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Mexico

The Catholic Church in Mexico:
Opting for the Status Quo

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter:

On December 12, 1981, the 450th anniversary of the apparition of the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe, festivities went on non-stop in the cathedral built in her honor. The altar was blanketed with fine bouquets, the masses were celebrated around the clock and the spectacular mass held at noon (seats available to ticket-holders only) was presided over by 150 bishops as well as the Pope's special emissary. The Church encourages Mexicans to make the pilgrimage from all corners of the country, in spite of the large cost and sacrifice it represents for the majority of these people. That religious event more than any other characterizes the Mexican Catholic Church: pomp and circumstance.

Despite the growing influence of a vociferous minority of progressive Latin American clergy, the conservatism of the Catholic Church's hierarchy here remains very much intact. This minority was particularly influential at the last two Latin American Bishops' Conferences. At the first of these, held at Medellin, Colombia, in 1968, the bishops produced the "Magna Carta" of the socially-committed faction of the Church. Their document condemned the repression, corruption, and social and economic injustice that for centuries have plagued the countries of this continent. As a solution, they advocated a new "liberation theology," based on organizing the impoverished and the oppressed to demand a more equitable socioeconomic system. While the declarations made at the following Latin American Bishops' Conference in 1979 were less strident, those congregated again "opted for the poor" as the principal social group with which they would work to eradicate poverty and to attain justice.

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The documents of these conferences are supposed to orient the Church hierarchies throughout Latin America. In fact, they have had a minimal impact on the Mexican Church's authorities. The reasons why seem to be many, and often convoluted. I believe those mentioned in this paper are among the more important.

There is probably no other country in Latin America that has witnessed such a lengthy and bitter quarrel between its government and the Catholic Church. For 300 years of colonial rule, the Church and the State virtually shared economic, social and political power. The State was allowed to collect and keep a portion of the Church's taxes. The Church was appointed as the official banking service of the colony. With the wealth acquired, it purchased between one-third and one-half of the nation's territory.

In the nineteenth century, the men who fought for Mexico's independence from Spain realized that for their rule to be successful, the Church would not only have to be separated from the State but would have to have its socioeconomic power diminished. Going right to the source, they expropriated the Church's lands. In retaliation, the Church refused to give sacraments to any who signed the rebels' Constitution of 1857.

In this century, the writers of the post-revolutionary Constitution of 1917 went on to add insult to injury. While many parish priests fought side by side with the revolutionaries, the Church hierarchy maintained its close affinity with the landed class throughout the struggle, and even issued a condemnation against all agrarian reformists. This did not sit well with the revolutionaries whose principal battle cry was "land and liberty."

And, in their moment of anger, the writers of the 1917 Constitution composed a whole series of anti-clerical clauses. All church buildings became state property, religious processions were banned, priests were forbidden to wear their clerical garb in public or to make political statements and foreign priests were not allowed to work in Mexico. But by far the worst blow to the Church hierarchy was the decision to require six years of socialist education for every Mexican child.

Most Mexicans, not knowing the meaning of "socialist," assumed this meant secular. Since the days of the Conquest, the Church had been the principal primary school educator in the country, a position that had provided it with an immeasurable amount of social influence. Consciously, the revolutionaries placed this law on the books to limit the Church's influence to the spiritual sphere.

It wasn't until June 24, 1925, however, that President Plutarco Elias Calles put these anti-clerical measures into effect. While slow in coming, the Church's response was equally provocative. On July 31, 1926, with the full approval of the Vatican, the Catholic Church of Mexico called a "strike," thereby suspending the giving of sacraments (baptism, confirmation, marriage, etc.) to all Mexicans. This strike, the first of its kind in the Catholic Church's history, lasted three years. President Calles retaliated by imprisoning and exiling many priests. In turn, clergy in the states of Jalisco, Guanajuato and Michoacan organized a small armed rebellion, which came to be known as the "cristeros movement." These guerrillas, who called themselves "cristeros" from their war cry "Viva Cristo Rey" (Long Live Christ the King), were not peasants but traditionalists, young aristocrats and extremely religious members of the landed class. Their main enemies were the secular rural teachers. The cristeros burned down schools and, in certain cases, hung teachers and cut off their tongues and ears. The State's retaliation intensified, with the deportation of bishops and Calles' calling in the army. By 1928, the Church hierarchy proposed a truce. It has been argued that its reason for doing so was not simply to end the bloodshed but to try to retrieve even a limited authority. For people had been getting on perfectly well without the clergy, even organising their own masses and other religious rites. The Church called off its strike, Calles called off the troops, and the State resumed a less bombastic but equally firm anti-clerical position.

In short, for over a century the Catholic Church and the Mexican State were involved in head-on confrontation. The obvious loser was the Church, which fell from a position of equal political, social and economic power and good relations with the government to one of mere spiritual leadership and near-pariah status.

Today, many of Mexico's one hundred bishops still remember the fierce persecution of the Calles years and are determined not to let Church-State relations so deteriorate ever again. Their gut fear is further enforced by their limited professional training. During the early part of this century, the Mexican Church had almost no funds to finance foreign studies for its seminarians. The only educational options available were studying in Mexico's conservative Catholic universities or in those of Rome (equally conservative), which provided scholarships from the Vatican. One can appreciate the importance of this factor by comparing the world view and political perspective of the Mexican clergy with those of Brazil's Church hierarchy, which includes many priests educated in Germany and France. Sao Paulo's Archbishop Paulo Arns, who received his doctoral degree from the Sorbonne in Paris, is one of the most important designers and most active practitioners of the "liberation theology."

The Vatican has also encouraged the Church in Mexico not to become involved in anything that might cause another falling-out with the government. The silence of the Church has been widely interpreted as a passive approval of the status quo.

Besides having a "status quo hierarchy," the rank-and-file clergy here is also more docile than those found in other Latin American countries. There seem to be two principal causes. First, there is no significant influx of foreign clergy. Unlike Brazil, Chile and the Central American nations, where the clergy has a large component of missionary nuns and priests, Mexico has quite effectively kept most of these people out. In general, foreign clergy tend to be more progressive and more outspoken. They usually have been exposed to a more varied curriculum and to better-quality education. Secondly, they tend to come from the developed countries, and are often shocked by the poverty and income disparities of Latin America. And, unlike local priests who have come to accept the socioeconomic order as inevitable, the imported clergy often attempt to change it. They can also be more independent in their thought and actions since they do not answer to the local bishops, who often are linked to the country's oligarchy.

Furthermore, in Mexico there is no clear issue on which the Church might criticise the behaviour of the State. While in much of Latin America political repression is widespread and brutal, in Mexico it is quite selectively reserved for peasant, student and labor leaders. The Mexican government does make some concerted efforts on behalf of its poor majority: much less than one would imagine from the bureaucracy's profusive self-praise, but something nonetheless. The Mexican government's revolutionary rhetoric, progressive foreign policy and inadequate but extant development programs have for fifty years kept it from being perceived as the principal defender of a political and socioeconomic structure that mostly benefits a small minority and treats the rest as less-deserving second-class citizens. Even though some priests are critical of the State, they often have a hard time convincing their parishioners, who still hope that someday the government will address their needs.

Of course, there are exceptions. There are some priests who are extremely committed to working with the poor to bring about structural change. Not surprisingly, those identified with the oppressed have suffered the most persecution. Arturo Lona Reyes, the bishop of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, strongly denounced killings of students, peasants and workers in the mid-seventies. Because of these protests, he was subject to an assassination attempt in April 1977. In the same year, two priests were murdered, two others were kidnapped and various Church organisations were sacked by persons unknown.

One of the murder victims, Father Rodolfo Aguilar, was killed in the northern city of Chihuahua "because he dared to cry out for justice on behalf of the poor people," according to the city's Archbishop Adalberto Almeida Merino. Father Aguilar had been organising the slum dwellers to demand such basic services as sewerage and mail delivery.

Today, the Mexican Catholic Church is undoubtedly in crisis. While 96% of the Mexican population considered itself Catholic during the 1970 census, by 1980 that percentage had fallen to 88%. Even more drastic has been the decline in men and women taking holy orders. In the largest seminary in Mexico City, which has capacity for 250 seminarians, only 64 were enrolled as of July 1981. The Convent of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnated Word, also situated in the capital, has only five of its 150 slots filled.

The Church attributes this decline to three causes. Protestant proselytizing has increased. Materialistic values have become widespread. And it is now much easier than in the past to rise to prestigious positions without the sacrifices of holy orders.

While these explanations should not be discounted, there are also other reasons. The priesthood today is in need of redefinition. What is at issue is whether clergy should limit their work to the spiritual realm or should also lead people in a struggle for a more just economic, political and social order. One Jesuit priest told me that this debate, which has been long and heated within his order, has left many of his colleagues unwilling to promote the religious career.

The Mexican Catholic Church's defence of the status quo has lost it many potential clergy and lay followers. The most rapid decline in persons entering the clergy came in 1968, a year of political crisis in Mexico. A public outcry erupted after the deaths of about 200 young people in a protest demonstration in the capital. Critics accused the government of ordering them to be shot down. But the Church hierarchy sided with the government. This act of solidarity convinced many potential priests that the Church was not the key to a more just society. Furthermore, in the months following the student massacre, dozens of priests renounced their religious vows.

In the past month, the rift between the Church's conservative and progressive clergy has widened. The cause has been the Mexican presidential election. Some progressives supported the argument of the main left-wing opposition group, the Mexican Unified Socialist Party, that Christianity and Socialism are compatible. This party's candidate was a Communist, an allegiance which provoked a counter-attack from conservative priests. The Archbishop of Mexico City, Corripio Ahumada, declared: "It is not possible to be both a Christian and a Marxist."

But does the Church's point of view really matter? Its influence - or lack of it - over the young is reflected in the increase in the use of contraceptives in Mexico. According to demographic studies, 60% of Mexican couples now use the Pill or other contraceptive methods banned by the Church.

Priests here claim that two factors will sharply influence the Mexican Catholic Church during the next ten to fifteen years. The bishops now in office will be replaced by more educated and open-minded priests, many of whom accept the basic tenets of the "liberation theology." And, while the problems of unemployment, inflation and income disparity seem certain to worsen in the years to come, it also seems likely that the government will be unable to control popular unrest except by large-scale repression. If this does occur, the Church hierarchy will have to choose between the government and those being repressed. Perhaps then it will opt for the poor.

Sincerely,



Received in Hanover 8/13/82