

Stop 30 – Church and Catholicism

Was it sound engineering and master craftsmanship or just a miracle that this amazing structure is so well preserved? Perhaps a bit of both deserve credit for the beautiful church at Mission Concepcion. What you see before you is not just one of the oldest stone churches in America... It is not just one of the oldest continuously operating Catholic parishes in America. It is also a living monument of the Spanish instrument that converted the indigenous people of Texas into subjects of the Spanish crown.

Imagine the area around present day Concepcion in the 1700s. Grassy plains and small clusters of woods dominated the landscape. Permanent structures were foreign to the bands of Indians that traveled the area. A great stone structure was surely a magnet for the curious...for the marginal. The stones of Mission Concepcion were most likely quarried from just outside the Mission walls. A master craftsman would have directed the natives how to cut and stack the stones. The strong Moorish influence is evident in the stonework. Enter the church and gaze at the barrel roof. Imagine the wood frame required to support the stones of the roof as it came together in the center at the keystone.

Native transformation took place culturally, economically, and spiritually. The hunter gatherers of the area gave up their nomadic ways and pagan rituals to follow the discipline of the cross. The toll of the tower bells set the daily schedule for mission residents. From scattered bands of roving Native Americans, the Spanish hoped to weave the fabric of a thriving agricultural society. Franciscan friars taught community harmony through the Catholic sacraments of baptism, communion, reconciliation, and marriage.

Cultural assimilation naturally creates a blend. Some native traditions were incorporated into Catholic ceremonies. Catholicism was the religious mandate in Spain and all Spanish territories. All Spanish citizens were Catholic. All non-Spaniards who wished to live in Spanish lands were required to follow the Catholic religion. Spanish bishops reported to the Spanish crown and not to the pope.

This spiritual symbol appears before you largely intact from the time the last stone was laid more than 250 years ago. It stands today as a symbol of transformation and continuity.