

Millions Join Religious Sects

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To paraphrase the Gospel, it could be requested that the Mexican who throws the first stone be one who has not been visited at least once by some evangelist preacher from one of the 200 sects present in Mexico.

Practically all Mexican families have been faced by one of these insistent, inquisitive, and occasionally threatening or aggressive persons who will not accept defeat. They are masters of debate and are adept at perceiving the slightest vacillation in the speaker. They know in depth the most successful marketing techniques, yet they only sell ideas and a spot in heaven.

Very few Mexicans could answer the question as to how many religious trends there are in the country today, data that even the government does not have. Regarding this, some researchers indicate that in Mexico there are more than 200 religious non-Catholic sects; the success of their proselytizing campaigns are verified with the following data: nearly 10 million Mexicans are members of some sect. This represents an increase of 200 percent with regard to the data in the National Population Census of 1980. Their rate of growth is around 10 percent annually, one of the highest in the world. They have founded more than 10,000 temples throughout the country.

Some of the more well-known sects are Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons), the Pentecostal Gospel Movement, the Moon Sect, the churches of the Word, the Sabbaticalist, the Congregation of God, the Light of the World, and so forth.

The northern and southern border states of Mexico are the most affected by this invasion of new religions. Some calculations consider that 45 percent of the population of Campeche, in the southeastern part of the country, are no longer Catholics, while in Chiapas and Tabasco, similiary 40 percent have changed religion over the last

few years. Researcher Gilberto Jiménez indicates that the most probable figure is around 20 percent.

To get an idea of the speed with which some of these religious groups have grown, it is necessary to indicate that in 1961 the Mormons had twelve thousand faithful, and now have more than 500,000 followers.

Another group with a great number of active members is the Jehovah's Witnesses, with 290,000 followers, a figure which places Mexico in second place in the world, after the United States, in followers of this religion.

A revealing point about the origin and objectives of the hundreds of sects is that 80 percent of them maintain relation with the National Council of Churches in the United States, an organization that has investments throughout the world.

Objectives

An example of the way these sects work is told by Arturo Solís in an investigation conducted in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, a city on the border with the United States (where recently a new sect called the Bahai Faith runs a local radio program conducted by foreigners and whose objective is the conversion of followers from the popular sectors).

Solís interviewed a number of persons from the city, who agreed that this and other religious groups alter the life style patterns and social organization of the places where they exist. They have influenced the population to such an extent that the Center for Technical Studies No. 44 of this city has threatened to expel school students who will not salute the flag and who refuse to sing the national anthem in the weekly ceremony.

Similar incidents are repeated daily in many places, without anyone apparently trying to mediate the conflicts.

The Migratory Studies and Information Center (CIEM) of Reynosa indicates that the sects promote the ideas of the Manifest Destiny originating in the Monroe Doctrine, which is North American-style puritanical Calvinism, as well as evident U.S. expansionist interests.

Journalist.

The denunciations against these religious groups are innumerable due to the increasing influence they exert in local communities. Besides, due to their behavior they are considered "foreigner-like", and they promote an active opposition to family planning campaigns based on artificial means; some sects prohibit blood transfusions or organ transplants and preach their own form of community relations which are often actions that frequently isolate them from the society. On the other hand, they call upon their followers to avoid political participation, which translates into electoral abstentionism, ignorance, and distance from local and national social problems.

For many years, groups defending human rights and the protection of indigenous peoples have made grave accusations against the Summer Institute of Linguistics (ILV), known in the United States as the Wycliffe Bible Translators.

The ILV was established in Mexico in 1934 by invitation of the Mexican President Lázaro Cardenas, as part of a government plan to educate people in the most remote regions of the country.

Among the strongest accusations against the ILV are the following: that instead of providing basic primary education, they teach indigenous peoples English as the national language, induce them to venerate the Stars and Stripes instead of the Mexican flag, and teach them that their president is that of the United States. They are also accused of causing internal divisions and violence in the proselytized communities.

This has propitiated the birth of myths that incite religious persecution and promote intolerance against these groups. Frequently the frictions end in physical aggression or with the jailing of the members of these religious movements.

Pursuing Spiritual Support

Some researchers attribute the growth of the sects to the new followers' need to strengthen their religiousness, to the search for support in the despair caused by incertitude in the future and the economic crisis in general, and the pursuit of spiritual support not found in traditional religious trends.

In a recent work presented in a forum on *Population, Demography and Religion, A Little Explored Relationship*, by Rodolfo Casillas and Alberto Hernández, it is noted that by the year 2,000 there will be states in Mexico where Catholics will be a minority, while emphasizing that this religion has the greatest following and political influence. The authors dare to assure us that the recent Population Census will confirm this tendency.

The risks faced by Catholicism in a region that has always believed in its exclusive influence, were causes of Pope John Paul II's visit during May. He frequently exhorted the Catholics to assume "all the responsibilities in the transmission of the Gospel's message and in the testimony of an alive and well-functioning faith".

On the eve of Catholicism's third millennium of existence and 500 years since the conquest of America, Karol Wojtila made a call to conduct an intense campaign to evangelize Latin America.

But the Catholics face problems such as some of their own traditions, little participation by their followers, increasing loss of prestige through ties to the powerful, and their frequent scorn for the poor.

In the face of this reality, the Catholic Church seeks to innovate its methods. "Evangelization 2000" is a charismatic evangelization movement based in Guadalajara, Jalisco. With a budget surpassing 10 million dollars, they began TV-evangelization, a method of indoctrination used originally by new religions in the United States. Also they produce radio programs transmitted by a broadcasting group of Jalisco. They also assume the task of training Mexican evangelists to preach the gospel using the same methods proven by new religious currents.

In a report published in No. 692 of *Proceso* magazine, the director of Evangelization 2000, Jesús J. Prado Flores, indicates some similarities between the charismatic



The monumental organ of the Cathedral. Photo from *Novedades* archives.