CHAPTER FOUR

WOMEN AND MEN AS COSMIC CO-BEARERS AT OAXTEPEC, MEXICO, ABOUT 1553

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Introduction

During the course of the sixteenth century, over two hundred monasteries were built in the central and southern Mexican countryside. Many of them still stand and function as parish churches, museums, or monastic establishments. They were constructed for the male Franciscan, Dominican, and Augustinian friars by their post-conquest native charges. Many of these monasteries featured large churches that accommodated hundreds of parishioners. Many also had capacious cloisters, complete with such dependencies as refectories and chapter rooms. The cloisters were almost always square and consisted of four roofed, often vaulted ranges supported by piers or columns called ‘cloister walks’ that opened onto a central unroofed garth. Most of these monasteries, including the cloisters, had at least some mural painting, and much of this painting survives on site. Where sixteenth-century paintings on cloister piers persist in central Mexico, they always represent groups of saints, one saint per pier surface opposite the viewer in the adjacent cloister walk.¹

No surviving Mexican sixteenth-century pier cycle attaches nearly as much importance to female saints as that of the cloister of the Dominican monastery of the town of Oaxtepec in the modern State of Morelos (Fig. 4.1). This sequence of saints on piers was painted about 1553, some thirty-two years after the Spanish conquest.² Given

² Kubler (1948) 348–49; Mullen (1975) 76–77; Dávila Padilla (1625) 617–18; and Santiago (1540–87) fols 35v, 40, 45v, 46. I am grateful to the then Directors of
Fig. 4.1 Schematic iconographical diagram, first floor of the cloister, Dominican monastery of Oaxtepec, State of Morelos, Mexico, ca. 1553. Drawing courtesy of Prof. James Dutremaine.