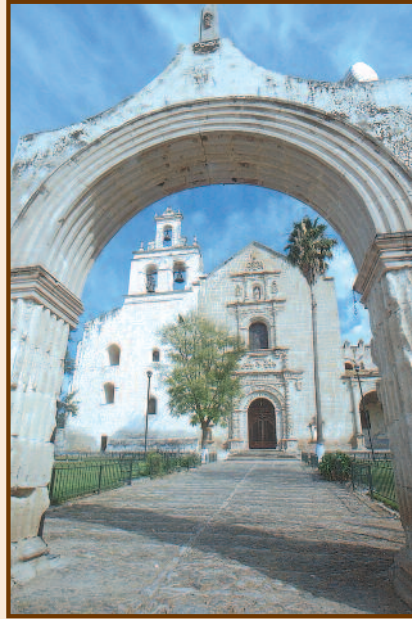
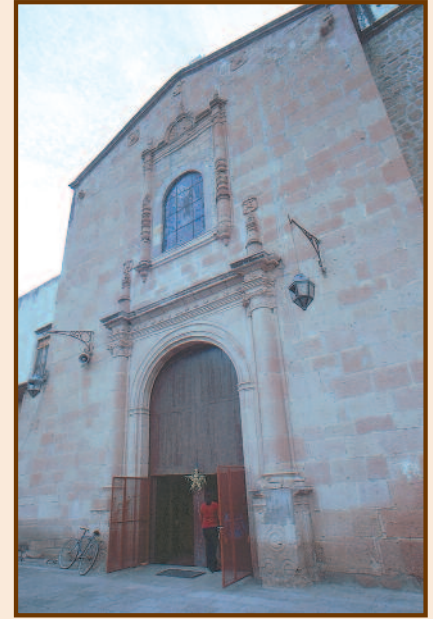




Side door, Saint Paul Church,
Yuriria.



Facade, Saint Mary Magdalene Church,
Cuitzeo.



Doorway, Santiago Monastery and Church,
Copándaro.

Yuriria, Cuitzeo and Copándaro Three Stone Arrows in the Heart of Michoacán

Jaime Abundis Canales*
Beatriz del Consuelo Camacho**

The Europeans' appropriation of Michoacán's lake district ("the place of those who have fish") in the third decade of the sixteenth century was less arduous than the conquest of Tenochtitlán. The Purépecha lords submitted to the conquistadors without a fight, and the radical change in their way of life was based on the evangelizing of two mendicant orders, the Franciscans and the Augustinian Hermits. In 1537, the Augustinian chapter elected Friar Nicolás de Ágreda as provin-

cial vicar, whom Viceroy Antonio de Mendoza asked to join the evangelizing work in Michoacán because there were insufficient Franciscans.¹ The encomendero of Tiripetío, Juan de Alvarado, offered them the town as a base of operations, and they used it to extend their work throughout Michoacán.²

Having arrived in 1533, after the Franciscans and Dominicans, the Augustinian Hermits came to the West Indies to evangelize, on the prompting of Saint Tomás de Villanueva, among others. Imbued with the sixteenth-century missionary spirit, the Augustinians had to go to the areas left open by other orders or places where there were not enough missionaries. This was the case of Mi-

* Mexican architect. Researcher at the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH).

** Volunteer at the Old San Ildefonso College.

Photos courtesy of Jaime Abundis.



Doorway, Saint Paul's Monastery, Yuriria.

Any description of the architectural virtues of Yuriria's monastery falls short of the building's real beauty.



Stairway, Saint Paul's Monastery, Yuriria.

choacán, where they had the support of their first bishop, Vasco de Quiroga.

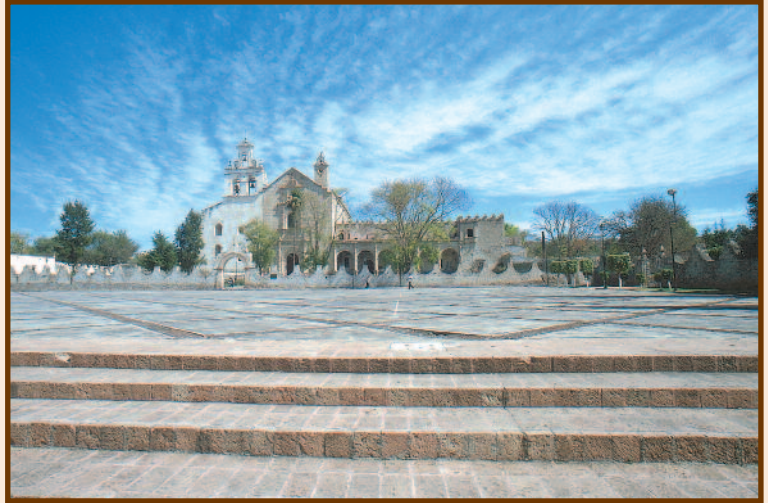
The task taken on by the mendicant friars in the first few decades was more complex than is usually imagined and ended up by profoundly transforming the indigenous peoples and establishing the basis for a new nation. The discovery of the native cultures, learning the languages, developing new teaching methods, getting the indigenous to congregate and settle, assimilating native traits, carrying out the cultural and religious educational process, eliminating old beliefs, laying out new towns, in brief, coming up with practical solutions to the many unexpected problems, were tasks that they had to deal with before they could undertake to erect permanent buildings.

One of those missionaries was Diego de Chávez, born of a wealthy family in Badajoz. His uncles Pedro and Jorge de Alvarado were prominent in the conquest of New Spain, but after arriving, Diego preferred to follow the religious life among the Augustinian Hermits from 1535 on. Two years

later, he settled in Tiripetío, where, in addition to his religious duties, he learned philosophy, scholastic theology, the Purépecha language and the work of the *alarifes*,³ architecture. Soon he became prior and erected new buildings. Thus, the illustrious Augustinian Friar Alonso de la Veracruz saw in Friar Diego the ideal candidate to found a new monastery near Yuririapúndaro (meaning the “lagoon of blood”) around 1550. Since the lake was fed by streams and springs, there was abundant drinking water, facilitating settlement. Friar Diego had to confront all the conflicts of evangelizing, but also the constant harassment of warring indigenous peoples in that then-border region. With support from General Alonso de Sosa, Friar Diego was able to contain them, congregate the friendly indigenous, plan the town and build an enormous monastery dedicated to Saint Paul, which he used to compare to El Escorial. When most of the work was done, he returned to Tiripetío to finish part of that town's monastery around 1562. Appointed bishop of Michoacán, he went to Mexico City, fell ill and, with-



Cloister corridor, Saint Mary Magdalene Monastery, Cuitzeo.



Saint Mary Magdalene Monastery, Cuitzeo.

In Cuitzeo a large indigenous population demanded the building of a luxurious open chapel into the doorway.

out taking his new office, died in 1573. He was buried in Tiripetío.

A short distance to the south of Yuriria was an indigenous settlement picked to establish another Augustinian parish monastery around 1550: Cuitzeo (meaning “the place of the large earthen jars”). Here, there was also an enormous lake, but since it was of salt water, even though it provided abundant fish, very deep wells had to be dug to obtain drinking water. Friars Francisco de Villafuerte and Miguel de Alvarado (a relative of Friar Diego de Chávez) founded a monastery dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene there. The warring indigenous tribes kept the neighboring villages on the defensive until the late sixteenth century, but they did not dare attack the main town. That first establishment was nothing more than a large hut, but it was soon replaced by a luxurious building inspired by the one in Yuriria. One of the villages under the Cuitzeo Augustinians was Copándaro (meaning “place of avocados”), located a short distance from the lake’s southern edge. For 16 years the Santiago

Copándaro *visita* was attended to from Cuitzeo, until it was elevated to a priory.⁴

At the center of the three towns, the Augustinians erected three extraordinary monasteries that continue to invite admiration. With the help of a master builder from Mexico City, Pedro del Toro, Friar Diego de Chávez designed and built an enormous monastery complex in Yuriria. A totally unprecedented case, here a cross-shaped church was laid out, a novelty in New Spain, on the south side of a two-story monastery organized around a traditional cloister. The cross-shaped lay-out would become common after the seventeenth century.

Any description of its architectural virtues falls short of the building’s real beauty. The church’s main doorway is undoubtedly derived from those of San Agustín Acolman and Santos Reyes Metztlán in the state of Hidalgo, although it has its own unique flavor thanks to the carved vines covering the second floor and the cap, enriching the carving of the balustered columns, the niches and the fine statues of the apostles Peter and Paul, the

Baby Jesus and the traditional founder of the order Saint Augustine of Hipona.

The side doorway, with its image of Saint Nicolás de Tolentino, is no less impressive. But, going through the doorway, the size and qualities of the nave itself cause the greatest awe. The barrel vault, decorated with a painted coffer is followed by the transept, the side transepts and the apse covered with Gothic ribs. Though the altarpiece that Friar Diego began has disappeared, today's neo-classical altars harmonize with the remains of the pictorial decoration. An Augustinian chronicler echoed the words of Tertullian about Rome's Pompeii Theater when he said of this church, "It was so great that only the spirit of He who made it was greater."

Next to the church is the monastery's superb doorway, which foreshadows its magnificent interior. The cloister is surrounded by arches on both levels, held up by columns anchored in strong

abutments; its lower corridors are covered in ribbed vaults, as is the stairway. The vestiges of murals that at one time made the rooms more beautiful can be seen everywhere. As the visitor walks through the chapter room, the refectory, the kitchen, the *cilla* (a cupboard for flour), the cells, the corridors, the *de profundis* room, the library, the WCs, the look-out points, stories from times past come out to meet him. If that were not enough, the exterior buttresses, the battlements and the talud give the building an uncommon monumental character.

The Cuitzeo complex seems to have been laid out by the same *alarife* from Mexico City given its similarity to Yuriria. However, its church is different in that it has the usual single nave. A large indigenous population in its early times demanded the building of a luxurious open chapel into the doorway, but the atrium was lost, including the unusual vaulted chamber at the center, used for teaching children.

The task taken on by the mendicant friars in the first few decades of the colonial era ended up by profoundly transforming the indigenous peoples.



Corner of the cloister, Santiago Monastery, Copándaro.



Santiago Church and Monastery, Copándaro.

The church's doorway, less elaborate than Yuriria's but no less sumptuous, seems to have been carved by an indigenous artisan named Juan Metl (meaning "maguety" in Nahuatl), according to the inscription on one of the frames. Its three superimposed openings are flanked by beautiful columns that emphasize the vertical. The church's interior proportions are surprising. It once held three beautiful golden altarpieces, the largest of which was a work with paintings and sculptures made in Mexico City.

The cloister has a large cistern under the floor for collecting rain water and a double row of arches on the second floor. It also has the remains of murals; of particular interest is one of a crucified friar on the stairway landing. Pillars, columns, ribs, arches, vaults, frames, doorways, battlements and buttresses all testify to the quality and building style of the sixteenth century.

An attempt was made to reproduce the Cuitzeo monastery more simply and on a smaller scale in Copándaro. The church's doorway reflects harmony and wisdom, despite its simplicity. The murals on the doorway, the nave, the chancel and the hallways show the mastery of their painters. But the minuscule cloister is the convent's gem. Two

elliptical arches on the bottom crowned by round arches paired above suffice to give it an unusually human, warm scale.

The Augustinian coat of arms, crowned by its three arrows, alluded to Saint Augustine's particular devotion for the Holy Trinity. These three extraordinary monasteries cleave themselves to the heart of Michoacán's lake district like three stone and wooden arrows that symbolize better than anything else the full charitable effort of those sons of doctor Saint Augustine to offer a better life to their mild sixteenth-century flocks.⁵ **MM**

NOTES

¹ A chapter is a regular meeting of religious in which they decide on important matters.

² An encomendero was a landlord in charge materially and spiritually of a group of indigenous. [Editor's Note].

³ *Alarife* is an archaic term derived from Arabic meaning architect or master builder.

⁴ A *visita* was a church attended to from time to time by the friars whose main base was a central monastery.

⁵ Saint Augustine was one of Catholic Church's four illustrious doctors (givers of doctrine) in the Middle Ages.