

Rome in Mexico

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For a week, Mexico was the kingdom of the Pope. Christ's messenger made a tireless pilgrimage throughout the country to reestablish the faith. Believers endured penances: travel to distant places, uncomfortable observation points, prolonged waits martyred by the sun and dust, the constant selling of portraits, images, medallions and above all the strict division of the rich and poor, officials - ecclesiastic and civil - and the common people, even during blessings. John Paul II reiterated his slogan: "Mexico, forever faithful".

On the afternoon of May 6th, the Sovereign Pontiff of the Universal Church travelled from the airport to the Basilica of Guadalupe to make official the Mexican

devotion to the Indian Juan Diego by beatifying him. "Juandiegismo" is the earthly part of "Guadalupanismo", the country's *mestizo* Catholic religion. During the same ceremony, he granted the country's ecclesiastic hierarchy the beatification of their own candidates: the Child Martyrs of Tlaxcala, sacrificed by adults in the 16th century for having adopted the religion of the Spanish conquerors. The Basilica, nevertheless, was far from the zeal shown for the Virgin of Guadalupe on December 12: the fervor of the religious service was limited by strict vigilance by the police.

The encounter between Carlos Salinas de Gortari and Karol Wojtila was not only a meeting between two heads of State, but

also of two reformers dedicated to the modernization of their gospels. The pastoral work of the representative of Christ is eminently political. Likewise, the policies undertaken by the president of the republic seek to be missionary, to redeem the Mexicans who live in extreme poverty. Chalco Valley symbolizes the encounter between both institutions.

In Chalco, east of Mexico City, in 1988 the then presidential candidate Salinas de Gortari did not have the sympathy of the population. In order to obtain it, at the very beginning of his administration he gave Chalco's inhabitants electric light and other services. Salinas himself spent the night there to verify that his orders had been



Painting of a 16th century baptism.

obeyed. The two million people who have moved to Chalco from all different parts of the country seeking to be a little less poor, also received the blessing of the sovereign of the Vatican.

Nevertheless, that morning of the 7th of May, the marginalized inhabitants of Chalco were marginalized once again. They attended Mass behind a fence which protected the more famous believers: Columbus' Knights, members of the Christian Family Movement, the boys' choir from the Catholic schools, nuns of different orders, distinguished families and the governor of the state of Mexico. John Paul II said: "I feel compassion for the multitude, because they are abused and humiliated like sheep without a pastor."

Wojtila's message linked the various Mexican cities he visited. Later that same day, in the port of Veracruz, which he called the "port of evangelization", he declared that the discovery, the conquest and the evangelization of America were brilliant, although not exempt from shadows. The next day he travelled to San Juan de los Lagos - that bastion of Catholics who, to the shout of "Long Live Christ the King!", fought the government of Plutarco Elías Calles in the Cristera War at the end of the 1920's - where he addressed the young people, after greeting the "land of martyrs", directing them to preach "the construction of a new heaven and a new earth" that would put an end to the injustices of the modern world. Previously, in the city of Aguascalientes, he had said that the "question of education, which is everyone's responsibility, is of growing concern for public opinion and awakens a renewed interest in the diverse areas of political responsibility". He insisted to the Catholic teachers: "Open the world of teaching to Christ!" The Church perseveres in its efforts to reeducate the Mexican people.

In the midst of the euphoria elicited by the Pope - fomented by the never ending messages in the mass media - President Salinas sent a proposal of Constitutional reform to the Chamber of Deputies that would put up for sale the banks that had been nationalized eight years ago.

On Wednesday May 9th entrepreneurs met with the Bishop of Rome in the city of Durango, where he stated that "the excessive monopolization of goods by a few

deprives the majority, and a type of wealth is formed that produces poverty". He also said that "an efficient, competitive and just firm is the best instrument that man has created to eradicate the extreme poverty of the people". It was a capital week for businessmen.

The next day, in the city of Chihuahua, he recapitulated on his "family doctrine", a "community of life and love". Later, in Monterrey, he told workers - he who was a worker in his youth - that the "Gospel is also the Gospel of work"; "Christianity cannot forget that the noble struggle for justice should in no way be confused with the program which "sees in the class struggle the only way to eliminate injustices". And he asked for heavenly grace for all Mexican workers.

Southern Mexico was his next stop. On May 11 he was in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, where he addressed the Indians and Central American refugees, commiserating with the harshness of their existence and the aggressions their culture suffers. The bishop of San Cristobal de las Casas had to write a letter to defend himself from the attacks of the region's political bosses, pointing out that a political clergy does not exist, as they had accused, but a Church which serves the poor. John Paul II then travelled to Villahermosa, Tabasco, a state in which atheism was the official religion during the twenties (now Protestant groups have great influence), where he spoke to his lost sheep saying: "Return without fear. Return to the breast of the church, your mother, who awaits you with open arms".

The city of Zacatecas received him on Saturday the 12th, where he gave his message to peasants, miners and immigrants: "A Christian must see work through faithful eyes... you must understand that your regular work, in the field, in the mine, wherever you labor, leads you to the fullness of your existence when know how to make it a offering pleasing to God."

Wojtila ended his mission of evangelism in Mexico City, by blessing the new building of the Mexican Episcopate Conference, encharging the bishops to continue the task he had begun. Late at night he met with a select group of intellectuals, many of whom clapped and shouted at the tops of their voices.

The office of the Pope makes Wojtila a very influential man: as Christ's vicar his word is spiritual, as an institutional man he gives orders. His supranational state makes his word a commandment for the simple believer as well as for the political institution where his speech is made. Wojtila could therefore dialogue with the Mexican State which still does not recognize the Vatican as it does other nation states.

For its part, the Mexican presidential institution is very flexible. President Salinas cannot separate himself from the anticlericalism which characterizes the State, but he can, personally, establish links with the representative of a State which today plays a very important role, especially in Eastern Europe. Likewise, he will make good use of the inertia of the Mexican Catholic majority for his political ends. In any case, the encounter between these two statesmen is only the first step towards putting into practice their respective gospels.



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Catholic renewal and the North American sects: including an emphasis on the Pentecost and in the charisma of the Holy Spirit, the use of unknown tongues, and the religious miracle cures such as the laying on of hands. The fervor and methodology are similar to gospel dissemination.

"To preach in public and to give testimony of faith, the practice of some sects, is something that the Catholic Church should emulate. What we lack is a practical methodology on how to do things, how to preach the gospel"; Prado says.

Another project very linked to Evangelization 2000 but based in the United States is Light 2000, which has established direct contact with the Summer Institute of Linguistics so that they may be taught the best means to conduct proselytizing campaigns in Latin America. They use the same methods that they have criticized and have used as an argument to expel others from Mexico.

The Government's Position

In view of this complex phenomenon of the advance of new religions and the stagnation or regression of the traditional ones, the Mexican government has only acted as a spectator.

The declarations of Jorge Moreno Collado, government director of the Government Ministry in the newspaper *unomásuno* on March 26 of this year were the following: "Paradoxically, we cannot make them appear evil even though some of them infringe on certain norms of convenience - such as Jehovah's Witnesses; the sects or religious movements can also aid in a more dynamic education of the people, to make them less conformist...It is preferable to have an excess of freedom in beliefs than any authoritarian determination. The conflicts can be resolved by the sensible application of the law...It is important to gain ground against ignorance, but by no means does the government assume a persecution posture, because that would be a return to barbarism, a situation we are far from accepting."

Everything makes us suppose that Mexico will continue to be a most fertile country for the development of new religious trends that continue to gain ground at the cost of the traditional religions.

Certainly not even the pressure recently applied by the Catholic Church to modify the Constitution on its behalf, with the intent to recover the terms of power, will impede its regression. It is probable that by the 2000th birthday of the Catholic Church, the prediction that it will be a minority will be fulfilled, at least in Mexico. ■