The Inquisition in Spanish Louisiana, 1762–1800

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During the eighteenth century Louisiana, French and Spanish, provided one of the major channels for penetration of Enlightenment philosophy and of Protestantism into the Spanish Empire in North America. While the Bourbon Kings of Spain never were willing to establish a formal Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Louisiana, the Spanish government and the tribunals in Mexico City and Cartagena did encourage and commission inquisitorial investigations in Louisiana.¹

Prior to 1569 there were no Tribunals of the Inquisition in the Spanish colonies. In the absence of Inquisitors the responsibility to punish heresy and proscribed conduct rested with the bishops or their delegates. The bishop in his role as ecclesiastical judge ordinary had been charged with preserving orthodoxy within his diocese since medieval times—before the formal establishment of the Inquisition. In early colonial Mexico in areas where there was no resident bishop or where his see was two days travel away, prelates of the Orders were given special faculties to exercise quasi-episcopal powers including the right to perform as ordinaries. After King Philip II established a Tribunal of the Inquisition in Mexico in 1569, the bishops and prelates relinquished their early powers over heresy and immoral conduct, except in the remote periphery of New Spain which came to include New Mexico, Texas, California, and finally Louisiana.² In 1610 the Spanish monarchy established an Inquisition Tribunal in Cartagena with jurisdiction over the modern-day areas of Venezuela and Colombia as well as the islands of the Caribbean.³ Since Spanish Florida
was suffragan to Cuba, the nominal enforcement of orthodoxy there was the province of the Bishop of Cuba or his delegates.

During the entire seventeenth century the tribunal at Cartagena busied itself with schemes to extend its jurisdiction and engaged in active rivalry with the Mexico City tribunal for control of the prosecution of heresy in the Southeast Borderlands. Henry C. Lea said of the Cartagena judges: “the history of the Tribunal is to be found not so much in its autos de fe as in the guerrilla war which for a century it maintained with the authorities, civil and ecclesiastical.” As early as 1606 the Mexican tribunal had a Comisario of the Holy Office in Havana, four years before the Cartagena Inquisition was founded. This Commissary clashed with the Bishop of Cuba over jurisdiction in Florida. In 1621 the Cartagena Inquisitor Agustín Ugarte y Saravia sent the governor of Florida two carte blanche appointments of a commissary and a familiar (Inquisition policeman), inviting the Governor to fill in the names of two appropriate men to occupy the positions. Eventually, in 1692, the Cartagena judges appointed Fray Pedro de Lima comisario in Florida, but as recent archival discoveries have indicated, Pedro de Lima secretly obeyed the Mexican Commissary of the Holy Office in Puebla rather than his superiors on the north coast of South America. Pedro de Lima’s role as Commissary of the Inquisition was challenged by the Cuban bishop and the Spanish governor of Florida. In the end they were able to convince the Council of the Indies to revoke Lima’s authority in 1695. The Cartagena tribunal did not let the matter rest there, however, and during the eighteenth century consistently endeavored to place agents in the Floridas and Louisiana. After France’s cession of Louisiana to Spain in 1762, the Mexican and Cartagena tribunals vied for spiritual control there.

Between 1680 and 1762, the era of French domination in Louisiana, the Mexican Tribunal of the Inquisition took the initiative in containing “the French Menace.” In the decades after the founding of New Orleans in 1718, French traders began to invade the borderlands of New Spain hoping to penetrate the Spanish colonial mercantile system and to form alliances with key
Indian groups along the river systems. French diplomacy among the Comanche tribes and the traders who traveled from New Orleans to Santa Fe after the 1730’s caused great anxiety in the Mexican viceroyalty. As early as 1743 the viceroy ordered that Frenchmen who incited Indians against Spanish authority be remanded to the Inquisition for trial. It became the custom of the Mexican Holy Office to appoint commissaries at each of the central and east Texas missions and presidios. We have lists of these individuals from 1731 until 1807. These records show that the Mexican Inquisition had agents in Adaes, Nacogdoches and Nachitoches from the 1750’s onward. As early as 1762 the comisarios were sending confiscated books to Mexico City for examination by the Holy Office. In 1756 they had given the Mexican Inquisition and the viceroy detailed lists of foreigners who were infiltrating Texas. The great fear in Mexico was not the incursion of Frenchmen per se but of the Enlightenment political and social ideas which they might bring with them, ideas which struck at the very heart of the Spanish power structure in Mexico. This fear somewhat moderated in 1760 when the French House of Bourbon entered into a “family compact” with the Spanish Bourbon kings, and the two countries began to coordinate their diplomacies. Nevertheless the Holy Office of the Inquisition continued to view the ideas of the French philosophers with great suspicion.

At the time France ceded Louisiana to Spain, the Spanish state was tolerant of French political philosophy, social ideas, and French Protestantism. Immigration of non-Catholics and foreigners was encouraged. Non-Spanish soldiers often served in Louisiana regiments, and after 1782 the port of New Orleans was opened to free trade with France and with the rest of Spain’s empire. The new governors in Louisiana and the Church adopted a posture of liberalism and flexible orthodoxy, and there were no known inquisitorial investigations in Spanish Louisiana until the 1790’s. Spanish religion and Spanish Catholic culture were protected in other ways.

Political officialdom attempted to curb sedition and seditious
ideas, a function that Mexican viceroys and the Inquisition usu­ally shared after 1760. The usual jurisdiction of the Inquisition (preserving religious orthodoxy, supervising the moral conduct of laymen and clergy, and attacking blasphemy and bigamy) was the purview of the ordinary in Louisiana, and since there was no bishop this power was delegated to an auxiliary vicar. A perusal of the records of the Diocese of Louisiana and the Floridas from 1576 to 1803 reveals that vicars took this responsibility seriously. Most severe breaches of moral conduct were referred to the eccle­siastical courts of the ordinary in Havana. Periodic episcopal visitations of peninsular Florida, west Florida, and Louisiana detail the permissiveness of Catholicism in the Southeast Border­lands. In the 1730's the Auxiliary Bishop of Florida deplored the influx of English traders who feigned Catholicism but who ac­tually proselytized their Protestant beliefs and undermined the faith of Spanish colonists and Indians alike. Franciscan friars and diocesan clergy, many of whom came from the Puebla friaries and missionary colleges in Mexico, had their own means of disci­plining blatant culprits. Some were lured under various pretexts to Veracruz or other Mexican ports where the Commissaries of the Holy Office could deal with them. For instance, in 1746 Francisca Zapata, accused of practicing sorcery all along the Gulf Coast from her headquarters in Punta de Ziguenga, modern Pensacola, Florida, was tried when she visited Mexico.

What is often evident from the Mexican and Spanish Inquisi­tion records is that there was a close circum-Caribbean surveillance of Catholics and foreigners alike who flouted religious orthodoxy and the power of the Spanish state. Inhabitants of Louisiana who talked heresy or sedition—and often they were the same thing—were arrested and tried by the Inquisition once they left home on business or other travel. Cuban authorities, the Mexican Inquisition Commissaries, and officials in Yucatán and Central America were informed of the culprits in question by an effective communications network. Very often the comisarios sought out such travelers, and on occasion the accused were persuaded to mend their ways.
In 1780 a Protestant merchant, Enrique Extempli, was induced to seek to convert to Catholicism “spontaneously.” He was incarcerated in the Fortress of San Juan de Ulúa, where he was allowed to talk to the Calificador and Commissary of the Holy Office in Veracruz, Don José María Laso de la Vega. The presidio was then full of sailors and merchants who had been hauled in for violating Spanish commercial regulations. Perhaps one of the Jews in this predicament gave Enrique the idea of converting to Catholicism in order to escape his sorry lot. He told the Commissary a very convincing story and apparently succeeded in getting out of jail.

From the trial record we learn that Enrique Extempli was a twenty-four-year-old Englishman from Fellin who had been a merchant in the British Natchez area for ten years. At the age of fourteen he had left home and his Lutheran parents to seek his fortune in the New World. He was in and out of jail in Spanish territory many times, usually charged with illegal trading. He had spent a year in prison in New Orleans before being deported, first to Havana and then to Cádiz as an undesirable alien. From Cádiz he and his partner Stephen Howard returned to the Gulf Coast. There he was apprehended again and sent to San Juan de Ulúa. The boy said he first encountered Catholicism and went to Mass during his stints in New Orleans, Havana, and in Spain. It was when he began to learn Spanish and to find his place among Spaniards that he had realized the superiority of Spanish religion and culture. He had known other “heretics” in the Caribbean but he eschewed their ways and he truly wished to convert.

In his lengthy interrogation, Dr. Laso de la Vega followed the prescribed formulary for those who wished to renounce their previous beliefs and to become Catholics. Laso de la Vega skillfully learned of the young man’s Lutheran background, his early education in England, and his travels in the New World. Extempli believed in the virginity of Mary, before, during, and after the birth of Christ, but he had been taught that she was the mother of other children. He believed in the sacrament of bap-
tism, but not in penance or the Eucharist. He denied the existence of Purgatory, the efficacy of indulgences, and the intercession of saints. He held the usual unacceptable Lutheran views on the power of the Pope, veneration of images, authority of bishops, and salvation through good works. Dr. Laso de la Vega certified to the Mexico City Tribunal of the Inquisition that Extempli was sincere in his desire to convert. The judges instructed Laso to make very sure that his prisoner was not a Jew in disguise and that he was not making his peace with the Church out of sheer expediency. A group of Veracruz clergy were appointed to instruct Extempli in Catholicism. When they certified that he was ready, a simple ceremony in the portico of the Veracruz cathedral, on September 29, 1780, absolved him of previous sins and errors and admitted him to the body of believers. One of the frustrating aspects of trials of this sort is that the record leaves off at this point, and the Natchez merchant fades from historical view.

Mexican Inquisition records show that many merchants under surveillance never came to trial. A case in point was the 1783 probe into activities of Francisco López, a creole entrepreneur of Florida who roamed the Caribbean and Mexico on business. López was denounced to the Mexican Holy Office from Havana on July 29, 1783, when Fray José de Santa Teresa related statements López had made in Cuban bars. López had argued that "only God knows the true religion of man." He and his cohorts were living in doctrinal error even though they were Catholics. Mexican Inquisitors Mier y Villar and Bergosa y Jordán studied the denunciation and concluded that, for the time being, the evidence was insufficient for them to proceed. It is obvious that some of the information gathered about Extempli and López probably came from clergy in New Orleans. There was one formally accredited Comisario of the Inquisition in New Orleans in the late 1780's and probably other informal agents who collected and dispatched information to the south and east by sea, and to the west through the chains of missions and presidios.
The Commissary of the Holy Office in Louisiana was the famous and controversial Capuchin friar Antonio de Sedella who had arrived in New Orleans with a group of Andalusian Capuchins in 1781. Owing to his conflicts with ecclesiastical superiors and with the Spanish governor a decade later, there exists a body of data on “Père Antoine’s” career as an Inquisitor. Most Louisiana historians have mentioned these events, but few have seen them in the perspective of Caribbean Inquisition history. What is clear from diocesan records is that long before his clashes with Governor Esteban Miró in 1790 over his status as Commissary of the Holy Office, Père Antoine was acting as judge in cases normally handled by the Inquisition in New Spain. During May of 1786 Governor Miró acknowledged reports Sedella sent him about investigations of faith and morals conducted under his jurisdiction as Auxiliary Vicar of New Orleans. These pros­ecutions dealt with blasphemy, bigamy, reading of books on the Index, and lack of orthodoxy among the Indian population of Spanish Louisiana. In an official communication dated May 8, 1788, Sedella used the title “Vicar and Ecclesiastical Judge of New Orleans.” The records show that Père Antoine was conducting heresy investigations under the episcopal jurisdiction of Ordinary, and often circumvented proper judicial channels within the hierarchy, thereby netting himself criticism from his Florida and Cuban superiors. The difference between such prosecutions and Inquisition business was merely semantic, and they were designed perhaps to allay the fears of foreigners and non-Catholics in Louisiana.

On February 10, 1786, the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition at Cartagena officially notified Fray Antonio de Sedella of his appointment as Commissary of the Holy Office in Louisiana. This was the culmination of a century of effort on the part of Cartagena Inquisitors to extend their jurisdiction onto the mainland of North America. Contrary to the opinion of earlier writers on Spanish Louisiana, Sedella’s appointment as Comisario did not imply the establishment of an Inquisition court in New
Orleans. Rather it meant that Père Antoine was to be the accredited representative of the Cartagena Tribunal there and he was to behave, as all Comisarios did, only as an investigatory agent. When the Auxiliary Bishop of the Spanish Floridas, Sedella's superior, heard of the commission he protested the action vigorously. Cyril de Barcelona enlisted the support of the Captain General of Cuba and of his ecclesiastical superior in Havana, Bishop Santiago Echevarría. All three functionaries pointed out that the population of Spanish Louisiana was composed largely of Frenchmen and foreign merchants, many of whom were non-Catholics. Bishop Echevarría suspended Sedella's patent as Commissary until a ruling regarding formalized Inquisition activity in Louisiana could be obtained from Spain. In a petition dated July 13, 1787, Cyril de Barcelona requested Charles III to decide the matter. Charles upheld the suspension of Sedella's appointment on January 9, 1788, and the Cuban hierarchy so notified Père Antoine. Sedella acknowledged receipt of the King's order and there the matter rested for two years.

Conflict between Sedella and his Auxiliary Bishop in Florida over the Inquisition patent led to hard feelings between the two men. Animosities intensified when Sedella polarized the New Orleans clergy into Andalusian and Havana groups. Partially as a result of this factionalism, but largely owing to reports of the deplorable state of religious life in the colony, Auxiliary Bishop Cyril de Barcelona journeyed to Louisiana and launched a personal investigation. His episcopal visitation began on August 30, 1789, and continued throughout 1790. The Cuban superior had empowered Cyril to send Sedella back to Havana if his findings would warrant it. The Auxiliary Bishop brought charges against Sedella for mismanagement of his Vicariate in New Orleans and determined to relieve him of office.

Because Père Antoine had a large popular following in New Orleans and public scandal was imminent as the proceedings unfolded, Cyril was willing to strike a compromise with the rebellious Sedella. The arrangement, as the bishop reported it in
his letters to Havana and to Spain was that he had agreed to withdraw charges in exchange for Sedella's promise to return to Spain "of his own free will." Cyril claimed that as the ship was waiting to take him away, Père Antoine reneged on the deal avowing "that if he went at all it would be as a prisoner under official guard." Exasperated, he complained to Governor Esteban Miró about Père Antoine's behavior and requested that Miró arrange for deportation. Meanwhile Sedella's ship set sail for Spain without its illustrious passenger.

At this juncture the real controversy over Antonio de Sedella's status as Inquisition Commissary began. Governor Miró was aware that Sedella's 1786 appointment had been nullified, and he was flabbergasted when Père Antoine confronted him with a document which seemed to reinstate him as Inquisitor of Spanish Louisiana. As the French Revolution gained momentum and as a spate of books and revolutionary tracts issued forth from France, the Spanish Inquisition felt constrained to curtail their circulation in the empire. Consequently the Inquisitor General of Spain issued specific instructions to Holy Office Tribunals in the New World and to their Commissaries to confiscate all subversive literature. Ignoring the revocation of Sedella's authority in 1787, the Spanish Tribunal sent Père Antoine a direct order on December 5, 1789, to search for and to seize suspected materials. By April 1790 the order had arrived in New Orleans and Sedella used it as a lever in his developing controversy with Governor Miró and Bishop Cyril de Barcelona. In a dramatic move, and one suspects with great bravado, Père Antoine went to the Governor's residence at nine o'clock on the evening of April 29, showed him the order from Spain, and tried to give Miró instructions on how the order was to be enforced:

To carry into effect instructions of December 5 in conformity with His Majesty's wishes expressed in the instructions . . . it is necessary that I have recourse at any hour of the night to the Corps de Garde from which I may draw the necessary troops to assist me if they are
necessary to carry on my operations. To this end Your Lordship will please issue the necessary instructions to the military commander that he must furnish me immediately the soldiers whom I may request to carry out my duties.

Sedella left the residence before the Governor could finish reading the documents.

The next day Père Antoine escalated the controversy and kept the pressure on Governor Miró. He issued another formal order to Don Esteban at six o'clock in the afternoon of April 29, 1790. Reviewing the contents of the request he had delivered twenty-one hours earlier, he threatened:

Since at the time of this writing I have not received any communication from Your Lordship . . . I deem it necessary to warn you that the success of my mission is imperiled by such tardy measures, and since this matter is of the gravest concern and of the utmost importance to the service of the King, Your Lordship will please inform me without further delay what steps you intend to take so that I may proceed promptly to accomplish my task.

Perhaps, as he claimed later, Governor Miró feared that Sedella might trigger insurrection and economic disaster in Louisiana if he carried out his Inquisitorial functions. Certainly Père Antoine had strong support from large numbers of the colonists and among the Louisiana clergy; and both Miró and the bishop feared that Sedella was further polarizing an already divided clerical establishment. The Capuchin also had powerful allies on the Governor's staff. Miró later confided to the crown that his own auditor was one of Sedella's confidants and chief supporters. At any rate the Governor decided to use the occasion to justify ridding his government of a rebellious and intriguing friar who was Vicar of New Orleans and a pretender to inquisitorial authority. After duly consulting with his legal counselor, Manuel Serrano, Colonel Manuel Gayoso of Natchez, and others, Miró empowered Cyril de Barcelona to order the arrest of Antonio de Sedella. On the night of April 29, 1790, Père Antoine was secretly arrested and “forcibly marched to a ship” bound for Cádiz.
Because of Sedella’s popularity in New Orleans, and formal protests lodged in Cuba and in Spain, the issue became a political cause célèbre. Both Bishop Cyril de Barcelona and Governor Miró were called to account for their actions. Each seemed to blame the other for the actual decision to deport Père Antoine. The Reverend Michael J. Curley, who examined the canonical process against Sedella, found it “strangely unconvincing” and came to the same conclusion that the Auxiliary Bishop’s superior did when he reprimanded the visitor for exceeding his powers, violating proper legal procedures, and arranging for Sedella to be deported. Governor Esteban Mira defended his actions in a lengthy dossier sent to the Spanish Minister of Justice and Pardons Antonio Porlier in 1790. On the surface his defense was an able one. He recounted, with adequate documentation, the Auxiliary Bishop’s recommendations for Père Antoine’s forced departure and then focused on the more serious issue of Sedella’s intended inquisitorial activities. The Governor wrote that when he read Sedella’s nocturnal demand for troops to search for and to seize heretical literature, “I trembled at such an attempt to ignore the prerogatives of the Royal Patronage, but above all because it happened at such a critical time in these provinces.”

Governor Miró argued convincingly to Minister Porlier that Antonio de Sedella’s attempt to extend the Inquisition’s activities into Louisiana endangered the policies dictated by the monarchy for the purpose of encouraging immigration and stimulating commerce with foreigners—who were apt to be non-Catholics. The Governor contended that any hint of Inquisition operations in Louisiana would be injurious to trade and future settlement:

these foreigners are imbued with, and very frightened of the power of the Holy Office which they consider absolutely despotic and discriminatory, notwithstanding the uprightness, stature, and circumspection of its most just proceedings.

Certainly Miró was correct in his assessment of the religious temperament of foreigners in the Louisiana colony, but just as surely he exaggerated the extent of Père Antoine’s machinations.
The documentary record shows that Sedella had no intention of establishing an Inquisition, nor was he trying to install himself as Chief Inquisitor. He merely hoped to use his status as Comisario of the Holy Office and its immunities in order to avoid deportation. Neither Governor Miró nor subsequent historians of Louisiana have seen these incidents in their correct light: a conflict between Spanish civil authority and the institution known as the Familia

Père Antoine’s deportation did not end his Inquisitorial activities, for he was allowed to return to New Orleans in 1795. It appears that this time he carried some secret commission from the Mexico City Tribunal. He supplied information on heretics and prohibited literature which often led to arrest and trial of Louisianians when they traveled the Caribbean in trade and commerce. Even after Louisiana was returned to France in 1800 and after the purchase of Louisiana by the United States in 1803, Sedella continued as an agent. Letters from him to the Governor of Yucatán and to the Mexican Inquisition are dated as late as 1806. They describe heretical literature in New Orleans destined for shipment to Mexico, give information about the seditious plots of fugitives from the Mexican Inquisition in New Orleans.

The underlying issue in the jurisdictional dispute had been Sedella’s commission to confiscate seditious literature. From the Holy Office’s standpoint, fear of French literature and other Enlightenment tracts was well founded. Inventories of plantation libraries, discovered and published in modern times, attest to the presence of all manner of avant-garde reading matter from the 1730’s onward. Allegations that colonial Louisiana was a provincial backwater, culturally destitute, are simply not true. The 1769 inventory of the estate of M. Prévost, agent of the Company of the Indies in New Orleans for thirty years, listed some three hundred titles of books, primarily works of social and political philosophy with a decidedly radical tint. Prévost and his family read Montesquieu, Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, and
many other authors who were prohibited in Mexico and Spain. After 1789, proscribed French political and economic tracts, as well as pamphlets against the Spanish state, infiltrated New Spain from the free ports of Louisiana and Cuba. Governors and clergy in New Orleans wrote letters to the Mexican Inquisition in the 1790’s warning about the influx of prohibited books, and the Inquisitors in Mexico City expressed concern about New Orleans as a center for political intrigue. From 1794 onward the Governors of Florida, Louisiana, and Cuba were instructed by the Viceroy of New Spain and by the Council of the Indies in Spain to prohibit the book trade which had developed from Philadelphia via New Orleans and the United States border.

In 1791 Felipe Santiago Puglia published in Philadelphia a particularly damning indictment of the ancien régime and the Spanish monarchy entitled El Desengaño del Hombre. Copies of the tract were circulated in New Orleans. The Holy Office condemned the book in 1794 in no uncertain terms. The censors said Puglia was taking cheap shots at the Spanish monarchy and fomenting “rebellion of the most infamous sort.” His attempt to induce loyal Spaniards to use the French Revolution as a model was attacked with great vehemence. The censor tried to show that liberty and happiness had not resulted from the French uprisings, but only desolation and spiritual “pestilences.” Concern with sedition and seditious literature from upriver was also evident in the documents of the diocesan archives from the 1790’s. For instance, on September 30, 1796, Fr. Paul de Sant Pierre wrote a disquieting letter from St. Genevieve, Missouri, to Bishop Peñalver in New Orleans. He had just heard that mobs of “mad Frenchmen” had been demonstrating in Saint Louis during the last few days, “shouting Long Live Liberty, Long Live Equality, and singing songs against religion.” Fr. Paul reported that American agitation in Missouri was reaching a dangerous peak.

While the Spanish monarchy was attempting to Hispanicize the stubbornly French Louisiana colony, each year the French population grew. A large influx of émigrés from Santo Domingo and elsewhere bolstered the population, and New Orleans alone
received some four thousand of these people in 1791. The population in the rest of the Louisiana country also grew. Arthur P. Whitaker studied a census taken by the Bishop of Louisiana in 1797 which reported the population of lower Louisiana and Natchez as 43,087. These Frenchmen, British traders, and American merchants added to the Francophile and Hispanophobe feelings in the colony. It was difficult, if not impossible, to contain the spread of heresy and sedition. In these difficult times of ideological conflict the governor of Louisiana was the coolheaded and tolerant Manuel Gayoso de Lemos who from 1789 to 1797 had governed the largely Protestant and American section of Natchez before he assumed his post in New Orleans in 1797.

Widely read, well-informed on political and economic issues in North America and Europe, Gayoso continued to promote the tolerant administrative environment necessary for political stability but damaging to orthodoxy. When Governor Gayoso died in 1799 his extensive library was auctioned off in New Orleans. The four hundred and eleven volumes on the inventory have been analyzed in depth by Irving A. Leonard, who judges them to be "the working library of a practical man of affairs ... reflecting Gayoso's varied experience and cosmopolitan culture." Quite a few of the books were on the Spanish Index of 1790 as "prohibited" or "subject to expurgation." It appears that Governor Gayoso both created and was influenced by the tolerant environment which he engendered.

As the Mexican Inquisition revitalized itself to combat philosophic ideas translated into practice by French Revolutionary activists after 1789, Spanish Louisiana clergy determined to pursue their previous policy of having heretics and blasphemers arrested after they departed from the colony. By far the most distinguished citizen of New Orleans tried by the Mexican Inquisition was Don Juan Longouran, a native of Bordeaux who had married into the distinguished and respected Fortier family. Longouran had migrated to Louisiana sometime in the late 1760's and at the time of his trial in Mexico City in 1793, he was fifty-eight years old. For over twenty years he had been married to
Marie Fortier, who lived in New Orleans with four of their children. The two eldest, Honorato and Mariana, were living in France with Longouran's brother while they completed their education. Longouran had graduated from medical school and had gone into the family business in Bordeaux when he was twenty-eight years old. In order not to marry a girl chosen by his father, Juan had gone to Haiti with a Captain Renart. After that he settled in New Orleans. With his wife he returned to Haiti where he bought a coffee plantation and forty slaves. Longouran and Marie returned to New Orleans to live because of an epidemic which decimated the labor force and because of business reverses. There he practiced medicine and engaged in trade. After the disastrous fire of 1788, which destroyed their property, Longouran began a career as merchant and Army doctor all over the Caribbean—in Havana, Honduras, Nicaragua, Mexico. He traveled a great deal, leaving his family in New Orleans. A gregarious and an opinionated man, he talked too much about religion and politics. Baron Carondelet's staff had dossiers on him in Central America, where the Baron had served prior to his Louisiana post. The Mexican Inquisition amassed some five hundred pages of data from Louisiana and Central America during the years 1790 to 1795 on Juan Longouran. On a trip to Santa Cruz Yoro, Honduras, in 1790, Longouran was house guest of a business associate when he blatantly expounded heretical ideas. His host made him leave the house, and the next morning he denounced him to the Inquisition. Soon thereafter Longouran was jailed in Honduras and his properties embargoed. Perhaps owing to political influence in Tegucigalpa, he was later released. He then proceeded to Mexico City where his iconoclastic views again got him into trouble. It is evident that Dr. Longouran's rationalistic medical view of the universe and the nature of man had led him to question religious phenomena. Evidence showed that Don Juan was a practicing Catholic when it was good for business, but that in his private life he was, to quote one report, an "obscene and lascivious" man who scoffed at religion. The Inquisition charged him with denying the validity of the sacraments of marriage and
baptism. Don Juan said fornication was not a sin, and that when men took the women they desired, they simply followed natural law, which was, after all, the guiding motivation of the world. He claimed that Hell was nothing more than the labors and sufferings men undergo in their mortal lives. He opined that a God of mercy could not save only Christians, for there were only three and one half million of them in a world of thirty-three million souls. Such a situation, he explained, would make for a “small Heaven and very great Hell.” He furthermore questioned the doctrine of the incarnation, the adoration of images, and various other mysteries of the Faith, saying he would not kiss the hands of bishops and popes or call for a priest at the hour of his death. He had spoken at length in favor of the French Revolution, and claimed it was legal and just to deny obedience to the Papacy.

The Holy Office of the Inquisition made a secret investigation of the Longouran affair, quietly gathering testimony and keeping the accused under surveillance as a “Protestant” and “secret spy.” Perhaps he escaped immediate censure because the Holy Office wished to receive more data on his background from Cuba, Honduras, and Louisiana. As the Reign of Terror in France intensified, and as the Spanish were preparing to expel Frenchmen from the viceroyalty, the Holy Office arrested Longouran in Mexico on July 17, 1793, and confiscated his property. After a long judicial procedure, Juan Longouran was convicted of heresy and sedition. After he was reconciled in the auto de fe of August 9, 1795, he made lengthy penance in the Monastery of the Holy Cross at Querétaro and was finally deported from Veracruz on April 24, 1798, to serve eight years of exile in a Spanish prison. Juan Longouran was the typical example of the learned man who had separated religion and science in his thinking.

Another member of a prominent New Orleans family, the Sant-Maxent, almost had serious problems with the Inquisition in 1795. Francisco Maximiliano de Sant-Maxent, son of the famous Gilbert Antoine de Sant-Maxent, brother of the Condesa de Gálvez, wife of the Mexican Viceroy, was serving as military
commander of New Santander in 1795. The whole San Luis Potosí and Coahuila populace were gossiping about the trials of Frenchmen by the Mexican Inquisition, especially the case of Juan Marie Murgier formerly military commander of the province. Murgier had been jailed by the Holy Office as a heretic and had committed suicide in order to escape interrogation and punishment. The Commissary of the Holy Office in New Santander, Fray Manuel Díaz, was investigating other Frenchmen in the area when he happened to take testimonies about the conduct of Manuel Maliban, whose case was pending. Witnesses against Maliban connected Sant-Maxent with Francophile sentiments and irreverent remarks about Spanish Catholicism. Furthermore, Sant-Maxent had criticized the Inquisition for its handling of the Murgier affair. As a result the Comisario alerted the Mexican Tribunal and a dossier on Sant-Maxent was opened. The Commissary was ordered to gather additional evidence, even though the suspect had been transferred to Louisiana by the time the investigation got started.

It all began on April 14, 1795, when Manuel Morales Balbuena told Comisario Díaz that Maliban and Captain Sant-Maxent held similar views on religion and politics. Morales Balbuena had heard this from a Fray Francisco López, who had disputed with the Captain about the ultimate worth of religious sects and political systems. López quoted Sant-Maxent as saying only on Judgment Day would it be clear who were right and who were wrong—the French or the Spanish. As the provincial commissaries continued gathering data more suspicion was focused on the captain, particularly as gossip intensified. In San Luis Potosí on May 21, Lt. Col. Silvestre López Portillo appeared before the Commissary to give testimony which had not been solicited. He told of an incident related to him by one of Sant-Maxent’s officers, which had occurred while they were on a reconnaissance. They had stopped to hear Mass and the Captain had jeered at the others: “Why are you doing this [ridiculous] thing? What do you think Mass is, anyway? It is nothing more than a ceremony.” Scandalized by this story, López scurried to tell the Inquisition. On
the margin of López' testimony, the Commissary wrote an interesting comment: "This gentleman is known to be a man of more than usual piety, but he has the defect of a very lively imagination, and he tends to exaggerate." Obviously the Comisario questioned whether López Portillo was an enemy of Francisco Sant-Maxent, and at the very least he felt that López was backbiting.

But still the investigation of Sant-Maxent continued. On May 21, 1796, Vicente Santa Cruz, Captain of the Militia of New Santander, was induced to testify. The deposition makes it clear that López Portillo had discussed the Sant-Maxent affair with him and had, in a sense, recruited Santa Cruz to further inculpate the Frenchman. Santa Cruz had been present at the Villa de Aguayo when Sant-Maxent ridiculed the Holy Mass. There the matter rested for almost ten years. In the meantime Francisco Maximiliano de Sant-Maxent had been transferred to Louisiana, and later served as Governor of Pensacola, from 1811 to 1816. Perhaps as the result of new cycles of Francophobia in the Spanish world after 1800, and most probably because of colonial creole animosities toward the Gálvez family and its policies, the Sant-Maxent dossier in the Holy Office archive in Mexico City was reactivated between 1805 and 1809. On March 4, 1805, the prosecutor of the Holy Office instructed his staff to gather up-to-date information on Sant-Maxent's career since 1795 and to find out more about the original denunciations.

As a consequence the bureaucracy of the Inquisition finally located the only surviving witness in the Querétaro area. On September 18, 1809, the Reverend Father Fray Francisco López, who was serving as First Preacher of the Convent of San Antonio de Querétaro, testified about events of a decade before. Until he was specifically prompted by Commissary Dr. Rafael Gil de León, Fr. López could not recall the Sant-Maxent incidents. Within the context of gossip about the scandalous trial and suicide of Juan Marie Murgier, López did remember how Sant-Maxent had criticized the Mexican Inquisition for its anti-French prosecutions in the mid-1790's. He also remembered that Francisco Sant-Maxent had remarked that everyone was preoccupied with re-
igious arguments in the province and that they were losing all sense of perspective. Then he made his oft-quoted statement that the arguments would be resolved on Judgment Day when mankind would know for sure which religion and which political system, French or Spanish, was the true one. As far as Sant-Maxent’s life style and conduct were concerned, Father López said he had never heard him attack religion or the Church per se. Indeed, he had observed that Francisco Maximiliano Sant-Maxent was always among the first at church to hear Mass, and that he treated the clergy with esteem and respect.

Fray Simón Francisco Coronel, the chaplain of Sant-Maxent’s regiment when he was stationed in New Santander, wrote from the Villa Nueva de Croix to say that he remembered the captain as a man who led a normal existence and whose religious sentiments gave no indication of scandal or wrongdoing. With these reports the second investigation of Francisco Maximiliano’s orthodoxy ended in October of 1809. While the dossier contains no clues to the Holy Office’s motivations in 1809, it seems safe to assume that the second investigation was somehow related to a security check prior to Sant-Maxent’s appointment as Governor of Pensacola in 1811. It is interesting to note that the fiscal of the Holy Office, when he suspended the proceedings, lamented that the evidence against Sant-Maxent was “very weak.”

In line with the attempt to avoid open Inquisitorial activity within Louisiana proper, the Mexican Holy Office often compiled dossiers on suspected heretics within the military establishment and then waited for them to go on leave or be transferred to another locale before taking any action. This was the case with Antonio Ventura Carrión, a thirty-seven-year-old grenadier from Ciudad Rodrigo in Spain in the Louisiana regiment. Carrión’s comrades denounced him while they were on leave in Puebla. Carrión was investigated for heresy and obscene language in April 1797. Before the trial ended almost two years later, perhaps a dozen of Ventura Carrión’s comrades in arms had offered proof of his blasphemies and heresies. The testimonies are so thoroughly scatological that the worst of them cannot be ana-
lyzed here. That Antonio was a foul-mouthed and loud braggart about his own sexual exploits and a jeering critic of the righteous cannot be doubted, but in the end the reader comes to distrust the motives of the "comrades" who denounced him.

Of those elements of the trial record which can be recounted with any delicacy the following are representative of Antonio Ventura Carrión's character. He had a mocking irreverence for saints, images, and the priesthood, which he considered an unnatural state. Many times he "talked to" religious sculptures in a very obscene way. He placed little pieces of bread in front of a carving of Christ and said: "Take it and eat. Don't you want to eat?" He told the Christ, "I am as good as you or better, and I eat," and "how whipped and bleeding you are—but better you than me!" Antonio ridiculed religious processions and funerals and jeered at the passersby and spoke to the corpses. On one memorable occasion during Holy Week he shouted at an image of Christ being carried through the streets "Why don't you get down and walk like everyone else?" and "What fine raiments you wear. Didn't they used to be my own shirt and pants?" More offensive to his upright colleagues, and to the Holy Office of the Inquisition, were Ventura Carrión's Freudian allusions to Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. He used religious literature, devotions, and broadsides torn from the walls of public buildings, as toilet paper. At great length and many times he disputed the virginity of the Virgin calling her a common Hebrew woman, and he made derisive comments about the sex life of Christ and the apostles. He referred to parts of his anatomy as "Saint this" and "Saint that." When his critics threatened to denounce him to the Holy Office for his deeds, Ventura Carrión had said "[expletive] the Inquisition." And so the testimony went. Let the reader understand that what is recounted here is only the milder part of the trial record. Real questions arise from the biographical part of Ventura Carrión's proceso. The astonishing and probably accurate picture of a young man, more picaresque than evil, brutalized by the society in which he lived, a thief, liar, and blasphemer who spent over half of his thirty-seven years in
jail and a large part of the rest as a draftee or "forced volunteer" in the military, does much to mitigate his behavior.

Antonio Ventura Carrión was born in Ciudad Rodrigo in Old Castile around 1760. He knew little of his parents because his father died when he was seven years old and he was sent to live in a miller's house and to work for his keep until he reached the age of fourteen. Antonio told the Inquisitors that he was a baptized Catholic but that he was not sure whether he had ever been confirmed. However, he had gone to confession and communion and he had heard Mass at regular intervals. When he was fourteen Ventura Carrión ran away and "fell in with bad company." He was arrested one night in Ronda and the judge declared him a vagrant and sentenced him to five years in prison at the Presidio of El Ferrol. In 1779 Spain was at war with England and there was a shortage of sailors. Somehow Ventura Carrión was pressed into the navy, but on the way to Cádiz he deserted and roamed around Extremadura until he got a job in Portugal with a band of roving bullfighters. Soon, however, he got drafted into the army and spent a tour of duty in Mallorca. After he extricated himself from this situation, he spent a year and a half in Zamora as servant to a colonel. One night one of the colonel's soldiers robbed his master's house and Antonio was blamed. This time he was condemned to a ten-year stretch in the Presidio at Oran in North Africa. While he was there he got overly familiar with a lady and said insulting things to her. As a result he was flogged, and he tried to kill one of the guards after wrestling a musket from him. Thereafter they transferred him to the prison in Almanza Castle and lengthened his sentence. It was then that he was allowed to volunteer for military service in Louisiana.

Antonio pictured his life as a grenadier in Louisiana as hard but permissive in discipline. He became dissolute, irreligious, and obscene. Ventura Carrión and his friend, a Corporal Francisco Romaña, who was also tried for blasphemy in 1797, had the same attitudes: "In this life one must eat, drink and enjoy oneself because after death there is nothing." Antonio claimed that this was
the philosophy of life of everyone in Louisiana. When the two soldiers, accompanied by other disapproving comrades, went on leave to Puebla in April 1797, one of the soldiers, who was from Puebla, Juan Francisco Bujanos, denounced them to the Inquisition. Other Louisiana soldiers gave evidence and some testimony was solicited by mail from New Orleans. After it had been evaluated by the Inquisition attorneys, Ventura Carrión was formally arraigned. The prosecutor charged that he was “a man alienated from God, obscene, scandalous, blasphemous, and a heretic. His utterances were offensive, impious, libertine, iconoclast, and Calvinist.” On September 11, 1797, he was removed from the Puebla jail and conducted to the Inquisition jail in Mexico City. There he languished for months while the wheels of justice turned. By January 1798 the staff of the Holy Office had spent considerable time counseling Antonio and showing him the error of his ways. He made a statement to the Tribunal on January 11 which was full of contrition and penitence. Antonio admitted to being a weak and miserable sinner but he contended that he had never renounced the Catholic religion. He had always maintained an inner reverence for sacred images although he publicly mocked them. He realized that he had committed crimes against the Faith but he swore they were without malice and without knowledge of their gravity.

Whether from fear of punishment or true regeneration, Antonio Ventura Carrión humbled himself before the Inquisitors and begged for mercy. He now swore that he unreservedly believed in the omnipotence of God, the perpetual virginity of the Virgin, and all of the other dogmas of the Church. He was renewing his knowledge of the catechism, the credo, and the sacraments, and he pled only to be allowed to live and die as a good Christian. He recognized his faults and dubbed himself as a “poor Gachupín” who would never again deviate from his faith “even if he were tortured” by those who hoped to lead him astray. Evidently the Holy Office of the Inquisition did not consider Ventura Carrión incorrigible, and most probably the judges were swayed to leniency by his contrition and by the dreadful circum-
stances of his formative years. On July 7, 1798, the proceso ended with the hint that Antonio Ventura Carrión was to be re-educated and reconciled with the Church. The final trial records are fragmentary and do not contain data after 1798. But the judges decided to send an extract of the proceedings to the Supreme Council of the Inquisition in Spain in order that the Inquisitor General and Spanish officialdom might study the kind of problems faced in enforcing orthodoxy in Spanish Louisiana.

A case similar to Carrión’s was the 1799 probe into the life and morals of Juan Braschi, captain of the Brigantine St. Gertrudis out of New Orleans. Since he often traveled to Mexico it seemed advisable to arrest him there to avoid scandal. If Carrión was a blasphemous and obscene soldier, Braschi was his nautical counterpart. His remarks about the Pope and the morality of the clergy rankled the religious establishment. He read prohibited books and bragged about it, and his relations with a multitude of women were a New Orleans scandal. He openly espoused French political philosophy. Because the trial record is fragmentary we do not know the results of the investigation.

The diocesan records show a like concern for enforcing moral conduct among the Louisiana colonists. In June of 1797 Father Pierre Joseph Didier reported to the bishop’s office on measures to curb blasphemy in the Missouri country, and in February 1797 records of the ecclesiastical judge in New Orleans contain proceedings against another soldier, Miguel Solivella, for sexual immorality. This same “Soldevilla” was investigated by the Inquisition Commissary in Querétaro, Mexico, in 1799 when residents denounced him as a heretic and blasphemer while he was touring the bajío area recruiting soldiers for the Louisiana regiment. While he was trying to convince a young boy from her father’s household to join the army, Soldevilla visited with María Petra Suesnabar and her friends in Querétaro on three separate occasions. He said such shocking things that she decided to inform against him to the Commissary of the Holy Office on June 8, 1799. María Petra never found out his first name and knew the accused only as “Soldevilla.” He had told her that the be-
lief in immortality of the soul was false because after death the body was returned to dirt and the soul was converted into smoke. Consequently, he argued, there was no such thing as heaven or hell or saints. To prove his point he suggested to María Petra that she beseech a statue of San Antonio in her house to perform a miracle. Soldevilla proceeded to tell her and her girl friends not to believe what the clergy preached because all religious beliefs were nothing but folk customs. On his third visit to their home Soldevilla told María Petra he believed only in God and the Holy Virgin but he did not believe in plural representations of the Virgin, for she was only one person and not many as some people believed. The girls were scandalized by Soldevilla’s statements, and the other women, in separate appearances before the Comisario, substantiated what María Petra had said. Meanwhile Soldevilla and his troops had left Querétaro and the Commissary forwarded his investigation to the Mexican capital. The staff of the Holy Office searched its files for any additional information that might pertain to Soldevilla to no avail, but they had no recourse to the Louisiana diocesan papers, where “Soldevilla” did indeed have a record.

By 1799, the last year of Spanish rule before the territory was ceded back to France, the Mexican Tribunal of the Holy Office had amassed a body of data on heresy in Louisiana. Perhaps the judges had begun to feel that the province was so permeated with moral laxity and foreign ideas that it was virtually impossible to contain the spread of heresy and to discipline proscribed conduct. Inquisition records showed that even the Catholic citizenry were liberal, iconoclastic, and often anticlerical. This was the environment promoted by the Spanish state to further its political and economic goals in Louisiana.


6. AGI, Audiencia de México, leg. 700; Lea, p. 459.

7. AGN, Historia, tomo 39, exp. 22.

8. AGN, Historia, tomo 43, exp. 24, tomo 301, exp. 116, ramo 5.


12. Consult the excellent study by John Rydjord, Foreign Interest in the Independence of New Spain (Durham, N.C., 1935) for a treatment of the period after 1760, based on Spanish archival documentation.

13. DLF.

15. AGN, Inquisición, tomo 1345, exp. 11.

16. AGN, Inquisición, tomo 1208, exp. 15.


18. AGN, Inquisición, tomo 1243, exp. 12.


20. DLF, reel 2, May 6, 1786.

21. DLF, reel 2, May 8, 1788.


23. AGI, Audiencia de Santo Domingo, leg. 2673, Letter of July 13, 1787.

24. AGI, Audiencia de Santo Domingo, leg. 2673, Royal Order of Jan. 9, 1788.

25. For a detailed examination of the canonical process against Sedella see Curley, pp.122-29.


27. AGI, Audiencia de Santo Domingo, leg. 2686, Order of Dec. 5, 1789.

28. AGI, Papeles de Cuba, leg. 102, Letter of April 28, 1790.

29. AGI, Papeles de Cuba, leg. 102, Letter of April 29, 1790. See also Gassler, p. 61.
30. AGI, Audiencia de Santo Domingo, leg. 2686, Letter of Dec. 6, 1790.
31. For the reprimand see Curley, p. 129.
32. AGI, Papeles de Cuba, leg. 102, Report of April 30, 1790.
33. Ibid.
39. AGN, Inquisición, tomo 1389, exp. 2.
40. AGN, Historia, tomo 401, exp. 1.
41. AGN, Inquisición, tomo 1389, exp. 2. See also the Gaceta de México, Nov. 13, 1794.
43. DLF, reel 5, Sept. 30, 1796.
45. See the biography by Jack D. L. Holmes, Gayoso, The Life of a Spanish Governor in the Mississippi Valley, 1789 to 1799 (Baton Rouge, 1965).
46. AGI, Papeles de Cuba, leg. 169, exp. 101.
48. AGN, Inquisición, tomo 1320, exps. 1, 2, 3; AHN, Inquisición de Méjico, leg. 2292, exp. 3.
49. The following general description of Juan Longourán’s heresies relies on Greenleaf, “The Mexican Inquisition and The Enlightenment,” pp. 187-89. The one thousand pages of trial records contained in AGN, Inquisición, tomo 1320 are to be examined in depth in the author’s forthcoming work “The Mexican Inquisition in the Bourbon Century 1700-1821.”
50. AGN, Inquisición, tomo 1331, exp. 14.
51. AGN, Inquisición, tomo 1382, exp. 25.
52. AGN, Inquisición, tomo 1390, exp. 9.
53. "Proceso contra Francisco Romaña, Corporal del Regimiento de Luisiana por proposiciones y blasfemo, 1797," AGN, Inquisición, tomo 1379, exp. 5.
54. AGN, Inquisición, tomo 1368, exp. 4.
55. DLF, reel 6, Feb. 24, 1797 and June 19, 1797.
56. AGN, Inquisición, tomo 1339, exp. 13.