

# Miradas

Revista de Historia del Arte y la Cultura de las Américas y la Península Ibérica

**MIRADAS 09 (2025)**

**Special Issue:** Experience and reception of images, objects and spaces in the Iberian Peninsula and the Americas

**Special Issue editors:** Alicia Miguélez, Sara Carreño

**Editorial Deadline:** November 2025

**eISSN:** 2363-8087

<https://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/miradas>

**Edited by:** Miriam Oesterreich; Franziska Neff;  
Institut für Europäische Kunstgeschichte, Heidelberg University

**Hosted by:** University Library Heidelberg

**SUMMARY “With Deep Affection and Devotion”:** Mechanisms of Implantation and Devotional Experiences in the Transfer of Corpisanti Between Rome and New Spain (17th–19th Centuries)

**Receipt date:** 02/09/2024

**Acceptance date:** 24/01/2025

**DOI:** [doi.org/10.11588/mira.2025.2.114834](https://doi.org/10.11588/mira.2025.2.114834)

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**Citation:**

Báez Hernández, Montserrat Andrea. “SUMMARY “With Deep Affection and Devotion”:  
Mechanisms of Implantation and Devotional Experiences in the Transfer of Corpisanti  
Between Rome and New Spain (17th–19th Centuries).” Special issue *Experience and  
reception of images, objects and spaces in the Iberian Peninsula and the Americas*, edited  
by Alicia Miguélez and Sara Carreño. *MIRADAS – Journal for the Arts and Culture of the  
Américas and the Iberian Peninsula* 9 (2025): 79-93, [doi.org/10.11588/mira.2025.2.114834](https://doi.org/10.11588/mira.2025.2.114834).

# SUMMARY “With Deep Affection and Devotion”: Mechanisms of Implantation and Devotional Experiences in the Transfer of *Corpisanti* Between Rome and New Spain (17th–19th Centuries)

*Montserrat Andrea Báez Hernández\**

## **Abstract**

This paper examines the transfer, reception, and devotional development of a selection of Roman catacomb martyr relics (*corpisanti*) donated to New Spain (now Mexico) between the 17th and 19th centuries: St. Pontian in Mexico City (ca. 1603), St. Veneranda in Aguascalientes (1786), St. Innocentia in Guadalajara (1785), and St. Theodora in Xalapa (1792). Drawing on documentary evidence from Roman archives regarding the requests and donation processes, as well as reports from New Spain’s printed media—such as gazettes, devotional pamphlets, and novenas—this paper explores the motivations of the benefactors and the spiritual needs that drove these acquisitions. Additionally, it analyzes the mechanisms of devotional implantation, the social dynamics surrounding the relics’ arrival, and the factors that influenced their enduring veneration, decline, or neglect.

**Keywords:** New Spain • *Corpisanti* • Relics • Rome • Devotion

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The circulation of relics from Europe to New Spain began in the second third of the 16th century. Their acquisition and transport were influenced by various factors, including the vast distance between Rome and the Americas and, most importantly, jurisdictional differences stemming from the system of Royal Patronage (Real Patronato). In 1508, Pope Julius II issued a bull granting the Spanish monarchy universal patronage rights over the Catholic Church in the New World. As a result, ecclesiastical matters involving the New Spanish Church and the Holy See were first addressed to the king through the Council of the Indies (Báez Hernández 2024, 521). In this context, the acquisition of sacred remains often accompanied the establishment of new dioceses, convents, and the dedication of churches, though some relics were also received as papal gifts. Procurators played a crucial role in this process, acting as agents empowered by high-ranking clergy and religious orders to carry out such transactions. Their responsibilities included acquiring various „objects of devotion,“ such as Agnus Dei medallions, relics, crowns, paintings, engravings, and crucifixes, among other sacred items (Alcalá 2007, 142).

The first relics brought to New Spain were associated with Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the apostles or belonged to the founders and saints of mendicant orders such as the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians, among others. However, the transfer of these sacred remains did not always result in the successful settlement of their cult or devotion. Although their significance was previously defined due to their connection with these revered figures, it was ultimately the community that assigned them meaning by engaging with them and integrating them into their local history (Geary 1978, 3). To achieve this, it was essential to communicate their value through elements such as a reliquary, an iconographic representation, an authentication document, or an oral or written tradition (Geary 1978, 6). Relics could also foster the development or consolidation of their cults by manifesting their agency through miracles, divine favors, and extraordinary occurrences. Finally, adherence to liturgical regulations regarding their handling and display played a key role in constructing their sacred aura within society. The combination of these elements formed a structured mechanism for devotional implantation, which was particularly important in the American context (Feliciano 2023, 270).

In addition to the relics associated with the aforementioned figures, the 16th century saw the emergence of a new type of relic: the skeletal remains of Roman catacomb martyrs. The ancient Christian cemeteries, known as catacombs —named after the toponym *ad catacumbas*, referring to an area along the Via Appia where the Cemetery of St. Sebastian was excavated—emerged in the 2nd century as burial sites. The most important catacombs were built along the ancient Via Appia and the new Via Salaria, including those of St. Sebastian, Domitilla, Priscilla, St. Agnes, St. Lawrence, St. Pancras, and Saints Marcellinus and Peter (Báez Hernández 2021, 10). By the 5th century, these burial sites were no longer used, gradually becoming pilgrimage destinations to the tombs of popes and renowned martyrs buried within them (Bouza 1990, 52). Between the 6th and 9th centuries, most of these sacred remains were transferred to intramural churches in Rome in an effort to protect them from looting.

By the 16th century, the memory of the catacombs of Saints Pancras, Agnes, and Lawrence were the only ones preserved, as their namesake basilicas had been built over the cemeteries where these martyrs were originally buried. However, on May 31, 1578, a discovery reignited interest in these burial sites: a group of *pozzolana* diggers uncovered the galleries of the Cemetery of the Jordans (*Coemeterium Iordanum*) near the Via Salaria (Bouza 1990, 48). This find—mistaken at the time for the Cemetery of Priscilla—occurred during the papacy of Gregory XIII, who encouraged further exploration of the catacombs. Thanks to the writings of St. Jerome and Prudentius, who noted that the number of martyr tombs in these cemeteries was “beyond counting”, the skeletal remains discovered within them were interpreted as belonging to early Christian martyrs. This led to their systematic extraction and distribution as distinguished relics. The term *corposanto* („holy body“) or *corpisanti* („holy bodies“) was specifically used to refer to these remains of „unknown martyrs taken from the ancient cemeteries“ (Ferrua 1950, 586–588).

The *corpisanti* began to be donated to New Spain during the last third of the 16th century. These newly introduced martyrs, lacking hagiographies and absent from official martyrologies, had no established devotional references in New Spain. As a result, their sacred value was constructed based on their origins in the Roman catacombs. The dissemination of the sanctity of these ancient Christian cemeteries in New Spain was largely driven by the efforts of the Jesuits and Oratorians (Ghilardi 2018, 235), particularly the latter. Their founder, St. Philip Neri, reflected on the significance of these relics, and members of the order further promoted their veneration through influential works such as *Roma Sotterranea* (1651) by Paolo Aringhi and *De Ss. Martyrum Cruciatibus* (1605) by Antonio Gallonio, both of which circulated widely in New Spain (Báez Hernández 2018b, 191–194).

The use of edifying literature and the aforementioned mechanisms of devotional implantation were essential in settling the veneration of Roman catacomb martyrs, or *corpisanti*, in New Spain. However, a crucial factor in determining the development, endurance, or relevance of these devotions was the relics' agency, manifested through the miracles they granted to the receiving community. A relic's ability to produce miracles transformed devotees from passive observers into active participants in its sacredness. In other words, the significance of relics was fundamentally a social construct, they could become sacred symbols only if the community recognized and attributed such value to them (Geary 1978, 7).

Between the 17th and 19th centuries, four *corpisanti* were donated to New Spain: St. Pontian to Mexico City, St. Veneranda to Aguascalientes, St. Innocentia to Guadalajara, and St. Theodora to Xalapa, Veracruz. The first, St. Pontian, is mentioned in Francisco de Florencia's *Historia de la provincia de la Compañía de Jesús de Nueva España* (1694). The author listed him among the relics of the Colegio de San Pedro y San Pablo, noting that he was the only complete skeleton in the collection: “St. Pontian, the entire body on his altar.” Regarding its origins, Florencia recorded that it was part of a group of relics “brought at various times by procurators from Rome” (Florencia 1694, 359). Alegre (1958, 167) attributed the donation to the Jesuit Martín Peláez, who obtained the relic in 1603 while serving as a procurator in Rome.

The *corpisanti* donations granted in the last third of the 18th century—analyzed in this article—were made during the papacy of Pius VI (1775–1799). St. Innocentia was delivered to Guadalajara in 1785 (Biblioteca Apostólica Vaticana, Vat. Lat., 14461, *Regestum sacrarum reliquiarum*, f. 73v). St. Veneranda was requested in 1786 by the exiled Jesuit Manuel Flores Alatorre for Aguascalientes (Biblioteca Apostólica Vaticana, Vat. Lat., 14461, *Regestum sacrarum reliquiarum*, f. 131r). Finally, St. Theodora was sent to Xalapa, Veracruz, in 1792, with both the request and transportation expenses covered by Mexican noblewoman Bárbara Ortiz de Zárate.

The analysis of the cases of St. Pontian, St. Veneranda, St. Innocentia, and St. Theodora sheds light on the process of their donation and the key figures involved in their transfer—from members of the Roman Curia, such as the Vicar General of Rome and the Papal Sacristan, to the bishops of the dioceses that received them, as well as their benefactors. A review of documentary and printed sources related to each *corposanto* made it possible to identify the strategies used by the clergy to introduce and legitimize their veneration in the aforementioned cities. These included solemn processions, authentication ceremonies, and liturgical regulations about their public display. By acknowledging the sacred status of the Roman martyrs, these communities assimilated them as symbols of divine power, attributing agency to them through miracles, blessings, and supernatural occurrences, which in turn fostered the establishment of their cults. However, factors such as relocation, political and religious conflicts, and even the transformation of the relics and their reliquaries influenced the continuity of their veneration. As a result, the devotional trajectories of each *corposanto* varied, leading some to endure in collective memory while others faded into obscurity.

This paper aims to characterize the *corpisanti* as dynamic sacred objects with their own agency, as their interaction with devotees transformed them into symbols that continue to elicit various responses, not only from the faithful but also from secular observers. For this reason, some are still recognized as saints who evoke the origins of Christianity, others have been reinterpreted through legends, while some have fallen into obscurity or have even been targeted as relics of a past that certain groups sought to erase. In any case, the devotion to these ancient catacomb martyrs continues to evolve within the societies in which they are embedded.



Fig. 1: Saint Faustina martyr and her vas sanguinis. Collegiate Basilica of Our Lady of Guanajuato, Guanajuato. Photo: Montserrat A. Báez Hernández.

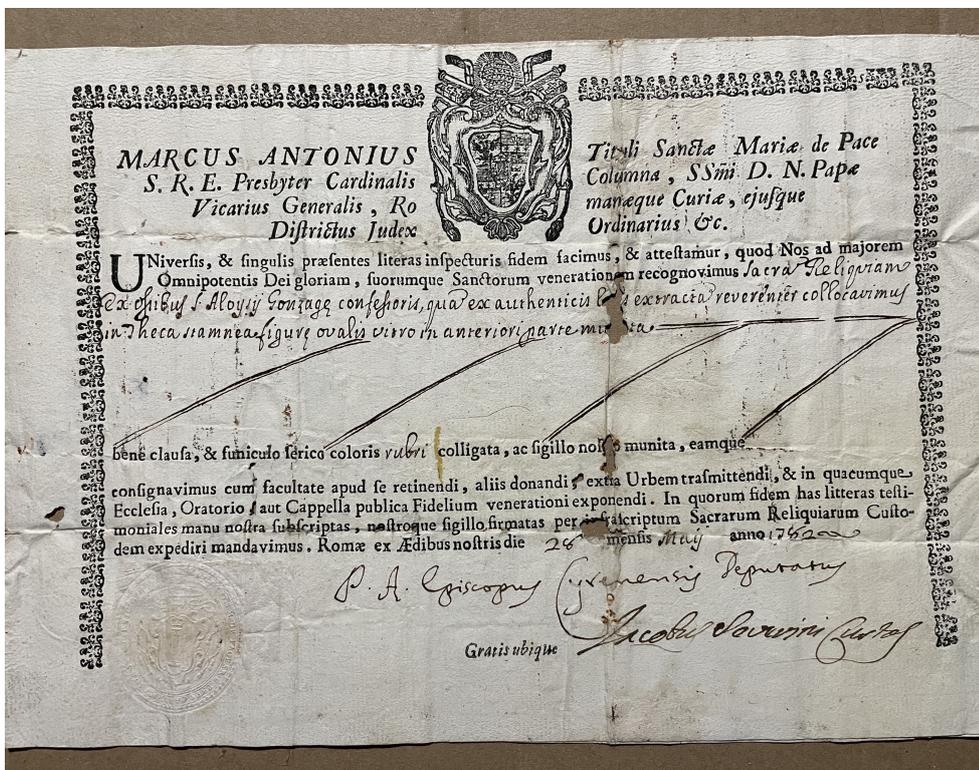


Fig. 2: Authentica issued by the Vicar General of Rome, Marco Antonio Colonna. 1782. Reproduction: Montserrat A. Báez Hernández. Private collection MABH.

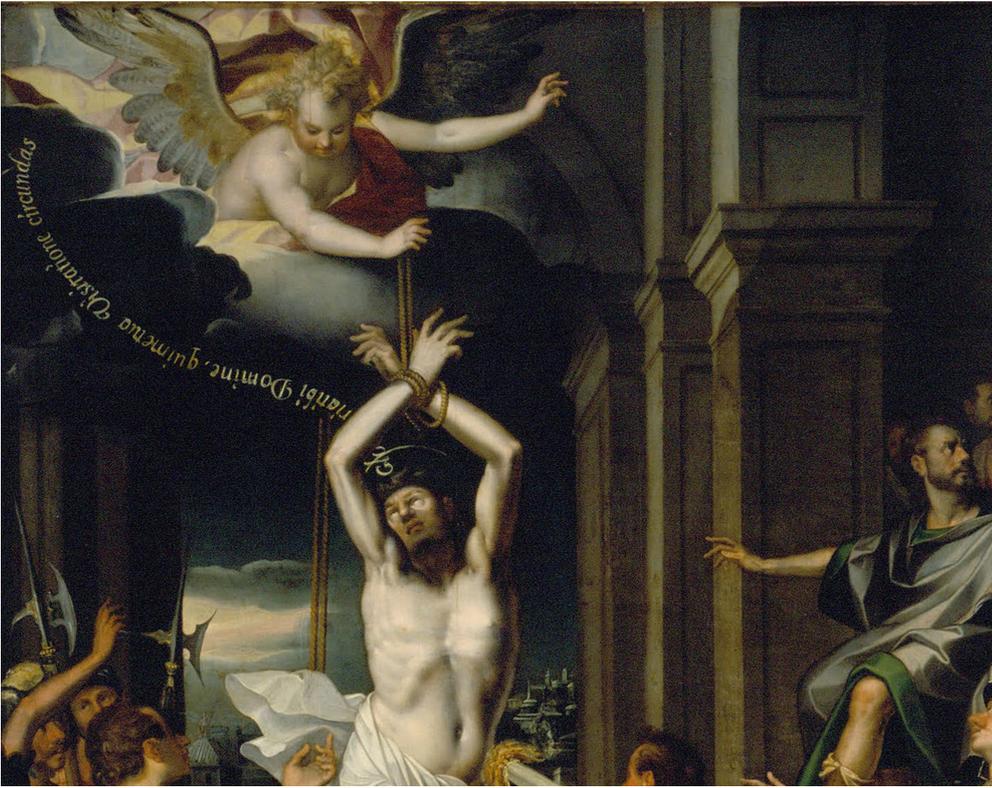


Fig. 3: Baltasar Echave Orrio, *Martyrdom of Saint Pontian*, 1605, Oil painting on panel, 258 x 160 cm. Collection of the National Art Museum, INBA. Photo: Wikipedia.



Fig. 4: *Authentica of Saint Veneranda martyr*, issued by the chapel sacristan Francesco Saverio Cristiani. 1785. Reprography: Historical Archive of the Archbishopric of Mexico.



Fig. 5: *Saint Veneranda martyr*. Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Aguascalientes, Aguascalientes. Photo: Valentín Juache Ortiz.



Fig. 6: *Saint Innocentia martyr*. Cathedral of Guadalajara, Jalisco. Photo: Montserrat A. Báez Hernández.



Fig. 7: A devotee touches the urn of Saint Innocentia martyr. Cathedral of Guadalajara, Jalisco. Photo: Montserrat A. Báez Hernández.



Fig. 8: Saint Theodora martyr. Chapel of the Third Order. Cathedral of Xalapa, Veracruz. Photo: Montserrat A. Báez Hernández.

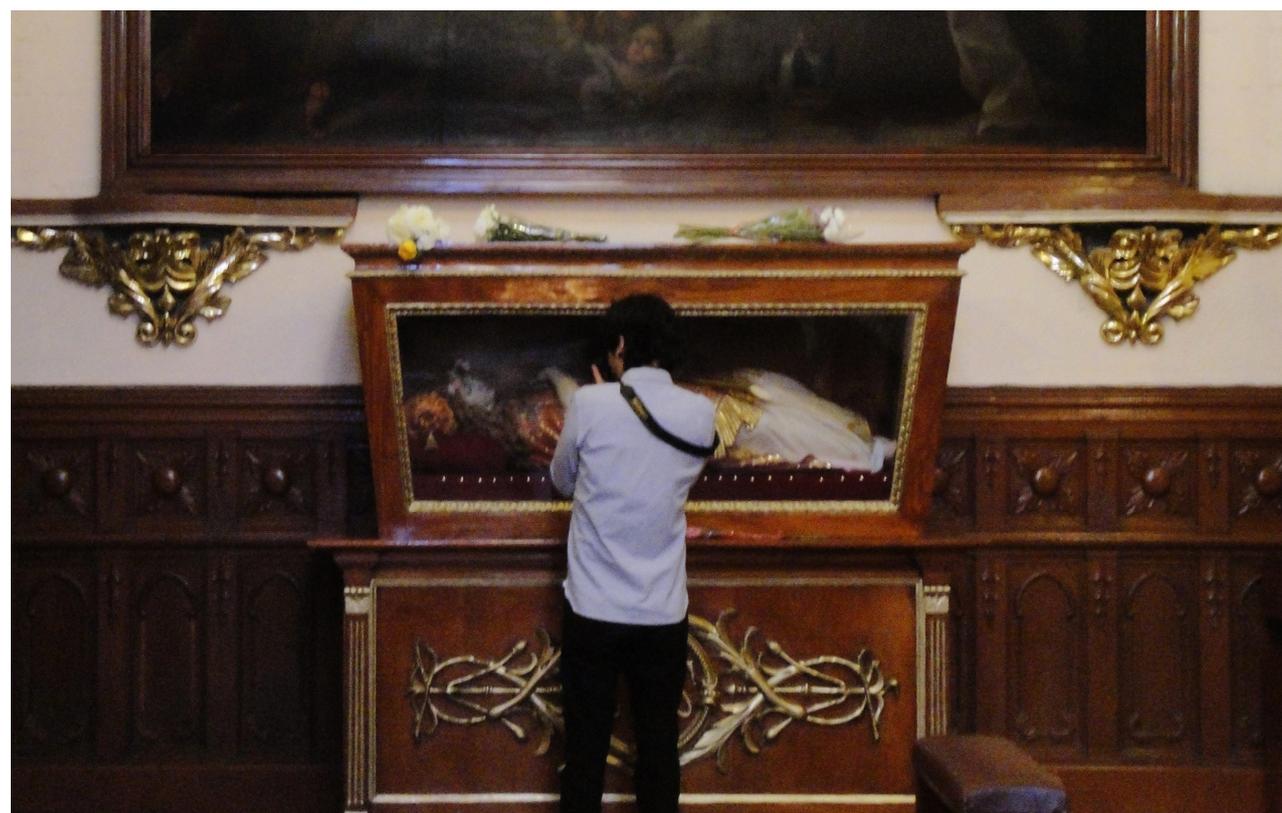


Fig. 9: A tourist takes a picture of Saint Theodora martyr. Cathedral of Xalapa, Veracruz. Photo: Montserrat A. Báez Hernández.

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Biblioteca Apostólica Vaticana. Vat. Lat. 14461. *Regestum sacrarum reliquiarum distributarum inde a mense iul. a 1782 usque ad diem 12 iun. a 1816, f. 131r.*

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