
4. A Priest Reports on Social Conditions in Mexico ~ Manuel Abad y Queipo*

At the end of the eighteenth century, Manuel Abad y Queipo, a Catholic priest who would later become bishop of Michoacán in the viceroyalty of New Spain, wrote a report addressed to the Spanish king. In his 1799 report, which is excerpted in this selection, he provided a detailed description of the conditions in which the viceroyalty's various social groups lived. Among those groups were the castas, the people of mixed racial ancestry that we discussed in the introduction to this chapter. By the eighteenth century, the proliferation of so many categories of mixed-racial identity in the American colonies led the Spanish authorities to develop a hierarchical system of social classification that is often referred to as the sociedad de castas, or society of castes. Abad y Queipo's principal goal in the report was to defend the interests of the Catholic Church in the Spanish American colonies. He thus argued strongly in favor of the Crown maintaining what was known as the ecclesiastical fuero, the special legal status that exempted clergymen from the jurisdiction of local judges (note that the fight to maintain the

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ecclesiastical fuero continued well into the nineteenth century). Abad y Queipo makes several specific recommendations to the king in his report. What were they, and what do they tell us about social conditions in late colonial New Spain?

New Spain has close upon four and a half million inhabitants, and these can be divided into three classes, Spaniards, Indians, and castas. The Spaniards form one-tenth of the total, and they alone possess almost all the property and wealth of the kingdom. The other two classes, comprising nine-tenths of the whole, can be divided into two-thirds who are castas and one-third pure Indians. Indians and castas are employed in domestic service, agriculture, and the menial side of trade and industry. That is to say, they are the servants, employees, or laborers of the first class. Consequently between them and the Spanish class there is that conflict of interests and feelings that invariably prevails between those who have nothing and those who have everything, between vassals and lords, leading to envy, thieving, and poor service on the part of some, and to contempt, exploitation, and harshness on the part of others. To some extent these conditions are prevalent all over the world. But in America it is worse, for there are no gradations between classes, no mean; they are all either rich or poor, noble or infamous.

The two classes of Indians and castas live in a state of utter degradation and squalor. The color, ignorance, and poverty of the Indians place them at an infinite distance from a Spaniard, and the laws do not help. Enclosed within a radius of 600 yards which the law assigns to their village, they have no individual property. The community land, which they work under great duress and for no immediate benefit, must be all the more hateful a burden, the more difficult it becomes to make use of its products; for under the new organization imposed by the law of intendancies nothing can be decided concerning community land without recourse to the superior junta of the royal treasury in Mexico City. Prohibited by law from intermixture and union with the other castas, they are deprived of the enlightenment and help that they should receive from communication and dealings with other castas and people. Isolated by their language and their most useless and tyrannical government, they preserve forever their traditions, usages, and gross superstitions, which in each village eight or ten old Indians mysteriously seek to maintain, living idly at the expense and exertions of the others and ruling them with the harshest despotism.

The castas are degraded by law as descendants of negro slaves. They pay tribute, and as the registers are drawn up with great precision the tribute becomes for them an indelible mark of slavery which the passage of time and race mixture in succeeding generations never efface. There are many whose color, physiognomy, and way of life would enable to rise to the class of Spaniards were it not for this stigma which holds them down in their original class. Degraded by law, they are poor and servile, lacking proper education and bearing still some of the stain of their origin; in these circumstances they must feel crushed in spirit, and surrender

themselves to their strong passions and fiery temperament. So they break the law to excess. The surprising thing is that they do not break it more, and that in many members of this class good behavior can still be recognized.

The Indians, like the castas, are governed in the first place by the district magistrates, who are not entirely blameless for their present condition. The *alcaldes mayores* [mayors] are regarded as merchants rather than judges, whose exclusive privilege and the power to enforce it give them authority to conduct a monopoly trade in their province and to extract from it in a five-year period from thirty to two hundred thousand pesos. Their forced and exorbitant sales caused great resentment. Yet in spite of this there were usually two positive features: first, they administered justice impartially and correctly in cases to which they themselves were not a party; second, they promoted industry and agriculture in those products which were important to them. An attempt was made to remedy the abuses of the *alcaldes mayores* by substituting subdelegates, who were strictly forbidden to engage in trade. But as they were not allocated any income, the remedy proved to be more harmful than the disease. If they rely on income from duties, among impoverished people who only compete in crime, they will perish from hunger. So they are forced to prostitute their jobs, to defraud the poor, and to sell justice. For this reason the intendants have the greatest difficulty in finding suitable candidates for these jobs. The only applicants are the failures of society or those whose conduct and talents do not qualify them for other careers. In such circumstances, what good, what protection can these magistrates provide for the Indians and the castas? How can they earn their good will and respect when extortion and injustice are their essential methods?

The parish priests and their deputies, on the other hand, dedicated solely to the spiritual service and temporal support of these wretched people, win their affection, gratitude, and respect by their ministries and works. They visit and comfort them in sickness and labor. They act as their doctors, prescribe and pay for their medicines, and they themselves sometimes apply the remedies. They also act as their lawyers and mediators with judges and plaintiffs. They defend them against the oppressions of the magistrates and of powerful neighbors. In short, the only ones whom the people can trust are the clergy and the senior magistrates, though recourse to the latter is extremely difficult.

In this state of affairs, what interests can attach these two classes to the first, and all three to the government and the laws? The upper class have the greatest interest in observing the laws, for these guarantee and protect their life, honor, property, and wealth against the envy and assaults of the destitute. But as for the other two classes, who have no property, or honor, or anything to covet or attack, what regard can they have for laws which only serve to mete out punishment for their crimes? What affection and good will can they have for the ministers of the law who only use their authority to send them to prison, the pillory, the peniten-

tiary, and the gallows? What ties can bind these classes to the government, whose beneficent protection they simply cannot understand?

It may be argued that fear of punishment is sufficient to keep the people in subjection to the laws and the government. According to one political authority, there are two classes who invalidate this argument: the powerful, who break the net, and the wretched, who slip through its mesh. If this is true in Europe, it is even more so in America, where the people live without a house or a home, virtual nomads. So let us hear from modern legislators how they propose to keep these classes subject to law and government, by means other than religion, which is preserved in the hearts of the people by the preaching and counsel in pulpit and confessional of the ministers of the Church. These are the true custodians of the laws and guarantors of their observance. It is they who have most influence on the hearts of the people and who strive most to keep them obedient and submissive to the sovereign. They are, therefore, the most powerful force for attaching to the government the two wretched classes, or nine-tenths of the whole population of the kingdom.

The clergy, therefore, have to their credit services of great importance to the government and the entire monarchy, and these easily counterbalance the failings of a few of their members. The need to support their position and to repair the damage we are now suffering has obliged us to draw attention to these facts. The evil which threatens us is great, the moment is critical, and the plea for Your Majesty's indulgence is urgent. If we were more content, we would also be more modest.

We have discussed the pernicious effects of existing land distribution, the lack of property or its equivalent among the people, the degradation of the Indians and castas in practice and in law, the disadvantages of the tribute and of community land, the unsalaried status of judges and consequent ill effects of established laws on the situation of the people, at the same time as the paternal concern of Your Majesty has been exercised on the new legislation so important for the future welfare of these kingdoms. Now it is only right to submit to Your Majesty our proposals for the remedy of these evils, in order to raise the people from their poverty, suppress their vices, and bind them closer to the government in obedience and subjection to the laws.

The first essential is the abolition of the tribute paid by Indians and castas. The second is the abolition of legal discrimination against the castas; they should be declared honest and honorable, eligible for civil offices that do not require noble rank and provided they qualify for them by their good conduct. Third, free distribution of all vacant public lands to Indians and castas. Fourth, free division of Indian community land between the Indians of each village. Fifth, a land law similar to that in Asturias and Galicia,* whereby under new tenancy arrange-

*Two autonomous principalities on the Iberian Peninsula generally considered part of Spain.

ments a village would be allowed to open those lands of the great proprietors left uncultivated for twenty or thirty years, at a just assessment in case of disagreement, on condition that they enclose this land and take any other necessary steps to preserve the rights of property. The provincial intendants would have cognizance of all this in first instance, with appeal to the *audiencia* of the district, as in all other civil cases. Sixth, free permission for all Spanish classes, castas, and Indians from other villages to reside in Indian villages and to construct houses and buildings, paying a ground rent. Seventh, a decent salary for all district judges, with the exception of the *alcaldes ordinarios*, who ought to discharge this office freely as a council duty. If to all this is added free permission to establish small cotton and woolen workshops, it would increase the impact of the other measures and help the people to take their first steps to improvement. These are already permitted in the case of larger factories through a special license from the viceroys or governors; but this is hard on the poor and should be removed together with all other obstacles, except for the *alcabala* tax on exports and imports of goods.

Self-interest produces and reinforces the ties binding society together, and these in turn reflect the strength of individual interests. This principle alone, applied to the clergy, would be sufficient to preserve intact their immunity from criminal prosecution, though there are also other reasons. The interests of the clergy vary in importance according to the religious order or class they belong to, and within these according to their individual position. They are all solid with the government, but not all in the same way. A *cura* [priest] and a senior sacristan both receive their benefices and privileges from Your Majesty. But as these are greater in the case of the *cura* than in that of the sacristan, then so is the *cura's* gratitude, support, and respect for the laws which protect him the greater of the two. The different level of benefice produces a different level of support from the beneficiaries, and a different level of solidarity among beneficiaries, such as between one sacristan and another, or between one *cura* and another. Canons show even more solidarity than do *curas* and sacristans, because their appointment is higher. And bishops show more than any others, because they receive more appointments from Your Majesty than anyone else. They are your natural counsellors, receive military honors, and often head the highest tribunals and commissions. They are treated with the greatest honor and respect, defended by the laws, and in short owe to Your Majesty their promotion to bishop and all the privileges, other than those of divine origin, that go with it. This accumulation of offices so unites and identifies them with Your Majesty that they see all your interests as their own and nothing will ever move them from this conviction.

But the rest of the clergy, who do not have an established benefice and live only from the small stipends of their office, receive nothing from the government to distinguish them from the other classes except the privilege of the *fuero*. Of the secular clergy of America eight-tenths are in this category; at least that is the case in this diocese. The regular clergy can be considered the same. Some are

assistants to curas, and it is they who perform most of the preaching and hearing of confessions, and who have most to do with the lower two classes of society. So they have great influence over the minds of these classes. Therefore the clerical fuero is the only special tie that attaches them to the government. Therefore if the fuero is removed, the tie will be broken, and influence over the lower two classes will be weakened. Therefore prudence and policy demand that there be no change and no setback.
