

HISTORY OF A CONVENT AND A GREAT HISTORICAL EVENT

To understand its history and the importance of such a construction, we must first talk about the Franciscan Order. Within this order, there was a group of friars who, for years, had advocated ideas of spiritual renewal. This group of friars were known as the “Discalced” (or barefoot) and were characterized by their austerity, sacrifices, and extreme penance, through which they sought to imitate the life of Christ in order to achieve spiritual perfection and divine grace. Their ideas not only led, over time, to a restructuring within the order, but also quickly spread to other religious orders and sectors of the Church, unsettling the clergy of the late 15th century, which had reached a high degree of relaxation and corruption.



Three of these friars, tired of being treated and persecuted as heretics, decided to settle in a place famous at the time for its devotion and pilgrimages. This place was the hermitage of Our Lady of Berrocal, where in the year 1500, Fray Martín de Valencia, Fray Pedro Mártir, and Fray Juan Suárez lived as hermits. The lords of Belvís, Don Francisco de Monroy and his first wife, Doña Francisca Enríquez, donated a plot of land to the friars and covered the construction costs of what would become the future convent. The construction began in 1505 and was completed in 1509. Fray Martín de Valencia was appointed as the first vicar of the house; the number of friars was limited to eight; their clothing was regulated; and it was established that they would walk barefoot, would not ask for wine or fish, would not receive gold, silk, or silver, and would not accept Mass offerings.

THE TWELVE APOSTLES OF MEXICO



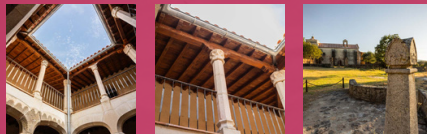
Fray Martín would go on to play a key role in one of the most significant events for this convent, for the order, and for the history of Extremadura. We refer to the expedition and evangelization of New Spain. In 1519, Hernán Cortés landed on the shores of Yucatán and, horrified by what he saw and being a deeply religious man, urgently requested that King Charles V initiate the evangelization of those lands. It was in 1523 that it was decided the Franciscans from the province of San Gabriel—to which these Discalced friars belonged—would be the ones to go to New Spain. Our twelve friars departed from the convent in November of 1523 and arrived in Mexico on May 13, 1524. These twelve would go down in history as the TWELVE APOSTLES OF MEXICO. There, they founded cities, convents, and schools, undertaking an important educational and spiritual mission—particularly in the city of Huejotzingo, which became a sister city of our municipality in 1991.

THE STORY OF A RESTORATION. THE CONVENT TODAY

Following the official abandonment of the Convent of San Francisco by Royal Decree on July 25, 1835, looting, the forces of nature, and neglect took their toll, leaving behind only the evidence of its ruins.

In October 1986, the congress “Franciscans from Extremadura in the New World” was held in Guadalupe, to which the municipal authorities of the town of Belvís de Monroy were invited. The name of their convent, “del Berrocal,” was mentioned repeatedly due to its connection with the first evangelizing mission in Mexican territory, known as the Twelve Apostles of Mexico.

From that point on, the historical memory of that institution was recovered for both Belvís and Extremadura. The building became public property, and in early March 1991, restoration work began on the ruins, based on an official project divided into five stages. The first phase consisted of clearing and cleaning the entire complex, as well as the complete reconstruction of the church and the sacristy.



These initial works were undertaken on two fronts. In addition to the construction company contracted by the Regional Government of Extremadura, which owned the building, the Belvís de Monroy Town Council used the restoration effort as an opportunity to join the workshop-schools program. This led to the establishment of the San Francisco I Workshop School (1991–1994), which included four training modules (gardening, masonry, stonework, and blacksmithing). Its students and instructors carried out various tasks such as clearing rubble, cleaning the ruins, improving the surroundings, and building or restoring elements like crosses, iron grilles, and lamps.

The main portion of the work was carried out by a private company not specialized in such restorations and followed the guidelines of an aggressive project that was not very respectful of the preserved remains or known historical information. At the time, reconstruction was prioritized over proper restoration. Nevertheless, the work was successfully completed, and the church, along with the sacristy, was rehabilitated.

The second phase focused on the complete reconstruction of the inner cloister—undoubtedly the most attractive, significant, and delicate feature of the entire complex. This task was carried out entirely by the staff of the San Francisco II Workshop School (1995–1997), which incorporated a carpentry module.



In 2024, the Yuste Foundation and the Royal Academy of Letters and Arts of Extremadura, in close collaboration with the Belvís de Monroy Town Council, commemorated the 500th anniversary of the journey of the Twelve Apostles, who departed from Belvís de Monroy toward Mexican lands. The occasion was marked by the international congress “The Franciscans in Hispanic America: Reassessment and Interpretation of the Legacy of the Twelve Apostles of Mexico”, held from October 21 to 26 in Guadalupe, Cáceres, and Belvís de Monroy.