

Mary of Agreda in America - Part I

A 'Lady in Blue' Instructs Indians in the Southwest

Margaret C. Galitzin

Source: https://www.traditioninaction.org/History/B_013_Agreda_1.html

The Spanish soldiers and missionaries had been exploring our vast Southwest for almost one century when the Pilgrims established their first colony at Plymouth Rock in 1620. The Spaniards had a dual mission. They definitely aimed to explore and settle the West, but another mission of equal import to the Crown was to convert the native Indians to the Catholic Faith.

By 1598 the Franciscan friars who accompanied the Spanish explorers and settlers had established a chain of missions to work with the Pueblo Indians and other tribes in the unsettled Colony of New Mexico. In 1623, Fray Alonso de Benavides arrived from Mexico to the Santa Fe Mission as the first Superior of the Franciscan Missions of New Mexico and the first commissioner of the Inquisition for the Colony. He was known not only for his capacity and energy, but also for his great missionary zeal.

He arrived with a small reinforcement of other Franciscan friars who would embark on the dangerous missionary labor in the expansive, unsettled territory of New Mexico. As in so many epic works in History, a few men, moved by supernatural zeal for the cause of God, undertook a work much larger than their human forces.

One of the most fascinating episodes of this time involves the missionary efforts of a Spanish Abbess who worked in New Mexico, Arizona and Texas from 1620 to 1631. She instructed various Indian tribes in the Catholic Faith and told them how to find the Franciscan Mission to ask for priests to come to baptize their people. Her name was Mother Mary of Jesus of Agreda, a Conceptionist nun who, nonetheless, never left her Convent in Spain.



Without leaving her convent in Spain Mother Mary of Agreda instructed Indians in the U.S.

An Abbess living in Spain bilocates to America

Her extraordinary bilocations to the New World were a source of wonder to the Spanish Church and Crown. The authenticity of the miracle of her more than 500 visits to America was carefully examined and documented by the proper authorities to ensure that there was no fraud or error. She was also carefully examined twice by the Inquisition in the years 1635 and 1650.

In his Memorial of 1630, a report on the state of the missions and colony, **Fr. Benavides** made a precise account of the Indians who had been instructed by the "Lady in Blue." His Memorial of 1634, written after he had met and visited with Mother Mary of Agreda in 1631, also describes that meeting and his favorable impressions of the Conceptionist Abbess (see Part Two). When he left Agreda, Fr. Benavides asked Mary of

Agreda to write a letter addressed to the missionaries of the New World. Her words inspired religious to labor in the American missionary fields for many years to come.

That Mary of Agreda played an influential role in our country is undeniable. Some years later Fr. Eusebio Kino found old Indians in New Mexico and Arizona who told stories about how a beautiful white woman dressed in blue had spoken to them about the Catholic Faith. Fr. Junipero Serra wrote that it was the “Seraphic Mother Mary of Jesus” who had inspired him to work in the vineyard of the Lord in California. (1)

Today Mother Mary of Agreda is better known for her momentous work on the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary, The Mystical City of God. Perhaps one reason that American Catholics know so little about her well-documented bilocations to America is because for centuries Friar Benavides' Memorials were concealed in the Archives of the Propaganda Fide in Rome and unknown to the English-speaking world. His expanded 1634 Memorial was only translated into English and made available to the public in 1945. (2) Many of the details from this article were taken from that document, as well as from several scholarly articles on the topic. (3)

A command for an inquiry

In 1627, Fr. Sebastian Marcilla, the confessor of Mother Mary of Agreda in Spain, sent a report about her work among the American Indians to the Archbishop of Mexico, Francisco de Manso. He told the Prelate that the young Abbess – age 25 - said that she was visiting Indian villages in New Mexico in some supernatural manner and was teaching the natives the Catholic Faith. Even though she spoke Spanish, the Indians understood her, and she understood them when they replied in their native dialect. The confessor had a favorable impression of the Conceptionist nun and was inclined to believe her words.

The Archbishop ordered Fr. Benavides, who was being transferred from New Spain to New Mexico, to make a careful inquiry to be carried out “with the exactness, faithfulness and devotion that such a grave matter requires.” It is noteworthy that Fr. Benavides had been invested with two offices in New Mexico – that of Superior and that of Inquisitor – and had all the resources available to make a serious inquiry. The Archbishop asked that he should find out whether new tribes - the Tejas [Texans], Chillescas, Jumanos and Caburcos - already had “some knowledge of the Faith” and “in what manner and by what means Our Lord has manifested it.”



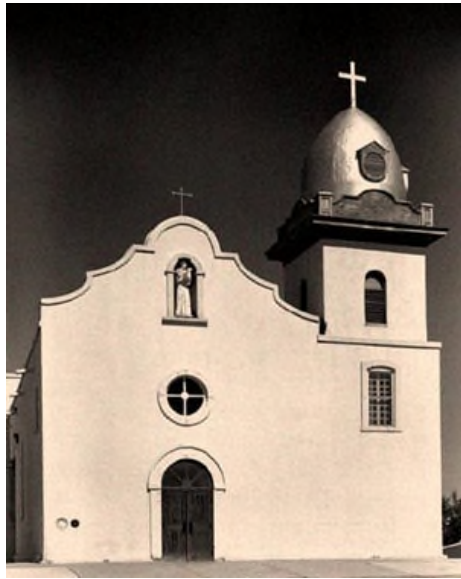
Mary of Agreda teaching the Indians

Indians requesting Baptism

In the summer of 1629, a delegation of 50 Jumanos arrived at Isleta, a Pueblo mission near present day Albuquerque, requesting priests to return with them and baptize their people. The Jumanos were an as yet uncatechized tribe who hunted and traded over a wide area in the Plains east of New Mexico – today the Panhandle or South Plains region of Texas.

For the past six years, smaller delegations of Jumanos had come at about the same time to Isleta to speak to Fr. Juan de Salas, a much-respected missionary who had established the church in Isleta in 1613. Each year, the Indians made the same plea and spoke about a woman who had sent them. They were the first to report the visits of the “Lady in Blue.” But the story was disregarded as impossible. To travel from Isleta to the eastern Plains was a long and dangerous trek – over 300 miles through the hostile lands of the Apache. At that time, the missionaries lacked both the priests and the necessary soldiers to make the trip and establish a new outpost, so the mission to the Jumanos was delayed.

This year, when the Jumanos party arrived, Fr. De Salas was at the chapter meeting at the Franciscan headquarters in Santo Domingo. A messenger was sent to him with the news about the delegation, and he informed the new Superior about the strange story of a lady who was supposedly teaching the Catholic faith to the Indians. Fr. Benavides, who had received specific instructions from the Franciscan general regarding this very topic, was very interested to know more. He decided to return with Fr. De Salas to Isleta in order to question the Indian party and ask how they had come to have knowledge of the Faith.



The Church of Corpus Christi at the Isleta Mission, the oldest operating church in the U.S.

In his Memorial to Pope Urban VIII, he reported the results of his inquiry: “We called the Jumanos to the monastery and asked them their reason for coming every year to ask for baptism with such insistence. Seeing a portrait of Mother Luisa [another Spanish Franciscan sister in Spain with a reputation for holiness] in the monastery, they said, ‘A woman in similar garb wanders among us there, always preaching, but her face is not old like this, but young and beautiful.’ “Asked why they had not told us this before, they answered, ‘Because you did not ask, and we thought she was here also.’”

The Indians called the woman the “Lady in Blue” because of the blue mantle she wore. She would appear among them, the Jumanos representatives said, and instruct them about the true

God and His holy law. The party, which included 12 chiefs, included representatives of other tribes, allies of the Jumanos. In Fr. Benavides’s 1630 Memorial, he notes that they told him “a woman used to preach to each one of them in his own tongue” [emphasis added]. It was this woman who had insisted they should ask the missionaries to be baptized and told them how to find them. At times, they said, the ‘Lady in Blue’ was hidden from them, and they did not know where she went or how to find her.

Missionaries find a field ready for harvest

Fr. Benavides sent two missionaries, Fr. Juan de Salas and Fr. Diego López, accompanied by three soldiers, on the apostolic mission to the Jumanos. After traveling several hundred miles east through the dangerous Apache territory, the weary expedition was met by a dozen Indians from the Jumanos tribe. They had been sent to greet them and accompany them on the last few days journey, they affirmed, by the ‘Lady in Blue’ who had alerted them of their proximity.

As the friars drew near the tribe, they saw in amazement a procession of men, women and children coming to meet them. At its head were Indians carrying two crosses decorated with garlands of flowers. With great respect the Indians kissed the crucifixes the Franciscans wore around their necks. "They learned from the Indians that the same nun had instructed them as to how they should come out in procession to receive them, and she had helped them to decorate the crosses," Fr. Benavides wrote in his Memorial. Many of the Indians immediately began to clamor to be baptized.

The missionaries found that the Indians were already instructed in the Faith and eager to learn more. Their astonishment increased as messengers arrived from neighboring Indian tribes who pleaded for the priests to come to them also. They said that the same lady in blue had catechized them and told them to seek out the missionaries for baptism. After a while the missionaries had to return to the San Antonio Mission to report to Fr. Benavides the astounding things they had found before he traveled to New Spain, where he would report to the Archbishop and Viceroy on the missionary work and potential in New Mexico.

A great miracle

Before they left, Fr. Juan de Salas told them that, until new missionaries arrived, "they should flock every day, as they were wont, to pray before a Cross which they had set up on a pedestal." But this did not satisfy the Jumanos Chief, who entreated the priests to cure the sick, "for you are priests of God and can do much with that holy cross." The infirm, numbering about 200, were brought together in one place. The priests made the Sign of the Cross over them, read the Gospel according to St. Luke and invoked Our Lady and St. Francis. To reward their faith and prepare the way for great conversions, God worked a miracle. All the sick arose healed. Amid great rejoicing, the missionaries left the village to begin the long and risky return journey to New Mexico.

Along the way, they were met by "ambassadors" from other tribes, the Quiviras and Aixaos. These Indians also asked for the priests to come to baptize their people and told them the 'Lady in Blue' had told them where to find the missionaries. These ambassadors accompanied the priests to New Mexico.

Report to the Viceroy and Archbishop

The missionaries returned shortly before Fr. Benavides departure for Mexico. When he heard the extraordinary account of what the missionaries had found, he included the story of the "Lady in Blue" and her miraculous work to convert the Jumanos in his report. His Memorial of 1630 gives a careful description of the missionary work that had been accomplished in the New Mexico Colony. The 111-page document described over 60,000 Christianized natives residing in 90 pueblos, divided into 25 districts.



*Mary of Agreda is better known for her work
The Mystical City of God*

The Viceroy and Archbishop Francisco de Manso were very impressed with his account and dispatched him to Madrid "to inform his Majesty, as the head of all, of the notable and unusual things that were happening." There were many pressing matters pertaining to the Mission Colonies that Fr. Benavides needed to address with the authorities in Spain. He also hoped to meet Mother Mary of Agreda in order to

question her and learn for certain if she were the 'Lady in Blue' who had brought the Gospel of Christ over the oceans to the Indians of New Mexico.

1. *Francisco Palou, Evangelista de la Mar Pacífico, ed. by M. Aguilar, Madrid, 1944. p. 25.*

2. *The Benavides Memorial of 1634, trans with notes by F. W. Hodge, G. P. Hammond and Agapito Rey, Albuquerque, 1945.*

3. *Donahue, William H., "Mary of Agreda and the Southwest United States," The Americas, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Jan., 1953), pp. 291-314; Nancy P Hickerson, "The Visits of the "Lady in Blue": An Episode in the History of the South Plains, 1629," Journal of Anthropological Research 46.1 (Spring 1990), pp. 67-90*

Mary of Agreda in America - Part II

Mary of Agreda Describes Her Travels

Margaret C. Galitzin

One of the most remarkable episodes in the early history of the Southwest is the bilocation of Mother Mary of Agreda to New Mexico and Texas. Her visits are confirmed by Fr. Benavides, the Franciscan Superior of the New Mexico Colony, in a report that describes the miraculous conversion of the Jumanos and their neighbors, who were catechized by the Lady in Blue. On the orders of the Archbishop of New Spain, he traveled to Spain in 1630 to deliver his report to the King and the Franciscan General.

On the first of August in 1630, Fr. Benevides arrived in Spain and reported to the Franciscan Father General, Fray Bernardino de Sena, Bishop of Viseo. The Father General had already been informed about the bilocations of Mother Mary of Agreda by her confessor. He had made a personal visit to her Convent eight years earlier, and she had spoken candidly to him about these marvels. He was favorably impressed with the Abbess, whose Convent was known for its piety, devotion and fidelity to the rule.

The presence of Fr. Benevides in Spain was opportune to ascertain the veracity of her bilocations. He would be able to speak with Mother Mary of Jesus and ask her questions about the missions, the Indians, and the country that only someone who had been there could know. As an inquisitor and administrator of exceptional capacity, his opinion would have great weight in determining if Mary of Agreda was indeed the "Lady in Blue."

In April of 1631, the Father General sent him to Agreda with the authority to oblige the Abbess under her vow of obedience to reveal to him everything relating to her miraculous visits to the Indians in the New World. When Fr. Benevides reached Agreda, he first contacted the Provincial, Fr. Sebastian Marcilla, and the nun's confessor, Fr. Andrés de la Torre. The three went to the Immaculate Conception Convent to question Mother Mary of Jesus. The account of their visit is documented by Fr. Benevides, who describes his first impression of the Abbess:



A statue of Ven. Mary of Agreda in the Conceptionist habit with its blue cloak

“Before saying anything else, I state that the said Mother Mary of Jesus, at present Abbess of the Convent of La Concepción, is almost 29 years of age, with a handsome face, a very clear and rosy complexion and large black eyes. "The fashion of her habit is simple like ours, that is, of coarse brown sackcloth worn next to the body without any other tunic. Over this brown habit is one of heavy white sackcloth, with a scapulary of the same and the cord of our Father St. Francis. Over the scapulary is the rosary. They wear no shoes or other footwear except boards bound to their feet or some straw sandals. The mantle is of heavy blue sackcloth and the veil is black.” (*Memorial, p. 479 - See footnote 1, Part 1*) It was this blue cloak of the Conceptionist Order that had inspired the Indians to call her the “Lady in Blue.”

The account of Mary of Agreda

Mary of Agreda obediently told the three priests all that concerned her visits to the Indians of America. Since she was a child, she said, she had been inspired to pray for the Indians in New Spain, whose souls would be lost unless they converted to the one true Faith.

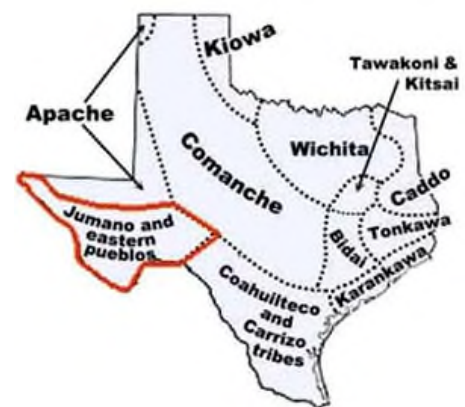
Then Our Lord began to show her more distinctly in visions those provinces He desired to be converted. She observed the appearance of the people, their barbaric condition of life and customs, and their need for priests to instruct them in the Faith. In one of these visions, Our Lord singled out the Indians of New Mexico and told her he desired to convert them and other remote “kingdoms” of that area. This inspired her to pray and sacrifice even more fervently for these souls across the Ocean.



The Jumanos Indians (above) in southwest Texas were the first to tell about the lady in blue who visited them

On one occasion, while praying for them, Our Lord unexpectedly transported her in a kind of ecstasy. Without perceiving the means, it seemed to her that she was in a different region and climate, amid those very Indians she had seen before only in visions. It seemed to her that she saw them with her eyes and felt the warmer temperature of the land. All her senses were affected by the change of place.

Then Our Lord commanded her to fulfill her charitable desires, and she began to preach the Catholic Faith to those people. She would preach to them in her own Spanish language, and the Indians understood her as if it were their own language. She could also understand what they said to her. Returning from her trance, she found herself in the same place where it overtook her. This happened to her in 1620.



Subsequently, in the next 11 years that miracle was repeated more than 500 times, sometimes with three or four visits in one day. On these occasions, she said, it seemed to her “that through her words and the miracles God wrought in confirmation of them, an extensive kingdom and its leader were being brought to the Holy Faith.”

She was not always received well. Several times, she suffered torture and was left for dead at the hands of Indians who had been provoked to violence by the shamans, the Indian witch doctors. To the astonishment of the Indians, she would return, and this and other wonders she worked through the mercy of Our Lord helped to persuade them she was preaching the truth.

As she passed in that supernatural flight through New Mexico, she would also see the Franciscans who were working for their conversion. That is how she was able to advise the Jumanos, who lived 300 miles from the mission, where they should go to find the Franciscans. They went at the command of Mother Mary of Jesus and following her specific directions.

A careful inquiry

Hearing the words of Mother Mary of Jesus, the missionary priest was much moved. To verify the truth of her account, he asked her specific questions about the area, if she could identify certain landmarks and describe the other missionaries, as well as specific Indians. "She told me many particularities of that land that even I had forgotten and she brought them to my memory," he noted. She also described the features and individual traits of the missionaries and various Indians, with details that only a person who had been in New Spain could know.

In a letter of May 1631 he wrote to the Father General: "She told me all we know that has happened to our brothers and fathers, Fray Juan de Salas and Fray Diego Lopez, in their journey to the Jumanos. ... She gave me their full descriptions, adding that she assisted them. She knows Captain Tuerto [a Jumano chief] very well, giving a detailed description of him and of the others." He concluded, "She has preached in person our Holy Catholic Faith in every nation, particularly in our New Mexico. "



Immaculate Conception Convent in Agreda, Spain

Fr. Benavides had other talks with Mother Mary of Jesus before he left. He became convinced that she was the "Lady in Blue" who had traveled to America to teach the Indians. It was not just her words, but her way of being that impressed him. He had formed a high opinion of the sanctity and piety of that Conceptionist nun who was favored with many mystical gifts and would write ***The Mystical City of God: The Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary.***

Bilocation to America

How did these mysterious transports to America take place? When Mother Mary of Jesus was questioned as to whether she was carried away bodily or in spirit, she said she did not know. What she knew was that she saw these lands and different tribes; she felt the change in climate and temperature; she experienced pain when the Indians turned on her and persecuted her. On one occasion it seemed to her that she distributed rosaries among the Indians. In fact, she had a number of rosaries with her in her cell, but later, coming out of her mystical state, she did not find them.

She was certain that her work in New Mexico among the Indians was not a delusion. In her humility, she affirmed repeatedly that she was inclined to believe an Angel passed in her form to catechize the Indians, as a sign from Our Lord of the effects of prayer. This was not the opinion of the Prelates who examined her. They were convinced that she was transported bodily because of what was clearly manifested to all her senses on those occasions. Satisfied with the spirituality of the Abbess, Fr. Benevides confirmed the opinion of her confessor, stating that he believed she was carried bodily to New Mexico and Texas, where she catechized the Indians.

Her letter to the American missionaries

Before he left Agreda, Fr. Benevides asked Mother Mary of Jesus to write a letter to the missionaries to encourage them in their work. In it, she described other kingdoms of Indians that had not yet been discovered, and encouraged the friars to continue their blessed labors of conversion. She told the missionaries how pleasing and acceptable their work and sacrifices were to God. Even though she was privileged to bring the Religion of Christ to the Indians, she said, she did not have the great merit of the missionaries, who underwent such tremendous hardships and sufferings.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sor Maria de Jesus". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and elegant.

Mary de Jesus def Agreda's signature on the letter addressed to the missionaries in America

Our Lord was “highly pleased by the conversion of souls,” she wrote. “I can assure you that the Blessed Ones envy you, if envy could exist among them, which is impossible, but I am stating it thus according to our mode of expression. If they could forsake their eternal bliss to accompany you in those conversions, they would do it.” Such was the great value of saving souls won by the Precious Blood of Christ, she concluded. This letter, which you can read in full [here](#), was destined to inspire many Franciscan missionaries in their work among the Indians in the Southwest and California.

Mary of Agreda in America - Part III

Testimonies of Her Presence in the U.S.

Margaret C. Galitzin

In Part One on Ven. Mary of Agreda in America, we saw how the Jumano Indians in the Territory of New Mexico reported in 1630 that a Lady in Blue was visiting them and teaching them the Catholic Faith. The Indians described the woman in detail, and told the Franciscans at the Isleto mission outside Albuquerque that she had sent them to ask for Baptism. Two missionaries were sent on an exploratory mission to the Jumano camp (roughly 250-300 miles east of Santa Fe) and found the Jumanos and other surrounding tribes already knew the rudiments of the Faith. They all reported the same phenomena of a Lady in Blue who visited them.

Part Two explains how Fr. Alonso de Benevides, Inquisitor and the Superior of the New Mexico Colony, made a detailed report of the mission situation in 1630 – including an account of the Lady in Blue – and delivered it to the King of Spain and the Spanish Franciscan Superior. While there, he visited Mary of Agreda in her convent. After a careful investigation, he became convinced that she was the Lady in Blue.

When Fathers Salas and Lopez left the Jumano camp in 1630, they evidently intended to return. The Indians realized that the fathers were making a preliminary inspection trip and did all they could to convince them to establish a permanent mission in Jumano territory. The decision, in fact, was in their favor, although the events turned out different from the plans.

Spanish missionaries would minister to the Jumanos for the rest of the century, but not in the High Plains area. Soon after the first visit of the missionaries, the Jumanos, a nomadic hunter tribe, had to leave their customary hunting grounds.

It seems that, with the help of the Franciscans, they resettled in the Mission of the Immaculate Conception at Quarai in New Mexico, established in 1629-1630 (today known as Gran Quivira). In 1670 – some 40 years after the last documented visit of the Lady in Blue – at least part of the High Plains Jumanos were resettled in the Manso Mission founded by the Franciscans near El Paso in 1659. (1)



A 17th century woodcarving

For the incredulous Europeans, Fr. Benavides' Memorials of 1630 and 1633, valid historical records, would offer proof that the bilocations of Mother Mary of Agreda were not just fantastic legends of the superstitious 'backward' peoples. For the Indians, the documentation was unnecessary. From one generation to another, the stories of the Conceptionist nun in her blue cape were recounted, evidence of her miraculous visits preserved by word of mouth, an enduring oral history.

"I want no other color but blue"

Fr. Benavides' Memorials are not, however, the only documented evidence of Mother Mary of Agreda's presence in the New World. As other Spaniards came to the territory where Mary of Agreda had made her visits, they found Indians who remembered a Lady in Blue and her teachings of the doctrine of Jesus Christ.

In 1689, 24 years after the death of Mary of Jesus, Spanish explorer Alonso de Leon made his fourth expedition into Texas territory. In his letter to the Viceroy, a report giving a detailed record of the expedition, (2) he wrote that some of the Tejas Indians whom he met were already partly instructed in the Catholic Faith because of the visits of the Lady in Blue to their forefathers. These are



Indians recount stories of a lady in blue visiting their forefathers

his words: "They perform many Christian rites, and the Indian chief asked for missionaries to instruct them, saying that many years ago a woman went inland to instruct them, but that she had not been there for a long time." (3)

Franciscan Fr. Damian Massanet accompanied de Leon on this expedition. Two years earlier, he had established Mission San Francisco de los Tejas, the first mission in East Texas. In a report to the Viceroy, he tells of an incident that took place on this expedition among the Tejas Indians. The expedition leaders were distributing clothing to the Indians. Their chief, or "governor" as Fr. Massanet calls him, asked for a piece of blue baize for a shroud to bury his mother in when she died.

Fr. Massanet writes: "I told him that cloth would be better, and he said that he did not want any other color than blue. I asked then what mystery was attached to the color blue, and the governor said that they were very fond of blue, particularly for burial clothes, because in times past a very beautiful woman visited them there, who descended from the heights, and that this woman was dressed in blue and that they wished to be like her.

"Being asked whether that was long ago, the chief said that it had not been in his time, but that his mother, who was aged, had seen her, as had the other old people. From this it is seen clearly that it was Mother Maria de Jesus de Agreda, who was very frequently in those regions, as she herself acknowledged to the Father Superior in New Mexico." (4)

Arizona Indians recall stories of a beautiful woman

Another written testimony to the presence of Mary of Agreda among the Indians of Arizona comes from the record book of Captain Mateo Mange, who traveled with Jesuit priests Eusebio Francisco Kino and Adamo Gil on the expedition to discover the Colorado and Zila Rivers in 1699. Once, when speaking with some very old Indians, the explorers asked them if they had ever heard their elders speak about a Spanish captain passing through their region with horses and soldiers. They were seeking information about the expedition of Don Juan de Oñate in 1606.

The Indians told them that they could remember hearing of such a group from the old people who were already dead. Then they added - without any question to prompt them - that when they were children a beautiful white woman, dressed in white, brown and blue, with a cloth covering her head, had come to their land.

Mange recounts more of what the Indians told him: "She had spoken, shouted and harangued them ... and showed them a cross. The nations of the Colorado River shot her with arrows, leaving her for dead on two occasions. Reviving, she disappeared into the air. They did not know where her house and dwelling was. After a few days, she returned again and then many times after to preach to them." (5)



A lady with a cross who "descended from above" to teach the Indians

This would concur with the report of Fr. Benevides, who had interviewed Mother Mary of Agreda in her convent see Part II. She told him that on several occasions the Indians had turned on her and shot arrows at her, leaving her for dead. She felt the pain of the attacks, but when she would come to herself later in the convent in Agreda, there was no sign of the wounds.

Mange further notes that the Indians of San Marcelo had told them this same story five days earlier, although at that time they had not believed it. But the fact that they heard the same thing repeated in a place some distance away made them begin to suspect that the woman was Mother Mary of Jesus of Agreda. The missionaries were acquainted with her life and work, and knew from Fr. Benavides' Memorials that during the years 1620-1631 she had preached to the Indians of North America. (6)

Almost 70 years had passed since that time, and these old men – who appeared to be about 80 – would have been young boys at the time that the Lady in Blue visited them.

The legend of the bluebonnet



The blue flowers commemorated the visits of Mary of Agreda

Historical documents clearly indicate Mary of Agreda visited the Southwest United States many times in the 1620s to instruct the Indians. It is not a legend.

Fr. Benavides, a trusted Inquisitor, left Agreda convinced that Mary of Agreda had been physically present in the New World, and that her visits had continued until the same year, 1631. In 1635 he became the Bishop of Goa, and he always recommended himself to the prayers of the Conceptionist Abbess and maintained the highest esteem for her.

There was, however, one charming legend that sprung up among the Tejas Indians, inspired by their love and respect for the Lady in Blue. According to it, after the Franciscans came to baptize and catechize the people, the Lady in Blue told the Jumanos that her visits were at an end. When she mysteriously left them in her accustomed way, the hillside where she had appeared was blanketed with beautiful blue flowers, a memory of her presence among them. That flower came to be known as the Bluebonnet, today the state flower of Texas.

1. Nancy P. Hickerson, "The Visits of the 'Lady in Blue': An Episode in the History of the South Plains, 1629" *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Spring, 1990), pp. 67-90; <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3630394>

2. Damian Massanet, *Letter of Fray Damian Massanet to Don Carlos de Siguënza*, in Bolton, Herbert Eugene Bolton (ed.), *Spanish Exploration in the Southwest, 1542-1706* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916). Pp. 347-38; www.americanjourneys.org/aj-018/

3. W. Donahue, "Mary of Agreda and the Southwest United States," p. 310; see Article 1, Note 1).

4. *Idem*, in *Ibid.*, p. 310

5. *Ibid.*, p. 311

6. *Ibid.*

Mary of Agreda in America - Part IV

Who Was Mother Mary of Agreda?

Margaret C. Galitzin

To end this series on the miraculous bilocations of Ven. Mary of Agreda, I thought the reader would like to know more about her. Who was the cloistered Spanish nun who bilocated to the American Southwest in the 17th century to instruct the Indians in the Catholic Faith and prepare them for baptism? This short biography will answer that question.

She was born Maria Coronel y Arana on April 2, 1602 in the town of Agreda in the Province of Soria in north Spain to Francisco Coronel and Catalina de Arana, a family of noble lineage but reduced means. The pious couple had 11 children, but only four lived to adulthood: Francis, Joseph, Mary and Jeronima. The children – and also their parents – would all become religious in the family of St. Francis.

From childhood, she was favored by God with ecstasies and visions. She took a vow of chastity at age eight, and four years later requested her parents' permission to enter a nearby Carmelite convent. That course changed, however, after her mother had a vision in which Our Lord revealed to her His desire that she should form a convent in her own home.

After overcoming many difficulties, in January of 1618, the mother and her two daughters took the habit in their family home, which became the Franciscan Convent of the Immaculate Conception. On the same day, her father became a monk in the Order of St. Francis, where his two sons were already religious.

Eight years later, at the age of 25 and with a papal approval, Mary of Jesus was made Abbess, a burden she reluctantly took on her young shoulders. She would continue to govern the Agreda Convent – except for one brief period – until her death in 1665.



Mother Mary of Jesus (1602-1665)

At the beginning of *The Mystical City of God*, she wrote: “The Almighty in His sheer goodness favored our family so much that all of us were consecrated to Him in the religious state. In the eighth year of the foundation of this convent, in the 25th year of my life, in the year of Our Lord 1627, holy obedience imposed upon me the office of Abbess, which to this day I unworthily hold.” (1)

Two investigations and words of praise

As news spread about the visions and writings of the holy Abbess, the attention of the Spanish Inquisition turned in her direction. In 1635 – shortly after the first visit of Fr. Alonso de Benavides to her Convent (see Part II) – a first inquiry was held. The majority of the questions were about her bilocations to America. Her inquisitors found her blameless and praised her virtue, charity and intelligence.



The family house became the first convent

In January of 1650, a second investigation opened. Inquisitors came to the Agreda Convent and questioned Mother Mary of Jesus for 11 days with 80 questions, which covered her bilocations, her writings and also the erroneous information that she was involved in a plot against the Spanish King. The case closed with Mary of Agreda exonerated of all suspicion. Again, the Inquisitors eulogized her life of prayer and her fidelity to Holy Mother Church.

Throughout her life, Mary of Jesus would affirm that obedience was her “compass” in life. She always opened her soul to her spiritual directors, manifesting the grace and favors received from Our Lord and asking for their approbation and counsel.

We know the names of her various directors because of the Inquisition records: They were Fr. Juan de Torrecilla, Fr. Juan Bautista de Santa María y Fr. Tomás Gonzalo. By the order of the Provincial, Fr. Francisco Andrés de la Torre would direct her from

1623 to 1647, when he died. Some difficult years passed for Mother Mary of Jesus under temporary spiritual directors until finally, in 1655 Fr. Andrés de Fuenmayor assumed her direction and continued until her death in 1665.

We have a vivid example of her spirit of ready obedience in the redaction of her most famous and controversial work, *The Mystical City of God*, a life of the Blessed Virgin dictated to the Conceptionist nun by the Heavenly Queen herself. In 1643, under the order of Fr. de la Torre, she wrote the massive work in her own hand. During his absence, however, a temporary director instructed her to burn that manuscript and the rest of her writings. She readily complied. When Fr. de la Torre returned, he reprimanded her sharply and commanded her to begin again. When he died in 1647, another order from another temporary director came to destroy the manuscript. A second time it was burned.

Finally, her last and most trusted director Fr. de Fuenmayor ordered Mary of Agreda to take up her pen for the third time. In 1655 she completed the magnificent work we have today on the life of the Virgin Mary. The same Fr. Fuenmayor wrote her first biography and testified under oath to her life of virtue and holiness at the process of beatification that opened seven years after her death.

A long correspondence with the King

In 1642 Maria of Jesus sent King Philip IV an account of one of her visions, in which she saw a council of devils plotting to destroy Catholicism and Spain. The King, who had already read Fr. Benavides’ Memorial of her mystical bilocations to New Spain, arranged to meet the Abbess on his way to suppress the rebellion of Catalonia in 1643.

Thus began a long correspondence with the King that lasted for more than 20 years until her death on March 29, 1665. The more than 600 letters that survive to this day reveal the great trust the Spanish Monarch placed in the cloistered Abbess. He consulted her on both spiritual and temporal matters. (2) It was common for the King to write his questions on one side of the page, and for the Abbess to write her responses on the other side.

The letters reveal the pressing topics the King faced: Spain's wars and quarrels with France, Flanders, Italy and Portugal, Catalanian rebellions and the lack of resources for his many initiatives. They also clearly show that Mother Mary of Jesus did not hesitate to remind him of his Catholic duties before God regarding his disordered personal life.



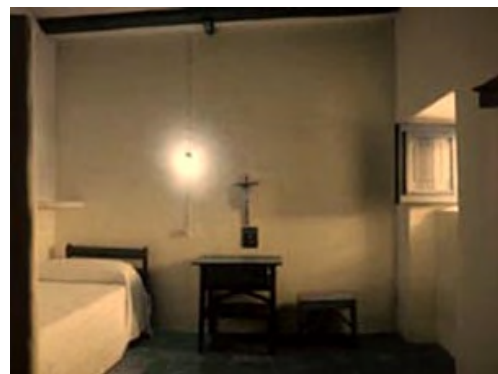
King of Spain Philip IV had frequent correspondence with Mary of Agreda

She wrote letters to Popes, Kings, Generals of Religious Orders, Bishops, nobles and every class of person in the Church and society. Although some have been lost, many survive, and we cannot help but admire the volume, extension, quality and variety of her epistolary activity. From her narrow cell, she truly touched the world of her time.

A controversial work on Our Lady

After her death in 1665, miracles and favors were reported, granted through her intercession. So well known was her extraordinary virtue that almost immediately the Spanish Bishops and other eminent churchmen took up the cause for her beatification. Eight years after her death Maria de Jesus de Agreda was declared Venerable by Pope Clement X for her heroic practice of virtues. Obstacles to her beatification, however, soon appeared in the form of objections to the Marial doctrine in *The Mystical City of God*, which had been published five years after her death and was received with great enthusiasm in Spain. The Spanish Inquisition scrutinized it for 14 years and found nothing contrary to Faith or Morals.

This was the golden marial age in Spain, and her Immaculate Conception was being fiercely debated. On one side as staunch defenders were the theologians who followed Duns Scotus, the Franciscans and the Spanish Universities of Salamanca, Madrid, Granada, among others. On the other side were the French Thomist theologians and, in particular, the University of the Sorbonne. In that climate of debate the work of Mother Mary of Agreda, which defends her Immaculate Conception, came under suspicion.



The cell of Mary of Jesus of Agreda

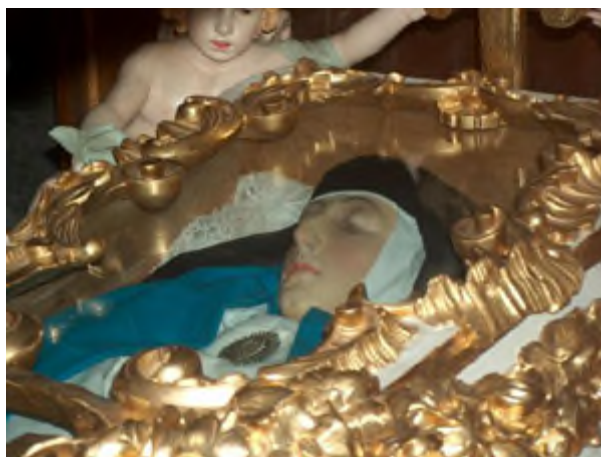
In 1681, the Holy Office censured the book, and on August 4 of the same year included it on the Index of Forbidden Books. By the order of Blessed Innocence XI, however, the decree of condemnation was removed three months later after it was shown that a faulty French translation was at the basis for the censure.

But the incident had a negative influence on her cause of beatification, and since then repeated campaigns have been made against The City of God. The Jansenists and Gallicans in the 18th century renewed the attack that the work was “excessive” in its devotion to Mary. Time and time again, the cause of Venerable Maria of Agreda was promoted, and then silenced.

In recent years, after the 400th anniversary of her birth in 2006, there have been renewed efforts by various Marian groups to move the beatification process forward. But another barrier stands in the way: the strong emphasis on Our Lady as Co-redemptrix and Co-mediatrix found in The City of God is in variance with the ecumenical doctrines of Vatican II. Mary of Agreda, once again, is being set aside for promoting devotion to Our Lady.

Incorrupt body

The holiness and admirable life of Mother Mary of Jesus has never been disputed. Within the walls of the Conceptionist Convent of Agreda we find a lively memory of the venerable Abbess. There we can see the eight books of The Mystical City of God, her cell with its two windows and the Franciscan habit she wore. But the most extraordinary sight for the admiring pilgrim is the incorrupt body of Venerable Mother Mary of Jesus.



Maria de Jesus incorrupt body is displayed at the Convent Chapel

In 1909 her casket was opened for the first time after her death in 1665. Her body was found to be completely incorrupt. A full report on the condition of the body was prepared by physicians and authorities. In 1989, another careful scientific investigation was made. Spanish physician Andreas Medina reported that the body was in the same state as it was described in the medical report from 1909. “We realized it had absolutely not deteriorated at all in the last 80 years.”

It remains on display in the Convent Chapel of Agreda over which she had ruled for so many years. On the 400th anniversary of her birth, over 12,000 pilgrims visited Agreda to venerate her and seek the intercession of the venerable Lady in Blue.

1. *Translated by Fiscar Marison, 4 vols, (Chicago, 1916), Book I, pp. 19-20.*

2. *María de Jesús de Agreda: Correspondencia con Felipe IV, Religión y Razón de Estado, Introduction and notes by Consolación Baranda (Madrid: Editorial Castalia, 1991)*