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The First Bishop of North America

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The early years of a country and its culture always have held the interest of historians. The Canadian Catholic Historical Society has consistently emphasized this aspect of Canadian history, both by scholarly contributions and the fostering of interest. It is fitting that such should be the case for the growth of the Church in Canada forms a very important part of our national history. The story of the fascinating and heroic years of seventeenth century Canadian history praises the work of Bishop Laval, the first bishop of Quebec. The stamp of his work is set firmly upon the pattern of our culture. One of the great universities of our land perpetuates his name. The first bishop of the northern part of the continent has not lacked for biographers both favourable and critical, and he needs no paper read here today to acquaint you with his achievements.[1]

It is most fitting however, that at a time when the unity of the world is being thrust upon men by their own tragic mistakes, that you as a Catholic group of historians have invited papers from outside the field of Canadian and European history. The world vision comes easily to the man of faith, and for the historian it enriches the achievements of area history by placing it in a balanced framework of development and growth. I take great pleasure in presenting to you a paper on the first bishop of mainland North America, Juan de Zumarraga, Bishop of Mexico, 1528-1548.

Although Bishop Zumarraga lived more than a century before Bishop Laval, the problems which the two men faced were somewhat similar. The achievements and personalities of these two prelates helped to mold the development of their respective countries. Bishop Laval has been accorded an honoured place in our national history. Bishop Zumarraga has suffered more at the hands of the scholar and the critic, although of late there has been a revaluation that will in time place this Franciscan prelate among the truly great in the annals of Mexican history. The limits of this paper do not allow for a complete comparison of the careers of the first bishops of North America. Some points of comparison are noted and I am sure other parallels will come to mind as the scope of Bishop Zumarraga's episcopate is indicated in this short essay.

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[1] A. Gosselin, *François de Montmorency-Laval* (Quebec, 1906), Gaillard de Champais, *François de Montmorency* Paris, 1924; H.R. Scott, *Bishop Laval* (Toronto, 1928).

Recorded Mexican history begins with the sixteenth century. The formative elements of this fascinating story germinated and matured in entirely different historical milieus. The mingling of the two cultural streams, Spanish and Indian, began with the Conquest and the first clash of these ways of life was most important. The Spanish pattern was firm and vibrant, deriving an additional impetus from a European preeminence which was to die with the century. The Indian pattern was unformed in many aspects, resting heavily upon borrowings from other indigenous groups, and its ascendancy in Mexico, at the time of the Conquest, was primarily military and still unconsolidated.

The sixteenth century is the period when the Spanish and Indian elements are in sharpest contrast, and the time when can be seen more clearly the cultural patterns destined to give Mexico its future personality; in embryo, one can discern the evolution of the country. The present is the highway that the past follows to the future. The "present" of the sixteenth century points more directly to the future of Mexico than any other.

A study of this period of Mexican history must heed the role of Bishop Juan de Zumarraga for he was a conspicuous figure in a violent pattern of color and action. Among the motives of the Spanish expansion was the desire to win the natives of the new lands to the faith. Consequently the sixteenth century witnessed a great missionary effort in Mexico with the development of new mission methods. In such an undertaking the first bishop of the country inevitably played a decisive role. Church and State were more closely aligned than in our day; hence in this opening phase of Mexican history, the bishop occupied the most important post in the land, next to the viceroy. Bishop Zumarraga, as the chief ecclesiastic in New Spain, shared in the solution of almost every important problem in the colony. A mediocre man could have made his mark just by holding office, but Zumarraga was not mediocre. He was one of the giants in the story of the first century of Spanish rule in Mexico. If his contribution to the formation of the country is neglected, the story is incomplete.

Juan de Zumarraga was born in the town of Durango, in the province of Vizcaya, in the Basque country.[2] The exact date of his birth cannot be determined but it was either late in 1468 or early in 1469.[3] His father was one of the greater landowners of the district and his mother came from a well

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[2] Fray Juan Ruiz de Larrinaga, *Don Fr. Juan de Zumarraga Primer Obispo y Arzobispo de México, Durangués, Franciscano y Servidor de la Patria al margen de su Pontificando* (Bilboa, 1948), pp. 9-11.

[3] Joaquim Garcia Icazbalceta, *Don Fray Juan de Zumárraga, Primer Obispo y Arzobispo de Mexico* (2nd ed., Mexico, 1947), 1, 12; Larrinaga, *Don Fray Juan de Zumarraga*, pp. 12-13.

known Basque family.[4] Although his family was not as well known in Spain as the Montmorency family was in France, it could be said that they were of the lesser nobility. Juan de Zumarraga entered the Franciscan order at the main convent of San Francisco de Valladolid of the Province of Santoya, an Observant house.[5] He made a thorough course in philosophy and theology, a fact that his letters from New Spain to the Council of the Indies demonstrates. He served in various administrative posts within the order. From 1520 to 1523 he was provincial of the new province of Concepcion.[6)] In 1526 he was the guardian at the convent of Abrojo. Charles V stayed at this convent during Holy Week in 1527 and became acquainted with the simple sincere piety of the guardian and his subjects.[7]

During these years there was an ever increasing flood of petitions and complaints coming to Spain from the distant Indies. Among these were repeated requests that prelates be sent to regulate and direct the ecclesiastical affairs of the colony.[8] Charles, deciding to fill this need, sent instructions to his ambassador in Rome to seek papal approval of the appointment of Juan de Zumarraga. At the same time he made known the imperial will to the humble guardian of Abrojo.[9]

The decision to send Zumarraga immediately, without waiting for the requisite bulls from Rome, was dictated both by the urgent political and religious needs of the colony and the awareness at the Spanish Court that papal approbation might be delayed for some time because of the strained relations existing in 1527, between the Emperor and the Pope. For the new appointee it meant the assuming of a way of life that must have been difficult of acceptance. Zumarraga was then a man of fifty-five, firmly set in his religious way of life, attached to a Franciscan rule of the strictest simplicity and quite content to spend his remaining years in the comparatively cloistered life of a small convent. When this is borne in mind the true worth of his future achievements becomes apparent. The period of more than a half a century that he had lived in Spain, holds the key for the reading of his

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4 Fr. Fidel de J. Chauvet, O.F.M., *Fray Juan de Zumarraga, O.F.M.* (Biblioteca de los anales de la Provincia de Santa Evangelio de México), V, 111, Mexico, 1948, p. 8.

5 Larrinaga, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-53; Fidel de Lejarza, O.F.M., "Acotaciones criticas en torno a la filiacion religiosa de Zumârraga," *Archivo ibero-Americana*, Ano IX, Number 13, Secundo Epoca (Madrid, 1949), pp. 5-71.

6 Fray Maios Alonso, *Historia de la Provincia de la Concepcíon* (Valladolid, 1774), p. 299.

7 Manuel Foronoda y Aguilera, *Estancias y viajes del Emperador Carlos V* (Madrid, 1914), pp. 289 ff.

8 *Epistolaria de la Nueva Espana*, XV, No. 890, p. 203; No. 891, p. 204.

9 M. Cuevas, *Historia de la Iglesia en México*, 1, 240, n. 40; Icazbalceta, *op. cit*., 111, No. 28, pp. 73-75.

future activities.

He was a Basque, a Spaniard of Spain, a Franciscan of perhaps the most completely reformed province of Europe, and at the same time a man of his age. Trained according to the tradition of his order, he had also benefited by the insistence of Cardinal Ximenes in furthering scholarly pursuits among the Spanish clergy. Here was a man who knew the writings of Thomas More and Erasmus,[10] and who did not hesitate to use those sections which he found applicable to the needs confronting him. Tested by time and duty, he was to display the practical wisdom which comes only from experience in the handling of men and that realism of judgement which is the result of a solid interior life of prayer. Charles V made a wise choice in selecting for the most important ecclesiastical post in New Spain, a man fitted by temperament, and prepared by vocation to face the intricate problems of the overseas dominions.

Bishop Zumarraga came to Mexico with the judges of the first appointed council, or *audiencia,* in 1528. Some years previously the home government decided that authority in the overseas realms could not be left in the hands of the Conquistadors. By 1528 they had taken steps to replace Cortes in Mexico by an *Audiencia* or judicial and advisory body, but this first experiment in this type of control proved a dismal failure. Zumarraga, as bishop and Protector of the Indians, challenged the authority of the unscrupulous officials and attempted to prevent their depredations. He did not hesitate to report their misrule to the Court and the relatively early institution of the vice-regal principle resulted, in a large degree, from the action of Zumarraga in opposing the corrupt *audiencia*.[11] This was the first "church-state" struggle in America. His relations with Antonio de Mendozo, the first viceroy 1535-1551, were at all times most friendly, and here then is a real difference from Bishop Laval's extended struggles with the governors of New France.

Bishop Zumarraga was responsible for the formal establishment of the church in Mexico, and the division of the country into dioceses in 1534, and the settling of the various questions resulting from this organization owed much to his energies.[12] However, the main problem of the Church was the conversion and assimilation of the masses of the Indians. It was the critical period for the mission effort and the fact that it achieved as much as it did was due to the understanding and zeal displayed by Zumarraga. The missionaries found in him a fellow religious who understood their views, and

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10 Chauvet, *op. cit*., pp. 14-17.

11 A. S. Aiton, *Antonio de Mendoza, First Viceroy of New Spain* (Durham, N.C., 1927), p. 20.

12 For this appraisal attention is also directed to the work of M. Cuevas, *Historia de la Iglesia en México* (3 vols., Mexico, 1921), 1, pp. 238-251.

he could temper them when necessary without dampening the ardor essential for the work. He insisted that the mission groups cooperate among themselves and pool information valuable to all workers in the field. He aided the missionaries in every possible way. In his solicitude for the spiritual welfare of the country, he was most insistent that only the best type of diocesan priest should come to the new land.[13] The major portion of his time was devoted to the work within his role of bishop and shepherd of the faithful.

In the organization of the Mexican Church his main concern was for the Indian population, the major problem of New Spain. The Spanish had conquered a land where, at least for the foreseeable future, they would be in a numerical minority. They had brought to this country a religious faith and a way of life strange and foreign to the native peoples. The faith was to be adopted by the Indians, but what was to be the standard for the rest of their way of life? Different solutions were possible. The Iberian pattern could be imposed on the entire country, and the Indian could sink into almost absolute slavery, save for those fortunate few able to adapt themselves to the new conditions-or steps could be instituted to allow the mass of the people to bridge gradually the cultural gap, and in the process create a new cultural pattern. Zumarraga subscribed to this latter policy. He grasped, at least implicitly, that such a large native population could not be governed and christianized wisely if the Indian problem was not viewed as being fundamental; if it were not realized that the Mexican Church and nation could not rise upon a purely European basis. As one author expresses it:

> Zumarraga played a notable role in the struggle for justice on behalf of the Indians simply by believing that these strange men populating the New World were rational beings who could he saved... Therefore it seems to me that the greatest contribution Zumarraga made to Mexican culture was his belief that there could be such a culture.[14]

As one of the creators of Mexican social life and culture, the bishop realized that the Indian must be instructed in the way of life desired for him, and thus he became one of the founders of educational effort in Mexico. He supported the friars' experiments in this field and his interest in the welfare of the Indians led him to provide educational facilities for native boys and girls in and around the capital. He was the founder of the first *colegio* of New Spain, the famous Santa Cruz de Tlalteloleo, and entertained high

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13 C. Bayle, *El Clero Secular y la Evangelizacíon de América* (Madrid, 1950), pp. 70-73. Also see A. M. Carreno, *Un Desconocido Cedulario del Siglo XVI* (Mexico, 1944), 105 and no. 66 and 75.

14 Lewis Hanke, "The Contribution of Bishop Juan de Zumarraga to Mexican Culture," *The Americas*, V (January, 1949), p. 275.

hopes that it would supply native aspirants to the priesthood. That this desire was not fulfilled was no fault of his; it was an experiment ahead of its time that was not given sufficient time to mature.[15]

A man of vision can glimpse the possibilities of the future. The educational contributions of the bishop were broader than the actual institutions he founded, and the ventures he encouraged. Zumarraga was the first to suggest the founding of a university in Mexico, and thus deserves credit and a share in the honors that are given to that institution.[16]

All his life Zumarraga was interested in books and assembled one of the first and most comprehensive collections in New Spain. With the varied and unprecedented demands of his office it was not surprising that he resorted to the printed word as one of the means to solve the problems of this new world. He was instrumental in bringing the first printing press to America. Further, of the fourteen books printed in America between 1539 and 1548, ten were printed and edited by the bishop of Mexico. He edited the first book off the press in America. At this time when the press was becoming the most valuable aid of the human intellect, as author, compiler, editor, censor, and consultor of books, ". . . he was one of the most illustrious bibliophiles of New Spain in the sixteenth century."[17]

The former economic relationships of Astec Mexico were continued and hardened by the Conquest, and all to the disadvantage of the native population. These "facts of life" did not escape the vigilant eye of the bishop. His description of the physical ills of the country, as evidenced in his remarkable *Parecer* and *Otro Parecer,* both addressed to the Council of the Indies, prove his concern for the native groups.[18] He realized that there were problems, economic in nature, to be adjusted before other and more important steps, such as the christianization of the Indians, could be accomplished. From the first day when he landed in Vera Cruz, until his death in 1548, Zumarraga strove to improve the standard of living of the native population. His attempts to provide a balanced economic life for the Indian ranged from the importation of European farm products and animals, to procuring the immigration of Spanish artisans who could teach the trades of the Old World to the people of the New. A famous example of this activity

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15 Pius Joseph Barth, *Franciscan Education and the Social Order in Spanish North America* (Chicago, 1945) ; R. Ricard, *La « Conquête Spirituelle » du Mexique* (Paris, 1933), pp. 245 ff.

16 Icazbabceta, *Zumdárraga*, IV, No. 11, p. 134. The complete text of this request is evident proof of the bishop's interest in a university establishment.

17 A. M. Carreno, "The Books of Don Juan de Zumarraga," *The Americas*, V (January, 1949), p. 330.

18 Icazbalceta, *Zumárraga*, 111, No. 34, 35.

of the bishop is the fact that he was partly responsible for the introduction of the silk industry into Mexico.

His social views and dreams were firmly based in reality, tempered by justice, charity and an awareness of the frailty of man. He opposed the enforcement, in their original form, of the so-called New Laws of 1542 designed to prevent exploitation of the natives, because it was his personal opinion that some form of the *encomienda* was necessary, at least temporarily, in the New World. His moderate views on the subject, and his influence in mapping a prudent course, helped New Spain through a stormy moment of her history. Zumarraga strove for an integrated society, and his contributions to the formation of it were based upon a firm faith in the possibilities of the Indian peoples.

The bishop-elect was a sick man when he landed at the port of Vera Cruz in 1528, which fact made him especially conscious of the effects of a long sea voyage. This realization and the unhealthy conditions of the port of entry to New Spain moved him to seek arrangements for the opening of a hospital in the city. This project came to naught, but later Zumarraga did found one of the first institutions of this sort in America, the *Hospital del Amor de Dios,* for incurables, in Mexico City. This was but one of the many charities that claimed his limited resources of time and strength.

Criticism of the bishop has not been lacking. Admittedly, he approved the destruction of certain temples and idols in the land. However, most of this activity took place before his arrival in New Spain. There is no clear proof that he authorized the destruction of any Indian writings or codices, and certainly not the razing of the archives of Texcoco.[19] The fact that Torquemada holds the Bishop responsible for such acts is not enough to convict him. It is true that he did not form a museum collection of the antiquities of the land, which some think desirable, but neither is he accountable for the lack of such antiquarian treasures.

Zumarraga, under appointment by the Holy Office in Spain, acted as Inquisitor in Mexico for several years, which office he discharged actively and, in general, leniently. Although Indians were involved in less than fifteen percent of the cases, the one in which the death sentence was imposed was that of Don Carlos, Indian chief of Texcoco. From the evidence that is now available, it would appear that Zumarraga had little responsibility for the sentencing of the unfortunate native official.[20]

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[19] Perhaps the most famous, and certainly the most widely read accusation leveled against Zumarraga is in Book 1, Chapter IV, of any edition of Prescott, *History of the Conquest of Mexico*.

[20] M. Carreno, *Un Desconocido Cedulario del Siglo XVI* (Mexico, 1944), No. 60, 13-135. See also on this point another work by the same author: *Zumárraga, Teologo y Editor*, pp. 51-54.

The apostolic age of a Catholic country usually witnesses, as a necessary liturgical compliment, the development of patronage and pilgrimage.[21] This was true for Mexico. The patroness of the nation is *Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe;* and this devotion to the Virgin Mary, under the title of Our Lady of Guadalupe, goes back to the sixteenth century. Historical tradition assigns to Zumarraga an active part in the events which occurred when the devotion began.[22]

The story is a familiar one and only the main elements are presented here. According to the earlier accounts, the Virgin Mary appeared several times during the month of December, in the year 1531, to an Indian convert, Juan Diego. Juan saw the visions on the crest of a hill called Tepeyac, which was a short distance from the city. Instructed in the vision to report what he had seen to the bishop, he did as he was commanded. Bishop Zumarraga told him to ask for a special sign to prove the validity of the apparitions. On the occasion of the next vision, Juan was told by the Lady to gather into his mantle the roses, which had suddenly bloomed on the winterswept landscape, and to carry them to the bishop. Juan did as instructed. Again in the presence of the bishop, he opened his cape and the fragrant flowers cascaded to the floor before the prelate. But more was to be seen; on the mantle of Juan, miraculously imprinted, was the image of the Lady whom Juan had seen in his visions.

The bishop was deeply moved by what he had witnessed. He kept the mantle in the palace for several days before moving it to the cathedral to be seen by the people of the city. Meanwhile, arrangements were under way to fulfill the request of the Virgin Mary, to erect a shrine on the hill in her honor. The temporary hermitage was ready towards the end of the month. On 26th December, 1531, the image was taken from the cathedral to the first shrine of Guadalupe, on the hill of Tepeyac. The Mexican devotion to the Blessed Mother, under the title of Our Lady of Guadalupe, started from these incidents and entered firmly into the cultural pattern of Mexican life, especially among the Indians.

Whether one accepts the authenticity of these apparitions, as recorded

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21 For interesting insights, from the mission point of view, on this subject see the work of Jean Danielou, *The Salvation of the Nations* (London, 1949); for the discussion of the historical cultural aspects, refer to R. Ricard, *La « Conquête Spirituelle » du Mexique* (Paris, 1933), pp. 225-228.

22 The best presentation of the question is to be found in the work of J. Bravo Ugarte, *Questiones Históricas Guadalupanas* (Mexico, 1946). Also, Primo Feliciano Velasquez, *La Aparición de Santa Maria de Guadalupe* (Mexico, 1931); P. M. Cuevas, *Album Historico Guadalupano* (Mexico, 1948), pp. 103. 113 -and 321-323. For the details of the apparition, the account as given in the famous *Informaciones Sobre la Milagrosa Aparición de la Santisima Virgen de Guadalupe Recibidas en 1666 y 1723* (Mexico, 1889), has been followed.

in the traditional accounts, or not, is not pertinent to this work.[23] What is pertinent is the fact that Zumarraga was the bishop at the time, and undoubtedly contributed to the initiation of this cultural emphasis so dear to the heart of modern Mexicans. The devotion to the Virgin de Guadalupe did start in the year 1531, and Zumarraga is intimately associated with the story. It is clear that he was responsible for the erection of the temporary hermitage, the first shrine of *Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe*.[24] Again in this instance there is no denying the fact that he was one of the creators of Mexican culture.

Zumarraga's work in New Spain was posited upon a firm faith in the ability of the Indian peoples to approach and achieve a Christian pattern of life. He saw for them an honored place in the society of the western world. The missionaries have been accused of treating the natives as children, of segregating them from the rest of society in New Spain, and thus never allowing them to reach a maturity permitting them to take their rightful place in the nation. Zumarraga did consider the Indians as his children, but he did not envisage them as remaining in that state indefinitely. His educational, economic, and social efforts all point to a vision of the Indians as equals of the rest of men, in a just, Christian way of life.

From all these details one may rightly draw the conclusion that as the first bishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumarraga gave the most devoted attention to his work, and did everything in his power to set on foot a lasting program for the integration of the masses of the Indian peoples into a healthy Christian society. It may be set down as one of the great tragedies of Mexican

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[23] Icazbalceta in his biography of the bishop does not treat of the beginnings of the devotion. His reason for this was that Zumarraga did not mention the incident in any of his letters, and therefore he did not consider that there was sufficient historical proof to substantiate the claims advanced. On this point see Icazbalceta, *Zumdáraga*, I, xxi-xvi. However, the first two bishops, Zumarraga and Montufar, were responsible for forwarding the devotion, and this in spite of opposition from certain groups within the country; Ricard, *op. cit*., p. 229. The opposition had cultural overtones, and it seems that it was the Iberian party which attacked strongly the liberty allowed the Indians in this particular form of religious practice. There exists sufficient historical proof that the devotion began during the episcopate of Zumarraga, and that he participated in the events surrounding these beginnings; and that is all that concerns us at this point.

[24] Cuevas, *op. cit*., I, 281, n. I. This letter, from the Bishop, discovered by the author in the Archives of the Indies, was addressed to Cortes. It is the only time in all his correspondence that Zumarraga refers to the incident. The letter is concerned with the transfer of the mantle from the cathedral to the hermitage; it is dated December, 1551. There is no need to repeat the complete analysis of Cuevas, but perhaps the closing words of this document are the most important. The bishop, after inviting the Conquistador to participate in the procession, adds: " .. Diga, V.S. a la Señora Marquesa que quiero poner a la Iglesia Mayor título de la Conceptión de la Madre de Dios. Pues en tal día ha querido dios y su madre hater esta merced a esta tierra que ganastes, y no mas ahora."

history that his appreciation of the capabilities of the Indians, and the moderate program he envisaged and implemented, did not live on in the succeeding generations. One simply cannot imagine what might have come out of Hispanic Mexico, if the country had at the beginning of the nineteenth century a numerous native clergy, supervised by a native hierarchy, and an Indian population accepted on a basis of equality with the non-Indian, all ready to accept the trial of self-government.

That this did not come to pass is the tragedy of Hispanic America, and of Zumarraga. The apostolic mission activity was not carried forward, especially in the social fields. Unfortunately for Mexico, the Iberian view dominated, if not in the lifetime of the bishop, at least shortly thereafter. Never again were the Indians considered capable of approaching the level of their white brethren from Europe. Altogether, one may set this down as the tragic fault, the omission gross with consequence, from which Mexico and America suffer to this day.

Sixteenth century New Spain was a wider stage than seventeenth century New France. The plot of the historical drama was more complicated, the action was swifter and the major and minor roles more numerous. It would be difficult to say of Zumarraga and New Spain, what has been said recently of Laval and New France.

> There can be little question that Bishop Laval had more influence on New France than Louis XIV, during a long lifetime which appropriately paralled Louis' reign. The development of the Church in New France may be said to be his work.[25]

He was, however, one of the true founders of Mexico, ranking with Cortes and Antonio de Mendoza – The religious, social, political and educational achievements of these two prelates present an interesting parallel. Zumarraga was once accused by some of the Spaniards of Mexico City of unduly protecting the Indians. Could not his words of reply have been used by Laval in rebuking those in Quebec who fostered the use of brandy in the fur trade?

> You are the ones who emit an unpleasant odor according to my way of thinking, and you are the ones who are repulsive and disgusting to me, because you seek only vain frivolities and because you had soft lives just as though you were not Christians. These poor Indians have a heavenly smell to me and give me health for they exemplify for me the harshness of life and penance which I must espouse if I am to be saved.[26]

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25 Mason Wade, *The French Canadians*, 1760-1945 (London, 1955), p. 37.

26 Jeronimo ce Mendieta, *Historia eclesiastica indiana* (Mexico, 1870), 631-632.