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# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN NOT-SO-CATHOLIC MEXICO

In the Christian churches, whatever denomination they be, there is a clear mission when the church is a minority. This is part of the apostolic tradition: no one can forget that the entire ministry of Jesus was carried out as a religious minority. His rejection of Phariseeism and of anything that converted human beings into slaves of dehumanizing legalism, made the people aware that He and his disciples were part of a heretical minority that was rebellious and broke laws.

The fact that Jesus insisted that the Sabbath was created for the good of humankind and not humankind for the good of the Sabbath, showed that He was a teacher whose lessons were dangerous for the majority of the people who were, of course, Jewish. He and his disciples were also Jewish, but they were different because they thought and acted in a very different way from the doctors and priests of the established law.

Thus, for Jesus, minorities had the possibility of realizing an important mission. For example, He showed this through the parable of the grain of salt. Though the grain is very small and has no beauty or worth, it can produce a unique flavor if dissolved in the appropriate medium. The only condition necessary is that minorities must be capable of sacrificing themselves in order to serve. The grain of salt must lose its form to be dissolved and give flavor. This characteristic (which many say is a tactic of minorities) was used by the persecuted Christians during the first centuries in order to survive and continue the struggle.

## Minorities in Mexico

In Mexico, from the beginning of the Conquest and the Catholic missions, people worried about what was called "the heretical and disease-spreading Lutheranism".

General Director of the Coordinating Center for Ecumenical Projects.

People were worried that this would come to Mexico and that the teachings would take root in the country. Don Pedro Gringoire, Protestant journalist who wrote the column, "The Pulse of the Times" in the newspaper *El Excelsior* for over fifty years, stated that the first Protestant who came to Mexico was Andrés Moral, or Morel or Morab. He was later called Juan Alemán. Moral was born in Brumm, Moravia, and worked in cutting and polishing precious stones. In 1536 he was arrested by the Inquisition, then under Bishop Juan de Zumárraga, accused of being a Lutheran and he was exiled in 1538 to Toledo, Spain. There he was reconciled with the Catholic church and the *sanbenito* (cap and garment stigmatizing a person accused by the Inquisition) was taken from him. The Catholic writer, José Gutiérrez Casillas wrote: "In 1539, there was an anti-Lutheran campaign begun in all the bishoprics that obeyed the strict orders of the Council of the Indies. In Yucatan, one Englishman and ten Frenchmen were tried for being Lutherans, heretics and sacrilegious persons. A Spaniard was also tried because he wanted mercy for the Frenchmen. There were also people sentenced in Oaxaca and Guadalajara". Thus, there is no doubt that anti-Protestantism has been present in Mexico since the beginning of the Conquest. In some way it seems natural that the majority persecute and antagonize a minority that in some way is a bother to this majority. Therefore, any legal or constitutional step that corresponds to proclaiming the rights and responsibilities of religious minorities is not only important but serves as an example. In the month of March, 1990, intolerance arose again as the fruit of a generalized campaign against

**The group led by Jesus Christ was once a minority itself**





16<sup>th</sup> Century engraving. The Inquisition forced heretics to wear the *sambenito*

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**From the beginning of Catholicism in Mexico, people worried about what was called the "heretical and disease-spreading Lutheranism"**

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religious sects. The authorities of the Catholic church define sects as all churches and religious organizations that are not Catholic. Sociologically this may be correct, but it does not help in understanding the problem and it returns to attitudes of the sixteenth century.

**The Catholic Definition of Sects**

The Catholic Church tends to put all non-Catholic believers into the same category of Protestantism. In the same group they lump together the Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans and Baptists, who are in fact Protestants; with Jehova's Witnesses, Mormons and Adventists who are not Protestants; with Penticostalists who practise a sanctified Protestantism, as they say themselves; and with all those groups that have come out of or have been created in the United States and have invaded Latin America with an alienating and disintegratory preaching since 1969. This is something that is not only incorrect, but dishonest. It seems to indicate - please note that I say "seems" to indicate - that the intentions of the

Catholic hierarchy are those of going back, historically speaking, to the Constitution of Apatzingán (in the process of actualizing the relations between the church and State). Article One of the 1814 Constitution states that the Catholic religion is the religion of the State and the only one for Mexicans. In other words, Article 24 of the present Constitution, which guarantees the freedom of cults, is contradicted. In this way, events such as that which occurred in the Ajusco area some weeks ago are legalized: more than 100 non-Catholic believers were on the verge of being lynched by a crowd of people who had previously been stirred up by the priest of this area of Magdalena Contreras in Mexico City.

The situation is serious, not only because the rights of a minority are being violated (those that are guaranteed in the above mentioned Article 24 of our Constitution from over 100 years ago) but also because of what this means in relationship with the Catholic church. There is the possibility and risk that the Catholic church recovers its political influence and with this the privileges that it never wanted to lose. And the seriousness of the situation increases due to the fact that Pope John Paul II, during his second visit to Mexico, spoke about freedom of religious cults and advocated that such freedom be controlled by the Catholic authorities in Mexico. This closes the doors to freedom for religious minorities. In light of this, it is a deplorable fact that Catholic militants of the ecumenical movement said nothing. This shows that the reappearance of religious intolerance has also reached them. A short while ago, the Pope's representative in Mexico, Monsenor Jeronimo Prigione, stated that Protestantism or



sects are enemies of our sovereignty. In part, he is correct; but as always, half truths are usually also half lies. Personally, I have time and again denounced the using of religion to defend and protect the interests of United States' imperialism. In this area, not only religious sects have been used but even the Roman Catholic church.

This was denounced by Ivan Illich in the magazine of U.S. Jesuits, *America*, in an article entitled, "The Clouds of Charity". It has been seen in Panama, Nicaragua and Argentina and also in our own country. Thus, the enemy is not this or that church or religious organization, but imperialism and those who are accomplices with it.

## Spanish evangelism endorsed the Conquest, with its killings, lootings and slavery

### Religious Persecution in Mexico

In our history, as Fidel Chauvet states, the Catholic church used the political method of evangelization to carry out her missionary work during the conquest of Mexico. This method had a triple goal: evangelize, civilize and colonize the non-Christians. These were the Indians who were the inhabitants of the conquered regions, who had their own culture including their own religion. The method of evangelization served the interests of the imperial power, Christian of course, that in this case was Spain. And, it endorsed or christianized the conquest with all that this signified, including the killings, the lootings and slavery. The method consisted of three parts: exposition of the gospel to the masses, elemental Christian instruction and baptisms. Thanks to this, the religious majorities were transformed into minorities with no rights in relation to the religion of the conquerors.

Civil as well as religious authorities persecuted minorities that already existed or were in fact created by them or, as is the case of the Jews, came with the European migration. In the case of Protestantism the curious fact is that a religious minority started to be persecuted even before it was formed. Even the possibility that some type of Protestant work be established, worried the authorities and they did everything possible to avoid the establishment of Protestantism. One example of this is the work of Don Alonso de Montúfar, who was a bishop who acted against Robert Tomson, Englishman and Agustin Boacio, Italian. Since these two persons were Europeans who had just come to New Spain, they had to be repressed because they might be Protestants (1560). Another case was that of the religious nun, Sor Elena de la Cruz (1568) who had read the books of Fray Luis de Granada and believed that one could be saved if one obeyed the ten commandments. She was taken by the

Inquisition because she was suspected of being a believer of Judaism and a Lutheran lie-spreader. In the Inquisition she repented and her punishment was not so severe. There are many cases like these, documented in the acts of the Inquisition in Mexico, from those of Fray Juan de Zumárraga in 1535 to the acts of Abad y Queipo in 1811.

### Religious Rights

In synthesis, a religious minority has the right to practice its religion (guaranteed by the Constitution) when it does not harm others nor violate the law. Article 24 of the Mexican Constitution and Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantee the freedom of conscience and religious practice. These do not uphold the use of religion for non-religious activities and even less to evade the law. This has been done many times by minorities when they have services in places that are not proper for such activities, such as stadiums, bullrings and arenas. This was also recently done by the Catholic church with its outdoor masses for the people during the visit of the Pope. Thus, there is no doubt that all defense of rights must involve all persons assuming their correct responsibilities. ■



16<sup>th</sup> Century persecution of heretics.