



Source: Wafa Amr, Reuters, 'Palestinian parliament opens with Hamas at helm', *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 19/02/06.

Tags: [death](#), [countryside](#), [religion](#), [mother/father](#), [literature](#)

Writer/s: [Miriam Taylor Gomez](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Tunja, Nuevo Granada, 1697

A maniacal clamouring of the bells of Santa Clara la Real rang out over the sparsely cropped slopes across the valley. An onion farmer and his eldest son raised their hatted heads, and then looked at each other.

The sound was wrong, at the wrong time, too noisy, too fast, the chimes were not musical but harsh and urgent.

The farmer and son stood, leaning on their hoes, grateful for the break in routine, but curious about the harsh clamour of the convent bells. The sky was clear; there was no sign of storm or foul weather. The men surveyed the horizons for signs of fire, but there was no smoke. There had been no rain for weeks, so there could be no flood. The earth was still, no earthquake threatened. Why would God allow such a panic?

As the bells stilled, echoes stirred the air. The farmer and his son looked at each other and waited some minutes before they returned to their work silently, their thoughts bristling with reasons for the peeling bells.

With its stark pink-blue walls and fluted bell tower, Santa Clara la Real rose steeply above its public rose gardens, and looked disdainfully down on the town.

When the first cry came, the Mother Superior, Francisca Josepha del Castillo was sitting in the dawn sunshine of her cell, adding words to her *Afectos Espirituales*.

*The Spiritual Passions* was her work of love, praising her God in words of heady ardour. This was to be her legacy to her beloved sisters. She was not free of vanities, she admitted, since the publication of such a work would bring money to the convent. With the money, new sisters would come to join her world of prayer. A further thought drove her to write with each dawn. Francisca owed respect to her attentive cousin, the second King of Spain, Viceroy Carlos V, who resided in Santafe de Bogota. What better gift than to publish works of love for the Divine One?

*Spiritual Passions* was moulded and remoulded by her hands, massaged like clay into a fine form, the poetry exquisite. Despite her innate distaste of waste, she did not regret rewriting pages until the flow of the hand was perfect. Writing removed her from the daily dramas of the convent.

Her sisters were dedicated to God but they had their foibles, and living under the one roof was a trying experience. Disobedience to God was not Francisca's domain, but their earthly duties were her concern. At times, it was exhausting.

In the past year, she had been forced to deal with a number of improprieties committed by two of her sisters with some assistance in sin from the local Dominican brothers. For these mortal sins, the two sisters must answer directly to God but for the natural consequences of these indecencies, this was Francisca's unfortunate responsibility.

The pregnancies were lamentable but the terminations had been the most difficult decision she had made.

Tearing a half-formed child, even a child of mortal sin, from a young woman weighed on the Mother Superior like a stain on her soul. Fortunately, one of the older Chibcha sisters had known just how to prepare herbal concoctions to make the baby come earlier than the body would want. When Francisca had twice now looked on the bloody evidence of her hard decisions, she had wanted to inflict a similar pain on whomever of the Dominican brothers had committed the crime, but there had been no discussion of such things with Father Duchene, head of the Dominican friary.

Young though she was, Francisca knew that to speak of such things to a priest of a powerful order would be to commit suicide, for herself and her convent. The Church would punish them well for such sins of the flesh. Hence, twice now, she swore her sisters-in-crime to silence, swallowed the memories, and buried the half-babies under rose bushes near the well in the central courtyard. The perfume of the roses would lift the foul odour of the crimes to a heaven where God could make a better judgment of her.

There were times she despaired of her lofty responsibilities, but she did not complain, for she had no-one to complain to. Instead, she sought guidance from the Virgin. When times of earthly disobedience by her sisters were abundant, Francisca dreamt of the Virgin, looking down on her from white clouds, her eyes blue and shining, a little hair peeping out from her veil of modesty, and her hand extended holding a rose of deep purple. The Mother Superior would take great comfort from the dreams, and the days were then not so hard to face.

That morning like any other, she was writing with a light attention to her poetry for she had an ominous feeling that her world was to be torn of its muslin walls. The bells were sounding. She had given no order for their ringing. Following the first cry of alarm in the convent, and the rising clamour of bells, came the sound of Sister Fernando's hurried steps down the stone corridor, outside the Mother Superior's door.

She lifted her quill from the page having inscribed her Afecto 244:

*He speaks delicately  
Of love which esteems,  
Honey and milk distilled  
Between roses and irises,*

*Without doubt his heart is my heart.*

Francisca del Castillo sighed and lowered her quill, brushing ink from her fingers on the hem of her habit.

She rose from her wooden chair. Hands folded, fingertips to her chin, she faced the door and waited for the knock, for the beginning of yet another earthly drama.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Miriam Taylor Gomez.*