

A BIOGRAPHY OF A CONVENT AND A PROSOPOGRAPHY OF ITS NUNS

UNA BIOGRAFÍA DE UN CONVENTO Y UNA PROSOPOGRAFÍA DE SUS MONJAS

Margaret Chowning

University Of California Berkeley
United States
chowning@berkeley.edu

Abstract

This work centers on the way I used the principles of biography and mini-biography (prosopography) in a book on a Mexican convent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I applied the concept of a life story to a non-human subject, the convent itself. I paid particular attention to the ways the convent's constitution and its physical plant actively shaped its life cycle from its "birth" in 1754 to its "death" when the nuns were excoistered in 1863. Compiling social data on the nuns allowed me to deepen my interpretation of a decade-long "rebellion".

Keywords: *Biography; Prosopography; Convent; Nuns; San Miguel de Allende.*

Resumen

Este trabajo se centra en los principios de la biografía y la minibiografía (prosopografía) en un libro sobre un convento mexicano de los siglos XVIII y XIX. Se aplicó el concepto de historia de vida a un tema no humano, el convento mismo. Presté especial atención a las formas en que la constitución del convento y su planta física moldearon activamente su ciclo de vida desde su "nacimiento" en 1754 hasta su "muerte" cuando las monjas fueron enclaustradas en 1863. La recopilación de datos sociales sobre las monjas profundiza la interpretación de una "rebelión" que duró una década.

Palabras clave: Biografía; Prosopografía; Convento; Monjas; San Miguel de Allende.

Introduction

I began thinking about biography as a tool and method as I was writing my 2006 book, *Rebellious Nuns: The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent, 1754-1863*. When I discovered, by accident, the rich materials on what the bishop called a “rebellion” in the convent of La Purísima Concepción in San Miguel el Grande (de Alende), I knew immediately that I had stumbled upon a great story with vivid characters.¹

The nuns’ personalities emerged clearly from the archive. The first abbess, Antonia del Santísimo Sacramento, was zealous, intransigent, and demanding, with what the vicar called a “violent temperament”: when her sister founding nuns resisted the amount of prayer she built into the daily schedule as inappropriate for a new convent with few nuns, she offered them three stark choices: “either I leave, or you leave, or you submit to me”. (AHAMich, 1759: Caja 209 (XVIII), exp. 20). Within three years approximately half the convent had sided with the youngest founding nun, Phelipa de San Antonio, in open defiance of Antonia. After the bishop was finally forced to remove Antonia from her position, the target of the rebellion shifted to the male authorities who had tried to enforce their obedience to Antonia and who had replaced her with another nun dedicated to the same strict prayer regimen.

Phelipa embarked on a furious campaign to discredit the vicar; according to one of the nuns, Manuela de la Santísima Trinidad, treating him “like a carbonero”, and going “from cell to cell, teaching even the girls in the school [...] that the Vicar is a simpleton, that he cannot even find his own face, that he persecutes her [...] that he is an ignoramus who knows nothing of convent governance” (AHAMich, 1769: Caja 209 (XVIII), exp. 23). Phelipa, who (to the bishop’s horror) was elected abbess in 1769, began to “feign strange infirmities in order to take to bed, so that all those who applaud her caprice have an excuse to visit her in her cell, and, perhaps in order to please her, to mimic these

infirmities, in whose symptoms and movements she has instructed them” (AHAMich, 1770: Caja 209 (XVIII), exp. 23). When the rebellious half of the convent became afflicted by this “jumping sickness”, the bishop was forced to send three advisors to interview the nuns and ascertain the cause (they blamed Phelipa, not the devil). The rebellion finally burned out when Phelipa’s term as abbess ended in 1772 and the bishop made sure a nun from the obedient faction was elected, but it had been over a decade of turbulence.

I put aside the project I was working on to write a book on the convent that had produced such turmoil. But how to construct such a book? There were already several distinguished studies of Mexican convents and nuns, either published or about to be published.² I needed to connect to the already-strong tradition of writing about religious women in Mexico, to make my story add something meaningful, besides local detail, to theirs.

One option was to center the rebellion of the nuns against their abbess (in the early phases) and, later, the bishop.³ With the extraordinary wealth of juicy and even shocking archival material on these events, this was tempting. And indeed, another scholar may someday produce an excellent book that digs deeply from a literary perspective into the language used by the nuns and their male supervisors (the bishop, the vicar) to better understand gendered power dynamics in the convent and the world of which it was a part.

I decided, however, that I would take more of a biographical approach, making use of all the excellent material I had collected that was *not* on the rebellion, in order to construct a whole life story of the convent, from “birth” (the foun-

¹ The “accident” was that I was going through the boxes of material on La Purísima Concepción in Salvatierra in the Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de Michoacán when I found a folder labeled “Gobierno del convento”. This material, I immediately recognized, pertained to the other La Purísima Concepción convent, in San Miguel el Grande. It had been misfiled.

² There is of course a large literature on Sor Juana and on nun’s writings by literary scholars. Among historians studying Mexican nuns and convents: *Conventos de monjas en la Nueva España* (Muriel, 1946); *Las mujeres en la Nueva España: educación y vida cotidiana* (Gonzalbo, 1987); *Místicas y descalzas: fundaciones femeninas carmelitas en la Nueva España* (Ramos, 1997); *Los conventos femeninos y el mundo urbano de la Puebla de los Ángeles del siglo XVIII*, (Loreto, 2000); Asunción Lavrin’s *Brides of Christ* was nearing completion but she had already published numerous important articles on nuns and convent life. For my thoughts on trends in the historiography of Mexican nuns and convents, see “Convents and Nuns: New Approaches to the Study of Female Religious Institutions in Colonial Mexico” (Chowning, 2008), *History Compass* (Blackwell Publishing). Published online: Sept. 8, 2008.

³ There were two distinct periods of rebellion in the 1760s.

dition in 1754) to “death” (the excloistering in 1863).⁴ That story would include the rebellion, of course, but it would aim for a more expansive explanation of how the convent turned out the way it did, one that did not assume at the outset that the rebellion was the defining feature of the convent’s troubled history. In the end the book had six chapters, only two of which were squarely centered on the rebellion.⁵

Biography of a convent

Thinking of a convent as the subject of a biography meant, inevitably, being open to granting an inanimate institution a degree of agency, independent of the agency of the individual actors that appear in the story. Much of the scholarship on “things” as agents had yet to be written at the time I was working on my book, but I was aware of Alfred Gell’s recent book arguing that point (Gell, 1998).⁶ And indeed, my research was compatible with the idea that nonhuman features of a convent (its constitution, its buildings) actively shaped its history.

La Purísima was constitutionally structured as a reformed, strict observance convent. This meant there would be no servants, no separate cells for the nuns to live in, no “niñas” (protégés/companions who were part of the nuns’ households), no individual kitchens (or as it was put, the nuns would eat “from a common pot”). The nuns would awaken in the middle of the night to sing the lesser hours of the Divine Office. Theirs would be a convent of *descalzas* (as were most new convents authorized after 1750, a response to the influence of an “enlightened” Catholicism that emphasized more stripped down and quiet religious practices).⁷

4 The convent “died” in that unlike the other convents in the archbishopric, the nuns made no attempt of which I am aware to live together or reconstitute their community for the next 45 years. But, as is detailed in the book, there was an ultimately-successful effort to recruit new nuns and revive the convent beginning in 1912.

5 Though it is true that one other chapter largely revolved around the efforts made by abbesses, bishops, and vicars to ameliorate the conditions in the convent that had given rise to the rebellions.

6 Later work includes “The Tribune Tower: Spolia as Despoliation.” (Wharton, 2011); *Onto-Cartography: An Ontology of Machines and Media* (Bryant, 2014).

7 See also: *Alone Before God: The Religious Origins of Modernity in Mexico* (Voekel, 2002); *For God and Liberty: Catholicism and Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Voekel, 2023); *The Very Nature of God: Baroque Catholicism and Religious Reform in Bourbon Mexico City* (Larkin, 2010).

But La Purísima was also a Conceptionist convent. All the other Conceptionist convents in New Spain were unreformed. So while the Capuchins or the Carmelites or the Poor Clares had long-standing reputations as strict observance convents and/or austere convents, and any entrant into these convents knew what to expect, in the case of La Purísima there was a clash between the Conceptionists’ reputation as a relaxed order, and the reality of its constitutional provisions for poverty and strict observance. This misperception was a key factor in generating resistance on the part of one faction of nuns to the zealotry of the “obedient” faction.

The divide along lines of observance created by the constitution of the convent was exacerbated by the unfortunate combination of nuns brought to San Miguel as founding nuns. The first abbess (whom we have already met) was utterly committed to the idea of building a reformed convent, after her experience in what she described as the shockingly relaxed convent of Regina Coeli in Mexico City. The second abbess, who took over after the bishop had to remove the first one because of her intransigence, was also in favor of reform, but she was weak and incompetent. The third founding nun, Phelipa de San Antonio, like the other two, had volunteered to go to San Miguel because she was unhappy at Regina Coeli. But her unhappiness there—the source of which she never detailed—clearly derived from different reasons.⁸ She was never fully committed to the idea of a strict observance convent, and though she told the abbess that she wanted to join such a convent, it appears that she did so only to escape Regina Coeli. She began pushing back against the first abbess and then the second almost from the start. Thus none of the three was interested in bringing the culture of Regina Coeli to San Miguel; they were interested in leaving it behind. They would have to build a new convent culture from scratch. And with only three experienced nuns the chances that they would be able to build this new culture and stabilize the new convent were not great. All of the comparable convents in the bishopric had more founding nuns, and none of them was charged with putting into place a con-

8 There was a fourth founding nun, but she returned to Mexico City, ostensibly, for health reasons, shortly after arriving in San Miguel. It is likely that she too chafed under the demands of the first abbess.

stitution that contradicted the way the Rule of their order was practiced in every other convent of that Rule.⁹

Adding to the dysfunction built into the convent's constitution and worsened by the small size and divisions within the group of founding nuns was the fact that the physical plant of the nuns' "temporary" living quarters when they arrived in San Miguel was not meant to serve as a convent, and must have been a stressful place in which to be enclosed. For the first nine years the nuns lived in a former poorhouse (*hospicio*) that had been hurriedly accommodated to house the nuns. This accommodation consisted largely of closing off doors and windows to the outside. A new door was cut through from the poorhouse to the church of San Rafael, and a makeshift choir was constructed in the church so that the nuns could enter the church without being seen. There was no outdoor space, since the hospicio was in the very center of the small city, with buildings all around. Because of the psychological demands of enclosure, convents generally made it a point to provide expansive patios and ample space outside the cloister for gardens and orchards for the nuns' recreation and meditation.¹⁰ The Hospicio, lacking outdoor space and dark from the boarding up of the windows, must have felt cramped and impermanent.

When the nuns moved into their newly constructed convent in 1765, they had plenty of space, with an orchard and gardens large enough for the nuns to ride horses for exercise. Here the problem was different: both the church and the convent buildings were unfinished, and so they remained for decades (AGN, 1801: vol. 6, exp. 1). The walls surrounding the orchard and the rooftops were low and too easy for "gente atrevida" to surmount, threatening their chastity. Low walls also made it hard to keep cloister, since it was too easy for the nuns to see and be seen by the outside world. The wall behind the

altar was made of adobe and on the verge of collapse. The dormitory was notoriously drafty, with five doors and two open windows. Its walls (and the walls of the refectory) were constantly dripping water that came from the wash basins and water pipes on the roof. And there was no infirmary, despite the fact that the nuns were always sick from the cold air and humidity that the building let in (AHAMich, 1791: Caja 255 (XVIII), exp. 42; AHAMich, 1791: caja 255 (XVIII), exp. 32; AHAMich, 1806: caja 374 (XIX), exp. 1). If their temporary quarters had been claustrophobic, the new convent brought illness, fear, and a sense of danger to their bodies and souls.

It was not until the 1830s and 1840s that the convent finally began to put its physical plant in order. The deteriorated garden and orchard, with its flowers and fruit trees, was cleaned, new trees were planted, and a gardener was hired (AHAMich, 1842: caja 375, exp. 39). The church was painted and repaired, and the three patios of the convent and their cloisters were white-washed and painted. A fountain was added to each of the four corners of the principal patio on the second floor. The kitchen got new ovens and braziers, and full length glass windows were installed in the the upstairs dormitory, the workroom, and the room where they stored and manufactured medicines. Parts of the cloister were re-roofed (AHAMich, 1836: caja 375 (XIX), exp. 33). The church acquired a new bell and, in 1841, work began on the bell tower of the church (AHAMich, 1841: caja 375 (XIX), exp. 38). These improvements to the nuns' living and spiritual spaces were accompanied by additional spending on clothing and food, and by a tolerance for entertainments and servants. All this was antithetical to the spirit of the original constitution, but by this time the church's project of reforming conventual practices and more generally popular piety, so important in the Bourbon era, had been overtaken by other ecclesiastical priorities.

Biographers seek a life story that is out of the ordinary, but at the same time not so extraordinary that it cannot tell us something more generally about the world of which the subject of the biography was a part. The more I read broadly in the literature on convents, the more I was convinced that La Purísima was a good choice by these standards. The convent's "life" began with specific disadvantages, as we have

9 Nuestra Señora de la Salud of Pátzcuaro had six founding nuns from the nearby convent of Santa Catarina in Valladolid; the Capuchin convent at Salvatierra that was founded in 1798 had seven founding nuns; La Enseñanza of Irapuato in 1804 also had seven; and the Carmelites of Valladolid had five in 1824. (AHAMICH, 1789: caja 257 (XVIII), exp. 3); (AHAMICH, 1800: caja 210 (XVIII), exp. 30); (AHAMICH, 1804: caja 4 (XIX), exp. 1); (AHAMICH, 1824: caja 395 (XIX), exp. 1.)

10 A lengthy description of the accommodations made to the Hospicio so that the nuns could live there temporarily is in the report of Conde de Casa de Loxa, 31 Jan. 1756, (AHAMICH, 1756: caja 208 (XVIII), exp. 12)

seen, and these factors, and the rebellion that flowed in part from them, made La Purísima's life story exceptional.

But conflict within convents, I soon learned, was not uncommon at all. Since I had not originally intended to write a book about a convent, I had not mastered the secondary literature before I went into the archive, and in my ignorance the rebellions in San Miguel struck me as strange and fascinating. When I began reading widely on convents, at first I was disappointed that the rebelliousness and factionalism so clearly on display at La Purísima was actually a fairly ordinary part of convent life, as Asunción Lavrin for Puebla and Luis Martins for Lima and others had shown (Lavrin, 1965; Martín, 1983).¹¹ I quickly figured out, though, that this commonality was a good thing, because it allowed me to theorize how convents functioned and why conflict should be a generalized feature of convent life, advancing our understanding of convents (and perhaps more broadly, other institutions where some version of segregation by sex or enclosure was the rule, like boarding schools or fraternity or sorority houses). I would certainly be able to go beyond the conclusion of the men who opined about the troubles at La Purísima, who simply saw pettiness and disagreement as a natural thing among houses of women.

If the rebellions were not unique in themselves, however, the surviving material on them was unusually rich in detail, featuring not only dozens of letters from the abbesses, the bishop and the vicar, but also three lengthy reports from the officials the bishop sent to the convent to investigate, as well as handwritten testimonials and correspondence from the nuns themselves, both the "obedient" ones and the rebellious ones. (Perhaps the fact that the material was not only misfiled, but also contained in a file folder that was innocuously labeled "Gobi-

erno del convento," was part of the reason for the survival of this much detail. If the label had signaled the scandalous nature of the material within, someone down the centuries might have caused it to disappear.) Thus, based solely on the materials directly concerning the rebellion, I could add to the literature on convent function and dysfunction.

In addition, however, I also had a wealth of information on the convent's finances, demography, and internal processes over time, material I could pair with the documentation on the rebellion to enrich my understanding of the role it had (or didn't have) in shaping the particular life history of this convent. Between the richness of the material on the rebellion directly and the completeness of the record of other aspects of the convent's history, I stood a good chance of producing both a great story and an illustrative story, the core of a good biography.

Prosopography of the nuns

The grand narrative of the convent's life story after the decade of rebellion in the 1760s was one of struggle, both financial and institutional. The convent continued to fall more and more into debt until well after Mexican independence, and it failed even to come close to its capacity of 72 nuns. The fairly obvious conclusion was that the rebellions had in some way fatally damaged the convent's reputation so that young women whose families had fought to establish the convent in San Miguel no longer wanted to enter. But how many years after the end of a rebellion is it reasonable to expect that potential entrants would still reject the convent? The efforts by both bishops and abbesses in the 1770s and 1780s to mollify the rebellious nuns were largely successful, and conflict within the convent diminished from a boil to a low simmer, no different from most convents. But La Purísima, compared to the other convents in the bishopric, continued to struggle to balance its books and attract new postulants. Were there other factors—either loosely connected to the rebellion or independent of it—that made this a "troubled" convent? The materials on the rebellion alone would not answer this question.

Among the records of this convent, as was true of most convents, were those concerning

¹¹ See also: *Mystic of Tunja: The Writings of Madre Castillo, 1671-1742* (McKnight, 1997); *Mexican Karismata: the Baroque Vocation of Francisca de los Angeles, 1674-1744* (Gunnarsdóttir, 2004); *Los conventos femeninos y el mundo urban de la Puebla de los Angeles del siglo XVIII* (Loreto, 2000); *La vida común en los conventos de monjas de la ciudad de Puebla* (Salazar, 1990); "Controversias sobre la 'vida común' ante la reforma monacal femenina en México," (Sarabia, 1995); *Virgins of Venice: Enclosed Lives and Broken vows in the Renaissance Convent* (Laven, 2002); *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millenia*, (McNamara, 1996); *A Convent Tale: A Century of Sisterhood in Spanish Milan*, (Baernstein, 2002).

postulants, including baptismal records and testimonials by witnesses who knew the would-be nuns' families and who attested to their "clean blood" going back several generations, as well as interviews with the young women. There were also profession documents, including records of the liens placed on property to secure a dowry, and a summary of a pre-profession interview with the candidate. And there were the records of elections and interviews with the nuns (the "secret visit") associated with the triennial visitations. I also had regular and extensive correspondence between the abbesses and the bishops and vicars.

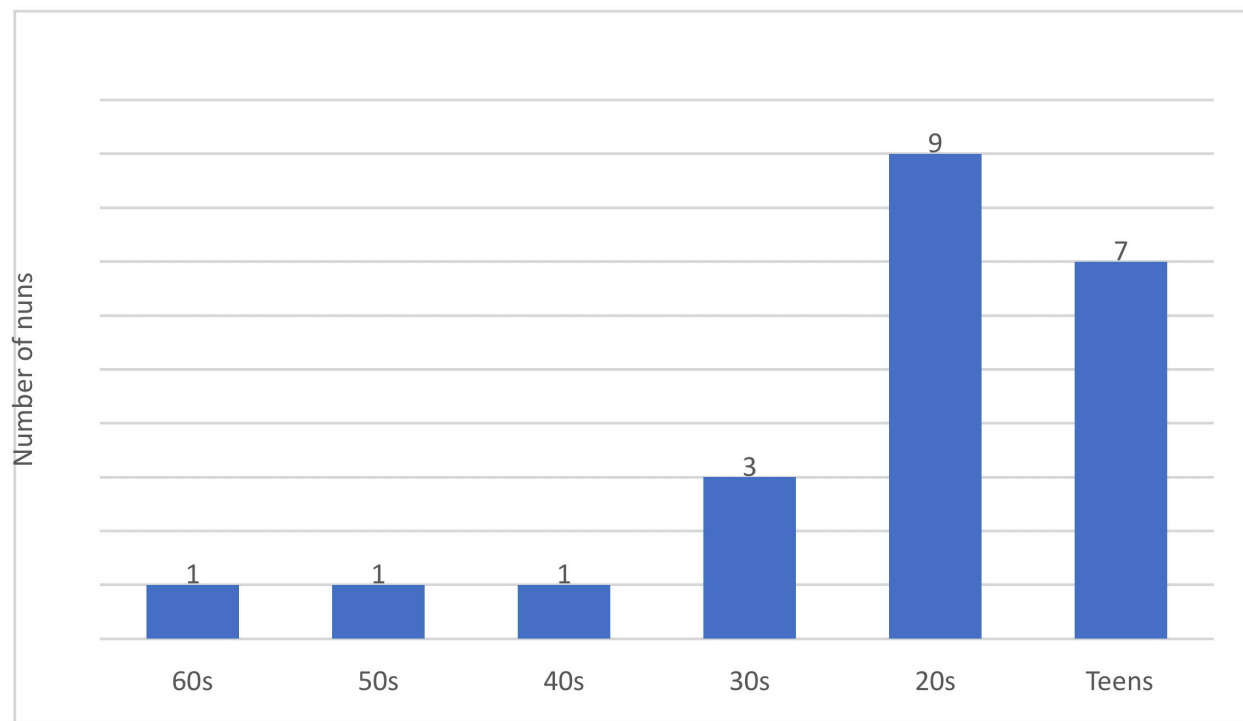
All this allowed me to construct mini-biographies of the 109 nuns who entered the convent between 1756 and 1854.¹² I was able to compile more information about some than others, but I almost always knew their age at entry and profession, birthplace, parents and/or circumstances of birth (for example, whether they were orphaned or not, whether they were *expuesta* or not), and conditions of entry (at full dowry as a

black-veil or choir nun, at half dowry as a *lega* or white veil nun; on scholarship as a choir nun; or as a *donada*, a kind of lay sister who performed domestic service in the absence of personal servants). This prosopographical information allowed me to use these non rebellion-related documents to deepen my understanding of the convent's post-rebellion history.

Age structure

The changing age structure of the convent population proved to be particularly revealing. It was in the nature of a new convent to have an age imbalance, and this one was no exception. Novices and recently professed nuns, almost invariably young, formed the majority of the convent populations in just-established convents. But at La Purísima the age structure was particularly unbalanced. By 1760, four years after the arrival of the three founding nuns in San Miguel in February 1756, there were nineteen new nuns, and the age structure in the convent looked like this:

Figure 1
Age Structure at La Purísima in 1760



Source: Author's calculations, from entrance and profession documents

Six years later, in 1766, the age structure in convent was not much more balanced, with 16 nuns in their teens, 20s, and 30s, and just three in their 40s or 50s.

Age imbalance that was skewed in favor of the young meant that there was a dearth of older nuns who could socialize the novices and the recently professed into the ways of the convent. Of course at La Purísima there *were* no “ways”, no traditions, no customs yet, because it had not had time to develop them (and because the founding nuns themselves disagreed on fundamental issues). The numerical domination of the convent by young women adds another dimension to our understanding of the rebellion, and may even help to explain the particular nature of the second phase of the rebellion, when the youth of the rebellious nuns may have made them more suggestible, more vulnerable to the trances and “jumping sickness” from which they suffered.

Did the age imbalance eventually diminish at La Purísima? And do we then see conflict diminishing? Yes and no. Even though the bishop and the post-rebellion abbesses made significant concessions to the rebellious nuns, conflict did not go away, but it did become far less existential and more petty. Generational issues, I argued on the basis of the data in my prosopography, continued to be a significant explanation for continued conflict. The measures taken by authorities to appease the rebellious nuns were expensive. Meanwhile, recruitment of new nuns during and in the immediate aftermath of the rebellion was difficult. The result was that by the late nineteenth century, the population at La Purísima was aging, as the relatively large number of young women who entered the convent in the late 1750s and early 1760s, before the rebellions became widely known (see the chart above), were in their 50s and 60s by the turn of the century.

If the convent had been able to resume recruitment at a steady pace after the rebellions were over, the age structure would have evened out. But the number of professions continued to lag. The goal of reaching 72 professed nuns, a number that would have produced an endowment large enough to support the convent, never came close to being reached. The financial crisis that resulted from having an inadequate endowment to support the living nuns became

self-fulfilling, discouraging entry into the convent just as effectively as the rebellions had done in the 1760s.

The broader financial crisis that followed on the 1810 insurgency made things worse. From a high of 41 professed nuns (choir nuns and white-veil nuns) in 1797, the number of nuns fell to 24 in 1823 and to 17 in 1844, as the “bulge” generation of early entrants into the convent died and the bishop did not allow new entrances. In light of the convent’s small endowment and history of financial troubles he did not want to admit any young women without a dowry, but there were few such women: the only ones who wanted to enter such an impoverished convent were those who did not have money for a dowry. By 1857, the number of choir nuns and legas was only 14, despite a recruitment bubble in 1854.

The reduced number of nuns and the fact that the new nuns since 1810 had been admitted in clusters (eight in 1829-32, three in 1844, and six in 1854, all moments in the national political history when the government was threatening to close down the smaller convents), could not help but make for sharper generational conflicts than would be the case in a convent with a mature and normal age structure with a steady rate of entry. Ironically, then, the generational conflict that was a major source of friction in the convent’s early years now resurfaced in its waning years, but upside down. Instead of too many young nuns, now there were too many older ones, and they clashed with the young 1854 cohort in particular. Some of the nuns in the 1857 *visita secreta* referred to the abbess’s special relationship with the “jóvenes”, the six recently-professed nuns whom she “instructed” in her cell in late-night meetings (AHAMich, 1857: caja 376 (XIX), exp. 52).

Age at entrance

Prosopography permits another insight into the convent’s life story when we consider the age of the future nuns at the time of their entry into the convent. In the early years at La Purísima an unusual number of nuns in the early years were very young when they entered: the median age at entrance between 1756 and 1766 was 18.5, and nine girls were 16 or under.¹³ The rival factions

¹³ Between 1756 and 1760 the median age was 19.

that developed in the convent correlated along lines of age at entrance: the younger women tended to be more rebellious, while those who were older when they entered the convent were less so. This pattern makes logical psychological sense; we would expect that older girls (on balance) might have made the decision to enter a convent on the basis of a more mature consideration and a truer vocation than the younger girls, and therefore might have been better prepared to make the sacrifices that were asked of them, more tolerant of what the younger women would consider excessive demands. The younger women were more likely to have been placed in the convent because of orphanhood or other family pressures. The median age at entrance of the twelve members of the rebellious faction for whom we have information was 17 years old: two of the rebellious nuns were 14 when they entered, three were 15, two were 17, one was 18, and one was 19; only three were over 20. Among the eight nonrebellious or “obedient” nuns, by contrast, only two were under 20 when they entered the convent, one of whom was the foundress, María Josepha Lina.

Later in the convent’s history age at entrance increased significantly. The average age at entrance of 44 nuns who entered between 1768 and 1811 was 25. From 1811 to 1853 the average age of the 18 nuns admitted to the convent increased to almost 31. Thus although historically the final cohort of six young women admitted in 1854, all of whom were their 20s except for one 17 year old, appears to be on the older side, in the context of admissions since 1810 they were definitely perceived as very young. The aging of the convent had the impact of increasing tensions around daily work. Older nuns claimed to be (and probably were) more sickly, needing to be cared for by the younger nuns and needing the younger nuns to do their chores for them. More than one of the younger nuns expressed resentment at this.

Family background

Related to the age at entrance were the nuns’ family circumstances. The convent contained a large number of girls who had lost one or both parents. In itself this was not unusual. One of the social functions of convents, after all, was

to provide security for girls who had lost parental protection. In its early years the San Miguel convent, however, seems to have attracted an unusually large number of orphaned girls: between 1756 and 1765 only 15% of the entrants into the convent had both biological parents living, compared to 47% of the women who entered the convent of Santa Catarina (Valladolid) and 36% who entered the other new convent in the bishopric, Nuestra Señora de la Salud in Pátzcuaro, during the second half of the eighteenth century.¹⁴ Almost two-thirds (61%) of the entrants into La Purísima had no living parents at all, whether adoptive or biological, compared to 27% for Santa Catarina in the 1750s and 1760s and 30% for Nuestra Señora de la Salud from 1750-99. Furthermore, one-quarter of the nuns were abandoned or natural children. In 1851 the vicar was concerned that illegitimacy (as well as old age) disqualified so many nuns from serving as abbess that he recommended temporarily, at least, making it possible for the four illegitimate nuns to stand for election (AHAMich, 1851: caja 376 (XIX), exp. 52).¹⁵

When orphanhood is as common as it was at the San Miguel convent it may have had broad consequences. One of the justifications for the establishment of a convent in San Miguel was that families wanted to be able to visit their daughters (the nearest convent to San Miguel was in Querétaro, where many families had been forced to send their daughters before the establishment of La Purísima). The large number of orphans at La Purísima may have meant that there was less connection, via these family visits, to the outside world than was true at a convent like Santa Catarina in Valladolid, where many of the nuns came from prominent local families, and visitors were a frequent event. An argument could be made that the nuns at La Purísima were not as well integrated into local society, and cared less about the mores of local society and what that society thought of them,

¹⁴ Data concerning Santa Catarina and Nuestra Señora de la Salud here and in the following paragraphs is drawn from scattered expedientes in the following boxes, and from other miscellaneous boxes that contain misfiled documents on these two convents. AHAMich, *Diocesano, Gobierno, Religiosas, Catarinas*, cajas 215-254 (XVIII); AHAMich, *Diocesano, Gobierno, Religiosas, Dominicas*, cajas 257-267.

¹⁵ In the text of his letter, the vicar refers repeatedly to nine who were ineligible, but he only named eight, and it appears likely that he counted Ygnacia del Corazón de María twice, once as too recently professed, and once as illegitimate.

than would be true in a very well-connected, well-visited, long-established convent such as Santa Catarina.

Exacerbating this relative lack of connection between the convent and the town was the fact that the only nuns whose families lived in or near San Miguel were the foundress, two of her sisters, and two others, whereas in the other convents in the bishopric it was much more likely that the nuns would come from the city where the convent was located.¹⁶

Social status

I did not discern signs of tension along lines of class or status, for example, factions that consisted of young women whose family had been able to afford a dowry (at 3000 pesos, not a small sum) pitted against young women who did not have family money for a dowry and had to either win a scholarship (music, bookkeeping), claim one of the dowries set aside for poor but deserving aspirants, or spend years as a *niña* hoping to accumulate a dowry by cultivating benefactors. The rebellious and the obedient nuns during the time of the rebellion were all overwhelmingly dowried—only four out of 21 came from families that could not pay a dowry. The proportion of poorer nuns increased over the convent's history, slowly at first. From 1768 to 1774 only four out of 18 nuns were either former *donadas* (who, in another unusual constitutional provision at La Purísima, were allowed to profess as white veil nuns after ten years of service), received a scholarship, or were granted a dowry set up by a patron or provided by a benefactor. From 1775 to 1810 seven out of 26 fell into these categories of poorer nuns. And by the post-1810 era 14 out of the 18 nuns who professed were too poor to bring a dowry, including five of the six admitted in 1854. Thus the last generation and a half of women admitted during the colonial period (1792-1810) might have seen themselves as fundamentally different from the younger women admitted in the late 1820s and

early 1830s who were, as a group, considerably less prominent and less wealthy than they were. However, while differences of class and wealth may have fed tensions through the late 1830s and into the 1840s, they seem likely to have faded by mid-century time as root causes for intra-conventual tensions, for the simple reason that by mid-century virtually no one came from a wealthy or prominent family.

Conclusion

Rebellious Nuns would have been a very different book if I had just focused on the rebellions. Adopting a biographical approach enabled me to see things in the way the convent started its "life" (its constitution, its founders, the nuns' built environment) that helped explain the rebellions more fully than just reconstructing the events. A biographical perspective also helped me gauge the importance of the rebellions vs. the financial crisis in the convent's historical dysfunctionality. And prosopography crucially showed how rebellion and financial crisis were cause and consequence of recruitment problems, which had multiple faces (an aging population, a poorer population, a population with an unusual degree of unorthodox (orphaned, illegitimate) family backgrounds. These biographical and prosopographical methods and approaches yielded a rich explanation of the convent's troubled history.

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¹⁶ In the Santa Catarina convent, over the course of the eighteenth century, one-third of the nuns in the convent came from Valladolid itself and another 24% came from towns within a day's visit of the convent; in the convent of Nuestra Señora de la Salud 52% came from Pátzcuaro and another 18% came from nearby towns; and in the convent of Santa Clara in Querétaro, half the nuns came from the city of Querétaro itself. Data on Santa Clara from Gallagher, 109.

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Margaret Chowning

She holds a Ph.D. in History from Stanford University. She is currently the Muriel McKevitt Sonne Chair Professor of Latin American History at the University of California, Berkeley. She is now working on a new project tentatively entitled "Gender and the Liberal City in Nineteenth-Century Mexico". It will examine both the impact of liberal politics and the absorption (or not) of liberal culture in Morelia, Mexico City, and Guadalajara. Her research interests are: Late colonial and nineteenth-century Mexico, with special focus on women, gender, the Catholic Church, social history, and economic history. Her most recent publications include: *Catholic Women and Mexican Politics, 1750-1940*, Princeton, Princeton University Press (2023); "Talking Back: Nuns, Beatas, and Colegialas Invoke Rights and Constitutional Principles in Late Colonial and Nineteenth-Century Mexico", *Colonial Latin American Review*, 29 (1), London, Taylor & Francis, pp. 115-138 (2020).

