The Valiant Cristeros of Mexico

by Father Ignacio Barreiro

Cristero Calvary lined up for battle.

Through the assistance of Our Lady of Guadalupe, who manifested her presence on December 9, 1531, Mexico was converted to the Catholic faith in the sixteenth century.[1] The Church in that large country made a successful effort to evangelize millions of natives, through the dedication of many missionaries belonging to diverse religious orders, including the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Augustinians and later the Jesuits.

At the same time, the violent hatred against the Catholic Church in Mexico has longstanding roots. Perhaps some of the horror of the Aztec religion remained hidden and under the surface. The Aztec religion was perhaps the most horrendous that has ever existed. For the inauguration of the grand temple of Tenochtitlan, around eighty thousand persons over the course of a few weeks were killed as human sacrifices. Under the Aztecs, around twenty thousand persons were sacrificed in Mexico every year. The horrible tyranny of the Aztecs is clearly the main reason for the relative ease with which the Spaniards conquered that country.

Pre-Enlightenment sources, like the Neapolitan traveler Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri, who visited Mexico in 1697, on the one hand provided evidence of the enormous influence and good works of the Church, but on the other hand criticized the number of monasteries and convents as well as the riches accumulated by the Church.[2] These criticisms are a foreshadowing of the persecution that in later years would be launched against the Church. Already in the eighteenth century we can see how intellectual and professional groups in Mexico, which was the most important Spanish viceroyalty in New World, were being influenced by the Enlightenment. A great barrier against the Enlightenment came tumbling down when the Jesuits were expelled in April 1767.

This situation was tragic and unacceptable … it allowed a Masonic state to control and mold a country, slowly eroding the faith of the people through its control of public education. …it cut Mexico from its Catholic roots, …it isolated Catholics from the mainstream of society.

The revolution that brought about Mexico's separation from Spain was conducted much like those in other parts of the Americas, under liberal, Masonic and anti-clerical inspiration. The Mexican constitution of 1824 reduced the privileges of the Church, but at the same time declared Catholicism to be the state religion. The reform laws of 1836 abolished monastic institutions, removed the competencies of the clergy on civil matters and secularized the properties of the Church. The Constitution of 1857, approved under the influence of Benito Juarez and inspired by anti-Catholic ideology, established the separation of Church and State. Under the same government civil marriage was introduced under the same ideology. By the law of July 12, 1859, religious orders were suppressed and their properties, including all their movable goods, were confiscated by the state.[3] After the political and military defeat of the conservatives that had brought Maximilian of Austria to Mexico to reign as Emperor with the support of Napoleon III, the situation of the Church grew still worse. The successor of Juarez, Lerdo de Tejada, took further measures against the Church, suppressing religious holidays and forbidding the clergy to teach and to wear the cassock. The religious who had entered Mexico during the

brief reign of Maximilian were all expelled.

From 1884 until 1911, Mexico was ruled by General Porfirio Diaz. Even though he was a Mason and influenced by the positivism of Auguste Comte, Diaz was to a large extent tolerant of the Church. Under his long rule the Church was able to function well, and even if the unjust laws of Juarez were not repealed they were applied with certain tolerance. The religious were able to return, and schools, seminaries and hospitals were reopened. Nevertheless, Catholics remained excluded from important political positions that were open only to those with Masonic credentials.

This situation was tragic and unacceptable for a number of reasons. First, it allowed a Masonic state to control and mold a country, slowly eroding the faith of the people through its control of public education. Second, it cut Mexico from its Catholic roots, which had built its greatness in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Last but not least it isolated Catholics from the mainstream of society. As Catholic historian John Rao points out, "Catholicism does, after all, have a vision of full participation in all forms of community life. It is not healthy for Catholics to retreat from this vision. When they do so retreat they have a tendency to create substitute communities that temporarily protect them from the reality around them which cannot shut it out permanently."[4] So it was not healthy for Catholics in Mexico to retreat to their own institutions, as it is not healthy for Catholics in any society that is dominated by anti-Catholic views to retire to any form of protected environments. That is why it was a magnificent response of the Cristeros, whose activities are described later in this story, to place themselves under the banner of the Social Kingship of Christ, seeking the establishment of a society under Christ the King as taught by the Magisterium of the Church, in particular in the encyclical *Quas Primas* of Pope Pius XI.

After several ephemeral regimes, Venustiano Carranza took power from 1914 until his murder in 1920. Already in 1914 this dictator had begun persecution of Catholics, accusing them of having supported his rival, Victoriano Huerta. He expelled priests, closed seminaries and forbade the public practice of the Faith in some states. In states like Jalisco, the bishop was forced to operate in a clandestine way. This anti-Catholicism gave rise on February 5, 1917, to the Constitution of Queretaro. According to Article 130, "The Law does not recognize any personality to the religious groups called churches." The Constitution was intended to totally break down the Catholic Church and constituted the legal expression of the revolutionaries' purpose: the eradication of the Catholic faith.

The insurrection was mainly the reaction of a Catholic and traditional rural society against the aggression perpetrated by an authoritarian secularist government.

The schools were to be totally secular in their approach and religious teaching was forbidden. Religious institutes were prohibited from having anything to do with primary or secondary education. Religious vows were forbidden because they were considered violations of human rights. All ecclesiastical properties were confiscated, with the Church reduced to using property under conditions established by the government. Only civil marriage was recognized. The clergy could only be Mexican, and they were totally deprived both of their political rights and of part of their civil rights (because they were allowed to inherit property only from their close relatives). The idea behind this last restriction was that property that was really given to the Church could not be placed in the name of an individual cleric. The objective of all these measures was for the Church to die out for lack of priests and for lack of the Christian education of children.[5]

(A vivid depiction of the persecution that the Church suffered in Mexico appears in Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory*. Even if it suffers from the flaws that derive from the author's liberal tendencies, the book provides a sense of the climate in which Mexican Catholics lived during the twenties and thirties.)

Both Carranza and Obregon, the Mexican general who served as president from 1920 to 1924, even if they affirmed the anti-clerical principles of the new Constitution, refrained from applying it in a systematic way. A strict application of the 1917 Constitution came only with Plutarco Elías Calles, who became president in 1924. Calles was a mediocre man who oscillated between liberalism and socialism. He was the natural son of a Mexican woman and an immigrant of eastern origin. He had a reputation for dishonesty and alcoholism. For a time he was a rural schoolteacher, then a tavern keeper, and, with the help of some of his relatives, he eventually became a public employee, where his reputation for dishonesty matured. He was a man without scruples, full of social resentment and dominated by a pathological anti-Catholicism.

Following the inspiration of the French Revolution and doing what the Communists would later attempt, he supported the creation of a national "patriotic" church. On Feb-

ruary 21, 1925, the Mexican Catholic Apostolic Church was established. He picked as a patriarch an adventurous priest named Joaquin Perez, and ten other priests were found to support him. Trade unionists of Marxist inspiration were used by the government to evict faithful priests from their churches and install patriotic priests in their place. This attempt to divide the Church was short lived because it did not find any support among the faithful, and shortly seven of the schismatic priests, including Perez, returned to the Catholic Church.

Calles promulgated two laws, first on January 6 and then on June 14, 1926, enforcing the norms of the Constitution. Through the first law several Catholic schools were closed and the number of active priests was reduced. To be active a church had to be entered in a special registry. The second law, known as the Calles law, became notorious: all manifestations of the cult outside church were forbidden, the use of religious habits or any form of clerical attire was declared illegal, the teaching of the Catholic religion was made a crime for which the perpetrator would be imprisoned, all religious orders or institutes were prohibited and, finally, only those priests recognized by the government could fulfill their ministry. Against these measures the Mexican episcopacy responded by suspending all public sacramental functions beginning on July 31st, even if the churches were going to remain open but entrusted to the laity. The sacraments and all other ceremonies would afterwards be celebrated outside the churches, which meant that they would be performed in a clandestine and illegal fashion. This decision, which laid down a clear challenge to the government, was approved by the Holy See. Confronted with this measure of the hierarchy, the government took upon itself the appointment of Church administrators. In many places this action of the government led to violent conflicts with the faithful.

At the same time that the government was taking these totalitarian legal measures against the Church a bloody persecution had been launched against her. From 1926 to 1929 seventy-eight priests, several religious and many lay persons were murdered, some of them after enduring the most cruel tortures. Nuns were expelled from their convents under the specious pretext of protecting their freedoms.[6] In 1926 the number of priests in Mexico was 3000; eight years afterwards, in 1934, only 334 priests were authorized by the government to exercise the priestly ministry.[7] With very few exceptions Catholics remained steadfast in their faith and formed a united front. All social classes were subject to persecution.

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Catholics and the episcopacy were divided over how they could resist the actions of the government. The moderates formed the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty. That organization objected to any form of armed rebellion and wanted to continue the fight at the civic level, requesting the total freedom of worship, of seminaries and of the schools. The league planned an economic boycott of the government to force it to abandon the enforcement of the Calles law.

The Execution of a Cristero

A vast number of Catholics, seeing that civic measures were insufficient to protect their rights, decided to take arms in legitimate defense against an unjust tyranny, and they organized the Liberation Movement (*Movimiento Libertador*). It started as a spontaneous grassroots movement, which was not coordinated by the authorities of the Church. Only a few bishops, like Orozco of Guadalajara, Gonzales y Valencia of Durango and Manriquez y Zarate of Huejutla, supported the Crusade in any significant way. Most of the bishops had serious doubts about the movement's chances of success, refusing to appoint chaplains and failing to appreciate its magnitude.[8]

Those who participated in this movement were soon called Cristeros, because their war cry was *Viva Cristo Rey* (Long Live Christ the King) and because of the crosses they wore around their necks. A solid army was established, called the National Guard. It had at its peak between thirty and forty thousand combatants. Most of the fighters came from the countryside but they were also joined by many students, young professionals and workers. These volunteers were moved by deep religious convictions.

In general the war was conducted with idealism, magnanimity and self-sacrificing devotion. The insurrection was mainly the reaction of a Catholic

and traditional rural society against the aggression perpetrated by an authoritarian secularist government. The Cristeros fought, suffered, and died for the Faith, to preserve a Catholic society for them and for their children, to form a society under the Social Kingship of Christ. (In Mexico, the teachings contained in Pius XI's *Quas Primas* on the Kingship of Christ were very well received.)

September 1926 marked the beginning of the crusade. By that date we can already count thirteen different places where armed men had begun to gather to resist the government. Their example was followed in many other places. In October a brigade of the Federal Army was attacked and destroyed in the state of Durango. Between November and December the uprising grew throughout central Mexico. In the state of Jalisco, one of the main centers of the movement, the regiment of General Arenas was defeated and destroyed.

The League that in the meanwhile wished to continue non-violent political action had organized a massive mobilization for January 1, 1927. This mobilization failed due to a wave of detentions and murders that the government launched in order to stop it. This massive repression showed most Catholics that all dialogue was impossible with a government firmly bent on destroying the Catholic Church.

On January 11, 1927, the birth of the National Liberating Army was publicly proclaimed. General Enrique Goroztieta was appointed its Commander in Chief. He was a professional officer educated in the Military Academy. He had voluntarily retired from the army at a relatively young age as a result of his disgust with the political situation. In the few pictures that we have he appears as a proud, willful man with a big silver cross hanging from his neck. For nearly thirty months he guided his men with great military ability, until his heroic death on the battlefield on June 20, 1929. The tactics used were those of high-level guerrilla warfare. General Goroztieta was able on many occasions to lead several columns into a single and coordinated attack.

The different columns of the Cristeros were well organized and were fortified by a serious spiritual life. Every day they prayed the Rosary, and when evening came they sang the hymn "The Troops of Mary." When possible they kept the Blessed Sacrament reserved, and they arranged things so that there were always two soldiers in adoration. Each regiment had its own chaplain. They always prayed before going into battle, and they would charge crying, *Viva Cristo Rey*! Their motto was God, Fatherland and Liberty. This last word should be understood not according to its liberal meaning, but in the sense of freedom to practice the Faith without interference from the state.

The biggest problem was weapons and ammunition. The Cristeros had started with a mixed bag of old weapons. As the campaign went on they supplied themselves with captured weapons from the Federal Army, but they were always undersupplied. The Federal Army was always receiving new supplies from the United States, but the U.S. government had imposed an embargo on weapons to the Cristeros. The main strength of the Cristeros was that their morale and motivation were always far superior to those of the Federal Army.

An auxiliary corps of women was organized under the patronage of St. Joan of Arc. This auxiliary corps took care of the wounded and secured provisions for the army. The Cristeros, who mostly had to live on the land, could count on the active support of the population. Thousands of people risked their lives and properties to furnish food, shelter and intelligence reports to the Cristeros on the movements of government troops. To receive this kind of support from the population is fundamental for any guerrilla group. As an old expression has it, "The guerrilla has to move through the countryside like a fish in the water." Even writers unsympathetic to the Cristeros are forced to admit that one of the reasons that the rural population was favorable to the insurgents was the unjust and violent way in which the population of the countryside was treated by the government's troops.[9]

On April 18, 1927, at Limón, in the State of Jalisco, a group of Cristeros attacked a train whose cargo, a considerable sum of money, was protected by a company of fifty-two soldiers. Every one of the Federal troops was killed and the money was taken. The Cristeros were commanded by Father Vega, who had been suspended by his bishop for taking arms against the government. This bishop was, in general, supportive of the Crusade but took the very traditional position that a member of the clergy should not shed blood in warfare. A priest can and should be the chaplain of an army, he may even encourage the soldiers if the war is a just one, but he should never take weapons. (Here we may recall the great example of Blessed Marco D'Aviano, who was chaplain of the coalition that defeated the Turks at the gates of Vienna. He was constantly in the front line, with a crucifix in his hands, encouraging and blessing the soldiers.[10])

The Calles government used this incident as proof that the Church

was openly involved in the rebellion. Lurid details were invented, including tales of civilian passengers being burned alive or shot as they emerged from the burning coaches. In fact, only one or two civilians were killed, by accident, in the crossfire.

The Cristeros soon began to have a taste of victory. At Puerto del Aire they suffered seven casualties against the 147 they inflicted upon Federal troops. Many other victories could be cited from that Summer of 1927, culminating on August 20 when at El Cobre they put down 370 government soldiers. By the Fall of 1927 the presence of the Cristeros in the State of Jalisco was so dominating that the government was forced to withdraw its guarantee of protection to the ranches owned by its supporters and to the foreign mining companies. In the State of Mexico, which practically surrounds the Federal District of Mexico, the Cristeros were very active and obtained important victories in 1927. Benjamín Mendoza inflicted heavy defeats on Federal troops. On May 28 Generals Urbalejo and Castrejón were ambushed and defeated at a place called Horno del Conejo. Later in June a convoy of trucks was totally destroyed along the highway that goes from Tenancingo to Escalerillas.[11]

Cristeros with priest and banner

By January 1928 General Amaro, who had been sent to fight the revolt in the state of Colima, was forced to ask for reinforcements of troops and airplanes just to keep the situation in hand. By March the Cristeros numbered nearly forty thousand in arms in twelve states. By May the Cristero division operating in South Jalisco under General Jesus Degollado was capable of making complicated tactical maneuvers. By mid-1928 Calles was forced to acknowledge that the situation had become a stalemate, and that he was no longer able to contain the revolt. In many areas of the country that had been liberated from the tyranny of the federal government the Cristeros were capable of establishing proper administrations.

Months earlier, in November 1927, an attempt against the life of general Obregon had failed (he was only lightly wounded). This attempt had been organized by three members of the League who were friends of the very popular Jesuit Father Miguel Augustin Pro. Since July 1926 and the promulgation of the persecutory laws, Father Pro had conducted a very effective clandestine apostolate of which the government was aware. Concerned to bring the Holy Sacrament to the largest possible number of persons, he organized the so called "Eucharistic Stations," which were private homes selected to distribute the Holy Eucharist. He would distribute anywhere between three to four hundred communions every day. On first Fridays he would distribute nearly fifteen hundred communions.[12] Dressed in different disguises he would hear confessions in public places. He was perfectly aware of the risks he was running and was ready to suffer the consequences, even martyrdom, as we can read in one of his letters.[13] He had been invited to join the insurrection but in obedience to the orders of his Provincial he had refused.

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Father Pro had nothing to do with the attempt against the life of Obregon. His brothers Roberto and Humberto, who were detained with him, were also uninvolved. Nevertheless, Father Pro was arrested where he was hidden, and without any trial was executed by firing squad on November 23, 1927. His brother Humberto and the two who were responsible for the attempt against Obregon, Luis Segura Vilchis and Juan Tirado, were executed that same morning. The order for their execution had been given by Calles in agreement with Obregon, and was intended to be a lesson to the Church and a show of the government's strength.

In accordance with his agreement with Calles on early July 1928, General Alvaro Obregon had been elected president again in balloting that was not exactly clean. On July 17 he was celebrating his election with a great banquet in the Restaurant La Bombilla of Mexico City, surrounded by five hundred supporters, when a young artist offered to show him a picture that he had just painted of the General. As Obregon was admiring his portrait the young man took out a pistol and shot him four times, killing him on the spot.

The attorney Emilio Portés Gil was appointed provisional president on December 1, 1928. He did not change the anticlerical program of his predecessors at all, and the persecution continued. At the same time the strong tensions within the ruling party and the economic difficulties of the government suggested to the Cristeros that after two years of war and suffering victory was possible.

By the end of 1928 the Cristeros were in *de facto* control of the countryside in nearly half of the country. The massive offensive launched by

the Federal Army in the winter of 1928-29 was far from a success, despite the use of a great many troops supported by airplanes and armored vehicles. In March, 1929, the regime suffered its heaviest menace with the defection to the rebels of two generals, Manzo and Escobar, with their divisions. These defections clearly weakened the Federals, forcing them to open another front and encouraging the Cristeros to launch a general offensive throughout the country. Between March 3rd and May 15th, the Cristeros routed nearly thirty thousand federal troops and conquered the towns of Aguas Calientes, Tepic and Guadalajara, where they entered with the enthusiastic acclamation of the population. But during this offensive the Cristeros lost their Commander in Chief, General Goroztieta, and the offensive itself had to be stopped by the end of the spring due to lack of ammunition.

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The Cristeros were particularly offended by the partiality of the American government. The Federals were allowed to buy all sorts of weapons and ammunition in the States, while a strict embargo was applied to the Cristeros. Even the International Red Cross would not assist them. Various persons and groups raised their voices in protest of this policy of the U.S. government. In 1926, Archbishop Curley of Baltimore wrote to ask the government to stop supplying arms and ammunition to Calles, in order to limit his power to persecute believers. At their meeting in Philadelphia that year, the Knights of Columbus criticized the lack of coherence of a government that on the one hand was opposing Soviet Russia but on the other was assisting a similar regime in Mexico. In September 1927 the Catholic Dames of America wrote to President Coolidge expressing their astonishment at the White House's support for Calles' oppressive regime.

Even in the midst of these difficulties the insurrectionists were able to obtain significant victories. On April 19, 1929, the Cristero battalions, under the command of Father Reyes Vega, who were besieged in the town of Tepatitlan, achieved a surprising reversal and obtained an overwhelming victory over their besiegers. This surprising defeat of the Federals after those same troops had overcome the division of the rebel general Escobar left the whole country in a state of shock.

Seeing how the situation was evolving, President Portés Gil began to declare that he was ready to pacify the country. He told the press that "there is no conflict that cannot be terminated by mutual goodwill." (As we shall see, he was acting in bad faith.) Reacting to these comments, the Apostolic Delegate Leopoldo Ruiz y Flores, from his exile in New York, indicated in the name of the Mexican episcopacy his willingness to collaborate with the government in the pacification of the country.

There were many reasons to reach a truce. The years of civil war had devastated and impoverished the country, paralyzing the economy and creating terrible chaos. The Cristeros suffered from many handicaps: an inferior quantity of combatants and weapons, a lack of well-prepared generals, very limited support from the bishops – and the Holy See was purposely ambiguous on the matter. The U.S. government was very much concerned to put an end to the fighting, both to avoid the repercussions in the U.S. of a civil war in a neighboring country and to protect its oil investments. Most of the Mexican bishops considered that a military victory was not possible and were concerned that they could not keep Catholics constantly living in the exceptional circumstances of a clandestine religion.

In June an agreement was reached through the intervention of the more moderate bishops, the American Ambassador Dwight Morrow, and the Apostolic Delegate in the United States, Fumasoni-Biondi. Morrow had dubious credentials as a peace broker, having been a personal friend of Calles and a supporter of the appointment of Portés Gil; it was clear, moreover, that he was defending economic interests in his mediation. As a price for his intervention he obtained the modification of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, thereby permitting the granting of oil rights to American companies, and he also obtained permission for the opening of a branch of the Bank of New York in Mexico City. The negotiations, under Morrow's mediation, took place at the historical Castle of Chapultepec, where on June 21, 1929, an accord was signed.

It was not presented publicly as a peace agreement between the parties involved but instead took the form of a press release by the new Mexican president, Portés Gil. The government declared that it did not want to destroy or attack the Church, but simply to apply the existing laws. But those laws were deeply anti-Catholic and had been promulgated with the purpose of destroying the Church.

The government declared that the registration of the priests recognized by the government as active in the pastoral work of the Church was a mere administrative act that did not invade the rights of the hierarchy. It was permitted to teach religion in the churches. It was licit to present petitions for the reform of the laws.

In turn, the Apostolic Delegate Ruiz y Florez declared that the public worship in the churches would be restarted. Verbally and in a private way, Portés Gil promised amnesty for the Cristeros who would stop fighting and demanded the exile of the more hard-line bishops – Orozco, Gonzales y Valencia and Manriquez y Zarate. In flagrant violation of these agreements, the government murdered 500 leaders of the Cristeros, and around 5000 other persons were executed, most of them outside their homes and in the presence of their families.[15]

On June 29, the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul, the churches in Mexico were reopened and Mass was celebrated in public again, with all the churches bursting with faithful. As Father Georges Jarlot[16] notes, Pius XI had established three conditions for an agreement with the Mexican government: 1) the churches, rectories, convents and schools that had been confiscated had to be returned to the Church; 2) ecclesiastical property should be respected in the future; 3) the insurgents who gave up the fight should receive an amnesty. A different author argues that the Pope added another condition: the repeal of the repressive laws.[17]

It is evident that the government did not enter into this agreement in good faith, and that the Church's representatives were not as wise as they should have been. As Father Jarlot notes, "The legal conflict was not solved because the legislation was not modified."[18] The bad faith of Portés Gil comes through in a July 1929 statement he made at a Masonic banquet, where he declared that he was ready to guarantee that the anti-Catholic laws would be strictly enforced. He also added that in Mexico the State and Masonry were the same thing, because the men who had been in power in recent years were in solidarity with the revolutionary principles of Masonry.[19]

When this agreement became known, many Mexican Catholics felt that they had been betrayed by the hierarchy.[20] Many Cristeros believed that what had been signed was not an agreement but a surrender. The Church accepted a compromise that was clearly more favorable to the government than to the Church. On the basis of this agreement the Church could begin to function once more but with extremely onerous limitations. The priests legally allowed to fulfill their public ministry were extremely few: one for 33,000 faithful in Michoacan, one for 45,000 in Chihuahua, one for 60,000 faithful in Chiapas, and one for 100,000 faithful in Veracruz.

Pius XI, in his 1932 encyclical *Acerba Animi Anxitudu* on the Church and Mexico, denounced the Mexican government's violations of the agreement. He praised the clergy and people of Mexico and asked the nation's Catholics to defend the holy rights of the Church by prayer and Catholic Action. Referring to the very few priests who were legally allowed to function, the Holy Father wrote: "Everyone can see whether it is possible with such restrictions to administer the Sacraments to so many people scattered for the most part over a vast territory."

The Mexican government interpreted the Pope's reference to Catholic Action as incitement to rebellion. As a result, the apostolic delegate Ruiz was expelled for the third time. The confiscation of Church property was continued by President Lazaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), who also ordered that in all schools instruction should be given on the doctrines of socialism, Marxism and atheism, as well as sex education. These measures caused a wave of protest, and for a time a new version of the bloody Calles regime was feared. It soon became apparent that such unpopular decrees could be carried out only by force. The government had to retreat, important changes were made to the cabinet. However, the campaign to destroy the Church continued, culminating with the closure of the seminaries. The renewed persecution launched by President Cárdenas led to a reorganization of the Cristeros, who waged guerrilla warfare from 1935 to 1940. They were active in more than fifteen states in small groups, and they took selective actions against officers of the government.

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As the persecution against the Church continued, Pope Pius XI recommended in his 1937 encyclical *Firmissimam Constantiam* that Mexican Catholics organize peacefully, expand Catholic Action and maintain the Faith. Although in this document the Pope allowed for the lawfulness of armed resistance under

certain circumstances, he underlined that the use of violent means "does not enter in any manner in the task of the clergy" or Catholic associations. After nearly all seminaries had been closed, Pius XI accepted the offer of the American bishops to found a seminary in the United States for Mexicans who could not study in their own country. In September 1937 the Jesuit-run Papal National Seminary at Montezuma, New Mexico opened, and went on to train a great many priests who would be ordained to serve the Church in Mexico.

Typically we state that the persecutions in the end strengthen the Church, and that, as Tertullian said, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians. Has that happened in Mexico? I cannot provide a clear-cut answer. What is beyond dispute is that a number of factors have converged to limit the vitality of the Church in Mexico. To be sure, the traditional faith remained and in many ways was strengthened. Many in Mexico became more conscious of the grave errors of liberalism. At the same time, since few priests were allowed to exercise their ministry and others were operating in a clandestine way, their ability to evangelize was very much limited. Strong efforts to

Cristeros present arms to the Blessed Sacrament

teach the catechism were undertaken by Catholic Action and to some extent were successful in the cities, but vast groups of the population in rural areas were instructed only in a limited way. The monopoly of education by the state and the fact that this education had a strong liberal and secularist content has had serious effects on the Mexican people. It was only gradually after 1940, with the presidency of Manuel Avila Camacho (1940-46), that Catholic schools could be reestablished. The problem is that those schools have influenced only a minority of students.

A final note: on September 25, 1988, Pope John Paul II beatified Father Miguel Pro along with Father Junipero Serra, the great evangelizer of California, and Francesco Faà di Bruno (a scientist, military officer, inventor, organizer of all sorts of works of charity, and a late vocation to the priesthood who founded a religious order and was tenaciously persecuted by the Masonic establishment of the Italian Risorgimento). Liberals within the Church were very much annoyed by those beatifications. At the rather liberal parish where I was serving at the time in New York, I had the pleasure of preaching, with gusto, on the beatifications of Pro and Serra. I showed how Father Pro died holding a crucifix in his right hand and a rosary in his left. Four years later, the Pope beatified a group of twenty-five martyrs of the Mexican persecution, some priests and others laymen – including Manuel Morales, President of the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty. ✠

This essay was presented at the 2002 session of the Dietrich von Hildebrand Institute in Gardone, Italy, by Father Ignacio Barreiro, STD, who is Director of the Rome Office of Human Life International.

Notes

1 Javier García Gonazález, Tonatzin *Guadalupe y Juan Diego en el Nascimiento de Mexico* (Diana, Mexico, 2002), p. 137; Warren H. Carroll, *The Cleaving of Christendom* (Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press, 2000), p. 616.

2 Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri, *Le Mexique a la Fin du XVIIe Siècle, vu par un voyageur Italien* (Calmann-Levy, Paris, 1968), p. 96.

3 Teodoro Ignacio Jiménez Urresti, *Relaciones Reestrenadas entre el Estado Mexicano y La Iglesia, Estudio Teolólogico* "San Ildefonso," de Toledo, Universidad Pontifica de Salamanca, 1994, p. 14.

4 Dr. John C. Rao, *Americanism and the Collapse of the Church in the United States* (New York, 1995), p. 27. Dr. Rao is President of the Dietrich von Hildebrand Institute, where this publication can be obtained. Speaking of the problems that we find when Catholics seek to leave the world at large and find for themselves protected environments, he writes: "They become sectarian in their behavior, sometimes even psychologically ill like so many Protestant cults."

5 Father Wilfried Parsons, S.J., *Mexican Martyrdom, 1926-1935: Firsthand Experiences of the Relgious Persecution in Mexico* (Rockford, IL: TAN, 1987), p. 18.

6 María Teresa Jarquín y Carlos Herrejón, *Breve historia del Estado de Mexico* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico), 1996, p. 135.

7 Vicente Cárcel Ortí, *Persecusiones Religiosas y Mártires del Siglo XX* (Palabra, Madrid), p. 109.

8 Cristián Garay Vera, "La Contrarevolución en Hispanoamerica," Verbo, n. 317-318, September-October 1993, p. 797.

9 Jarquín y Herrejón, *Breve historia del Estado de Mexico*, op. cit., p. 135.

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