

The Legend of . . . “The Lady in Blue” (The Blue Nun)

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In researching early New Mexico history from old Spanish and Franciscan documents, one finds an intriguing story that comes up time and again – the mystical appearance of a Franciscan nun in the 1600s. Though well documented, the “Legend of the Lady in Blue” seems to have been nearly forgotten in New Mexico history, until recently.

Here is her story.

The Jumanos Indians

In 1581-1582, the Chamuscado-Rodríguez Expedition ventured into New Spain along the Rio Grande. Their first stop was the Senecú pueblo, south of Socorro. Later at Puaray, a pueblo near present-day Bernalillo, friars Francisco López and Agustín Rodríguez elected to stay behind and minister to the pueblo Indians.

Upon their return to Mexico, Father Bernardino Beltrán criticized the expedition for allowing the two friars to stay behind unprotected. Beltrán received permission for an expedition to rescue his brethren. Led by don Antonio Espejo and a group of soldiers, Beltrán departed Chihuahua for New Mexico in

November 1582. Traveling up the Rio Grande, they briefly visited several Piro pueblos in what is now Socorro County.

Reaching Puaray, they learned the two friars had been martyred. Rather than returning to Mexico, Espejo wanted to explore the plains, poke around for some gold, and see the herds of buffalo he had heard about. Spanish officials in Mexico City authorized this expedition only for rescue, not exploration.

Father Beltrán, and some followers, returned to Mexico to not be party to the illegal portion of the expedition that followed. Espejo and the remaining men traveled into eastern New Mexico. To make a long story short, they basically got lost and decided to follow the Pecos River back to the Rio Grande.

Somewhere along the Pecos, they encountered several villages of Indians called the Jumanos, previously unknown to the Spaniards. They lived in grass huts, not pueblos. The men were tattooed for a distinctive appearance from the pueblo

Indians of New Mexico.

The Jumanos convinced Espejo the Rio Grande was many days away following the Pecos; instead, they escorted the Spaniards to nearby Jumanos villages in the Big Bend country of today's Texas. There, overlooking the Rio Grande, they quickly collected their bearings and returned to Chihuahua.

Espejo only spent a few days with the Jumanos Indians, mostly on the trail returning to Mexico. And, recall, there were no friars with Espejo at this point. This brief 1582 Spanish contact with the Jumanos, without missionaries, is very important to the story that follows.



Courtesy of Ojinaga Pueblo
The Lady in Blue ministered to the Jumanos Indians, and described their tattooed appearance – years before first seen by the Spaniards.



Adapted from Office of the State Historian image
Depiction of the Isleta pueblo after the mission was built 1612-1613. Most mission pueblos had a similar appearance – including the Socorro mission church at the Pilabó pueblo.

Mission Building

Around 1620, the Franciscans began building missions along the Rio Grande, including the mission at Socorro. A major mission and monastery had already been built, in 1612, at Isleta Pueblo under Fray Juan de Salas.

In July 1623, a small band of Indians arrived at Isleta on a trading trip. They had tattooed lines on their faces and arms, calling themselves the Jumanos. They asked for the priest. Fray Salas must have been totally stunned when the unknown Jumanos asked to be baptized and for missionaries to be sent with them “to their country” and continue teaching them about Christianity.

In spite of his astonishment at their request, the good friar had to decline. Salas was one of only a few friars in New Mexico at that time.

Over the next several years, the Jumanos would arrive at Isleta each July, and again, asked the friar to be baptized and for missionaries. Again, Salas explained he had to decline the request; there were no missionaries to spare.

At some point, Fray Salas asked the unknown Jumanos Indians how they knew about Christianity, the ways of the church, and the significance of baptism. What the Jumanos Indians told Fray Salas is truly amazing, and well documented.

The Lady in Blue

The Jumanos delegation told the friar, through an Isletan translator, that they had been visited on numerous occasions by a “beautiful white skinned

lady in blue.” She came “down from the heights” and taught their people about God and Jesus Christ in their own language. She had them build a cross and an altar in their villages, taught them how to pray, make a rosary, and other Catholic rituals.

The description of the woman, and her clothing, was that of a nun. Her gray robe and blue cloak described a Franciscan nun – *although, no nuns were in New Mexico at that time.*

The Jumanos insisted they had not been visited by any friars or missionaries, only some Spaniards they heard about 40 years before – identifying the Espejo Expedition. Their Christian education was due, solely, to “the Lady in Blue” who told the Jumanos to find the missionaries, be kind to them, and ask to be baptized.

There is no indication that Fray Salas shared this story with others at this time, but no doubt wondered on many occasions, “Who is the Blue Nun?”

Across the Atlantic

Back in Spain, there was little doubt who the Blue Nun might be. She was a young Franciscan nun named Sor (sister) María de Jesús de Ágreda. Her life and miracles are well documented.

Born María Fernandez Coronel on April 2, 1602, she grew up in central Spain, north of Madrid. According to her parents, she was unusually spiritual from an early age.

In 1619, at just 17 years old, María Coronel took her vows in the Franciscan order, also known as the “Poor Clares.” The virtues of the Franciscan order are poverty, chastity, and obedience.



Courtesy Ágreda Convento Concepción
The Ágreda Monastery in Spain as it appears today. This was the home of Sor María de Jesús, the Blue Nun, from 1620 until her death in 1665.

The following year, Sister María became a cloistered nun at the Ágreda (AH-gre-tha) Monastery in the Franciscan Conceptionist order, taking the name María de Jesús de Ágreda. Conceptionists were those who believed in the Immaculate Conception of Mary, which at the time was not fully embraced by the Catholic Church. Conceptionists believe that the mother of Jesus, Mary, was herself born of a virginal conception, thus freeing Mary from original sin. This was not adopted as church doctrine until 1854.

As a cloistered nun, María agreed to serve the Ágreda Monastery the rest of her life. And, indeed she did. There is no indication she ever left the four walls of the monastery until her death in 1665. As a Conceptionist nun, she wore a light gray habit with a blue cloak.

Sister María “Travels”

Entering the monastery in 1620, Sister María began having mystical experiences almost immediately. She was often seen in deep trances or levitating. Having nothing to hide, she told her fellow nuns and friars how she was “transported by the aid of the angels” almost daily to



Courtesy PoorClare.org

Some of the Franciscan sisters of the Poor Clare order still wear a gray habit and blue cloak today as did Sister María – the Blue Nun – in the 1600s.



The dedicated Franciscans were the first to spread the gospel to the Pueblo Indians in the 1600s. Nuns were not allowed in New Mexico until the 1800s.

settlements of strange people in a strange land – the native Indians of New Spain. Among these, she identified one group called “Jumanos.” In her altered state, she appeared and ministered to these people, teaching them in their own language, and urged them to get baptized when the men of God would one day arrive.

The word of her mystical abilities quickly spread. Sharing her stories, Father Sebastian Marcilla documented many of her experiences and travels, called “bilocation” at the time and often “teleportation” or “astro-projection” today.

Not everyone believed the stories; skeptics called for an investigation. María de Jesús testified before numerous priests, a bishop, and the Franciscan Minister General in 1622. One year before the Jumanos first appeared before Fray Salas at Isleta, Sister María described the New Mexico Indians in amazing detail – including their tattooed appearance.

Two years later, hints of heresy against María were raised by the Inquisition and investigated. In the end, the sister's testimony was declared to be authentic.

At the Ágreda Monastery, Father Marcilla, Sister María's confidant, prepared transcripts of the testimonies and sent the reports to Mexico for final verification. Carried across the sea by royal mail, Sister María's portfolio was delivered in 1626 to the acting archbishop of Mexico, Father Francisco y Manso Zuñiga. The letter asked if there were any reports of a Franciscan nun being seen in New Spain, and if her descriptions of the Jumanas and other groups were accurate.

Archbishop Zuñiga read the reports with intrigue. Reports of a beautiful young “lady in blue” teaching Christianity to the native Indians was nothing new to the friars. Learning the identity of the mysterious traveler from Spain added credibility to the reports and became an inspiration to the missionaries.

1628 Caravan to New Mexico

The handful of overworked friars in New Mexico begged Mexico City for more missionaries and mission support. On April 12, 1628, Archbishop Zuñiga was ordained a bishop. Taking advantage of his new position, he organized a mission caravan for the Franciscans far to the north. The new bishop also appointed Fray Estevan de Perea to head the missions in New Mexico, the post currently held by Padre Alonso Benavides, the “Apostle of Socorro.”



Courtesy National Park Service

An early sketch of Santo Domingo pueblo, southwest of Santa Fe. This was the headquarters for the Franciscans in New Mexico during the 1600s.

On September 4, the caravan departed Mexico City for New Mexico. Under military escort, the caravan headed up El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro for Santa Fe with 30 friars, including Fray Perea, and 36 ox carts of badly needed mission supplies.

It was a long, rough trip to Santa Fe. Winter travel was slow through the Sierra Madre mountains; further delays were experienced in the heavy spring winds and sand storms of the Chihuahuan deserts; and once crossing the Rio Grande, the muddy trail from unusual spring rains brought the caravan to a halt on several occasions.

After nine months on the Camino Real, the caravan finally passed Socorro at the end of May,

1629, stopped at Isleta Pueblo on June 3, and arrived in Santa Fe on June 13.

Friars Arrive in New Mexico

Father Benavides had called all the Franciscans in New Mexico to Santa Fe to greet the long-awaited caravan. Immediately upon their arrival, they retreated to their headquarters at the Santo Domingo Pueblo.

A special ecclesiastical meeting was held in the chapter house with all the Franciscans in New Mexico in attendance. The new missionaries were welcomed and introduced, given assignments, and briefed on mission affairs.

It was at this meeting that Fray Perea revealed a letter he had hand-carried from Archbishop Zuñiga in Mexico City inquiring about the rumors of the Blue Nun. The letter was read, in which the archbishop charged the friars to ascertain whether or not, in unknown kingdoms, “there is any knowledge of our holy faith, and in what manner and by what means our Lord has manifested it.”

Fray Perea, having read the Inquisition reports of Sister Maria, further explained that there had been suggestions of outside intervention among the Indians not yet ministered to by the Franciscans.

At this point, Fray Salas from Isleta apparently recalled how a group of tattooed Indians, calling themselves the Jumanos, arrive at his mission each July asking to be baptized, with no previously known contact with the Spaniards or Franciscans. He revealed how they had been preached to in their own language by a mysterious woman they called the Lady in Blue, though he did not know where their villages were located. Salas also explained how he had to refuse their request of baptism and to send missionaries due to the lack of friars.

To Fray Perea, who had read the Inquisition reports, and perhaps Father Benavides, there seemed little doubt the Lady in Blue was Sister María de Jesús of Spain inquired about in Archbishop Zuñiga’s letter. Sor María’s descriptions of the tattooed Indians, called Jumanos by name, and other details, were just too uncanny to be a coincidence.

The Jumanos Arrive at Isleta

Fray Perea accompanied Fray Salas back to Isleta to hopefully meet Sister María’s Indians. Like clockwork, the Jumanos arrived at Isleta

Pueblo on July 22, 1629, just as they had for the past six years. Received by the two friars, the Jumanos again asked to be baptized and have a missionary assigned to their villages. Fray Perea quizzed the delegation. What prompted their repeated requests for baptism? Why had they come and at whose direction?



When the New Mexico Franciscan friars arrived at the Jumanos villages, they found Christian altars and crosses in their plazas – built under the direction of the Blue Nun.

The answers were the same: “at the instruction received from the Lady in Blue.”

No doubt overwhelmed by their answers, Perea sent for Padre Benavides, still the head Franciscan, or *custos*, in New Mexico. Upon arriving, Benavides, Perea, and Salas again quizzed the Jumanos about their knowledge of Christianity, the church, and their desire to be baptized. The answers were as solid as rock; they were ministered to by the Lady in Blue that came down from the sky.

Father Benavides took the Jumanos Indians into the convent, where a painting of a Franciscan nun, wearing her light gray habit and blue cloak, was on the wall. They were asked if this was the woman who visited them. The Jumanos shook their heads and replied the woman in the painting was too old and fat. They told the friars the woman appearing to them wore the same clothes, but was much younger and very beautiful, and comes to them from the sky. Of interest is how the Jumanos found nothing unusual in her angelic arrival.

This left no doubt that the mysterious Lady in Blue was indeed a Franciscan nun, and that of Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda, Spain. The New Mexico friars were also convinced they were receiving divine assistance in their missionary work, which inspired them greatly.

The three senior friars agreed to return with the Jumanos delegation. They traveled for days, over 100 leagues (250-300 miles) “to the east,” to reach the Jumanos nation. Their villages were grass huts, being a nomadic people. With no permanent

homes, like the pueblo Indians of New Mexico, there remains today no trace of the Jumanos villages. Most agree their home must have been in far east New Mexico or the panhandle of Texas. Some have suggested the Palo Duro Canyon south of today's Amarillo.

When the friars reached the villages, they were greeted with a Catholic-fiesta style procession carrying a large cross. They were told the Lady in Blue helped them build the cross and taught them how to greet the “men of God.” The cross was decorated with fresh flowers, which the Indians told them the Lady of Blue had helped them decorate “earlier in the day.”

The missionaries preached and conducted their apostolic work at the various villages for several weeks. It is not recorded if the Jumanos were baptized or not, though presumably they were, as Father Benavides' counted them as “Christianized Indians” in his departing report. They did not, however, stay to build a mission, a mystery to the missionaries that followed. The population of these Jumanos villages was estimated at “several thousand souls.”



*La V. Madre Sor Maria de Jesus de Agreda
Joto Mayor. esc.*

Father Alonso Benavidez included this image of Sor María - the Blue Nun - in his book “Memorial of 1634.”



Photo by Paul Harden

The Lady in Blue taught the native Indians to “be kind to the missionaries” when they arrived, paving the way for the easy establishment of the pueblo missions from Acoma to Santo Domingo.



Photo by Paul Harden

Gran Quivira mission pueblo, or “Las Humanas,” was possibly so named after the Jumanos Indians who settled there in the 1630s. The Lady in Blue appeared to the Jumanos people on numerous occasions.

Father Benavides to Spain

Upon their return to Santo Domingo, Fray Perea relieved Benavides as the *custos* – the custodian of the New Mexico province. Benavides returned to Mexico and penned portions of his landmark document that historians continue to use today, entitled *Memorial of 1630*. In this 111-page document, Benavides recorded detailed observations of the people of New Mexico, mission building and ministerial works, the terrain and resources in the Southwest. Most of what we know about 1600s Socorro, and the founding of today's San Miguel church, is from the pages of this historic document.

Benavides also included the story of the Lady in Blue, and the striking parallels to the description of the Jumanos and pueblo people, and their miraculous conversion to the faith, by Sister María – the Blue Nun. Archbishop Manso Zuñiga was so taken by the story, he sent Benavides back to Spain to report the miraculous story to church leaders and King Phillip IV in person.

In the meantime, due to her very recognized mystical ministry, she was elevated to the position of abbess, or Mother Superior, of the Ágreda Monastery in 1627. Due to her young age of only 25 years old, her appointment as abbess was approved by Pope Urban VIII.

While in Spain, Father Benavides met with now Mother María de Jesús at the monastery in 1631. He interviewed her exhaustively, amazed at the details she provided, including physical

descriptions of some of the dominant Indian leaders and Franciscan friars Benavides knew well. Mother Mariá, by her own testimony, claimed over 500 visitations to New Spain between 1620 and 1631, without physically ever leaving the monastery.

Benavides was summoned to Rome, where he authored his *Memorial of 1634* – an addendum and revision to his report on New Mexico.

Benavides approached Pope Urban VIII about returning to be New Mexico's first bishop. This was denied by the pontiff; instead, he was sent to Genoa, Portugal as assistant Bishop, never to return to the Jumanos and pueblo Indians he had learned to love.



Photo by Paul Harden

The historical record documents a supernatural appearance of the Blue Nun inside the walls of Socorro's San Miguel mission on August 3, 1626.

Other Blue Nun Sightings

This article has concentrated on the Jumanos Indians, primarily because they were an unknown people to the Spaniards and Franciscans until revealed by Sister María. However, many of New Mexico's pueblos also have stories of being visited by the Lady in Blue in the 1600s.

Of particular interest are reports of Sor María visiting the Piro people of today's Socorro County. Following his meeting with the now Mother María in 1631, Father Benavides' wrote, "This blessed mother told me that she had been present with me at the baptism of the Pizos (Piro Indians) and she recognized me as the one she had seen there. Likewise, she had helped Fray Cristóbal de Quirós with some baptisms, giving minute description of his person and face."

Father Benavides dedicated the Nuestra Señora de Socorro mission on August 3, 1626 and baptized many of the Christianized Piro Indians at that time. After the dedication of the Socorro mission, the local friar conducted baptisms. Therefore, we have documentation that gives us at least one date that Socorro was visited by the Blue Nun.



Clemente X served as Pope from 1670–1676. He died at 86 years of age, in 1676, and buried at St. Peter's Basilica.

Fray Quirós, also mentioned, established the missions at San Felipe and Zuni pueblos, baptizing many.

Sister María also testified she ministered to the Tampiro Indians of the Salinas pueblos at Abo, Quarai and Gran Quivira. Interestingly, Gran Quivira is also known as "Las Humanas," believed

in part due to the Lady in Blue encouraging the Jumanos desiring a mission and Christian teaching to move to the mission pueblo at Gran Quivira. Integrating with the Tampiros at Gran Quivira and the Salinas pueblos, they were called the Humanas Indians for many years.

Apparently, Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda – the Blue Nun – was no stranger to Socorro County.



Courtesy Ágreda Convento Concepción
Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda's perfectly preserved body, considered a miracle in itself, is on display at the basilica church in Ágreda, Spain.

The Legend Continues

Mother María served as a cloistered Franciscan nun her entire life, never leaving the Ágreda Monastery. Throughout that time, she is credited with numerous miracles and visions in addition to her well documented ability to spiritually transport herself to different places. She died in 1665 at 63 years of age, though her legend lives on to this day.

In 1690, after her death, an Indian in Texas asked a Franciscan missionary for a piece of blue cloth in which to bury his mother. While he had never seen the Blue Nun, he explained "In times past, (we) had been visited frequently by a very beautiful woman who used to come down from the heights, dressed in blue garments, and they wished to be like that woman."

Many such stories persisted long after the sister's death.

In 1765, Pope Clemente X declared her to be "heroic in virtue" and bestowed the title of "venerable" to Sor Maria. Since then, there has been at least two known attempts at full canonization to make Sister Maria a saint. This has yet come to pass.

In 1909, the body of Sor María de Jesús was exhumed and placed in the church at Ágreda. After 200 years, her body was found to be virtually uncorrupted. Her nearly perfectly preserved body is now on display in Ágreda in a glass coffin. This miracle initiated another unsuccessful attempt at canonization.

And, just a few weeks ago, Archbishop Michael Sheenan, Archdiocese of Santa Fe, blessed a

roundtable discussion on “The Bilocations of the Cloistered Nun, Sor María de Jesús de Ágreda, the Blue Nun, who lived from 1602 to 1665.”

Attended by historians and clergy, details of the discussions or opinions derived have not yet been released. It does show the continued interest into the Blue Nun by today's church.

There are over 70,000 Poor Clare Franciscan sisters today, living in monasteries in 70 countries. They are still cloistered nuns – living in the same monastery for their entire lives. The dedicated Franciscans are also still in New Mexico today, living in the Poor Clare Monastery of our Lady of Guadalupe in Roswell.

Most legends are loosely based on fact, passed from generation to generation by word of mouth.

The appearance of the Blue Nun in New Mexico has been well recorded in both secular and church documents over the centuries, and never discounted by the church. Her supernatural appearances were an important part of spreading the faith in early New Mexico, and at least once, graced the walls of Socorro's San Miguel mission.

Some of the references used in this article:
“María de Jesús de Ágreda,” Office of the State Historian; “Mystery of the Lady in Blue,” by C. F. Eckhardt; “Mystical Lady in Blue,” by Marilyn Fedewa; “The Strange Tale of the Lady in Blue,” by Jay W. Sharp, *Chronicles of the Trail (CARTA)* Vol. 8 No. 1.

The Visit from Ágreda

During the week of July 9–12, 2012, just a month after this article was published in *El Defensor Chieftain* newspaper, a delegation from Ágreda, Spain arrived in New Mexico.

Their trip was described as: *Pilgrims from Ágreda, Spain will gather information to advance the cause for Sainthood of Venerable Sor María de Jesús de Ágredas (aka The Blue Nun) based on her tremendous contributions in New Mexico in promulgating the Faith. They will report their findings to their bishop Most Rev. Gerardo Melgar Viciosa, Bishop of Osmasoria, Spain and to Padre Gaspar Calvo, Vice Postulator for the Cause of Sor María and President of*

the Pontifical International Marian Academy of Rome, Emeritus.

The delegation visited the Salinas mission ruins, including Gran Quivera, and other area mission churches where Sor Maria is reported to have appeared in the 1600s. They ended their day on Wednesday, July 11 with a warm reception at the Isleta Pueblo.

This author was invited to Isleta to meet the delegates and give a short talk on the Blue Nun.

[More photos on the next page >>](#)



The English-speaking spokesperson of the delegation already had a copy of *El Defensor Chieftain*, with the “Blue Nun” article, in her possession.



The delegation presented the Isleta mission church with a commemorative painting of Sor Maria to Father George Pavambolt, the Norbertine priest at the church.

The St. Augustine church, at Isleta Pueblo, was built 1612-1613, making it one of the oldest mission churches still in regular use in New Mexico.



A sunset view of the St. Augustine church, Isleta Pueblo, New Mexico.



An inside look of the historic church at Isleta while awaiting the arrival of the Ágrede delegation.



Some of the Ágrede pilgrims posing with the Norbertine priors, and the governor of the pueblo, in front of the St. Augustine church.



The cloth wall painting of Sor María de Jesús de Ágrede presented to the people of Isleta. It is modeled after a 1600s painting of the Blue Nun.



Spokesperson of the delegation reads a letter from the sisters at the Ágrede Monastery in Spain. The sisters are still cloistered nuns and never leave the monastery.



Frank Lujan, Governor of Isleta Pueblo, presents gifts to the Ágrede delegates during the nice (and tasty!) feast the pueblo held in their honor.

NOTE: Photography is normally prohibited of the Isleta St. Augustine church and other pueblo areas and activities. The author received permission to take and publically use the above photographs.