



Introduction

A Tale of Two Communities

*La mujer huyo a la soledad donde tenía un lugar preparado por Dios.
(The woman fled into solitude in the desert, where she had a place prepared for her by God.)*

Revelation 12:6

On a trip to Mexico City several years ago, I came across a plaque tucked away in a dark corner of the Catedral Metropolitana. The plaque bore the above-cited epigram, which comes from the Book of Revelation. It refers to a woman who, after having done battle in heaven with a great red dragon with seven crowned heads and ten horns, gives birth to a male child. God then takes the child and places him on a throne, sending the woman away into the desert, to a site of solitude he has prepared for her. I am obviously glossing over a great deal of the context in which this quotation appears in the Book of Revelation. However, I am simply echoing the lack of context in which this exact phrase first came to my attention. The plaque, appearing as it does on the wall of the supreme symbol of the power of the Church in Mexico built at the height of its powers in the baroque period,¹ highlights the historical attitude of the Catholic Church toward women throughout the many centuries of its existence. It also perfectly exemplifies the attitude of the colonial Mexican Church to the nuns who were supposed to live by its rules in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Mexico.

In this book, I argue that for the Mexican ecclesiastical authorities, the convent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries functioned as the special place, the ideal place, of solitude prepared by God for women. I have chosen to focus on these two centuries in particular because of the rich reserves of both printed matter and archival material I was able to uncover from this time period. Moreover, the seventeenth century with its still lingering post-Tridentine fervor was

a time when the Church tightened its control of all aspects of religious life. The convents and their inhabitants came under intense scrutiny and vigilance as the ecclesiastical authorities worried about the implications of religious women's singularity. The eighteenth century is a contradictory time for the convents. Against a backdrop of political reform and Enlightenment ideals, the convents became places where some member of the Church hoped to perpetuate—often, ironically, in the name of reform—the misogynist ideals of Trent laid down two centuries before.

The Mexican colonial context derives, of course, from the Western Christian tradition, from which it inherited a complex series of gender ideologies and prejudices honed over the centuries since the very first years of the Early Church.² The idea of a place of solitude cut off from society had informed the initial desires to cloister female religious in the first few centuries of Christianity.³ Cloister, initially adopted as “a means to an end” (Makowski 126) to protect all-female communities from marauding invaders, eventually developed in the Middle Ages into “an end in itself” (126). Enclosure became something gender based—and biased—that strove to protect society from women's carnality and, in turn, to protect weak-willed women from compromising their own virtue. Peter of Abelard (1079–1142) summed up the ideal of solitude in a letter to the Abbess Heloise: “Solitude [. . .] is all the more necessary for your woman's frailty, inasmuch as for our [men's] part we are less attacked by the conflicts of carnal temptations and less likely to stray toward bodily things through the senses” (qtd. in Makowski 31). In theory, the convent space provided the Church with the perfect site from which to keep women in solitude. This they believed served their purpose well: many women could be simultaneously withdrawn from society, as a result making vigilance more feasible.

Tracing the trajectory of the politics of cloister inherited by the Mexican convents, we see that until the thirteenth century, the enclosure of female communities had been a rather patchy and haphazard affair, entrusted to each specific order for enforcement. People entered and left the cloister freely. Many communities did not observe enclosure and were thus able to administer their own affairs and be involved in matters that required women to travel outside the convent. Despite the vigilance of the Church authorities, scholars of female monasticism agree that female houses enjoyed a period of relative autonomy up until the twelfth century (see Johnson; McNamara; Makowski). This was the period of the so-called double monastery in which female abbesses, wielding considerable power, often ruled over male houses as well. Obviously, we should not regard the early medieval period as fostering a proto-feminist utopia, but in-

stead should view it in the context of the Church's embrace of a relative spiritual commonality (Johnson 3–5). However, dissenting voices warning against the dangers of women and power were always present, and by the middle years of the twelfth century, as Penelope Johnson points out, “a hostile backlash slammed the door on female monastic equality” (5). Many factors contributed to this change in climate for women in monastic orders beginning in this period. With the closure of the double monasteries, the exclusion of women from many male orders, the growth of the friar's movement in which men freely wandered the lands preaching, and the university clerical education to which only men had access, by the twelfth century the Church had begun to definitively marginalize women religious.

The Church worked hard to generate an ideology that would justify and sustain this subordination of women. They relied on what McNamara calls “complex myths of fragility, vulnerability, and incompetence” that would serve to disguise what she terms “the structural realities denying women self-sufficiency” (*Sisters* 261). One of the watershed moments in this generation and institutionalization of misogynistic mythmaking came in 1298 with the promulgation of the decree known as *Periculoso* by Pope Boniface VIII. *Periculoso*, so called after the first word in the Latin text, laid the cornerstone for the Church's suppression of relative female autonomy. The Pope found the notion of female religious who strayed from the convent walls, engaging in wandering or preaching, to be especially egregious. Obviously, it was more difficult to control and discipline women once flexibility of movement was permitted. *Periculoso* claimed to protect women from ill-intentioned men, but more significantly, from themselves. One has only to look at the first lines of the edict to realize the true impetus behind the decree: “Wishing to provide for the dangerous and abominable situation of certain nuns, who casting off the reins of respectability and impudently abandoning nunnish modesty and the natural bashfulness of their sex, sometimes rove about outside of their monasteries, to the injury of that to which by free choice they vowed their chastity, to the disgrace and dishonor of the religious life and the temptation of many . . .” (qtd. in Makowski 133–35).⁴

The decree marked the beginning of the official establishment of gender differences between monks and nuns, with its mandate of cloister for women based solely on the weaknesses associated with their gender.⁵ No similar legislation was enacted for the male houses (Makowski 3). Moreover, this gender bias stood in sharp contrast to Boniface's claim, and those of *Periculoso's* subsequent commentators, of monastic spiritual equality between the sexes (125). This has been called the “paradox of *Periculoso*” (56). Church authorities were able to justify

this enormous inconsistency by citing the singular relationship between women and chastity, what one could almost call an obsession with female sexual purity (127), that would extend far beyond *Periculoso* into the era of the Council of Trent, and into the post-Tridentine context of the colonial Mexican Church.

Scholars of female monasticism have noted, however, that chastity has often been a source of empowerment for nuns (Perry; McNamara). Since the very beginnings of the Christian Church, women in particular had been attracted by the freedom celibacy accorded them (McNamara, *Sisters* 47). However, as the institutionalization of the Church progressed throughout the centuries, men in power in the Church attempted to co-opt the concept of chastity, using it as a tool to enhance their own dominance while simultaneously controlling and subduing the authority of women. Moreover, men could abdicate from personal responsibility for chastity by projecting the female body as the site of purity and thus “the vessels of their [own] redemption” (49). As the influence of women waned in the Church, the symbolic value of their chastity took on more and more importance. The symbolism attached to female chastity became a mainstay of the Church’s outlook. It was still firmly in existence in the periods of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Mexico, where it became even more pressing in the New World context, as I shall go on to explore later in this book.

Beginning in the Middle Ages, the emblematic importance society attributed to chastity rendered it an inherently misogynist ideal that intended to essentialize the female body and cast it as the locus of society’s redemption from sin.⁶ Virginity under these terms could not be viewed in any way as liberating, as it effectively functioned as a “device for the virtual immobilization of women” (McNamara, *Sisters* 323). Enclosure, conceived of principally to protect women’s chastity, was also a misogynist act as it denied women agency in the care and control of their own physical movements, thus necessitating the handing over of other responsibilities, among them economic, to men.⁷ Women were not encouraged to cultivate manly qualities, but were instead redefined as the guardians of purity (321–22). The burden of the role of “guardian of purity” was a heavy one, and women in particular were doomed to failure from the outset. The Christian tradition, as the Mexican case I examine in this book will bear out, considered women to be the very incarnation of sin, while at the same time investing them with all the symbolism of purity in order to wipe away the sins of others (Glantz, “El cuerpo” 179–80; Burns 24). Woman’s identity was based on her corporeality (Ibsen, “The Hiding Places” 261)—an ambivalent referent at best and one prone to conflictive interpretations. Thus, the idealization of women had its counterpart in the mistrust and denigration of women, as the

Church constantly struggled to make them fit into an unrealistic ideal of the Church's own making.

Boniface's decree created the "bedrock" (Makowski 127) of female religious enclosure, upon which the Church would build and obsessively rebuild. The Church constantly struggled to effectively enforce enclosure, as well as to control just how women lived their lives once shut away in the cloister. Formal enclosure, begun with *Periculoso*, was stringently revisited at the Council of Trent, where it was ratified in the final session on December 3, 1568. Female orders were to observe strict universal enclosure, both passive and active,⁸ upon pain of punishment, according to the mandates laid out in Boniface XVIII's *Periculoso*:

The holy council [. . .] commands all bishops that [. . .] they make it their special care that in all monasteries subject to them by their own authority and in others by the authority of the Apostolic See, the enclosure of nuns be restored wherever it has been violated and that it be preserved where it has not been violated: restraining with ecclesiastical censures and other penalties, every appeal being set aside, the disobedient and gainsayers, even summoning for this purpose, if need be, the aid of the secular arm. (qtd. in Schroeder, 220–21)

Women were forbidden to go out of their convent unless they had first gained episcopal permission. For McNamara, this ratification of what she calls the "hostile sentiments of fourteenth century popes" was a blow to any female autonomy gained through "bitter struggles" in the intervening centuries between *Periculoso* and its commentators,⁹ and the ratification at Trent.¹⁰

The Council of Trent ushered in a period of masculinist reform of a Catholic Church under threat from the onslaught of Protestantism. The Church, on the offensive, became the Church militant, an organization in which there was to be no active role for women. The mandate of enclosure sums up the attitude to women that prevailed. They were both troublesome and not equipped to take on the mantle of this active and combative Church. The Counter-Reformation Church aimed to control the faithful and strengthened the male ecclesiastical hierarchy in order to do so. The primacy of the sacraments was to be the centerpiece of the Church's onslaught, and thus women were ruled out of active participation in consolidating the Catholic faith. Male religious orders formed during the Counter-Reformation—including the Jesuits, Oratorians, and Theatines—deliberately made ordination a requirement for admission, thus excluding women from their Christianizing projects (McNamara, *Sisters* 490). Male clergy often scorned women who wished to actively participate in the battle,