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Absent Voices: Experience of common life in world history
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Between the Cross and the Crown: daily life in post-conquest Central Mexico, 1521 to 1600.

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The depopulation of the central valley of Mexico after the conquest greatly disrupted labor and social relations in daily life. Epidemics hit native men more than women since men had more social contact with the conquerors. The diseases they brought scared the indigenous population who felt that the indigenous gods were not protecting them, and wondered if the new immune people had a better god. This validated the Spanish religion and consolidating colonial power. Strict social stratification among Michica or Aztecs was already a familiar system. In colonialism's initial phase, Spaniards took local women as wives, sometimes in consensual unions.

Preconquest Mexico had been stratified into a nobility, a middle sector, and the commoners. The Spaniards brought their own system of stratification, structured foremostly along lines of descent. *Limpieza de sangre* (pureness of blood) was a precondition to achieving success in Spain: Spaniards brought this idea to Mexico, but brought few Spanish women. At their maximum at certain periods, only 28% of Spanish settlers were females. The blood hierarchy became complicated by men's and women's willingness to cross racial boundaries. Within fifteen years mixing was visible, creating difficulties for Spaniards to maintain social hierarchy through marriage.

Racially mixed individuals were usually considered illegitimate. Many bastard children, often racially mixed, had no official fathers, thus no access to their biological fathers' wealth. They became the first street urchins in the central valley of Mexico. Color became marker of status. Two types of whites existed: Criollos (people of Spanish descent born in Mexico) and Spanish-born men and women. Mexico City was spacialized by gender, class, and race. Each town had a *pueblo bajo*, the bad part of town marked by bars, poor people, and ill-constructed houses. Drinking had been highly regulated by the Aztecs, but the Spaniards had no such restrictions; poverty and anxiety led to alcohol abuse. Heavy drinkers could not keep jobs and constituted an underclass of vagabonds, hoods, and thieves. Homicides were common in the pueblo bajo.

The central valley of Mexico had been intensively urbanized prior to Spanish arrival - 250,000 persons lived in Tenochtitlan. The Spaniards had come primarily for gold and silver bullion, though many eventually resigned themselves to becoming agricultural producers. There had been a frenzy of expeditions to find gold and silver. Coronado came to Kansas, the Spaniards to Peru. In 1546 the Spaniards hit gold and silver, the first major silver strike, followed by several more. Everything imploded into the valley of Mexico. Mexico City became the new empire's center of gravity for Pacific trade. Everything centered around the trade of silver. After the conquest, the previous labor systems gave way to wage labor. Spaniards recruited the indigenous population as miners, and some

five thousand miners moving to Zacatecas stimulated agricultural production and siphoned labor from the central valley of Mexico. But by 1560 the depopulation of the Valley of Mexico bounced back up to 100,000 and by 1600 had reached 200,000. With silver available, a monetary system appeared, and the city proved attractive for financial dealings. A metropolitan network of villages and towns fed into the city itself.

In colonial Mexico, the life cycle determined many aspects of social experience. Persons aged 50 were considered old; 60 ancient. Childhood was brief. Children worked as soon as they were capable. Schooling primarily belonged to the upper levels of society. Poor Indian children had no access to convent education. Age usually determined opportunities. An individual without a place by age 24 suffered compromised social mobility, as did women not married by 20 or who had lost their husbands and families to disease. Since marriage was acceptable at a young age, and because men often postponed marriage to acquire wealth, often a wide age gap existed between husbands and wives. Independent single women suffered much social vulnerability. This led to extra-marital arrangements: in return for someone to wash their clothes and make food, men cohabited with women and protected them from crime. Women might have sexual relations with men for these purposes.

Everyday life was complicated by all these categories. Religion featured hugely in Aztec society as well as Spanish. At this historical moment the Spanish wished fervently to cleanse the Church of corruption and renew it. Franciscans, Augustinians, and Dominicans were at the head of the pack; Jesuits did not come until 1571, but immediately became wealthy, powerful and influential; offensive enough to get kicked out in 1767. Roughly 800 friars (missionaries) worked the precincts and barrios. Thousands of nuns came over. Many Spanish women joined nunneries, not necessarily interested in the vocation; but women who did not marry otherwise drained family finances. Secular clergy did not necessarily come to the new world with missionary zeal; many Spanish priests were simply sick of Spain. Priests who were third or fourth son of someone struggling to keep middle-class status might be particularly eager to go to the New World, eager for a good parish like Guadalajara or Veracruz, particularly near a rich part of Mexico City where they might be invited by rich people to dinner and vacation.

Another domain that must be mentioned was Spanish bureaucracy. Spaniards, especially the Habsburgs, loved bureaucracy. The Crown took a cut of whatever wealth with a cultural system requiring stamps for all forms that still endures today. Every child, when born, received a long document inquiring the identity of his grandparents, parents, how many children were already in the family, etc. Bureaucratic presence of Spanish colonial rule was everywhere.