HELPING OTHERS TO DIE WELL:
THE CONGREGACIÓN DE LA BUENA MUERTE AT THE TEMPLO DE SAN FELIPE NERI (LA PROFESA) IN MEXICO CITY

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And he [Christ] is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. (Colossians 1:18)

The tradition of counseling the Catholic through the process of death has been a service that the Church has provided since the early years of Catholicity. Even though the Church was viewed as being the only provider of safe passage to Heaven and held the key to preparing the soul adequately for its Judgment, there were other organizations that fulfilled some of these spiritual needs and some practical ones too. These organizations were the confraternities.¹

In 1710, the Congregación de la Buena Muerte was founded at the Templo de San Felipe Neri (La Profesa) in Mexico City. This was not however, the first time. This congregation had been previously founded in 1659, but it was suspended because of a lack of funds (Alvarez Rodríguez 111). This was not the case for the second Congregación de la Buena Muerte. The second incarnation was founded by the Viceroy, the Duque de Linares, who worked with the Visitor General, Father Andrés de Luque and Father Félix de Espinosa, the superior at the Casa Profesa, to obtain the rights to celebrate mass. The purpose of this second congregation was to build an exclusive community of believers who would meet every Friday to encourage each other in their faith, but more importantly, to prepare the soul for the afterlife through community support and common spiritual exercises. The first meeting of this congregation was held on Friday, October 14, 1712. It was announced from the pulpit at La Profesa the previous Sunday with an elegant invitation for parishioners to join the

¹ The main objective of the confraternities in New Spain, following colonization, was for the founding of hospitals and schools, or for burying its members (Bazarte Martínez 31). They did not require ecclesiastical approval in the early years of the colony; however, this changed in the seventeenth century with a Bull by Pope Clement VIII (December 3, 1604) that any new confraternity would have to seek the approval of a bishop, who would be qualified to review and approve its statutes.
congregation (Rodríguez Alvarez 112). Since the viceroy was a founding member, this time around, the Congregación de la Buena Muerte was an immediate success.

The purpose of this article is to examine the manual that the Congregación de la Buena Muerte published in 1747 titled Reglas y obligaciones para el Congregante de la Congregación de la Buena Muerte. This nine-page manual, as the title suggests, clearly outlined for its members the requirements and rules that each one had to follow in life in order to die well. As will be demonstrated, rather than focusing on individual efforts for saving the soul, the manual emphasized the role of the Congregación as a community who, as a unit, shared accountability for the salvation of each member’s soul. For this shared experience, it promised each individual special indulgences, which were awarded exclusively by the Holy See for prayers on the behalf of members, both living and dead, and for attending weekly meetings on Friday at La Profesa.

D.A. Brading notes in Church and State in Bourbon Mexico: The Diocese of Michoacán 1749-1810 that there were three functions for confraternities in eighteenth-century Mexico. The first was so that members could pay a monthly fee in turn for funeral expenses. The second case was to support liturgical functions. The third case was for members to gain special indulgences through regular prayers (133). As he notes, many congregations in the eighteenth century fell under all three descriptions. This was the case for the Congregación de la Buena Muerte. Members had to pay fees (in cash, land, and donations of silver and works of art) that would be used to pay for their funeral expenses and expenses of the congregation, and also to beautify the altar of the Congregación de la Buena Muerte at La Profesa. The Congregación also funded masses at their own altar during special days for its membership (anniversaries, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Corpus Christi). In addition, members would gain special indulgences through prayers, spiritual exercises that would be assigned at the meetings every Friday, and through Papal Bulls that had been issued to this specific congregation by the Popes.

There is a great deal of controversy regarding the Novo-Hispanic congregations and confraternities from the eighteenth century. Bourbon reformers were concerned that the confraternities were collecting all of the funds available from their members, thus leaving them in a state of poverty (Brading 131). Because of this, in 1796, the crown demanded that all confraternities submit copies of their constitutions to the Council of Indies for review. This was done to ensure that a bishop had approved and that they possessed a royal license. The archival documents that I have found at the Congregación de la Buena Muerte at the Archivo General de la Nación

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2 The Popes who had authored these Bulls were Benedict XIII, Paul III, Gregory XIII.
(AGN) and at the Fondo Reservado of the Biblioteca Nacional de México (FR, BNM) all pertain to the first half of the eighteenth century. I am, therefore, uncertain if the Crown and Church reviewed the aforementioned issues. Even though the Jesuits were expelled from New Spain in 1767, the altar from the Congregación de la Buena Muerte is still visited by many people today at La Profesa.

The Congregación, like the others in Mexico City was mostly concerned with death, burial and the commemoration of the dead. However, it was also involved in works of charity such as caring for the ill, granting the dowries to poor orphaned girls so that they could marry or become nuns, and giving alms to the poor. These charitable works were also mentioned in the wills of individuals in eighteenth-century New Spain and would grant the soul divine mercy in the Judgment and as they spent their time allotted in Purgatory (Larkin, Nature 102-109). It also encouraged the veneration of the image of Christ at their altar in the church of San Felipe Neri, La Profesa.

In the fifteenth-century, a literary tradition called the *Ars moriendi* began to circulate in Europe. This tradition, which was based on the treatise “De scientia mortis” by Jean de Gerson (1363-1429), the Chancellor of the University of Paris, was meant to prepare every Catholic for the inevitability of death. The manual advised its reader that accepting his mortality and being prepared for death’s sudden arrival by ensuring that he had fulfilled all of the sacraments of the Church, and confessed his sins before his death, would thus guarantee him life after death. The *Ars moriendi* manuals circulated in two similar but distinct traditions: the “Cum de praesentis vitae miseria” (CP), and the "Quamvis secundum philosophum" (QS). The *Ars moriendi* became an instant success because of its brevity and also because it covered all of the requirements for a good death. Many of the QS versions contained woodcuts that represented, in pictorial form, the Catholic (*moriens*) at his deathbed surrounded by angels, saints and demons. These beatific and demonic figures were unseen to the Catholic and were participating in the spiritual battle for the Catholic’s soul. The text that accompanied these images was written typically in vernacular. It is therefore believed that these manuals were destined for the laity, whereas the texts that circulated in the CP version were much longer and were written in Latin, thus suggesting an ecclesiastical readership. These manuals were used and printed in Europe during the late-middle ages, and then changed their discourses in the sixteenth after the Reformation to focus

3 There are documents pertaining to the Congregación de la Buena Muerte at the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City that describe some of the forms of charity that the congregation should take part in: Indiferente Virreinal, Cofradías y archicofradías, exp.9, caja 1284; Indiferente Virreinal, Jesuitas, exp. 20, caja 0906.
more on the life of the Catholic, that if lived “well” would guarantee his “good death.”

The Arte de bien morir books in sixteenth-century Spain became more popular there than they had been in the Middle Ages (Eire 26), and were imported to New Spain by the Franciscans in the same century. They enjoyed a wide readership and distribution in New Spain until the eighteenth century, as is evidenced in the collection of Artes de bien morir in the holdings at the Fondo Reservado at the Biblioteca Nacional de México. The manuals in its collection belonged to the four main religious orders (Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, and Jesuits) during the Novo-Hispanic period. Among the texts in this collection of imported and Novo-Hispanic Artes de bien morir, I came across the manual, Reglas y obligaciones para el Congregante de la Congregación de la Buena Muerte by the Congregación de la Buena Muerte (FR-BN-R-637-LAF). Although this text is from the eighteenth century, it shares some of the main themes that can be found in the other manuals based on this medieval tradition: the acceptance of one’s mortality, to live a life of piety, and to take part in the sacraments of the Church. It also had some unique requirements for its reader: to participate in the congregation’s meetings every Friday, to prepare a testament; to pray for other members; to serve the Virgin Mary; to attend special meetings and services; and to notify the congregation of any member who might be ill or going through the process of death before the Friday meetings so that the names could be mentioned in the prayers.

The first rule that is addressed in the Reglas y obligaciones is that every congregant must serve Christ and take part in doing works of Catholic charity. It also notes that the member should live an “ajustada vida” (2f) as this will contribute to the purification of their conscience, and the reformation of their habits. In order to accomplish this end result, the manual states that the member should therefore cleanse his soul with a good and sincere confession, as this will allow for him to receive the sacraments necessary for “la eterna salud” (2f). This advice is followed by the comment that appears in all of the Ars moriendi manuals which is for the reader to meditate constantly of his mortal state and eventual death (2f). As will be shown later, this meditation would also take on a visual reference with mock vigils staged by the Congregación on special days. Reflecting on one’s mortality was an essential component to the Ars moriendi as it allowed the Catholic to realize that his life on earth was not eternal and that he should be ready and able to disconnect from all the elements that could make this world an attractive place; especially those of a material nature. One of the exercises that helped the individual to prepare for the unexpected arrival of death was the writing of his testament, as this would serve as an act of penance. It would force the Catholic to disconnect himself from his material possessions and from his family and friends, and to realize that he would be unable to take these things with him to the afterlife. In the Book of Matthew 6:19-21, Christ warns the believer
Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

This warning from Christ to disconnect from earthly possessions and to focus on the treasures in heaven, which could be gained through faith and charitable works toward others, would also be emphasized in the Reglas y obligaciones with regard to the preparation of a testament. The testament, it advised, should be crafted in good health in order to prevent leaving and creating problems for the individuals who were left behind.

De mucho agrado de Nuestro Señor, y de particular bien para un Congregante sería, que en sana salud tuviera hecha alguna disposicion testamentaria, y en buen orden, y con claridad sus cuentas, para que la muerte no le coja desprevenido, y muera sin testar, y declarar sus cosas, o por lo grave de la enfermedad, o porque le assalte la muerte de repente, como a muchos otros. (2v)

This statement of the unexpected arrival of death displays some similarities to the parable of the ten virgins when the bridegroom, Christ, will come to judge the living and the dead, “[w]atch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour” (Matthew 25:13). It is the Catholic’s responsibility to be prepared for death’s arrival and for Christ’s arrival, as a lack of preparation for them will lead to a bad death in the next life, and in the eternal life.

Even though this rule mentions that the testament should be prepared while the congregant is in good health, and that all of his earthly assets should be accounted for, this was not always the case. Brian Larkin notes in The Very Nature of God: Baroque Catholicism and Religious Reform in Bourbon Mexico City that testators who possessed —property would often summon a notary to their bedside in the last days and weeks before their deaths (17). These wills were not always legal documents that included the distribution of earthly affairs, they were also documents that were declarations of faith, and which included

pious clauses in their wills to gain grace for their souls and improve their standing before God. They ordered funerary masses, proclaimed membership in confraternities, arranged their funerals, funded liturgical celebrations and donated gifts to religious institutions and the poor. (17)

As many of the testaments were prepared in the final moments of life of the testator or in the weeks leading up to his death, there was a higher
probability that there would be displeasure amongst the testator’s survivors caused by the testament’s contents. While researching at the AGN last year, I came across a file that contained a case from 1731-1732 (Indiferente Virreinal, exp.3, caja 15). The file presented extensive documents that had been drafted to contest a will that had been written at a deathbed. The will had been written at the bedside of Doña Ana María Gamarra and outlined how she wished to leave all of her earthly possessions to her heir. This endowment would be distributed by her priest, Dr. Don Ygnacio de Mesa, and would pay for her funeral expenses, send alms to a school in need, and ensure that masses for her soul were recited. Ana María’s husband and brothers contested the testament, as they were her only living survivors and were shocked and angered to have been “disinherited” on the behalf of her soul. The survivors accused the notary of having swayed Ana María to distribute her earthly possessions in this way and to disregard her only living relatives. In sum, it was a mess that could have been avoided had Ana María been “better prepared” for her death and crafted her testament in good health.

The next set of rules in the Reglas y obligaciones pertain to the meetings of the congregation. The congregation met every Friday afternoon at La Profesa. Congregants were to light a candle in their home between noon and three o’clock in the afternoon as a reminder of the three hours in which Christ was on the cross. A Hail Mary would have to be recited every hour between noon and three (2v). The obligation of the member to attend the meetings at La Profesa was meant to shift the attention of the Catholic from his earthly possessions and daily worries to his death and the health of his soul. This was also the opportune time to participate in the communal contemplation of his mortality with the support of his community of congregants, and to pray for those in the membership who were ill, dying, and already dead. The congregation required for its members to be present at the meetings before three in the afternoon as the Holy Sacrament would be available for silent contemplation thirty minutes before the service began. At three o’clock the spiritual exercise for the coming week was assigned, and a half-hour in length sermon was then read to the attendees. At these meetings the members would receive plenary indulgences that had been awarded specifically for this congregation by the Holy See. Prayers would be printed for distribution at these meetings for the members in attendance with the objective of helping them continue their devotion at home and pray for its membership, both living and dead. It is noted that the poor members of the congregation were unable to take home the spiritual exercise in a notebook, as they did not possess one, therefore they were encouraged to attend the Friday meetings and make the most of their content and the exercises there. This is a curious observation in the manual, as it would imply that the poor, because of their economic circumstance, were not necessarily as “pious” as the more economically stable members.
because they could not continue to practice the spiritual exercise at home in the coming week.

Every third Friday of the month was special and was labeled as a day for spiritual retreat. In addition to the aforementioned activities at La Profesa, the congregant was expected to participate in confession and then communion “como si fuera la ultima, haciendo cuenta, que la recibe por Viatico” (4f). This component that foreshadowed their death and reenacted the last communion of the Catholic was a special exercise that would allow the congregation to reflect on their mortality and meditate on the salvation of their soul. Similar activities were to be carried out during the four Fridays of Lent, and it was emphasized that the congregant visit the icon of the crucified Christ at the altar of the Congregación de la Buena Muerte; especially on the Fridays to request that by the five stripes, Christ would provide them with a good death (4v).

As part of the festivities surrounding Lent, all of the members were expected to participate in the processions of the Holy Sacrament on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. At these events, they would carry candles and walk together through the streets as a community forming the mystical body of Christ, “para hacer un cuerpo con su cabeza, y dar buen ejemplo con su devota assistencia a las demas personas, que acuden con la edificacion y piadosa Catholicidad, que es notoria a aqueste Sagrado Templo en los mismos dias de tan Sagrada semana” (5f). A requirement during these festivities was for the congregation to reflect a solemn and humble attitude for all the spectators on the street. The manual further states that women belonging to the congregation should set a good example at these processions by not wearing jewelry or ostentatious clothes. These vanities should be avoided, as the Virgin Mary would view them as a personal insult and lack of compassion toward her grief. This subtle criticism of vanity in the woman’s appearance is not a new theme. It dates back to the middle ages. The preoccupation of a young woman with her youth and appearance are but vanities in the face of the reality of death. Sor Juana has referred to these vanities in her sonets, as has the character of La Muerte in the medieval Dança general de la Muerte when she invites two damsels to participate in her dance (lines 201-204). The freshness of youth and beauty are contrasted with the ugliness of death.

The founding of this second Congregación de la Buena Muerte at La Profesa was due in large part to the support of the Duque de Linares, the viceroy of New Spain. In 1716 elections were held for the role of Prefect in the congregation and the viceroy was named the Congregación de la Buena Muerte’s first prefect. To commemorate this founder of the congregation,

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4 I am referring to Sonnet 145 “Este, que ves, engaño colorido/que del arte ostentado los primores[…] es un afan caduco y, bien mirado,/ es cadáver, es polvo, es sombra, es nada.”
the members held special masses for the viceroy’s soul on the Friday immediately following June 3. At this meeting, prayers would be raised for his soul. The living members of the Congregación would remember the viceroy on another day that was important for the community: the fifteenth of September, which was designated to pray for all the deceased members of the congregation and especially for the viceroy (6v). The special ceremony was held at the altar of the congregation at La Profesa at eight o’clock. At this celebration, which included a sermon, mass, response, communion, and the singing of the *miserere*, the living members held a mock vigil complete with coffin. All members were expected to attend this service and to participate in the prayers for the Duque de Linares and the others who had already died. The rule in the manual concludes with a comforting warning to the living: “Bueno sera el que los vivos asistan a este Suffragio, que se hace a sus Hermanos los muertos; para que quando aquellos estuvieren como estos en la otra vida, aya quien haga lo mismo por ellos” (6v).

These services that were held at La Profesa for the Congregación de la Buena Muerte that included mass, the sacrament of communion, and common prayers for the members who were ill and dying, and for the dead demonstrate a strong collective tie. The men and women in the Congregación were joined together through their prayers, which held them accountable to each other. The celebration of mass and the common responses, the sharing of communion—a symbolic meal and covenant with Christ—and the prayers that were only part of the benefits to belonging to a confraternity. As Brian Larkin observes, Novo-Hispanic Catholics did spend time worshipping alone, but the rites of the Church and of the Congregations encouraged collective devotions ("Confrenterities" 192). These meetings forced the members to meditate on their mortality and to continue to remember the dead. Even though the deceased were no longer in the same physical and temporal world, they would benefit directly from having participated in the congregation’s community; they were still a part of the mystical body of Christ and the community of saints. They would receive prayers from the living, and this would guarantee the living members the same benefit at their deaths. This form of charity can also be interpreted as a continuous cycle of death and renewal. The cycle of death and renewal can be applied to this form of thinking. Although each individual died and would be held accountable for his sins, the prayers of the congregation and the works of charity done on the behalf of the membership, both living and dead, could continue to make an impact on the state of the soul after death.

Added to these benefits, the Congregación de la Buena Muerte received special privileges from the Holy See for meetings and prayers. Not every confraternity received papal bulls that guaranteed its members plenary indulgences, so this was an attractive option for the congregants and future generations of members. The *Reglas y obligaciones* included information
regarding exercises of penance from which congregants could benefit (taking the first five days of the month for the five stripes of Christ's passion), and recommended that they read “algún libro espiritual, que les aproveche”(7f). Taking part in these exercises and in the meetings on Fridays would guarantee them to receive, in addition to the plenary indulgences for each meeting attended, seven years of pardon and seven cuarentenas (periods of lent). In addition to these indulgences, attending the funerals of fellow congregants, visiting members who were agonizing through an illness or were unable to attend the meetings, would earn the congregant more indulgences. Other charitable works that are mentioned are the visitation of members and non-members in their homes or in hospitals, and to visit prisoners. Performing spiritual exercises in their homes and an examination of the state of their souls at night were also recommended.

There were also provisions made in this manual for members who traveled outside of Mexico City. The manual states that individuals who should find themselves away from La Profesa, could receive their indulgences for meeting the criteria outlined at other churches, “haciendo las diligencias, que hicieran en los días, en que se pueden ganar dentro de la Ciudad y de la Profesa” (8f). This was encouraging for the members as it guaranteed them prayers from afar, and indulgences if they participated in all of the activities outlined in the manual.

The Congregación de la Buena Muerte also had privileges in other parts of the world where there were congregations with the same name. If the members should find themselves in Rome, they would be able to participate in the meetings there and receive unique indulgences: “se aplique por ellas el ejercicio de aquel Viernes, las siete cuarentenas y siete años de perdón, y demás Indulgencias, que se pudieren ganar” (7f). To do this, they would have to attend the Friday meetings of the Congregación de la Buena Muerte at the church of the Company of Jesus in Rome or any chapel within their reach and pray seven Lord’s Prayers and seven Hail Marys. By completing this series of prayers, and a visit to all the churches in Rome, they would receive the indulgences promised by the Holy See (8v). In the first ten days of their time in Rome, if they accomplished all that was prescribed in the Reglas y obligaciones, praying a prayer in the manual following this rule, and by virtue of Paul V’s bull, they would be able to save their soul from the fires of Purgatory (8v).

The manual notes that these and other plenary indulgences, by virtue of the bull issued by Benedict III, could also be applied to the souls in Purgatory. A document that each member should also possess at the moment of his death was the Bull of the Holy Crusade, a document that had a long history in the Novo-Hispanic funerary tradition. The indulgence that was granted with this bull was applied at the moment of the Catholic’s death. In some cases, as María de los Ángeles Rodríguez Álvarez notes, the
bull was also buried with the deceased as a guarantee that the indulgence had been applied to the individual (106).

All of these rules and obligations were clearly outlined in this nine-page manual. The manual concludes with a list of special indulgences for the members of the congregation. All of the indulgences were perpetual and irrevocable (9f). They would therefore obtain indulgences for visiting La Profesa and for praying for the pope at the congregation’s special celebrations. The prayers raised for the pope were an act that demonstrated support to the Holy See, but also to the greater body of Christ, which included all Catholics. Individuals who prayed at La Profesa during their visits would receive each time four years and two hundred and forty-four days of indulgences (9v). In addition, they could receive seven years and seven Lent periods' worth of indulgences if they prayed a Hail Mary and Lord's Prayer at La Profesa or at any church founded by the Company of Jesus every Sunday and Friday of the year, and on Christmas, the day commemorating Christ's circumcision, Epiphany, Corpus Christi, and the whole Lent period until the week following Easter (9v). By listening to mass at the churches established by the Company of Jesus on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays during Lent, they could receive one hundred, thirty-two, and two hundred days of indulgences, respectively. Lastly, they could receive one hundred days of indulgences for each time they attended mass on any other day of the year.

Although the Congregación de la Buena Muerte seemed to offer a strong support for its members as well as generous indulgences, their members also belonged to other confraternities. Why? As Brian Larkin notes, belonging to more than one confraternity was not uncommon in the eighteenth century as lists of membership in confraternities were included in the testaments of Catholics ("Nature" 113). In these legal documents explanations would be outlined as to which ones would be responsible for the individual’s burial, and which ones would receive suffrages for prayers and other expenses related to their soul’s health. In addition to these material requirements, membership in these other organizations would allow the Catholic to receive the prayers and support of another group of believers. Membership in these other confraternities would also allow them to provide this same support for members of the body of Christ at other confraternities. This reality is acknowledged in the Reglas y obligaciones when it is noted that during the processions for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday all members who “que no tuvieran especial ocupacion en las otras Iglesias...” should be present and represent the body of Christ at their procession (5f).

The purpose of my article was to describe the different requirements of the Congregación de la Buena Muerte for its members as listed in the Reglas y obligaciones. By doing this, we can see that the individual members of this congregation had the ability to earn indulgences for themselves, but these benefits could be gained through acts of community charity toward their
confreres, living and dead, as well as individuals who required charity in
general. The charitable deeds, prayers, and celebration of mass, the
receiving of the Eucharist, and the completing of spiritual exercises in the
Friday meetings at La Profesa, forged a strong relationship among the
membership of the Congregación de la Buena Muerte, both living and dead,
and held them all accountable for the salvation of each other’s souls.
François Lebrun notes that “religión eminentemente personal que llama a
cada cual, con individualidad, a la fe y a la salvación” (71) but it is also, “una
religión colectiva que se apoya en una Iglesia” (71). This community
support was invaluable to the members of the Congregación de la Buena
Muerte as it ensured that the cycle of prayers offered up for the living and
the dead continued to carry onward for future generations of congregants.

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