



## The Mexican Kulturkampf The Christeros and the Crusade for the Greater Glory of God

Persecution has been endemic to the Catholic Church for 2000 years. In 1871 Chancellor Otto von Bismarck initiated a *Kulturkampf* or *Culture War* against German Catholics that lasted for 20 years. He boarded up Catholic hospitals and schools and virtually eliminated Catholics from the public marketplace under the pretext that Church teachings were a hindrance to national unity and scientific progress.

### Calles Law

After its civil war and ensuing Industrial Revolution, a secular animus toward organized religion began to permeate American culture. By the turn of the century, its ideological seeds had filtered into America's neighboring countries, most importantly, Mexico. By 1917 secularism had bred a spirit of anti-clericalism that dominated Venustiano Carranza's government. In 1920 his successor and former ally Álvaro Obregón shared Carranza's anti-clerical sentiments, but he applied the measures selectively and only in areas where Catholic support was the weakest.

This uneasy *truce* between the government and the church ended with the 1924 election of Plutarco Elías Calles, a strident atheist and Freemason. A morose and stubborn man, Calles was a fanatic who was determined to make the Catholic Church subservient to his socialist rule. He not only applied the anti-clerical laws more severely throughout the country but also added more restricted legislation.

In June 1926 he signed the *Calles Law*, officially known as *The Law for Reforming the Penal Code*. This law provided strict penalties for priests and individuals who violated the provisions of the 1917 Constitution. Priests were fined 500 pesos, or about \$250 for wearing clerical garb and could be imprisoned five years for criticizing the government. The Calles Law enraged the Mexican Episcopate, which behind the scenes was working tirelessly to have the offending articles of the Constitution repealed. In Rome Pope Pius XI explicitly approved their non-violent means of resistance.

### A General Outrage

On July 14 the same year the bishops endorsed a plan for an economic boycott against the Calles regime. The boycott voluntarily limited economic activity in Mexican recreation, commerce, transportation and education. Catholics

stopped attending movies and plays, riding on buses or streetcars and Catholic teachers refused to teach in secular schools.

The Calles regime condemned the bishops' involvement as sedition. Calles enacted another law that made *the exercise of sacred ministry a crime worthy of capital punishment*. He boldly seized church property, expelled all foreign priests and closed the monasteries, convents and religious schools. In effect the Church could no longer own any property. All church buildings, including its seminaries, religious houses, episcopal residences and all its charitable institutions, now belonged to the state. Calles even used some churches as garages, museums and public meeting halls.

As a last resort the bishops suspended all remaining ministry and urged the people to protest the persecution of their faith. By October the boycott had collapsed, due mainly to lack of support from wealthy Catholics. As a result Mexico staggered under the explosive weight of general outrage and dissatisfaction with the Calles reign. The threat of violence escalated with each ensuing day. After the August 1926 siege of the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Guadalajara, which left many dead including the parish priest and his vicar, many Catholics decided to go to war against the regime's oppressive rule.

### The Hour of Battle

From the time of the early Roman persecutions, Christians have always been conflicted by their moral response to violence. Should they meekly turn the other cheek or fight fire with fire. While the bishops never officially supported the rebellion, the *Cristeros*, who were fighting for *Cristo Rey* or *Christ the King*, had their tacit understanding that this was a *just war*.

The *Cristeros* War officially began on January 1, 1927 with the manifesto *A la Nación (To the Nation)* that solemnly declared the hour of battle *has sounded* and *the hour of victory belongs to God*. Several armed uprisings erupted throughout Mexico. The *Cristeros*, who were often armed with only ancient muskets and clubs, invaded the *Los Altos* region northeast of Guadalajara and began seizing villages.

A throwback to the Catholics in the *Vendee* region during the French Revolution, the *Cristeros* fought valiantly for faith, family and Mexico. Seriously hampered by a lack of logistical supplies, the *Cristeros* had to rely on lightning raids of towns, trains and ranches in order to supply themselves with food, money, ammunition and horses. More importantly they lacked a central command and an overall strategy for final victory.

The Calles government did not take the *Cristeros* seriously at first because Calles had the support of the *agraristas*, his rural militia, who were also fervent Catholics. As a result he had not calculated such an impassioned response to his persecutions from mainstream Catholics. The *Cristeros* thrived against the *agraristas* but were always defeated by the *federales* who protected the major cities. In many towns and villages Calles' soldiers hanged many priests and their vicars. Calles' church atrocities only strengthened the *Cristeros'* resolve to continue the war.

The tide turned in 1928 as the *Cristeros* became better organized. However on June 2 Enrique Gorostieta Velarde was ambushed and killed. A former general and a keen strategist, he had been largely responsible for their sustained success on the battlefield. With some 50,000 men still under arms, the *Cristeros* had made their point. However their war would not end on the battlefield but at the bargaining table.

### Ham and Eggs Diplomacy

In October 1927, Dwight Whitney Morrow, whose daughter Ann would marry Charles Lindbergh, was summoned by his old Amherst College classmate President Calvin Coolidge to be the American Ambassador to Mexico. His first major task was to address the chaos caused by President Calles' oppression of the Catholic Church. Not unlike Jack Kennedy in appearance, his banter was so laced with wit and Yankee charm that President Calles was enthralled.

The new Ambassador initiated a series of breakfast meetings with President Calles at which they discussed a wide range of issues from the *Cristeros* to oil and irrigation. This earned him the sobriquet *ham and eggs diplomat*. Morrow was bitterly opposed to many of Calles' policies and vowed at the very least to restore a modicum of religious freedom for Mexico's Catholics. As a U. S. diplomat, Morrow also had to look at the larger economic issues that included regional security and America's energy needs.

The matter was complicated by the fact that Morrow was not a Catholic. To maintain his credibility, he had to demonstrate his abject neutrality. Fortunately he was a true Mexicophile, with a genuine affection and love for the Mexican people and their traditions. He enjoyed wandering through public markets buying pottery and talking with the market vendors. Morrow received invaluable assistance from Father John J. Burke of the National Catholic Welfare Conference.

The waters of diplomacy were seriously muddied after Obregón was elected to replace Calles, whose term had expired on December 1, 1927. Two weeks after his election, José de León

Tora, a young Catholic fanatic and sidewalk artist, while calmly sketching a profile of Obregón in a Mexico City café, promptly shot him in the head. This impetuous act gravely damaged the peace accords while costing the *Cristeros* a great deal of political capital.

### The Pealing of the Bells

The Mexican Congress named Emilio Portes interim president in September of 1928. He sanctioned Morrow and Burke's continued efforts in the peace process. The next day, exiled Archbishop Leopoldo Ruíz y Flores issued a statement the bishops would not demand the repeal of the laws, only their more lenient application.

With strong church support, Morrow managed to bring the warring parties to an agreement on June 21, 1929. His office drafted a pact called the *arreglos* (agreement) that allowed worship to resume and additional concessions that stated that only priests who were named by hierarchal superiors would be required to register. While the pact allowed for religious instruction in the churches, it was still proscribed in the schools. But all citizens, including the clergy, would be allowed to petition the government to reform the laws.

The most important part of the agreement was that the church would recover its property rights. Under the agreement the state technically still owned church property but there was literally no enforcement, giving the church and its clergy de facto control over its land and buildings. When the *arreglos* was announced, most of the Catholic *Cristeros* went home, thinking that the fight for freedom of worship had been won. Some *Cristeros* complained that since they did not have a seat at the peace table, the church had betrayed them and they continued the war.

With the *arreglos* in hand, the bishops called for an end to the war and even threatened recalcitrant *Cristeros* with excommunication. The remaining rebels were captured and summarily executed, ending the war on a sour note. On June 27, 1929, church bells rang in Mexico for the first time in nearly three years.

### For the Greater Glory

The film industry has always had a fascination with History. The *Cristeros* War piqued their recent interest. A new film with a limited run, *For Greater Glory*, debuted early this summer, starring Peter O'Toole and Andy Garcia.

This somewhat romanticized movie version of the *Cristeros War* begins with President Calles berating Mexico's Catholics as *outcasts from Rome* and *fanatics of foreign interests*. *For Greater Glory* dramatizes the variegated reactions of thousands of Catholics to Calles' anti-clerical policies. His outlawing of public worship and pledges to deport anyone who protests ultimately sparks what had all the ingredients of a *just crusade* against the secularization of the Church and the loss of its religious freedom.

The major difference between *Glory* and many of the traditional Christian movies, such as *The Sign of the Cross*, *The Silver*

*Challice* and even *Ben Hur*, with its throngs of singing Christians valiantly on their way to face the lions, is that thousands of Mexicans took up the sword to resist their persecution.

This created many visible conflicts of religious conscience. Many like Father Christopher, an old, small-town parish priest who mentored a young boy named José Luis Sanchez del Rio, went meekly to their deaths with complete resignation to God's will, while others viciously and without any show of mercy killed the church's enemies.

Over and above the carnage and the diplomatic maneuvering was the deep and unshakeable religious faith of the Mexican people in the face of overwhelming odds. Many of these Catholics willingly faced the cross of suffering and even death with dignity and aplomb. The movie drew much of its dramatic strength from the internal struggles of Garcia's character Enrique Gorostieta Velarde, who had been a popular general with many victories. Gorostieta's love of Mexico and its struggle for religious freedom transcends his inner conflict of conscience between his saintly wife's Catholicism and his personal atheism. His death in battle effectively ended the *Cristeros* fight.

### Battleground for the Faith

The *Cristeros War* claimed the lives of some 90,000 people, including 56,882 *federales*, 30,000 *Cristeros*, and numerous civilians. Several of the Catholics killed in this war have been beatified or canonized. The most famous is Miguel Pro, SJ. Blessed, who though seriously ill returned to Mexico from Spain. While secretly ministering to the poor, he was falsely accused of being part of an assassination plot on former President Calles. In the sanguine tradition of Thomas Becket, Thomas More and John Fisher, he was sentenced and executed without a trial. His beatification took place in 1988.

Pope Pius XI was instrumental in garnering opposition to the Calles regime. Many Catholics believed that Mexico, more than Russia, had become the major *battleground for the faith*. The pope condemned the press for creating a *conspiracy of silence* with regard to the atrocities committed against Catholics in Mexico, which was 97% Catholic, during this war and its aftermath.

Over a 10-year period the Pope addressed the Mexican crisis in three encyclicals, as well as countless letters and diplomatic appeals for assistance. Pius XI acknowledged the *longsuffering resistance of the clergy to the anti-Catholic laws of Mexico and compared these many Mexican martyrs to those of the French Revolution*.

Unfortunately the Morrow peace accords did not last very long. The persecutions resumed in 1931. Pius XI condemned the Mexican government again in his 1932 encyclical *Acerba Animi*. This grave situation continued until 1940 when President Manuel Ávila Camacho returned the Mexican churches to the Catholic Church. The effects of the war on the church were profound. During the persecution the Mexican clergy dropped from 4,500 priests to only 334 priests for 15 million people in 1935. Many Mexican states had no priests at all.

### Same Enlightened Trough

As Mexico entered the mid-20th century the hostility and lingering persecutions from the Calles' regime had nearly ceased to exist. Before 1940 the church legally did not have any real estate, including schools, monasteries or convents. Its priests had no legal right to defend themselves publicly or even in courts and there was little hope for improvement. With the election of Manuel Ávila Camacho in 1940 things changed. In exchange for the Church's pledge to maintain peace, Ávila agreed to relax most of the anti-clerical provisions, except the right to free association and political free speech.

A case can be made that both presidents Calles and Barack Obama have supped at the same *enlightened trough*. Both appear to have attempted, not so much the physical destruction of the Catholic Church, but more its eventual incorporation as a department of the state. Both have tried to enlist the Catholic Church as compliant co-conspirators in their policies. Calles regarded the priesthood as a public profession, not unlike doctors and lawyers who could be regulated by the government. Obama sees them as naive dreamers who can be easily manipulated by his fake pleas for social justice and false compassion for the poor.

The recent Supreme Court decision, National Federation of Independent Business vs. Sebelius, reaffirmed the shaky constitutionality of the ObamaCare mandate that will force Catholic and other religious institutions to provide abortifacients, among other proscribed medical procedures. This has put the religious liberty of the church back in the crosshairs. The Roberts' decision bodes poorly for the Catholic Church unless its prelates can muster the continued courage to register their outrage at the voting booth in November. They might look south to the *Cristeros* for divine inspiration.

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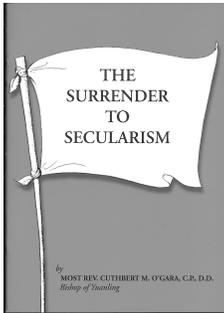
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