

Psychoanalysis, religion and architecture. Fray Gabriel Chávez de la Mora and the monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección

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Abstract: At the end of the sixties, the Mexican monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección, located in Ahuacatlán, near Cuernavaca (Mexico), caused rivers of ink to flow due to its novel therapies, in which the Benedictine monks underwent group psychoanalytic processes. The commotion that this entailed, motivated that in 1967, the monastic community decided to dissolve, after its prior, the Belgian priest Gregorio Lemerrier, was repeatedly admonished by the Vatican authorities. Starting from the dispersed existing documentation, and abundant unpublished material, this article proposes, in the first place, to reconstruct the events that took place in the monastery of Ahuacatlán. Secondly, to highlight the architectural implications of the process, something that no one has noticed to date. Finally, to underline the role that Fray Gabriel Chávez de la Mora played as architect of the monastery and, especially, of its circular chapel, very novel and controversial for that time.

Keywords: psychoanalysis; religious architecture; Mexico; Gregorio Lemerrier; Fray Gabriel Chávez de la Mora.

Psicoanálisis, religión y arquitectura. Fray Gabriel Chávez de la Mora y el monasterio de Santa María de la Resurrección

Resumen: A finales de los años sesenta, el monasterio mexicano de Santa María de la Resurrección hizo correr ríos de tinta debido a sus novedosas terapias, en las que los monjes benedictinos se sometían a procesos psicoanalíticos grupales. El revuelo que ello supuso, motivó que en 1967, la comunidad monástica decidiera disolverse, después de que su prior, el sacerdote belga Gregorio Lemerrier, fuera repetidamente amonestado por las instancias vaticanas. Partiendo de la dispersa documentación existente y de abundante material inédito, este artículo se propone, en primer lugar, reconstruir los hechos acaecidos en el monasterio de Ahuacatlán. En segundo lugar, poner de manifiesto las implicaciones arquitectónicas que tuvo el proceso, algo en lo que nadie ha reparado hasta la fecha. Y finalmente, subrayar el papel que jugó Fray Gabriel Chávez de la Mora como arquitecto del monasterio y, especialmente, de su capilla circular, muy novedosa y polémica para aquella época.

Palabras clave: psicoanálisis; arquitectura religiosa; México; Gregorio Lemerrier; fray Gabriel Chávez de la Mora.

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INTENTIONS

Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders weary themselves in vain (Psalm 126:1).

When in the fall of 2019, the XI Bienal de Arquitectura Jalisciense in Guadalajara organized an exhibition homage to Fray Gabriel Chávez de la Mora (1929-2022)—the first graduate of the School of Architecture of the University of Guadalajara—on the occasion of his 90th birthday,¹ I thought that someone should write a text framing Fray Gabriel among the religious architects of the 20th century (Fernández-Cobian 2021). I was intrigued by his figure, in particular, as to why he was treated as a friar and not as a Dom, which is proper among Benedictines, and I wondered if this anomaly would be reflected, in some way, in his religious architecture.

Taking advantage of my visit to Mexico City in June of that same year, I wanted to visit the abbey of Tepeyac to talk to him about the matter, but it was physically impossible, and I could only greet him briefly by telephone. He told me that this singular treatment came from his time in the monastery of Ahuacatlán, where everyone—professed religious and novices—were brothers, and only the prior was called father. Today the Benedictine monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección, in Ahuacatlán (Cuernavaca, Mexico) is abandoned and threatens ruin. Its chapel is a fundamental work of religious architecture of the twentieth century, and although they are studying how to protect it and enhance its value, it is not easy to access it.²

At that time, my knowledge of Ahuacatlán was scarce. The three monographs that existed at that time on Fray Gabriel (González Pozo 2005; Plazola 2006 and 2010) begin with two dazzling works: this chapel and the reform of the cathedral of Cuernavaca; then they go on to expose his extensive career in sacred and liturgical craftsmanship, and then to the construction of the abbey of Tepeyac and the sanctuary of Guadalupe, works that already correspond to another vital moment of the author.

At the end of the sixties, the so-called *monastery of psychoanalysis* caused rivers of ink to flow, to the point that the events that took place in Ahuacatlán constitute one of the three milestones that placed Mexico on the ecclesial map of the second half of the 20th century, together with the

scandals of Marcial Maciel and the indigenous congress in San Cristóbal de las Casas (1974). Much was written about the group psychoanalytic experience and its promoters, and not only in local magazines, but also in media of wide world circulation such as *Le Monde*, *Life*, *Paris Match*, or *Der Spiegel*. Even plays and movies inspired by them appeared.³ Naturally, all the reports highlighted the most sensational aspects of the case. Later, their flame faded, although it never disappeared completely, and in the last few years a certain interest in that experience has reappeared in Mexico (Carrillo 1988; Cabrera 1996; Gutiérrez Quintanilla 2007; González 2011; Ashwell 2012; Litmánovich 2015 y 2008).

Fray Gabriel was one of the monks who survived—from a religious point of view—the psychoanalytic experiment; in spite of everything, he kept a good memory of that time and a great affection for its main protagonist, Prior Gregorio Lemercier, whom he considered his spiritual father. He died on 17th December 2022, but in September 2019, he had the opportunity to revisit the place on the occasion of the retrospective that the Guadalajara Biennial dedicated to him: fifty years had passed.

It is not my intention to describe the details of the therapeutic analysis of the community of monks. I would like, however, to make a linear reading of the most relevant facts, to highlight the architectural implications of the process—something that no one has noticed to date—and finally, to underline the role played by Fray Gabriel as a psychoanalyzed monk-priest and architect of the monastery chapel.⁴ Since the dates are important, we will review the events chronologically.⁵

It is worth remembering that in all religious orders with a Benedictine spirit, such as the Cistercians, the Trappists, or even the Premonstratensians, the monks live in community and commit themselves to remain in the same building all their lives. *Stabilitas loci* or local stability is the permanent adherence of a monk to a particular monastery.⁶ One understands, then, the importance that architecture acquires in the life of the monk, and in particular, the place where divine worship is celebrated.

³ The successful *Pueblo rechazado* (1968), by Vicente Leñero; and the gruesome *El monasterio de los buitres* (1973), by Francisco del Villar, respectively. The former gave Fray Gabriel his original script to read, although he did not incorporate the changes suggested by the monk (Autor 2020).

⁴ The bibliography on Fray Gabriel, although not very abundant, is already beginning to be significant: cf. González Pozo 2005; Plazola 2006 y 2010; Chávez de la Mora 1983, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c y 2015; Jaramillo 2013; Afana 2015; Fernández-Cobian y Orozco 2017; Argüelles 2020.

⁵ I will rely, above all, on two books: that of the Spanish journalist Luis Suárez López (1970), *Cuernavaca frente al Vaticano*, which condenses a series of interviews published at the time in the magazine *Siempre!* and that of the psychoanalyst Fernando M. González (2011) entitled *Crisis de fe. Psicoanálisis en el monasterio de Santa María de la Resurrección, 1961-1968*. In October 2020, Fray Gabriel himself reviewed the text and gave his approval.

⁶ This rule was introduced by the Rule of St. Benedict in the 6th century, where it is stated: “He who is to be admitted should promise stability, conversion of his habits and obedience in the oratory before all” (c. 58/17). Braunfels (1975) affirms that it was precisely stability that led to the appearance of great architectural works linked to monasticism.

¹ This article is an extended version of the Spanish article “Psicoanálisis, religión y arquitectura: Fray Gabriel Chávez de la Mora y el monasterio de Santa María de la Resurrección”, published in the Italian journal ‘Esempi di Architettura’ 1 (2019): 1-34. Accessed 03/12/2023, <https://bit.ly/3CdEwqA>.

About the Biennial exhibition and some parallel events can be seen, for example, Ceja 2019; Fabila 2019; Feregrino 2019; Morales 2019, etc. This was not the first retrospective exhibition dedicated to our monk-architect, who has been honored several times throughout his career; recall, for example, the exhibition “55 años de arquitectura: Fray Gabriel Chávez de la Mora. Mística y arte”, which was open to the public at the National Museo Nacional de Arquitectura of the Palacio de las Bellas Artes in Mexico City from January 28 to May 30, 2010.

² Plazola (2010, 28) states: “This work has been proposed as Mexico’s artistic heritage protected by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes and the Dirección de Arquitectura y Conservación del Patrimonio Artístico Inmueble and Conaculta”.

THE ORIGINS OF THE MONASTERY OF SANTA MARIA DE LA RESURRECCIÓN

Unlike what happened with the Franciscans, the Dominicans, or the Augustinians, who arrived with the Spanish conquerors during the 16th century, in the mid-20th century the Benedictines had not yet established themselves in Mexico, because the then King of Spain, Carlos I, thought that their contemplative life would not be useful for the evangelization of those lands. On the other hand, the kings of Portugal did send them to Brazil. Therefore, before speaking of this monastery, it is necessary to remember how its charismatic prior, Joseph Gregorio Lemerrier, ended up in America. Who was he? What was his relationship with Mexico?⁷

Joseph Lemerrier was born in Liege (Belgium) in 1912. Shortly before his 17th birthday he moved to Africa with the White Fathers (Society of the Missionaries of Africa), and remained with them until 1932, when he entered as a novice in the Benedictine Abbey of Mont-César, in Louvain, one of the centers of the Liturgical Movement.⁸ There he studied theology, changed his name to Gregory and in 1938 was ordained a priest. Years later he recalled that the monastery was divided into two camps: the intelligent non-pious and the pious non-intelligent. In his opinion, this vital division was the consequence of the unappealable condemnation of modernism made by Pope St. Pius X in 1907. He set out, therefore, to bring about in himself the union of religious life and intelligence.

In Louvain also lived the Mexican Ignacio Romero Vargas Yturbide and the Belgian Thomas d'Aquin Chardome, with whom he conceived the idea of making a foundation in America; Mexico seemed to him the perfect place to re-spiritualize the Church (Lemerrier 1968). In 1939, Gregorio, Hildebrando, and Benedicto, as the other two companions were called, obtained permission to move to the Aztec country, but the outbreak of World War II forced Lemerrier to join the Belgian army as a chaplain. He was taken prisoner, and in 1941, after being freed thanks to the economic support of the Romero Vargas family, he managed to join his companions at the Benedictine Abbey of Conception (Missouri, United States).⁹

Thus, in 1942, Hildebrando and Benedicto moved to Mexico. The former acquired in Guaymas (Sonora), a farm called La Granja, where they founded the monastery of San Benito del Mar. Lemerrier joined them in 1944. But in 1946, the bishop of Sonora, Juan Navarrete Guerrero—currently in the process of beatification—began to hear rumors of alleged abuses committed by the monks, so he ordered them to leave his diocese immediately. Benedicto decides to marry a local woman and disassociate himself from the project.

Claiming the impossibility of living from agriculture in such a dry climate as that of Guaymas, Hildebrando and Gregorio asked different bishops for permission to settle in their dioceses. But after trying unsuccessfully in Mexico, Morelia, Guadalajara, Puebla, Tulancingo, Zamora, Leon, Apatzingan, Veracruz, and San Luis Potosi, it was finally the bishop of Cuernavaca, Francisco Gonzalez Arias, who welcomed them.¹⁰ They settled in Huitzilac, where they founded the monastery of Monte Casino.

We have no information about the architecture of these first two foundations. We only know that at the beginning of 1949, an irresolvable conflict arose between Romero Vargas and Lemerrier over economic, liturgical, and personal issues,¹¹ two sides were created among the monks and Romero Vargas sold the monastery. The eight monks in favor of Lemerrier refused to abandon it. There are attempts of armed struggle with sticks and *machetes*, so Gregorio and his followers settle in the house of the sacristan of the town of Santa María Ahuacatlán. Finally, Hildebrando decides to hang up his habits and leave the Catholic Church.¹²

Already alone, and thanks to the support of the primate abbot of the Benedictines, Bernardo Kaelin OSB, on January 14, 1950, Lemerrier obtained from Pope Pius XII permission to found an independent monastery following the primitive Benedictine rule: Santa María de la Resurrección (Fig. 1).¹³ The new bishop of Cuernavaca, Alfonso Espino Silva, authorizes him to establish himself officially in his diocese, and seven months later, he can see the first wing of the building erected (Fig. 2).

⁷ In addition to the two books already cited, there is a great deal of information—albeit uneven—on Lemerrier and his psychoanalytic experience in Cuernavaca. From his own writings and interviews (Lemerrier 1967, 1968, 1969; Lemerrier and Drane 1967; Fresquet 1965; Laurentin 1965; Serrou 1965), biographies and varied studies (Latorre 1969; Basaglia-Ongaro 1981; Cabrera 1996; Lucci 2000; Chao Barona 2002; Gallo 2010; Ashwell 2012; Velasco 2014; Vives 2017), to simple press reports or small reports in periodicals such as *Excelsior*, *Siempre!*, *Proceso*, *Novedades*, etc.

⁸ Garrido Boñano (2008) devotes a chapter of his book “Grandes maestros y promotores del Movimiento Litúrgico” to Dom Bernard Capelle (1884-1961), who was the abbot of Mont-César and professor at the University of Louvain at the time Lemerrier lived there. Dom Capelle was a member of the Liturgical Preparatory Commission for the Second Vatican Council. On the architectural implications of the Liturgical Movement, see Fernández-Cobian 2005, 53-59.

⁹ “According to Mario Menéndez’s interview with Romero Vargas (1967), Lemerrier, as chaplain of the Belgian army, was taken prisoner by the Germans and they asked him for 1200 dollars for his ransom, after which Romero Vargas’ family gave it to him and, in addition, paid his trip to the United States, where he stayed for a year and then moved to Sonora” (González 2011, 53).

¹⁰ Monsignor González Arias was the uncle of Marcial Maciel Degollado, who had ordained him a priest in 1944 and gave him his endorsement to found the congregation of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart and the Virgin of Sorrows (later Legion of Christ). He died on August 20, 1946, shortly after authorizing the creation of the monastery of Ahuacatlán.

¹¹ Personal: apart from the fact that both accused each other of being active homosexuals, their strong character made them incompatible. Liturgical: Romero Vargas accused Lemerrier of experimenting with the liturgy, performing outlandish celebrations. Economic: Romero Vargas accused Lemerrier of wanting to appropriate everything his family had given him, including his library. In any case, there is no doubt that without Romero Vargas’ help, Lemerrier would never have arrived in Mexico.

¹² In 1957, Ignacio Romero Vargas, in order to obtain his doctorate in Law at the National School of Jurisprudence of the UNAM, presented the thesis *La Organización Política de los Pueblos de Anahuac*, whose published synthesis he called *Los gobiernos socialistas de Anahuac* (Mexico DF: Romero Vargas 1978).

¹³ Alfonso Espino Silva was bishop of Cuernavaca between 1947 and 1951; his predecessor was González Arias—already mentioned—, and his successor, Sergio Méndez Arceo.

FIGURE 1

Joseph “Gregorio” Lemerrier (standing, center) with the community of monks of the Benedictine monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección (1950)



Source: Monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección's Archive (Ahuacatitlán, Mexico).

FIGURE 2

View of the first wing of the monastery under construction (1950)



Source: Monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección's Archive (Ahuacatitlán, Mexico).

In 1952 Sergio Méndez Arceo (1907-92) assumed the bishopric of the diocese of Cuernavaca, who in 1959 erected the monastery as a conventual priory and appointed Lemerrier as prior. At that time the community consisted of about thirty monks. The monastic rigor that was lived in Santa María de la Resurrección, together with the aspiration of its prior to combining intelligence and piety, made Thomas Merton cite it in 1957 in his book *The Silent Life* as an example to follow for all of Latin America.

Fray Gabriel Chávez de la Mora

Gabriel Chávez de la Mora (Guadalajara, 1929 – Cuautitlán Izcalli, 2022) arrived at the monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección in 1955. Some members of his family had already entered religion, so the monastic way

of life was not something strange to him. On the other hand, he had a good pedigree, as he was the nephew of the famous architect Enrique de la Mora y Palomar.¹⁴

He was fascinated by the readings of the Trappist monks T. Merton and M. Raymond, author of the saga of Cîteaux. That is why, when around 1951 he heard that a Benedictine monastery was being built near Cuernavaca, he wanted to visit it. The monastery had some novel features; on the one hand, the monks were self-sufficient, since they consumed products from their own garden and from their farm animals; on the other, Mass was celebrated in Spanish, Gregorian chant was cultivated, and in the future refectory there was a provisional chapel with the altar facing the faithful (Fig. 3). All this gave him a glimpse of a way of life that fully satisfied him.

FIGURE 3

Liturgical celebration in the provisional chapel of the monastery (ca. 1953)



Source: Monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección's Archive (Ahuacatitlán, Mexico).

The building had no great pretensions—at least in style—and the modesty of its construction was evident, which was very appropriate for the spirit of evangelical radicalism that he was looking for. Following the millenary tradition of the Benedictines, the planning of the building had been done by the prior, Gregory Lemerrier, relying on the construction experience of some local masons and counting on the labor of the monks themselves. Initially, two bays were built at right angles: one in an east-west direction and the other in a north-south direction. On the first floor should be the chapter house and the refectory on one side, and the kitchen and storerooms on the other. And on the upper floors, the dormitories (Fig. 4).

Gradually, he became involved in the design of the monastery, suggesting ideas to the prior. In fact, he made three ambitious proposals to complete the monastery and build its chapel, the first two unpublished to date (Figs. 5-8). Then, he helped design a third body, with which the open cloister adopted a U-shape. With that background piece, they began to celebrate the Sunday Eucharist in the open

¹⁴ On this important Mexican architect can be seen, for example, the monographs González Pozo 1981 and González Franco 2015.

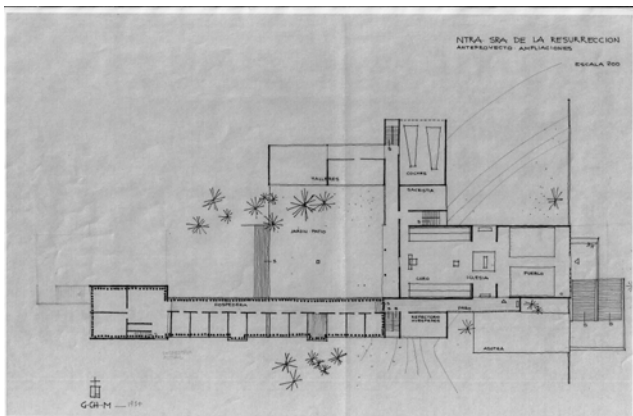
air, in Spanish and *coram populo*: it was a great success. The numerous attendees who came every Sunday from Cuernavaca and Mexico City (not so much from the town of Ahuacatitlán), could shelter from the sun under a canvas tent (Fig. 9).¹⁵ The formalization of that presbytery, in brick, is still preserved. Only a few years later the definitive chapel was built.

FIGURE 4
View of the monastery under construction,
with the second wing completed (ca. 1953)



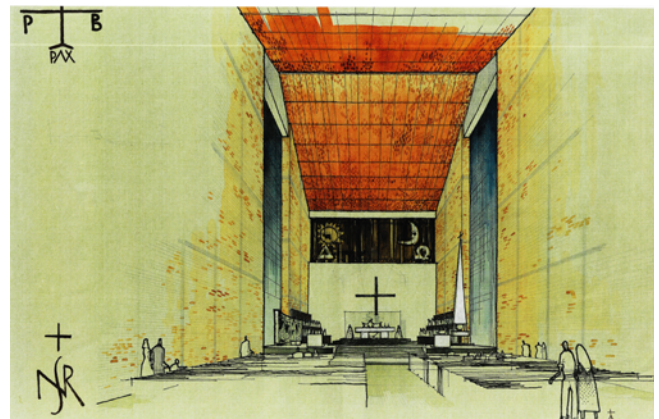
Source: Monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección's Archive (Ahuacatitlán, Mexico).

FIGURE 5
First version of the monastery chapel by Fray Gabriel;
first floor (1954)



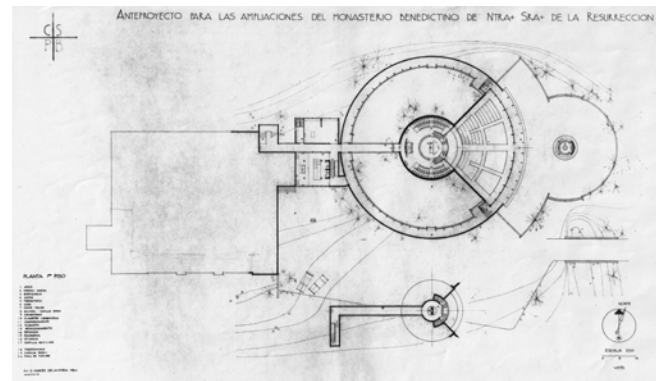
Source: Taller San José Artesano's Archive (Tepeyac Abbey, Mexico).

FIGURE 6
Interior perspective of the chapel (1954)



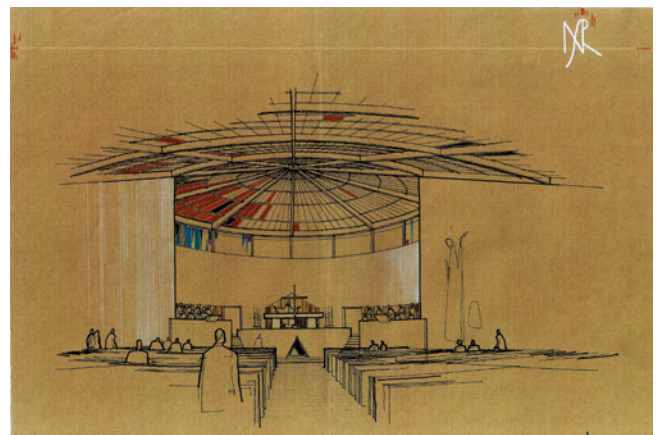
Source: Taller San José Artesano's Archive (Tepeyac Abbey, Mexico).

FIGURE 7
Second version of the monastery chapel by Fray Gabriel;
ground floor (1955)



Source: Taller San José Artesano's Archive (Tepeyac Abbey, Mexico).

FIGURE 8
Interior perspective of the chapel (1955)



Source: Taller San José Artesano's Archive (Tepeyac Abbey, Mexico).

¹⁵ Since the mass was celebrated at 11 a.m., and according to the ecclesiastical regulations of the time, it was necessary to attend fasting, at the end of the celebration the monks offered breakfast to the visitors. Fray Gabriel recalls that they even prepared breakfasts for two hundred people.

FIGURE 9

The marquee chapel that was set up on Sundays in the patio of the monastery (ca. 1955)



Source: Monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección's Archive (Ahuacatlán, Mexico).

At the same time, the young architecture student had the opportunity to meet Octavio Muñoz Castillo and Benjamín Ferreira, priests linked to the Liturgical Movement that was consolidating in European ecclesiastical circles.

On February 20, 1955, Chávez took his licentiate exam, and the following May 5 he entered the monastery of Ahuacatlán (Fig. 10). He was aware that with this decision he was giving up his career;¹⁶ in fact, in the twelve years he remained in this monastery (1955-67) he worked as a craftsman, and only occasionally as an architect.¹⁷

¹⁶ The Rule of St. Benedict, in chapter LVII states: "If there are artisans in the monastery, they shall exercise their arts with all humility and respect, if the abbot commands them to do so. But if any one should become proud of his skill, because it seems to him to be of some benefit to the monastery, let such a one be deprived of his trade and never return to it. Unless the abbot, seeing him humiliated, should again command him to do so".

¹⁷ Although he states that he hardly worked as an architect in Ahuacatlán (the chapel of the monastery, the reform of the cathedral and "the Cuautla thing", he usually says), in his biographical resume there are quite a few works executed at that time:

- Chapel and annexes of the Benedictine monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección, Santa María Ahuacatlán, 1957.
- Liturgical refurbishment of the Cathedral of the Assumption of Mary, Cuernavaca, 1957.
- Residences for the Verber family and for Dr. Javier Baz, Santa María Ahuacatlán, 1958. These two houses were later transformed into a convent for the Benedictine sisters.
- Liturgical refurbishment of the parish church of San Diego, Cuautla, 1960.
- Residence of Dr. Gustavo Quevedo, Santa María Ahuacatlán, 1961.
- Residence of Dr. Frida Zmud, Santa María Ahuacatlán, 1961.
- Residence *Los colorines* for Victoria de la Mora, Santa María Ahuacatlán, 1961.
- Emaús Psychoanalytic Center, Santa María Ahuacatlán, 1961.
- Stores *Talleres Monásticos* in the atrium of the Cathedral of Cuernavaca, 1963.
- Stores *Emmaus*, Zona Rosa and Saturday bazaar, Mexico City, 1963.

FIGURE 10

The student Gabriel Chávez de la Mora, taking his licentiate exam at the University of Guadalajara (20/02/1955)

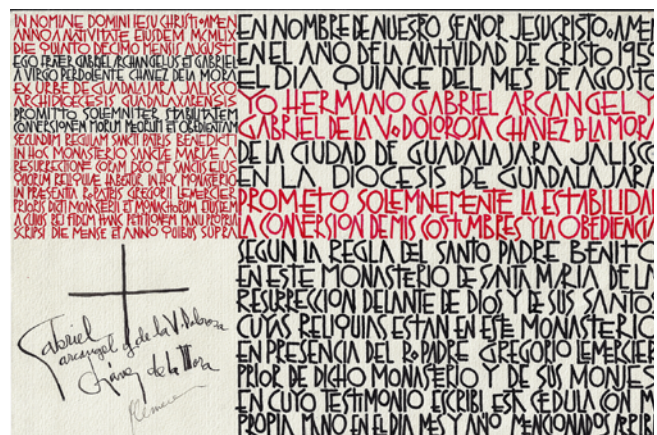


Source: Plazola 2006.

Once he had completed his initial training, on August 15, 1956, he made his first profession (Fig. 11), and exactly three years later (August 15, 1959), his solemn profession. On that day he was accompanied by the architect Ignacio Díaz Morales and other colleagues, with whom he had created the *Ars Sacra* workshop in the faculty to work on religious art. From then on he started the Monastic Workshops, which gradually began to be more important as a source of income for the monastery than the initial agricultural and livestock work. The simplification of forms in sacred iconography, the abstraction of classical motifs, the use of different materials, and above all, the biblical messages made in silkscreen with a very peculiar typeface that he had already used to label his works in the faculty, began to be widely accepted, while at the same time producing a certain commotion.

FIGURE 11

Manuscript with the monastic vows of Fray Gabriel Chávez de la Mora (1956)



Source: Taller San José Artesano's Archive (Tepeyac Abbey, Mexico).

In 1957, Lemer cier entrusted Fray Gabriel with the construction of the monastery's definitive chapel, a

tremendous novelty for the time, which was partially financed by the banker and businessman Carlos Trouyet (1903-71).¹⁸ Fray Gabriel used to refer to it affectionately as “la niña chica” (the little girl) because it was his first work (Gutiérrez Quintanilla 2020). On the other hand, Bishop Méndez Arceo, who was enthusiastic about the liturgical renovation that was taking place in the monastery, commissioned Fray Gabriel to reform the cathedral of Cuernavaca (1957-59), as well as fifty-two sets of liturgical vestments, one for each Sunday of the year (Suárez 1970, 11 ff.; Plazola 2010; Espino 2015).

Santa María de la Resurrección was, in many ways, not a conventional monastery. To underscore its radical evangelical simplicity, in the early 1960s the monks began to wear a *manta* habit, the thick gray denim cloth from which the uniforms of Mexico City street sweepers were made at the time (Fig. 12). It was a design that conformed perfectly to the Rule of St. Benedict (c. 55) and, of course, of the authorship of Fray Gabriel, who goes on to relate:

There was no lack of criticism and accusations for many things in this monastery: that why there was no difference between brother and priest, that why the brothers took solemn vows, that why we read the Bible and the Bible in Spanish so much if at that time everything was in Latin, that why the Mass was celebrated in Spanish and everything from the front, that why they worked... (Plazola 2006, 141).

We had a kind of wall newspaper to see that they said we were drug addicts, effeminate, *agiotistas*, land sellers (González 2017, 28).

FIGURE 12

Monks of Ahuacatlán with manta habits and huaraches (ca. 1959)



Source: Monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección's Archive (Ahuacatlán, Mexico).

¹⁸ Fray Gabriel recalls that, to build it, some 80,000 pesos were needed. Years later, Trouyet would commission him to build the ecumenical chapel La Paz, in Acapulco (1971).

At first, the only presbyter was Lemerrier; later other monks were ordained as priests. In 1960, at the urging of the prior, Fray Gabriel began his theology studies at the Conciliar Seminary of Mexico, located in Tlalpan, where Guillermo Schulenburg Prado was rector, and on May 1, 1965, he was ordained by Bishop Sergio Méndez Arceo in the monastery chapel itself (Fig. 13). He chose that date with every intention: because it was the liturgical commemoration of St. Joseph, Craftsman, the Feast of Labor in Mexico, and to show solidarity with the *Worker-Priests* that were beginning to emerge in many parts of the world (Fernández-Cobian 2020).

FIGURE 13

Fray Gabriel, already a priest, blessing with hyssop (ca. 1965)



Source: González Pozo 2005.

At that time, the psychoanalytic process of the community was already in full swing.

A MONASTERY IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

Psychoanalysis had made its appearance at Santa María de la Resurrección towards the end of the 1950s. The causes of its origin were related to the absence of previous filters in the admission of candidates, since from the beginning—and contrary to what is customary in the Benedictine tradition—Lemerrier refused to implement them in his monastery. There was no distinction between monks and *converts* (Braunfels 1975). He soon realized that the community had become filled with maladjusted and violent characters—drug addicts and active homosexuals, above all—who compromised the climate of prayer and intellectual work. The Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal, who resided there for a period between 1959 and 1961, describes in detail this sort of *Monipodio's courtyard*, to the point of going so far as

to say that the Belgian intended to welcome there all “the refuse of society” (González 2011, 27).¹⁹ Chávez de la Mora, on the contrary, recalls that St. Benedict asked to welcome everyone, as long as they sought God, and explains that the monastery had resources, such as fraternal correction or chapter meetings, to correct individually or collectively the brothers who committed faults.

The fact is that at a certain point, Lemerrier began to doubt the *balancing effect*—in his own words—that monastic life could exert on individuals. For example, he noticed that the homosexual tendencies of some monks, far from being attenuated, had been accentuated. More importantly, he began to question his own capacity as a spiritual father and as a director of souls. Undoubtedly, he was exhausted from correcting. As a first step, he sent two monks to meet in Mexico City with Francisco Garza, a psychoanalyst of the Sociedad Psicoanalítica Frommiana (SPF), but the experience did not work, in his opinion, because of the too *humanistic* character of his therapies. He then thought of turning to Mauricio González de la Garza (1966), a writer and friend of his who was a psychoanalytic enthusiast living in the monastery while drafting his master’s thesis on Walt Whitman.²⁰ González de la Garza, also a homosexual, was in turn analyzing with Santiago Ramírez, president of the Asociación Psicoanalítica Mexicana (APM), of Freudian and atheist line.²¹

But the trigger for the full introduction of psychoanalysis in the monastery was the hallucination suffered by Lemerrier himself on the night of October 4-5, 1960. This experience completely disrupted his life and that of the monastery, for after it Lemerrier would ask himself in all its crudeness what was the origin of the subjective experience of the faith of the monks of his community and of his own. He himself narrated it on several occasions:

I was lying on my back, awake in my bed. Suddenly, I saw before me a multitude of lightning flashes of all colors. It was a most beautiful sight. My eyes were wide open and I enjoyed unspeakably those fireworks that I would have liked to prolong indefinitely. I turned on my left side. Then it appeared on the wall of my cell like a small screen, on which I saw a succession of human faces. This kaleidoscope stopped on a very beautiful face, of great kindness. At that precise moment, I cried out: “My God, why don’t you speak to me like that?” And immediately, I began to weep with extreme violence, overcome by the profound awareness of being loved by God. [...] I wanted to tell him that he could do with me whatever he wanted, but I was afraid that he would take me seriously. I had the deep feeling that I did not deserve this love because of my sins. And everything was summed up in a feeling of defeat, of God’s dominion over me. And at the same time, of great joy. This lasted several hours. When I could stand it no longer, I called the amateur psychologist who lived not far away and who came to keep me company (Lemerrier 1969).

The prior considered himself a hard, cold, rational man, extremely skeptical of any kind of mysticism. Therefore, the next day he went to see Ramírez, who refused to psychoanalyze him—he believed that this was not his problem—and sent him to an ophthalmologist, who found that the nocturnal experience could be related to the beginning of ocular cancer. Even so, as Lemerrier insisted, Ramírez ended up recommending him to go to Dr. Gustavo Quevedo, a psychoanalyst he trusted, with whom he entered psychoanalysis three months later, on January 17, 1961.²² On March 8, cancer was confirmed in his left eye, which was immediately removed.

Thinking that what was good for him would also be good for his brothers in religion—“the long asceticism of psychoanalysis has led me to a spiritual life that I could not have reached in thirty years of monastic life”, he would affirm in his conference in the USA (Lemerrier 1969)—, shortly afterwards Lemerrier requested Quevedo’s intervention to explore, through the novel system of group psychoanalysis, the quality of faith of the monks in his monastery²³ (Fig. 14).

¹⁹ When Ernesto Cardenal arrived in Ahuacatitlán in 1959, he was coming from the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani, Kentucky, then directed by Thomas Merton. In his memoirs, he explains in vivid colors what convent life was like there at that time. Cardinal had begun his novitiate at the Trappist monastery in Kentucky, but a psychiatric monk, Father Eudes, detected a pre-ulcerous gastric condition and diagnosed him with a psychosomatic conflict caused by nervous tension. He advised him to look for another order, the Benedictines, for example. And he went to Lemerrier. As he continued with his problems, Lemerrier sent him to talk to Mauricio González de la Garza, who advised him not to be psychoanalyzed, but to visit a stomach specialist. But he was not cured either. He then entered psychoanalysis with another doctor recommended by Lemerrier, who did not understand religious life at all (he described it as neurosis, masochism and madness), so he did not return (González 2011, 25-26).

²⁰ “It is true that there was an experience around 1959, but I would not properly call it a psychoanalytic experience, that of Mauricio. He was a very conflictive person. Not an honest spirit at all. He gave a dialogical support, with brothers. I don’t think with the elders but with young monastics (...) He [came] to have a lot of interference and then problems, Lemerrier [put] a stop to it, he [became] furious and made some tremendous scenes”, says Fray Gabriel (González 2011, 30).

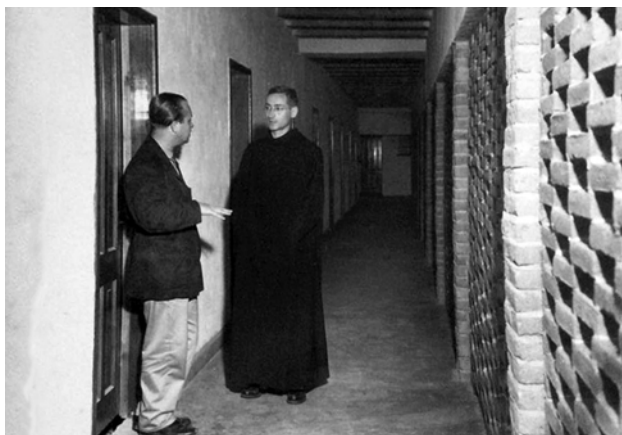
²¹ Both societies had different origins and methods and were considered rivals; later the Asociación Mexicana de Psicoanálisis Grupal (AMPG) was added, which was not well received by the other two. Ramírez had just published in 1959 his famous book *El Mexicano. Psicología de sus motivaciones* (The Mexican. Psychology of their motivations) (Mexico DF, Pax).

²² Gustavo Quevedo Bazán (1915-86) was not Argentinean—as he is often remembered—but Mexican, although his stay in Buenos Aires (1951-59), where he qualified as a psychoanalyst, marked his way of being and acting. The following year he returned to Mexico, where with Frida Zmud, Héctor Prado and other colleagues he started a group in the Mexican Psychoanalytic Association (APM), which gave rise to the idea of founding the Mexican Association of Group Analytic Psychotherapy (AMPAG). Simultaneously, he began to work in group psychoanalysis in the monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección. He died in 1968.

²³ González de la Garza (1971) considered his replacement as a betrayal, and so stated in his book *El padre prior*. For his part, Lemerrier had read his first and last book on psychoanalysis—*La méthode psychanalytique et la doctrine Freudienne*, by Roland Dalbiez (Paris, Desclée de Brower 1936)—, in Louvain.

FIGURE 14

Gustavo Quevedo and Gregorio Lemerrier in the monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección (ca. 1960)



Source: Monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección's Archive (Ahuacatitlán, Mexico).

Although Lemerrier did not force anyone to be psychoanalyzed, it was certainly enough for the prior to suggest something for any monk to be willing to do so. However, some did not accept it. In this regard, the difference in perspective that two of the *surviving* monks have on the process is striking. Fray Gabriel—who was basically an avant-garde artist in the sixties, with all that implies—was very happy; in fact, he usually affirms that in his case, both the individual and group sessions were a complement that helped him to find the true motivations of his vocation.²⁴ For his part, Friar Benedict Verber was always very critical of this type of therapy and did not psychoanalyze himself.²⁵

On July 16, 1961, *L'Osservatore Romano*—the official journal of The Holy See—published a canonical warning (*monitum*) questioning psychoanalytic training as a condition for access to the priesthood. In spite of everything, the first group session at Santa Maria della Resurrezione took place three days later. Quevedo, 46 years old, was assisted as a listener by the young Paraguayan doctor Frida Zmud Simkin, 37 years old, whose photos of her psychoanalyzing the monks published years later by Pierre Vals in *Paris Match* magazine would travel around the world (Fig. 15).²⁶

²⁴ “For me, psychoanalysis was a complement and it did work for me. Of course, the sacramental, the liturgical, grace or the Holy Spirit did not enter into the subject. Our biblical Christian anthropology, or what monastic observance meant, the value of silence, fraternity, adoration, dependence, dedication to God, I think we should have dealt with them more comprehensively with the psychoanalysts. But psychoanalysis allowed me to understand my brother monks more, the difficulties they were experiencing...” (González 2011, 92).

²⁵ A few days after Lemerrier's death, to the journalist's question “—Did psychoanalysis create problems?” he declared: “—The destruction of this house—he answers bluntly—, a house that was flourishing. [...] Psychoanalysis creates a dependence on the analyst: it does not liberate, it chains, the vocation comes from the Holy Spirit. It caused the spiritual life of the monastery to decline, affected the faith and ended up destroying it” (González 2011, 100).

²⁶ Frida Zmud Simkin was born in Asunción (Paraguay) in 1914. In 1931 she moved to Buenos Aires, where she studied medicine and married Dr. Abraham Minujin. After the Ahuacatitlán experience, she moved to Mexico City and then to Cuba. She committed suicide in

Quevedo made two groups: one with those who had made the triennial vows, and another with those who had already made their perpetual vows, Fray Gabriel among them. The sessions took place twice a week, usually in the private homes of the analysts, until a consultation room was built *ex-profeso* for this purpose. Years later, Zmud would draw an almost paradisiacal picture of the architecture of the place:

On a hill, from high above, where both the city and the valley can be seen, rises the Benedictine monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección. Surrounded by tall jacaranda trees with clusters of violet flowers, and covered with bright red and orange bougainvillea and aqua plumbagos, here stands the convent, where until recently, a group of monks going about their routine chores, stepping on petals everywhere as they walked, their feet barely protected by leather sandals. With their heads shaved, completely covered with hoods, wrapped in robes that evoke the fetal membrane, the monks perform the same tasks over and over again, in complete silence, surrounded by a warm breeze, precisely like a fetus that is protected and gratified by the pleasant climate of the womb (Zmud 1971, 10).²⁷

FIGURE 15

Dr. Frida Zmud in a group psychoanalysis session at the monastery (1965)



Source: *Paris Match*.

THE VATICAN INTERVENTION AND THE EMMAUS PSYCHOANALYTIC CENTER

November 1962. The first session of the Second Vatican Council. The Bishop of Cuernavaca, Sergio Méndez Arceo, in a memorable plenary intervention, proposes that the Catholic Church attend to the teachings of Marx, Darwin and Freud. Specifically, he recommends the use of psychoanalysis for the correct discernment of the suitability of religious vocations or their pathologies, and in any case,

1985. Her daughter Alicia Frida Minujin Zmud (1940-2014) was also a psychiatrist. A somewhat more extended biography can be found at Psychoanalytikerinnen 2020.

²⁷ The atmosphere and the architectural context of these sessions can be seen in the video *Psychanalyse au monastère mexicain de Cuernavaca* (02/09/1966).

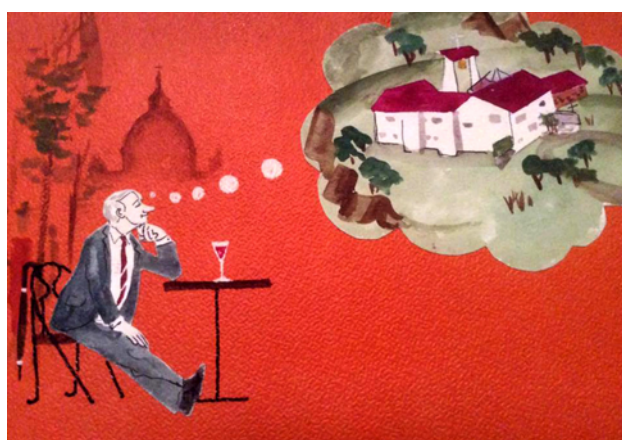
as a complement to monastic life.²⁸ He gives the example of the work that Lemerrier had been developing with the monks of Santa María de la Resurrección. The scandal is a major one.

A few months later (August 1963), the primate abbot of the Benedictines, Dom Benno Gut, was sent to the monastery. After his visit, he proposed that psychoanalysis should only be practiced before the novitiate and only as a therapy. This recommendation did not convince the Sacred Congregation of Religious, which in April 1964 sent Father Odo J. Zimmermann OSB, Prior of the newly founded college of Tepeyac, as an extraordinary visitor. But against all odds, his report was also positive.

In September, events came to a head. Lemerrier travels to Rome to attend the third session of the Second Vatican Council as an advisor to Méndez Arceo (Fig. 16). On the eve of his return, he receives a call from The Holy See ordering him not to return to the monastery, because a new visitation had been arranged without his presence; in spite of everything, he decides to travel. He arrives in Mexico on December 30, but they do not allow him to enter Ahuacatlán. And when the new visitor, in his report, suggests the possibility that Lemerrier could return, they answer him that not only is he not allowed to enter, but that any epistolary relation with the community is avoided.

FIGURE 16

Lemerrier in Rome (drawing by an unknown author, ca. 1965)



Source: Monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección's Archive (Ahuacatlán, Mexico).

In April 1965, the prior wrote to The Holy Office offering to travel to the Vatican to discuss his case. Since he did not receive a reply, after five months of absence, on May 20 he returned to his post, informing the Sacred Congregation for Religious. In September, he attended the last session of the Second Vatican Council accompanying Méndez Arceo. In Rome, he gave some interviews (Fresquet 1965; Laurentin 1965) and requested an audience with Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, then Secretary of the Holy Office, who received him on October 26. Ottaviani informs him that they have

decided to confine him in Belgium, reminding him of the prohibition to practice psychoanalysis as indicated in the *monitum* of 1961. Lemerrier defends himself by saying that he had never transgressed these rules. When Ottaviani asked him to explain it in writing, Lemerrier refused, arguing that it was not up to him but to the Sacred Congregation to prove that he had transgressed them. On November 12, he was summoned by a tribunal, and seeing that his confinement would not be lifted, he left the courtroom. He returned to Ahuacatlán, where his psychoanalysis had not been interrupted, while Méndez Arceo got Paul VI to transfer the case from the Holy Office to a commission of three cardinals.

The year 1966 passed uneventfully, and it seemed that in Rome they had forgotten about him. But at the beginning of 1967, Lemerrier decided to give the press a pamphlet entitled *A Benedictine monastery in psychoanalysis*, and immediately *Life* magazine published an inflammatory report (Fig. 17). In the midst of the post-conciliar period, the prior had challenged the Vatican authorities and they responded forcefully. On May 18, the Roman Rota issued a sentence that read as follows: "Father Lemerrier is admonished not to sustain either in public or in private the psychoanalytic theory or practice that he himself recognizes as psychoanalysis properly so called, in the strict sense, under penalty of suspension *a divinis*, by the same fact reserved to The Holy See" (Gonzalez 2011, 95).

FIGURE 17

Cover of *Life en español*, October 23, 1967



Source: Author's Archive.

This sentence would motivate the immediate dissolution of the monastery. In fact, at the chapter meeting held ten days later (May 28, 1967), the monks themselves decided to abandon it and continue with psychoanalysis. The Vatican approved the decision.

On Sunday, June 11, 1967, Lemerrier celebrated Mass for the last time in the chapel of Santa María de la

²⁸ Evidently, cases such as that of Marcial Maciel were public knowledge in Mexico, and the concern of the hierarchy, manifestly.

Resurrección.²⁹ At the end, after singing the hymns, all the monks, in procession, left the chapel, and already in the cloak room they were stripping off their habits. In the afternoon they distributed a communiqué that would appear in the press the following day, announcing the closing of the monastery and the beginning of a new project: a community not dependent on the Catholic Church, which would include twenty-one of the twenty-four monks.

The three self-excluded—the priests Fray Benito Verber, who was the last guardian of the monastery, Fray Hugo González, and Fray Gabriel—wanted to remain monks, although not Benedictine, but diocesan, and hoped that Méndez Arceo would allow them to attend to the new ecumenical community that was being created. This new community made up of three religious, independent of the Benedictine Confederation, never fully materialized. No one was very clear about how it would be organized or where it would live, although until the situation was defined, they continued to live in the monastery for a few months. The bishop appointed Fray Gabriel to be in charge of it.

The text underwritten by “Lemercier and the Emmaus family” was published on June 12, 1967. From that day on, many religious moved to the Emmaus Psychoanalytic Center (CPE), which had been founded the previous year (1966), on the other side of the gate that closed the monastery, as a filter to prepare future postulants to enter the novitiate. The new ecumenical community was to have a different lifestyle. Its mission was the practice of psychoanalysis, addressed to all those who wanted to free themselves from their neuroses: alcoholism, depression, sexism, or homosexuality. They were the *Emmausites*. Other monks left for various monasteries in Mexico or Europe. The situation was confusing.

On Saturday, June 17, 1967, Méndez Arceo distributed among all the parishes of his diocese the document “Reflexión del señor Obispo de Cuernavaca con todo el pueblo de Dios en su diócesis sobre el Monasterio de Nuestra Señora de la Resurrección” (Reflection of the Bishop of Cuernavaca with all the people of God in his diocese about the Monastery of Our Lady of the Resurrection), which he himself read the following day in the cathedral. In this text, the bishop calls for unreserved acceptance of The Holy See’s decision on the monastery, warning that perhaps psychoanalysis has been overrated.³⁰

As you all know, a few days ago, without my being able to prevent it, straighten it out or defer it, all the monks, with the exception of three, have considered fidelity to their personal vocation, renouncing their Benedictine religious life, asking the legitimate authority to dispense them from their vows [...]. Brothers: I am particularly concerned about the danger that

psychoanalysis may have engendered an excessive confidence and become a new panacea, a substitute for religion, which would harm psychoanalysis itself in any religious sphere (Suarez 1975, 104).³¹

Although he wanted to remain faithful to the Catholic Church all his life, Lemercier was convinced that, at least in his immediate environment, psychoanalysis was more curative for people than the usual practice of religion. Fray Gabriel, for his part, recalls that at this point, many monks could not do without psychoanalysis, and so they sympathized with the prior.³² And since the Benedictine order disengaged from them, the decision was either to join the CPE or to create a new diocesan institution (which was his personal choice).

We were 24 capitulars, the congregation of religious gave us permission and authorized our departures [...] My request was: I would leave as a monk and incardinate myself in Cuernavaca, and Don Sergio would name me chaplain of Emmaus for those who wanted to join. We stayed that way for a few months. Then I received a letter forbidding me to stay in the diocese of Cuernavaca. Long live holy peace! I left Cuernavaca and decided to continue as a Benedictine. I sincerely believe in the monastic institution. I chose the abbey [sic] of Tepeyac,³³ in Lindavista, very different from what was ours. With a school and a Benedictine house. But I consciously assume it (González 2011, 101).

On the other hand, the Monastic Workshops (1956-67) that our architect directed and where the crafts that had made the monastery famous were made, were renamed Talleres Emaús (1967-68) and Artesanías Emaús (1968-92) in the CPE.³⁴

On September 16, 1967, the Vatican granted Lemercier dispensation from all his obligations connected with the priesthood and religious profession, including that of celibacy. After his exclaustation, he regained his given name, José (Joseph). He was 55 years old (Fig. 18). The playwright Vicente Leñero, who in 1962 portrayed the Belgian priest as “an impressive man”, since “the grace with which he handled his stature, the white hair so blond, the plastic eye that filled his left orbit and the elegance, the softness of his gestures, turned him before the interlocutor into an almighty giant, wise, holy and seductive” (Leñero 1982, 4), in 1968, after his reduction to the lay state, feared that his charm had been completely diluted.

²⁹ In the homily, entitled *Gregorio, intérrate en el mar* (Gregorio, enter the sea), he commented on the passage from Luke 5:1-11, the miraculous catch of fish.

³⁰ The bishop had another front open in his diocese after the publication of the polemic pamphlet *El reverso de la caridad*, that the priest Ivan Illich had just published in English under the title *The Seamy Side of Charity* on January 21, 1967, in the magazine *America*, published by the Jesuits in New York—pages 88-91—, and that a few days later he would complete with another one entitled *El clero, una ‘especie’ que desaparece* (The clergy, a ‘species’ that disappears) (*Siempre!*, July 12, 1967).

³¹ Fray Gabriel affirms that this communiqué was confusing, because there were more than three monks who persevered in their Benedictine vocation. Fray Benito Verber and six others moved to the new monastery that was beginning in Ahuatepec; Fray Antonio Ramírez Padilla went to France and Fray Macario, to Switzerland. The three who remained in Cuernavaca depending on the bishop were Fray Gabriel, Fray Hugo González and Fray Juan Münch, who was spending some time in Ahuatepec and then returned to his monastery in Alsace (Fernández-Cobian 2020).

³² Interview by González in Guadalajara (1988).

³³ At that time there was only one school in Tepeyac. Years later the abbey would emerge.

³⁴ At present, Fray Gabriel works in the Taller San José Artesano, heir of the former.

FIGURE 18

Former Prior Joseph Lemerrier (back, foreground) attending Mass in the monastery chapel after the exlaustration of the monks. The celebrant is Fray Gabriel (1967)



Source: *Life en español*.

It seems that this was not entirely the case, since on July 21, 1968, Lemerrier married Graciela Rumayor (1936-2017), a young woman whom he had met exactly one year earlier. The press echoed the event: “The religious wedding was officiated by the Benedictine fathers Gabriel Chávez de la Mora, José Munich [sic, by Juan Münch] and Hugo González, former members of the Emmaus community and former religious subjects of Lemerrier” (García Labordena 1968, 14). Contrary to what might have been foreseen, the ceremony was not held in the chapel of the monastery, but in the garden terrace of the residence of Ignacio and Edith Gianelloni, in Cuernavaca; and a day before the announced date, to avoid the sensationalist press. Even so, more than two hundred people attended, including family, friends and journalists. In the homily, Fray Gabriel affirmed that the wedding was beneficial for the Emmaus community, and he was grateful for the opportunity to marry his own father... “I congratulate you, Graciela, because you have accepted José; it was not easy. And his work; it was not easy” (Suarez 1975, 118). Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* opened and closed the religious act; fragments of the *Misa Panamericana* (Pan-American Mass) were also heard, which Méndez Arceo—who at the last moment did not attend, although he had been invited to officiate at the ceremony—had introduced into the liturgy of his cathedral.

Returning to the Centro Psicoanalítico Emaús, little by little two very marked groups were established in it: Lemerrier/Quevedo vs. Chagoyán/Zmud,³⁵ until in May 1968, when Lemerrier burst into a session of the Paraguayan psychoanalyst and accused her of trying to destroy the community, the definitive rupture of the center took place. Frida Zmud withdrew to Mexico City with almost all the members of her therapeutic group. The situation

³⁵ José Luis González Chagoyán, who was a *comecuras* (devourer of priests) psychoanalyst, notorious for his anti-clericalism, had just come on the scene at the CPE.

unhinged Quevedo, who died of a heart attack on August 15, 1968.³⁶ The ex-monk Alejandro Chao Barona—who had been the first psychoanalyzed and had just qualified as a psychoanalyst—took over his group and moved to the capital with Zmud. The CPE would close in 1982, with Zmud already living in Cuba.

THE MONASTERY CLOSED

While all this was happening, on February 2, 1968, Bishop Méndez Arceo laid the first stone of a new Benedictine monastery in his diocese: the monastery of Our Lady of the Angels, in the neighboring town of Ahuatepec, which had been canonically erected two years earlier (August 15, 1966).³⁷ It is significant that this new foundation—depending on the abbey of Mount Angel (Oregon, USA)—took place right in this place and right at this time, among other things because, years later, Fray Gabriel would build his chapel, equally circular but larger than the one in Ahuacatlán, although not as intense.³⁸ Fray Benito Verber, who had remained legally responsible for the unoccupied building of Santa María de la Resurrección, joined this monastery.³⁹ What happened, then, in Santa María de la Resurrección? There is very little information about this period. The only certainty is that—as we have already said—Fray Gabriel continued to live there for a few months (Fernández-Cobian 2020).

Suarez recounts a visit to the place in February 1969, accompanying the ex-prior, already secularized:

At the bottom of the cobblestone road, the almost empty convent building awaits a decision from The Holy See on its use and destination. Part of the first floor is also being used as an Emmaus workshop. Looking at what was his house as prior, José Lemerrier tells me without nostalgia for his past life inside that building, but with a hint that seems to caress the place where his formidable debate was a crisis: “I hope that soon a satisfactory solution for the building will be reached with The Holy See for all the interested parties” (Suárez 1970, 127).

Eleven years later, in 1980, the sociologist Franca Basaglia-Ongaro visited the monastery with some friends. Suddenly, the silence that reigned there was interrupted by the presence and voice of a young man in his mid-twenties, with a beard and Hindu-like clothing, who told them, in broken Spanish, that this was private property. He asked them if they spoke English, and finally agreed to take them inside the cloister, where he explained that its inhabitants lived in cells that they shared with their families. He then led them to the round chapel where he proudly stated: This is our temple. When asked by the sociologist if this was a religious community, the young man replied that

³⁶ Other sources indicate that Gustavo Quevedo died in an automobile accident; perhaps it was a combination of both.

³⁷ In addition to the bishop, the ceremony was attended by Abbot Damian Jentges and Prior Ambrosio Zenner. The history of this foundation can be found at Monasterio Benedictino 2020.

³⁸ It was not the only circular chapel he built: the El Encuentro chapel in Ciudad Hidalgo (Michoacán, Mexico, 1982-84), similar in scale to the one in Ahuacatlán, also has this shape.

³⁹ Verber’s biography is available at Monje Padre 2018.

there were about twenty members, including Americans and Canadians, that each had their own religion and that it was wonderful to have a real temple where they could pray (Basaglia-Ongaro 1981; cit. González 2011, 144-145).

1987. On December 28, Joseph Lemerrier died and his ashes were placed in one of the chapel walls. For one day, the monastery is reoccupied with many of its former inhabitants. Bishop Sergio Méndez Arceo, Fray Gabriel and Father Francisco Jiménez, Prior of the Franciscan community that inhabited the building at the time, concelebrated the funeral mass. Former monk Juan Lucio (Giovanni Lucci) remembers it like this:

At one point the lights were turned on, the chapel and all the pews and aisles were decorated, and the part of the faithful was filled with people who had been here (...) The chapel was full of priests, nuns, workers, Emmausites, bishops, and we were all there to witness the final explosion (...) The sky was filled with a multicolored light and ashes fell everywhere. And at night, when everything was over, the last farewell song that we sang every night was heard: "Seeing him go up to heaven, along a richly carpeted road illuminated with countless torches" (Lucci 2000; cit. González 2011, 146).

I have not been able to find out the exact date on which the Spanish Capuchin friars who replaced the informal group referred to above had begun to live there, but I do know that they left the monastery in 1988, shortly after the death of its prior. Before returning to Spain, the friars communicated to Lemerrier's widow their desire to legally transfer the property to her, with the condition that it would continue to be used for social purposes. At first, Rumayor did not want to commit and spoke to Méndez Arceo. However, in 2004 he stated in an interview: "And now I manage it, with young people who come for spiritual retreats. They bring their priests. And they come from all over and stay for three or four days. There is room for about sixty young people" (González 2011, 145). Among the groups that most used the monastery building she cited the Movimiento Familiar Cristiano.⁴⁰

THE CHAPEL

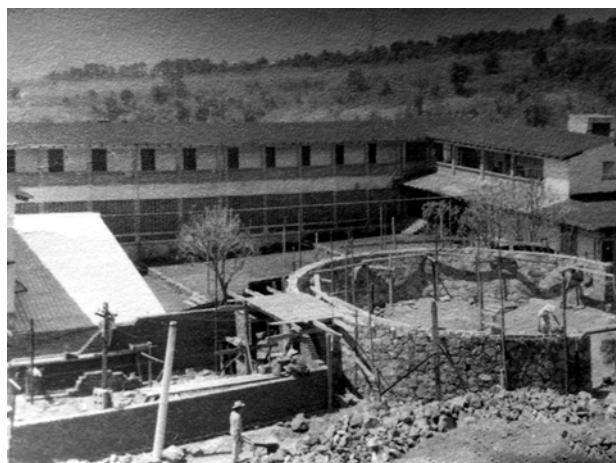
Every house is made by someone, but God is the maker of all things
(Heb 3:4).

So much for the facts. Let us dwell, now, on the chapel, as it was and as it was used at the times when it was the center of the life of the monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección. We have seen that Fray Gabriel received the definitive commission to design the chapel in 1957; but it was only completed in 1959 and consecrated in

1962.⁴¹ Therefore, it was hardly used as such for eight years (Fig. 19).

FIGURE 19

The monastery chapel, under construction (1958)

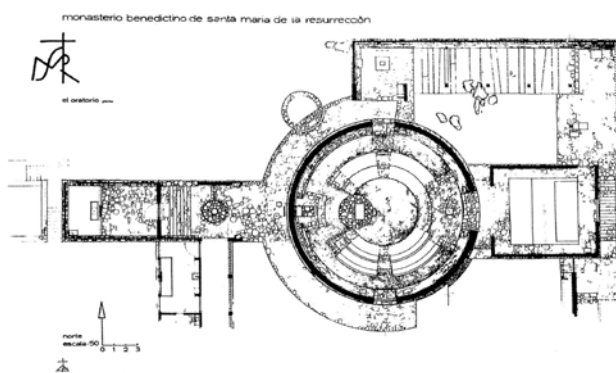


Source: Monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección's Archive (Ahuacatitlán, Mexico).

It is a circular space located at the north end of the courtyard formed by the three bodies of the monastery, as indicated by Benedictine tradition. Fray Gabriel, in the plans, calls it "the oratory," as established in the Rule of St. Benedict (c. 52) (Figs. 20-21).⁴²

FIGURE 20

Plan of the oratory (1957). The north location is not exact, but should be rotated to the east about 10°



Source: Plazola 2006.

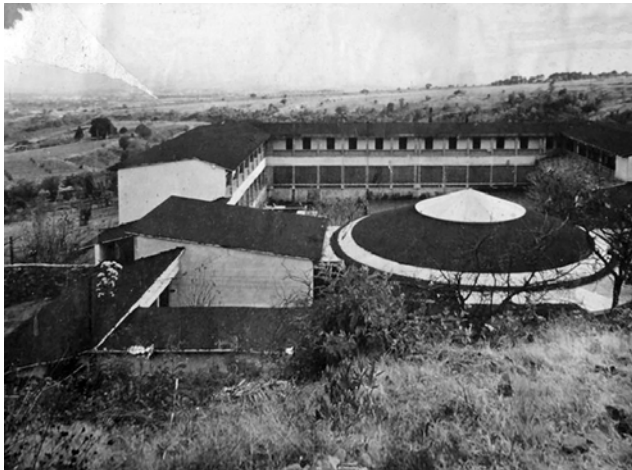
⁴⁰ On this Catholic movement, see Movimiento Familiar Cristiano 2020. De la Rosa 1979 also refers to the MFC in the context of the controversy following the publication of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968.

⁴¹ According to the upper left corner of the *codex* that we will talk about later, the first stone of the chapel was laid on March 21, 1959, the feast of St. Benedict; its putting into use is dated August 15 of the same year, feast of the Assumption of Mary and the day of the solemn profession of Fray Gabriel; and the consecration ceremony was held on February 2, 1962, being the titular Santa María de la Resurrección or María de la Pascua.

⁴² The difference between the terms *oratory* and *chapel* is discussed in Fernández-Cobián 2005, 485-492.

FIGURE 21

View of the monastery from the north (ca. 1960)



Source: Monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección's Archive (Ahuacatlán, Mexico).

The chapel has two access circuits: one to the west for the monks, who arrive from the monastery, and another to the east, for visitors from the outside. González Pozo describes them as follows:

The first comes from the sacristy, passes in front of the chapel designed especially for Latin Masses, turns around and forms a simple covered passage that surrounds a holy water font under the bell tower. It then bifurcates for the processional transit of the monks, who enter the chapel from two opposite sides [—north and south—]. Guests, on the other hand, enter through a generous L-shaped narthex where the confessional is also located (González Pozo 2005, 35-37).

The interior space is carefully thought out so that everything underlines the centrality of the liturgy. Gabriel places the altar in a position close to the geometric center of the piece, where he places a suspended Greek cross, so that the priest can celebrate the Eucharist facing the cross, with all the brethren around. During the time the chapel was in use, a new cross was placed every year. They were varied crosses, without crucifix—the ritual of consecration of the churches does not speak of crucifixes, but of crosses—with small colored glass globes inserted, like jewels.⁴³

The monks are arranged on two levels, embracing the altar. On both sides, in an east-west direction, are placed—respectively—the ambo and the seat, forming the three liturgical poles. Both are made of *chiluca* stone ashlar. And to the north, aligned with the great cross—but not visible from the altar—the tabernacle of the Eucharistic reserve is located. It was the first time that this layout was adopted in Mexico, which caused a strong controversy (Fig. 22).

FIGURE 22

Fray Gabriel, reading on the ambo of the chapel (ca. 1960)

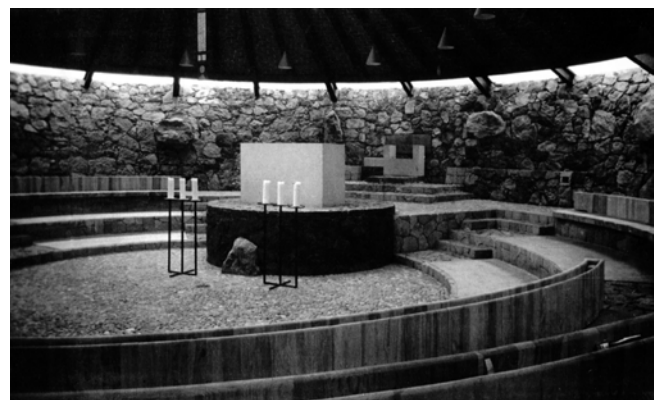


Source: González Pozo 2005.

The centrality of the altar is enhanced by the use of a lowered conical roof. This roof rests on twelve steel beams, which, supported by twelve other consecration stones—each one dedicated to one of Christ's apostles—, converge radially on a central oculus.⁴⁴ Light not only penetrates from this skylight, but also from another perimeter ring, tangentially bathing the thick volcanic stone walls arranged in a slope (Fig. 23). From this wise management of light, to a great extent, the remarkable results achieved by natural lighting from dawn to sunset were derived. At evening, during nocturnal prayer, the monks can see the firmament.

FIGURE 23

Detail of the presbytery of the chapel, with the first stone in front of the altar



Source: Taller San José Artesano's Archive (Tepeyac Abbey, Mexico).

⁴³ A similar cross exists in the church of the Madonna dei Poveri, in Milan (Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini, 1952-54), made by the Franciscan Father Costantino Ruggeri.

⁴⁴ The stones were consecrated on February 2, 1962, together with the altar.

Visitors do not enter the monastic choir of the chapel, but follow the services from an enclosure to the east, which includes a small garden.⁴⁵ The south door opens the chapel to the cloister protected by a lattice; it is dedicated to the memory of the *absent brothers*—those who at the time of prayer are busy with household chores.

To a modern observer, it is surprising that the liturgical layout of this chapel, built between 1957 and 1959, is very close to the postulates of the *Communio-Raûme* movement (2003) or even to the layout of the church of Saint-François de Molitor, of the Jesuits in Paris (1996-2005).

ARCHITECTURE, SYMBOLISM AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Let us now say a word about the symbolic aspects of this chapel. In my opinion, there are three levels of reading that could be applied in this case: the historical, the liturgical and the psychoanalytical.

History

It is worth remembering that the history of architecture has linked circular churches to the remembrance of the dead, although not in all cases and not in the same way. There are many examples of circular places of worship. From Santo Stefano Rotondo (4th century), in Rome, to Otto Bartning's Church of the Resurrection in Essen (Germany, 1929-30)—note the coincidence with the dedication of the monastery of Ahuacatitlán—the static and closed form of the plan and the vertical dimension of this type of building would have the purpose of defining an *axis mundi* that connects the overworld with the underworld, and that would contrast with the linear form of life, which is movement, expectation. In our case, it could be argued that just as the monks can be considered for the world—society in general—*dead in life*, the circular perimeter of this chapel, built with large stones extracted from the same ground, would tectonically refer to the idea of the tomb. After all, the monastery was dedicated to Saint Mary of the Resurrection, and perhaps because of this, the community had decided that the mortal remains of Gregory Lemerrier would rest there forever, as they did. According to Fray Gabriel, the fact that years later those of Graciela Rumayor, his wife, were also deposited there was logical (Fernández-Cobian 2020) (Fig. 24).

Liturgy

Since the end of the 19th century, it became increasingly common to hear about the fortunate communitarian and Eucharistic vocation of circular or elliptical churches. Dominikus Böhm's *Messopferkirche* (1922), also called *Circumstantes*, turned out to be the planimetric visualization of this successful liturgical concept (Fernández-Cobián 2005). Undoubtedly, the Eucharist was the center and the root of the life of any Christian community—especially after the Second Vatican Council—, but it is difficult to say to what extent these considerations were present in Fray Gabriel when designing this space. But it is also true that in Latin America this type of form was not frequent, not even in monastic chapels. In any

case, the architect found in Santa María Ahuacatitlán a fertile ground for the densification of a type of composition that, as happens to any recently graduated architect—especially if he is a monk—, he longs to renew.

FIGURE 24

Graciela Rumayor's tomb plaque in the chapel of the former Benedictine monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección (2017)



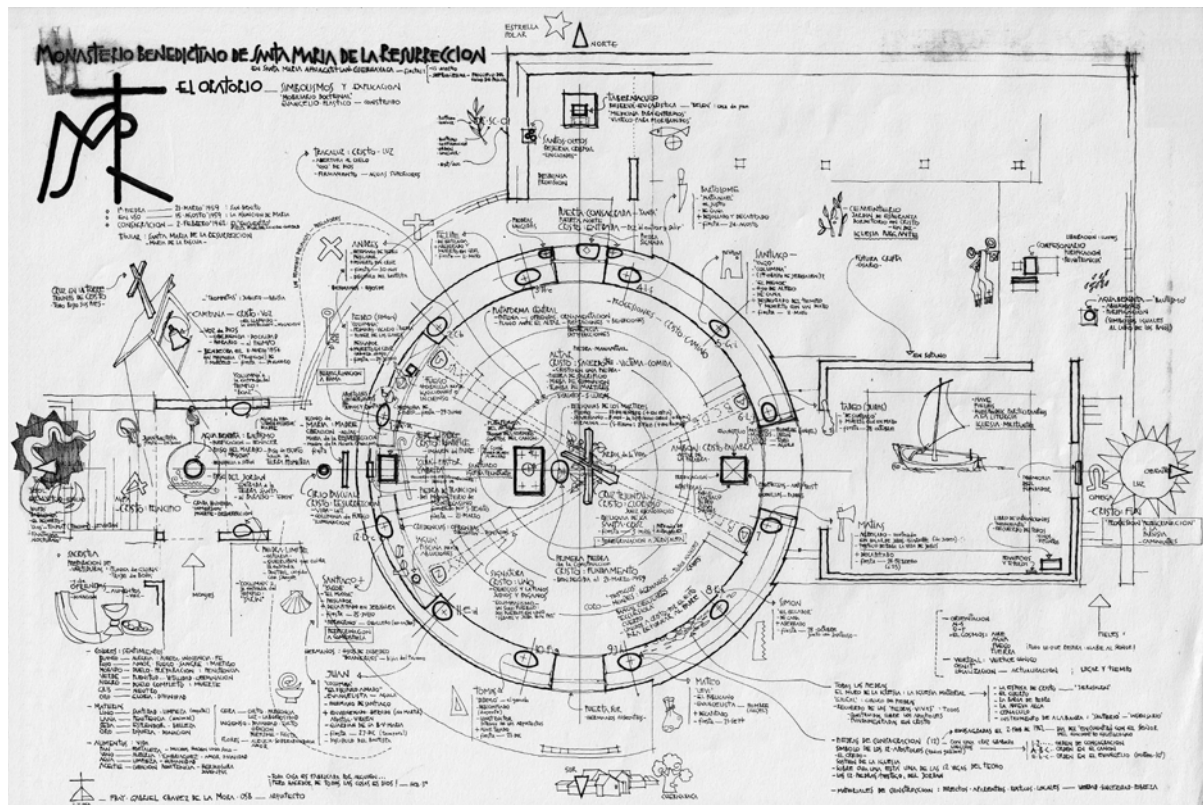
Source: Monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección's Archive (Ahuacatitlán, Mexico).

The design of every detail of this chapel corresponds to a very meticulous and complex liturgical and iconographic program. Years after finishing the building (1963), our architect captured all his intentions in an impressive drawing—"Simbolismos y explicación" (Symbolisms and explanation), he calls it—, a sort of theological-liturgical-architectural *codex* in which he explains the *raison d'être* of each of its elements (Fig. 25). The place of the icon of Mary, Mother, the paschal candle, the traditional stone brought from the Abbey of Montecassino in Italy, the memory of the Founder, the chrism reserve of the holy oils, the credentials and so many other details are marked there. I remember the impression that this sketch caused among those present when it was exhibited at a congress held in Bologna—in fact, it appears on the cover of the proceedings book— (Longhi 2017). Rarely had such a drawing been seen, so theoretically charged and so beautifully realized.

⁴⁵ Fray Gabriel recalls that it was made small on purpose, so that not as many faithful could attend as in the cloister, and instead, they would go to the mass in the cathedral celebrated by Don Sergio.

FIGURE 25

Chapel of Santa María de la Resurrección: the theological-liturgical-architectural codex (1963)

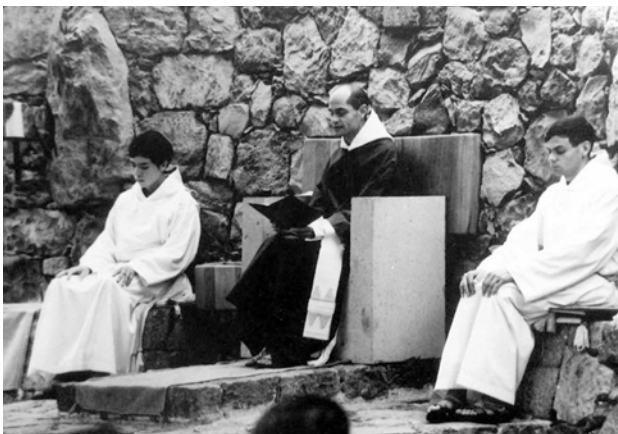


Source: Taller San José Artesano's Archive (Tepeyac Abbey, Mexico).

The cultic ensemble is complemented by many other symbolic and constructive elements. In the lower right corner of this codex plan, we can read: "Construction materials: direct, apparent, rustic, local. Truth, sincerity, poverty". In fact, except for the metal structure, the entire building was constructed with local materials, treated roughly, with a certain primitivism, as if they wanted to show their elementariness (Fig. 26).

FIGURE 26

The sloping stone walls behind the seat of the celebrant, in this case, Fray Gabriel himself (ca. 1965)



Source: Monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección's Archive (Ahuacatitlán, Mexico).

Psychoanalysis

There is no doubt that the circular shape of the chapel was well suited to the psychoanalytic process in which it was involved. "This way of constituting the architectural space prefigures the opening to other fields by the Benedictine community of Ahuacatitlán, as is going to be the case of psychoanalysis," states González (2017, 72).

We have seen that the first group of psychoanalysts who intervened in the monastery belonged to the Frommian school, humanist and respectful of religion,⁴⁶ and that the second, on the contrary, to the Freudian one, which was atheist and followed the line of Melanie Klein and the proposal of fetal psychism of Arnaldo Rascovsky. Well, the latter was the one that finally prevailed. Both Dr. Frida Zmud and Quevedo argued that monks had to be born again, that they had to leave the warmth and silence of the utero-convent to go out into the world and be real people. And to try to reverse the alienation of the infantilized monks inserted in the utero-convent, Zmud implemented the five phases of the Kleinian sequence. She herself explains it this way:

To the assumption of the "alienation of the monk-fetuses"—in which the prior occupies the place of the one who tolerates their "non-birth," by keeping them enclosed within

⁴⁶ Erich Fromm had arrived in Mexico in 1950, the same year he wrote his book *Psychoanalysis and Religion*. On Fromm in Cuernavaca, see Delahanty 2013.

the four walls of the convent, but who in practice calls upon the psychoanalysts to test their vocation—the psychoanalyst, from her liberating mission, adds and accentuates the monks' anguish, by playing the role of psychic midwife (González 2011, 81-82).⁴⁷

Beyond the debatability of these arguments—which undoubtedly have a distant reference in the nocturnal interview between Christ and Nicodemus narrated in John 2:23-3:15—what is certain is that one of the fundamental archetypes of the sacred architecture of any religion is the cave, the first significant construction of the human being. In this sense, the monastery chapel would act as such, since its enveloping form and its filtered light correspond very well with the maternal womb.⁴⁸

Going a step further in the possible sexual derivations of the monastic subconscious applied to architectural form, and still risking forcing the argument beyond what is reasonable, we could read the exterior of the chapel, with its pointed hood surrounded by a perimeter skylight, as a great nourishing udder, ready to suckle the monks who would access the outside world, already freed from their confinement by the *psychic midwife* (Fig. 27).⁴⁹

FIGURE 27
Exterior view of the chapel (2016)



Source: Google Maps 2020 (Luis Manuel García Orozco).

For the two psychoanalysts, the dissolution of the monastery fulfilled their expectations. It was no longer just a matter of the *fetus-monks* being reborn, but even the *uterus-monastery* was disappearing.

⁴⁷ Someone has recalled, in this regard, that Frida Kahlo's *Moses* (1945) is practically contemporary with the events of Cuernavaca.

⁴⁸ The chapel shares, in a way, some of that, but also—I would add—it anticipates the church of Tempelaukio, in Helsinki (1961-69). On the theme of the cave as an architectural archetype and its relation to the maternal womb, see García Morales 2009.

⁴⁹ Actually, all the cupulated forms from the Pantheon of Agrippa, in Rome (2nd century AD), to the Great Mother of God, in Turin (1818-31)—one of its most direct epigones—, could be assimilated to enormous cosmic udders, which would multiply in certain cases in the manner of the Artemis of Ephesus, as in the Capilla Real de Naturales, in Cholula (1540) or in the more recent Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, in Managua (1990-93).

THE READING OF FRAY GABRIEL

Now, what is the architect's own interpretation of the chapel of the monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección? To date, Fray Gabriel had never explained this project in detail but, in the conversation, we had on October 5, 2020, he provided quite a bit of information in this regard.

First of all, he recalls that the design and construction of the chapel predated the psychoanalytic process at the monastery, and therefore could not have been influenced by it. At the time, he was very attracted to topographical architecture, carved into the ground. He liked the excavated architecture he had seen in the ruins of Malinalco, near Cuernavaca, a large monolithic structure belonging to the late period of the Mexica civilization. There everything was integrated: steps, platforms, walls, steps. At the same time, he wanted to return to the sources, to the maximum simplicity of early Christian architecture.

Secondly, he had a little-known biblical reference in mind: Chapter 4 of the Book of Joshua. In this passage it is narrated that the Israelites, after entering the Promised Land by crossing the Jordan River, take twelve large stones out of the river and, organizing a liturgical procession, place them in a circle as a sign of gratitude to Yahweh. This archetypal circle of stones—which, moreover, is found in many sacred places—Fray Gabriel reproduced it in the twelve stones of consecration of the chapel. Each is dedicated to an apostle, each has a cross, and each supports one of the roof beams. In addition, the stone slope that contains them is very accentuated, so that the chapel can function as a sundial and mark the canonical hours.

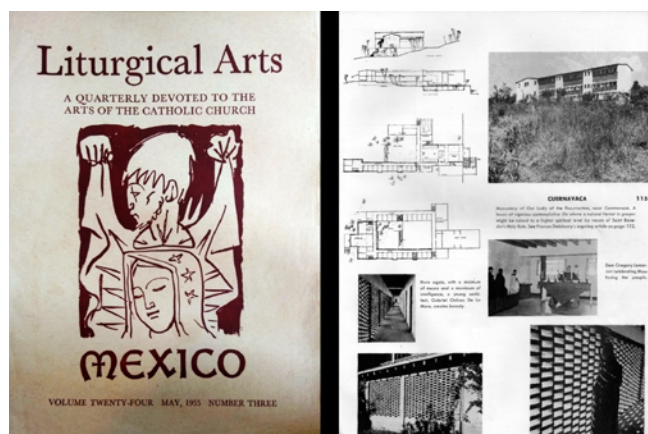
The chapel is completely circular and Fray Gabriel compares its shape to a large censer (every temple is built for the praise of the Creator). Moreover, the circular arrangement of the monks shows that they are all equal before the Lord, that they are all brothers. We could ask ourselves: is it an open ring or a closed ring? At that time, Fray Gabriel did not know *Vom Bau der Kirche* (1938), the book where Rudolf Schwarz explains these concepts, although he had seen some of his church in the magazines that were received at the monastery: *L'Art sacré*, *L'Art d'église*, *ARA*, *Liturgical Arts*... The latter published in May 1955 his first project for the complete monastery, which was never fully realized; it is said there that our young architect worked "with a minimum of means and a maximum of intelligence". In that project, the chapel was rectangular (Figs. 5-6 and 28). Symbolically, the square represents the world and nature; the circle, God and the cosmos. The first stone is right in the center and connects vertically with the zenith: *Kairos*—the second coming of Christ—, personal eschatological life. Once again, resurrection.

An interesting detail is that the pavement of the lowest platform is built with pebbles, to give the sensation of water (Fig. 29). Some years, during the Easter Vigil, they even flooded it, leaving the paschal candle in the middle (during the construction a faucet had been provided for cleaning).⁵⁰ But the most controversial was the arrangement of the tabernacle in its own Eucharistic chapel.

⁵⁰ But there was no drainage...! Fray Gabriel recalls that, fortunately, the pebble pavement naturally absorbed all the water.

FIGURE 28

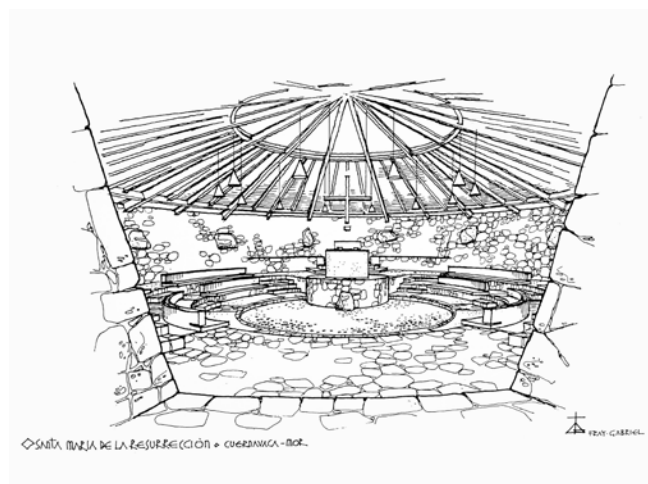
Issue 24/3 (1955) of *Liturgical Arts* magazine, dedicated to Mexico, illustrating the unrealized project for the monastery drawn by Fray Gabriel



Source: Taller San José Artesano's Archive (Tepeyac Abbey, Mexico).

FIGURE 29

Drawing of the interior of the chapel made by Fray Gabriel (2006)



Note that the ambo has not been included so as not to obstruct the perspective, and that the pavement of the lower level is made with pebbles. Source: Plazola 2006.

Fray Gabriel insists that all the symbolic decisions of the building—which he left drawn in the *plan-codex* to which we have already alluded—were incorporated after their timely sharing, discussion and approval by the whole community. Even so, he recalls that the ecclesiastical hierarchy only authorized its construction—and the celebrations in Spanish and facing the people—on the condition that the monastery also had another conventional chapel so that the monks who wanted to celebrate Mass in Latin could do so. This was done, on the other side of the bell tower.

Final

Fernando González has stated that

in the humble but forceful laboratory that represented the Cuernavaca of those two and a half decades—from 1950 to the mid-seventies—, four characters of the Catholic Church stood out: Bishop Sergio Méndez Arceo, the intellectual Iván Illich, the Benedictine monk Gregorio Lemerrier and the architect monk Gabriel Chávez de la Mora. Two Mexicans and two foreigners who ended up acclimatizing in Mexico (González 2011, 184).

And among the contributions that the monks of the monastery of Santa María de la Resurrección made to the Catholic culture of the twentieth century, the concretion of a type of architecture that sought to introduce a new way of entering into contact with divinity, by transforming the conception of the temple and the liturgy, stands out. “At this point the participation of the monk architect Gabriel Chávez de la Mora was fundamental” (González 2011, 184).

Similarly, Méndez Arceo remembered this monastery as a dynamic center, fundamental for Christian thought and action in his diocese, and as one of the vital elements for the reception of the Council in the country, emphasizing that the liturgical renewal had arrived in Mexico precisely because of its architecture (Fig. 30). He thought that more than psychoanalysis, the main source of the conflicts that ended up closing the monastery of Santa Maria had been the way of celebrating the liturgy in that chapel, since neither the majority of the bishops of the country, nor the Benedictine communities of the continent liked it (Ponce and Robles 1988; De la Rosa 1979).

At the end of 1967, with *holy peace*, Fray Gabriel Chávez de la Mora moved to a Benedictine community of North American foundation that was being established in Lindavista, north of Mexico City, very close to the Villa de Guadalupe. Immediately, the then rector of the sanctuary, Guillermo Schulenburg, invited him to work on the Guadalupe complex, first designing an ephemeral basilica (1970) and then collaborating in the design of the new circular basilica (1970-76) with the team of architects led by Pedro Ramírez Vázquez. Simultaneously, he was commissioned to build the new Abbey of Tepeyac, with all its facilities—including a chapel, this time completely orthogonal—, in Cuautitlán Izcalli (State of Mexico), where his community would move soon after and where Fray Gabriel has resided ever since. But these projects are already part of another story.

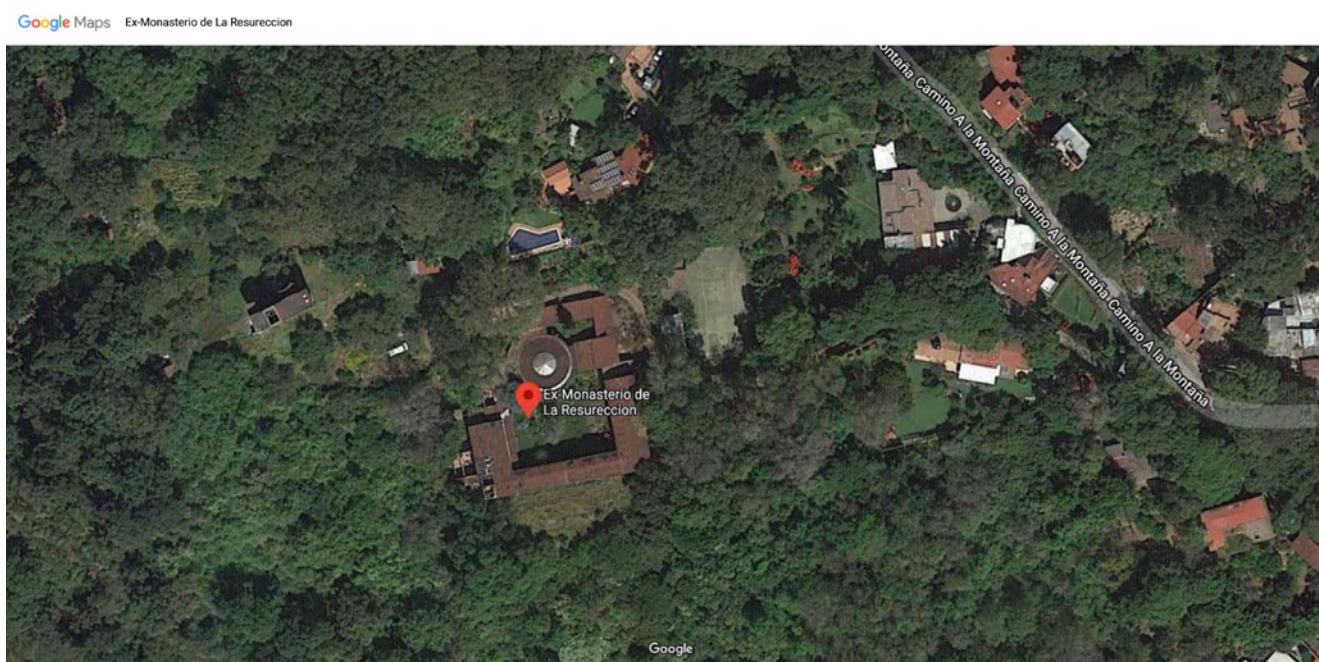
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DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The author of this article declares that he has no financial, professional or personal conflicts of interest that could have inappropriately influenced this work.

FIGURE 30
Aerial view of the ex-monastery today



Source: Google Maps 2020.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Esteban Fernández-Cobián: conceptualization, investigation, methodology, Project administration, visualization, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing.

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