
José Diaz Pimienta: Rogue Priest

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Although the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century prescribed a selection process to weed out the unfit among those who wanted to take priestly vows or enter monastic orders, it was a long time before the rules were uniformly applied and executed throughout the Roman Catholic Church, especially in outlying areas. Even today a strange bird sometimes flies through the meshes of the net, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the lack of rapid communications made it difficult to conduct thorough background inquiries about candidates and aspirants, such occurrences were more frequent. One of the most peculiar cases involved José Diaz Pimienta, a Cuban priest whose life story brings to mind the picaresque novels that were so popular in Spanish literature in the same period, but in this instance the *picaresco* (“rogue”) was a real person, and his adventures, however incredible they may seem, were not a fiction writer’s inventions but true events amply documented by contemporary evidence.

José Diaz Pimienta was a scoundrel and con man of the first order, and apparently emotionally disturbed as well, though it is clear that few if any of his contemporaries saw through him. A Christian born and baptized who served a novitiate as a monk and was fraudulently ordained as a priest, Pimienta chalked up a record of offenses while a clergyman that would have earned him pride of place on a Church wanted list if such existed: theft, assault with a deadly weapon, forgery, piracy, extortion, sexual misconduct, not to mention a wide range of disciplinary infractions and personal eccentricities. From the standpoint of the Inquisition, whose interrogations of Pimienta provide our main source for the details of his checkered life, his worst offense was his conversion to Judaism. Though he later reverted to Christianity and maintained that he had adopted Judaism against his will or perhaps for pecuniary reasons, Pimienta seems to have wavered between the two faiths for the rest of his life, identifying with one or the other as his mood dictated, with no consideration for expediency

or the commonsense dictates of the situation in which he found himself. During his short but lurid career, Pimienta's frequent flights from the authorities and searches for new victims and money-making opportunities took him through much of the Caribbean region. He finally ended his days in Seville, Spain, where he was tried by the Inquisition and burned in an *auto da fé*.

Pimienta has been mentioned in several books and pamphlets, and many years ago his early life was the subject of articles by Professor Richard Gottheil and by Elkan Nathan Adler.¹ In this paper, utilizing the records of his interrogations before the Inquisition, I shall endeavor to give the first full account of his life.²

A Born Catholic and a Converted Jew

José Diaz Pimienta was born in the village of San Juan de los Remedios, Cuba. There is some question about the date of his birth. In 1708, when he became a priest before he was old enough, he said that he had been born in 1682, producing a forged baptismal certificate as substantiation, but another certificate, on file in the archives in Seville, states that he was baptized in 1688. In all probability this was the actual year of his birth, because his parents seem to have been pious, as is implied by their desire that he enter the clergy, and thus it is unlikely that they would have waited six years before having him baptized. In any case, both of Pimienta's parents were *Cristianos Viejos* (Old Christians), meaning that their Catholic roots anteceded the period of forced conversions in the fifteenth century, and thus, despite Pimienta's later claim to this effect in Curaçao, there was no possibility of an admixture of Jewish blood in his ancestry. According to the terminology in use in the Spanish New World colonies, Pimienta's father was a Spaniard (i.e., born in Spain), and his mother was a Creole (i.e., born in Cuba to white Spanish parents).

In 1697, at the age of nine, Pimienta was confirmed in Havana, where his parents had sent him for his education. It was around this time, when he tried to kill himself by taking poison, that his mental instability first became evident. After this unsuccessful suicide attempt, Pimienta remained in Havana for two more years. Toward the end of 1699 he was studying grammar and moral theology with the fathers of a monastery in Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico, but in 1703 he trans-

ferred to a convent of the Mercedarians, a monastic order that had been founded in the thirteenth century for the purpose of ransoming captives from the Moors and subsequently had begun to concentrate its activities in the Caribbean and Latin America. On the Feast of Our Lady of Ransom in 1706 (September 24), when he was eighteen, Pimienta entered the order himself as a novice.

Barely two months later, however, Pimienta and two other monks ran off. After hiding out in his parents' home for ten months, Pimienta returned to the monastery and asked the superior for permission to continue his studies at one of the order's other convents. When this request was denied, he ran away again, leading an itinerant existence that took him to Caracas, Vera Cruz, and finally Puebla de los Angeles, where he came up with the idea of becoming a priest. Since he had not yet attained the canonical age of twenty-four required for admission to the priesthood, he forged the baptismal certificate mentioned earlier. This document enabled him to deceive the bishop, and in 1708 he was ordained. He was assigned to a post in Vera Cruz, although whether as a parish priest or in some other capacity cannot be determined, but about four months later the bishop discovered that he had lied about his age and recalled him to Havana. There Pimienta was forbidden to perform any priestly functions, but he remained a priest since Catholic doctrine holds that priestly vows are an irrevocable sacrament.

After a few weeks of aimless wandering, Pimienta returned to the Mercedarian monastery. Despite his record of escapes and his fraudulent ordination, the master of novices gave him another chance, but soon afterwards Pimienta decamped again. He was caught and returned to the monastery but before long escaped again. This time he was brought back in shackles. After two months fettered to the walls of his cell, he was taken to another monastery in Arta, but permitted to leave ten days later.

Pimienta's next stop was a French island which is named Prechiguan in the sources but can no longer be identified. Three months later he turned up in Puerto del Principe, Cuba, where he presented a forged document from his bishop authorizing him to proceed to New Spain. While in Cuba he attempted to steal some mules from his parents' home. When he was caught red-handed by one of their servants, Pimienta pulled a pistol and shot him, inflicting no less than seven

wounds, and then hurriedly took his departure from Cuba to avoid arrest.

The ship *Pimienta* boarded was captured by English pirates, who put him ashore near *Icacos*, not far from where he had started out. Embarking on another ship, he went to *Trinidad*, where a friend of his was a priest. Through his friend he obtained permission to collect alms and was appointed sub-parish priest in a hamlet named *Pueblo*, then in *Tarimtos*, and finally in *San Benito Atad*—townships which can no longer be identified. In *San Benito Atad* he had an affair with a woman and then became embroiled with her lover, who threatened to kill him. *Pimienta* managed to frighten the fellow off with his pistol but for some reason was unable to do the same thing when he was accosted and soundly beaten by a mulatto whom he had refused permission to marry.

Sometime after these events *Pimienta* left *Trinidad*. In 1714 he turned up in *Rio de la Hacha* on the Venezuelan coast, and there, so he later told his Inquisition interrogators, he said Holy Mass for the last time. *Pimienta* then made his way to *Cartagena*, but when he learned that the Spanish Vicar General was coming for a visit, he realized that the jig was up and began nosing about for a new refuge. He finally decided on the Dutch colony of *Curaçao*, having heard, according to his testimony before the Inquisition, that the Jews of that island had recently given 300 pesetas to a man who had converted to Judaism. The man in question, *Pimienta* said, had been obliged to whip a crucifix and deface the images of the saints. While *Pimienta* later insisted that he himself would never have done any such thing, he explained that he took the story as an indication that heretics and Jews were free to live in *Curaçao* and thus that it would be a safe haven for him. By and large he was right; while the Calvinist Dutch in *Curaçao* barely tolerated Protestant heretics and sometimes persecuted them, they had a more open-minded attitude toward Catholics and Jews, especially the latter, and permitted them to reside in the colony so long as they kept a low profile.

On February 6, 1715, when he arrived in *Curaçao*, *Pimienta* got in touch with the Jewish community and quickly discovered that the story about the crucifix and the images was pure fantasy. Not only had such a thing never happened, according to the Jew he consulted, but it could not possibly happen, since the tale implied that the Jews had

graven images in their possession, and this would have been a sin.

Reassured that he would not have to perform an act that he professed to find odious, at least so he said later on, Pimienta decided to convert. Claiming that his parents were Marranos who had fled to the New World to escape the Inquisition, losing all their property in the process, he took lodgings with the godfather of the convert who had been given the 300 pesetas. Although Pimienta replied that the Messiah had not yet come when he was asked his beliefs about Jesus, the Curaçao Jews were astute enough not to take him at face value, especially when they discovered that he knew almost nothing about the Bible—which is amazing in itself since he is supposed to have spent several years studying theology. Biding their time, they gave him some books on Judaism and suggested that he begin studying.

Despite Pimienta's punctilious observance of the laws of ritual purity at mealtimes, the Curaçao Jews remained suspicious and tried to persuade him to go to Amsterdam for his conversion, but he refused, claiming that he would be unable to endure the cold climate in the Netherlands. Meanwhile, virtually destitute since he had not been given the sum he anticipated, Pimienta wrote to his parents for money. The suspicions of the Curaçao Jews were heightened when they intercepted the letter and discovered that his parents, supposedly divested of their property by the Inquisition, were actually rather prosperous, but Pimienta managed to talk his way out of this predicament, concluding his explanation with the words, "The Law of Moses stands forever."

Since the story of Pimienta's life can only be reconstructed on the basis of information derived from his interrogations before the Inquisition, we do not have all the details, and some of what we have may not be reliable. Certainly, in view of his past history, we have no way of knowing how he finally managed to convince the Jews of Curaçao that he was sincere. According to his own account, which of course may not be true, the decisive moment came when he tore his rosary apart and shouted, "If this thing is from God, then let flowers sprout from the beads." Whether or not this actually happened or had the effect he claimed, the Jews decided to accept him into their congregation, presumably Mikvé Israel. On May 21, 1715, he was circumcised with all the appropriate ceremonies and adopted the Hebrew name Abraham in place of José. He was given 94 pesetas—one wonders

why—and a banquet was held in his honor. Soon afterward he married a Jewish woman, but unfortunately the sources do not give her name.

In his “new life” Pimienta remained as restless as ever, and before long he put out to sea again, sailing to Bahia Honda, where he somehow managed to accumulate 500 pesetas. His reason for making this voyage is not stated in his testimony, but it must have involved buccaneering of some kind, for around this time, while engaged in what he admitted was an act of piracy, he was struck with a cutlass and suffered a split nose, a wound that left him with a permanent scar. Life as a pirate was not to Pimienta’s taste, however, and the wound in his nose actually set him to praying—not in the Jewish manner, as one might expect, but by reciting the Litany of Our Lady, with the addition of a *Salve Regina* for his safe return to Curaçao.

If Pimienta’s shipmates overheard his prayers, they said nothing back in Curaçao. Meanwhile, the Jewish congregation appointed Pimienta as a teacher in its school. It may be assumed that a man charged with the religious instruction of the young was expected to conduct himself in an exemplary manner, but Pimienta later told the Inquisition that he had not observed the dietary laws except when Jews were present. He also recounted what may have been an attempt to convert him to Protestantism—a Lutheran acquaintance in Curaçao gave him a copy of the New Testament and told him that as a born Catholic and a converted Jew he would have been better off if he had never been born.

A Prisoner of the Inquisition

Not long after this Pimienta gave up his job as a teacher and left Curaçao. A few days out to sea his ship was captured by pirates. They put him ashore in Jamaica, where a Jewish friend took him in. Pimienta still had the Lutheran’s New Testament, and while staying in his friend’s house he threw it into the fire. According to his own account, he saw blood flowing from the burning pages. Whatever the true significance of this hallucination, Pimienta took it as a sign that he should turn his back on Judaism. Soon afterward he visited the synagogue in Jamaica, made contacts with Catholics, and baptized two Jewish children.

While still in Jamaica, Pimienta learned that someone was trying to track him down. The information was so vague that Pimienta had no

idea whether the person on his trail was an agent of the Jews or of the Inquisition, but whatever the case, he decided to move on, departing from Jamaica in the company of a Jew and fifteen Indians. The Jew seems to have been his prisoner; Pimienta regularly beat him, and for reasons that are no longer clear, forced him to eat pork and to recite the name of the Holy Trinity. After a while, however, the Indians turned against Pimienta, beating him half to death and fleeing. Left on his own, he managed to reach a camp of some kind, where he was arrested and sent to Rio de la Hacha. For the next three weeks Pimienta played the fool—a role that certainly gave him no trouble—praying first in the Catholic manner and then in the Jewish, and boasting to his jailers that he would profess to be a Catholic when taken before the Inquisition but would then escape to Curaçao and resume his life as a Jew. He offered to sell his soul to the devil in exchange for deliverance from prison.

In due course Pimienta was handed over to the Inquisition in Cartagena. Brought before the tribunal, he pleaded guilty and begged for mercy. After undergoing the public disgrace of marching in a procession of penitents while garbed in a *sambenito* (penitential garment), he was sentenced, at an *auto da fé* in the city's Dominican convent, to life imprisonment in a Mercedarian monastery in Spain. Soon thereafter, together with some other prisoners, he was embarked on the ship *Minora* for the transatlantic voyage, but it was only thanks to his guards that he ever got to Spain, because his fellow prisoners, driven to distraction by his constant ranting and raving, tried to throw him overboard.

When the *Minora* docked in Cadiz, Pimienta was taken in custody by the bishop and the city prefect, and the record of his trial was sent to the archives in Seville. Contrary to the terms of his sentence in Cartagena, and despite his vehement protestations, he was fettered and sent to a prison rather than a monastery. In prison, though, Pimienta was really in his element, and before long he and another inmate managed to break out. They left behind a note inviting anyone who was tired of life to try and catch them.

After parting from his fellow escapee, Pimienta turned himself in at a Mercedarian convent in Jerez. The monks extended him their full hospitality; he was allowed to participate in the choir and to make confession of sins every four days, but was not permitted to say Holy

Mass because he could not show the necessary permit.

From the monastery Pimienta wrote to a wealthy resident of Jerez and asked that he come see him. Since Pimienta later referred to this man as a Jew, he was probably a New Christian, and in all likelihood Pimienta saw him as a possible ally or patron, perhaps even imagining that he was a secret judaizer. This would explain why he included some Hebrew phrases remembered from his circumcision ceremony in the letter, but despite, or perhaps because of, this gesture, the man turned him down, replying that he did not understand Latin. Undaunted, Pimienta wrote to another Jerez "Jew," but this time he specified that the recipient should not ask for him at the monastery—instead he would be waiting somewhere in the street outside, and could be identified by the scar on his nose and by a long green ribbon on his wrist. When this letter went unanswered, Pimienta wrote to a third "Jew," promising to pay him 25 doubloons when they met, but this letter too was ignored.

Since there are no secrets in a monastery, the superiors soon found out about Pimienta's spate of letter writing and asked for an explanation. As always he had a ready answer. He wanted to get money from the Jerez Jews, he said, so that he could go back to Curaçao and kill his former Jewish associates there. He wanted revenge because they had caused all his troubles by circumcising him against his will, even though he had never wanted to become a Jew and had never converted in his heart. His superiors were apparently duped by this tale, since they dropped the matter and even began addressing him as Fray José.

Meanwhile, as if to underscore the veracity of his explanation, Pimienta wrote to the king and then to the duke of Veragues, asking for money for the same purpose. These two letters, which were never answered, had hardly been sent when he sat down to write another mis-sive, this time to the city prefect. In it he declared that he had never intended to abandon Judaism and convert to Jesus and was now more convinced than ever that the Law of Moses was true; in fact he was ready to give up his life for it and felt certain that he would gain a thousand lives in the flames at the stake. Before the prefect could respond, Pimienta slipped out of the monastery and made his way to Lisbon, where he hoped to book passage on a ship to London, Amsterdam, or Jamaica. When he proved unable to do so, he went to the Mercedarian monastery in Seville and asked the superior to hand him over to the Inquisition.

When Pimienta appeared before the tribunal in Seville, he was charged with heresy, apostasy, and conversion to Judaism. The case against him was overwhelming, but his defense attorney, evidently one of those people who think it possible to find a silver lining in the darkest cloud, tried to put a good face on the seemingly damning incidents just recounted. Maintaining that Pimienta's return to Catholicism was sincere, he described his plan to finance a vendetta against the Curaçao Jews with funds obtained from the Jerez Jews as commendable; pointed out that he could have waited in Lisbon for a ship to Amsterdam or could have escaped to Cadiz or Gibraltar but instead turned himself in voluntarily; and explained away the letter to the city prefect as a naive attempt to ensure that he would not be sent back to the monastery if captured after leaving there.

Not surprisingly, none of this impressed the judges, and they had Pimienta jailed. Visited in his cell by an official, Pimienta declared that he was a Jew and intended to remain one. When the visitor reported this conversation, Pimienta was brought before the tribunal again. He repeated the statement, capping it with an apt quotation from St. Paul: "Everyone who has himself circumcised is obliged to observe the entire law" (Galatians 5:3).

Pimienta's interrogation now focused on other aspects of Catholic doctrine. Asked to state his views in regard to the Holy Trinity, he replied that he believed in one God, the creator of heaven and earth, in accordance with Deuteronomy 32. Asked about the Blessed Virgin, he quoted Isaiah, "Who will tell his birth?", and then said that in his opinion the Virgin had never existed but that Jesus was a prophet worth following. He added that when he recited psalms each day in his cell, he omitted the *Gloria Patri*, the Catholic trinitarian doxology. Warned by his attorney that he would be burned at the stake if he persisted in his obstinacy, Pimienta replied that he wanted nothing else, since he was willing to die for the Law of Moses in order to obtain eternal life. Finally, when asked to sign the trial record, he refused, "because it is the Sabbath."

The tribunal found Pimienta guilty of heresy and conversion to Judaism, and sentenced him to be burned alive. He was given a three-month respite to reconsider. During this period learned clerics visited his cell every day to persuade him to recant, but when he remained adamant, the tribunal decided to proceed with the execution. On Monday, July 22, 1720, Pimienta was notified that he would be burned the

following Thursday in an *auto da fé* to be held in the Plaza de San Francisco. He seemed unmoved, but on Wednesday, July 24, he asked for a confessor, made a full confession, revoked his errors, and asked for a pardon. His excommunication was then lifted, and the next morning, the day of his execution, he received Holy Communion.

The *auto da fé* in which Pimienta and six other condemned persons were burned was the first such event in many years, and crowds of sensation-seekers turned out for the occasion, jamming the temporary galleries erected around the place of execution as Pimienta and the others were escorted into the Plaza by a group of priests. Dressed in priestly vestments, and holding a crucifix in his hand, Pimienta once again revoked his errors and confessed that he had been redeemed by the wounds of Jesus Christ. He then kneeled before Msgr. José de Esquibel, O.P., the bishop of Licopoli, who was presiding over the burnings in honor of the faith, and the bishop, moved to tears, removed his clerical vestments.

This ceremony completed, Pimienta was handed over to the secular arm with a request for merciful treatment in view of his repentance. In response, Alonso de los Rios, the functionary of the secular arm, declared that he would be garrotted before the burning. At this point a homily was read, but then, because it was midday and too hot to continue, the execution was postponed and Pimienta was taken back to his cell. According to the execution report, he lunched with a good appetite.

Between five and six in the afternoon Pimienta was taken back to the Plaza. While walking there he again displayed his repentance. When the procession reached the Plaza, the priests embraced Pimienta, and he in turn, in a loud voice, asked to be forgiven for the bad example he had set and for the disrepute he had cast on his order and on the priesthood. After a final confession of faith in Jesus Christ and one last declaration that he believed in the teachings of Mother Church, Pimienta was garrotted. His corpse, with a paper crown on its head as a symbol of disgrace, was tied to the stake and burned.

In the aftermath of his strange life, we are told that numerous Holy Masses were ordered for the rest of his soul, and that days of fasting were observed for the same purpose in many monasteries and nunneries.

thor of The Jews and St. Eustatius and History of St. Maarten and St. Martin. Dr. Hartog now lives in Salzburg, Austria.

Notes

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1. R. Gottheil, "Fray Joseph Díaz Pimienta, alias Abraham Pimienta," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 9 (1901); E. N. Adler, *Auto de Fé and Jew* (London, 1908), pp. 172-180. The case is also mentioned in C. de Bethencourt, "Notes on the Spanish and Portuguese Jews in the U.S., Guiana, and the Dutch and British West Indies during the 17th and 18th Centuries," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 29 (1925): 21-25, and is given a few words or paragraphs in several other works, although none of these provide any dates not found in the works cited in this note or in note 2.

2. My primary source for the account in this article is *Relación de el autodafee celebrado en el real Convento de San Pablo, Orden de Predicadores* (Manuscript section, British Library [formerly British Museum], London, inv. 4071.1.4.9). See also J. Hartog, *Curaçao* (Aruba, 1961), 1:411.