



Conquest and the Kingdom of Heaven

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You are the most powerful God, He who gives life and rules through men on this earth. You tilt the butterfly's wing, hide the ocelot in shadows, lift fleeing deer over fallen trees, and draw the sun across the sky each day. You give life, You take life away, and You bring Your devout servants to You when their work is complete. I am but one man at the end of his days, and from the height accomplished by the climb through these years, I see the marvels and riches that await me in Your presence—the vast halls thronging with the faithful, the banquet tables filled with bread and wine, the glittering angels who attend You, and those who bow before the empty chair that now awaits me.

But do not take this ill: how can You—a great and powerful ruler and lord—not see the sin in sacrifice and the constant call for people to die in Your name? I and my forebears fought for You and died at the hands of Moors and Turks, slashed with the broad blade of Saracen swords or left to die, burned and maimed, in prisons. These are the sacrifices made in Your name, the death and destruction You called for. The Holy Mother and Jesus Christ, Our Lord, ask for love and faith, not this killing and dying, this life spent defending You, this sprawling on a sacrificial bed waiting for You to take this life and leave an empty, rotting shell after years of devotion. Is this how the one True Merciful God treats those created in His image, who offer daily, even hourly sacrifices? I see now how things are: we were sent to the Mexica not to convert the faithless but to pass under the obsidian knife. By failing to die at the hands of the pagans, Velázquez, Narváez, or the conspirators or falling on the causeway or disappearing in the darkness of Tenochtitlan, I am still here by mistake. Now instead of being praised for giving my life and the lives of brave men and fellow soldiers to honor You, I suffer this neglect and humiliation, and finally I see who you really are.

There is but one thing to be done, not for me but for the faithful who would be greatly troubled by your deceits. When they understand the cruelty of sending your own Son to the Jews, if they see your hand in the violent deaths of saints and martyrs, if they recognize how you manipulated Adam and Abraham and Lot, they will know you and what you have done to me and my men. This I prefer not to reveal to them. It is not necessary. But remember: without us, you are meaningless. Cease this pretense, and all will be well; I ask this for your sake and out of love for you.

But now you send this priest to coerce me into confessing sins I did not commit. Do not try to turn the tables on me. I know who you are and how to deal with revolvedores. I know your enemies, your victims, those who suffered under your reign for centuries. They have been misunderstood, their actions called evil, their thoughts traitorous, their souls flawed and impure. But they understand the righteousness of conquest, the property of the conquistador. They understand the sanctity of gold and the religious fervor of forced subservience. For nowhere is faith stronger than in the souls of the deceived, nowhere is intent purer than in the heart of the wrong, nowhere is love more earnest than in the eyes of those who have seen holy war. The doors to the hall are barred, but in the end there will only be the dead and us.

—*Hernán Cortés*; ¹ 2 December 1547; *Castilleja de la Cuesta near Seville, Spain*

¹ **Hernán Cortés** (1485-1547) fought and defeated the Mexica, destroyed Tenochtitlan, built Mexico City in its place, and was named governor and captain general of New Spain in 1523. In overthrowing Moctezuma and displacing him as the emperor of the Mexica Empire, Cortés first flattered Moctezuma and admired the wealth and beauty of Tenochtitlan; then criticized certain practices such as human sacrifice to later give himself a moral basis for his conquest; then bullied, threatened, and took Moctezuma hostage; and finally used force and conspired with the Tlaxcalans, the Mexicas' enemies, to fight with Cortés against them.