

## Module 01: Demographic Catastrophe — What Happened to the Native Population After 1492?

### Evidence 5: The Ten Plagues

# A

#### Introduction

Fray Toribio de Benavente, better known by his Indian name, Motolinía, was one of a group of twelve Franciscan friars who journeyed to New Spain in 1523, after the surrender of Tenochtitlán and the establishment of Spanish rule in Mexico. Others were sent to surrounding towns to baptize the Indians. Fray Toribio remained in Mexico City, built with Aztec labor on the site of Tenochtitlán after the Spaniards razed the city. Civil and church authorities often clashed over policies, and Fray Toribio became an outspoken critic of "the Spaniards," his epithet for Spanish laity whose maltreatment of the Indians was, he believed, jeopardizing not only his efforts to convert the native peoples but also the entire Spanish colonial enterprise. Though the two were not friends, Las Casas and Motolinía shared similar views on Spanish treatment of the Indians.

Motolinía's *History of the Indians of New Spain*, completed in 1541, is a testimony to his admiration for the people he ministered to in the name of the Catholic Church. The *History* is in large measure an account of his successful efforts to convert Native Americans, but Fray Toribio also described the people and their customs, the landscape, the plants and animals of the region, and, as in the selection below, the arrival of the Spaniards and the experiences of the native peoples at the hands of their Spanish conquerors. At times, he based his account on testimony from those who lived through the events.

In Chapter 1 of the *History*, Motolinía used biblical allegory — the ten plagues — to tell his story. The account is a chronological one, beginning before the siege and fall of Tenochtitlán with the plague of "smallpox" that erupted in the capital city in the fall of 1520. His account has been used by many to explain the origins of the first "virgin soil" epidemic to ravage Central America in the sixteenth century. The "Captain Narváez" referred to in the tale of the first plague was sent by the governor of Cuba to stop Cortés, whose march to the interior of Mexico and determination to claim

territory for Spain violated the terms under which the governor had commissioned the expedition. The Tlaxcallans, referenced in the second plague, were those natives who allied themselves with Cortés against the Aztecs.

### Questions to Consider

- What sorts of words did Motolinía use to describe the epidemic?
- According to Fray Toribio, how did the native peoples respond to the smallpox epidemic? What kinds of treatments did they use?
- What other "plagues" beset the people of Mexico after the arrival of the Spaniards? According to Motolinía, how "terrible" were those plagues compared to the experience with smallpox?
- What part do you think the friar would assign to this epidemic in the pantheon of ill fortune that bested the Aztecs after the arrival of the Spaniards?

### Document



Here begins the account of the things, idolatries, rites and ceremonies which the Spaniards found in New Spain when they conquered it, together with many other notable things which they found in the land.

### Chapter 1

Of how and when the first friars who made that journey set out; and of the persecutions and plagues which occurred in New Spain.

In the year of our Lord 1523, on the day of the conversion of Saint Paul, which is the 25th of January, Father Fray Martin de Valencia, of blessed memory, with eleven friars as his companions set out from Spain to this land of Anáhuac, sent by the most reverend father, Fray Francisco de los Angeles, at that time General of the Order of Saint Francis. They came with

great indulgences and pardons from our very Holy Father, and at the special command of His Majesty our Lord the Emperor to convert the Indians, natives of this land of Anáhuac, now New Spain.

God struck and chastened with ten terrible plagues this land and all who dwelt in it, both natives and foreigners.

The first was a plague of smallpox, and it began in this manner. When Hernando Cortés was captain and governor, at the time that Captain Pánfilo de Narváez landed in this country, there was in one of his ships a negro stricken with smallpox, a disease which had never been seen here. At this time New Spain was extremely full of people, and when the smallpox began to attack the Indians it became so great a pestilence among them throughout the land that in most provinces more than half the population died; in others the proportion was little less. For as the Indians did not know the remedy for the disease and were very much in the habit of bathing frequently, whether well or ill, and continued to do so even when suffering from smallpox, they died in heaps, like bedbugs. Many others died of starvation, because, as they were all taken sick at once, they could not care for each other, nor was there anyone to give them bread or anything else. In many places it happened that everyone in a house died, and, as it was impossible to bury the great number of dead, they pulled down the houses over them in order to check the stench that rose from the dead bodies so that their homes became their tombs. This disease was called by the Indians 'the great leprosy' because the victims were so covered with pustules that they looked like lepers. Even today one can see obvious evidences of it in some individuals who escaped death, for they were left covered with pockmarks.

Eleven years later there came a Spaniard who had measles, and from him the disease was communicated to the Indians; if great care had not been taken to prevent their bathing, and to use other remedies, this would have been as terrible a plague and pestilence as the former. Even with all these precautions many died. They called this the year of the 'little leprosy.'

The second plague was the great number of those who died in the conquest of New Spain, especially around Mexico. For you must know that when Hernando Cortés landed on the coast of this country, with the energy which he always showed, he scuttled his ships to rouse the courage of his men,

and plunged into the interior. After marching forty leagues he entered the land of Tlaxcallan, one of the largest provinces of the country and most thickly populated. Entering the inhabited part of it, he established himself in some temples of the devil in a little town called Tecoautzinco (the Spaniards called it Torrecilla, 'the little tower,' because it is on a height) and while there he fought for two weeks with the Indians roundabout. They are called Otomíes and are people of low condition, like peasants. A great number of them came together, for the country is thickly populated. The Indians who live farther in the interior speak the languages of Mexico.

As the Spaniards were fighting valiantly with these Otomíes, the news reached Tlaxcallan; whereupon the lords and principal men came out, formed a great friendship with the Spaniards, took them to Tlaxcallan, gave them presents and supplies in abundance and showed them great affection. Not content to remain in Tlaxcallan, after resting for a few days they took the road to Mexico. The great lord of Mexico, whose name was Moteuczoma, received them in peace, coming out in great majesty, attended by many noble lords. He gave many jewels and gifts to Captain Hernando Cortés and a very good reception to all his companions; and so, with his safe-conduct and agreement they went about Mexico for many days. At this time Pánfilo de Narváez arrived with many more men and horses than Hernando Cortés had. Put under the banner and command of Cortés, they showed themselves very mighty and presumptuous because of their arms and numbers, but were so humbled and humiliated by God that the Indians, wishing to throw them out of the city and beginning to make war upon them, drove them out with very little difficulty. More than half the Spaniards died in the retreat from the city, and nearly all the others were wounded, as were also the friendly Indians; in fact the whole force came very near to destruction and had great difficulty in getting back to Tlaxcallan, because of the many warriors who followed them all the way. When they reached Tlaxcallan they cared for their wounds and got back their strength, always showing courage; and, making the best of a bad situation, they set out on a campaign of conquest, accompanied by many of the Tlaxcaltecas, and conquered the land of Mexico. In order to conquer Mexico they had built brigantines in Tlaxcallan which can be seen today in the shipyards of Mexico. These brigantines they carried in pieces from Tlaxcallan to Tetzaco, a distance of fifteen leagues. When they had put the brigantines together and launched them, having by this time taken many towns and won others over to fight on their side, a great number of

warriors went out from Tlaxcallan to fight for the Spaniards against the Mexicans, for they had always been their very deadly enemies. In Mexico and on the Mexican side there was much greater strength, because all the most powerful lords of the land were in Mexico and on her side. When the Spaniards arrived they laid siege to Mexico. The captains waged war savagely along the highways and tore down every bit of the city that they captured; before this practice was instituted, so as the Spaniards retired to their camps at night the Indians re-took all that the Spaniards had won during the day and reopened the highways. Having made a practice of tearing down buildings and blocking up roads, they took the city after many days. In this war, because of the great numbers who died in both armies, men compared the number of the dead and say that it is greater than the number of those who died in Jerusalem when it was destroyed by Titus and Vespasian.

The third plague was a very great famine which came immediately after the taking of the city of Mexico. As they were unable to plant because of the great wars, some of them defending the land and helping the Mexicans and others fighting on the side of the Spaniards, and as what was planted by one side was cut down and laid waste by the other, they had nothing to eat. Although it sometimes happens that there are barren years in this country, years of little rainfall or of heavy frost, the Indians at such times eat a variety of different roots and herbs, for they can endure barren years better and more easily than other races. In this year of which I am speaking, however, there was such a scarcity of grain (which in this country they call centli when it is in the ear, and in the Islands they call it maíz; and the Spaniards use this latter word, and many others which they brought from the Islands to New Spain); corn, I say, was so scarce then even the Spaniards were in difficulties for lack of it.

The fourth plague was that of the calpixques or overseers, and the negroes. As soon as the land was divided, the conquerors put into their allotments and into the towns granted to them servants or negroes to collect the tributes and to look after their various affairs. These men lived, and still live, in the villages, and though for the most part they are peasants. . . . from Spain they have taken possession of the land and order the native lords around as if the latter were their slaves. Because I do not wish to disclose their defects, I shall keep silent about what I think and only say that they make themselves feared and insist upon service as if they were

the absolute and natural masters. They never do anything but demand, and however much people give them they are never content, for wherever they are they infect and corrupt everything, as foul as putrid flesh. They make no effort to do anything except give orders. They are the drones who eat the honey made by the poor bees who are the Indians, and they are not satisfied with what the poor things give them, but keep demanding. In the first years these overseers were absolute in their maltreatment of the Indians, over-loading them, sending them far from their land and giving them many other tasks, that many Indians died because of them and at their hands, which is the worst feature of the situation.

The fifth plague was the great taxes and tributes that the Indians paid. As they had, in the temples of their idols and in the possession of their lords and chief men and in many tombs, a great quantity of gold, the accumulation of many years, the Spaniards began to exact heavy tributes from them, and the Indians, terrified of the Spaniards ever since the war, gave everything they had. As the tributes, however, were so continuous that they scarcely paid one when they were obliged to pay another, they sold children and their lands to the money lenders in order to meet obligations; and when they were unable to do so many died because of it, some under torture and some in cruel prisons, for the Spaniards treated them brutally and considered them less than beasts.

The sixth plague was the gold mines, for in addition to the taxes and tributes paid by the towns which had been granted to the Spaniards, the latter began to seek for mines, and it would be impossible to count the number of Indians who have, up to the present day, died in these mines. Gold of this country was a second golden calf, worshipped as a god, for they came all the way from Castile through many dangers and difficulties to adore it. Now that they have it, please God it may not be to their damnation.

The seventh plague was the building of the great city of Mexico, which, in the first years, employed more people than the building of the of Jerusalem. So many were the people engaged in the work that could scarcely make his way along some streets and highways, broad as they are. In the construction some were crushed by beams, others fell from heights, others were caught beneath buildings which were being torn down in one place to be built up again in another; especially did this illicit when they

tore down the principal temples of the devil. Many Indians died there, and it was many years before they completely demolished the temples, from which they obtained an enormous amount of stone.

The custom of this country is not the best in the world, for the Indians do the work, get the materials at their own expense, pay the stonemasons and carpenters, and if they do not bring their own food, they go hungry. They carry all the material on their backs and drag the beams and big stones with ropes, and as they had no machinery and plenty of people, they used four hundred men to transport a stone that required one hundred. It is their custom to sing and shout as they work, and their songs and cries scarcely stopped day or night, so great was the zeal which, in the early days, they brought to the building of the town.

The eighth plague was the slaves whom the Spaniards made in order to put them to work in the mines. So great was their haste, in some years, to make slaves that from all parts of Mexico they brought in great herds of them, like flocks of sheep, in order to brand them. They were not content with those who among the Indians are called slaves (for, although according to their cruel and barbarous law some may be slaves, in actual truth almost no one is), but hurried the Indians so to produce slaves in tribute — so many every eighty days — that having exhausted the supply real slaves, they brought their children and their *macehuals* (who are of a low social class, like farmer-vassals) and all whom they could get together, and brought them in, terrifying them into saying that they were slaves. The fact that no careful investigation was made and that branding was cheap produced so many marks on their faces, in addition to the royal brand, that they had their faces covered with letters, for they bore the marks of all who had bought and sold them. For this reason this eighth plague cannot be considered the least.

The ninth plague was the service of the mines, to which the heavily laden Indians traveled sixty leagues or more to carry provisions; the food which they carried for themselves gave out when they reached the mines and sometimes on the way back before they reached home; sometimes they were kept by the miners for several days to help them get out the mineral or to build houses for them or to serve them, and when their food gave out they died, either at the mines or on the road, for they had no money to buy food and there was no one to give it to them. Some reached home in such

a state that they died soon after. The bodies of these Indians and of the slaves who died in the mines produced such a stench that it caused a pestilence, especially at the mines of Oaxtepec. For half a league around these mines and along a great part of the road one could scarcely avoid walking over dead bodies or bones, and the flocks of birds and crows that came to feed upon the corpses were so numerous that they darkened the sun, so that many villages along the road and in the district were deserted. Other Indians fled to the woods, abandoning their houses and fields.

The tenth plague was the divisions and factions which existed among the Spaniards in Mexico; this was the one that most endangered the country, had it not been that the Lord kept the Indians blinded. These dissensions were the cause of the execution of some Spaniards and the injury and exile of others. Some were wounded when they came to blows, there being no one except the friars to reconcile them nor intervene. The few Spaniards left in Mexico were all passionate adherents of one party or the other, and the friars had to go out sometimes to prevent their fighting, and sometimes to separate them after they had started, exposing themselves to the shots and weapons of the combatants and the hoofs of the horses. They had to be kept from fighting both because it endangered the Spanish possession of the country and because it was known that the Indians were ready for war and had made provision of arms and were only awaiting the arrival of an expected piece of news. According to a conspiracy arranged by the Indians with those who escorted him, the captain and governor, Hernando Cortés, was to be killed on the road to Las Hibueras. Cortés discovered the conspiracy very near to the spot where the assassination was to have taken place. He executed the chief men who were involved in the treason, thus putting an end to that danger. Here in Mexico the Indians were waiting for one party of Spaniards to defeat the other in order to fall upon those who should be left and put them all to the sword. God, however, did not permit this, not wishing that what had with such difficulty been won to His service should be lost; and He Himself gave grace to the friars to pacify the belligerent factions and the Spaniards to obey the friars as their true fathers, which they did. The Spaniards themselves had begged the Friars Minor (for at that time there were no others) to use the powers granted to them by the Pope until such time as bishops should be appointed. Thus, sometimes by treaty and sometimes by reproof, the friars remedied great evils and prevented many deaths.



Source:

Toribio Motolinía, *History of the Indians of New Spain*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Andros Foster (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973), 37-44.