MEXICO - INTRODUCTION

The Dominican friars arrived in Mexico in 1526 and for the next more than fifty years were so busy evangelizing and founding mission-houses that there was no time to devote to the foundation of monasteries for Dominican nuns. Furthermore, for a long time there were few Spanish women, and they were fully occupied in acquiring a certain social and material security. It was only in the second half of the 16th century that their circumstances had eased a little and they could give thought to their Christian duties. Some started to seek how to live in a more silent and retiring way – that is, they wanted a convent where they could consecrate themselves to God.

The history of Dominican nuns in this vast country is particularly rich and interesting. An initial flourishing under the colonial régime, with ten monasteries founded before 1750 – this is quite exceptional in the context of Dominican foundations for women colonial America. The in the 19th and early twentieth centuries, the nuns experienced persecutions by successive governments, comparable at least with those of the French Revolution or Emperor Josef II in Europe. And yet the nuns clung to their identity and way of life, and the great majority of the monasteries were restored, with a new generation of sisters, and often in a different location, but usually within the same town.

It is in the second half of the twentieth century that the story of the Mexican nuns is also quite remarkable. When other geographical and cultural areas were experiencing a dearth of vocations, in Mexico no less than eleven monasteries were founded between 1977 and 2001. The federative experience has been particularly successful in this country – the Federation of... was created in...and since has a federal monastery providing formation and information as well as a common novitiate at the service of all the monasteries of the Order in Mexico.
Monasterio de Santa Catalina de Siena
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Tel. (01-222) 242-38-70
Founded 1556 – 1568 by local women

This is the first foundation of Dominican nuns in Mexico, and the first female religious community in the diocese of Tlaxcala-Puebla. The city (Puebla), under the patronage of the Angels (de los Angeles), was founded in 1531; it became a diocese in 1539. We believe the first foundation of Dominican friars in Puebla to have occurred in 1532, although the exact date is not known. We do know that the Dominican friars were greatly helped by Bishop Julián Garcés, and that in 1556 the Prior of the Convent of Santo Domingo, Juan de Alcázar, was the spiritual director of a group of devout women, amongst whom was Doña María de la Cruz Monnegro, native of Toledo, Spain, widow of Francisco Márquez, and mother of two sons – Melchior and Juan Márquez. She wished to devote her remaining years in religious seclusion, as we read in a letter from Cardinal Charles, titular of St Praxedes:

to my dearly loved in Christ, María de la Cruz Monnegro, religious woman and administrator or prioress of the house or monastery – sacred refuge of women – founded in the city of the Angels, in Indian lands, greetings in the Lord: You presented us with a petition stating, inter alia, that you are a widow since the death of your husband Francisco Márquez. And to obtain the above, you decided to turn your home …. after a period of trial, into an enclosed monastery) in which you could finish your days serving God in the company of other devout women who wished to join you. And, for greater ease, you bought other adjoining houses and incorporated them into yours, which you then enclosed, with the permission of the Ordinary. Furthermore, with his permission you built a church within these buildings. And, little by little, other devout women desirous of serving Our Lord Jesus Christ joined you. And, with the agreement of the local Ordinary and of the women now accompanying you, you entered enclosure and called these houses “The Monastery of St. Catherine of Siena and St. Ann”, cloistering yourselves under the protection of the local Ordinary and of certain religious of the Order of Preachers living in the city. And that you have continued in this enclosure until the present time …. We, acceding to your request in part, grant that the above described house be a monastery of nuns under the avocation of St. Catherine of Siena and St. Ann, under the Rule of the Brothers Preachers of St. Dominic, and under obedience, discipline and jurisdiction, now and for always, of the Bishop of the city of the Angels, who will be responsible for the church, refectory bell, dormitory and other necessary monastic areas if these have not already been completed; reserving for you, Maria, the exercise of administrative power and the office of Prioress and Abbess such as you have exercised them until now and exercise them in the present in order to bring this monastery to completion ….

Given in Rome, near St. Peter’s… March 15 in the second year of the Pontificate of Pope Pius V. (As his reign began in 1566, this is dated 1567).
Doña María de la Cruz duly made her profession to Bishop Fernando de Villagómez on January 10 1568. Three of her nieces were amongst the foundresses. This early convent was located a block from the Convent of Santo Domingo. Apart from that of the Chaplain, there were no other houses in the block where the nuns’ monastery was situated.

From the first century of its foundation, the Monastery of St. Catherine and St. Ann proved its strength and solidity; it was during this period that its four daughter-houses were founded: Santa María de Gracia, Guadalajara in 1588, la Purísima Concepción - also in Puebla - in 1593, Santa Catarina de Siena, Morelia in 1595, and Santa Inéz de Montepoliciano in 1626. It can thus be seen how wide was the influence of the Monastery of St. Catherine and St. Ann on the spread of contemplative life in Mexico.

This monastery was one of the richest in the city, reaching its peak in the 18th century. At this time, it housed up to eighty nuns, and more than a thousand had made their solemn profession here since its inception. As the monastery had come to own a large amount of urban property, it was able to help the city with the allocation of housing. The monastery also accepted young girls to be educated, as was then customary.

In the 19th century, the disastrous Reform laws passed by the government, with the expropriation of monastic possessions and the exclaustration of religious, brought anguish and suffering to the nuns. In 1861, half of their buildings were lost when the government cut a road through the monastic site. From then on, they were gradually despoiled. By 1934, they had lost everything. During this period, the community faced various crises and was on the point of extinction three times. In 1920, there remained only four old and infirm sisters. The Monastery of St. Rose of Lima came to the aid of its sister-house and managed to recruit a new generation of nuns, leaving a community of seventeen when they returned to their own community in 1936. For years, however, the nuns of St. Catherine’s lived in such an old, small and damp house that the ecclesiastical authorities forbade them to accept vocations. Faced with this situation, the “Catalinas” started the construction of new premises. It required tremendous effort, and the help of their families and of benefactors, principally that of the German foundation *Adveniat*. The new building was inaugurated in 1970.
The origins of the Monastery of our Lady of Grace, Guadalajara are to be found in the second phase of the colonial period when the Spanish inhabitants had settled into a more peaceful and prosperous existence. They wanted a convent where they could place those of their daughters inclined to the religious life, without having to send them to Puebla, Oaxaca or Mexico. With this aim, they put pressure on the civil and ecclesiastical authorities and counted on the co-operation of wealthy and influential neighbours.

The origins of the monastery are also to be found in a school for poor girls, founded in 1571 by Bishop Francisco Gómez Mendiola and located in some small houses originally belonging to him. For the administration of the school and the education of the girls, Mendiola brought Doña Catalina de Carbajal from Mexico to be the director of the “St. Catherine of Siena School for Poor Girls”. In 1583, the Dominican Domingo de Alzola became Bishop of Guadalajara. He took a great interest in the school and requested that the Mayor and civil authorities and the Ecclesiastical Chapter contribute to its upkeep.

Not content with this, Bishop Alzola called together the gentlemen and main citizens of New Galicia so as to explain and impress the need of a female monastic foundation in the diocese. On completion of the necessary information and administration, the petition was sent to Phillip II of Spain who, after due study and agreement with the project, dispatched the Royal Letter of Approval. Bishop Alzola favoured and encouraged the foundation to the point of requesting Don Diego Romano, Bishop of Puebla, to send him foundresses. The foundation was solemnly verified on August 17 1588, during the reign of Pope Sixtus V. The nuns coming from Puebla passed through the Province of Michoacán, where Mother Catalina, most providentially, fell ill. Unable to continue, she remained in the capital, Valladolid, for seven years, during which time she founded the Convent of St. Catherine of Siena, Morelia.

On November 13 1590, the Dean and Ecclesiastical Chapter, judging too small the nuns’ cells and living space, ordered their transfer to the principal church of the city and the buildings of the Royal Hospital of St. Michael, Plaza de San Agustín. The Royal Hospital moved to the premises the nuns had vacated. As the new premises were still very simple - an extremely humble adobe church and living quarters inappropriate to a monastery – great efforts were made to construct a bigger church and a more adequate convent. With time, this construction became the biggest and richest of the female monastic establishments of New Galicia. Both convent and gardens expanded, becoming the delight and recreation of the nuns and the girls living with them.

Many of the women later figuring prominently in the society of New Galicia were educated in the nuns’ school of St. John, where a good and solid formation was given
until the exclaustration of the nuns in the 19th century. Following this expulsion, the buildings were vandalized and destroyed and the persecuted community found refuge where it could in private homes. In the Revolutionary period, the convent was totally lost. (See Sor María de las Llagas, Noticias Históricas de la Fundación del Convento de Sta María de Gracia de Guadalajara, 1924).

Today, the Dominican community of the Monastery of Our Lady of Grace occupies a beautiful convent in a modern section of Guadalajara. It has founded two daughter-houses: Jesús María, Guadalajara in 1722 and the Holy Family in San Miguel el Alto, Jalisco in 1977.

Santa Maria de Gracia, Guadalajara
The historian Alonso Franco writes: “those who were most interested in founding a monastery of Dominican nuns in Mexico City were the three Felipa sisters, women of only modest means but very willing to give their farmstead and land for the construction of the desired Dominican monastery. They were devout and devoted to the Order, especially the oldest, Isabel Felipa. This desire became an obsession for them; day and night they begged God for the grace of a monastery. God heard their prayer and, in 1581 they had the joy of seeing the superiors of the Dominican Province of Santiago of Mexico start to treat the matter of the foundation seriously, writing to Pope Gregory XIII for papal permission to found. Benevolently, the Pope agreed to the petition, in the Bull that the Father Provincial, Friar Andrés de Ubilla, conveyed to the Fathers at the Chapter in Coixtlahuaca (Oaxaca) on January 10th 1583. The Bull authorized the construction of a monastery of Dominican nuns in the city of Mexico, which would be subject to the friars of the Order of St. Dominic and placed under the patronage of St. Catherine of Siena.

It would seem logical that, having obtained this permission, the building of the monastery would have started immediately. Serious difficulties arose, however, and work on the foundation was delayed for ten years. Initially, the monastery was created in a house previously used by the group known as ‘recluses of Mercy’ (de la Misericordia). The nuns stayed here for only two years; the house was uncomfortable and so small that postulants could not be accepted. They were moved to a second site, a block away, but these premises also proved inadequate for monastic life. The Dominican superiors, therefore, resolved to buy the houses of Diego Hurtado de Peñaloza - at that time the best in the city – situated in what is today the Calle de la República Argentina. The foundation stone was laid on August 15 1619; within three years and seven months the convent possessed a dormitory, work room, administrative areas, church, sacristy, choir, cloister and everything needed for monastic life - On March 7 1623, Archbishop Juan Pérez de la Serna dedicated the monastery. A Pontifical Mass was celebrated, attended by the Civil Authorities and Ecclesiastical Chapter, the Viceroy, and numerous citizens. The public festivities lasted eight days.

Although the Felipa sisters were the initiators of the foundation, it was the Dominican friars who made it a reality. They wrote to the Pope for permission to found. It was the Provincial, Friar Gabriel de San José, who – after mature consultation with prudent and respected members of the Order – blessed the creation of the monastery and, above all, asked the Community of St. Catherine of Oaxaca to lend two experienced religious for the spiritual and monastic formation of the future contemplatives. The nuns in question were Sisters Mariana de San Bernardo and Cristina de la Asunción. Mother Mariana was the first Prioress (a charge she held many times); once the new foundation had the right number of correctly
formed nuns, she returned to her beloved monastery of Oaxaca. It is surprising that the Father Provincial requested nuns from the monastery at Oaxaca when that of St. Catherine of Siena of Puebla (de los Angeles) was geographically closer. On reflection, it would seem that he did so because the monastery of Puebla was subject to the jurisdiction of its Bishops whereas that of Oaxaca depended on the Dominican Province. He, along with the Friars, wanted the nuns of Mexico City to depend directly on the Dominicans, as directed by His Holiness Gregory XIII.

Given that the Community of St. Catherine of Siena in Mexico City came under the jurisdiction of the Order, it was always extremely well cared for, spiritually and temporally. In matters spiritual, it had three confessors and its liturgy always flourished. In matters material, a Dominican friar was responsible for the administration of the convent’s economic capital and possessions; these were ample and complicated. In her Chronicle, Mother María de la Luz Castro gives the three sources of the convent’s capital: the nuns’ dowries (4,000 pesos per dowry), the donations of benefactors, and inheritances received from certain wealthy families. If this is calculated over three centuries, we can see that the nuns accumulated a substantial capital and a large number of houses.

This did not imply, however, that they lived a relaxed or comfortable life. It is recorded that they kept strict enclosure and observed their vows of chastity and obedience. As concerns poverty, the same chronicler tells us that, from the beginning, the Dominican fathers allowed each nun a certain sum for personal needs. As the majority of the nuns were from wealthy families, this allowance was considerable, enough for each nun to have one or two servants and her own kitchen, but also enough (as we learn from certain monastic biographies) to help nuns less financially favoured. As well as the nuns and servants living in the monastery, there were also the young girls entrusted to the nuns for their education.

This Dominican community of St. Catherine lived very peacefully from 1593 to 1810, the year of Mexican Independence from Spain and the start of troubles and abuses from both the liberal and conservative factions, battling for power and the wealth with which to raise armies and buy arms. What irrevocably ruined the monastery were the Laws of Exclaustration and Expropriation promulgated in 1859. The following year, after Juárez’s entry into Mexico City, the Monastery of St. Catherine was overrun by government agents; the premises were taken over and all capital, goods and properties expropriated. Only the dowries were spared.

Turned out of their monastery and finding refuge in private houses, the nuns suffered enormously. They had no new vocations. Most of the community died. The final disaster was the pontifical decision (Rescripto Pontificio) that those nuns of the Republic of Mexico subject to the superiors of religious orders (Prelados Regulares) pass, for the space of two years, to the jurisdiction of the Bishops Ordinary of their places of residence. (2) The devastated nuns wrote to the Master of the Order, Vicente Jandel, begging him to intercede for their return to Dominican jurisdiction. Neither Father Jandel nor his successor Father José María Larroca were able to help. As the Archbishop of Mexico City refused to allow the admission of postulants, the community was eventually reduced to two elderly and infirm nuns. the Vicar General, Secundino Martinez, who arrived in Mexico together with other Dominicans in 1895, came with the express order of Pope Leo XIII and of the Master of the Order to restore “these desolate Mexican Provinces”.
From the time of his arrival, Father Secundino Martínez worked to restore the community of St. Catherine in Mexico City. He turned to the Monasteries of St. Catherine in Morelia and of St. Inés and of St. Catherine in Puebla in search of nuns who would help him save the community from extinction. No help was forthcoming, and yet this too was providential, for the nuns best prepared for the new reconstruction were those of the Monastery of St. Rose of Lima in Puebla. As they had never fallen away from ‘common life’ into ‘particular life’, they were the most observant. The Vicar General, in person, persuaded the Community of St. Rose to lend him three religious – Margarita del Rosario (Prioress), María del Rosario de Santo Domingo (Mistress of Novices) and Asunción Cano (lay sister). They stayed in Mexico City for ten years, during which they reformed the community and formed fifteen new nuns.

Today, the community has its new monastery in Mixcoac. On May 24 1982, the Federation’s Training and Formation Centre was inaugurated here. Thus, the Monastery of St. Catherine of Siena gives precious help to all its sister monasteries.
The Dominican Bishop, Alonso Guerra, disembarked in Acapulco on July 25 1590. He had come from the Diocese of Río de la Plata, Argentina to take charge of the Episcopal See of Valladolid (today Morelia). His first concern was the foundation of missionary convents in his diocese, so that his brother Dominicans could help in his ministry. In due course he turned his attention to the foundation of a monastery for Dominican nuns, under the patronage of St. Catherine of Siena, to whom he had a particular devotion. Success was such that, in the same year of 1590, work on the monastery began.

For the formation of the future community, Guerra asked Bishop Diego Romano of Tlaxcala-Puebla to “send four nuns of known virtue from the Convent of St. Catherine of Siena in Puebla”. Once Guerra learnt that Romano had agreed, he dispatched the Dean of Valladolid Cathedral to bring them from Puebla to Valladolid with all possible care and attention. Together with two of the Bishop’s own nieces – Jerónima de San Miguel and Catalina de la Magdalena – and the four professed sisters from Puebla, the new community was formed. Alonso Franco writes that “many noble young women” entered this community “where virtue and sanctity flourished”, and despite the fact that they had no Dominican friars to attend to their spiritual needs, they always had great affection for their Dominican brothers, prayed the Dominican Office and observed the Dominican Constitutions. Enclosure was formalized on March 28 1595. This is considered the official date of foundation.

The nun-chronicler of the monastery tells us that it contained premises for the reception and education of “young girls of the highest nobility who wished to become nuns”, and that the original monastery (inhabited from 1595 to 1738) was known locally as “the Church of the Roses”. (Today, this site is occupied by the Conservatory of Music.). The chronicler claims not to know why the nuns left the original convent and built a new one so big that it occupied two whole blocks. Costs were high and the money ran out; the bishop gave the nuns a gift of 10,000 pesos to finish the building. He also supplied dowries for a number of aspirants to the new monastery.

On May 3 1738, the nuns moved to their new monastery, with all the pomp and solemnity typical of the period. A huge painting records the event. It hung in the monastery church until 1950 when it was transferred to the City Museum, where its size and beauty are much admired. Nine years after the community’s move to its new monastery, on October 3 1747, Bishop Francisco Matos Coronado asked the community for sisters to found a new Dominican monastery in Pátzcuaro. They would be dedicated to Our Lady of Salvation.

The sufferings of the nuns in 1810 must be mentioned. Two of the community were sisters of the Rebel General José Mariano Michelsen. The General wrote to one of his sisters, Juana de la Purísima Concepción, inclosing missives for other members of his political party. The letter was intercepted by the Spanish Royalists, who believed her to be an accomplice of
her brother’s. Sister Juana de la Purísima Concepción was sentenced to be shot. Her shock was so great that she died on December 13 1810. The monastery was bitterly criticized as a result of this apparent intrigue. The community suffered hunger and other privations during the War of Independence, to the point that their Chaplain was forced to beg for alms on their behalf.

Between 1861 and 1862, the monastery was subject to frequent visits from government agents investigating the community’s finances and the amount of the dowry of each nun. The eighteen members of the community at the time were expelled on March 30 1863, taking refuge in the homes of friends. They were allowed to return on December 30 of the same year. The monastery, however, was uninhabitable, with a little over four feet of dung in the cloisters and cells; the soldiers had ridden their horses up to the second floor. It took one hundred men for three days and twenty men for the following three weeks to clean this, not to mention the nuns working all day and part of the night. The community remained here until 1867, when it was stripped of everything. For eleven years, the nuns lived in other people’s houses until they were able to regroup in 1878 at 8, Calle Miralprado.

On September 2 1913, the Community of St. Catherine of Siena moved from Calle Miralprado into the convent vacated by the Visitation nuns. Originally, this building had been a ‘beaterio’ of Carmelites; our chronicler describes it as spacious and beautiful. Just when the nuns believed themselves to have reached a safe haven, the Government expropriated the convent. Fortunately, it was put up for sale and the community bought it back for 10,000 pesos. But in 1920, the community found itself yet again dispersed among private homes until a widow made them a gift of a house, where they remained here for twenty-six years.

As the house became too small to be developed appropriately, a plot of land was bought for them in Vista Bella in 1966, and work on a new monastery started. Funds, however, ran out. Encouraged by Father Enrique Romero op, the young nuns obtained permission from the Bishops of Michoacán, Toluca and Tacámbaro, as well as from various prelates, religious and parish priests, to beg in their respective dioceses, parishes and churches. This they did by day and worked by night to such good effect that the new monastery was inaugurated on March 22 1972, five years after the start of its construction.


The famous painting of the transfer of the nuns of Morelia to their new monastery in 1738
Señora Géronima de Gamboa of Puebla, widow of Diego Franquez Serrano, is the main protagonist of this foundation. She allocated 60,000 pesos to build the church and monastery, to be dedicated to St. Agnes of Montepulciano, to whom she was deeply devoted. As of 1620, she had the agreement of the Viceroy, Diego Fernández de Mendoza (Marquis of Guadalcázar) and of Bishop Diego de Escobar y Llamas. Her principal argument for obtaining permission to build was that “a copious number of unmarried women of all ages, from the city and surrounding regions, need this foundation; they want to consecrate themselves to God and have nowhere to do so”. (1)

The building and decoration of the monastery were carried out with care and delicacy, and such attention was given to the provision of income and capital that the founding nuns wanted for nothing. On April 17th 1626, a petition was presented and read in the Chapter of Civil Authorities in which Doña Géronima de Gamboa declared “that for the honour and glory of Our Lord God, for the good of this city and that of orphaned girls both of my family and others, the work is completed, and the See, being in agreement with the foundation, has authorized the said convent to be placed under strict enclosure next Quasimodo Sunday – that is, the 19th of this month and the eve of the feast of St. Inés; and as the Founding Mothers have to be taken out of the Convent of St. Catherine of Siena of this city and brought to the Cathedral, and from there taken in procession with the Blessed Sacrament to the said convent, and all with due solemnity for such a celebration…” … She asks the Civil Authorities to help.

It has to be said that, from the time of foundation, Doña Géronima de Gamboa imposed a large number of conditions on the community - amongst others, that young girls be received (starting with two of her own relatives and ten girls not of her family) and that they be cared for, clothed, shod and educated up to the age of sixteen, when they would choose either the religious life or marriage. (3) Perhaps this was the reason for later conflict between the Community of St. Inés and Bishop Fabián y Fuero (1765 – 1773) when the Bishop ordered the removal of all these “old maidens” (some were eighty years old) and the return to common life. This was the monastery which suffered most in the “common life conflict”.

Doña Géronima also stipulated the number of nuns – never more than forty choir nuns and five lay-sisters at a time, and their dowries – 3,000 pesos per choir nun and 600 pesos for a lay-sister. According to the information we possess, there were 310 professed nuns between 1626 and 1900. Much of the documentation of the convent was destroyed when the archives were burnt during the period of persecution. This monastery suffered the same troubles and vicissitudes as all other Mexican monasteries, due to the anti-clerical legislation of the Government of Benito Juárez. Later, it also suffered the consequences of the Mexican
Revolution and the period of Religious Persecution (1926 – 1929). The community was again ruined but never lost its thread of continuity.

In 1940, there were seven surviving nuns; they returned to a part of the old convent, now converted into lodgings. Little by little, they acquired more space and started to re-adapt it for their needs. And, in 1975, they began a more radical restoration. This is proceeding slowly owing to a shortage of funds; the work is costly as not only do they have to build but also knock down the extremely solid but no longer functional original construction. Young vocations have come to the help of the elderly and tired sisters, who are examples of sanctity and perseverance in conditions of extraordinary difficulty;

*The Church of the Monastery of St Agnes of Montepulciano, Puebla*
On the death of Bishop Garabito, the Mexican Dominican Felipe Galindo Chávez y Pineda was promoted to the Episcopal See of Guadalajara by order of Charles II of Spain. The royal appointment is dated January 17 1695, and was confirmed by Pope Innocent XII on May 30 of the same year. During his six years at the head of the diocese, Bishop Galindo undertook a number of major works, among them the foundation of the Conciliar Seminary and the foundation of a second convent of Dominican nuns in Guadalajara (the first was that of Santa María de Gracia). He placed the new convent under the protection of Jesus and Mary. As the nucleus of this foundation, Bishop Galindo called on a group of devout women – known as The Women of Nazareth (las Nazarenas). They had started as a Pious Union in the town of Compostela, until moved from Compostela to Guadalajara by Bishop Galindo’s predecessor, Bishop Garabito. The latter was fully aware of their austere and virtuous lives and their desire to become ‘real’ nuns.

Following the procedures of the time, Bishop Galindo requested permission to found from the Spanish king. While waiting for this, he acquired “a large and comfortable property near the hermitage of St. Sebastian, which had been used, as of 1699, as a home for girls being educated under the care of the Jesuit Feliciano Esquivel”. As Fr. Esquivel lacked the necessary funds to support them, however, and even less to build a school, he asked Bishop Galindo to take charge. This the Bishop did gladly, requesting the Nazarenas to care for and educate the girls as well as possible.

Construction of the proposed Dominican monastery (we are told he spent more than 20,000 pesos on it) started as soon as Galindo had acquired the site, but the papal Bulle was slow in coming; the ways of palaces are slow. Galindo did not live to see his foundation of Dominican nuns; he died on March 7 1702. The See of Guadalajara remained vacant for five years, and it was during this period that the Ecclesiastical Chapter received the Royal Letter from the Spanish monarch, authorizing the Pious Union of the Nazarenas to become a beaterio. The permission to found the monastery which Galindo had requested did not arrive until 1722, twenty years after his death. It was the Vicar General of the diocese who executed the content of this royal permission, and who found the nuns who would form the Nazarenas as true monastic contemplatives.

Bishop Galindo had thought to bring nuns from the Monastery of St. Catherine of Siena in Puebla to found the Monastery of Jesus and Mary. The Chapter, however, preferred to call on the nuns of Santa Maria de Gracia; this monastery was in the same city, was very well established (founded in 1588), and its nuns “were so observant (of the Rule) that they could be
teachers of the strictest monasteries”. Five professed and two novices came as foundresses. All left Santa María de Gracia for the Monastery of Jesus and Mary on May 30 1722,

Though the nuns of the community of Jesus and Mary were self-sacrificing in matters of food, drink and clothing, they spared no cost in building a beautiful and richly decorated church. The image of Our Lady of the Thunder Bolt is venerated there. The painting was originally in the monastery infirmary. Struck by lightning during a storm, the painting “was consumed but not burnt, becoming extraordinarily beautiful”. The nuns started a cult of the image, and when the faithful heard of it they demanded it be moved into the church for public veneration. This devotion has spread to many parts of the Republic.

The nuns of the Monastery of Jesus and Mary are the only Mexican Dominicans never to have left their original convent or to have been forbidden the use of their church. Neither was this ever closed during the periods of religious conflict. Perhaps this is God’s reward for their unbroken fidelity to their promise to live the common life of strict observance, despite pressures to do otherwise. Currently, they are restoring the old buildings, part of which were recuperated only a short time ago. This will give the community more space. Furthermore, they are the main instigators of the foundation of the Monastery of Our Lady of the Assumption, in Tijuana, Northern Lower California.
What is today the Monastery of St. Rose of Lima was originally the Beaterio of Santa Inés de Montepoliciano founded in 1740. At the end of the 17th century, the illustrious Dominican, Bernardo de Andía was living in the Convent of Santo Domingo in Puebla. The date of his arrival in Puebla is unknown, but we do know he took the Dominican habit in the same Convent of Santo Domingo on March 4 1640. He was elected Prior of Santo Domingo, but declined. Rather than hold an academic chair or govern a large community (such as that of Santo Domingo), Bernardo de Andía preferred to seek a solution to the needs and suffering of the poor of Puebla; he had discovered that many failed to attend Mass because they lacked clothes. He opted to dedicate his life to the poor.

His first step was to organize within the church of his Dominican convent a confraternity or association of charitable laypeople who would work to alleviate the misery of the poor. This was placed under the patronage of Santa Inés de Montepoliciano, to whom he had great devotion and in whom he had absolute trust. Not content, however, with practicing the works of mercy, de Andía resolved to help the many young women unable to enter religious life for lack of economic resources. He decided to found a *beaterio*, where aspirants would not be obliged to bring a dowry. He rapidly gathered fifteen young women and inaugurated the beaterio in 1683, in a house so small as to almost not be able to accommodate the fifteen. From the start, they lived in great austerity, as if they really were professed nuns, under the guidance of the Father Founder and of Juana de Santa Inés (the Mother President), who believed that these women were called to be the foundresses of the future monastery they hoped to build in honour of the new saint, Rose of Lima, the first saint of America and a Dominican tertiary.

Father Bernardo did indeed found the *beaterio* with the intention that it would one day become a formal Dominican monastery of contemplative life, dedicated to St. Rose, and the equal of the Monasteries of St. Inés and of St. Catherine of Siena in the same city. He counted on the powerful economic help of his friend Ildefonso Raboso, father of three Dominican nuns of the Monastery of St. Catherine who offered themselves for the new foundation. Unfortunately, Raboso died suddenly and the project stagnated, until his son, Miguel, resolved to fulfill the wishes of his late father. He bought the site on March 23 1688, and the first stone was laid on April 8 1690. It was finished by the Bishop of the Diocese of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, to such effect that the *beatas* of Santa Inés were able to take possession on August 29 1697. Father Bernardo de Andía did not have the joy of seeing them installed; he had died a year earlier. The Provincial requested the Spanish king to raise the *beaterio* to the rank of full monastery, where the *beatas* could make their vows and live the
full monastic life. King Phillip V, however, refused his permission, alleging that the seven existing monasteries in Puebla were enough to cover any number of vocations, and so the beaterio of Santa Inés remained without the faculty of receiving monastic vows. After the Dominicans protested that they wished to honour St Rose in this way, the king agreed to change the name of the beaterio of Santa Inés to that of Santa Rosa but refused its reclassification as a monastery, and even placed the community under the jurisdiction of the bishop and his successors, rather than the Dominican provincial.

The papal Bull of foundation for the Monastery of St. Rose of Lima was not to be granted until 1739. The following year, it started to function as a true monastery and has remained so to this day.

After the Reform Laws promulgated in 1859 and applied after 1860, the community suffered as did all the other nuns of Mexico. With the advent of better times, they tried to re-establish themselves in part of the old monastery, but found this so ill-adapted and difficult that they decided to buy land on the outskirts of the city and build anew. This they did with the help of their families, friends and –above all – the German benevolent society Adveniat. The modern monastery is spacious, sober, harmonious, hygienic and functional.

Perhaps the most noteworthy fact of this convent is that, despite being the last of the Dominican communities to be founded in Puebla, it contributed to the restoration of the Monasteries of St. Catherine in Mexico City, 1896 -1906, an of St. Catherine in Puebla, 1920-1937, when both were on the brink of annihilation as the result of forced exclaustration and persecution suffered for over a century.

The Kitchen and Façade of the Old Monastery of St Rose of Lima, Puebla
This monastery was not founded at the instigation of Dominican friars or bishops as the previous ones had been, but was an initiative of the same Virgin under whose patronage the monastery is now placed. According to the “beatita” (holy woman) of Patzcuaro, Antonia Gallegos dedicated to the service of this already famous Marian shrine, the Virgin herself requested “the foundation of a convent of Dominican nuns in this place.” It would be interesting to know why the Virgin Mary specifically requested Dominican nuns. It is maybe permissible to think that because the Dominicans promoted devotion to the Rosary, they would be well placed to encourage this devotion amongst the pilgrims visiting the shrine. This brings to mind the words of Our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego about building a church, but the bishop did not believe him. On the contrary the beatita of Patzcuaro was believd; further proof was offered when the Virgin apparently appeared to Antonia Gallegos in the habit of a Dominican nun.

Application was made to Conde de Fuenclara, the Viceroy, and a royal rescript validated by the Council of the Indies was received in April 1745. Unfortunately the Bishop Matos who had been so favourable to the Dominican foundation died before the building of the monastery could be completed. The see was vacant for two years but in 1747, the new bishop summoned foundresses from Santa Catalina, Valladolid (now Morelia) to inaugurate the foundation which began with nine sisters. The monastery was beautifully constructed and is known today as “the house of eleven patios”.

This community suffered the same persecutions and forced exclaustrations as the other Mexican monasteries in the 19th century. On 3rd May 1977 the first stone of the new novitiate and subsequently the whole monastery moved to a former retreat house, situated close to what is now the Basilica of Our Lady of Salvation. The work was completed in 1979.
On October 16th 1972, five nuns set out from the Monastery of Santa Catalina de Siena zt Morelia, Michoacan in order to make a new foundation at Ciudad Valles, San Luis Potosi, and on the 21st of the same months, five others followed. By common agreement amongst the nuns themselves and the bishop of the diocese Don José Melgoza, the monastery was placed under the patronage of St Dominic. This was to be the first Dominican monastery to be founded in Mexico in over two hundred years.

The sisters found accommodation in the first instance in the residence of the Obregon family, and subsequently in the former diocesan seminary. They were made very welcome by all, but it became necessary to move to a more suitable location, in particular because of the excessive heat. The same bishop transferred the community to Xilitla, where the climate was more suitable and land available, near the “Garden of Eden”. (These exotic gardens were created by an Englishman in the 19th century, made possible by the exceptional tropical climate). Xilitla had a population of some 9,000 inhabitants at the time. Here the construction of a new monastery was undertaken under the direction of Madre Josefina Suarez, who had been prioress in Morelia where new buildings had also been constructed.

The monastery received its canonical documents on 2nd January 1978, and the erection of the enclosure was celebrated with great pomp on the 22nd of the same month.
On the 19th April 1974 authorization was obtained from the Archbishop of San Juan de los Lagos for the foundation of a monastery at San Miguel el Alto, Jalisco, and on the 8th August of the same year, the Master of the Dominican Order approved the foundation, to be made by the nuns at Guadalajara.

On 24th December, three nuns moved into a house made available to them by the home for old people of the town, while they awaited the construction of the monastery. On the 27th – feast of the Holy Family – the first mass was celebrated, and by now they were already five religious. The number rose to eight before the end of January 1975; it now became possible to envisage canonical erection as the location was deemed favourable for vocations. This was obtained in 1977, and the first prioress was elected on 16th May of that year.
On 14th August 1976 a Group of eleven sisters Leith the Monastery of Santa Catalina de Siena at Morelia, heading for Tampico (Tamaulipas), and with the purpose of founding a monastery, to be placed under the patronage of the Blessed Virgin. They had been invited to do this by the bishop of the diocese, in a letter dated November 5th 1975 and addressed to the Dominican nuns at Morelia.

In the first instance the foundresses moved into a house that had previously been a convent, and was adapted to their needs. The official opening took place on 22nd August 1976 at a ceremony presided by the bishop and attended by many of the local inhabitants.

On 6th August 1977 the document of canonical erection was received from the General Curia of the Order of Preachers, and a celebration was held on the 22nd of the same month (the patronal feast day).
This foundation was officially approved by the assembly of the Federation of Mexican Nuns in 1986 and entrusted to the Monastery of Jesus Maria, Guadalajara. This was in response to a petition from the Bishop of Tijuana who, on 28th January 1988 issued a decree permitting the foundation to begun for a trial period of three years in the chapel of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, situated in the parish of Our Lord of mercy in the city of Tijuana. The foundresses were eight in number all from Jesus Maria Monastery, Guadalajara.

The monastery achieved its canonical erection in 1992, in the year of the fifth centenary of the evangelisation of Mexico.
As early as 1968 a group of local people had desired the presence of a Dominican monastery in this sizeable, industrial city (the largest steel works in the country). It had been the capital of the province of New Extramadura in the colonial period. One of the keenest supporters of this idea, a certain Señor Cura, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday on 4th February 1986, and with the backing of the local bishop, petitioned the Federation of Dominican Nuns of Mexico to make such a foundation.

The federal president and her council asked the Monastery of St Dominic at Xilitla if the community would take on this project, and the sisters accepted. About ten sisters began the foundation in February 1990 when the official documents had been received from Rome.
Monasterio Federal Santa María de Guadalupe
Casa de Formación de la Federación
Av. Santa Escolástica No. 5
Col. Lago de Guadalupe
54760 Cuautitlén Izcalli, Edo. de Méx.
Tel (01-55) 58-77-28-72
Founded in 1999

An aerial view of the impressive complex of the Mexican nuns’ federal monastery

This monastery placed under the patronage of Our Lady of Guadalupe – so important in the religious culture of Mexico – houses the common novitiate for the member monasteries of the Federation “Santa Maria de Guadalupe” of Mexican nuns of the Dominican Order. It is situated not too far distant from the shrine commemorating the apparitions to Juan Diego.

This common novitiate venture and its purpose-built monastery have attracted much interest on the part of other Dominican federations of nuns throughout the world.
Monasterio de la Inmaculada Concepción de María
Av. Seiba 1
Fraccionamiento Arboledas
61980 San Lucas, Mich.
Tel. (01-435) 678-31-62
Founded in 1994

Monasterio de Cristo Rey
Prolongación Agustín Melgar 1000
Col. Amahuacata
65100 Mina, N.L.
Tel-fax (01-829) 288-00-27
Founded in 1999

Monasterio del Señor de la Divina Misericordia y Nuestra Señora del Rosario
Calle 41 por 32 A y 34
97117 Mérida, Yuc.
Tel. (01-999) 911-07-72
Founded in 2001

A Nun leading a meeting of the Confraternity of the Rosary at the Merida, Yucatan Monastery

To date it has proved impossible to obtain any more information concerning these four recent foundations.
Dominican missionaries came to the city of Antequera (Oaxaca) in 1529. Their convent rapidly became the centre of a number of mission-houses within the Zapotec region; in 1592 it became the seat of the future Province of San Hipólito Mártir. Oaxaca also had Dominican bishops, among them Friar Bernardo de Albuquerque. A deeply spiritual man, Bernardo de Albuquerque sensed the need to found a monastery of Dominican nuns in his diocese, who – through their prayers and lives of sacrifice – would bring grace from heaven for the conversion of sinners. Padilla writes that, in order to found, Albuquerque saved every penny and “took the very food from his own mouth”.1

The problem, however, was not so much economic as to how to form the young women interested in embracing monastic life. At this time, there were no Dominican nuns in the whole of New Spain. The chronicler, Friar Francisco de Burgoa, writes that, in order to teach the ten postulants the meaning of monastic life, Albuquerque asked the Provincial of the Franciscans to lend him Poor Clares from Mexico City. The Poor Clares came, successfully initiating the potential Dominican postulants in religious observance, liturgy, chant etcetera for a period of three years. They declined, however, to continue this formation into the novitiate and returned to their convent in Mexico.

Albuquerque did not give up. He wrote to Pius V, telling the Pope of his desire to found a community of contemplative Dominican nuns, of his recent efforts and his failure, and asking for special permission and powers to proceed with such a foundation on his own. The Pope agreed to grant him the widest powers, as we can read in the Bull sent from the Holy See: Albuquerque could avail himself of the help of nuns from other orders; he could accept the profession of those he judged apt to the monastic life and could dispense with the rules governing age and dowry where these represented an impediment to entry. While negotiating with the Holy See, the Bishop was also adapting buildings belonging to the Episcopate for use as the future convent. He built the church and sacristy, supplying “the ornaments, chalices, bells and everything necessary for the liturgy, as well as the convent and the infirmary”.

When he deemed the postulants ready to take the habit and make their first profession, Bishop Albuquerque set about organizing the solemn ceremony, starting with the procession of the Blessed Sacrament from the cathedral to the monastery so that the Sacrament should be already present when the young women pronounced their vows. The Bishop collected them

1 Agustín Dávila Padilla, Historia de la Fundación de la Provincia de México
himself, followed by the population carrying lighted candles of various size and cost. (1) On arrival at the monastery, the Te Deum was sung in thanksgiving for having received from God the gift of the first monastery of contemplative nuns in the diocese, and the second of Dominican nuns in the whole of New Spain. (The first was that of St. Catherine in Puebla de los Angeles.)

With the broad powers given to him by Pope Pius V, the Bishop had arranged for the Dominican nuns to be placed under the jurisdiction of the Father Provincial and his successors in the Province of Santiago of Mexico. The convent was then dedicated by the bishop, who – according to Padilla – paid more attention to devotion than to grammar; he named it the Convent of the Mother of God of St. Catherine. The inhabitants of Oaxaca simply amended it to the Convent of St. Catherine.

Sadly, the archives of the Monastery of St. Catherine have been lost and so there are no documents pertaining to the personal history of the nuns, not even those famed for their virtue. All we have is references to one who was certainly famous for her extraordinary sanctity and who is still remembered in the city - Sister Jacinta María Ana Catalina de San Antonio, professed on April 22 1713. The Register of Professions however has survived. From this we know that 401 nuns made their vows between October 20 1577 and July 26 1849, the date of profession of the last nun, Sister María de Jesús de San Joaquín. The last nun to die was Sister María Rafaela, professed on February 2 1826 and deceased on March 23 1861.

We know various nuns survived after the exclaustration decreed by Benito Juárez but are ignorant of their number. Initially, they took refuge in the Convent of the Concepción in the same city; later they were dispersed in the homes of their friends, where they slowly died, one by one. The famous “Dance of the Feather” (Danza de la Pluma) – the account of the war between Moors and Christians which had been composed by the friars and given to the nuns - was guarded jealously and passed for safekeeping from one nun to the other, until the last nun of St. Catherine of Siena, Oaxaca gave it to the ecclesiastical authorities of the city. The Dominican community of Oaxaca was the only one to disappear completely. The actual buildings of the monastery, one block from the Convent of Santo Domingo where the friars live, have suffered huge modifications. They have housed a men’s prison, the Town Hall, a cinema etcetera. Today, the former monastery is a 5-star hotel, with elegant rooms, swimming-pools, gardens and even a bar called “the Bar of the Novices”.

The Former Monastery of Santa Catalina de Siena Oaxaca, now a luxury hotel