

Mexico—The Essentials



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Family

A Pillar of Society

Each year at Carnival in Huejotzingo, Puebla, residents proudly reenact the first Christian marriage of an indigenous couple in the Americas. The newlyweds created Mexico's first Catholic family as the building block of a new society. In Huejotzingo's Carnival drama, the marriage completes the defeat of the Aztecs in 1521, when other Spaniards, both soldiers and missionaries, fanned out across what became New Spain. In Puebla, a Franciscan friar reached Huejotzingo on the eastern slope of the volcano Popocatepetl, converted the villagers with a mass baptism, and, for the first time in the hemisphere, began to marry the couples. These families became the ideal standard and the legal basis of society, and the procedures continued unchanged until the Liberal Constitution in 1857 provided a new definition of marriage. The liberal, secular family demonstrated the resilience of society's basic structures as it continued unchanged, although with some modifications, into the 1980s.

The essence of the family in Mexico is that it serves as the fundamental pillar of the community and the critical influence in individual identity. Catholic two-parent families predominate, but the strength of the institution today comes from its diverse forms with single parents, same-sex parents, and grandparents, among others.

CREATING THE COLONIAL FAMILY

After Spaniards arrived in the Americas, royal authorities insisted on the crown, Church, and family as the basic structures of the new colonial society. Seizing wealth and converting heathens provided the initial and constant activity, but the crown wanted to create a colony with a settled society, not the trading posts that resulted in Portugal's commercial empire. Royal policies dictated that the family, as it did in Spain, provided the center for kinship, socialization, and ownership of property.¹ The creation of families required fostering marriage and preserving households. The king's administrators promoted and protected the

family, and the religious officials supervised its moral aspects, through marriage and women's activities. Royal policy in the early 1500s ordered married Spaniards going to the Americas to take their wives. For those Spaniards already in New Spain, the decree ordered them to arrange for their wives' arrival within 2 years or to return to Spain. The same authorities ordered that Spaniards living with indigenous women must marry their partners, with fines and even deportation as penalties for failure to obey. Colonial officials attempted to induce compliance with their marriage strictures by using such regulations as declaring that only married Spaniards could receive a grant of Indian workers (the labor system called the *encomienda*) and limiting many government appointments to men who had demonstrated their maturity and sobriety through marriage.

The crown soon recognized that, with limited numbers of Spanish women in New Spain, the emerging society included various legal and consensual families, based on the different ethnicities in the population. Especially common were the families of Spanish males with indigenous women confirmed in the Church or through personal commitment, which resulted in children called mestizos. Other common-law marriages soon created numerous ethnically diverse families that included mulattoes (Spaniards and Africans) and Moriscos (persons with one African parent). Ultimately, in their well-known bureaucratic style, authorities recognized sixteen castes or *castas* and in many cases limited clothing, jewelry, transportation, and the right to carry weapons according to these categories. They made the categorization of the castes visible in portraits identified as *casta* paintings. These images portrayed the family, with mother, father, and child for each of the castes. Ethnicity and birthplace provided the critical markers of an individual's identity.

Marriage as a sacrament of the Church provided both legitimacy and continuity of the family. For the upper classes and those aspiring to social recognition, a Church marriage was essential. The Church ceremony insisted on ensuring that both men and women understood their responsibility within the family. The patriarchal character of Spanish families served as a model for the colony beginning in the sixteenth century. In this common description, the dominant father exerted all the legal powers inherent in *patria potestad*. As daughters, females remained subject to this authority until the age of 25, unless they married, in which case the authority over her passed to her husband. Women's status was defined in legal codes that dated from the Siete Partidas established during the reign of Alfonso X of Castile (1252–1284). The standard for women's behavior was described in several hortatory treatises. Three authors, Fray Martín de Córdoba (1500), Fray Hernando de Talavera (ca. 1500), and Luis Vives (1524) wrote texts that stressed spirituality, docility, virginity, and faithfulness to husbands after marriage. The first two treatises addressed noblewomen, and Vives directed his misogynistic oratory to women in general.