



On the church's travels across the world Bernardino de Sahagún (1576)

Bernardino de Sahagún was a Catholic priest from Spain. He spent most of his life in colonial Mexico, known as New Spain, where the Spanish, having conquered the Aztec empire, ruled over the indigenous Nahua people. Sahagún directed a team of missionary-educated Nahua Christians in compiling a 12-volume encyclopedia of Nahua culture, which included extensive information about Nahua religion as practiced prior to the Spanish conquest. The encyclopedia was composed of images made by Nahua artists, with explanatory text in two languages: Nahuatl and Spanish. The monumental work remained unpublished in its creators' lifetimes; but the Spanish text, by itself, was published in the 1800s under the title General History of the Things of New Spain, with authorial credit assigned solely to Sahagún.

Sahagún was indeed the author of the following selection from the General History, which situates Spain's colonizing of the Americas in a sweeping narrative of the global journey of Christianity. Sahagún's narrative begins with Christianity's origins in ancient Palestine and ends with the anticipation that Spanish imperialism is on the verge of bringing Christianity to the Chinese empire.

It is well known to all that the church militant began in the kingdom of Palestine and from there made its way through diverse parts of the world, toward the east and the west, the north and the south. We know that northward there are still many provinces, even many undiscovered lands, where the gospel has yet to be preached; and southward, where formerly it was thought that no peoples lived, even now in these times many inhabited lands and kingdoms have been discovered, where now the gospel is being preached.

The church set out from Palestine, which is now inhabited, ruled, and governed by infidels; from thence it went to Asia, where now are only Turks and Moors; it went also to Africa, where there are no longer Christians; it went to Germany, where now are only heretics; it went to Europe, the greater part of which does not obey the church. The places where now the church holds its seat most serenely are Italy and Spain, from whence, crossing the ocean, it has come to these parts of the western Indies, where formerly there were diversities of people and tongues, of which many have now come to an end, while those who remain are on the way to their end. The most populous and well situated of all these western Indies has been and remains New Spain, and that which now most thrives and shines is the district of the city of Mexico, where the Catholic Church has taken residence and lives at peace. But with regards to the Catholic faith, the soil of this place is sterile and extremely difficult to cultivate. Here the Catholic faith has feeble roots; much labor is required to produce very little fruit, while little is required to cause what has been planted and cultivated to wither.

It seems to me that the Catholic faith will be able to persist for only a little time in these parts. First and foremost, this is because the peoples are very speedily coming to an end, due not so much to the poor treatment they receive as to the epidemics God sends upon them. Since this land was discovered, there have been three great epidemics, very widespread, besides others not so great and widespread. The first was in the year 1520; when the Spanish were driven out of the city of Mexico by war, and they regrouped in Tlaxcala, there was a smallpox epidemic, in which died an almost infinite number of people. After that one—and after the Spanish had conquered

New Spain, and pacified it, and the preaching of the gospel was being carried out with much success—in the year 1545, there was an extremely great and widespread epidemic, in which died the majority of the people living throughout all of New Spain. At the time of that epidemic, I was living in the city of Mexico, in the quarter of Tlatelolco; I buried more than ten thousand bodies, and near the end of the epidemic, I myself contracted the disease and came very close to death. After that, matters pertaining to the faith advanced peacefully, and the work of reforming the people resumed for a little more or less than 30 years. Now in August of this year, 1576, a great and widespread epidemic began, which has now run for three months; many people have died, and more go on dying every day. I do not know how long it will continue nor how much calamity it will cause. [...]

Returning to my subject, the pilgrim travels of the church: In recent years, there have been discovered, in these parts, the Spice Islands, where the Spanish have now settled and the gospel is being preached, and from whence is brought much gold and very rich porcelain, as well as many spices. Near there is the great kingdom of China, into which the Augustinian fathers have begun to enter. In this year, 1576, we received reliable news of two fathers who entered the kingdom of China, though they did not succeed in seeing the Chinese emperor; after many days of journeying, they were required to turn back because there arose some danger of war. They had been transported, with much honor, from the Spice Islands settled by the Spanish to a certain city of China; but from there—by the counsel, they say, of the devil, whom the Chinese emperor or his satraps consulted—they were sent back to the island from whence they had embarked, being made to return with dishonor and with many difficulties during their return journey.

I have heard that the account those Augustinian fathers gave upon their return has been written and will soon appear here and in Spain. It seems to me that our Lord God is now opening a way for the Catholic faith to enter the Chinese kingdoms, where there are superlatively able people, of great refinement and great knowledge. When the church enters those kingdoms, and the Catholic faith is planted in them, I believe it will continue to dwell there for many years; for in the Spice Islands, and New Spain, and Peru, it has done no more than pass through on its way to converse with yonder peoples of the lands of China.

Source: Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Pedro Robredo, 1938), 3:302-305 (book 11, chap. 12, sect. 7), https://archive.org/details/b29827620_0003. Free eBook from the Internet Archive.

Excerpts translated into English by John-Charles Duffy. A paragraph break omitted for a more compact presentation of the text. Sentence breaks adjusted for readability. Punctuation and typography (italics) emended in line with modern conventions. Although *Iglesia* is regularly capitalized in the source publication, its English translation (*church*) is presented here in lowercase for the sake of readability, except in the institutional name *Catholic Church*. The word *emperor*, inconsistently capitalized in the source, is consistently presented here in lowercase. Several other words capitalized in the source have been converted here to lowercase for the sake of modernization and readability: *kingdom*, *ocean*, *western* (in the term *western Indies*), *gospel*, *faith*, *preaching*, *fathers*, and *our* (in the phrase *our Lord God*).



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