

**Margaret Chowning, *Rebellious Nuns: The Troubled History of a Mexican Convent, 1752-1863*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006. £19.99, ISBN 0 19 518221 9 (hardback), pp. x + 296**

**Reviewed by: Lita van Bunnik, PhD student, Religious Studies Department  
Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, WELLINGTON, NEW ZEALAND**

The title of this book intrigued me. I knew nothing about religious life in Mexico or anything in particular about Mexico at the time of the existence of the convent of La Purísima. I wondered, rebellious towards whom? Why rebellious? Rebellious nuns today would most likely have their story told, so why not the story of rebellious nuns of 150 – 250 years ago? What would have caused them to rebel? These are possibly the questions that Margaret Chowning asked when she stumbled across material incorrectly archived that inspired her to dig deeper and to investigate further.

Chowning introduces her story by explaining how she came across the archival records of the convent of La Purísima in San Miguel that led her to put aside another project to explore further its history. She explains that the first part of the book is a more narrative account of the history of the convent while in the second section of the book the tone changes to a slightly more academic and social scientific presentation. The Introduction also offers five themes that the author proposes to cover in the story, and she explains that she does not allow those themes to inhibit the story line but rather allows the story to flow rather than to be always referring to the contextual themes.

La Purísima was founded by María Josepha Lina while she was a young woman, and the eldest of a large family of children who had been orphaned. Her parents were wealthy, well-to-do people and María Josepha Lina was an independent woman whose confessor was a man known for starting new religious foundations. After some years, notably fewer than the normal time period for permission to be granted, La Purísima was founded in temporary accommodation while the convent was built from a major share of María Josepha Lina's inheritance.

In Mexico at that time the establishment of a convent added to the prestige and economic welfare of a town. There was much fanfare on the arrival of the four founding nuns from a Conceptionist convent in Mexico City, and their settlement into the new foundation. Although the convent would be the home of religious women with a spiritual calling, it was not unknown for unmarried daughters, orphaned and illegitimate daughters of the rich, and those who sought freedom to pursue intellectual and creative pursuits (as opposed to marriage and childbirth) to make a home in a convent. Ten years after the founding of the convent in San Miguel on 1st February 1756 the new foundation moved in magnificent procession to their newly built cloister.

What was the cause of the rebellion? While the Conceptionists were known to be an order that observed a lax rule, the first two superiors, nuns from Mexico City, were keen to live a more austere and rigid daily distribution than they had been used to and that one of their founding group and many of the new nuns to join the convent were willing or able to live. In the first ten years the median age of the new entrants was 18.5 years, some being as young as 14 or 15 and a strict observance of the rule would not have suited many of them. These very young women were most likely expecting to live the *vida particular* whereby they would have servants and their own cooking arrangements as well as the ability to bargain and barter for goods with the locals at the grille during the times that they were not at prayer.

This is a fascinating story of many colourful characters both within and outside the convent walls that is well researched and referenced, with non-glossy photographs and informative tables that give personal information about the main characters and comparisons with similar cloisters in the vicinity. It is also the story of how one woman in particular, with her supporters, can influence her convent to make radical changes, that allow, for instance, horse riding in the convent grounds and theatre productions, amidst the changing contexts of convent leadership, of church leaders and their decrees, while situated in a time of changing relationships between women and the church, politics and the church, and intellectual life and society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Chowning has produced a valuable history of religious life for both a local and an international readership by analysing the wealth of resources such as letters, convent administrative documents and bishops' reports (or lack of) that she has sourced. This story is revealing of the attitudes of church hierarchy towards women and their personal attitudes to reformed convents, as well as of the many and complex reasons for problems within this and no doubt some other convents. It is also revealing of the striving of a group of women for independence from church authorities so that they can be free to make their own decisions about life within their convent.

In clarifying the names of the nuns such as pointing out that the first two superiors' names both end with the words "del Santísimo Sacramento" Chowning neglects to mention the similarity in the names of the third superior and one of the rebellious nuns, Anna María Josepha de los Dolores and Anna María de los Dolores respectively, the former of whom is only named once that way in the narrative and always without "Josepha" later – it must be the same person because of her position in the convent and according to the personal information such as year and age at entrance provided in the tables. While I did find some of the financial details of the second section a little tedious they were essential to building a picture of the lifestyle of the convent over the years and its changing character. Also, I wondered if the author had considered inserting a map of the area including diocesan and provincial boundaries to assist the reader in placing towns, cities and bishoprics.