



Catechism or Instruction for the People Juan Fernández de Sotomayor (1814)

This document is one of several pro-revolutionary catechisms published in Spain's American colonies during the early 1800s, while colonists were fighting for independence. The author, Juan Fernández de Sotomayor, was a criollo (a person of Spanish ancestry born in the Americas) and a Catholic priest in what now is Colombia but at that time was the colony of New Granada. In 1810, he issued a call for revolution to his parishioners in Mompo, which became the first town in New Granada to declare independence from Spain. Fernández de Sotomayor published his catechism in 1814, at a time when revolutionaries were in control of New Granada. A couple of years later, however, royalists briefly regained power, prompting Fernández de Sotomayor to flee to Jamaica; in his absence, the Inquisition condemned his catechism, and a royalist bishop excommunicated him. Fernández de Sotomayor returned to Colombia as the war for independence was ending, subsequently serving as a congressional representative and later as a bishop.

The arguments against independence are refuted

Q. Before the revolution from Spain, America was the dependent of whom?

A. The kings of Spain.

Q. Did this dependence or submission have any just basis?

A. It had none, from the beginning.

Q. On what grounds was this dependence allegedly based?

A. On three grounds, namely: the papal donation, conquest, and the propagation of the Christian religion.

Q. Was the papal donation not legitimate?

A. It was not, because the vicar of Jesus Christ cannot give or cede what has never been his, much less in his capacity as pope, or successor of St. Peter, who has no temporal authority or dominion; the empire which was entrusted to St. Peter, and which has passed to his legitimate successors, is purely spiritual [...]

[On conquest]

Q. What of conquest—is that not just grounds for exercising dominion over America?

A. Conquest is nothing more than laying claim to something by using force against the weak, as when an armed robber lays claim to what belongs to someone else by assaulting the legitimate owner, who resists either feebly or not at all. Just like the victim of a robbery, those who have been conquered can and should recover what is rightly theirs once they are free from force or can muster superior force.

Q. You say the conquered should recover what is rightly theirs—what is that?

- A. What they enjoyed before they were conquered: liberty and independence from the conqueror.
- Q. So then, conquest confers upon the conqueror no just or legitimate title in the slightest?
- A. Certainly not; for if conquest did confer any such title, it would be a crime to resist the results of conquest—in which case, the Spanish, among many others, who refuse to accept their having been conquered by the French, would be criminals for having tried to revolt as soon as they saw an opportunity to do so. [...]
- Q. But are we not vassals of Spain?
- A. We are not nor ever have been.
- Q. Then why do the Spanish claim that right over us?
- A. Because they have always regarded the Americans as a different species of men, inferior to themselves, born to obey and to be ordered about as if we were a herd of animals.
- Q. And what do we say to that?
- A. That the Americans are, and always have been, free men equal to the Spanish, the French, the English, the Romans, and every other nation that is, or has been, or could be in the world; and therefore no man or nation has the least right to command us or to exact our obedience without our express collective consent.
- Q. And if, nevertheless, they attempt to do that by force, what recourse do we have?
- A. To fight them, in compliance with the natural law that entitles all men to oppose force with force for the sake of preserving their lives, liberty, and individual property.
- Q. And to fight in such circumstances is not a crime?
- A. It would be a crime, rather, not to fight; for the man who peaceably consents to subjugation bequeaths to his children and descendants servitude and oppression for their inheritance, and this he cannot do. [...T]hree hundred years of chains, affronts, insults, depredations—in a word, of every kind of suffering, endured in patience and silence—cannot be the lot decreed to millions of men; and our sufferings could not have failed to move Providence one day in our favor, affording us the opportunity to throw off such a heavy and ignominious yoke and restoring to us the precious right to live free from tyranny.
- Q. So then, the war that we are fighting is a just war?
- A. Yes, a just and a holy war, perhaps the most just and the most holy that has been seen in the world for many centuries.

[On the propagation of Christianity]

- Q. What should we say about the propagation of the Christian religion: is that just grounds for dependence?

A. It is a slander against the Christian religion to think that it could have been preached among us only by subjugating us [...] Whenever their ministers claimed to be preaching the gospel, they wholly contradicted the teachings of its divine author.

Q. How so?

A. By preaching the gospel, which consists entirely of peace and charity, with escorts of soldiers, who typically left the site of the preaching covered with corpses; and by insisting that subjugation to Spain was a necessary and essential condition of the gospel, thereby overthrowing the gospel's true principles and mighty works.

Q. All that notwithstanding, did they not succeed in destroying idolatry and making known the true God?

A. Jesus Christ has never wanted anyone to be forced to embrace religion. His first disciples carried no weapons when they preached except the word and the power of conviction. And by those means, they converted thousands of idolaters, whose resistance to Christianity was countered by the apostles not with armies and navies, but with patience and suffering in the face of every kind of persecution until, in the end, they bore witness to their mission with their own blood.

Q. To whom, then, do we owe our being Christian?

A. First and foremost, to the omnipotence of God, who alone could overcome the obstacles that Spanish Christians themselves raised to the establishment and propagation of Christianity; and second, to the zeal of the occasional truly apostolic man, men who suffered more at the hands of the Spanish than at the hands of the Indians whom they peaceably converted.

Q. So why have the Spanish kings always boasted that their zeal and care are responsible for the Catholic religion in these countries—that temples have been built, altars erected, and ministers salaried, all at their expense?

A. Because who would have dared to contradict them? But it was after the great rivers of human blood had ceased to flow; after the most populous lands had been transformed into forbidding wastes by the sacrifice of millions of victims to the Spaniards' insatiable greed; after the conquerors, secure in their possession of the rich spoils, imposed on the displaced tribes whom their swords had spared the heavy yoke that we have just now thrown off—it was, I say, in the calm that followed those murders and atrocities that the Christian religion began to be established and its temples, priests, and altars appeared. The hapless Indians who were apportioned or sold as slaves to the conquerors came to practice this religion simply because it was the religion of their masters, as likewise has happened to the African slaves among us, the primary object of whose purchase was never to Christianize them, but rather to provide labor for the estates, etc. The new communities that came into being would receive, after some time, a priest, who, with a lash in one hand and a cross in the other, would instruct the people in the mysteries of our faith, but so poorly that they cannot be said to have received a true religious education. Furthermore, how can it possibly be claimed that the rogues who first abandoned Spain to make their fortunes in America were dedicated to proclaiming the gospel, when they were the ones who instigated the pernicious debate over whether or not the

Indians belonged to the human race, alleging them to be incapable of receiving the sacraments of the Church?

More recently, the financial maintenance of worship, temples, altars, etc., has depended on individual donations; that which is reputed to have been done at the expense of the royal treasury has, in reality, been paid for entirely from our own goodwill contributions, from the disgraceful tribute levied on the Indians, and from the many diverse taxes with which we are bled. What gifts of money, treasure, or other things useful for the support of religion have been brought to us from Spain? On the contrary, the kings have frequently petitioned the apostolic see for rights to the income of the Church; they already take a portion of the tithes; they appropriate vacant bishoprics and prebends; and they tax prebends, bishoprics, and parishes by means of the *media anata*, subsidies, annuities, etc., to such an extent that it would seem the cabinet of Madrid had decreed a wholesale plundering of the goods of the Church in America—as the Cortes have in fact done, formally declaring their intention to carry off to Spain all the treasures of the churches, excepting only the most indispensable.

Q. What should we conclude from all this?

A. That if we truly love the Catholic religion—if we desire to preserve it, to live and die in it—then we must redouble our efforts to never return to the dependence of old.

Q. So why do our enemies say that independence will spell the end of religion?

A. The Catholic religion does not favor any people or any form of government. In Asia and in Africa, in Europe and in the Americas, in monarchies and in republics, under free governments and even under despotic ones, Christianity makes itself perfectly at home. The Spanish, in waging war against us, have tried to exploit our devotion to Christianity for their own ends. They have enlisted ministers who, prostituting their divine mission, have stirred up fear in timid, weak-kneed souls, indoctrinating them with maxims that run contrary to a religion which knows nothing of slavery or chains and which will surely benefit from our emancipation and liberty.

Source: Juan Fernández de Sotomayor, *Catecismo o instrucción popular* (Cartagena de Indias: Imprenta del Gobierno, 1814; facsimile edition, Bogotá, Colombia: Editorial Kelly, 1976), 7-8, 10-11, 13-16, 18-26. No known copyright restriction on Fernández de Sotomayor's text.

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