, incests, and adulteries” (AGN 1626, 276v).

Up until this point, one might assume that Fray Juan was simply trying to inculcate the proper fear and awe of death and God’s judgment. However, his *own* passions appear to have been stirred inappropriately by a rumour that the bishop had died alone. According to his denouncer Fray Pedro, Fray Juan had given full vent to his emotions in discussing this offensive rumour, accusing his listeners thus: “Devils, devils! Knaves who go around saying and writing to Guatemala that the Bishop died alone: thieves, thieves! The thief thinks that everyone is like him. Insolent people, I hope to God to see you hanged, and those who support and defend such people punished!” (AGN 1626, 276) These intemperate words, Fray Pedro reflected, showed the “great anger, choler, and

indignation of [Fray Juan's] mood,” introducing the emotional excess that was at odds with the controlled emotions characteristic of a healthy and hopeful Christian attitude toward death (Raeburn 2020).

This vignette, simply filed without investigation in the archives of the Holy Office, displays the power and limits of widespread adherence to the ideal of the “good death,” possibly varying interpretations among the clergy and between clergy and laity, and the mixed emotions death could engender. On one hand, the gathered parishioners were outraged that a cleric would question the possibility and value of “dying well.” They chose to believe instead that in achieving a good death, even the most unreconstructed sinner could achieve salvation. On the other, Fray Juan himself was disgusted by rumour-mongering suggesting that the “saintly” Don Bernardo had died alone, which would imply in turn that the friars had abandoned their duty to give the bishop a “good death.” The fury on both sides—each positioning itself as defender of “dying well”—disrupted the proper emotional tone of the bishop’s funeral service, given that rage, unlike fear, was inconducive to “dying well” both for the *moriens* and for those left behind. Not surprisingly, the mood in the city was apparently embittered by this incident for some months.

Anger was recognized as a natural emotion in the face of death (Raeburn 2020), but excessive anger also disrupted a death on the ship *El Angel Bueno*, bound from Spain to Veracruz after a brief stop on the island of Hispaniola (AGN 1564a). The Holy Office of Mexico City looked into the case in 1564, presumably at least a year after the incident, since *El Angel Bueno* was lost at sea in 1563.<sup>1</sup> When the narrative commenced, Manuel, a young Portuguese sailor, was dying, or “wanting to die” (*queriendose morir*), as many of the witnesses stated, in a phrase often repeated in these documents. While the document is terse about the cause of his death, there is no suggestion that the death itself was abnormal or accidental. “Helping him die well,” as witnesses put it, was another sailor, a gunner (*lombardero*) called Nicolás de Mosquera. According to witnesses,

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<sup>1</sup> *El Angel Bueno* wrecked on 10 September 1563 after leaving Havana Harbour. Thirty-five crew members were rescued six days later. See, Singer, 2019, 150–151.

Mosquera was assisting at the youth's deathbed when a cleric called Vergara arrived, and immediately also began to "help the youth to die well." Given the ideals expressed in the *ars moriendi* manuals, Mosquera should then have stood aside to play the prescribed role of a deathbed onlooker: praying, exhorting, and supporting the *moriens* in coordination with (and subordination) to the clergy, whose role in guiding and assessing the sincerity of the *moriens* was "crucial" (Bastante 2006, 32).

Instead, what had been a peaceful and supportive deathbed scene altered. Rather than standing aside for the ritual specialist, Mosquera attempted to silence the other onlookers, telling them (according to some witnesses) that there was no need for so much praying, and that he alone would suffice. Later, he claimed that he wanted to hear the words of the dying youth, attempting to justify his actions in a manner that suggests he was fulfilling the interlocutory role usually granted to a cleric. Perhaps sensing this ambition, one of the other sailors reportedly told Mosquera that "the father" (that is, the priest) knew well what to do, whereupon Mosquera replied blasphemously "I'm a father too, and all of us are fathers of sows!" (AGN 1564a) According to witnesses, Mosquera then rose from the dying sailor's side and extinguished the candle burning there, a deeply offensive act given that the candle was symbolic of the *moriens*' soul and was only to be extinguished after death. Mosquera then spoke again, asking "am I not a man?" (AGN 1564a) Finally, witnesses claimed, he struck the priest in the face, first with his hand and then with the crucifix, hitting him again and again until the cross shattered, scandalizing the onlookers even more than the act of violence itself did. A man already lame in one leg, the priest was badly injured in the head and face, apparently remaining in bed for twelve days following the attack.

All witnesses who testified agreed that Mosquera had interfered with the priest's duties, violently attacked him, and shattered the crucifix; Mosquera himself could only defend his actions through a vague claim that he did not know the man was a priest and therefore reacted in a typically masculine fashion, as one man might to an insult from another. In the end, after marshalling an impressive list of witnesses who testified to his good character and Christian devotion, Mosquera was fined six pesos and ordered to

hear Mass in the Amor de Dios hospital with a candle in his hand. But why did Mosquera behave in such an intemperate manner? His rage-filled, possessive response to the priest's interference might have resulted from a personal relationship to the youth, but none is hinted at in the document. Or perhaps his rage arose from something else contained in the phrase "Am I not a man" (AGN 1564a), also translatable as "Am I not a human being"? That is, Mosquera, a seasoned seaman accustomed to maritime death, might simply have been contesting the priest's primacy at the youth's deathbed. Neither of these emotional responses would have been licit but suggest once again possible tensions between clerical and lay understandings of death and the primacy of the clergy at the deathbed. Mosquera's anger, whatever its source, unsettled what otherwise might have been if not a "good death," at least a "good enough death." Rage was not an acceptable response to a deathbed scene, nor was interfering with the central role of the clergy in the drama of the passage from life to death. Mosquera's behaviour, however, demonstrates that at least some early modern subjects rejected the hegemonic ideal of the good death.

An even less licit emotional response can be seen in a suicide case, the most cautionary type of death imaginable. In 1564, 28-year-old Francisca de la Anunciación, a professed nun in La Concepción in Mexico City, was denounced to the Holy Office for heretical propositions (AGN 1564b; Tortorici 2011). Interviewed by the inquisitors, Francisca provided a harrowing story about a death and her part in it—a part that set her against the judgment of her coreligionists and her church. She described finding a young nun who had hanged herself, but whose body was still trembling. Francisca took her in her arms, released her, and pleaded with her to repent of her sins and beg God's forgiveness. At this, Francisca said, the nun lowered her head three or four times, "giving Francisca to understand" (AGN 1564b) that she had indeed repented. Moreover, the other nun sank to her knees, presumably before giving up the ghost. Despite Francisca's attempt to help the other nun "die well," the death was judged a suicide and the young nun was buried in a dung heap; she thus became officially ungrievable.

Francisca, however, would not leave her grief alone. She told the other nuns that Scripture says that on the Day of Judgment, many who lay in dung heaps would be raised to heaven, while some buried in cathedrals would be raised only to be sent to hell. And she warned them that the judgments of God are quite different from those of men. Other nuns interviewed claimed that Francisca's mental state had deteriorated since the death; some even perhaps helpfully suggested that Francisca was occasionally "crazy" (*loca*). Francisca's actions, though, were completely intelligible. Finding a nun alive, she attempted to guide her from the worst death imaginable to a "good enough death" by reading the signs of the dying nun's body. Moreover, Francisca firmly believed that she had succeeded. A cautionary death like this one could become exemplary, as was sometimes demonstrated by those sentenced to die by the state (Boyden 2000). In addition, suicides—even by clergy—were sometimes later exonerated by the evidence of devotion they had left behind (Tortorici 2011). But where others had succeeded, Francisca failed. Her responsibility thereafter was to accept the judgment of the convent's male clergy and the ignominious burial of the nun; instead, she unsuccessfully contested the will of the church and the judgment of her coreligionists. Like Mosquera, she did not overtly reject the concept of "dying well" but rather claimed for herself a central role in the process, something more characteristic of male clergy than of onlookers.

Non-exemplary and contested deaths such as these, along with the ambivalent evidence to be found in at least some religious biographies, show both the hegemonic power of the *ars moriendi* in New Spain and the degree to which its acceptance could be tempered by the emotional and affective responses of those who watched and helped others die. Anger, shock, defiant grief, longing, and terror coexisted alongside the more licit emotions: sorrow and fear, certainly, but tempered by comfort, resignation, and love of God. The cases discussed here do not diminish the magisterial studies that have found in hundreds of wills and exemplary texts evidence of the power of the church and its definitions of the "good death." Indeed, with those studies, this one serves to acknowledge the hegemonic power of Catholicism in early colonial New Spain, whose death culture likely had more in common with those of contemporary Europe than with

today's ludic national celebrations. However, these cases and others like them demonstrate how in their emotional responses to death, ordinary people contested elements of the *ars moriendi*, such as the primacy of clergy and, perhaps, the limits to the ability of a good death to reform a bad life. In that sense, the vignettes captured here may suggest the outlines of a death culture indebted to the *ars moriendi*, but nonetheless *sui generis* and even, perhaps, authentically Mexican.

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