

IN MEMORIAM: *MIGUEL LEÓN-PORTILLA*, 1926–2019

On October 1, Miguel León-Portilla, a distinguished Mexican scholar and collaborator of the Academy of American Franciscan History, died in Mexico City at age 93.* The best words I have found to acknowledge the breadth of his academic activities are those of another distinguished Franciscan scholar, the late fray Lino Gómez Canedo. Fray Lino, on the occasion of presenting the Serra Award of the Americas to León-Portilla, described him as “a great teacher whose influence transcends the vast field of American culture. His profound understanding of the Nahuatl culture has prompted him to uncover its relationship with other Mexican and American cultures. A true humanist, León-Portilla has sought to view the complete Nahuatl experience in the perspective of the great world cultures.” The Serra Award of the Americas was offered by the Academy of American Franciscan History to outstanding Americanists. León-Portilla received it in 1978.

León-Portilla’s academic activities were not restricted to Nahua culture. He wrote notable books and articles in the fields of historiography, codices, linguistics, Mayan culture, biographies, and Indian revolts, contributing in addition critical editions and translations of Nahuatl texts to Spanish. He also published important works on the history of Lower California. His most widely read work is *The Broken Spears (La visión de los vencidos)*; it has had 29 editions and has been translated into several languages. A member of the National Academy of Sciences, he received more than a dozen honoris causae doctorates from national and international universities, and in 2013 was named a Living Legend by the US Library of Congress. In Mexico, he was a member of the Colegio Nacional, the Academia Mexicana de la Historia, and the Academia Mexicana de la Lengua.

A very important aspect of León-Portilla’s academic activities, to which little attention seems to have been given, is his most significant contribution to our

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knowledge of the sixteenth-century Franciscan writers who were important witnesses of the Mexican indigenous past. León-Portilla's great interest in the sources by which we know of Nahuatl culture led him to take this matter as one of his favorite subjects. In a cursory review of his published works, I found more than 30 books and articles that deal with Franciscan historical writers. Naturally, the largest number of them are dedicated to fray Bernardino de Sahagún and his *Opus magnum*. León-Portilla's work includes the study not only of Sahagún's published works but also of his numerous manuscripts, which are dispersed in the archives and libraries of many countries. For León-Portilla, this topic was the door to enter into the rich cultural legacy of the Nahuatl peoples. In 2005, he began to work with a group of Mexican scholars on a transcription of the original Nahuatl text of the *Florentine Codex* and its translation into Spanish. The advances this project has made are now being published in the journal *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl*¹ and have been the focus of three colloquia celebrated in the Biblioteca Franciscana in Cholula, Puebla.

Fray Juan de Torquemada, another Franciscan writer keenly interested in native Mexican culture, was also a research subject of León-Portilla, and it is thanks to his studies that the credibility of Torquemada's *Monarquía indiana* is being restored. This work had long been considered a pure plagiarism by Torquemada of Jerónimo de Mendieta's *Historia eclesiástica indiana*, but, beginning with a 1965 popular edition of Torquemada's *Monarquía*, León-Portilla outlined the basic themes to reassess its historical value. In that popular edition, he proposed to compile and study the Franciscan writer's biographical data, with two aims: to analyze the different trends of writing chronicles in the sixteenth century to appropriately situate Torquemada's work, and to focus on Torquemada's idea of history, the sources of his *Monarquía*, and his research methods.

Ten years later, these areas of study were thoroughly covered in the critical edition of the *Monarquía*, published in seven volumes by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). Thanks to exhaustive research in both indigenous and Spanish sources, some of them unpublished, León-Portilla revealed Torquemada to be a convincing and innovative historian. This study can be considered the best analysis of Torquemada's life and work we have. León-Portilla's esteem for this Franciscan writer can be summed up in his closing remarks on Torquemada's biography: "Fray Juan de Torquemada looks like a Franciscan with a strong and at times aggressive personality, but he left many historical testimonies in his multiple works. His *Monarquía indiana*, rich

1. Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, <http://www.historicas.unam.mx/publicaciones/revistas/nahuatl/nahuatl.html>, accessed January 12, 2020.

in historical information, is a requisite source for those who study not only the pre-Hispanic past of Mexico, but also the meaning of the cultural shock of the Spanish conquest, the implementation of our social and political institutions, and the history of the first century of New Spain.”

Other Franciscan writers to whom León-Portilla dedicated significant time and effort are fray Alonso de Molina, fray Andrés de Olmos, and fray Juan Bautista Viseo. León-Portilla wrote exhaustive and well-documented prologues to Molina’s *Vocabulario*, Olmos’s *Arte para aprender la lengua mexicana*, and Juan Bautistás *Huehuetlatolli*. Worth mentioning also are his articles on fray Juan de Zumárraga, the first archbishop of Mexico, who dreamed of having the Holy Scripture translated into Indian languages. Also important are his articles on fray Junípero Serra, the best-known missionary of the northwestern Mexican frontier.

Leon-Portilla’s edition of the *Diálogos de los doce primeros franciscanos*, with a direct translation of the Nahuatl text into Spanish, is undoubtedly his most important contribution for approaching the difficult process of expressing Christian ideas with Nahua thoughts. The text of the *Diálogos*, written in Nahuatl with a Spanish translation by fray Bernardino de Sahagún, was known as early as 1924, and since then has been studied by various European and North American scholars. Without denying the numerous controversies this work has provoked among historians who have focused on its historicity and its value as testimony of the Christianization of the Nahua people, there is no doubt that it deserves a special place in the history of Christian literature. It would be difficult to find in multi-secular literature a work that expresses so well the basic theological concepts of Christianity with concepts from a completely different culture. One example: the theological concept of the Incarnation is expressed in the Nahuatl text as “*ocuinocutlico in tomaceualnacayo* [He took for Himself our *macehual* flesh].” Another example, to express the Redemption: “*tlatolli in nemaquixtiloni* [the Word that frees people],” and another, to transmit a concept of the Bible, *Muchi teuamuxpan tlilotoc, tlapallotoc, muchi oncan ixq’ch mopia in axcan, in cenca mauicauhqui teutlatoli* [Everything is in the Divine Book, with black ink, with red ink, everything is kept there, the great marvelous Words].”

León-Portilla’s best assessment of the works of the sixteenth-century Franciscans is found in his book *Los franciscanos vistos por el hombre náhuatl*, published by UNAM in 1985. In this book, he collected from pictorial and Nahua documents the significant texts in which the Nahua people expressed their thoughts about the Franciscans and their missionary endeavors. Significant dates, such as the arrival of the Twelve Apostles of Mexico, and the foundation

of the Franciscan monasteries, receive special attention in these Nahuatl annals. Missionaries such as Alonso de Molina, Bernardino de Sahagún, and Juan de Torquemada, who are mentioned throughout the Spanish chronicles, are also present in these Nahuatl documents. One case deserves particular attention. While Pedro de Gante was still alive, the Aztecs wrote a poem comparing the heart of fray Pedro to a book elaborated with colorful hieroglyphics such as those found in their ancient codices: “*In tlapalamoxtli moyolo, tipalepetolo, inquisquich mocuic in tonehuia Jesucristo* [A book with painted colors: your heart, you father Pedro, many are your songs we intone to Jesus].” It would be difficult to find a better eulogy for a Franciscan who dedicated his life to teaching and educating the Indian people. This poem was read at the meeting of the General Chapter of the Franciscan Order in San Diego in 1991. The text, in Nahuatl and Spanish, remains registered in the General Chapter acts.

I would like to close my memory of this much appreciated scholar with his own words, written some twenty years ago. “The Giver of Life [*Ipalnemoani*] keeps me in his painted book [*tlapallotoc*, book of colors], He gives me life with his flowers and songs [poetry]. One day, like everyone else, the black ink [*tlillotoc*] will mark my end. I hope that, as the wise ones in the Nahuatl world believed, I will be able to say that ‘my flowers will not perish, my songs will not be silenced. I deliver them to the house of the bird with the red and blue feathers,’ there, where dwells the One who, without being Himself history [*sin ser él mismo historia*], is the One who makes it possible and in the end [He] gives it a meaning.”

León-Portilla’s words, which express the profound meaning of his life, became a reality on October 1, 2019.

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