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The Lords and Holy Men of Tenochtitlan Reply to the Franciscans, 1524

(1564)

The following two chapters of a *coloquio*, or exchange of speeches, between lords and holy men from the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan and "the Twelve" (the first group of Franciscan evangelizers in central Mexico; see Selection 8), purports to be the Indians' reply to the friars' explanation of their mission in 1524, three years after Cortés had captured the city. It was written out in parallel Nahuatl and Spanish texts in 1564 by or for Bernardino de Sahagún (1500–1590), the famous Spanish Franciscan linguist and missionary who, with the collaboration of surviving elders and young Indian nobles who studied with him in the school of Santiago Tlatelolco on the outskirts of Mexico City, composed the monumental work about beliefs and practices in Aztec society known as the Florentine Codex.

This *coloquio* is not a literal transcription of what the friars and Indians said to each other on a single occasion. Sahagún could not have witnessed such an encounter, since he did not reach Mexico until 1529. But several early Spanish chroniclers who were there by 1523 refer to such formal exchanges, and Sahagún reportedly drew upon an accumulation of notes and conversations with Indian informants and members of "the Twelve" in

his 1564 composition. It is, then, a literary reworking into one scene of the fragmentary recollections of several such encounters. Sahagún's stated intention in his studies and writings was to understand Indian life and religion more thoroughly, the better to make converts. This intention undoubtedly shaped his presentation of Aztec culture (including the silences) in ways that remain obscure to us, but his deep interest in native life and thought led to the inclusion of much that was tangential, if not irrelevant, to his stated purpose. Miguel León-Portilla, a leading student of Aztec culture and Nahuatl sources, concludes that this *coloquio* was crafted as an instrument of evangelization, but it also offers an authentic glimpse of the Aztec religion and vision of the world and response to Spanish colonization.

If so, what is glimpsed? The words attributed to the Aztec lords convey a feeling of profound but not altogether incompatible differences between their vision of divinity and human destiny and that of the friars. They accept, even welcome as providential, the arrival of the Spaniards and their king as rulers, but are reluctant to substitute the newcomers' religious doctrines for their own.

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They are impressed by the majesty of the Christian God and accept the Bible as a "book of celestial and divine words." They accept the friars as bearers of divine riches, as God's representatives sent by "our great Emperor," Charles V; and they are prepared to consider their teachings, and adopt them in good time, but they are not persuaded by the friars' assertions that "we do not know the One who gives us life and being . . . that [the gods] we worship are not gods." They fear the wrath of their ancestral gods, omnipresent in the landscape, and the creative and destructive forces of nature, hungry for propitiation, if they were to neglect or forsake them. Their

ceremonies and sacrifices, they assure the friars, are not empty gestures, easily abandoned. The Aztec interlocutors convey a profound veneration for their forebears—ancestor worship, a Spaniard might have called it—and a way of thinking about divine power that blurred basic dichotomies and boundaries of Christian thought, such as natural/supernatural, heaven/earth, and good/evil. Acceptance of Christianity does not strike them as an all-or-nothing proposition. Speaking in a convivial way as one elite group to another, they warn of popular rebellions rooted in desperation should the Spaniards force such a choice.

Chapter 6

How the Indian Lords Responded to the Twelve

After the twelve priests had finished their first speech to the lords and nobles of Mexico [Tenochtitlan], one of them arose and most courteously and urbanely replied in the following way:

"Dear Sirs, you are most welcome among us. Your coming to our city gives us pleasure. We are at your service and offer you all that we have. We know that you come from among the clouds and mist in the sky. That, along with your persons and way of speaking which we ourselves have seen and heard, makes your arrival unique and marvelous. Altogether, it seems like a celestial event, as if you had opened in our presence a chest of divine riches from the Lord of the sky, and of riches from the great priest who is Lord of the earth, riches that are sent to us by our great Emperor. You showed us all sorts of precious stones—most pure, resplendent, flawless, big and round, sapphires, emeralds, rubies, and pearls. You showed us new kinds of feathers, rich ones of great value. What gives us anguish now is that our wise men who were prudent and skillful in our kind of speech and who were in charge of the principality [the territory controlled by Tenochtitlan], are now dead. If they had heard from your mouths what we have heard, you would hear in return a most agreeable salutation and reply. But we who are inferior and less wise, what can we say? Even though, in truth, we are the leaders of the kingdom and republic, we lack their knowledge and prudence, and it does not seem just to us that the customs and rites that our forebears passed down to us, which they considered good and worthy of safekeeping, should be lightly set aside and destroyed by us.

"Besides this you should know, our lords, that we have priests who guide us and prepare us in the culture and service of our gods. There are also many others with distinct names who serve in the temples day and night, who are wise and knowledgeable about the movement of the heavenly bodies as well as about our ancient customs. They have the books of our forebears which they study and

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peruse day and night. These guide us and prepare us in counting the years, days, months, and feasts of our gods, which are celebrated every twenty days. These same priests are in charge of the histories of our gods and the rules about serving them, because we are in charge only of warfare, collection of tribute, and justice. We will gather them together and tell them what we have heard of the words of God. It is well that they answer and contradict, for they know and it falls to them by their office."

Having finished speaking, the lords took their leave of the twelve. That same day, the principal lords and priests of the idols gathered and the lords recounted all that had happened, giving a full account of what the twelve had said. They remained a long time discussing this matter.

Having understood the reasoning and speech of the twelve, the principal lords and priests of the idols became greatly agitated and fell into a great sadness and fear, offering no response. Some time later they began to speak again and decided among themselves to go together the following day to see, hear, and speak to the twelve. Once the following day dawned, they all gathered and went directly to where the twelve were. Upon arrival, all greeted them and spoke to them affectionately. And the lords said [to the twelve]: "Our Lords, here before you are our principal lords and priests. They have come. We have told them all you said to us yesterday. Here they are. Let them respond. And so that they may be fully satisfied [that they understand what you said], please tell them again from the beginning all that you said to us yesterday, though we know it is tedious for you to do so." Then one of the twelve, using the interpreter, repeated everything that they had said to the lords the day before. Having heard this, one of the principal lords arose, asked the indulgence of the twelve, then began to speak and made the following long speech.

Chapter 7
In Which the Reply of the Principal Holy Men to the Twelve Is Found

"Our lords, leading personages of much esteem, you are very welcome to our lands and towns. We ourselves, being inferior and base, are unworthy of looking upon the faces of such valiant personages. God, Our Lord, has brought you to rule us. We do not know where you come from or where our lords and gods dwell because you have come by sea, through the clouds and mist, a route we have never known. God sends you among us as His own eyes, ears, and mouth. He who is invisible and spiritual becomes visible in you. And we hear His words with our own ears through you, His representatives. We have heard the words that you have brought us of the One who gives us life and being. And we have heard with admiration the words of the Lord of the World which he has sent here for love of us, and also you have brought us the book of celestial and divine words.

"You have told us that we do not know the One who gives us life and being, who is Lord of the heavens and of the earth. You also say that those we worship are not gods. This way of speaking is entirely new to us, and very scandalous. We are frightened by this way of speaking because our forebears who engendered and governed us never said anything like this. On the contrary, they left us this our

custom of worshipping our gods, in which they believed and which they worshiped all the time that they lived here on earth. They taught us how to honor them. And they taught us all the ceremonies and sacrifices that we make. They told us that through them [our gods] we live and are, and that we were beholden to them, to be theirs and to serve countless centuries before the sun began to shine and before there was daytime. They said that these gods that we worship give us everything we need for our physical existence: maize, beans, chia seeds, etc. We appeal to them for the rain to make the things of the earth grow.

"These our gods are the source of great riches and delights, all of which belong to them. They live in very delightful places where there are always flowers, vegetation, and great freshness, a place unknown to mere mortals, called Tlalocan, where there is never hunger, poverty, or illness. It is they who bestow honors, property, titles, and kingdoms, gold and silver, precious feathers, and gemstones.

"There has never been a time remembered when they were not worshiped, honored, and esteemed. Perhaps it is a century or two since this began; it is a time beyond counting. Who can remember when or how those celebrated and sacred places came into being, where miracles occurred and answers were given, called Tulan Vapalcalco, Xuchatlapan, Tamoancham, Yoallyycham, Teutiucam? The inhabitants of these aforementioned places reigned and ruled everywhere, so honored, so famous, such kingdoms and glory and lordship.

"It would be a fickle, foolish thing for us to destroy the most ancient laws and customs left by the first inhabitants of this land, who were the Chichimecas, the Tulanos, those from Colhua, the Tepanecas, for the worship, faith, and service of the abovementioned [gods], in which we were born and raised. And we are accustomed to them and we have them impressed on our hearts.

"Oh, our lords and leaders! You should take great care not to do anything to stir up or incite your vassals to some evil deed. How could you leave the poor elderly among us bereft of that in which they have been raised throughout their lives? Watch out that we do not incur the wrath of our gods. Watch out that the common people do not rise up against us if we were to tell them that the gods they have always understood to be such are not gods at all.

"It is best, our lords, to act on this matter very slowly, with great deliberation. We are not satisfied or convinced by what you have told us, nor do we understand or give credit to what has been said of our gods. It gives us anguish, lords and fathers, to speak in this way. Here present are the lords charged with governing the kingdom and republics of this world. All of us together feel that it is enough to have lost, enough that the power and royal jurisdiction have been taken from us. As for our gods, we will die before giving up serving and worshipping them. This is our determination; do what you will. This will serve in reply and contradiction to what you have said. We have no more to say, lords."