

Colonial Latin American Society and the Roman Catholic Church

Directions: Read the passages below and complete the assignment as noted.

Colonial Latin American Society

To start off, colonial society was divided along racial lines, with a European minority (from 2 to 20 percent) ruling over a large population.

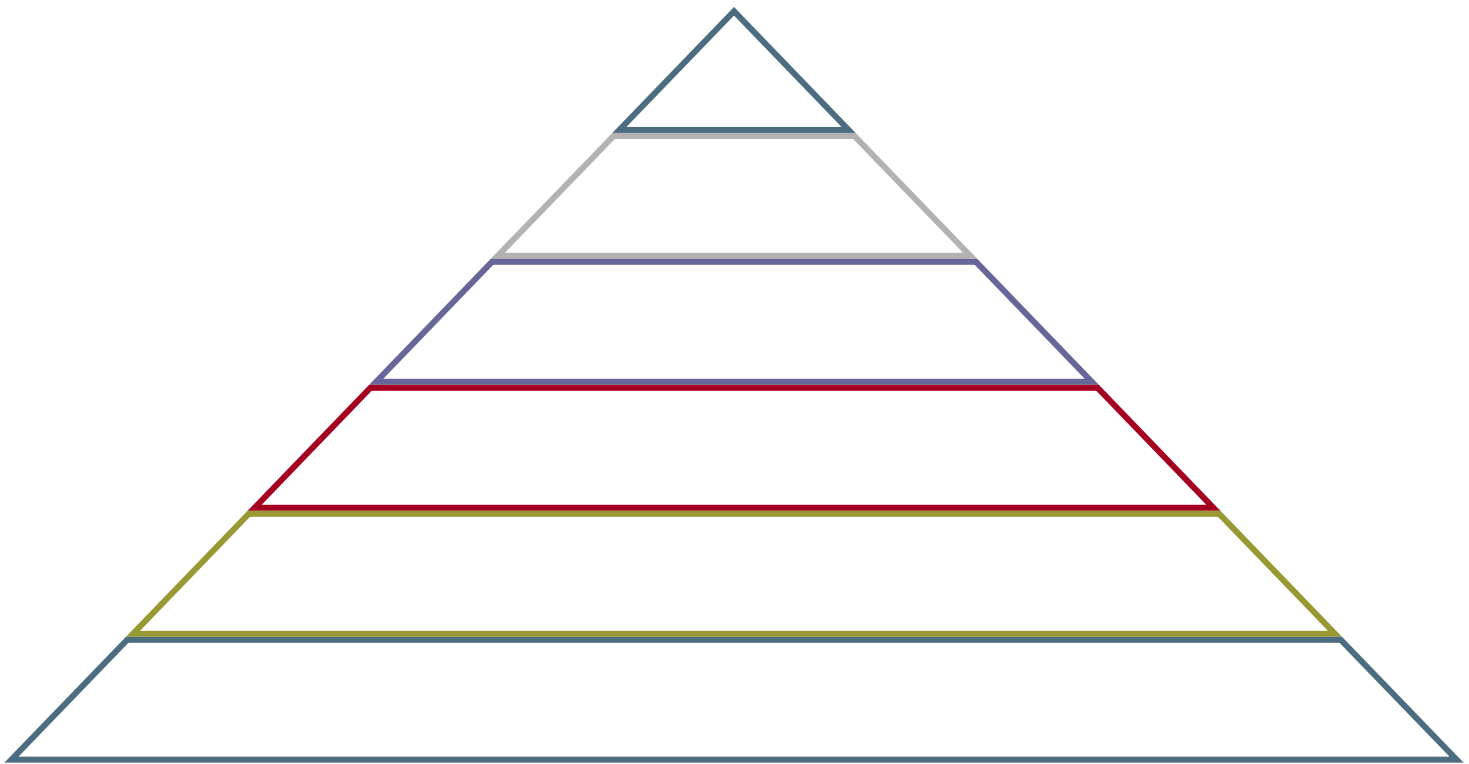
The highest position in the social structure of colonial Latin America was the ***peninsulares***. They were officials sent from Spain and Portugal to rule the colonies. The ***peninsulares*** also held the highest government positions such as acting as viceroys and Church officials. Second were the **creoles** (*criollos*). They were children (and descendants) of the ***peninsulares*** who were born in the Americas.

The next group of people was **mestizos** who were people of mixed Native American and European descent. Then, there were **Native Americans** who worked as farmhands, converted to Catholicism, and spoke their own languages. After that, were **free blacks** who were ex-slaves that bought their freedom. Finally, at the bottom of society were **African slaves** who were bought from different parts of Africa and forced to work in Latin America.

From the 1500s to the 1800s between 10 and 15 million African slaves were taken to Latin America (mostly to Brazil and the Caribbean)—more than 20 times the number sold to the English colonies (which became the United States). Owners sometimes preferred to import new slaves rather than invest in food and water for times of drought and famine. Some slaves escaped to form communities in the backlands...

Directions: Using the reading above, fill in the following chart on how Colonial Latin American society was structured. Read carefully! **Identify AND define** the groups of people in the pyramid below.

Colonial Latin America Class Structure



Roman Catholicism and the Native Americans

The social system divided people along class lines. By contrast, the Roman Catholic Church was a unifying force. From the very beginning, the Church played a major role in shaping colonial life. The missionaries who came with the conquistadores set up churches in towns and cities. They also traveled to remote areas, where they built missions.

At first, missionaries tried to protect the Native Americans from harsh rule by the Spanish. But they also wanted Native Americans to give up their religious beliefs, which the missionaries believed were evil. For this reason, they destroyed Native American temples, statues, and sacred objects. In writing about his travels to Maya lands, the bishop Diego de Landa said, "We found a large number of books...and we burned them all."

The Church replaced Native American beliefs with those of European Christians. In the process, the Church absorbed some Native American customs. In Mexico City, Cuzco, and elsewhere, Christian churches were built on the ruins of Indian temples. In Mexico, Native American stonemasons decorated the new churches with both Christian figures and Aztec symbols. Offerings of maize and other local products filled the churches during religious festivals. The story of the Virgin of Guadalupe is an example of the blending of Native American and Christian traditions.

Roman Catholicism and Africans

The Church also spread Christianity among the Africans who had been brought to the Americas. To teach Christian beliefs, missionaries told stories about saints. Africans often saw similarities between their traditional gods and Catholic saints. Most Africans converted to Christianity, but many retained some elements of their traditional beliefs.

The Catholic Church's Power

Because it had close ties to the government, the Church enjoyed great power and wealth. It received huge grants of land from Spain and Portugal, as well as gifts from wealthy colonists. Like other landowners, Church officials taxed the Native Americans and others who worked the land. In time, it became the largest and richest property owner in Latin America.

The Church controlled many aspects of life including education, hospitals, and services to the poor. It set up schools and trained teachers. By the 1550s, it had built universities in Santo Domingo, Mexico City, and Lima. There, the sons of wealthy creoles and even some mestizos studied to become priests, doctors, and lawyers. The Church spent large sums of money on charity and on the many religious festivals that were celebrated throughout the year.

**Now, fill in the chart below using the information above.

Roman Catholic Church Chart

What missionaries did	1. 2. 3.
How the Native American traditions blended with the Catholic traditions	1. 2. 3.
Why some Africans converted	1.
Ways the Catholic Church influenced Latin America	1. 2. 3.