

# Weaving Meanings: Laura Montoya and the Symbolic Fabric at the Caribbean Frontier of Colombia, 1917–1930\*

[English Version]

Tejiendo significados: Laura Montoya y el entramado simbólico en la frontera caribeña de Colombia, 1917-1930

Tecendo significados: Laura Montoya e o tecido simbólico na fronteira caribenha da Colômbia, 1917–1930

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Colombia

## Abstract

**Objective:** To analyze the symbolic efficacy of Catholic language in shaping the Caribbean geographic frontier in the area of the department of Antioquia within the Colombian State, a process in which Laura Montoya and her religious congregation “María Inmaculada y Santa Catalina de Sena” took part between 1917 and 1930. **Methodology:** This is a social history study. Laura Montoya’s discourses were examined on the basis of “linguistic equations” that account for the symbolic efficacy of Catholic language and for the symbolic power of the alliance between the State, the Catholic Church, and Antioquian society in the domination of national frontiers. Within this process of national incorporation, the participation of Laura Montoya through her

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religious pedagogy was crucial. **Results:** The incorporation of forest territories into the national order depended on women's participation. Indigenous women were evangelized and became responsible for disseminating a new moral order that facilitated the selective presence of the State and the Catholic Church. **Conclusions:** Laura Montoya's Catholic and evangelizing mission brought into the national order a geographic area that had been regarded as a national frontier.

**Keywords:** State; language; efficacy; domination; Catholic Church; Laura Montoya; Colombia (obtained from the UNESCO Thesaurus).

## Resumen

**Objetivo:** analizar la eficacia simbólica del lenguaje católico en la formación de la frontera geográfica del Caribe, en la zona del departamento de Antioquia, del Estado colombiano, proceso en el que Laura Montoya y su Congregación religiosa «María Inmaculada y Santa Catalina de Sena» participaron en las décadas de 1917 a 1930.

**Metodología:** la investigación es de historia social. Se analizaron discursos de Laura Montoya, partiendo de ecuaciones del lenguaje que explicaran la eficacia simbólica del lenguaje católico en cuanto al poder simbólico de la alianza, Estado, Iglesia católica y sociedad antioqueña para dominar las fronteras nacionales. En dicha incorporación nacional, la participación de Laura Montoya mediante su pedagogía religiosa fue fundamental. **Resultados:** la inclusión de territorios selváticos al orden nacional dependió de la participación femenina. Las mujeres indígenas fueron evangelizadas, encargándose de diseminar un nuevo orden moral propicio para la presencia selectiva del Estado y de la Iglesia católica. **Conclusiones:** la misión católica y evangelizadora de Laura Montoya incorporó al orden nacional una zona geográfica considerada como frontera nacional.

**Palabras clave:** Estado; lenguaje; eficacia; dominación; Iglesia católica; Laura Montoya; Colombia (obtenidos del tesoro de la UNESCO).

## Resumo

**Objetivo:** analisar a eficácia simbólica da linguagem católica na conformação da fronteira geográfica do Caribe, na região do departamento de Antioquia, no Estado colombiano, processo do qual participaram Laura Montoya e sua congregação religiosa «María Inmaculada y Santa Catalina de Sena» nas décadas de 1917 a 1930. **Metodologia:** trata-se de uma pesquisa em história social. Foram analisados discursos de Laura

Montoya, com base em “equações da linguagem” que explicassem a eficácia simbólica da linguagem católica e o poder simbólico da aliança entre Estado, Igreja Católica e sociedade antioquenha para dominar as fronteiras nacionais. Nessa incorporação nacional, a participação de Laura Montoya, por meio de sua pedagogia religiosa, foi fundamental. **Resultados:** a inclusão de territórios selváticos na ordem nacional dependeu da participação feminina. As mulheres indígenas foram evangelizadas e encarregadas de disseminar uma nova ordem moral favorável à presença seletiva do Estado e da Igreja Católica. **Conclusões:** a missão católica e evangelizadora de Laura Montoya incorporou à ordem nacional uma zona geográfica considerada como fronteira nacional.

**Palavras-chave:** Estado; linguagem; eficácia; dominação; Igreja Católica; Laura Montoya; Colômbia (obtidas do Tesouro da UNESCO).

## Introduction

Domination, even when it is grounded in the crudest forms of force, whether through weapons or money, always possesses a symbolic dimension. Acts of submission and obedience are acts of knowledge and recognition that, as such, draw upon cognitive structures capable of being applied to all things in the world and, in particular, to social structures.  
(Bourdieu, 2009, p. 229. Own translation).

Research on religion and gender is gaining increasing relevance, highlighting the tensions between tradition and modernity in both political and religious spheres. Today, the global academic community is focused on analyzing women's participation in theology, a field of thought historically dominated by male religious capital and by a hierarchy defined through the sacrament of Holy Orders.

In international academic literature, particularly in English-speaking scholarship, a close relationship between politics and religion is emphasized. This connection reflects the understanding that political revolution alone is insufficient to trigger a symbolic, and consequently cultural, revolution within the modern State. History has shown that the Catholic Church is not a marginal actor in the political life of nations; rather, it has participated actively in the social revolutions of the modern world.

A comprehensive review of academic literature (EBSCOHost, AtlaSerials, Religion Collection), using search terms such as "Catholic church AND /women," "Religion and politics," and "Religión y política," underscores the importance of the Catholic Church and women's participation in the evangelization of frontier territories.

Scholarship on the Catholic Church in Latin America is rooted in Spain's foreign policy. For this reason, the American countries that achieved independence between 1810 and 1824 maintained a strong identity-based bond with the Spanish crown, grounded in the legitimacy of Catholicism. However, it was not until 1835 that Pope Gregory XVI officially recognized Ibero-American independence through the bull *Sollicitudo Ecclesiarum* (Martín, 2018; Latasa, 2011).

Indeed, religion has not been excluded from the State-building process, generating both convergences and tensions at the international, national, and local levels (Habermas, 2018). For example, the encyclical *Summi Pontificatus*, issued by Pope Pius XII on 20 October 1939, called for the solidarity of Catholics in the face of war (PIUS PP. XII, 1939).

However, beyond relations among States, concern arises regarding the governance of populations within nations. The debate on women's participation in the Catholic Church has been longstanding from both ecclesial and cultural

perspectives. Historical reflection on the symbolic domination of women is essential to understanding the conflicts surrounding women's ordination and their involvement in territories undergoing processes of national integration, where ethnicity plays a differentiating role. Many Roman Catholics experience feelings of anger, indignation, and fear when imagining a woman hearing confessions, preaching from the pulpit, celebrating Mass in sacred vestments, or managing parish affairs.

Since the nineteenth century, numerous women have engaged in intellectual and political activities, although their participation was conditioned by geography, origin, race, social class, and gender (Burggraf, 2003).

Colombia was characterized as a conservative republic due to the National Constitution of 1886 and the Concordat signed with the Catholic Church in 1887, which established mandatory Catholic religious education aimed at generating identity-based ties that would facilitate national unity (Díaz & Leguizamón, 2019, p. 205). However, despite these efforts, there remained national frontiers that needed to be integrated into the national ideal. Evangelizing missions in frontier territories were predominantly led by men and were marked by failures in dominating Indigenous peoples in the Caribbean region.

Within this constitutional context, a woman from Antioquia, Laura Montoya, proposed the creation of a religious association known as the "Congregation of Missionaries of Mary Immaculate and Saint Catherine of Siena", with the purpose of contributing to the evangelizing mission, particularly regarding the religious instruction of Indigenous women. Catholic pedagogy functioned as a way of life embedded in the intimate fabric of society, guiding families and shaping culture at large. As a result, most women received education with the expectation of becoming either wives or cloistered nuns (Díaz & Leguizamón, 2019).

However, the involvement of women in the "Congregation of Mary Immaculate and Saint Catherine of Siena" was crucial to the evangelization of Indigenous peoples, which generated controversy within the Catholic Church. For this reason, Laura Montoya was judged for assuming functions that, according to Catholic canon law, were reserved exclusively for priests; nonetheless, she always adhered to ecclesiastical precepts (De Santa Teresa, 2015).

This article examines the symbolic efficacy of religious language as a tool for territorial and population domination in the formation of the Colombian nation and State. Laura Montoya legitimized the power of dominant actors and the State-Church alliance, while simultaneously influencing the assimilation of Indigenous peoples along the national frontier.

## Methodology

A critical analysis is conducted of Laura Montoya's discourses within a context of domination by the Catholic Church and the Colombian State. From this perspective, the analytical tripod composed of language, mentality, and historical events is employed. This conceptual tool is used in historiography and was popularized by Jacques Le Goff (2008).

The concepts of "symbolic efficacy of language" (Bourdieu, 2009), "civilizing process" (Elias, 2015), and Jacques Le Goff's notions of "culture" and "mentality" (2008) enable an approach that seeks to understand not only historical events and human actions, but also the ways in which they were perceived and expressed through the language and mentality of a given era. This represents a way of approaching history from multiple perspectives.

## Results

The purpose of this analysis is to explore women's participation in evangelization and progress through the case of the female religious congregation of Mary Immaculate and Saint Catherine of Siena in Urabá during the early twentieth century in Colombia, a period in which the Colombian Republic was predominantly conservative.

It is crucial to recognize that the formation of nation-states has been closely linked to Catholic evangelization in the Western world, and women have played a significant role in this historical process by actively participating in missions to jungle territories. However, a central question emerges: can the Church ordain women? This dilemma became evident in Urabá when Laura Montoya was compelled to assume the void left by missions previously led by men.

### **Transformations of the Catholic Church and Conservative Colombia: 1886-1930**

Between 1886 and 1930, Colombia underwent a series of significant transformations in both the political and religious spheres, particularly under conservative rule. Without a doubt, the Colombian nation was established as a unitary Republic that regarded God as the source of all authority, with the purpose of regenerating the country under the principles of authority, order, and sovereignty (Álvarez, 2011).

The Catholic Church, for its part, held spiritual authority to evangelize, civilize, and colonize Indigenous territories, as stipulated in Title IV of the 1886 Political Constitution of Colombia. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a cycle of transformations within the Catholic Church that enabled women's participation at three key historical moments. The first occurred during the Council of Trent, convened under the pontificate of Paul III in 1545. During this period, female religious life was defined primarily through enclosure, establishing that nuns were to be subordinated to bishops and to the Holy See.

The second significant moment took place in the twentieth century, when Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council on 25 January 1959. This Council brought about a major renewal within the Catholic Church. In the decree *Perfectae caritatis*, women religious obtained improved status and greater capacity for action within the Church, without dependence on the support of male religious orders (Holy See, 1965).

The third relevant moment occurred in 1998, when Pope John Paul II wrote the apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, celebrating the fact that women could participate fully in the structures of responsibility and communion within the Church (John Paul II, 1988).

Despite these advances, the colonization of a route to the sea for Antioquia revealed the cultural and religious barriers that women faced in intervening in sacred, state, and territorial domains traditionally reserved for men. The Catholic Church, entrusting priests with the protection of tradition and maintaining the prohibition of female priesthood, viewed as disruptive the establishment of female religious associations in the jungle, such as the one advocated by Laura Montoya.

Although the 1886 Political Constitution of Colombia allowed the creation of public or private associations that did not contravene morality or legal order, requiring registration before the civil authority and ecclesiastical authorization, the actions of women like Laura Montoya represented a challenge to established norms (Const. 1886, Art. 47).

### **The Path of Mother Laura: Foundation, Dissemination, and Tensions with Society and the Church**

The path of Mother Laura, also known as Laura Montoya, represents a fascinating story of foundation, dissemination, and setbacks in her relationship with society and the Church. On 28 June 1916, the Bishop of Antioquia, Monsignor Maximiliano Crespo, granted authorization for the establishment of a religious congregation called the "Missionaries of Mary Immaculate and Saint Catherine of Siena." The purpose of this congregation was the sanctification of its members

and their dedication to the salvation of Indigenous peoples (De Santa Teresa, 2015, p. 211).

Laura Montoya's Constitutions stipulated that the sisters were to live in regions inhabited by "infidels and savages" in order to facilitate the apostolate and reach all members of Indigenous families, including those who feared male missionaries (Montoya, 2013).

She also questioned the inefficacy of European missions in integrating frontier regions into the Colombian nation, such as the Gulf of Urabá. Her words reflected both the Church's perspective and that of Antioquian society, yet her resistance to dividing religious missions by gender led to her expulsion from the Catholic Prefecture of Urabá, which was under the leadership of the Discalced Carmelites.

Religious language, as a society's system of beliefs, evolves alongside it (Santamaría, 2016). Laura Montoya's major legacy lay in her contextualized missionary approach, a pedagogy that engaged with the cultural environment to disseminate Catholicism in collaboration with the Colombian State, seeking the integration and "civilization" of populations. She demonstrated remarkable skill in applying biblical teachings in frontier territories with strong Indigenous presence, where the expansion of the Church was crucial for ensuring adherence to divine commandments.

Montoya actively challenged established norms by participating in the missionary movement, overcoming the limitations imposed on women in Catholic missions during the twentieth century. Her goal was to liberate Indigenous people from sin, encouraging them to live according to divine justice. Female religious congregations, which grew in number and demanded greater participation and less enclosure, became key figures in the social, cultural, and political transformations of the nineteenth century, providing catechesis and challenging the distribution of power and authority (Burggraf, 2003).

In 1917, Laura Montoya began her missionary work, pushing beyond the boundaries set by the Council of Trent and distinguishing herself from European missions. Her evangelizing pedagogy was dedicated to pacifying Indigenous regions, serving the Catholic Church under delegation from the State. In 1930, at St. Peter's Basilica, Montoya expressed a profound desire to dedicate "a million lives" to the missions, reflecting her humility and her struggle against the Church's symbolic domination over women (Vatican, 2024).

The constitutions of the "Missionary Sisters of Mary Immaculate and Saint Catherine of Siena" were approved in 1968 by Pope Paul VI, nearly two decades after her death in 1949. Today, the order has a presence in the Americas, Europe, and Africa.



In 1975, Mary Daly's *The Church and the Second Sex* denounced sexism in the Catholic Church, arguing that it instrumentalized women as objects of oppression, relegated them to passive roles, excluded them on the basis of presumed inferiority, blocked their transcendental role, and required reform through a Catholic feminist theology.

The alliance between the Church and the Colombian State established a system of domination and symbolic violence along the frontiers, subjecting both Indigenous peoples and women religious. Obedience emerged as a sacred value within a "civilizing process" (Elias, 2015) that promoted social self-regulation and the restriction of individual impulses.

Laura Montoya's mission in western Antioquia faced persecution, and she was expelled from territories dominated by men, with local priests and the wider community considering her work "useless" or a "delusion" (Montoya, 2017; Gil *et al.*, 2023). This conflict intensified debates concerning the role of women in the Church, where rituals traditionally reserved for men became a point of contention. Montoya defended her actions as pedagogical gestures, precursors to priestly ceremonies, and denounced the absence of clergy. The mission of "Las Lauritas" in Urabá was eventually replaced by the Carmelites.

The current debate in the Vatican regarding the female diaconate remains unresolved, despite several Popes recognizing the important roles women have played in the Church throughout history (Roma Reports, 2023). Laura Montoya's work was perceived as a "strange situation" for breaking with tradition by performing religious practices reserved for men.

The evangelizing method of "Las Lauritas" sought to transform the "savage" Indigenous person into a "civilized" citizen through medical and hygienic practices and the prohibition of traditional rituals, generating trust. The history of women in the Catholic Church and the modern State has been subjected to male domination through the symbolic language of encyclicals and papal letters, which often depict women in terms of obedience and submission (Bourdieu, 1982). Challenging these structures is crucial to achieving gender equality.

## **The Route to the Sea for Antioquia: A Territory of Missions and Colonization**

The search for access to the sea was a crucial objective for Antioquia, intended to drive a process of missions and colonization that Christianized the region and integrated local communities. Simultaneously, both State-led and private colonization contributed to territorial expansion and economic development.

During the colonial period, western Antioquia constituted a closed frontier due to the difficulty of governing the Indigenous population. The Apostolic Prefecture of Urabá, established by the Discalced Carmelites in 1918, was a milestone made possible through the support of the Missionaries of Mary Immaculate (De Santa Teresa, 2015). The first field of Catholic apostolate in Urabá was established between 1510 and 1518, marking the religious history of the continent through missions from various orders that contributed to the moral and Christian formation of Indigenous communities (De Santa Teresa, 2015).

The Atrato River was the principal communication route in Urabá, but its use declined due to fear of the Indigenous peoples of Chocó and the region's reputation as swampy and prone to fever. Although Cartagena was the only legal Spanish port, contraband circulated through the Atrato. After 1540, river navigation and the entry of foreign vessels into the Gulf of Urabá were punished by death. Catholic missions in the region came to an end in 1714 (Parsons, 1961).

Despite earlier challenges, commercial and political elites did not abandon the hope of controlling the Atrato River as a communication route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. It was believed that opening the Atrato depended on constructing a canal linking it to the San Juan River (Chenu, 1988). A decree issued on April 28, 1855 granted José Gooding and Ricardo Vanegas the rights to undertake the opening of an interoceanic canal in the province of Chocó (Vélez (Provincia), 1855). Since independence, Colombian leaders viewed progress in international trade as contingent upon connections between the interior and the sea (Melo, 2020). However, the heterogeneous geography of Gran Colombia, mountains, rivers, and jungles, combined with a lack of infrastructure and labor, limited interregional commerce and undermined the economic value of land (Vélez, 2002). Access to the Atrato River was perceived as key to Antioquia's economic prosperity (Gutiérrez, 2010).

Colonization was conceived as progress, transforming the tropical rainforest to "civilize" the region (Melo, 2020). During the conservative administration (1886–1930), *baldíos* (public lands) laws were enacted (Law 61 of 1874; Law 52 of 1877; Law 48 of 1882). The National Constituent Assembly granted Antioquia sovereignty over the Atrato River (Law 17 of 1905). Colonization was based on the dissolution of Indigenous *resguardos* and the adjudication of *baldíos*. These lands, perceived as unproductive and controlled by Indigenous communities, were subjected to market legislation, in line with the conservative government's particular interest in settling these "no man's lands" (Serje, 2005).

Initially, an increase in land adjudication to so-called "free men" was observed, and in 1887 a Colonization Board was established in Dabeiba, composed of notable figures such as Felix A. Vélez, Benjamin Trespalacios, Juan Henrique

White, Constancio Gómez, and Ismael Montoya. From that point forward, gold mining began and work on communication routes in the area was undertaken.

Law 89 of 1890, which sought to incorporate the Indigenous population into civil life, prevented Indigenous peoples from defending their territories against dispossession for adjudication to “free men,” marking a significant redistribution of land.

It is essential to highlight that for years, colonization legislation established that ownership of *baldíos* could be acquired through cultivation, regardless of their extension. Moreover, those who labored the land in good faith could not be dispossessed (Law 48 of 1882). However, in 1929 the displacement of Indigenous peoples increased once they learned the commandment “thou shalt not kill,” and some Antioqueños took advantage to push their frontier forward and colonize (Machado, 2009).

Particularly noteworthy is José María Villa’s 1896 proposal for completing the Puente de Occidente in Santa Fe de Antioquia over the Cauca River, originally conceived as part of the works linking Antioquia to the Atrato River and its tributaries (Law 18 of 1905). This initiative was not only crucial for regional development but also served as inspiration for an even larger project, the Urabá railroad (Zuleta, 1864).

The dispossession of Indigenous lands spanned more than a century, with State authorities protecting Antioqueño settlers as they opened routes through Indigenous territories, disregarding their sacred character, as occurred with the parcelling of an Indigenous cemetery (Gobernación de Antioquia, 1920).

In summary, the solution to the “ethnic problem” centered on the total elimination of Indigenous *resguardos* and promoted a missionary strategy. The Catholic Church, represented by religious communities such as the Carmelites and Laura Montoya’s congregation, played a fundamental role in the Christianization and “whitening” of Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations, while serving as a public referent within a State marked by militarization and police control (Uribe, 1992, p. 30).

### **The Evangelizing Method of the *Lauritas* Community**

The evangelizing method of the Lauritas community, led by Laura Montoya, represented a unique and contextualized approach to missionary work. In 1910, Montoya, an Antioquian schoolteacher, requested financial support and legislation

from President Carlos E. Restrepo for works among the Indigenous population, whom she referred to as “savages.”

In her autobiography, Montoya expressed her view on the failure of male-led missions among the Caribe and Katío peoples, seeing women’s participation as necessary. In 1911, she invited young women from Antioquian society to participate in the “reduction, catechization, and civilization of the savages” (Mesa, 1986). Montoya believed that her condition as a woman was not an obstacle to serving Christ, convinced that the Indigenous world was disordered and resistant to Christianity.

On June 28, 1916, Bishop Maximiliano Crespo authorized the foundation of the Religious Congregation of the Missionaries of Mary Immaculate and Saint Catherine of Siena, with the purpose of the sanctification of its members and the salvation of Indigenous peoples (De Santa Teresa, 2015). Laura Montoya and her congregation began their evangelizing mission, being valued by political and religious elites as agents of progress. It was believed that only these “virginal” and “immaculate” women could morally and religiously indoctrinate Indigenous peoples, especially women, who were considered bearers of original sin.

The Diocesan Congregation of the Missionaries of Mary Immaculate and Saint Catherine of Siena was officially founded on January 1, 1917, with authorization from Rome (Mesa, 1986). The selective presence of the State, through infrastructure projects, required the moral education of Indigenous peoples to prevent them from occupying spaces designated for public use in the architectural design of the “paradise.” Within this context, Laura Montoya undertook the task of reaching Indigenous *resguardos* along the route to the sea for Antioquia. One such *resguardo* was Cañasgordas, known since colonial times for its resistance to both State presence and Catholic influence.

National order depended on female indoctrination through Catholic education, which projected an ideal model of femininity from pulpits and manuals (Pimoulier, 2020). It was believed that evangelizing women would enable male obedience to the authority of the Church and the State. However, Montoya denounced the absence of priests and male lay ministers in her evangelization zone.

For this reason, in 1917, Laura Montoya offered a mission of Christianization aimed at the civil incorporation of Indigenous peoples, who resisted surrendering their lands for public works. By establishing the Congregation of the Missionaries of Mary Immaculate and Saint Catherine of Siena, she sought to gain the trust of Indigenous communities, something necessary for the installation of the Discalced Carmelite missionaries in western Antioquia and Urabá (Montoya, 2013).

Furthermore, in Laura Montoya's evangelizing mission, popular religiosity did not pose an obstacle to implementing a Catholic pedagogical approach. Montoya transformed Indigenous popular beliefs through the presentation of miracles attributed to the Holy Trinity. Ultimately, despite the Catholic Church having long considered popular religiosity as pagan, Laura Montoya managed to adapt it to the principles of Christian faith (Le Goff, 2008).

Mother Laura described Indigenous religiosity as "pacts with the devil and superstitions," and considered Christianization the best strategy for eliminating it (Montoya, 2013). According to her, Christianization occurred in two phases: first, removing Indigenous peoples from their "almost irrational state" by helping them lose their fear of the civilized world; and second, prudently destroying their "barbaric customs" so they could receive "civilized life" (Montoya, 2013). Bringing civilization meant "erasing the savage" from both space and population, destroying barbaric customs through a Catholic pedagogy that punished the soul rather than the body (Díaz & Leguizamón, 2019).

For Laura, *jaibanismo* and Indigenous healing practices were a dark and demonic force. She considered the devil the "master" of the Katío people (Montoya, 2013). Her challenge was to eradicate ritual manifestations of *jaibanismo*, as ritual gestures were central to the symbolic system of the culture (Le Goff, 2008).

Montoya confronted Katío beliefs by symbolically opposing Caragabi and Antomiá (God and the devil). She convinced women through natural medicines and prayers, persuading them that they did not need a *jaibaná*, and that following one would lead to the loss of their souls. Instead of the "jai" (ritual dolls), she introduced the figure of the Virgin Mary and holy water in food as part of the evangelization process (Montoya, 2015).

Laura Montoya considered it essential to "Christianize" Indigenous peoples before clothing them, believing that shame would eventually lead them to dress according to Christian moral precepts and abandon sin (Montoya, 2013). She also placed great emphasis on evangelizing women and girls to civilize the territory. According to her missionary letters (2013), turning them into "model Christians" would transform the territory transgenerationally. She compared them to Eve, emphasizing their capacity for deceit, and insisted on the presence of priests for administering sacraments such as baptism and Catholic marriage (Montoya, 2013).

Through language, Laura Montoya constructed a new cultural system that required the adaptation of one culture to another through the domination of rituals, symbols, gestures, and practices (Le Goff, 2008). She replaced symbols of *jaibanismo* with the image of the Virgin Mary and introduced prayer accompanied by gifts such as medals, measures that fostered trust and strengthened the mission

(Montoya, 2013). Catholic pedagogy, in addition to punishment, emphasized rewards (Díaz & Leguizamón, 2019). Bourdieu (2009) notes that “one gives in order to possess,” highlighting power dynamics within exchange.

Laura Montoya’s project sought to lead people from “barbarism” to “civilization” through the sacraments (Montoya, 2013). The success of her mission lay in the transition from Indigenous religiosity to institutional Catholicism, using punishment and reward. The Lauritas earned the respect of Katío culture toward Catholicism, strengthening bonds through symbolic actions and the teaching of sacraments as salvation, faith experience, and a system of rewards and punishments.

Anthropologically, sacraments are cultural symbolic actions, but theologically they are linked to Christ and the Catholic Church. By responding to an internal call, the religious woman transcends cultural values, demonstrating creativity in evangelizing and challenging stereotypes about women’s roles in religious life (Gil *et al.*, 2023).

Once Laura Montoya gained Indigenous trust, the Catholic Prefecture of Urabá was established with the Discalced Carmelite Fathers on April 15, 1919 (De Santa Teresa, 2015). The Carmelites recognized that the Missionary Sisters had provided them with the *adjutorium simile sibi* (necessary assistance) for colonization.

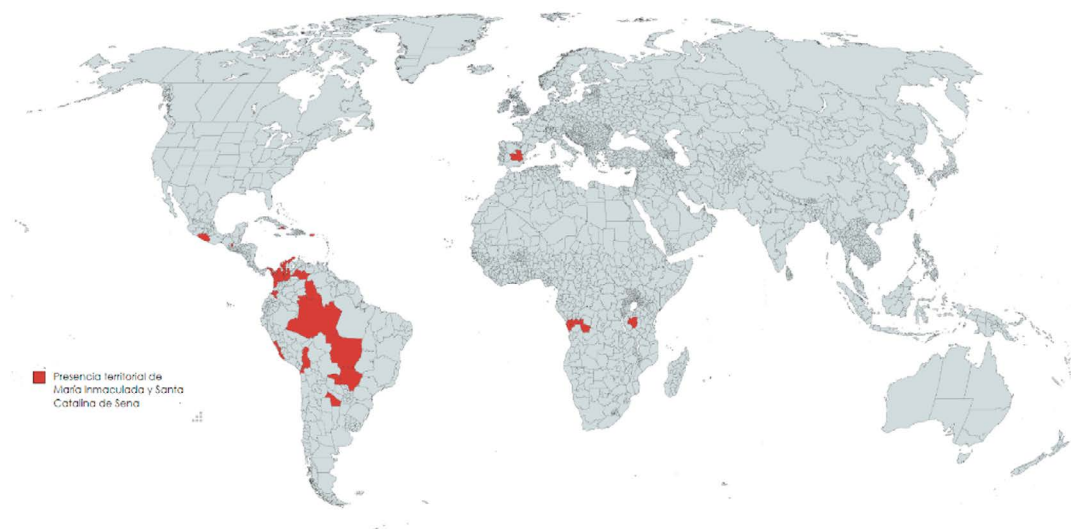
However, Mother Laura’s evangelizing practices were considered too “liberal” for the Catholic Prefecture of Urabá. The Apostolic Prefect, Fray José Joaquín de la Virgen del Carmen, expressed concern that “[...] this kind of apostolic excursion is more proper to a missionary than to a woman missionary,” suggesting that they attract Indigenous peoples to their houses rather than moving around (cited in De Santa Teresa, 2015, p. 221). This passage reflects tensions regarding women’s roles in mission work.

The Gospel of Saint Paul states: “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law” (Reina-Valera, 1960, 1 Corinthians 14:34-35). This traditional interpretation of gender roles has been subject to debate.

As Lerner (1986) notes, “Women have not only been deprived of teaching at any historical moment and in any known society; they have also been excluded from the formation of theories” (p. 21).

The Prefecture asked Laura Montoya to join the Carmelites, but she refused and closed the houses in Dabeiba, Murri, and Turbo, relocating the novitiate to San Pedro. The prefect facilitated the arrival of the Discalced Carmelite Sisters from Barcelona to replace them (De Santa Teresa, 2015).

Despite these efforts, the frontier where the Missionaries of Mary Immaculate and Saint Catherine of Siena work remains a transnational zone marked by persistent poverty, affecting Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, where women bear the greatest burden of care and face illness and food scarcity. The population relies on subsistence agriculture, and development remains a distant goal. Nonetheless, the evangelizing work of these missionaries, present in 21 countries, continues to serve as a beacon of hope.



**Figure 1.** *Map 1. Territorial Presence of Mary Immaculate and Saint Catherine of Siena.*

Source: Author's elaboration based on information from the Missionaries of Mary Immaculate and Saint Catherine of Siena (2022).

## Conclusions

The mission of Laura Montoya and her congregation, aimed at the evangelization of Indigenous peoples, was labeled as seditious. They were accused of influencing other women to join their cause, distancing them from matrimonial tradition and mobilizing them toward defending the right to education. “In the press of the time and in the Departmental Assembly, the self-sacrificing missionaries were the object of ruthless attacks” (Mesa, 1986, p. 48). Although she felt ashamed for

challenging the opinions and customs of her society, Laura Montoya persevered in her life's purpose: to fill empty spaces with a Christian meaning (Gil *et al.*, 2023).

The civilizing project led by the "Lauritas" evolved significantly as they became key collaborators of the Church in the pedagogy of the Gospel, particularly in introducing the sacraments among Indigenous communities. These sacraments, baptism, communion, marriage, prayer, and the act of contrition, played a fundamental role in the catechetical process. Indigenous women were crucial facilitators of this process, gradually abandoning the religious rituals of *jaibanismo* in order to adopt Catholicism. This change not only represented a spiritual transformation but also facilitated the intervention of the political orders of the nation in territories where the State could not be physically present.

Mother Laura confronted the deeply rooted traditions of the Catholic Church and the scrutiny of Antioquian society by assuming roles traditionally considered masculine, such as offering Mass. However, it is important to emphasize that this ritual act was performed more as a pedagogical gesture than an institutionalized ceremony. This anomalous situation was justified by the absence of priests before the establishment of the Catholic Prefecture of Urabá in 1919 (De Santa Teresa, 2015).

Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* states that the exclusion of women from priestly ordination does not imply "[...] a lesser dignity nor discrimination against them, but faithful observance of a disposition attributed to the wisdom of the Lord of the universe" (John Paul II, 1994, para. 6).

The case of Laura Montoya opens the door to reflection on women's participation in the Catholic Church, which has been shaped by debates surrounding the priesthood and the diaconate. However, it is important to recognize that although the presence and role of women in the life and mission of the Church are not tied to ministerial priesthood, they remain absolutely necessary and irreplaceable (John Paul II, 1994).

Laura Montoya was judged for usurping the sacred order, since according to tradition women cannot perform the representative function of the ministry, that is, acting *in persona Christi* and representing Christ. God's communication in the Bible is conveyed through masculine imagery, and especially through the man Jesus Christ. Theologians have explained that the Church cannot entrust the representative function of the ministry to a woman, as this would contradict the divine plan of the Incarnation and would misrepresent God before humanity. However, the lack of a tradition of female priesthood does not preclude the possibility of changing a practice that has endured for centuries in the interest of greater service to Christ and His mission. In fact, changes have been observed in this regard from the pontificate of Paul VI to that of John Paul II, with an increasingly active role for women in the Catholic Church.



In summary, the meaning of the Incarnation lies in the fact that Jesus assumed a human nature, and the fact that He was male is extrinsic and accidental. In essence, God transcends bodily gender characteristics; God is neither man nor woman. History has shown how women-led evangelizing missions represented the presence of God in the jungle.

Consequently, the role of women has been of utmost importance for the evangelizing mission, and cultural change has provided the opportunity for Christians to deepen the redemptive message of the Gospel, both for women and for frontier territories where the presence of the Church and the State is limited. Since Old Testament times, woman has been regarded as mother and comforter (Reina-Valera, 1960, Isaiah 66:13), a fundamental role that continues to resonate in evangelizing work and in accompanying communities at the frontiers of faith.

The symbolic efficacy of Laura Montoya's pedagogy is evidenced by a major historical development of long duration: the expansion of her Catholic and female mission across three different continents, America, Europe, and Africa. All of this has been accomplished with the approval and support of the Catholic Church, thus highlighting the enduring impact of her evangelizing and educational work in various parts of the world.

Pastoral decisions regarding female priesthood will be made according to the needs of the Church and in accordance with cultural changes over the long term; the history of salvation is not limited to the period from Abraham to Christ. Theologians have argued that the ministry of ordained women would constitute a new type of ministry within the Catholic Church, one whose missionary dimension has historically been exercised even when culture and ecclesiastical institutions have opposed it.

The symbolic efficacy of language in Laura Montoya manifested itself through rituals and pedagogical practices that prepared the ground for receiving the Catholic Prefecture of Urabá, led by male Carmelite priests. Despite the evangelization of the territory, which taught the commandment "thou shalt not kill" to the Indigenous population, many remained submissive and self-sacrificing in the face of the offenses committed by Antioquian settlers, who, driven by greed on their route to the sea for Antioquia, violated the commandment: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, nor his wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor's".

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