

## María de Jesús de Ágreda and the Jumanos (Events described: 1620s)

*María de Jesús de Ágreda—or Sor María (meaning “Sister María”), for short—was a white nun in Spain who became famous as a wonder-working mystic. Her admirers believed that on repeated occasions in the 1620s, when Sor María was in her 20s, God miraculously transported her from Spain to colonial New Mexico, where, by her preaching, she converted an entire indigenous nation to Catholicism. Reports of Sor María’s mystical journeys were sent from Spain to the archbishop of Mexico, who in turn asked Franciscan missionaries in New Mexico to search for the people whom Sor María was said to have converted.*

*Shortly after receiving the archbishop’s request, the missionaries were visited by a delegation of Jumanos (“Xumanas,” in the Benavides text, below), an indigenous people who lived in what is now western Texas. The missionaries’ account reveals that the Jumanos hoped the missionaries would provide them with economic aid and healing from disease; likely, too, they sought Spanish military protection from nearby Apaches. Presumably to sharpen the missionaries’ interest in them, the Jumanos said that they had already been visited by a young woman dressed like a nun. Perhaps they had heard of Sor María during their days-long visit to the mission, or perhaps they were claiming an apparition of the Virgin Mary. In any case, the missionaries interpreted the Jumanos’ stories as confirmation of the reports they had received from Spain about Sor María.*

*The first selection below comes from a biography of Sor María written after her death by a Spanish priest; although he doesn’t indicate this, his description of Sor María’s mystical journeys incorporates language from an account that she herself wrote. The second selection is a promotional report of the Jumanos’ conversion, written to the king of Spain by Alonso de Benavides, who headed the Franciscan mission in New Mexico. Not long after he wrote this report, Benavides traveled to Spain and there met Sor María. (Expanding the scope of this transoceanic story still further, Benavides was then sent to be a bishop in Goa, India, though he died en route.)*

### **1. Joseph Ximénez Samaniego describes Sor María’s mystical journeys (published 1687)**

From the first illuminations with which the Lord enlightened his Servant’s understanding, her will was inflamed with such ardent charity that [...] she burned with desires that all creatures capable of knowing and loving the Lord should experience the joy of doing so. In consequence, the thought that souls should be damned caused her such grief as to make her faint, her pain being magnified by the knowledge of how many there were who did not profess the true and Catholic faith, their only gateway to salvation. [...] She would break forth into tears, groans, and sobs, her heart straining so violently that she felt as if it would leave her body [...] In this state, on some occasions the Lord gave her to know that it was his will that she work on behalf of his creatures, and he directed her to offer up, for the conversion of some souls, the illnesses, pains, and torments that (as was related earlier) she suffered. Having received this illumination, the faithful Bride [of Christ] appealed more confidently to his mercy and offered to endure far greater suffering, even to give her life if necessary, if thereby a single soul could be saved.

In this willing frame of mind, the Servant of God was one day carried away into ecstasy, as she was wont, after having received communion; and the Lord marvelously showed her, in a spiritual vision, the entire world. [...] She saw very clearly the multitude of peoples who inhabited the

earth, the souls that were in it, and how few there were among them who professed the purity of the true faith and how many there were who had not entered through the gate of baptism to become sons and daughters of the holy Church. [...] Having shown her the great variety of those who did not profess or confess the faith—idolatrous pagans, perfidious Jews, Mahometans, and heretics—the Lord declared to her that those of his creatures who were most disposed to be converted, and toward whom his mercy was most inclined, were the pagans of New Mexico and other remote kingdoms of those parts. [...] These marvelous illuminations were repeated on similar occasions, the Lord showing her more closely those kingdoms and provinces of the Indians whose conversion he desired; commanding that she pray and work on their behalf; and making more clearly known to her the people's manner and appearance, their disposition, and their need for ministers to lead them to the knowledge of God and of his holy faith. All of this disposed yet more the mind and heart of the faithful Servant to work and to pray—and with such wondrous efficacy that the Lord, whose judgments are incomprehensible and whose ways are unsearchable, worked in her and through her one of the greatest marvels that the centuries have witnessed.

On one occasion, as she was praying intently for the salvation of these souls, the Lord having carried her away into ecstasy, she unexpectedly seemed to find herself, without knowing how, in some other region, with a very different climate, and in the midst of a people with the same manner, appearance, and disposition as those Indians whom she had seen in her spiritual visions. But now it seemed to her that she saw them with her natural eyes, that she felt physically the warmer temperature of that land and experienced that foreign place with her other senses. Finding herself in this setting, she was commanded by the Lord to give vent to her charitable yearnings by preaching his faith and holy law to those people. And it seemed to her that in reality she did: that she preached to them in the Spanish language, and that the Indians understood her as perfectly as if she spoke to them in their native language; that when they spoke in their language, she understood them with total clarity; that she performed miracles in confirmation of the faith she preached; that the Indians were converted, and that she catechized them. Then, recovering from her rapture, she found herself back where she had been when her ecstasy came upon her. This marvel was repeated frequently thereafter, she seemingly being transported back to continue that work. This occurred more than five hundred times. During these experiences, it seemed to her that through the efficacy of her preaching and the miracles that God worked in its confirmation, an entire vast kingdom, with its prince, was converted to the faith of Jesus Christ; that passing through New Mexico, she saw and recognized the religious of St. Francis, who were working in that mission; and though they were at a great distance from the converted kingdom, she advised her Indians that some of them go in search of the religious (she signaling to them where and how to find them) to ask the religious to baptize them and to send workers to baptize the rest of the converted multitude; that this was done; that the religious came; and many other wondrous things that would be very long in telling.

The Servant of God related all these marvelous occurrences, with deep humility and sincere truth, to her confessor. [...] Because what had happened was so extraordinary, she always doubted that it had been in the body and was inclined to think it had occurred in the spirit only; and in her great humility, she could not believe that she could be judged so useful and that God would choose her for so marvelous a work, in consequence of which she came to wonder if it were a fantasy of her imagining [...] Her confessor, however, being convinced of the good spirit of the Servant of God, having come to hold her illuminations in high regard, and believing that one

should not presume to limit the wonders of the Almighty—for these reasons, he concluded that she had been bodily transported to those parts, and other learned persons to whom he communicated the matter were of the same opinion. And because it is so difficult to keep secrets of this kind once they have been disclosed to some, in a short time the report ran among the religious, men and women, that the Servant of God had been bodily transported to the Indies.

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## 2. Alonso de Benavides narrates the conversion of the Jumanos (*published* 1630)

[G]oing forth from the town of Santa Fé, the center of New Mexico, [...] traversing the Apache nation of the Vaqueros for more than 112 leagues to the east, one comes to hit upon the Xumana nation; which since its conversion was so miraculous, it is just to tell how it was. Years back, when a religious named Fray Juan de Salas was traveling, occupied in the conversion of the Tompiras and Salineros Indians—[...] which [...] border upon these Xumanas—there was war between them. And when Father Fray Juan de Salas went back for the Salineros, the Xumanas said that people who went back for the poor were good people; and so they became fond of the Father and begged him that he would go to live among them. And each year they came to seek him. [...But] not having enough religious, I kept putting off the Xumanas, who were asking for him, until God should send more laborers—as [indeed] he sent them in the past year of 1629, inspiring Your Majesty to order the viceroy of New Spain that he send us thirty religious. [...] And so we immediately dispatched the said Father Salas with another, his companion, who is Father Fray Diego Lopez, whom the selfsame Indians went with as guides. And before they went, we asked the Indians to tell us the reason why they were with so much concern petitioning us for baptism and for religious to go to indoctrinate them. They replied that a woman like *that* one whom we had there painted—which was a picture of Mother Luisa de Carrion<sup>a</sup>—used to preach to each one of them in their tongue, telling them that they should come to summon the Fathers to instruct and baptize them and that they should not be slothful about it. And that the woman who preached to them was dressed precisely like her who was painted there; but that the face was not like that one, but that their visitant was young and beautiful. [...]

The devil, enemy of souls, seeing that those religious were going to deliver from his claws the souls which he there had possession of, wished to defend himself and made use of a stratagem of the sort that he is accustomed to; and it was that he dried up the lagoons of water that they drank, on account of which, also, fled the much herd of buffalo which was there, by which all these nations sustain themselves. And directly, by the medium of the Indian sorcerers, he broadcast the word that they should change their location to seek their food, and that now the religious whom they were sending to summon would not come—since in six years that they had waited for them, they did not go, and this time they were already delaying so much that they had not to expect them. And so the captains ordered that they should strike their tents to go the next day at dawn. And at the break of day, the Saint<sup>b</sup> spoke to each one of them individually and told them they

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<sup>a</sup> *Luisa de Carrión was another white nun famed as a mystic. She was then about 65 years old, living in Spain.*

<sup>b</sup> *“The Saint” (in Spanish, Santa) refers to the young female visitor.*

should not go, for already the religious whom they were sending to seek were drawing near. And all of them having discussed it among themselves, they sent twelve captains, in whom they most confided, to see if it were so. And on the third day, they ran upon the religious [...] And immediately they went to give news to their people of the coming of the Fathers and came out to meet them in procession, with two crosses in front, as they were so well instructed by heaven. When the said Fathers, and three soldiers that went with them, had adored the crosses, the Fathers also took out their two crucifixes, which they wore at the neck, and all came to kiss the crucifix and to venerate it, as if they were very old Christians. And the same they did to a very pretty Infant Jesus that the Fathers carried, putting their mouth and eyes to his feet with much devotion—at which all our people were left marveling much. [...]

These religious were there for some few days, preaching the divine word and teaching them to pray, to which they flocked with so much punctuality that they failed not morning or evening. And in those days came messengers from the rest of the neighboring nations to summon the Fathers to go and teach them likewise, since there likewise went that Saint, preaching to them. And as it seemed to the Fathers that that harvest was much and the laborers few, and the people disposed to settle down and make their churches, the Fathers returned to where we were to take the assistants therefor. And before leaving, they brought together all the Indians to bid them farewell. [...] To the which the chief captain answered these words: “Father, we cannot yet do anything with God, for we are like deer and animals of the wilds; and thou canst do much with God and with this holy cross. And we have many sick ones—cure them first before that thou goest.” And it appears that God permitted that at this season there should be so many sick, upon whom he might well employ his divine pity; for it being three o’clock in the afternoon when they commenced, they had to bring sick ones all the afternoon, all the night, and the next day until ten o’clock. And one of the religious on one side and the other on the other, with only making the sign of the cross and saying the Gospel of St. Luke, “*Loquente Iesu*,” and the prayer of Our Lady, “*Concede nos*,” and that of our father St. Francis, “*Deus qui Ecclesiam tuam*”—instantly they rose up well of all their infirmities [...]

From the aforesaid may well be inferred the so copious spiritual blessings which our seraphic order<sup>c</sup> hath discovered throughout all the world. And in this region, it alone is the order which, with so great travails and risks, makes these so superb discoveries—since, as has been said, in one sole stretch of one hundred leagues, it has baptized more than 80,000 souls and built more than 50 very beautiful churches and monasteries. And we have more than 500,000 Indians, pacified and subject to Your Majesty in all the neighboring nations, who are little by little being catechized to be baptized. In such sort that, though all that territory belonged to the devil until now and was thick with idolatry, without there being a person to praise the most holy name of Jesus, today it is all thick with temples and monasteries and with pedestals of the cross, and there is no one that does not praise God and his most holy Mother aloud in the wilds when they are saluting one another. In which merit Your Majesty is so much a sharer, since with your royal aid we are sustained in those conversions, and with your royal incomes we found churches to the Lord; for the which I have very great faith that as Your Majesty so much spreads our holy Catholic faith, our Lord hath to pay you it, even in this life, in the same coin, by extending your

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<sup>c</sup> That is, the Franciscan order.

royal crown, subjecting to it so many enemies of the faith, and manifesting to you such rich treasures of mines as now we have discovered.

#### Sources:

1. Joseph Ximénez Samaniego, *Prólogo galeato; Relación de la vida de la V. Madre Sor María de Jesús [...]; y Notas a las tres partes de la “Mística ciudad de Dios”* (Madrid: Imprenta de la Causa de la V. Madre, 1720), 131-133 (chap. 12), <http://bibliotecavirtual.larioja.org/bvrioja/es/consulta/registro.do?id=123>. Licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Zero 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.

2. Mrs. Edward E. Ayer, trans., *The Memorial of Fray Alonso de Benavides, 1630*, annot. Frederick Webb Hodge and Charles Fletcher Lummis (Chicago: Privately printed, 1916), 57-63, cf. 157-165, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.319510023496091>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts from Ximénez translated by John-Charles Duffy; excerpts from Ayer edited and annotated by Duffy. In the Ayer excerpts, editorial notes that appeared in square brackets in the source publication have been either omitted or integrated into this edited text without the use of square brackets, to reduce textual clutter. A confusing syntactic structure in Ayer simplified. Ayer’s translation of *el demonio* as *the Demon* emended to *the devil*. *Padre(s)* is consistently translated here as *Father(s)*, whereas Ayer often left it untranslated. For smoother reading, instances in Ayer of *the Father* placed immediately before a name (e.g., *the Father Fray Juan*) have been emended here to simply *Father*; likewise for *Mother*. Some spelled-out numbers converted to numerals. Across both texts, paragraph or sentence breaks adjusted for readability. Spelling and punctuation emended in line with modern conventions.

For the sake of consistency and readability, many words capitalized in the source publications have been converted here to lowercase. These include the religious terms *baptism*, *faith*, *law*, *pagans*, *heretics*, *confessor*, *religious*, *ministers*, *workers*, *crosses*, *crucifixes*, *order*, *name of Jesus*, and *(most) holy*; and the political terms *kingdom*, *prince*, *viceroys*, *royal*, and *crown*. The capitalization of *Servant*, *Bride*, and *Saint* (as epithets for Sor María), of *Father* and *Mother* (as titles for men and women religious), of *Infant Jesus* (as the name of an image), of *Our Lady* and *Mother* (as titles for the Virgin Mary), and of the honorific *Your Majesty* all reproduce the usage of the source publications. The lowercasing of divine pronouns in Ximénez replicates the source; divine pronouns capitalized in Ayer’s translation have been converted here to lowercase, for consistency across the two texts and to match the usage of Ayer’s Spanish source.

The edited excerpts from Ayer are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.

**See also:** For one reconstruction of how the Jumanos came to claim to have been visited by Sor María, see Nancy P. Hickerson, “The Visits of the ‘Lady in Blue’: An Episode in the History of the South Plains, 1629,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 46, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 67-90.



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