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Guiding Confessors in 16th-Century Mexico

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A group of scholars, based in the Colegio de Michoacán and other institutes in Mexico, has been working on the documents of the Third Provincial Council of Mexico since 2003. This last installment of their efforts, dedicated to the late Claudia Ferreira Ascencio, presents a set of fascinating essays that focus, by and large, on one of the lesser studied documents of the council, the *Directorio de confesores*.¹ The working group was organized in the Colegio de México under the leadership of Andrés Lira González in the seminar »Formación Política de México siglos XVI–XX«.

This volume is organized into four different areas: the doctrine and practice of confession; the administration of justice and legitimacy of authority; the instruments of pastoral care and the Native population; and the people, privileges, and cathedrals in the Third Provincial Council. By far the largest section is the first, in which all the essays directly address the importance of the *Directorio*, its roots, and its effect and implications on confession in the colonial period. These articles explore many of the important themes found in the *Directorio*.

In the first article, Lira González focuses on one of the most intriguing sections of the *Directorio*, namely the one looking at the confessional needs of the different offices and occupations in the larger society. Lira finds that it draws on earlier works by authors such as Martín de Azpilcueta, and notes that the *Directorio* recognizes the competence of the confessor to assign the appropriate penance. Another of the leaders of the Provincial Council working group, Alberto Carrillo Cázares, explores the role of Azpilcueta to a greater degree. On the one hand, the work of Azpilcueta was theoretical, looking at what might be, whereas the *Directorio* was more practical, stipulating the role of the confessor in the rite of penance. Carrillo notes that it was the precise application of these theories that caused a backlash as the ecclesiastical officials of

Mexico attempted to address the issues they perceived in their society, a backlash that prevented the *Directorio* from being published for nearly forty years. Sebastián Terráneo considers the *Directorio* as a source with which to better understand canon law as it developed in the Americas. Looking at the canons and decrees of Trent, Terráneo focuses specifically on those cases which were reserved to an ecclesiastical superior and on cases of conscience. These were in the Tridentine canons and decrees and also occupy an important part of the *Directorio*. He concludes that the *Directorio* then played an outsized role in establishing canon law in the Indies. Roberto Jaramillo Escutia posits that the *Directorio* was absolutely required if the decrees of the Third Provincial Council were to be effectively applied to Mexico, reflecting as they did the canons and decrees of Trent. Looking at the works of the Augustinian Alonso de la Veracruz, Jaramillo notes that different orders and different confessors approached their duty in such a way as to cause confusion among the faithful. He looked also at the conquest of the Philippines largely by Augustinian friars as a case where both a diversity of orders was needed and regulation centralized in the administration of penance along with a need for training for the priests licensed for that sacrament. The last essay in this section, by Jesús Joel Peña Espinosa, considers the sacrament of penance in a larger context of both doctrine and strategy as manifested in the Third Provincial Council. The *Directorio* became the outlet for this twin vision of the Council. He considers the important report provided by the Jesuit Juan de la Plaza in laying out both the proper use of the sacrament and its abuse, which Peña sees as also reflected in the establishment of the church in Granada after the Reconquest. In short, he concludes that the Council and *Directorio* were, perhaps, the last utopian efforts of the 16th century.

* ANDRÉS LIRA GONZÁLEZ, LEOPOLDO LÓPEZ VALENCIA (eds.), *Manuscritos del concilio provincial mexicano (1585). Directorio de confesores*. Estudios, Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán 2022, 324 p., ISBN 978-607-544-177-1

1 For readers of English, the *Directorio* was translated by Stafford Poole and me and published by the University of Oklahoma Press in 2018.

The next section consists of an excellent essay by Rodrigo Salomón Pérez Hernández regarding the right of sanctuary, *inmunidad de las iglesias*. He discusses it in three manners: how it entered the debates of the council, how it was manifested in the *Directorio*, and how the high court of Mexico applied these rules. This essay draws deeply on the decrees of the Council, the theoretical writings of a later author, Hevia Bolaños, and actual cases from the Archivo General de la Nación, to present a very solid argument that the principle of sanctuary (and various forms of clerical immunity) inevitably created friction between church and state. The next article was requested to be removed from the collection by the author, as it has appeared elsewhere, and so it will not be considered here.

The third section considers the administration of pastoral responsibility for the ›natives‹. An essay by José David Cortés Guerrero looks at penance and confession as practiced in the Kingdom of New Granada. While the topic has been explored by other authors, Cortés Guerrero offers a more systematic and complete analysis, taking the experience of New Spain as a touchstone. He also uses material from the Cartagena inquisition to illustrate the principles that he outlines. María del Carmen Espinosa Valdivia offers an article on the relationship of the Jesuits, especially Juan de la Plaza, to the issue of confession, particularly as seen in the *Directorio*. As noted in the article by Peña Espinosa, it was the *memorial* presented by Plaza that organized the thinking of the Council regarding the sacrament of confession. Espinosa Valdivia expands on this and probes more deeply into Jesuit practice and norms laid out by the Council of Trent. Juana Patricia Pérez Munguía considers how the *Directorio*, specifically, and catechisms in general, attempted to integrate or create common norms and responses to acts which occurred in a complex and unequal society. As she notes, all the faithful are subject to sinful desires and actions, but some, because of their state, nature, or occupation, are more tempted than others to specific offenses.

Margarita Menegus Bornemann focuses on the indigenous lords as seen through several 16th-century documents, one of which was the *Directorio*. One of the features of these documents, she demonstrates, is that they sought to control and regulate the extent of the actions of the indigenous

lords, in various ordinances, in *confessionarios*, and particularly in the *Directorio* itself. The Bull of the Holy Crusade, a revenue source for the Spanish Crown, is the theme of the article by María del Pilar Martínez López-Cano. The Spanish Crown benefitted from the sale of copies of the Bull, which in turn granted indulgences to the purchasers. One indulgence became key, namely the ability to refrain from fasting during Lent and other penitential periods of the year. Martínez looks to see how the Councils dealt with the issue. In general, the three 16th-century Councils in Mexico were mute on the Bull itself, although some of the position papers submitted to them did touch on the issue. It was the issue of fasting and the use of the indulgences in that regard that stimulated the biggest reaction. Martínez López-Cano's analysis is very well done and quite convincing. The last article of the collection, written by Lourdes Turrent Díaz, considers legislation regarding cathedral choirs in the decrees of the Third Council. The decrees reinforced the bulls of erection for the dioceses and other statutes that called for beauty and order in the cathedrals' rites and rituals.

Taken as a whole, these essays explore many important issues that went into and that flowed from both the canons and decrees of the Third Council, and more particularly from the *Directorio de confesores*. They are uniformly well written, incisive, and explore many fascinating and fruitful areas of research. The team is to be commended on the high quality of the work. Given this, it is somewhat surprising that very few titles written in English were consulted, particularly Stafford Poole's introduction and English translation of the *Directorio*. The bibliography tended to draw on works from other members of the team rather than casting the net more widely. Several essays were particularly strong in that they went beyond merely parsing the words in the decrees or the *Directorio* and looked to documentation held in civil archives. This provided a richness to the analysis. As scholars have learned over the past few decades, that which was written in royal decrees or pronounced by ecclesiastical authorities was one thing. What actually happened was something very, very different.

