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Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (1499-1590) directed the composition of an encyclopaedic work on the world of the Nahuas, *Universal History of the Things of New Spain* (ca. 1577-1579), for which he has received the title of pioneering ethnographer and anthropologist of colonial Mexico. Contextualizing Sahagún and this work in sixteenth-century Spain and America, this study presents him as a cultural translator who reconceptualized the Nahua world according to his own Euro-Christian categorization of knowledge for evangelization purposes. Sahagún's so-called ethnographic method of data collection is discussed from the perspective of its reliance on confessional and inquisitorial techniques. *Universal History of the Things of New Spain* is also revisited as a doctrinal reference text that resembles classical and medieval encyclopaedias deployed by preachers for homiletic purposes, and which contains useful material for the confessors who administered the sacrament to Nahua penitents.