

The Place of the Church In Mexico's New Democracy

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Spanish colonial saints from the Museum of International Folk Art Collections, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Vicente Fox himself may not have imagined the political impact two photographs taken during his campaign and published on the front page of the influential daily *Reforma* would have. In one, shot a few days before formally beginning the campaign, he is waving the standard of Our Lady of Guadalupe in a gesture reminiscent of Father Miguel Hidalgo, who

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launched the struggle for Mexico's independence. Fox was the first presidential candidate to openly use the country's best known religious symbol to publicly reaffirm his faith. And, even though the electoral authorities fined him for breaking the law, Fox made it very clear that he would not be intimidated by political reaction to this kind of rash move.

In the other photograph, taken after his election, Fox is receiving commu-

nion at Sunday mass at his ranch in Guanajuato. Previously, no political figure of the party in power, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), had been photographed at any religious service or activity. Without uttering a word, Fox broke that seven-decade-long anticlerical tradition as eloquently as he possibly could.

Liberal fears among academics, intellectuals and Jacobins are rising. Does Fox's victory mean the Catholic

Church will have the political opportunity to recover its privileges and have an ally in government so it can impose its moral agenda? After all, the president is a fervent Catholic and his party, the National Action Party, is known for its strict social conservatism.

Concern on the part of liberal and anticlerical groups makes perfect sense in the light of the tumultuous history of relations between church and state in Mexico. In contrast to the United

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States, where the separation of the two was a constituent part of the new nation's founding, in Mexico, that separation came out of a nineteenth-century civil war, the War of the Reform, in which the victorious liberals stripped the church of its privileges and economic and political power. Before that, the church controlled education, hospitals, cemeteries and the registration of births through baptismal documents (which to this day still serve as proof of birth date for Mexican migrants in the United States) and possessed large expanses of land that turned it into the government's main creditor. In fact, the church was a state within the state.

For the liberal elite, it was clear that any attempt to build a modern state would have to contend with the opposition of the clergy, which also exercised absolute control over a populace that was in its majority, rural, illiterate and Catholic.

The liberal victory and the resultant separation of church and state did not eliminate the power or the influence that the church had in politics. Porfirio Díaz, a liberal but pragmatic general



Norberto Rivera Carrera, archbishop of Mexico.

who governed from 1864 to 1910 (with a brief, four-year break) understood that perfectly well. He had to seek the support of the church to pacify a nation that found in a dictatorship the means to achieve the political stability that would make Mexico's first wave of industrialization possible.

The Catholic Church's marriage to Díaz led it to make political errors that would take decades to overcome. It underestimated the strength of the political elite who made the Mexican Revolution and finally toppled Díaz from power. Through the National Catholic Party, it harshly questioned Francisco I. Madero, Mexico's first demo-

cratically elected president in the twentieth century. Worse still, it supported the coup d'état against Madero in 1913, a coup which would give rise to a truly bloody phase of the revolution in which 1.5 million Mexicans would die, 10 percent of the total population.

It is not surprising that, once in power, the revolutionaries saw the Catholic Church as their worst enemy and that when writing the new Constitution in 1917, they decided to go further than the liberals of 1857: they eliminated the church's legal standing, prohibited the clergy from criticizing the laws and from wearing clerical garb in the street or saying mass outside the churches. From 1926 to 1929, Mexico experienced an insurrection against President Plutarco Elías Calles' religious policy, which, among other things, compelled all priests in the country to register with the state, designated a specific number of priests per number of inhabitants and forced bishops and priests to close many churches. A civil war, known as the Cristero War, originated in Western Mexico. Many historians estimate that the death toll was 200,000, four times more than the number of U.S. soldiers killed in Vietnam. Finally, the need to stabilize the country forced the revolutionary generals to strike a political pact with the church. They arrived at a modus vivendi in which the state would not apply the anticlerical constitutional articles and laws, while the church would not question the new regime that had emanated from the revolution, nor would it involve itself in political activities. This arrangement, forged in 1929, would last more than five decades until then-President Carlos Salinas pushed through constitutional amendments to reestablish the church's legal standing, although he maintained important lim-

itations, such as not allowing it to own any mass media or take a public position against existing legislation.

This quick overview of the past is repeated daily in the debate about church-state relations and when liberals and anticlerics express their fears about Fox's affinity with the Catholic Church. The fears are well founded, but perhaps exaggerated. Mexico is no longer the rural country it was in the 1920s, nor are illiteracy levels what they were in the past. The advance of new religious groups is a fact and in some southern states like Chiapas and Tabasco, the population is divided among Catholics and a myriad of other religions. The Ministry of the Interior's Office of Religious Associations has registered more than 5,000 religious groups nationwide. Nevertheless, the fears are grounded given Fox's social conservatism: he is an opponent of abortion and critical of homosexuality. But above all, they are grounded in the policies his party has enforced at a local level: local PAN officials have caused scandals by censoring photographic and painting exhibits; in 1995 in Guadalajara, they forbid female public employees from wearing miniskirts; in Mérida, the city government has banned films and paintings showing nudity; in Monterrey, they prohibited table dance; and in another city, a bust of Benito Juárez—the main icon of Mexican liberalism, the man who decreed the separation of church and state—was taken out of the town's main plaza and replaced by a statue of the Archangel Gabriel, unveiled by the state governor, also a PAN member.

Two other episodes in which the PAN confirmed its complicity with the Catholic Church had an even greater impact and received broader coverage in the

Mexican media. In the first case, state officials in Baja California prevented a young girl, impregnated by her rapist, from aborting, even though she had both the legal right and court's authorization to do so. In the second case, the legislature of Guanajuato, Fox's home state, approved a law a few weeks after the presidential election prohibiting abortion across the board, including cases of incest, rape or congenital deformation. Reaction was so strong nationwide that



Samuel Ruiz García, former bishop of Chiapas.

Guanajuato's governor, also a PAN member, had to veto the law after being coaxed by Fox himself and members of his team exercising damage control. The incident showed that Fox, together with the moderate wing of the PAN, almost undistinguishable from the outside because of the clerical veil that covers the whole party, are aware that a modern PAN must be tolerant and distance itself from scandals rooted in matters which are not relevant to the country's political and economic agenda: the fight against poverty and inequality, the consolidation of a political reform and the modernization of the economy.

What the Jacobins and the liberals do not understand is that the country's political opening, reflected in greater freedom of expression and demonstration, has also been taken advantage of by the Catholic Church and groups close to it like the Pro-Life organization, nationally recognized for its fight against abortion, to exert pressure on the authorities. The new political situation has opened up the way for the church to continue taking advantage

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of the spotlight the media usually shines on it to express its position or to publicize its pastoral letters.

But for those who are anticlerical, accustomed for decades to a church silent on political matters and which only recovered its voice little by little as the ancien régime collapsed, the church's political activism is not read as an inevitable part of the freedom that democracy brings. A more objective vision of the role of the Catholic Church in the new political situation should take into account at least three key points: first, the power and influence the church actually has and is perceived to have; second, its agenda and inter-

ests as an institution; and, finally, its place in the new political and social pluralism of a more modern Mexico.

JUST HOW BROAD IS THE CHURCH'S INFLUENCE?

A paternalistic view of the population is all-pervasive in Mexico. The reason the 1917 Constituent Assembly restricted the Catholic Church's political activities was its belief that the priests could manipulate and organize the populace against the new state born of the revolution. The framers of the Constitution thought that limiting the church but not individuals' exercise of religious belief would make it possible to defend the state from possible political attacks. That is, from the very beginning the political elite assumed that religious influence over the population was equivalent to an ability to politically influence its behavior. Although even today in rural areas the priest is the community's natural leader, and in some cases that influence is used, in effect, to political ends, this impression of the church's power to manipulate grew in recent years after the incredible mobilizations during the Pope's visits to Mexico or given the important role in the conflict in Chiapas of the former bishop of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Samuel Ruiz, seen by a local and federal political elite as the person responsible for the existence of the guerrilla movement in the state.

Nevertheless, one thing is the exceptional response during the Pope's visit, the outpouring on city streets, the response of a popular Catholicism or the tradition of pilgrimages to different sanctuaries throughout the country. Something quite different is the degree to

which the church is able to influence politically, and observers often forget that there is no automatic correlation between the two. In fact, the bishops themselves recognize the great pastoral challenge what they call the divorce between faith and life is, the separation between believing and behaving according to certain values. The advance of non-Catholic denominations in the country, the prevalence of so-called

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“anti-values” on television, in films and in other media even makes one doubt the effectiveness of the church's 500 years of evangelizing.

On the political level, the perception of the church's power was linked to its ability to question the electoral frauds of a regime that had neither credibility, nor an effective way of assuaging that criticism given political parties' and nongovernmental organizations' efforts to defend the vote, plus the criticisms of national and foreign press. The media played an important part in this perception when it disseminated the criticisms of certain bishops which the government had no way to

counter. On one occasion, after Sunday mass outside the cathedral, a reporter asked the former cardinal and archbishop of Mexico, Ernesto Corripio, what it felt like to have so much power. Corripio replied, “I have no more power than you journalists give me.” And he was right.

The political activism of Bishop Samuel Ruiz —today honorary bishop in retirement— in Chiapas also contributed to increasing the image of a politicized church, although that does not take into account the fact that the country has 110 bishops in 58 dioceses and 14 archdioceses, of whom no more than eight regularly make statements to the national press. It also does not take into account the fact that Mexico, the country with the second largest Catholic population in the world, has fewer priests (around 12,000 for a population of about 75 million Catholics), fewer bishops and even fewer cardinals (three) than the United States (which has nine).

There are even some rather surrealistic situations that favor the political perception of a powerful church, ignoring its weaknesses: in the last five years, the Mexican government has awarded two papal nuncios (Gerónimo Prigione and Justo Mullor) the highest decoration that can be given to a foreigner; PRI members and politicians in general condemn the Catholic Church's “participation” in politics, but presidential candidates —as well as candidates for governors' seats and other elected posts— meet with bishops and priests; federal officials attend sessions of the Bishops Conference to explain specific issues of economic policy or the current status of reforms on the national agenda; in 1999 President Zedillo was the guest of honor at the inau-

guration of the cathedral in Ecatepec, a municipality in the Mexico City metropolitan area with more than a million inhabitants, an event the likes of which had not occurred in Mexico for a century. In the last elections, the left presidential candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) proposed broadening out the clergy's political rights, among them the right to run for public office; but the PRD general secretary in Mexico City —of which Cárdenas had been mayor— asked the Minister of the Interior to admonish Mexico's cardinal archbishop for criticizing the PRD's support of a bill to decriminalize abortion.

Now that Mexican democracy has passed the test of alternating in office, the church's political strength cannot be measured against an administration with which it shares fundamental tenets of social conservatism. Today, the true political strength of the Catholic Church will be measured by its ability to impose its moral agenda on an increasingly diverse, plural society and to successfully lobby for its institutional agenda.

THE CHURCH'S AGENDA

The road ahead looks rocky. The church is against abortion; it supports religious education in public schools; it wants the right to acquire its own media, although many bishops would prefer that the market be closed so as not to have to compete with other religions better prepared to use the media. All this would imply that it should become stronger vis-à-vis not only an administration that it is ideologically akin to, but also a more mod-

ern, diverse society, particularly in the large urban areas.

Nevertheless, the Fox administration does not have a majority in Congress (the PAN has 206 out of 500 deputies and 46 out of 128 senators); 19 out of 32 states are governed by the PRI; and society is increasingly plural and diverse, making the imposition of a conservative agenda not at all easy or automatic. Neither the PRI nor the PRD would

Anti-clericalists, accustomed to a church silent on political matters, do not see its political activism as an inevitable part of the freedom of a democracy.

support an agenda that gave more freedom to the Catholic Church, and around issues like abortion, things are even more polarized. Religious education in public schools is a very delicate question and would have to overcome, among other obstacles, the opposition of a more-than-one-million-strong teachers union with a solid anticlerical tradition. Allowing the Catholic Church to own communications media will open up the market to all the different religious organizations, some of them better equipped than the Catholics for acquiring a broad audience through them.

With democracy, the Catholic Church is discovering that to effec-

tively implement its agenda, it will have to take on a public role that has often made it uncomfortable because of the criticism that its activism will inevitably draw. But it will have to assume that role because it will not be enough to politically agree with an administration if the latter does not have the clout to reform the legal framework that still restricts the church's field of action.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S PLACE IN A DEMOCRACY?

Enrique Tarancón, cardinal archbishop of Madrid, said that the Spanish church's most important challenge after Franco was to find its proper place in a democracy. In Mexico, liberals will have to accept and recognize the rights of an institution like the Catholic Church. Bishops and priests will increasingly have to recognize more values like tolerance, pluralism and diversity and will have to subject their ideas to debate with others who, even though they disagree with the clergy's positions, must be capable of establishing a dialogue that will strengthen what has taken so long to build in Mexico: a democracy that goes beyond elections.

To the extent that the criticisms of the Catholic Church's political participation give way to criticisms of its positions, and to the extent that the church itself accepts a debate about what until now it has considered unquestionable with those who oppose its agenda, democracy will find a place for an institution with an undeniable and inevitable social and political presence, but will also contribute to preserving the essential pluralism of a new regimen that will take time to consolidate. ■■■