

Víctor L. Urquidi

A Model Life (1919-2004)

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At a time when heroes and life models are in short supply, in which pettiness, envy, corruption and ambition have free rein, it is very difficult to find people whose lives can be an example to others. I just found out about the death of Víctor L. Urquidi. Perhaps most readers do not know who he was. Despite being one of the leaders of his profession

and being renowned in the academic world, he was not very well known outside it, although he shone like few of his fellows.

Among many other things, for years he participated actively and led the Mexican section of the Club of Rome when it was the obligatory reference point for dealing with many of the world's problems. Urquidi was the best that this country has produced in intellectual terms.

His main efforts went into being the president of the Mexican College from 1967 to 1985, almost 20 years in which he raised it to one of the most respectable and respected

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Photos courtesy of Graciela Salazar, former assistant of Mr. Urquidi at the CEDDU of El Colegio de México.

institutions in the world of higher education in social sciences and the humanities, following in the footsteps of his predecessors, writer Alfonso Reyes and historians Daniel Cosío Villegas and Silvio Zavala.

I met Víctor when I was doing my undergraduate work in international relations at the Mexican College and he was its president. At that time, in the late 1970s, student and labor unrest were high. University unions did not have legal status and Mexico's political system was going through a profound transformation. Urquidi faced the situation in the institution as best he could. I did not agree with the administration's political and administrative solutions that led to the famous strike of 1980.

Those were the times of an omnipresent Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and an imperial presidency, so people who questioned the status quo were not well looked-upon. This was never the case of Víctor L. Urquidi, who was simply above all that. He was genuinely concerned about the institution and the advance of social sciences in Mexico. Many years later, Urquidi invited me to become part of the Tepoztlán Center, an institution he had created to stimulate debate about national problems. What had happened 15 years before was not the prism through which he viewed the world. If anything, it was an experience which, like many others, had helped him understand the changes the country needed.

If anything surprised Urquidi's colleagues and friends, it was his great capacity for work and his enormous curiosity. Here was a man who at the age of 84 read literally everything that fell into his hands. A few years ago I happened to share a table with him in the professors' dining room at the Mexican College. We talked about my research topics and he told me that he had once suggested to President Luis Echeverría Álvarez that he visit Pope Paul VI to convince him to support the Charter of Economic Duties and Rights

of States, but above all to change the relations between the Mexican state and the Catholic Church. At the end of the meal, we returned to our cubicles, which at that time were very close together, and he gave me one of the most recent articles that he had published in an international journal. Out of mere courtesy—and never thinking that he would actually read it—I gave him a book about the pope's successor which I had just published. It was to my great surprise that a few days later, as I walked by his cubicle, he called me in and began to express his opinion about my book; he had read it cover to cover. To finish up he invited me to talk about religion and politics in Mexico in the framework of the secularization of beliefs at the Tepoztlán Center.

**In our difficult times, life
models, examples to follow,
are hard to find. Víctor L. Urquidi
is undoubtedly one of them.**

Víctor L. Urquidi's academic discipline and intellectual curiosity made him an unusual phenomenon in the academic system. Accustomed to super-specialization and working in the different compartments of sub-disciplines, few intellectuals can converse like he could in a well-founded way about economics, demography, urban development, religion, politics, the environment, natural resources, alternative energy sources, education, security and many other issues. There was no intellectual grand-standing; this was a genuine desire to know and expand knowledge, fostering inter- and multi-disciplinary focuses.

Urquidi was no intellectual isolated in an ivory tower. Quite to the contrary, he knew how



to deal with politicians and civil society, how to explain to them the advantages in supporting the social sciences and the humanities. During his term of office, the Mexican College became the birthplace of the knowledge needed for designing public policies essential for the country; a great part of foreign policy, and policies for demographics, urban development, energy, education and other areas were constructed there and in other academic or public policy spaces that he helped build, always with the lack of vested interest that characterizes true intellectuals.

Urquidi was an academic who knew the importance of the independence of academic work *vis-à-vis* the powers that be. In his day, he crossed swords with politicians who wanted to use the different sister graduate schools founded throughout Mexico as though they were bureaucratic institutions. At the same time, he built and helped found other

institutions that guaranteed independence and autonomy for intellectual work.

At the age of 84, Urquidi continued to work as though he were 20. It never would have occurred to him to retire and when he finally accepted a small ceremony in his honor at the Mexican College it was not because he believed that his time was up, but because his colleagues and friends who genuinely wanted to pay homage to his career while he was still alive insisted. His idea was to keep working, and he did as long as he had the strength. Víctor L. Urquidi was an extraordinary man, one of a kind, that strange species that only appears once in a great while. The country has lost a truly great man, a life model for many in this sea of mediocrity and pettiness. Rest in peace, Don Víctor, if you have the chance, because something tells me that if there is a heaven, you must be there going over the apostles' letters. **VM**