

# Finding the Balance Between Christian Faith and Latin American Folk Healing



## Introduction

Curanderismo is a form of Latin American folk healing that is believed to be a combination of indigenous practices with Catholicism brought over by the Spanish. The practice combines prayer, psychic healing, herbal remedies, and spiritualism with a combination of some Catholic elements (holy water and saints). Curanderos dedicate themselves to helping others both spiritually and mentally, which are aspects that western medicine often doesn't cover. However, there are groups of curanderos who are attempting to distance themselves from Catholic traditions and are instead turning to reconnect with their ancestral methods of healing.

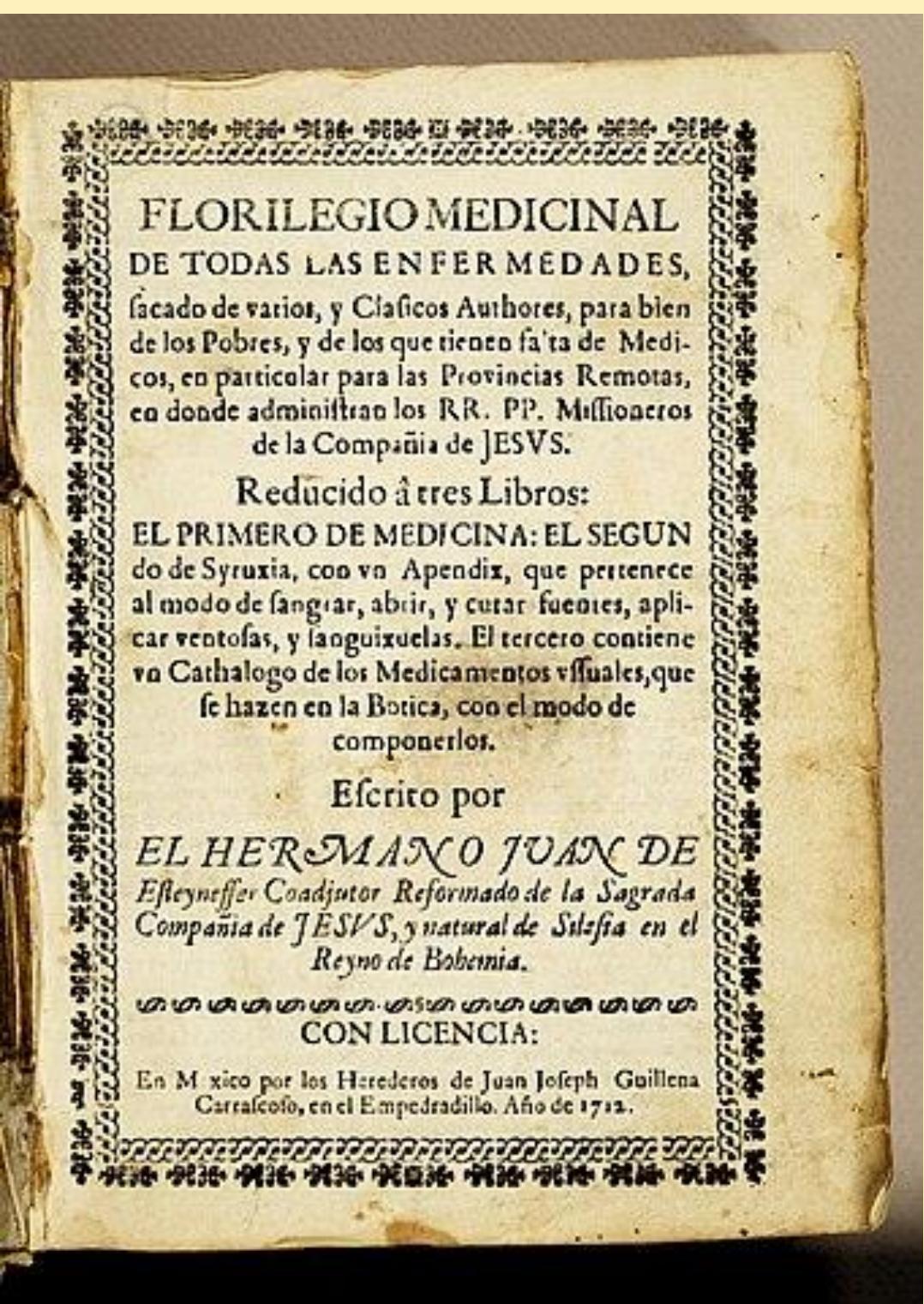
Curanderos and those that actively receive treatment from them are adopting a sense of poetic creativity with Catholicism, for they bend the religious practice in a way that best suits their needs. During the 1850s this sense of creativity was extremely present in Latin American Christian communities at the time, and it caused Latin American Christians to be seen as corrupt by Anglo-American Christians. This perception of corruption inspired there to be racial divisions between Latin American Christians and Anglo-American Christians due to their medicinal practices.



## Early Development

Around the 1790s Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries were attempting to spread the Catholic Church's authority and wanted to gain the productive potential of indigenous inhabitants within Northern Mexico. They carried out their mission by caring for the sick and administering them medicine. It could be argued that their premodern European healing methods were no more effective than the native people's healing methods.

The *Florilegio Medicinal* (seen below), was an important collection of medical texts that were compiled by a Jesuit, which reformulated native plants and indigenous remedies within the context of Catholicism, divine retribution, and saints. This combination of Mesoamerican knowledge and premodern European healing methods may have helped to develop early forms of curanderismo.



## Add Author Names and Information

## Add Department Names if Needed



[Fidencio and his followers and him performing one of his many surgeries ]

## Rising Divisions

In 1853 Thaddeus Amat was appointed as bishop of Los Angeles and Monterey. Once he was appointed as bishop, he discouraged the practices of curanderos. In 1858 "he suspended the Mexican Franciscans in the diocese for their support of Mexican "ceremonies, cults, and devotions of corrupt Catholicism." Amat and other American Church leaders at the time were rampant with fear that Mexican religious practices would discredit the church in a predominant Anglo-American society. Therefore, leaving Mexican healing practices and devotions to being excluded from public religious practices.

The division felt between Mexican's faith and healing practices against those within the western world, would be a constant running theme within curanderismo history. During the 20th century scholars differentiated between Mexican American health treatments from Anglo health care, which attributed to cultural and racial segregation. This distinction also caused racist assumptions relating to religious superstition and intelligence. Nevertheless, Anglo-American health care continues to shape curanderismo both by their botanical knowledge and cultural-religious therapies.

## El Nino Fidencio

One polarizing figure that has emerged from curanderismo and is one of the most famous Christian curanderos that has ever lived was "El Niño Fidencio." He has even garnered followers, who call themselves Fidencistas, and they see him as a saint. His believers would say that he could diagnose people simply by looking at them. He would treat illnesses of all kinds, such as cancer and leprosy. He would also conduct surgeries as well. His followers refer to his as El Guadalupano (the son of Guadalupe) and they also refer to him as the intercessor between God and humans. Therefore, he is seen as the Virgin, Christ, and a curandero all at once. No other curandero has garnered as large of a following, nor has inspired many other curanderos as he has. Even in death.

## Conclusion

Overall, curanderismo has remained a polarizing practice in Latin American Christian communities. It arose out of a combination of indigenous practices with the Catholicism brought by the Spanish. Curanderos dedicate themselves to helping people heal both spiritually and mentally, which are aspects that western medicine often doesn't cover. Those that participate in curanderismo are adopting a form of poetic creativity with Catholicism. Even those that feel a sense of "guilt" for participating in the practice, assume that Catholicism is elastic enough to accommodate to their needs without breaking.

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