Hagiographical Misery and the Liminal Witness: Novohispanic Franciscan Martyr Portraits and the Politics of Imperial Expansion

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In *Chronica apostólica y seráfica de todos los colegios de propaganda fide* (1746), friar Isidro Félix de Espinosa recounts how the Franciscan friar Francisco Casañas de Jesús left Zacatecas in 1693 and said goodbye to his friends and benefactors with such delight that everybody felt surprised by the happiness in his face. “Brothers, he said, “do not forget about me in your prayers as I am headed out to be killed by the indians.”

The saga of friar Casañas, and other Novohispanic Franciscan martyrs of the seventeenth century, survives in visual form through many eighteenth-century portraits. These depictions, ranging from the twenty-six martyrs of Japan (martyred on 5 February 1597) and San Felipe de Jesús (1572–1597) to the twenty-one Franciscan victims of the Pueblo Revolution of 1680 and the massacre at the Mission of San Sabá, Texas, of 1758, were painted in the Spanish viceroyalty of New Spain in what is today central Mexico. They hung as components of altar-pieces in countless churches, and especially within Franciscan collections in colleges and monasteries, on the walls of galleries adorned with portraits of exemplary Franciscans, as can be viewed in the portrait gallery currently occupying the walls of a narrow corridor within the Museo de Guadalupe in Zacatecas (originally established as a College of Propaganda Fide in 1707) (Fig. 7.1).

Diego Sanabria’s *Fray Francisco Casañas de Jesus*, painted in the middle of the eighteenth century, is a prime example of what I call Franciscan hagiographic portraiture. The painting possesses numerous characteristics common among

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1 Isidro Félix de Espinosa (and Juan Domingo Arricivita), *Chronica apostólica y seráfica de todos los colegios de Propaganda Fide de esta Nueva-España, de missioneros franciscanos observantes: erigidos con autoridad pontificia y regia para la reformacion de los fieles y conversion de los gentiles* (Mexico City: la viuda de don J. B. de Hogal, 1746). The original text reads as follows: “Salio a esta ciudad a despedirse de sus amigos, y bienhechores con tanto regocijo, que todos extrañaban la alegría de su semblante…. Hermanos, no se olviden de mi en sus oraciones que voy a que me maten los indios.” See also Isidro Félix de Espinosa, *Chronica apostólica y seraphica de todos los colegios de propaganda fide de: erigidos con,...* (New York: Gale Ecco, Sabin Americana, 2012), 283.
works portraying the martyrdom of various Franciscans who perished as witnesses to their faith in the Spanish American viceroyalties (Fig. 7.2). Friar Casañas kneels in the foreground, occupying most of the picture plane. His calm eyes are raised towards the large wooden cross he grasps as a half-naked Native who stands behind him swings a macana (wooden club with obsidian blades) towards him. Casañas’s expression is stoic despite his suffering. The wounds and dripping blood visible on top of the friar’s head signal the pain he experiences, and these signs are intended to solicit empathy from the observer. In the middleground, a distant scene depicts him being assailed by a pair of Natives as he kneels before a large cross. A biographical inscription on the bottom details the basics of who and what appears in the scene.

In this essay, I examine three eighteenth-century hagiographic martyr portraits anchored to the Franciscan missionary history of New Mexico including Sanabria’s Fray Francisco Casañas de Jesús, as well as two works of unknown authorship: Fray Francisco de Arvide, who Zuni Natives killed in 1632 by sinking a machete into his skull (Fig. 7.3), and the Virgen de la Macana, showing the twenty-one martyrs of the 1680 New Mexican Pueblo Revolution depicted in a battle in the composition (Fig. 7.4). The three works were all found in the portrait galleries of monastic spaces such as the Colleges of Propaganda Fide where novices studied for several years in preparation for their lives as missionaries. These establishments, first founded in Rome by Pope Gregory XV

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2 In these colleges, novices were required to study philosophy and theology for six years and moral theology for two years. As Galindo notes, “intellectual brainstorming was a daily activity in the colleges for the propagation of the faith. Concerns with the qualifications of the future missionaries started after the novitiate. Students gathered with other friars, including veteran missionaries, to discuss evangelical subjects in daily conferences to problematize