

## RELIGIOUS FAITHS IN MEXICO

After the Spanish Conquest in the 16th century, the Catholic religion became an essential part of our culture. The influence of the representatives of the Catholic Church on the population, the parts they played in the principal historic events that have shaped the country, their economic power and even their political power, the number of believers, all of these have given this religion predominance over others. Nevertheless, these characteristics are not sufficient to warrant calling Mexico a Catholic country today. The country's regional, cultural and geographic diversity have permitted the development of an array of religions including Spiritualism and Protestant beliefs, many of the second being of North American origin. If we add to this situation the fact that the Catholic religion itself contains both official, dominant tendencies as well as important minority tendencies such as liberation theology, we can discern a multi-religious mosaic which cannot be ignored as a vital characteristic of modern Mexico. In this context of minority and majority religious groups which search for acceptance among the Mexican people, the rapprochement of the Catholic Church and the Mexican State occurs, favored by the naming of a presidential representative to the Vatican and the recent papal visit. *Voices* presents an historical review of Church - State relations and examines the growing importance of minority religions.

# CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS IN MEXICO

Luis Ramos

In Latin countries, religion is not an esthetic experience which exclusively concerns the individual's inner self, therefore the religious question tends to have a prominent place in their respective histories. Mexico is no exception and although it has a coherent and homogeneous legislative history, the space reserved for the individual and collective religious experience has not always been valued in the same way, so that as a rule the country has preferred to approach the solution of this problem with caution, parting from the principle of the separation of Church and State. During the nineteenth and part of the twentieth century the fundamental idea has been the struggle against the manipulation of religion by the oligarchy.

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### 1810: An Independent Nation

When the colony of New Spain became the independent State of Mexico, in 1821, it lost the statute which ruled its relations with the Vatican, because the only relations which were recognized by the Holy See were those which had been established with the Spanish crown. The Iturbide Empire sought an extension by the Vatican of the Royal Trust which permitted the Spanish sovereign to choose candidates for ecclesiastic posts. However, this trust was not conceded to the new nation, whose independence was not immediately recognized.

The Vatican maintained its relations with the Spanish crown intact, in that it did not recognize the colonies which had declared their independence. Therefore, the question of the Royal Trust was left unanswered and it was impossible to name ecclesiastic authorities.





The new relationship: Pope John Paul II and President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Photo by Luis Humberto González.

### **The Question of the Royal Trust**

The history of the efforts of independent Mexico to establish relations with the Vatican began with a petition made by the Iturbide regime to obtain a trust similar to that of the Spanish crown. This was not attained because of the fall of the Iturbide Empire and execution of the emperor.

After overcoming the obstacle of an unfortunate letter which Pope Leo XII sent in 1824 to the Latin American colonies urging them to be obedient to the very Catholic King Fernando IV, which caused great consternation in Mexico, relations between Guadalupe Victoria and the Vatican were very good ones.

Efforts were made to obtain diplomatic relations that would make explicit mention of the separation of Church and State. The negotiations were not easy but in the end they produced the acceptance by the Vatican of Francisco Pablo Vásquez, canon of the Cathedral of Puebla, as the representative of the Mexican Republic. Pope Pius VIII refused to name bishops to the Republic and it was his successor, Gregory XVI who in 1831 named the first six bishops of independent Mexico.

Rome was not in a position to recognize the independence of Mexico, given the close relations which tied

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it to the interests of Spain. This prevented the arrival of the diplomatic minister sent by the government of Victoria as an official envoy as well as hindering agreements with the Vatican.

Relations were tense and unstable, at times due to the Vatican and at times due to the Mexican government which was inclined to establish a national church similar to that of Galicia or France. This was something Rome did not want to hear about.

From independence onwards, the ideas of the revolution of 1789 became ever more popular in Mexico. The Church, whose wealth and hegemony had been criticized by some independent clergy, came under the scrutiny of the liberal and republican regime. This was a church which tolerated worse things of the Europeans than of the Americans, who were always considered to be "under age".

### **Towards Mexican Liberalism**

The regime of General Antonio López de Santa Anna put an end to a series of provisional, short-lived governments. The liberal ideals of the expropriation of Church property, the freedom of religion for other faiths, and the secularization of education were the primary goals of a republic which endeavored to be enlightened and modern. The Santa Anna government was not a conservative one, and favored a strong clergy, in a comfortable economic situation, understood to be the mortar which held the bricks of the nation together. But the liberal ideas of José María Luis Mora and Melchor Ocampo had obtained wide acceptance by then, and attacks on the clergy by intellectuals and the educated classes multiplied.

In 1833 the vice-president Valentin Gómez Farías created legislation which secularized education, made the clergy an appendix of the government, and suppressed the male and female religious orders. In reality, these laws were short-lived and not only did Gómez Farías fall from power but the very post of vice-president was abolished by Santa Anna. In the era of Antonio López de Santa Anna, around 1855, a reform which had been announced at the end of the past century was enforced. The Jesuits returned and Saint Gregory's College was reopened; many properties which the laws of 1833 had expropriated were returned to their former religious owners.

But liberal ideas were already part of the values of many citizens and the Church began to feel the effects of a wave of secularization which would irreversibly strip it of the



properties necessary to continue ecclesiastic work in the customary manner.

It must be noted that since 1851 the ecclesiastic laws had shown a liberal tendency towards which the most important politicians wished to see the country lean. The relations between Church and State became ever more similar to those of France and Austria, in spite of the resistance of the Church, expressed repeatedly. Meanwhile, the conservatives were preparing the imposition of a monarchy.

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#### The Constitution of 1857

In 1854 with the creation of the Ayutla Plan the panorama changed completely for the Church. The conservatives had lost the battle and Juan N. Alvarez took power, decreed laws which took away the political rights of the clergy and ended all the ecclesiastic exemptions. The Church suffered its first exclusion from national life, or to say it another way, it faced a new situation in a liberal republic where it did not have privileges. This situation created problems for which the Church did not have a solution; a Church in an enlightened nation had not yet been imagined.

Juan N. Alvarez, Melchor Ocampo, Benito Juárez and Guillermo Prieto put together their intelligence and motivation to give the country the liberal institutions which the progress of the nation required in 1855; the formation of this group was fortuitous and short-lived, although it was decisive in the long run.

However, these liberal institutions included the suppression of all ecclesiastic exemptions, which affected many interests; the clergy of Puebla and in particular those from Acapoaxtla took up arms and the city of Puebla followed their example.

They faced the arms of both the conservatives and the liberals. Ignacio Comonfort placed the church property of the rebels under government control and forced them to pay the costs of the repression. The bishop of Puebla, D. Pelagio Antonio de Labastida y Dávalos criticized these events mildly, but a sermon of his did not appeal to the authorities in the capital of the republic and he was exiled.

On February 5th, 1857, the Constitution was proclaimed, a fundamental piece of legislation which took many sessions to create and which was fought over both within and outside the Congress. The fundamental idea was that the State was above the Church and the Church

existed within the State and therefore the latter was responsible for controlling the former. All Mexican citizens were invited to swear loyalty to the Constitution, including the bishops, who refused to do so because they thought that the Church, being a divine institution, should not be subject to laws which would hurt its interests. The bishops of Mexico City, Michoacán, Linares, Guadalajara and San Luis Potosí wrote a letter denouncing persecution of the Church.

It was on this occasion that Benito Juárez accused the Church of fostering civil war and of disobeying the civil authority.

The conflict worsened with the nationalization of Church property and with the destruction of churches, church buildings and colonial monuments. Pope Pius IX denounced the persecution of the Church in Mexico. With the rise of President Zuloaga to power and the creation of the Tacubaya Plan, the President sent a missive to the Pope asking for the establishment of a new situation which would disregard the past history of persecution and bitterness. It was a petition for formal relations with the Vatican.

But Juárez, who governed from Veracruz, passed a law in opposition to these efforts, specifying the withdrawal of the Mexican representative to the Vatican. We have already mentioned that there were no formal, mutual diplomatic relations with the Holy See, but unofficial relations, without the use of the title of ambassador, had been maintained almost without interruption.

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**The victorious entrance of Benito Juárez into Mexico in 1861 resulted in the expulsion of the bishops who had supported the reactionary cause**

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#### The Reform Legislation

In July of 1859, in order to cement the independence of the State in relation to the Church, the unofficial representative was withdrawn with the argument that there were actually very few diplomatic and commercial relations which tied the Mexican Republic to the Pope as sovereign of the papal states. In reality the Mexican representation, due to the differences with the liberal government, was almost completely inactive, which motivated the Minister of Foreign Relations, Melchor Ocampo, to send the order to London for the suspension of representation and the return of the archives to the Mexican Republic. Although there were no formal, mutual diplomatic relations involving ambassadors, for Juárez it was a question of principles and a manner of emphasizing the change which the Church underwent in relation to the liberal republic, that is, the new space it was assigned.



The armed conflict between liberals and conservatives made the establishment of relations with the Vatican even more difficult. The victorious entrance of Benito Juárez into Mexico on January 11, 1861 resulted in the expulsion of the bishops who had supported the reactionary cause and of the Apostolic Delegate Luigi Clementi. The departure of the bishops was extremely embarrassing because the most frenzied onlookers threw stones at them and they had to take refuge in the French consulate, in the houses of foreign businessmen and eventually in the fort of San Juan de Ulua.

**Almost an Empire**

With the people tired of war and violence of all kinds, the French invasion of Mexico, with a political situation favorable for the conservatives, led to the imposition of an archduke, dressed as an emperor. Most of the bishops favored this radical change in government because they expected the reestablishment of the previous situation. However, Maximilian was Catholic but not conservative, and those who supported him were disappointed because no one in the Mexican "court" wanted to turn the clock back, or at least not if it involved returning property seized from the clergy. The very bishops who had participated in the negotiations that brought the archduke to Mexico were left bewildered by the results. The Archbishop of Mexico, D. Pelagio Antonio de Labastida y Dávalos, who was a member of the Regency established by the French army before the Emperor arrived, had to

resign when he realized that the Church was not going to recuperate its previous properties and power. Maximilian, nevertheless, wanted relations with the Vatican like those which had existed under the Bourbon Kings.

Pius IX, in a show of benevolence towards the new regime which proposed a reform of the Mexican Church, granted an Apostolic Nuncio, Monsignor Francisco Meglia, in response to the arrival of Mexican ministers who had been sent to the Holy See. For the first time the relations between the Church and Mexico were formalized; unfortunately this occurred under a foreign prince and a regime that was only maintained by the threat of force imposed by the armed invaders. The emperor intended to impose a liberal resolution upon the nuncio consisting of nine points. Since the nuncio refused to accept the imperial proposal, his political and diplomatic validity was revoked and he was forced to leave the country suddenly and without formalities. The nuncio resigned and left Mexico with all the personnel from the nunciature in the end of April of 1865. Relations were not discontinued because Maximilian sent a commission to try to mend the damage, but they were never reestablished with formal ambassadors from that time onwards.

Maximilian's fall and execution in 1867, and the return of Benito Juárez to the presidency, created a very difficult situation for the Church, that is to say for the Ecclesiastic Hierarchy, and most bishops had to go into exile once again. The people were left without pastors once more.



Mexican intellectuals listened to the leader of universal Catholicism. Photo by Rossy Alemán/Imagenlatina





Archbishop of Mexico City, Ernesto Corripio Ahumada demands greater political space. Photo from Novedades archives.

### Under the Restored Republic

On August 3, 1959 Juárez suspended diplomatic relations with the Vatican, from the port of Veracruz. The restored republican regime did everything possible to reduce the influence of the Church, and relations with the Holy See were almost nonexistent.

The government of Sebastian Lerdo de Tejada enforced the laws energetically; he went so far as to make the Reform laws part of the constitution. This, as well as legislation which was added later, meant that besides being bereft of its properties, the Church lost the right to collect alms outside of church buildings. The monastic orders were disbanded and those who created communities outside of the monasteries were sought out and dispersed. The repeated protests of the bishops were ineffective; it was soon evident that the liberal State proposed a policy without concessions. The result of this extreme policy was a homogeneous, coherent and clear legislation, but it was not clear what rights religion did have. This defect would continue to exist in the following years.

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From 1865 to 1896 there was no Mexican representative in the Vatican; during this time the Mexican government tolerated the presence of Monsignor Averardi, who tried many times to initiate diplomatic relations with the Vatican, but the government rejected all efforts in this direction. Things had changed since the fall of Sebastian Lerdo de Tejada and the efforts to establish relations failed repeatedly.

The Tuxtepec revolution brought Porfirio Díaz to power (he would continue as dictator for 35 years) and initiated a period in which Church and State agreed to disagree. The government would not enforce the laws and the Church would not demand that they be changed. During this period, from 1876 to 1910, the Church recuperated. Porfirio Díaz actually had a conciliatory policy under which the dioceses could grow in number. Carmelita Romero Rubio, the dictator's wife, favored the Church in many ways and thus it recuperated part of its property as well as being able to build seminaries. Many councils and synods were formed which enriched the life of the Church. The Latin American Plenary Council, held in 1899 in Rome, stimulated the life of the Church and initiated an active social promotion campaign through the Catholic Congresses, which mobilized workers and peasants. The Church acquired political power and its capacity for mobilizing the masses made it evermore conspicuous and important in the nation's life. The encyclical letter entitled "Rerum Novarum" from Leo XIII, sent in 1891, encouraged social work, which intensified towards the end of the century. At this time, since the bishops were restricted by law in many aspects, activities by laymen were intensely promoted through social work and the publication of newspapers which had a large influence on public opinion such as "Catholic Society" and "The Voice of Mexico", and which opposed the famous anti-clerical newspapers "The Century" and the "Republican Monitor".

In 1902 Leo XIII tried to propose a Mexican Cardinal but the government decided that the situation was not ripe for relations to be formalized with the Vatican. However, the Apostolic Delegation was reestablished in 1904, and this type of relations lasted until 1911.

### The Revolution

The Mexican Revolution (1911-1917) intensified the difficulties of the Church, since both the constitutionalist forces from the south and Francisco Villa from the north occupied Catholic buildings for use as barracks and Government buildings. Emiliano Zapata was the only one to respect Church property and helped the Church in many ways. It was a tortuous period when the Mexican people suffered continuously and repression was concentrated among Catholics, both laymen and priests.

Francisco I. Madero's Revolution was victorious because it took advantage of the general rejection of the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, but Madero was not a radical and this would cost him his life. Madero left the dictator's cabinet almost intact, and a military man from the previous regime named Victoriano Huerta took advantage of this



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situation with a coup d'état that included the assassination of Madero and his vice president Pino Suárez, with the obvious support of the United States' ambassador to Mexico, Henry Lane Wilson.

#### **The Church and Huerta**

While some members of the clergy supported Huerta, others such as Leopoldo Ruiz y Flores, criticized him for usurping power. Huerta knew that the relations with the Church could be manipulated as they had been in the times of Porfirio Díaz, and he supported it, but he repressed the National Catholic Party when it began to have opinions and attitudes that were too independent. Huerta avoided direct conflict with the Church, and the Church gave him a loan when the troops threatened to take their salaries in looting.

The relations between Huerta and the Church have always been interpreted as an example of a reactionary attitude which legitimized violence, but in reality from 1913 on, conflicts between Catholics and followers of Huerta became more and more serious, until the government exiled those Catholic journalists who dared to criticize the regime in the official publication of the Catholic Party. But the fact that some members of the Catholic hierarchy had supported the Huerta dictatorship (which lasted only 17 months) could not be erased from the memory of the Jacobins. With Huerta's fall from power, the Catholic Party was dissolved and its members were threatened and harassed, and some had to leave the country. A new party, the National Republican Party, which lasted an even shorter time, grouped together those Catholics who dreamed of a Christian State. This party participated in the election which made Obregon president.

The Guadalupe Plan, proclaimed by Venustiano Carranza and supported by the large Constitutional Army, began a period of intense persecution of the Church, in that it stated that the Church had been responsible for Madero's death and Huerta's victory.

For four years before and twelve years after the proclamation of the Constitution of 1917, the Church was attacked on economic and ideological matters. This constitution legitimized the violent attitude of the Constitutional Army towards the Church. Carranza's campaign to import U.S. capital and industry included the promise of tolerance of different faiths and the suppression of the Catholic Church. With these promises Venustiano Carranza arrived at the capital with ammunition, fuel and food for his troops provided by the U.S.

The Church was unable to find points of agreement with the revolutionaries, because of their ideals in favor of workers and peasants. The Revolution seemed like disorder and barbarianism to the Church, and the Church was seen by the revolutionaries to be closely tied to those who exploited the people. The constitutionalist movement was in conflict with the Church from the beginning and the right to political participation was denied the Church, while those who had conservative ideas or belonged to religious parties were excluded from elections. Evidently, under these circumstances there was no possibility for relations between the Church and the Constitutionalist government, much less with the Vatican.

But under Obregon the law was not strictly enforced, only Calles tried to apply it definitively, and this produced the Cristero War.

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#### **Agreement without Consensus**

When an agreement was reached, the bishops agreed to accept the laws of the Constitution without conditions, in exchange for which the government would return the confiscated property and grant amnesty to those implicated in the armed uprisings. The Church had to comply with its part of the bargain but the government only satisfied the first part of the agreement partially and instead of granting an amnesty it began a witch hunt and summarily executed all the Cristero leaders who were unable to escape.

These provisional "agreements" set the stage for relations between the Catholic Church and the governments of the revolutionary generals and their successors until the end of the twentieth century. Given the individualist understanding of religion that the liberals and the masons took it upon themselves to emphasize, a government official was shielded by law and government in any attacks he might make on the ecclesiastic institutions. Most politicians who supported anticlerical legislation sent their children to Catholic schools that by law should not have existed. The Catholic Church was also persecuted under President Lázaro Cárdenas who, obviously intending to make Mexico socialist, expropriated the oil wells from foreign ownership and nationalized the production of crude oil. For Catholics it was a time of persecution because some members of the Cárdenas government, such as Tomás Garrido Canabal, in the state of Tabasco, enforced laws limiting the clergy, until they almost completely disappeared. The third article of the Constitution



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which prohibited religious education in the schools was enforced without concessions. Government inspectors made unannounced visits to the Catholic schools and fined those which broke the law.

**Towards a Pacific Co-existence**

From 1940 on there was a slow warming process in the relations between Church and State. President Manuel Avila Camacho declared publicly that he was a believer, and President Miguel Alemán Valdés maintained a semi-public personal friendship during his administration (1946-1952) with the Archbishop of Mexico, Luis María Martínez, who had participated in the agreement of 1929. Relations with the Church slowly improved, without actual changes in legislation.

The anti-communist campaign resulting from the McCarthyism of the fifties resurfaced in the sixties in fanatical uprisings which aimed to crush those arguments that were less than reactionary. Since the Vatican II and its theology did not comply with these requirements, extreme fanatics became enemies of the Pope and of those bishops who had participated in the conciliate. The

Archbishop of Mexico, Miguel Darío Miranda, perceiving the dangerous nature of these groups, called them to order.

**Legislation Follows Practice**

The relations between Church and State underwent profound changes when President Luis Echeverría Alvarez visited Pope Paul VI in 1974 in a private meeting that lasted 50 minutes and about which there is no official information. Paul VI wanted to visit Mexico for the Second Meeting of the Latin American Episcopate (CELAM), but death surprised him, and his successor as well, and it was John Paul II who visited Mexico in 1979.

From that moment, the apostolic delegate, Jeronimo Prigione has made public his desire to establish diplomatic relations between Church and State. Since the papal visit was used by the party in power to strengthen its position, some editorialists expressed the fear that the visit of Pope John Paul II in May of 1990 would aim to establish relations which the Mexican Republic had never maintained before. But the farewell discourse of the Foreign Relations Secretary, Fernando Solana, made clear that these matters would be dealt with in Mexico through the appropriate channels and within the Mexican judicial tradition.

The number of Catholics has decreased in the last decade (1980-1990), but the Catholic Church is still the majority religious group and the Mexican government must accept dialogue with it in the search for the place which religion will occupy in the social and political life of the country. ■

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CAROL WOJTILA'S SECOND VISIT

Breaking Security to Touch the Pope







...the law as a sign of his return to the world of politics.



Photos by Luis Humberto González.