The Conflict of the Candle, the Compass, and the Constitution – The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution

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April 21, 2015

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution

To break down the power and authority of the Church was to break down the order and structure of Mexican society

Each of the following time frames contained a unique type of struggle for power over the soul of Mexico

- **1821 – 1908** Independence, creation of a nation, through the early revolutionary years
- **1910 – 1920** The core revolutionary years
- **1926 – 1940** The years of open conflict between the Church and the government

An asterisk (*) placed next to an item signifies a topic for which exists the need for additional research (Term paper, thesis, or dissertation, anyone?

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 1

Pivotal Dates for the Catholic Church in the slow process of independence and creation of a nation:

1810-15 Secular priests Miguel Hidalgo and José Morelos lead the charge for independence. Both martyred

1821 – **Plan of Iguala** proclaimed – Religion (the Catholic Church), independence from Spain, and social equality via a constitutional monarchy

1821-34 – Chaos in the Church hierarchy due to cessation of Patronato Real. Who would pick the bishops? 16 of 17 vacant.* Church supports Iturbide as emperor in the early 20's. Church perceived as led by foreigners at a time of great nationalism.

1824 – New constitution ratified. Article 3 proclaims the Catholic Church as the national religion and prohibits the exercise of any other religion

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 1

Pivotal Dates for the Catholic Church in the slow process of independence and creation of a nation:

1825-1855 – Struggles between Liberals and Conservatives – Revolutionary rehearsal

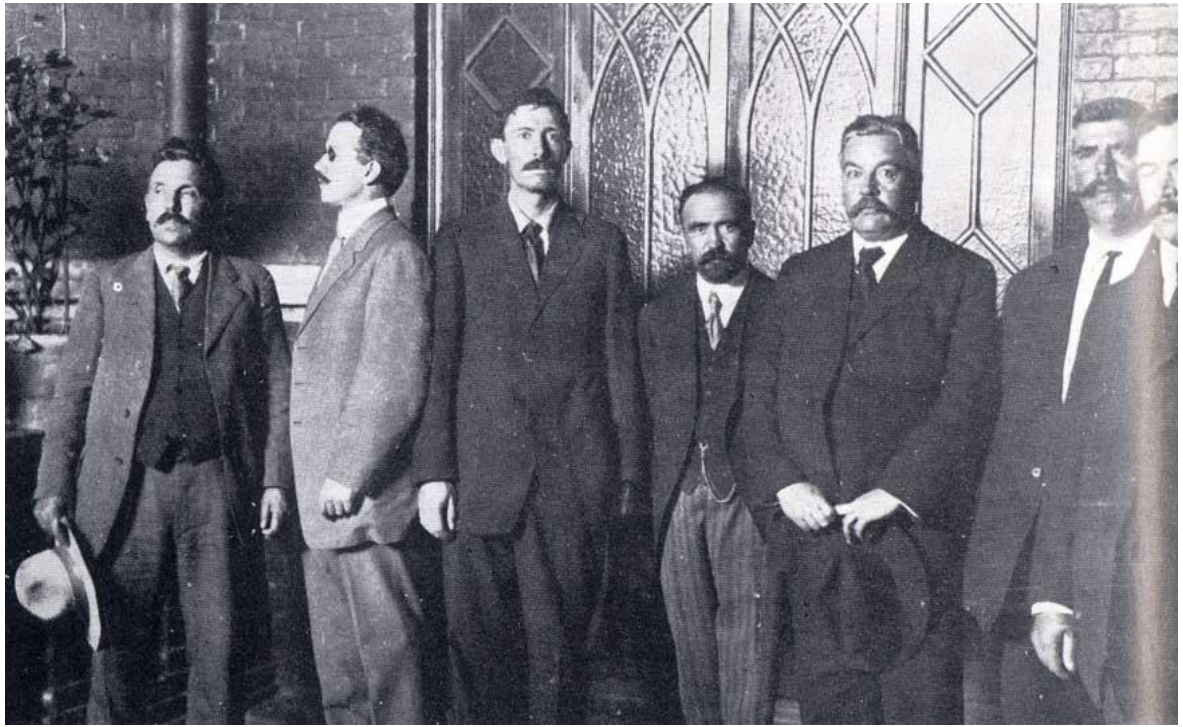
1857 – A liberal constitution limited the rights of the Church: property, political acts, religious courts, and ensured freedom of religion (implicitly)

1864-67 – After Reform Wars, Church supports French Emperor Maximilian*

1867-76 – Liberals in power. Church loses significant influence, prestige and power. Protestants actively proselytizing

1876-1908 – Díaz in power. Church regains some strength, but plays no significant role (other than at a local level) in the early (1890's) revolutionary struggles

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 2



Maderistas in Mexico City – Diversity of Faith*

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 2

The Church is uncertain, but experiences change in the early revolutionary timeframe (1890's – 1908)

- Prefers the status quo (Díaz) who ignored anti-clerical laws
- It is trying to find its way in a new reality – dealing with both Protestant and Liberal threats. Fails to comprehend the breadth and scope of the impending revolution
- The Catholic Congress met in 1903 in Puebla to initiate a new emphasis on social needs, welfare, and labor issues. This marked a new beginning for the Church in an emergent theological context that included an **increased role for the laity in Church affairs,** recognizing the local nature of faith.
  * This lessened the tension between lay and clergy

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 2

- May 1911 – The National Catholic Party (Partido Católico Nacional) is created and hesitantly supports Madero for the presidency. Over the next several years it has great success in local and state elections. Short lived
- David Bailey writes that by 1913 the Church "would again play a central role in Mexican public life, not as the defender of a discredited past, but as agent of progress."
- The chaos of the revolution from 1913 to 1920 interrupted this progress, as anticlericalism grew and the Church hierarchy struggled to find its voice.
- The Church failed to support any revolutionary party, thus angering and alienating all. Was perceived as anti-revolutionary. The revolution became a competing religion, spawning anticlericalism

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 2

Anticlericalism in Mexico was not a monolithic movement. It had many different voices and motivations during the revolutionary timeframe. It was usually, but not always specifically aimed at the Catholic Church

- Protestant opposition to Catholicism – competition for souls
- Liberal anticlericalism:
  - Could be mild or severe (Iconoclasm*)
  - Desire for a greater piety – return to spiritual authority
  - Could be motivated by a desire for rationale, scientific thought – most often reflected in schools/teachers (more teachers than priests were killed in the revolutionary years)
- Personal opposition due to negative experience or bias
- Competition with government for authority over the people

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 2

Álvaro Obregón Attending Wedding of Secretary and Calles' Daughter

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 2

Revolutionaries varied in their opposition to the Church:

Madero was supportive, but distant. He was a Spiritist

Huerta* manipulated and used the Church to his benefit

Carranza's* constitutionalists were often aggressive and belligerent in their anticlericalism. He was above it all, showing significant favor to Protestants

Villa respected the institution, but could treat individual clerics badly if they were Spanish, or he thought them hypocritical. Treated Mormons well

Obregón* scolded the Church and called for a return to piety. He welcomed the Mennonites

Calles was a hardliner. His strident anticlericalism and strong pro-government position caused two wars and was a factor in two rebellions. He was not an atheist, as often claimed – was healed by a curandero and practiced Spiritism

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 2

The Constitution of 1917, created under Carranza's influence, created a firestorm of protest from the Church. In part it included:

- Freedom of religious beliefs
- Education free from any religious doctrine
- The elimination of monastic orders
- Required public worship to be performed inside a church
- A ban on churches acquiring real property. All church property was nationalized
- A ban on foreign ministers
- The right of local officials to restrict the number of clergy

Until Calles' strict enforcement began in 1925, these provisions were only selectively enforced against Catholic churches and clergy. They were rarely enacted against those of other faiths.

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 2

Bishop Francis Kelley of Oklahoma City – Typified the Strong American Catholic Advocacy for Mexican Catholics During these Years

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 2

Non-Catholic Religious Groups in the Revolution:

- **Protestants:**
  - Experienced slow to moderate growth after 1870
  - Benefited greatly from the anti-clericalism of the revolution
  - Were welcomed and used as a wedge against Catholics
  - Fought disproportionately (2% versus 30% at Juarez) in the revolution – for this loyalty, they were applauded by the revolutionary liberals.* Their theology was revolutionary by its very nature.* Accused of U.S. advocacy, they were instead paternalistic
  - Well-known Protestant Generals included Orozco, Hernandez, Blanco, the Osuna brothers, Trinidad Rodriguez and Contreras
  - The Plan of Cincinnati (1916) divided Mexico and created chaos
  - Achieved high political positions, especially in Carranza regime
  - Almost achieved presidency of Mexico – Aaron Sáenz in 1928*

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 2

FAMILY OF REV. EZEKIEL FERNANDEZ
PASTOR OF CHURCH AT TOLUCA, MEXICO

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 2

Non-Catholic and non-Protestant Religious Groups in the Revolution:

- **Mormons** (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints)
  - A U.S. founded faith (1830) that moved from place to place across the country to escape persecution
  - Arrived in Mexico in the 1880's to escape persecution related to plural marriage and to proselytize. Initially settled in Sonora and Chihuahua
  - Achieved great economic gains which last to this day
  - Never truly integrated into Mexican society – Very U.S. oriented, ethnocentric, and very endogamous*
  - Made three exoduses from Mexico during the revolutionary timeframe (1912, 1915, and 1917)
  - Provided much need supplies and material (voluntarily and involuntarily) to various revolutionary groups
  - Never quite understood the complexities of the various revolutionary parties

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 2

Mormons Preparing to Leave Mexico in 1912 for the United States

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 2

Non-Catholic and non-Protestant Religious Groups in the Revolution:

- **Mennonites:**
  - An old group (early 1500's) who moved from country to country because of persecution
  - During and after WWI sought to emigrate from western Canada because of religious persecution and stricter laws
  - Were welcomed to Mexico by Obregón due to revolutionary devastation. Initially settled in Durango and Chihuahua
  - Were guaranteed the "Privilegium"* in perpetuity – five unique rights not granted to any other Mexicans (still honored)
  - Great economic success; live in isolated communities
  - Did not meet all of Obregón's hopes for their immigration due to their endogamous nature

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 2

Mennonites Preparing to Leave Canada for Mexico

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 3

The Catholic Church hierarchy and laity decide to take a stand against anticlericalism and the Constitution of 1917:

- The laity creates the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty (Liga Nacional Defensora de la Libertad Religiosa) in 1925
- 1926 Pope Pius XI writes the first of three letters declaring against the religious articles in the Constitution of 1917
- The U.S. Catholic Church encourages the U.S. government to intervene. This is without success
- An economic boycott was begun (with mixed success) and in July 1926 the hierarchy ceased the performance of all sacraments. This “strike” by the priests lasted three years and was partly responsible for enflaming the faithful to war

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 3

The Cristero War (1926-1929) was a bloody and terrible conflict. It was a response by the laity to the Church's struggle with the government. The theological rationale* (often overlooked) for the fighting included:

- **An Exclusive Soteriology**: No salvation outside the Church
- **Blood Atonement**: The blood of the martyr's sacrifice in enduring torture and death was a reciprocal offering to Christ
- **Eschatology**: A better place waiting for the martyr after death
- **Ecclesiology**: The church was the source of authority and essential to the efficacy of the sacraments and salvation. It had to prevail over the secular government
- **Divine Intervention and Protection**: God is active on behalf of the faithful. Many instances of divine protection were reported. Theophanies or hierophanies are common

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 3

Cristero-era interesting and influential Catholic bishops* whose lives deserve more research:

- **Juan Maria Fortino Navarrete y Guerrero** – Bishop of Sonora, at his appointment the youngest Catholic bishop in the world, and at his death, the oldest Catholic bishop in the world. His slogan during the Second Cristiada “De Sonora al Cielo” inspired his flock.
- **José Maria González Valencia** – Archbishop of Durango, a fiery and outspoken advocate for the struggle. Encouraged resistance, represented the Mexican Church in Rome, and regularly played chess with rode horses with Francisco Villa at his hacienda at Canutillo, Durango
- **Francisco Orozco y Jiménez** – Archbishop of Jalisco, a charismatic, articulate, and brave bishop who resisted exile by hiding all over his state
- **Antonio Guízar y Valencia** – Bishop of Chihuahua who kept peace in his state by ordering his flock not to fight on penalty of excommunication

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 3

- The Church hierarchy as a whole gave conflicting signals to the laity. As a group, they neither condemned nor endorsed the rebellion. Most bishops went into exile, so their influence was lessened
- The League tried to raise money and support in the United States, but without much success
- The fighting was predominantly in the west and west central part of the country. Estimates vary widely as to the casualties – from 30,000 to 90,000 deaths on both sides of the conflict

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 3

- An agreement known as a *Modus Vivendi* was negotiated by American and Mexican clergy, representatives of the Vatican, Dwight Morrow, the U.S. ambassador, and Calles in 1929. It brought a temporary end to the conflict, but satisfied no one.
- The faithful were unhappy with their leaders, both in the Church and in the government.
- Virtually every Cristero leader was killed by the government in the months and years after the agreement was signed
- The dissatisfaction with the agreement by all parties set the stage for the eruption of new conflict a few years later in the lesser known Second Cristiada

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 3

The Second Cristiada – Little known, but extremely violent – 1932-1938**

Very strict enforcement of the laws relating to the number of clergy drove the Church, in some states to virtual extinction

Iconoclasm* reached its pinnacle, much more so than with the Carrancistas, who were often blamed for their wanton destructiveness

Fighting was more active in the north, especially in Durango, southern Coahuila, and Sonora (where iconoclasm was rampant)

Fighting was of a guerilla nature, very angry, and very violent. Small numbers of fighters caused great damage to the federals

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution – Period 3

- Healing of the wounds of the two Cristiadas did not truly begin until President Manuel Avila Camacho's famous declaration "Soy creyente" (I am a believer) late in 1940. This amazing admission (for a 20th century Mexican President) is sometimes heralded as the "end of the revolution."
- Camacho had served under Carranza, so he was considered a true revolutionary. His older brother Maximino Avila Camacho* had been one of the most violent of all revolutionary Generals and was the cacique of Puebla
- However, it took until 1992 for the most restrictive of the anticlerical clauses of the 1917 Constitution to be removed or amended

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution

In summary, the Catholic Church was severely tested and tried during the 19th century and the first four decades of the 20th. Many say it was weaker when that tested ended; some say it was stronger . . .

I tend to agree with the latter. Mexican faith is first and foremost a local faith. It is the story of personal faith more than priestly formalities. Through the turmoil of the revolution:

- The Church grew more sensitive to the social needs of the people. It became a religion of choice
- The faithful rallied around their local priests and schools
- The Church was less political, returning to its spiritual roots
- The faithful fought and died for their faith in Cristo Rey and la Virgen de Guadalupe. They were faithful . . . even unto death

The Catholic Church in the Mexican Revolution

Conclusion

We, therefore, end this book where we began. On a thousand hills and in millions of hearts, the individual lives out his or her faith in the manner that has the most personal and intimate meaning. The revolution did not stifle La Llorona's cries. Curanderos are still active in administering the cures needed by the masses who believe. Personal religion is that which has endured, whether it finds its expression in the glossolalia of the Pentecostal or the elaborate simplicity of the altarcito or home altar. Mexicans today have great freedom to observe the grand rituals, to prefer the quiet reflection of the capilla, or simply to tip their hats as they ride by the church. Perhaps that is ultimately what the revolution was all about. In that sense, it was profoundly successful.

Phil Stover in *Religion and Revolution in Mexico's North: Even Unto Death . . . Tengamos Fe*