

SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCE

Instructions for the New World

Document Text

The following are the things that you, Frey Nicolás de Ovando, Comendador of Lares of the military of Alcántara, are to do on the islands and mainland of the Ocean Sea, where you will serve as Our governor:

First of all, you are to work diligently in those things that pertain to the service of God and ensure that divine services are conducted with much respect, order, and reverence.

Also, because it is our will that the Indians convert to Our Holy Catholic Faith and their souls be saved, since this is the greatest benefit We can desire for them, for which it is necessary that they be taught the things of Our faith in order to come into the knowledge of it, you are to take much care, without using any force against them, that the priests who are there teach and admonish them for this purpose with much love; so that they are converted as quickly as possible; and to this end you are to provide all the support and help needed for this.

Summary

Isabella opens by telling the governor that these are the instructions he should follow when governing the Spanish colonies in the New World.

His first priority is making sure that everything is done in accordance with the rules of the Catholic Church and that Catholic Church services are held regularly.

He must do everything in his power to promote the conversion of the Native people who live in the colonies, but must also make sure that force is not used against them.

Also, using Our provision, which you are taking with you, you are to see that all the vecinos and residents of the abovesaid islands and mainland submit to you personally and with their dependents, and that they obey you as Our governor in everything that you order on Our behalf. And you are to ensure that all live always in peace and concord and justice, treating all equally without exception; and you are to appoint for this purpose enough good subordinate officials and punish everything that justly should be punished.

Also, you are to ensure that the Indians are well treated and can walk safely throughout the country without anyone assaulting or robbing them or doing them any other harm, decreeing for this purpose the penalties that seem to you to be necessary and executing them in those found guilty and making all the prohibitions and announcements required.

Also, you are to tell the caciques and the other principales on Our behalf that it is Our wish that the Indians be well treated as Our good subjects and vassals, and that nobody dares to do them any harm or ill, and you are to have this proclaimed publicly on Our behalf. And you should tell them that if subsequently anyone does them any ill or harm or take something of theirs from them by force, they should inform you, because you will punish it so that no one will dare to do them any ill or damage in the future.

He must assert his authority over every person who lives in the colony, and ensure that they are all treated fairly by the government. To make sure that everyone lives together in harmony, he should appoint government officials and punish everyone who breaks the law.

He must ensure the safety of the Native people of the colony by declaring new punishments for anyone found guilty of a crime against a Native person, and carrying out the punishments when necessary.

His must tell all the Native leaders that the Queen and King view all Native people in their territory as subjects of Spain. Therefore, if any Spanish person commits a crime against a Native person, the Native leaders should report the crime to the government, and the criminals will be punished.

Also, because We have been informed that some Christians in the above said islands, and especially in Hispaniola, have taken the Indians' wives and daughters and other things from them against their will, you shall give orders, as soon as you arrive, that everything taken from the Indians against their will be returned, and you are to forbid anyone from doing such things in the future under severe penalties; and if Spaniards should wish to marry Indian women, the marriages should be entered into willingly by both parties and not made by force.

Also, because it is Our will that the Indians pay our tributes and dues they owe Us as subjects in Our Kingdoms and Lordships, since paying tributes as here in Spain would be hard on them due to the quality of the land, you are to speak with the caciques and principales and whatever Indians you think necessary, negotiating with them the tribute and dues to be paid by each one of them each year in such a manner that they know they are not being done any injustice.

Also, because it will be necessary to take advantage of the service from the Indians in mining gold and other tasks We have ordered done, you are to require the Indians to work in the things of Our service, paying to each the salary that seems fair to you with regard to the quality of the land.

Isabella acknowledges that Spanish settlers have been kidnapping and sexually abusing Native women, as well as stealing from Native communities. She instructs the governor to make sure everything stolen from Native people is returned, and set severe new punishments for this crime. She also requires that if a Spanish settler wants to marry a Native woman, the woman must be equally willing and cannot be forced.

He should negotiate the amount of tribute Native communities need to pay yearly with the Native leaders, to make sure they don't feel they are being treated unfairly.

Isabella acknowledges that the government needs Native people to be the labor force of the colony. She tells the governor that he can make work mandatory, but must pay Native people a fair wage.

Also, because you are taking with you the people you need to accompany you and do the other things you order, and it will not be necessary to have any other people receiving a salary from Us, as soon as you arrive you are to dismiss all those that are there, both those taken out by the Comendador Bobadilla and those who were there earlier, so that no one will be receiving a salary from us except for those accompanying you. And if one of the latter should die or be dismissed, you will receive someone else in his place, a person from our contador.

Also, because We want to know what debts are owed both to Us and to the Admiral Don Cristobal Colon, you are to take with you from here all the information on this you can, and in Hispaniola, you are to make inquiry with the Comendador Bobadilla and any other persons necessary to find out about it. And with regard to collecting the debts, you are to appoint a person that does it with all due care and are not to discharge anyone's debts; and you are to report to Us on all of this so that We can decide fairly on the matter.

Also, because it is necessary to found some towns on Hispaniola, and since it is impossible to determine how this should be done from here, you are to inspect the places and sites on the island, and in accordance with the quality of the land and the sites and people besides the existing towns, you are to establish towns in the numbers and at the sites that seem best to you.

He should fire all the government officials in the colony, and replace them with those he brings with him from Spain. If one of his officials should die or get fired, the governor should write to the Queen and King for a replacement.

The governor should appoint a person to investigate any debts owed to the crown and Christopher Columbus. No debts should be forgiven, but information about disputed debts should be sent back to Spain so the Queen and King can make a fair judgment.

He should conduct a survey of the land and found new towns in the best locations.

Also, because it is Our will that the Christians in the abovesaid island of Hispaniola live together from now on rather than being scattered through the countryside, and that no one lives outside the towns that are established on the island, and that each Spaniard may build a small house or hut on his farm, in which to take shelter when he goes to look it over or cultivate it.

Also, since the security of the land requires the construction of some forts, you are to determine the manner of building these forts and build up to three, which should be reasonably strong and well supplied.

Also, because We have been informed that the Comendador Bobadilla granted certain privileges to the vecinos and residents of the island of Hispaniola, exempting them from paying anything to the Crown for the gold they mined on the island for a certain period of time, though he did not have the power or instructions from Us to do this, you are to investigate the matter, and if you find this to be the case, you are to make use of the provision from Us, which you are taking with you, in which We revoke this privilege given without Our approval. With regard to the gold that may have been gathered at the time of your arrival, you are to make everyone pay the share that is due to us under the contract that the admiral Columbus may have made with Us. And for the future, they are to pay half of the gold mined, as do the new settlers that are currently going to populate the island.

Every Spanish citizen is now required to live in the towns established by the governor.

He should build up to three forts wherever he thinks they are most necessary. The finished forts should be strong and well supplied.

Isabella explains that the last governor of the colony gave privileges to the residents without asking the Queen and King first. She tells the new governor that he should take back these privileges, and make everyone pay the same taxes on the gold they mine.

Also, since We have been informed that good practice has not been followed in the cutting of brazilwood, many trees being cut down to the base so that more dye can be obtained, thus doing great damage to the forests, you are to give orders that no one is to cut down the trees at the base, and that where brazilwood is cut, the branches rather than the trunks should be cut, and if some trees have to be cut down it should be as few as possible.

Also, because We have been informed that some of those who have gone to the abovesaid island of Hispaniola have done things for which they should be sent back here, and that others who are here should not be allowed to go there, you are to make inquiry about this and if it seems to you that some of those who are there should come here, you will order them to come immediately, and if there are some among those who are here who should not be allowed to go there, you will not allow them to go.

Also, since there is the possibility of much deceit and fraud in the collection and smelting of gold and We may be defrauded in the share that We should receive, you will give orders that the extraction of gold be done by cuadrillas of ten persons, or whatever number seems best to you; and for each cuadrilla, you shall appoint a trustworthy person to be present when they gather the gold and to accompany them when they take it to the smelting house. And you are to decide where to establish the smelting furnaces, where everyone is to come to have their gold smelted. And you shall order, under severe penalties, that no one shall do any smelting except in these furnaces in the presence of Our overseer, so that there will be no fraud.

Isabella says that the valuable brazilwood that grows in the colony has been harvested irresponsibly, and gives specific instructions for how the trees should be preserved.

Isabella wants the governor to investigate the Spanish settlers for any wrong doing, and ban those who have committed crimes from the colony.

To prevent the theft of gold that belongs to the Crown during mining operations, Isabella establishes rigid systems for the mining and smelting of gold.

Also, forasmuch as We have been granted the tithes and first fruits of the abovesaid islands and mainland by Our Most Holy Father, you will give orders that everyone, both Christians and Indians, shall pay the tithe and first fruits of the maize they may have, trade, and owe, paying the first fruits according to the rate scale that you are taking out with you, which is the most reasonable scale that it has been possible to draw up in Our Kingdoms.

Also, because We are informed that the Comendador Bobadilla has distributed all the horses, mares, cattle, and other livestock that belonged to Us in the island of Hispaniola in payment of debts owed to the settlers, as soon as you arrive you are to collect all the abovesaid horses, mares, cattle, and livestock belonging to Us that the governor gave to these persons in payment of the debts of the Admiral, and to arrange for the payment of the amounts of these debts from his property and rents. And with regard to what was given in payment of debts charged to Us, if it seems to you that it would be of greater benefit to Our service to take possession of the abovesaid horses, mares, and livestock, you shall do this, and if it seems to you that they ought to be left in the possession of those who now have them, you may do this, provided they were given for fair value in accord with the quality of the land.

Isabella requires that all Spanish settlers and Native people pay taxes to the Catholic Church, in recognition of the fact that the Church gave the colony to Spain.

Isabella is angry that the last governor used royal horses and cattle to pay debts he owed settlers. She instructs the new governor to collect all the horses and cattle that were distributed in this way, and pay the debts using the former governor's money and possessions. She then clarifies that if the debt paid was a royal debt, and the trade was fair, the governor should let the settler keep the horses and cattle.

Also, because it benefits Our service that those who are foreign to Our Kingdoms and Realms not live in the abovesaid islands, you are not to allow foreigners to settle in the said islands and mainland. And if there are some who have already settled there, you are to order them to leave, and if any of them have any landed property and wish to sell it you must have it done in accord with the law. And if there is there any factor of the Admiral that is a foreigner, you must inform Us who the person is and of what quality, so that We can order you what should be done.

Also, in order that Christians and Indians shall live together in peace, friendship, and harmony, and that there be no fights or quarrels among them, you shall order that no one give or sell offensive or defensive weapons to the Indians nor exchange such weapons with them, establishing the penalties that seem appropriate for this. And if you should find such weapons in the possession of the Indians, you shall take them in payment of their taxes, tributes, and dues and turn them over to Our factor.

Also, since We are informed. that some persons have gone without Our license or permission to explore and trade in the abovesaid Ocean Sea, and since in a previous provision We prohibited this under certain penalties and desire that this be obeyed and enforced, you are to have our provision, which you are taking with you for this purpose, proclaimed at all the places and shorelines of Our Kingdoms and Realms and in the islands and mainland, and if any person or persons should disobey it, you shall execute on their person and goods the penalties contained in the said provision of ours.

Isabella does not want any foreign people living in the Spanish colonies. The governor is to kick any non-Spanish or non-Native person out of the colonies, and ban any new foreigners from settling there. If there are foreign born people in the government, the governor must write to the Queen and King to find out what should be done with them.

To maintain peace between the Spanish settlers and Native people, Isabella outlaws the sale of weapons to Native populations, and instructs the governor to confiscate any weapons he finds in Native communities in lieu of taxes.

The governor must spread the word that it is illegal to explore the areas around the Spanish colonies without the permission of the Queen and King. If someone breaks this law, the governor should punish them.

Also, forasmuch as We have the responsibility for bringing about the conversion of the Indians to Our Holy Catholic Faith, and since the arrival of persons of suspect faith could offer an impediment to this conversion, you are not to allow or consent to the passage of Moors, Jews, reconciled, heretics, or persons newly converted to our faith, except for black slaves or other slaves who were -born in the power of Christians, and who are Our subjects and natives of Our Kingdoms.

Also, since the manner in which Our tithes, first fruits, tributes, and dues should be collected cannot be decided here, you should give orders for Our accountant, who is going to the Indies, to arrange for this to be done in a way that is convenient to the improvement and profit of Our rents.

Also, in order that you can act more freely in your office and be better obeyed, We order you to appoint the magistrates, the people who should remain in the forts, and any other officials you deem necessary for the administration of Our justice, provided they are trustworthy and qualified for those jobs.

Isabella believes that if people of diverse religions are allowed in the colony, it will interfere with the conversion of Native people to the Catholic Church. She instructs the governor to ban Muslims, Jews, heretics, and others. The only exception to this rule is enslaved people, whose beliefs are considered irrelevant.

The governor should work closely with the royal accountant to make sure the Crown makes as much money as possible.

The governor is allowed to appoint judges, fort commanders, and any other minor officials he deems necessary to promote his own authority.

Also, during a period of thirty days, you are to conduct a residencia of the Comendador Bobadilla and his officials for the entire time they have been in charge of the abovesaid islands and mainland, on condition that, as soon as you arrive, the Comendador Bobadilla is to come here without waiting for this process, leaving a representative to intervene in it on his behalf. If you find that anyone has received any injury, you are to remedy it in accord with Our provisión, which you are taking with you for this purpose.

Also, since there will be other things that cannot now be acted on from here as they should be, you are to inform yourself as soon as you arrive of what problems need to be dealt with and how, and you are to report to Us at length concerning this by means of the ships you are taking with you, so that We can order the proper action.

Also, you are to take great care and diligence that each and everyone of the officials We are sending out uses his office well, faithfully, and diligently. You have the authority over all of them, in order to keep them from doing anything they should not; and if any official does act improperly, you are to deprive him of his office and punish him in accord with justice, appointing another person in his place. And in everything you should act as you deem fitting with the service of God, the discharge of Our consciences, and the increase of Our rents, since We place total confidence in you.

The governor is to conduct a full criminal investigation of the last governor's tenure. The previous governor is not allowed to stay around for this investigation; he must appoint a representative and take the first ship home. If the new governor finds that someone was treated unfairly by the old governor, he should make amends.

Isabella acknowledges that she doesn't know everything about the present state of the colony. She asks the governor to investigate everything and then write a long report for her, so she can offer further advice.

The governor must make sure all the officials who are traveling and working with him do their duty faithfully. If someone does something improper, he is allowed to fire them and punish them according to the law.

The governor should always act in the best interests of God, the monarchy, and the prosperity of the colony, in that order.

We order you to perform and carry out all that is said and contained in these instructions and each and every part of them, and not to do anything contrary to them; and so that you may execute and comply with it we grant you our full power with all its incidents, accidents, concomitants, adjuncts, and connections. Done in Granada the 16th of September, 1501.

I the King. I the Queen.

By order of the King and Queen, Gaspar de Gricio. Signed by Antonio de Fonseca and Dr. Angulo and Licenciante Zapata.

The governor must carry out every instruction detailed in this letter, and not to anything contrary to these instructions. In return the Queen and King grant him full power in the colony.

Signed in Granada, Spain. September 16, 1501.

“Instructions to Commander Nicolás de Ovando, Third Governor of Hispaniola, from King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain,” 1501. *New Iberian World: A Documentary History of the Discovery and Settlement of Latin America to the Early 17th Century, Vol. II.* Ed. John H. Parry and Robert G. Keith. (New York: Times Books, 1984). Translation revised in 2018 by Anthony Stevens, with the assistance of Dr. Carmen del Camino Martinez and Dr. Reyes Rojas Garcia.