

The Vatican in Mexico And the New Evangelization of America

Ricardo Ampudia*

After John Paul II's recent visit to Mexico, *Voices of Mexico* asked Ricardo Ampudia, author of a new book about the Vatican's influence in Mexico, for an article about his book, the importance of the visit and its impact in Latin America.

La *Iglesia de Roma. Estructura y presencia en México*¹ (The Church of Rome. Structure and Presence in Mexico) is a book born of a genuine and very personal interest in knowing what the church is, how it is organized, how it works and, above, all, what has made it possible for it to function for 2,000 years, a period in which it has witnessed the rise,

evolution and decline of several empires and of unprecedented technological and scientific headway. The most important thing about this book is that it presents the criteria upon which what we know as Western civilization was forged, a civilization whose notion of ethics depends fundamentally on the tenets of the gospel.

The book grew out of my own curiosity when in 1992, after constitutional reforms changed the legal status of church-

es in Mexico, formal diplomatic relations with the Holy See were proposed. At the time, I was the General Director of Protocol of the Foreign Relations Ministry, and my duties led me to find out how official dealings with the authorities of the Vatican City State should be established, particularly during the third papal trip in August 1993, when John Paul II visited Mérida. On that occasion, I had the opportunity to meet figures of the stature of

* Mexican journalist and writer.



Gustavo Graf/Imaginatina

Pope John Paul II with Cardinal Norberto Rivera of Mexico.

Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Secretary of State for the Holy See.

After that I began to delve more and more deeply into bibliography on the question, mainly about the role of the church in Mexico, and I began thinking of writing a book that would propound some basic ideas about the Catholic Church, its organization, structure, doctrine and, particularly, the weight that Catholicism has had in forging the Mexican state.

La Iglesia de Roma. Estructura y presencia en México is a book aimed at people interested in the Catholic Church, whether they are Catholics or not. It tries to make the basic doctrinal concepts and administrative structure of the Holy See of the Vatican City State accessible to the ordinary reader, as well as its differences and how it is unified through the Pope. It also deals with topics like the concepts of hierarchy, territorial divisions, religious orders, statistics of ecclesiastical life, etc., making it a brief compendium that explains them, how they operate and, above all, their reason for being. This part, perhaps a little more theoretical, is the first section of the book, accompanied by a



Gustavo Graf/Imagematina

Just before departure.

brief historical sketch of the church and Pope John Paul II.

In the second part of the book, my interest is to clearly present the role the church has played in Mexican history from the conquest until our time. The central factor which continues to surprise as the reader goes through the text is the social role of the church in Mexico, which cannot be understood without first mentioning the *Patronato Real*, a legal institution of the colonial period which

allowed for the church to support the state and vice versa. The state has based the conceptualization of its relations with the church on this legal institution. The symbiotic relationship of the colonial period became more difficult in the eighteenth century during the Enlightenment that the Bourbons brought with them. Later, with the insurgency which led to the independence of Mexico, we can appreciate the fundamental sociopolitical role the church played. Throughout the nineteenth century, the struggle raged to create a modern state which would limit religion to the private sphere—that is, separate church and state—leading to the Reform Laws. Today, these laws are understood as a just foundation upon which to regulate religious freedom and are the basis for our current legislation, but at that time they were an unprecedented affront domestically and internationally.

In this century, the role of the church has been uneven: it supported the 30-year regime of Porfirio Díaz and then the first stage of the Revolution; it took a position of confrontation with the revolutionary groups after 1913 and openly opposed the



Octavio Nave/AVE

Crowded streets always awaited him.

state after the Constitutional Congress of 1917 which denied the church legal status in an attempt to affirm the central elements of modernity: secularization of the state, the restriction of religion to the private sphere and freedom of religion.

While the 1917 constitution was the immediate precedent of one of the bloodiest chapters in our history, the Cristera War, an arrangement was reached later in the relationship of church and state, a *modus vivendi*. The church committed itself to staying out of sociopolitical questions and the state guaranteed the freedom of religion, an arrangement which lasted until the 1970s.

In 1970, the first voices from the church were heard demanding a change in legislation, basically to ensure respect for the clergy's human and civil rights. Though this issue was discretely discussed in the first half of the 1970s, it began to be more intensely discussed in the 1980s when a greater participation of clergymen in national life began to be noticeable despite legally prohibitions.

The changes to articles 3, 5, 24, 27 and 130 of the Constitution were a landmark in Mexican history. Confrontation was left behind and replaced with a relationship based on mutual recognition expressed in legislation. The appearance of this book on the market was opportune given the Pope's fourth visit last January 22 to 26.

John Paul II's visit to Mexico had strictly religious aims, but his importance as an international figure means it has an undoubted sociopolitical impact on the hemisphere. The objective of the visit, which cannot be underestimated, is that the Pope came to present a strictly ecclesiastic document, *Ecclesia in Amer-*

ica, the fruit of an analysis made by the region's bishops at their 1997 Synod of the Americas, whose conclusions are the basic outlines for undertaking the new and definitive evangelization of the Western Hemisphere.

In my opinion, John Paul II, as a historic figure—and in this I agree with several analysts—is now in the second stage of his papacy. The first stage was characterized by a palpably anticommunist discourse and political praxis, without which the fall of Eastern Europe and the liberalization of Poland, the central objective of papal policy, would not have been possible. Once the fall of the Soviet bloc was achieved, despite its consequences (unbridled consumerism, the lack of an ethic of solidarity, corruption, drug trafficking, etc.), John Paul II went back to strictly religious aims: the strengthening of Catholicism, already undertaken with the 1983 review of the Canonical Legal Code and the structuring of the universal catechism, all in the face of a more and more open spiritual market, rampant secularism and the abandonment of traditions in highly industrialized countries. In this second stage, the Americas, particularly Latin America, has become the continent of hope that will guarantee the existence of a vigorous Catholicism at the dawn of the third millennium.

For the Pope it is important to trace a new course for Catholicism in the Americas because, despite its orthodox stand defined by the papacy, deviations in the application of the church's social doctrine, known as liberation theology, have emerged here. John Paul II called a meeting, a synod, of bishops at which select members—specialists—of the Mexican hierarchy gathered to find the deficiencies,

systematize them and work out strategies for spreading the gospel in the new century. The joy of continuing the work of the missionaries was a fiesta in itself, which had to be celebrated at the feet of the most venerated and loved image in the Americas, Our Lady of Guadalupe. The Pope came to Mexico to present the post-synod call exactly 20 years after the 1979 CELAM III meeting in Puebla.²

The expectations aroused by the Pope's arrival in Mexico were enormous. The preparations included a tremendous amount of work by employees in the offices of the Archdiocese in Mexico and different government bodies to ensure the Pope's security and that the largest possible number of people could come into contact with him. The great majority of Mexicans wanted to see the Pope, as close up as possible, even if only for a fraction of a second. His message was two-fold: the demand for a high moral standard, based on the definition of new social sins such as drug trafficking, corruption, ecocide, the lack of respect for human dignity, etc., and the introduction of values based on the message of Christ, newly modernized to make it comprehensible to those who can take the new project forward, the young. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Ricardo Ampudia, *La Iglesia de Roma. Estructura y presencia en México* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1998).

² The document signed by the Pope on January 1999 comprises some of the bishops of the Americas' concerns expressed in 1979 at the Third Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM III), mainly the strategies the Church should develop to confront the increasing violence, poverty and inequality among peoples and countries, which still exist on the eve of the new millennium. [Editor's Note.]