An Account of Tenochtitlán by a Spanish Soldier

When they first arrived, Hernán Cortés and his men spent several days with the Aztec emperor Moctezuma (spelled Montezuma here) in the capital city of Tenochtitlán. Moctezuma welcomed Cortés's group and even took them to the top of the great temple to view the splendor of the city. Later, relations grew strained after Cortés criticized the Aztecs' religion. In this excerpt, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, one of Cortés's soldiers, describes his group's experiences before and after relations deteriorated. As you read, think about the emotions these men felt once knew they had angered Montezuma. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.

Tenochtitlán

When we saw so all those cities and villages built in the water, and other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading toward [Tenochtitlán], we were astounded. . . . It was all so wonderful that I do not know how to describe this first glimpse of things never heard of, seen or dreamed of before.

We turned back to the great market and the swarm of people buying and selling. The mere murmur of their voices was loud enough to be heard more than three miles away. Some of our soldiers who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, Rome, and all over Italy, said that they had never seen a market so well laid out, so large, so orderly, and so filled with people. . . .

Then Cortés said to Montezuma, "Your Highness is indeed a great prince, and it has delighted us to see your cities. Now that we are here in your temple, will you show us your gods?"

Montezuma . . . bade us enter a small tower room, a kind of hall where there were two altars with very richly painted planks on the ceiling. On each altar there were two giant figures, their bodies very tall and stout. The first one, to the right, they said was Chicxulub, their god of war. It had a very broad face with monstrous, horrible eyes. . . . The body was circled with great snakes made of gold and precious stones, and in one hand he held a bow and in the other some arrows. . . . There were braziers [urns] with . . . incense, and they were burning in them the hearts of three Indians they had sacrificed that day . . .

Our captain said to Montezuma, half laughingly, "Lord Montezuma, I do not understand how such a such a great prince and wise man as yourself can have failed to come to the conclusion that these idols of yours are not gods, but evil things . . .

. . . Montezuma replied with annoyance, " . . . [If] I had thought that you would so insult my gods, I would not have shown them to you . . ."

When our captain heard this and saw how changed Montezuma was, he didn’t argue with him any more . . .

Montezuma agreed, but he said that before he left he had to pray and make certain offerings to atone for . . . permitting us to . . . see his gods, and for being the cause of the dishonor that we had done them by speaking ill of them.

Cortés said, "If it is really like that, forgive me sir."


causeway - a raised bed above a lake or ocean
swarm - a mass
bade - to express or offer
stout - heavy
atone - to ask for forgiveness of one's sins

Questions

1. Why would Cortés ask Moctezuma, "Will you show us your gods?"
2. What cases relations between the Spanish and Moctezuma to deteriorate?
3. What assumptions do you think Cortés and his men have about the religion and beliefs of the Aztecs?