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Salinas'

Modernization Extends to the Church

The second visit of Pope John Paul II to Mexico brought to light an old discussion on a theme which traditionally has caused polemics in Mexican politics: the relations between State and Church, formally non-existent since President Benito Juárez broke the diplomatic relationship in 1859.

Carol Wojtila encountered an economically polarized Mexico which is facing rocky social roads - as he expressed himself in many speeches - and a nation which continues to be largely Catholic. But he also found a government determined to apply a modernization policy without which perhaps the operating changes in the State's relations with the Church could not be explained.

The Pope's visit cannot be analyzed more than in terms of the gains for himself, as representative of the Vatican, and for the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the Mexican government. There is an important absence in this trilogy: the majority of the Mexican nation, in whose name, paradoxically, all these meetings and agreements are made. In these terms, the question of the State and Church is addressed by Miguel Concha, university professor in the Department of Political Science of the UNAM, and by Miguel Basáñez, director of the Center for Public Opinion Studies, interviewed for *Voices* by Sara Alatorre.

INTERVIEW WITH MIGUEL CONCHA

What is your opinion about what is occurring between the State and the Church?

It is not the first time during the second half of this century, with different goals and even with contradictions, that this rapprochement is sought between some government sectors and the upper part of the hierarchy of the ecclesiastic community, civil society and even some political organisms. The candidates for president of the Institutional Revolutionary Party in 1970, 1976, and 1982, had the initiative to seek out, through their agents, the bishops of the dioceses where their campaigns were taking place in order to dialogue with them. On June 9, 1970, a sector of the Cuernavaca church gave to the ex-President Luis Echeverría Álvarez, the so-called Anenecuilco Paper, signed by the bishop Sergio Méndez Arceo, his Presbyterial Board and the secular apostolic organizations of the diocese. In this paper, the theme of State and Church relations was directly treated with a theological and renovated pastoral tone and a ponderous and objective historical judgement, and it was deemed convenient to openly and maturely elucidate



these issues in order to benefit the nation. To me, it does not seem either just or correct that in these recent times that paper is not duly considered. The document characterizes the legal situation of the Church as an "exceptional regime", and, without denying the common responsibility of Church action, judges the public relations between both institutions as "abusive-tolerant".

Is this rapprochement sponsored also by Christians who participate in popular movements?

Some groups of Christians tied to popular movements or leftist parties have thought it convenient to debate this problem openly and above all analyze it objectively from different perspectives, clearly distinguishing what would be a legal survey of the civil rights of religious ministers and the very status of religious institutions, of the recognition of the Vatican as the Holy See and therefore with jurisdiction within the Catholic Church in Mexico on the one hand, and on the other, the issue of State relations and the maintenance of diplomatic relations with the Vatican. In practice, the political and ecclesiastical implications of establishing these relations are generally feared in the country.

Does this imply that the principle of separation of State and Church is placed in doubt?

None of the political forces that until now have participated in the debate have placed in doubt the principle of the separation of the State and the Church and the lay character of the former, which should be absolutely observed not only in theory but above all, in practice, in order to avoid known opportunistic acts, should they be the Church over the State or vice versa. It is important to remember that since 1979, year of the first visit by Pope John Paul II to Mexico, a shift in the treatment of this theme has been observed, which many explain as due to the different political and ecclesiastical contexts of this decade, which in itself necessarily imposes a greater care in analysis.

Have Mexican bishops been influenced by the Vatican in order to sponsor the rapprochement with the State?

Previously it was the Mexican bishops who seemed to take the initiative in this affair, without counting on at least the veiled support of the Apostolic Delegation, which represents the authority of the Pope in the heart of the Catholic church in Mexico. Today it is well-known that Monseigneur Jeronimo Prigione, apostolic delegate since 1979, strongly sponsors legal changes in this respect.

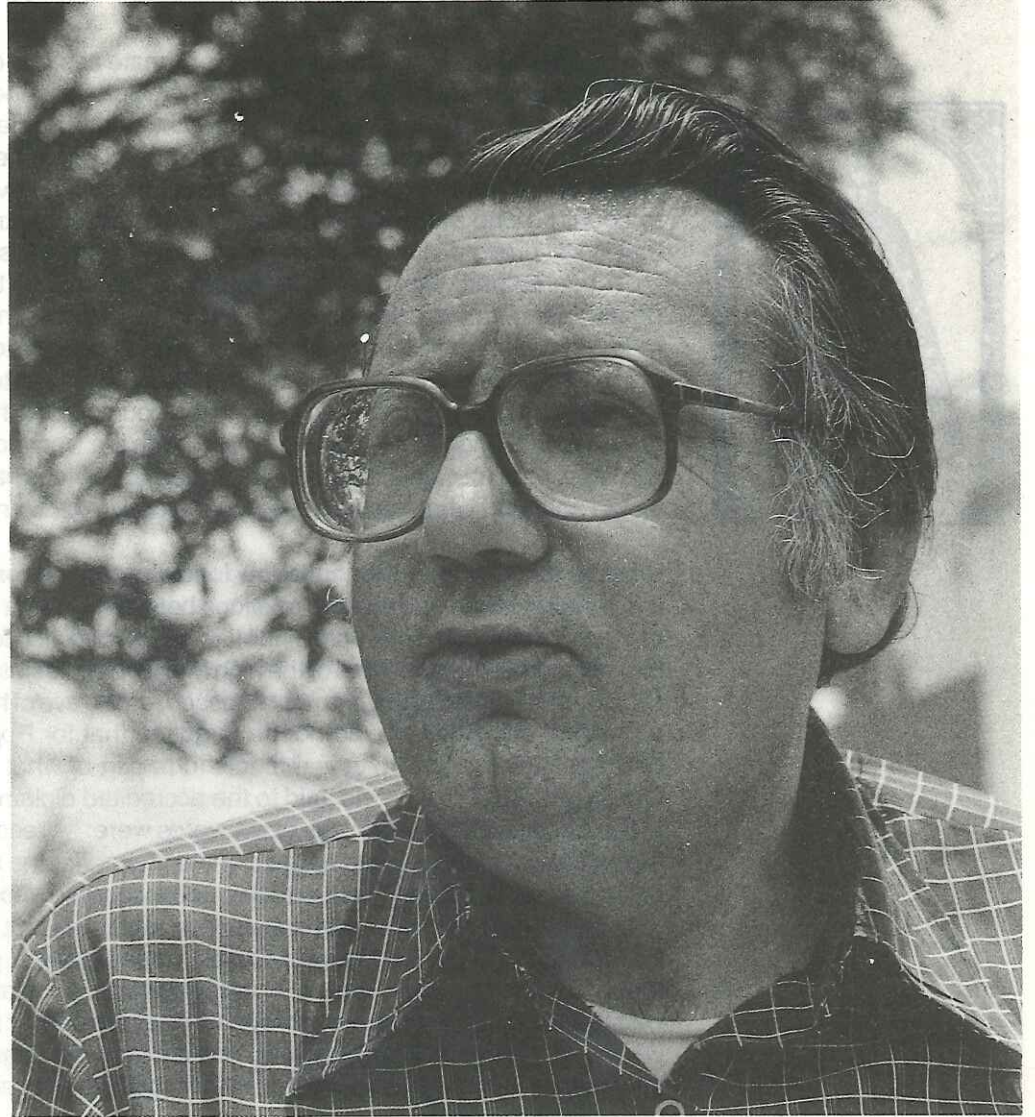
Is this rapprochement related to the economic and political situation presently facing the country?

As I have said, since 1979, and particularly since 1982, the ecclesiastic, international and national political contexts are very different. Cardinal Ernesto Corripio expressed during the XXX assembly of the Mexican Episcopal Conference in November 1982, that "the situation in the country looks greatly conflictive, challenging and problematic". Today we can see the change in the developmental model implemented by the Salinas government and the great social cost which this has meant for the majority sectors of the country in terms of unemployment, underemployment, scarcity, loss of the workers' buying power, the reduction and loss of quality in social services, etcetera.

But is this really a worry of the Mexican bishops?

It does not require great astuteness to discover a search for negotiation and mutual support between State and Church that, nevertheless, leaves the great majority of the Mexican nation out of their considerations. In his first statement after becoming President of the Mexican Episcopal Conference, the archbishop of Xalapa, Monseigneur Sergio Obeso Rivera referred to this: "The Church will use all its moral power to change the situation in Mexico", and concretely, "to seek to reform the Constitution if it is necessary in order to obtain the legal status of the Church", and specifically that in the Church-State relations "there has been mutual aggression and poor treatment, even though it is not possible to say that the representatives on both sides have been totally closed-minded".





Miguel Concha. Photo by Alejandra Novoa.

Nevertheless, even though it is publicly supposed with relative frequency that the Apostolic Delegate and important bishops discreetly meet with federal authorities of equal importance of the previous administration, particularly in important moments such as the state elections, the government does not openly and officially react to the demands of the hierarchy.

For this reason many analysts have strongly called attention to the official presence of the Apostolic Delegate, of the president of the Mexican Episcopal Conference and other high dignitaries of the Catholic church in Mexico, at the inauguration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari on December 1, 1988. This was questioned by important citizens' groups, and above all the new President's explicit mention of the Church in the context of "modernization" and "agreement between it and the actual administration".

Then, what is the profit derived by both institutions in this rapprochement?

Besides considering questions of principle, which perhaps should be treated objectively in a different way and in another climate, for some it is necessary to take into account the possible motivations of both sides, that in the case of the government could be to answer, for example, the demands for a recognized space formulated by the hierarchy. On the other hand, Church intervention in electoral processes at the regional level, that in many instances coincided with the positions of some sector of the opposition, implied greater difficulties for the government in negotiating the situation. Also, the fact that the traditional corporate apparatus of the system was losing relevance and efficiency, led



the governing power group to try and legitimate itself by calling together and activating social subjects who until now were not participants in the corporate pact, as would be the case of the high ecclesiastical hierarchy and of some business sectors, that would look favorably on such participation. We can observe here an attempt to improve the image of the government through actions that would have ample popular support and to count on one more ally in the struggle for social control, in spite of the Jacobinism that is still present in some official sectors and some leftist organizations.

In counterpart, the Church hierarchy, conscious of the weakness of the present government, would seek on one hand to respond to the actual Vatican pressure to recover larger spaces of social influence and capacity to dialogue with governments; and on the other hand, to respond with greater advantage to the secularization processes evident particularly in the large cities of the country, and that it continues to consider the greatest challenge of its pastoral action. With it a "reconciliation with history" would be possible, as an ecclesiastical scholar of these questions has considered, and the Church would abandon what has been deemed "a dark legal corner".

What is the status of this question following the second visit of the Pope?

It is a secret for no one that the relations between Church and State in Mexico were one of the principal worries of John Paul II in his second visit to our country, even though he himself, numerous speakers of the high Mexican ecclesiastical hierarchy and even some representatives of the government stressed, on the eve of his visit, that this was eminently a pastoral act. But it should not be forgotten that for Pope John Paul II, the relations between states and with governments form part of what he calls his pastoral mission. One proof of this is what he said to the accredited diplomatic body in Mexico on May 8 in the Apostolic Delegation; his exact words were: "A recent example of the holy See to this vocation of service and request of the church for the spiritual and social well-being of the people has been given with this noble country, Mexico".

"I have received with great satisfaction the significant and important gesture of the President of the United Mexican States, to designate a personal and permanent correspondent to the Holy See, to which praiseworthy initiative the Holy See has replied with the designation of its own personal correspondent. It is the request for the supreme values of peace, solidarity among nations and the dignity of human beings, which induces the Holy See to be present also in the field of international relations where they constantly take form."

Thus it would be disorienting to consider the relations between the Pope and the governments of the world as a purely politically affair that has no relation with the pastoral mission. The concept held by Pope John Paul II is exactly the opposite of this. Another proof of this can be found in the speech he gave to the bishops of Mexico on May 12 in which, while speaking of the value crisis today affecting institutions such as the family or other determinant sectors of the population such as youth, he said that Mexico offers motives of well-founded hope for a fruitful and cordial understanding with the civil authorities, with a view to the straight development of social life and the continuance of the common good for all Mexicans. For this reason the Pope was seen to be profoundly pleased at the presence of President Salinas at the airport to welcome him, at the more than one hour long interview they had in the official residence of Los Pinos, and on different occasions during his visit he spoke with particular satisfaction of this new situation. What then has remained in Mexico following the Papal visit, has been the naming of the special presidential representative to Pope John Paul II, Agustín Téllez Cruces, and the official designation of the apostolic delegate as the Pope's personal representative to President Salinas. If this is to progress further, we shall see it as the situation develops.



And what about the Mexican people in all of this?

Well, that is the big question: the role that the majority of Mexicans are to play in all these negotiations, in all these agreements, in all these meetings, dialogues, discussions, and above all when these are proposed in the context of modernization and democratization of the society. For this reason, I myself began to favor several months ago an open, participative, plural, non-opportunistic proposal neither in favor of the church toward the State or vice versa, through some instance that could be a multidisciplinary and plural

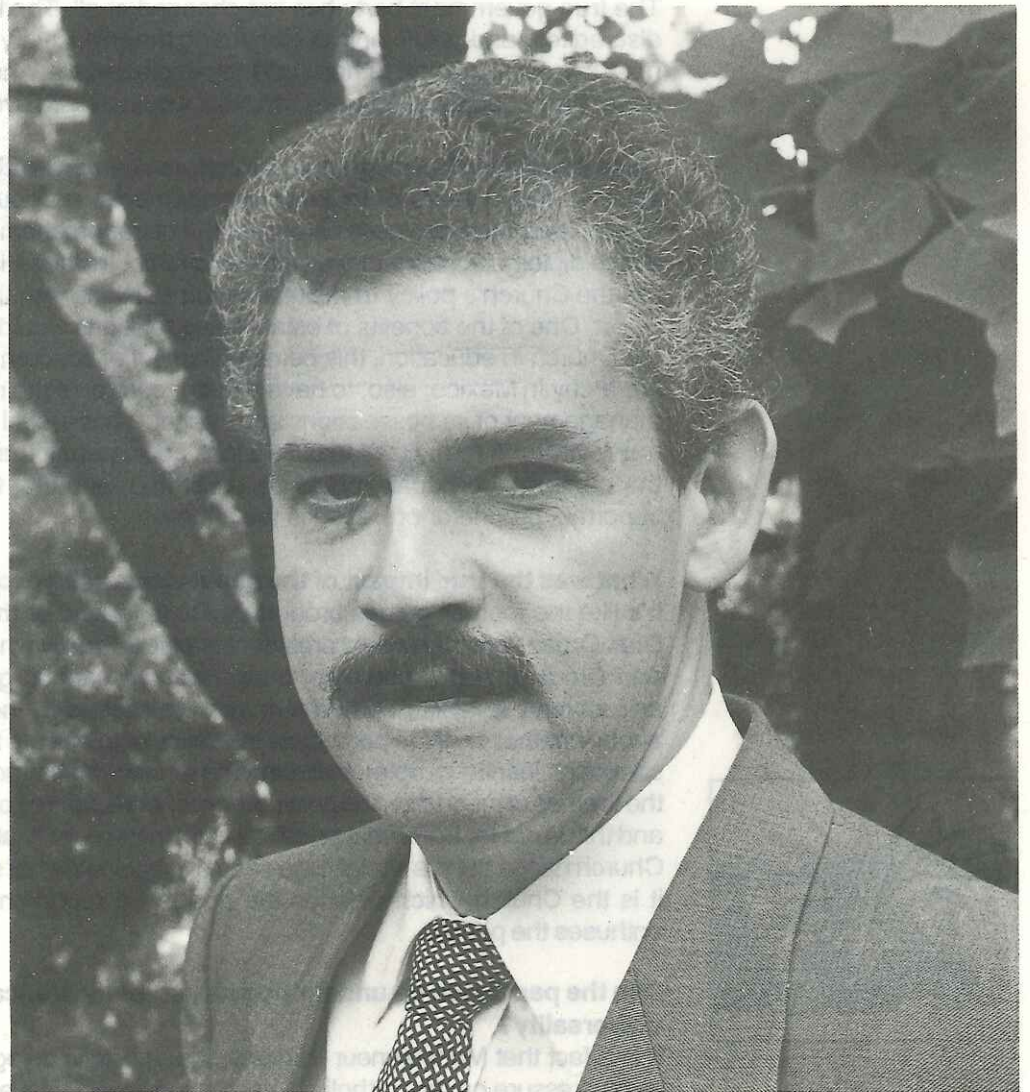
commission recognized by both institutions, that in an open way and following the sentiment of the different sectors of the population, would propose in a new climate the solution to this problem, analyzing its historical, philosophical, sociological, political, ethical and legal aspects.

That neither the government nor the high ecclesiastical hierarchy should assume that they automatically represent the people of Mexico, who have not yet been duly considered and consulted in regard to this.

INTERVIEW WITH MIGUEL BASAÑEZ

What would the Mexican government gain with a rapprochement between the Church and the State?

For the government, the rapprochement with the Church forms part of a more general framework. The government is modifying the system of things that used to exist: in particular in the economy, in its relations with the United States, and its power relations with other parties. These changes also modify the bases of support of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Already the governing party's three main support organizations, the unions (CTM), peasants (CNC) and the group called "popular" (CNOP), do not work, and so the government has to seek to reconstitute its alliances. In this search for new allies, the middle class and the Church are very important. The PRI has gradually



Miguel Basáñez. Photo by Gerardo Hellion.



been losing its ability to attract members, and it is polarizing the poorest strata towards the left and the middle sectors to the right.

In this context, a project is forming and tending to the evolution of the PRI towards the formation of new middle-of-the road parties, that represent what it has been during all its history, in other words, a coalition of forces that have been able to articulate comfortably within the party, something which gets harder and harder. So, I believe that the country is ripe to give birth to two very similar parties, one slightly leaning toward the promotion of the economy and the other to social necessities. In this scheme, if the PRI gives birth to these two parties, the one which will attract the middle classes needs the support of the Church. Thus, if the ruling group, which really has the hegemony within the PRI, achieves a peaceful transition, it will be a great success because it will enable some members of the PRI, under another name, to attract even a large part of the National Action Party (PAN), of the strong businessmen, of the middle classes and the Church; and, another part of the PRI, along with the Authentic Mexican Revolutionary Party (PARM), the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) and the unions, will form the other party, in an overall scheme of social democracy, or social democracy of parties, whose differences of hue will be almost imperceptible. Thus, the visit of the Pope and the rapprochement with the Church become extremely fundamental to the formation of this new party which will attract the middle classes, which are very important for the present administration.

But if the public opinion polls indicate that the people trust the Church more than they trust the government...?

The true government party has not changed at all. The PRI becomes more and more discredited, and public opinion regarding the PRI is very negative, even though this is not a correct image but rather what the people believe. And to change this image it would have to be changed effectively, and this would be achieved with the party system.

What does the Church gain in the rapprochement with the State?

After so many years of informal arrangements, no doubt the relationships between Church and State are quite established. The rapprochement is the proposition of a new active diplomatic policy of the Catholic church. In itself it is a proposition, in as much as it is the Church's policy to maintain good relations with the states. Mexico is added to its list. One of the benefits of establishing relations would constitute the participation of the Church in education, this being an aspect of concern for much of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Mexico; also, to have a better control of the market and an opening for the management of its possessions and capital, whose legal status has been uncertain for many years. A formalization of relations could permit that its patrimonial rights, now in the name of individuals, could be confirmed, and that the clergy could again be an important proprietor of wealth in the country.

What was the true impact of the papal visit on the people?

It's like the football games brought by De la Madrid or the Olympic games brought by Díaz Ordaz when they held presidential office. Finally what is behind all of this is bread and circus; it has a perverse impact that we cannot ignore. The other thing is that undoubtedly it injects enthusiasm into the sectors of the population that had doubts about whether or not to participate in politics or to affiliate to a political party. The Pope's speeches inspire people - including the priests - to be more critical of politicians, since the themes of inequality, the political errors, were pointed out by the Pope in his speeches and this is not far from what priests preach in the cult. That such a reputable actor as the Church hangs out the social flags seems to be somewhat spectacularly box office, since it is the Church which defends the poor, who represent 65% of the population; this enthuses the people.



Can the papal visit be understood as part of the Vatican strategy to recover universality?

It is a fact that Monseigneur Prigione, the apostolic delegate of the Vatican, exercises great pressure on the Catholic hierarchy in Mexico. Nevertheless, the Mexican bishops tread carefully around the theme of re-establishing the relations between our country

and the Vatican. But the consequence of this has been that the negotiations have been conducted almost exclusively between Prigione and the President, and now, with the personal representative of the President, Agustín Téllez Cruces. But the Mexican hierarchy seems to feel more enthusiasm for constitutional reforms than for establishing diplomatic relations.

Is it possible to speak of "high political" negotiation between the government and ecclesiastical authorities, beyond the sentiments of all of Mexican society?

What the tests of world opinion are saying is that there is an advance toward postmaterialism, a return to the so-called profound values of the human being, to spiritualism, values considered to be beyond the material, and this lends new foundations to religion in general. Also, it becomes clearer that the Church is an agent which forms a very important part of the diffusion of values. This new papal visit is not different from the role that the Catholic church has played since the Conquest. The papal speech was one of a conqueror before the set table. Now the evangelical word has been dispensed with and the cross of a local virgin has been added. ■