

“¡VIVA CRISTO REY!”

The Martyrdom of Mexico – 1926/1929

Curators: Cultural Center “Identita’ Europea”

Texts by: Paolo Gulisano

Iconographic research: Adolfo Morganti

Graphic: Multimedia-Mission

Special thanks to: Alejandro Ochoa Machaen, Guzman Carriquiry,
“Compagnia dei tipi Loschi del Beato PierGiorgio Frassati”, Olivetta
Danese, Carlo Lancellotti, Marta Pettenella, Marta Bruschetti



Premise:

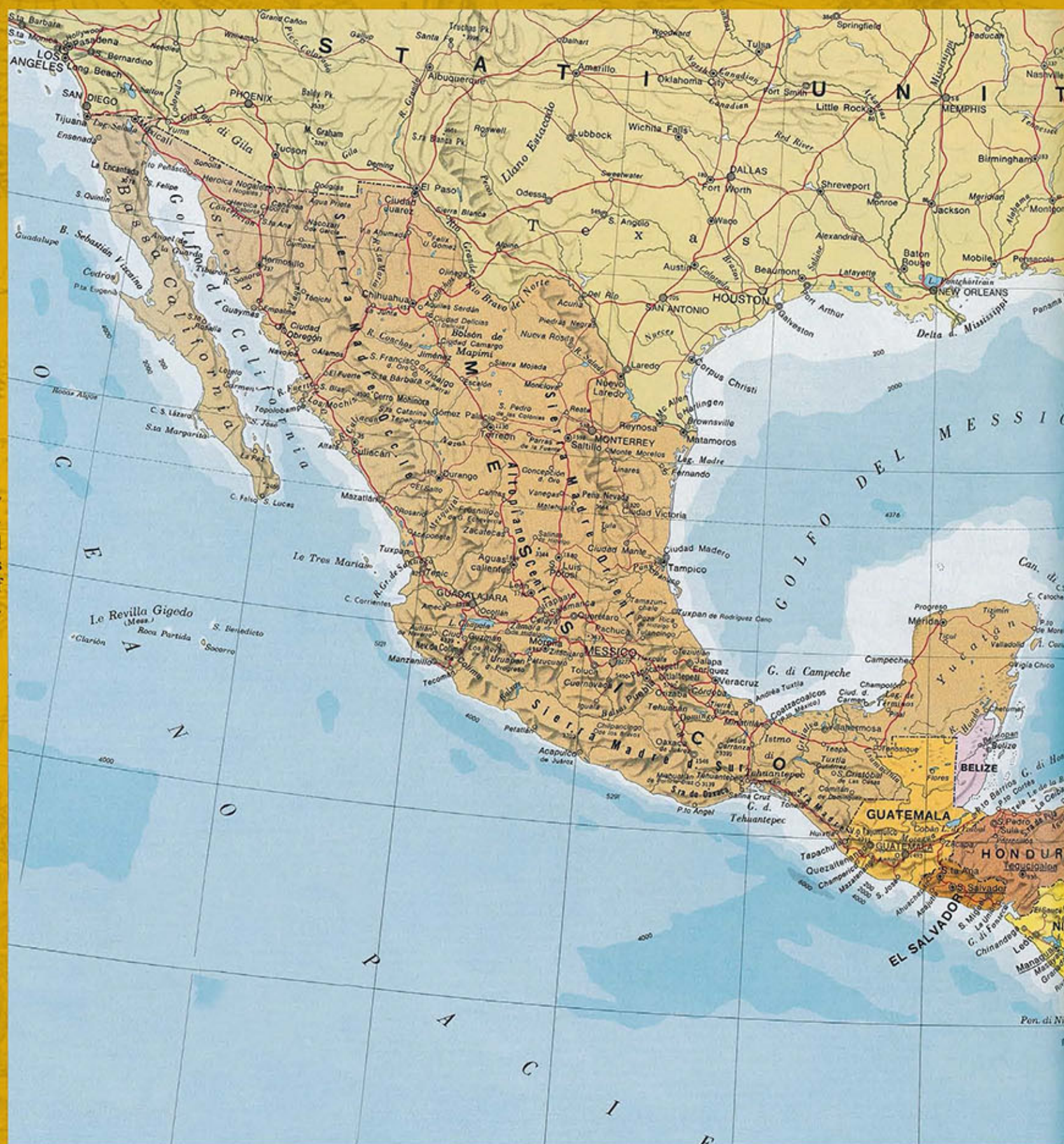
A HISTORY TO BE RETHOUGHT

During his Pontificate, Pope John Paul II reminded us many times that the XX century was a new age of martyrs, not only because of the totalitarian systems but, above all, because of the ideological and cultural atmosphere created by two hundred years of rationalist dreams (or nightmares). Among the great tragedies of that age, one stands out as deeply significant, both because of the events themselves and of the way it was almost erased from our collective memory: the martyrdom of Mexico at the end of the Twenties, known as Cristiada or the Cristeros rebellion. It was an event of considerable importance, but it is usually overlooked by history textbooks. Perhaps some people remember Graham Greene's 1940 novel *The Power and the Glory*, set in revolutionary Mexico while the religious persecution rages. It was the work of a British Catholic writer whose existential and artistic background is complex and painful,

and it is remembered mostly because of the character of the unworthy priest, humanly weak before the terrible events that he becomes part of. Besides it, almost nothing. And yet it was a large insurrection, a civil war that took place in an important country like Mexico and lasted three years, leaving long-term, lasting effects on the political and social structure of the country, and irreversibly shaping not only Mexico's destiny, but perhaps that of the entire Latin American sub-continent. This conflict had characteristics that should, first of all, be of interest to scholars, but also to anyone who cares for values like liberty, human rights, and social justice. The Cristeros revolt was indeed the most important spontaneous peasants' rebellion in Latin America in the entire 20th century, and certainly one of the largest worldwide. It was above all the reaction of a traditional, farming, Catholic society against the ag-

gression by the authoritarian government that came out of the revolutions of the 1910s - a government which formally expressed the people's revolutionary will, but in reality was profoundly extraneous to the 'true' people, those who lived in the poor neighborhoods of the large cities as well as those in the countryside and the native people in the jungles. Hopefully, these events will emerge from the shadows of forgetfulness, and come to the attention of the many who care for what the Cristeros fought, suffered and died for: their faith and religious freedom for themselves and for their children.

Mexico: a great country in a very particular geographical position, and a nation that symbolizes the evangelization of Latin America.



MEXICO: HEART OF THE AMERICAN CONTINENT

The martyrdom of the Cristeros is very representative of the XX century, a time marked by repeated attempts at building not just new societies but 'new men.' All such attempts left behind a frightful wake of blood, and the Mexican revolution was no exception. Like other revolutions, it unleashed a furious persecution against religion, which constituted the soul of the Mexican nation and the foundation of its civic and human order. Every plan of a new order and a new man always had as its first goal to get rid, ideologically and materially, of the presence of He who claimed to be the Way, the Truth and the Life.

It is impossible to deeply comprehend the events of the Cristiada, the forces at play, the reasons and motives of both sides, without a brief review of Mexico's history. It began with Christopher Columbus' travel toward the Indies, followed by the Spanish conquest at the

hands of Fernando Cortés. After destroying the powerful Aztec empire, Cortés transferred Mexico to Spain in 1521, the beginning of almost three centuries of colonial rule. Whereas it is undeniable that the Spanish conquest was marked by tragic acts of violence, it is worth pointing out certain aspects that are often neglected by the proponents of the so-called 'black legend.' First of all, in spite of many errors, the Spanish method of colonization certainly produced better results, from the standpoint of reconciling economic development with respect for the local cultures, compared with other great European nations that entered the New World. The question was what to do with the native populations: should they be pushed West and into reservations, or should they be assimilated? Various colonizers chose one or the other of these two approaches, leading to slavery and genocide. The peoples of Central and South

America, however, experienced also a different reality coming from the other side of the ocean: the Church with its missionaries, its charitable works and ideals of justice. Even if it is true that for a long time the civil authority kept the indigenous population in a position of inferiority, and the landowners (encomenderos) imposed upon them a tough yoke, the Church strongly opposed segregating the indigenous peoples and reducing them to the role of pack animals. Baptism is what conferred them the same dignity as those who conquered them.



The encounter of the Mexican indios and the Spanish people was not just the story of an earthly conquest. It was also the occasion for the indios to encounter Christianity.

JUAN DIEGO AND OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE

Therefore, the Church emphasized the value for the common good of the energies of the indigenous peoples, and even managed to blend two peoples who used to be opposed and radically different from each other. Mexico experienced a new civilization, made up of indigenous peoples, whites, and - for the most part - mestizos. One aspect of the totalitarian imperialisms born of the Enlightenment was totally foreign to the Church's evangelizing action: racism.

Patronage over the new Mexican Christendom was guaranteed by Our Lady, who appeared in Guadalupe on December 9, 1531 to a poor indio named Juan Diego. Recently converted, he was on his way to Mass when, upon reaching the feet of Mount Tepayac, he heard a very sweet melody coming from the summit. There he saw, amidst a cloud, a lady shining with beauty. The lady, who introduced herself as the Virgin Mother of God,

asked him to go to his bishop and tell him that a temple was to be built there, so that Her name could be trustfully invoked as the loving Mother of all Mexicans. Three days later Juan Diego went to meet the bishop, who believed him by virtue of a miraculous event: Juan Diego laid out his mantle before the prelate, and at his feet fell roses having an extraordinary scent, color and fragrance. Yet this marvel was followed immediately by an even greater one: the mantle of the poor indio carried in vivid colors the image of the apparition. The miraculous image of the Virgin remained forever unchanged, as if it had been just painted. After subjecting it to numerous tests, the experts unanimously defined it an authentic marvel because of its make, design and color. The canvas that carries the drawing was not subjected to any chemical preparation, and to this date the image is transparent. Later, the great shrine of Our Lady of

Guadalupe was built on the site of the apparition. The Mexican nation took form around it, or rather around Her, bringing together the Spanish and the indigenous people: the shrine became the home of all.

Thus, a civilization was born founded on a lived form of Christianity, which set roots among the people and gave a soul to the nation, making it capable of building a new society based on the witness of the faith that had generated a new life. This was the age of the great baroque cathedrals but also of the first universities and of many productive economic activities.

The miraculous image of the Virgin of Guadalupe.



A traditional image of the indio Juan Diego in prayer.



MEXICO AFTER INDEPENDENCE

Spanish colonial rule ended at the beginning of the XIX century, after the war of independence of 1810-1821. Although many Catholics had participated in the secessionist movement, the 1824 Constitution of the newly proclaimed republic was shaped by a very different spirit. The liberal and Masonic elements influenced by the ideas of the French Revolution prevailed, as was actually the case throughout all of Latin America. They saw in the Church the State's worst enemy, whose presence had to be restricted and suffocated.

The newborn Mexican state went through a tumultuous history, marked by frequent regime changes and civil strife. Partially as a result of such instability, Mexico was disastrously defeated by the United States in the war of 1848 and lost much of its territory. The country achieved a degree of stability with the rise to power in 1861 of President Benito

Juarez. A major protagonist of these years, Juarez was later turned into a myth by revolutionary propaganda. His fame crossed the ocean and sparked the fantasy of radicals and socialists in every nation, who saw in him the example of a proletarian revolutionary who managed to defeat the powerful aristocrats and the clergy. His rule was interrupted in 1863 by the brief reign of Maximilian of Austria, who pursued the romantic and impossible dream of establishing in Mexico a Catholic and Latin-American monarchy. Juarez defeated him with the decisive support of the United States, and remained president until his death in 1872. Juarez gave his government and especially his foreign policy some traits that would remain unchanged through many subsequent changes of leadership and of constitutional forms: the alliance with the United States (or we should rather say, subordination to their interests) and

the fight against the Church's activities. His direct successor, Lerdo de Tejada, included in the constitution the reform laws laid out by Juarez - which included the confiscation of the Church's assets and the introduction of civil marriage. Furthermore, he suppressed religious holidays, forbade clergy to teach and to wear the cassock. All monasteries were transformed into barracks and kindergartens, and the religious orders that had entered the country during the short reign of Maximilian of Austria were all expelled.



The lawyer Benito Juarez is considered the father of the Mexican nation. In fact, he was profoundly imbued with anti-Catholic ideologies. During his presidency the persecution of the Church continued.

On June 9, 1867, the execution of the archduke Maximilian of Hapsburg marked the end of the dream for a Catholic and Latino Mexican state.



MODERNIZATION AND CIVIL WAR

In 1876 Porfirio Diaz seized power, and retained it for 35 years, establishing a peculiar sort of personal dictatorship (also known as the “porfiriato”). During his long years in power, he carried out a remarkable modernization of the Country, putting into place several reforms. In order to attenuate the social effects of such modernization, he attempted to establish a modus vivendi with the Church, which led to a period of religious truce. Juarez's unjust laws remained in effect, but they were enforced with a degree of tolerance.

Finally, in 1911 Diaz was deposed and forced into exile. The man who put an end to the long porfirist domination – thus starting a period of dramatic changes and revolution - was Francisco Indalecio Madero. He was a wealthy landowner of liberal sentiments, native of the Northern state of Coahuila, who had not been previously involved in politics

and had lived for a long time in the United States. According to Jean Meyer, the revolution started by Madero would represent for many fundamental aspects a continuation and a fulfillment of the porfiriato: the development of public power and of the centralization of administration, and the commitment to carry out a capitalistic economic system having as protagonists a new middle class which rapidly annihilated whatever was left of the social structures created by Spanish colonization - including customs and lifestyles from the traditional pre-Columbian society. The attempt was to destroy at the same time the Church and the culture of indigenous peoples, as well as the aristocracy and the remaining cultural memory of Europe.

The events of the following years were rather convulsive. Madero's revolt culminated in his presidency (1911-1913), which was followed by the clash between

General Huerta (a porfirist restoration attempt) and the revolutionary troops (1913-1914). The victorious revolutionary forces then split between the constitutionalist and conventionalist components (1915-1916) and fought another civil war. The success of the constitutionalists, led to the presidency of Venustiano Carranza and to the promulgation in 1917 of the new constitution called 'of Queretaro' (the same place where Maximilian was shot), and finally to a settling of scores within the same faction and the final affirmation in 1920 of Carranza's former right-hand man, general Alvaro Obregón.

The Mexican common people, always under the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe, participated generously in all efforts to overturn the military dictatorships that came one another starting in 1910.



An official portrait of General Porfirio Diaz, who was the dictator of Mexico from 1876 to 1911.



MEXICO ON FIRE

The Mexican civil wars and revolutions of the 1910's did not have anything romantic. It was merely a dogged fight for power among ambitious generals and local caudillos. The Mexican people, far from participating in the process of liberation from the obscurantism of the past, were spectators to the bloody events, often suffering because of them. The interests at stake were far different. On the eve of World War I a new discovery - crude oil - had further increased the North-American interest for the territories across the Rio Grande. During the civil war the United States bet on the revolutionary elite of Sonora, from which Carranza, Obregón and his successor, Plutarco Calles came from. This elite was modern and had modernizing intentions. From the ideological point of view it was pragmatic and pliable, but extremely rigid in matters of religion. It regarded itself as the custodian both of the

country's economic development and of the definitive entry of Mexico into the international economic-financial circuit. Anti-clericalism had a long history in Mexico, but nothing had been comparable to what happened after the triumph of revolution. Then the mass arrests, tortures and executions began. With determination and sacrilegious fury the anti-religious program unfolded. The soldiers of the government broke into the churches, threw the Holy Blood and Body on the pavement, danced, and shot at crucifixes and tabernacles, mimicking the excesses of the French Revolution. The new Constitution of Queretaro gave legal cover to extreme breaches of freedom of conscience and expression. Article 3 said: "No religious community and no religious minister... is allowed to create or direct a primary school." Article 5 forbade "the existence of any religious order of congregation." Article 24 said that

"worship is illegal outside Church buildings, and inside Churches it will always be subjected to the oversight of civil authorities." Moreover "all church buildings are state property. Every religious association cannot buy, own or manage real estate" (Art. 27). "The various states of the Nation maintain the right to determine, through appropriate legislation, the number of religious ministers... [priests] are forbidden from criticizing the constitution or people of authority" (Art. 130).



This part of the century saw the beginning of an armed persecution against the Church by various factions within the army

THE REPRESSION

Mexican Catholics (95% of the population) found themselves part of a Church bereft of juridical personality, muffled and robbed even of the possibility to criticize and oppose. The government asked for submission and absolute obedience, rigorously applying the law. Eleven Archbishops were exiled to the United States, two to Cuba and others to Europe. Hundreds of religious people and priests were expelled, and two thousand Catholic schools were closed. The government went even beyond the guidelines of the Constitution, using violence against priests and lay people, arresting them and putting them in jail. The Seminaries were emptied by force of arms; the students were loaded on trucks and deported. Next, the government decided to plan a sacrilegious and atrocious attack on the Image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, not only the symbol of Catholic Mexico, but also of its identity and tradition. On

November 14, 1921, a bomb was put in the Sanctuary below the silver throne that carries the Holy Image. Miraculously, no damage was done to it. All the church windows were shattered from the loud explosion, candle holders and marble friezes cracked, but the Holy Icon remained untouched.

When Plutarco Elias Calles succeeded his friend Obregón as president in 1924, he strengthened even further the religious legislation. He pushed for a strict interpretation of Carranza's constitution and reformed the penal code, including the notorious article 130, which was expanded into a new law in 33 articles known as the 'Calles Law.' Government officials made exemplary statements, like the following one by General Joaquim Amaro, Minister of War and Masonic dignitary: "The Catholic, Apostolic and Roman Church and its clergy, turned into a rapacious, reactionary and retrograde

political party, have been the only cause of the evils that have oppressed Mexico from the Spanish conquest to our days (...). During the never-ending sequence of uprisings and coupes d'état that have ravaged our country for centuries, the clergy has been the instigator and the most powerful factor because of its many material resources and its absolute identification with all the enemies of the Revolution." These historically false statements clearly echoed the rhetoric of the Enlightenment, which regarded the Catholic Church as the mortal enemy of progress and rationality.

The government started using torture on large scale against the "rebels." Pictures like this one were spread widely in order to frighten the Catholic opposition around the country.



Although 95% of the population was Catholic, the Calles-Obregón administrations did not hesitate to do everything possible to force people to obey unconditionally their anti-Catholic laws. In the photo, police scatter with water cannons a peaceful Catholic protest rally in 1926.

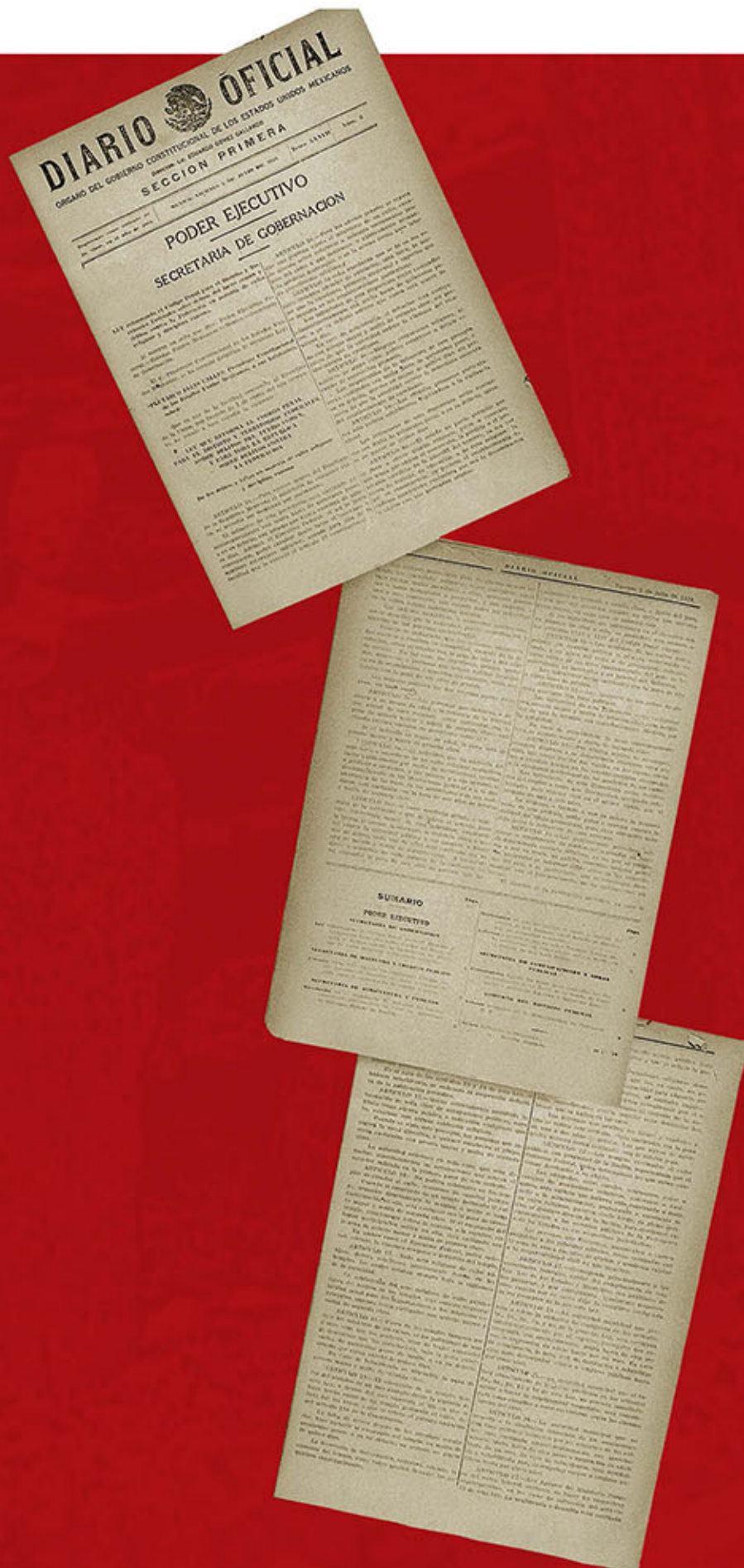


THE PENAL LAWS

The Calles Law implemented the Constitution of Queretaro literally. The regime denied the Church any form of recognition, ordered the expulsion of foreign priests, abolished many dioceses, deprived the hierarchy of its authority, ordered the registration of all priests and even determined what divine services could be celebrated. Government agents searched Catholic institutions and social agencies and looted their properties. The bureaucratic nitpicking and totalitarian organization reached a new heights when the government assumed the task of determining the number of candles that could be lit, the alms that could be received, and the water to be used for baptism (which had to be rigorously sterilized). Religious education was forbidden, not only using textbooks but also through names, images, gestures (the sign of the cross), furnishings, and persons. Religious communities were prohibited, the

free taking of vows was forbidden, and parents who educated their children in the faith were punished. No more religious propaganda through publications and conferences; the clergy lost the right to vote and cassock were outlawed. All the members of Religious Orders, including nuns, were expelled from Mexico, depriving entire charitable institutions of their staff – orphanages, hospitals, nursery schools, hospices. Every transgression of the law, even the smallest, was punished with jail. This would be followed by another revolutionary experiment: the institution of a national, “patriotic” church controlled by the government. On February 21, 1925, the “Mexican Apostolic Catholic Church” was founded. The government tried to impose this church on the believers by force, instigating the Marxist-Leninist Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (Regional Confederation of

can Workers) to chase away the parish priests and to install patriotic priests instead. These attempt to forcibly divide the Church left a deep impression on the people and mobilized Catholic lay people to defend their churches and the personal safety of their priests. Clashes with the communist militants and police forces increased, as well as with army battalions that the government sent to “guarantee the public order.” The army opened fire on unarmed demonstrators and caused many casualties. The wave of arrests that came down upon the Catholic leaders and militants was a stimulus to organize opposition forces in a climate of growing tension and struggle.



The government started using torture on large scale against the “rebels.” Pictures like this one were spread widely in order to frighten the Catholic opposition around the country.

THE TIME OF VIOLENCE

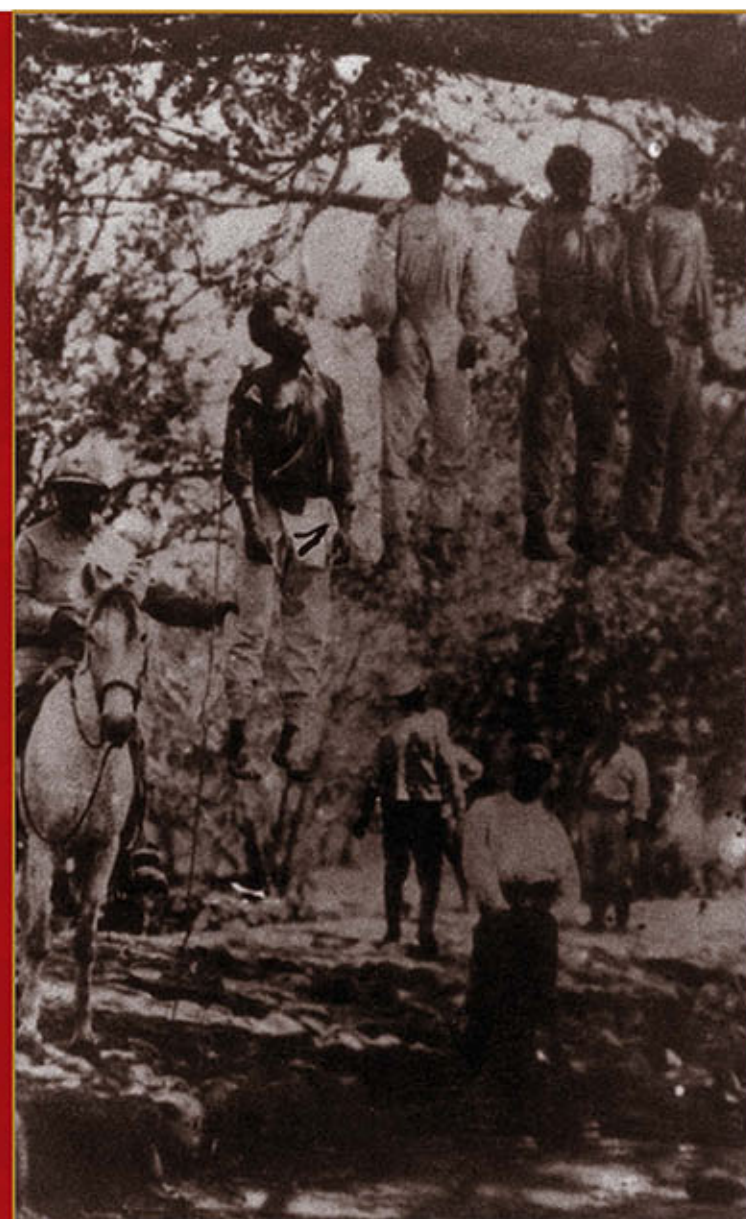
Faced with such revival of anti-Catholic hatred and further limitations of liberty, this time the Church of Mexico – clergy and lay people together – answered ‘No’. The gauntlet had been thrown down, and once more in history, a struggle began – usque ad effusionem sanguinis – to preserve the liberty of the Church and to guarantee respect for the rights of the people. What tactics should be employed to defend oneself from these laws? It was a difficult choice: peaceful methods again or active defense? And with what means? Catholics opted once again for non-violent methods, but in a more decisive and organized fashion. First of all, a petition signed by two millions citizens was presented to Congress. These signatures represented a true pronouncement by the whole nation and expressed very loudly the popular will against the regime. At Calle’s suggestion, Congress rejected the petition without examining it, under the f

pretext that Catholics had lost their citizenship by obeying the Pope, a foreign potentate. Having exhausted all legal means to obtain at least the same basic rights as everybody else, the Mexican Episcopate decided to suspend public worship. This solution was reached after a confrontation between rather different positions on the part of the bishops about how to handle the crisis.

Facing the perplexity of the pastors, the organized Catholic laity acted with intelligence and decisiveness. Two proposals for incisive and non-violent action were brought to the attention of the Bishops. The first called for a massive campaign of anti-government propaganda and civil disobedience, including economic boycott of the state and its supporters (industrialists, trading tycoons, bankers). The second proposal was equally bold and even more symbolically significant: the suspension of public worship

throughout the entire country with the goal of showing the world that the Church of Mexico was not able to freely exercise its activities and mission. In regard to the first proposal, the Episcopate immediately expressed a favorable consideration. Regarding the grave decision to suspend public worship services, however, the Bishops decided to suspend their decision until they consulted with the Holy See.

The spreading of peaceful protests by Catholic Mexicans triggered the barbarism of armed government gangs. Without any respect for the law, went on murderous rampages against the opposition. In the photo: the victims of a mass shooting.



Mass hangings also were widely used by government troops to break the resistance of the people.

JULY 31, 1926

The months of June and July saw an intense exchange of dispatches with Rome. The definitive answer came on July 22nd. In one of his telegrams, the Secretary of State, Cardinal Gasparri, wrote: "The Holy Father condemns the law and at the same time every act that could signify or be interpreted by the faithful as acceptance or recognition of said law". The anticipated official suspension of public worship was promulgated immediately on the 24th of July, and was to remain in force until the law was revoked. Beginning July 31st 1926 the Clergy would no longer celebrate the Sacraments and would leave the churches in the custody of the faithful. The decision made a huge impression on the faithful and was seen as more than just a political decision or a pivotal moment in a cultural and social conflict. It was an exceptional, history-making and apocalyptic event for a large part of the Mexican population: indios,

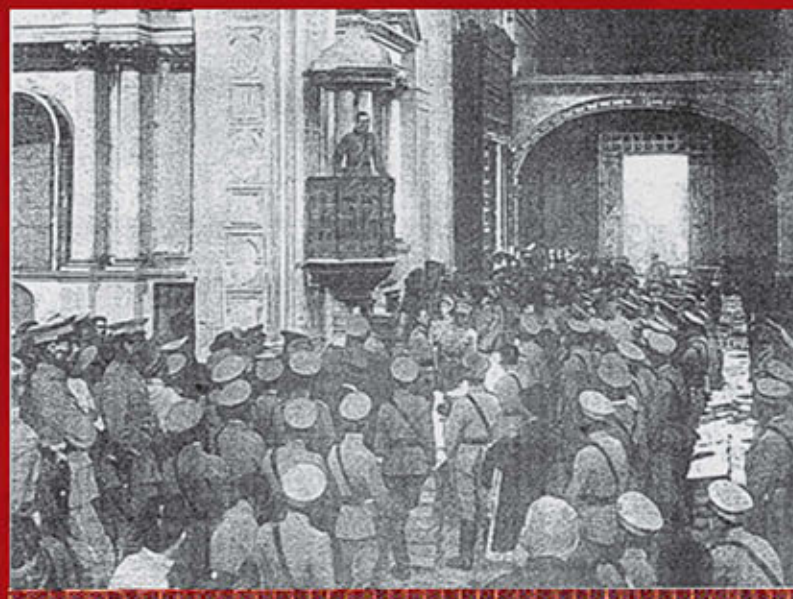
peasants, and women. The priests who had not been exiled, arrested, or killed, were hidden; the churches empty and the altars bare. One could almost perceive the atmosphere of a Waste Land, of a land desolate and abandoned by God because of mankind's impiety, an atmosphere of almost mystical spiritual tension. The poor of Christ had never seen anything like it, and what was happening had never even been imagined: a land without Sacraments, without the visible signs of the presence of God. In the days prior to the suspension of worship, the churches of Mexico were crowded with people around the altar to receive the Eucharistic bread. There were thousands of baptisms, communions, and weddings; in the capital city alone, ninety thousand confirmations were administered. A great fervor came over the people of Mexico, as if Judgment Day were at hand. The Catholics united in the Religious Liberty

League, meanwhile, decided to employ all known methods of passive resistance. This led to several courageous and legitimate initiatives. Because the churches were closed, private homes were transformed into oratories. The Pope authorized a shorter liturgy for the Mass, so that the Church in Mexico experienced anew the period of the catacombs. The priests could celebrate Mass anywhere, even without sacred vestments, using glass chalices, and shorten the sacred rite to include only Offertory, Consecration and Communion.



In response to increasing state terrorism, the Mexican Church, in full agreement with the Holy See, was forced to take an extreme and sensational step: on July 31st 1926 the Church suspended public worship and all churches were closed, making a huge impression on the people. In the picture: the last Mass in the church of San Francesco D'Assisi (Jalisco).

A group of soldiers who have broken into a church are harangued by a Masonic official. Throughout the country hundreds of sacred buildings were desecrated.



THE PERSECUTION BEGINS

D Persecuted for their faith, Catholics found new courage: they filled the churches on Sundays and prayed aloud, singing litanies, the hymn to Christ King, while a layman read the Gospels in front of the empty tabernacle, with candles snuffed and spies watching. When the faithful met they would greet each other with the motto, "Let us pray for ourselves and for them." "Them" referred to those who suffered in the prisons, those who were exiled and those who joined the ranks of the soldiers of Christ the King. The police watched especially the priests, most of whom resided in the capital and had to report daily to the police stations. Arrests and violent abuses increased dramatically. The persecution started with the bishops: all the ordinaries were denounced and their pastoral letters declared seditious. The Government decreed that each state could have only one episcopal leader, and so some bishops

were driven from their dioceses, others arrested and others threatened, mistreated or sent to the United States. Even in the periphery of the Republic, in every town and village, the police and the army harassed methodically and ever more harshly priests and lay people. Calles forced Catholic government employees to choose: either renounce Christ, by denying Him publicly, or lose their job. Of four hundred teachers in Guadalajara, three hundred and eighty nine preferred to be destitute rather than obey Calles. The voice of conscience, which commands not to give to Caesar what belongs to God, prevailed over material interests. Catholics responded to the dictator by starting a boycott: buying only bare necessities, deserting theaters and similar venues, giving up travel and withdrawing bank deposits. Young people spread the boycott: they posted leaflets with the message "Don't buy" on walls, in stores, on

trams, and even glued them to their hats. Soon such commercial paralysis had its effects. Stores emptied and within days twenty seven million pesos were withdrawn from the banks and sent abroad, forcing the Minister of Finance to resign. On October 9th, the bank of Tampico went bankrupt, followed by the Bank of England; the Chambers of Commerce collapsed. The Government coffers turned out to be empty, and underground papers denounced the scandals and thefts of the Party members, starting with Calles and Obregón. The reaction of the regime was immediate: the suspected presses were closed and women and children were arrested in large numbers.



After July 31st, 1926 persecution against Catholics began on large scale. Every Catholic, just for being one, became an enemy of the military government, which claimed to embody "progressive principles" and "freedom". The main instrument of persecution was the army, which was often made of conscripts recruited by force. They had very limited military value, but they were prone to looting and violence.

A PEOPLE RISE: THE CRISTEROS

Catholic resistance did not start for ideological reasons but to defend people from physical harm, to protect freedom under threat and rights that had been violated. In the early stages of the clash there were two priorities: to defend the churches and to organize underground worship. The Catholic Youth provided personnel and enthusiasm for these tasks. Their courage was on display also during a few “commando” actions, e.g. to free priests from prison and move them abroad safely. Active resistance was starting along the passive one. Starting in August 1926 riots and genuine uprisings took place in rural areas. The Mexican army, relying on its usual methods, displayed confidence, but in September there were already thirteen hotbeds of armed insurrection. The spread of the blaze was fast and deadly. In October, a federal brigade was assaulted and annihilated in the state of Durango. These revolts were always

spontaneous, locally organized and with no connections or common strategies. They were simply men and women, farmers and craftsmen who, tired of being victimised, took up their rudimentary weapons – old shotguns, sickles, and knives -- to stop hatred and raging fanaticism. News of these fights and of this courageous awakening of the Mexican people went through the countryside bringing excitement and hopes of redemption everywhere. Between November and December, all of Central Mexico was in an uproar. In the state of Jalisco, one of the epicenters of the rebellion, the regiment led by General Arenas was defeated and destroyed. In the big cities, controlled by the army, the opposition was led by the League for the Defense of Religious Freedom, using the few means still allowed by law. The persecution had worsened, with killings, arrests, thefts, looting, and rapes. Mexico was subjected to a regime

of terror. Against it, there was an unarmed opposition. Freedom of the press had been abolished, justice suspended, the Constitution itself interpreted arbitrarily, and the rule of law suffocated by the police system. In Calles’ Mexico Catholic citizens faced an alternative between apostasy and martyrdom. For years they had been patient while they were being deprived of freedom and rights. They had been subject to every possible abuse by the local caudillos; they had been robbed, mocked and oppressed. Enough was enough and Calles went too far. Then a civilized but exasperated people took up arms, raising the blue and white flag with the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe.



Having tried all peaceful means, Mexican Catholic lay people took up arms to defend their faith, their own life and their possessions. In the photo: A Cristeros Unit attends daily mass at the camp.

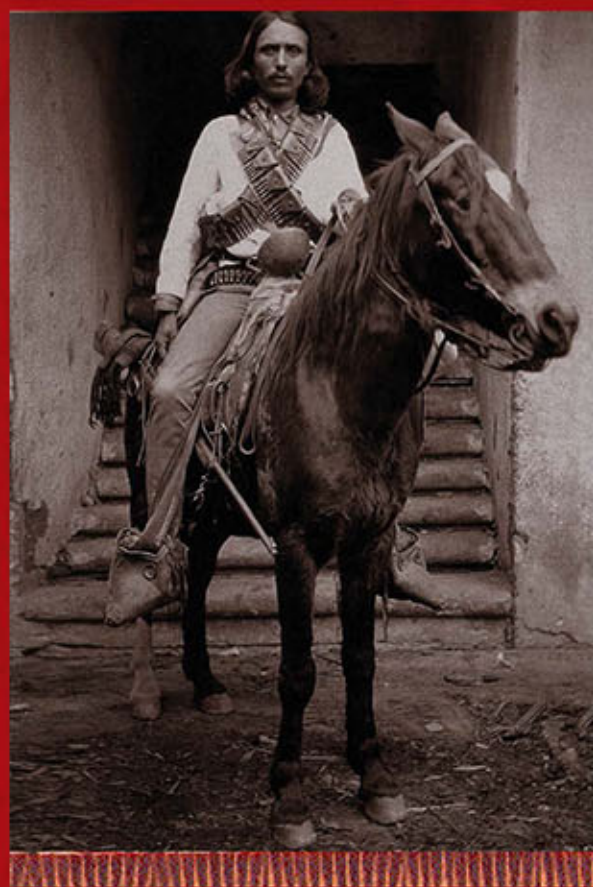
MEN TO FIGHT THE GOOD FIGHT

On January 1, 1927, the League began a peaceful mobilization that failed, put down once again by mass arrests, torture of prisoners and murders. The mass demonstrations ended in a colossal bloodbath and all attempts at starting a dialogue with the Government ended in vain; the pressure of the boycotts was offset by immediate economic aid from the US. Without any reasonable possibility of a political solution, Catholics had no alternative but to leave their occupations, their families, their homes and join the National Army of Liberators. The other side mockingly called them Cristeros (from Cristos Reyes), and in truth they were soldiers of Christ the King, engaged in the legitimate defense of their own lives, of their loved ones and of what they held most dear: their faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ, which had been struck, denied and oppressed by their enemies. Just like the people of the Vendée facing the advance

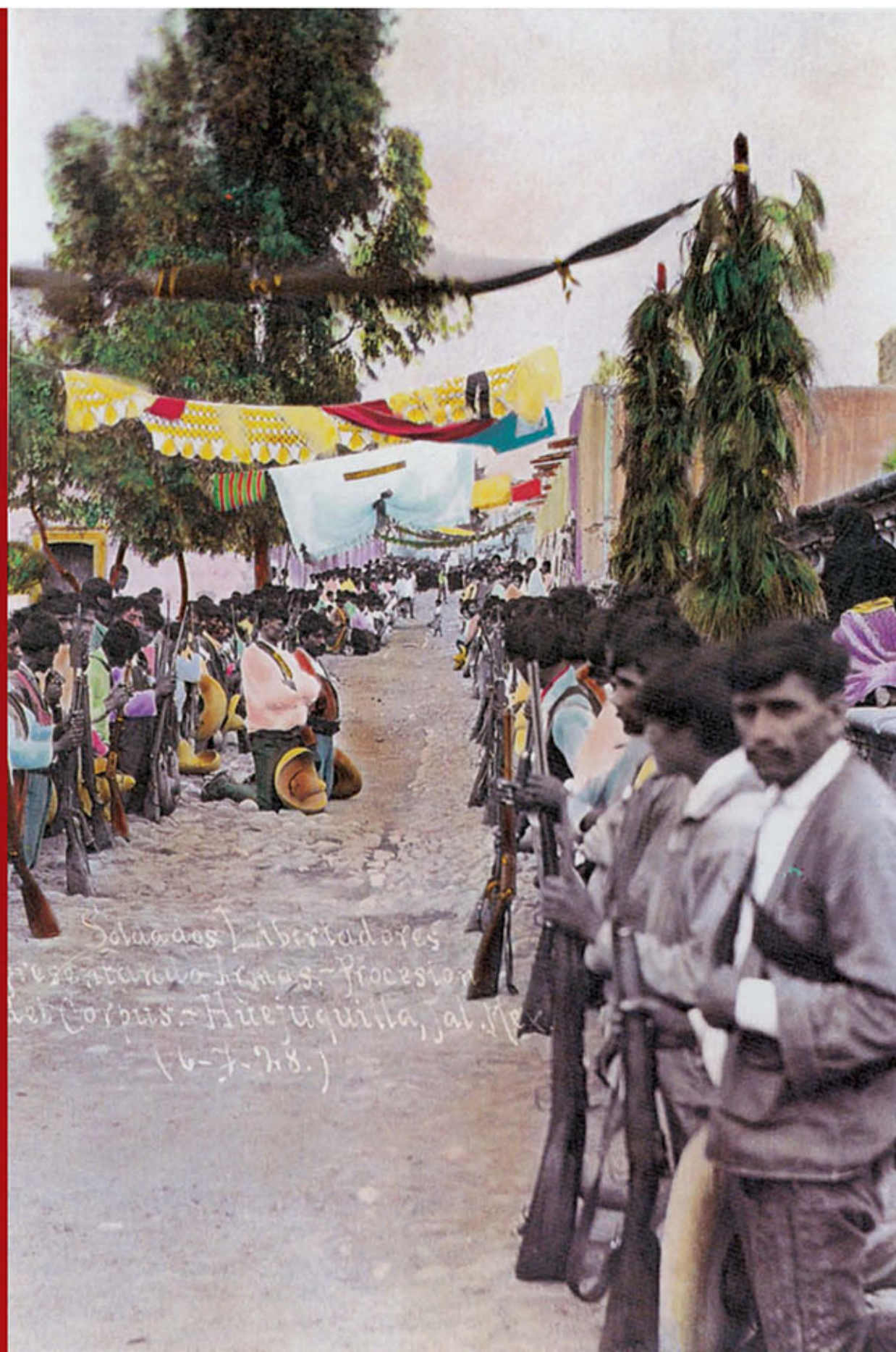
of the Jacobins, who came to destroy churches, kill priests and burn everything to the ground, they raised their heads proudly and they shouted: "Give us back our God!" This is what the Cristeros did with courage and full awareness. It must be said - to avoid any misunderstandings - that this was not a "clerical" conflict: the Mexican bishops, who were largely sympathetic to these fighters, were not involved in any military operations. We read in a poster of March 14, 1927 that the leaders of the Movement took upon themselves full responsibility, "without the Church having any participation in political and military activities, as its mission is to realize peaceful, charitable, religious and social works." Actually the Cristeros War, the so called Cristiada, was - as Meyer writes, "a colonial war, led by a colonial army against its own people; it followed the course of every other war of this type: a brutal re-

pression, executions of prisoners, massacres of civilians, scorched earth tactics, plunder, violence. They all left in the wake of the federal army the seeds of other similar uprisings". For the dictatorship, the armed uprising was a totally unexpected development. It thought that it had frightened enough the hierarchy and suppressed the official Catholic associations. It had not foreseen that an entire population might rebel.

In the ranks of the Cristeros the deep soul of the Mexican people could be found: proud and devout, and very different from the politically motivated caricatures that were spread later on. In the photo, a Cristero on his horse.



A Cristeros Unit waits for a religious procession, with hats off but guns in hand.



Salas de Libertadores
Huejutlan de Jimas - Proceso
del Corpus - Huejutlan, Jal. Mex.
(6-7-28.)

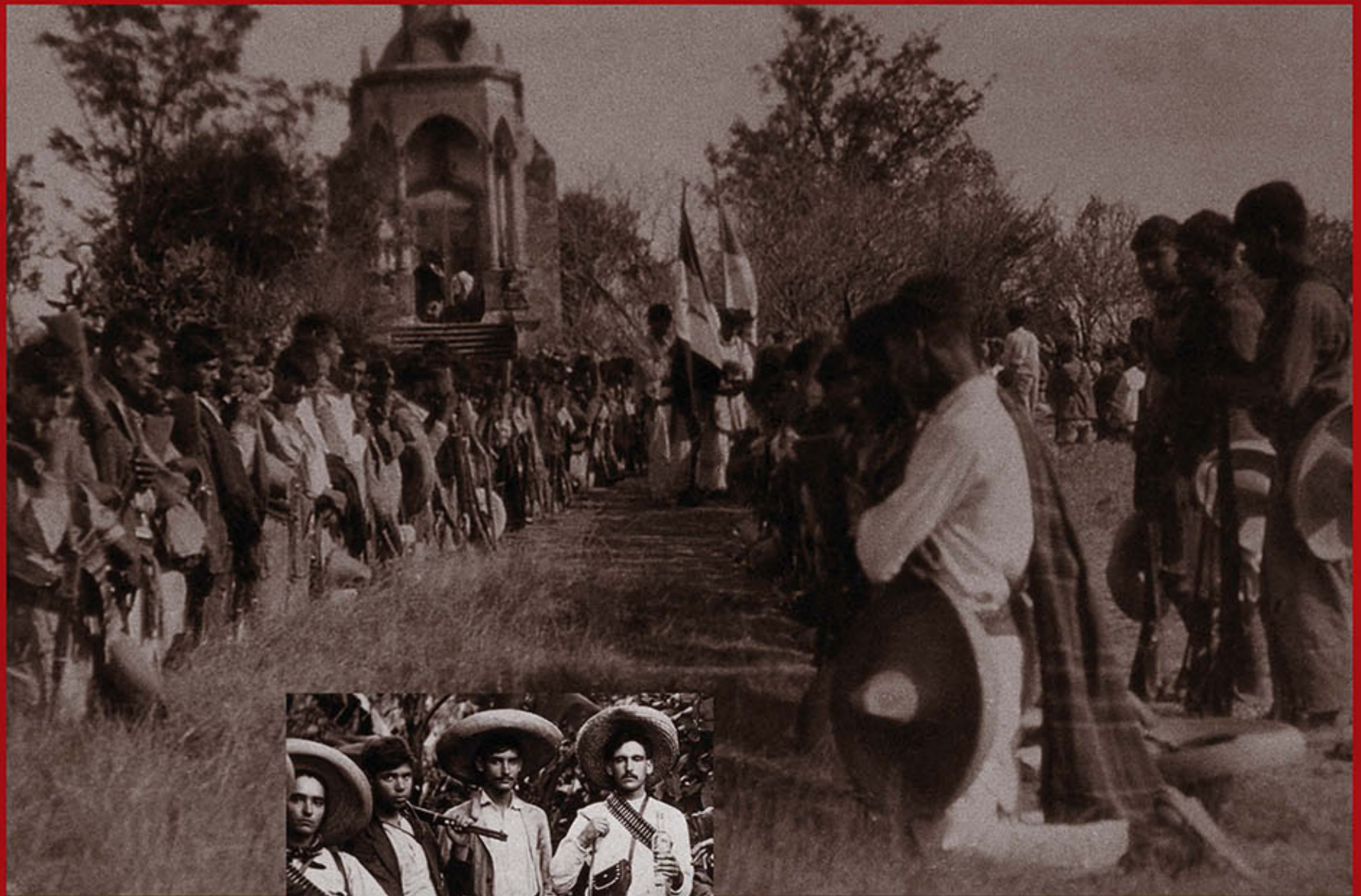
THE CRISTIADA

The armed uprising of the Cristeros took place only after every effort to obtain justice by peaceful means had proved to be futile. Mexican Catholics turned in vain to foreign governments for an international humanitarian intervention: the League of Nations in Geneva rejected their appeal. Facing such indifference and their own obvious isolation, Mexican Catholics deemed it necessary to rescue their country with their own blood and sweat. On January 11, 1927 the so-called De los Altos Manifesto was presented to the country. It sanctioned the birth of the National Army of Liberators. Enrique Goroztieta, who had graduated from the Military Academy, was elected supreme general. He had adopted the program of the League epitomized by the word liberty. All the fundamental freedoms that had been suspended had to be ensured: freedom of religion, education, association and the press. Goroztieta was not

the usual generalissimo, like the protagonists of the endless golpes that had devastated the country for a century. On the contrary, the absence of charismatic leaders among the Cristeros was something significantly new in Mexico's history, where entire revolutionary movements had ideologically identified with their leaders (just think of porfirismo, villismo and zapatismo). The consistent body of concrete ideals that the Cristeros cherished ensured that there was no cult of personality. The Cristeros recognized Christ the King as the true and only leader of their troops, of whom even the high commanders were only servants. So it was for Goroztieta, a general in his forties who had already voluntarily retired. The few photos of the rebellion show him as a proud, strong-willed man, decked out in a gun belt with ammunition, but also with a big silver crucifix hanging from his neck, highly visible on his shirt.

The Army of Liberators, or National Guard, organized itself relying only the help of volunteers and civilians. The troops were composed of youths, primarily peasants but also workmen, students and office workers, animated and united by an admirable spirit. In the evening, before going to sleep, the Cristeros sang the hymn "Tropas de Maria." Whenever possible they kept the Holy Sacrament, and soldiers took turns for adoration every fifteen minutes. Every regiment had its chaplain. Officers wore the cross on their chest and the soldiers the Image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Before going into battle the soldiers made the sign of the cross and then fought to the cry of "Viva Cristo Rey!"

Before fighting the government army, the Cristeros would confess and take communion.



Each Cristeros Unit was constantly assisted by its own chaplain, who shared the life of the fighters. In the photo: a group of Cristeros from San Jose' de Gracia (State of Michoacán). The third from left, at the bottom, is the priest who ministered to the group, Fr. Federico Gonzales.

THE “BRIGADES OF ST. JOAN OF ARC”

International public opinion, influenced by the media, viewed what was happening in Mexico as “a reactionary coup financed by wealthy landowners.” In fact, Mexican finance and major businesses were on Calles’ side. It was the poor who gave everything to help the Army of Christ the King against the dictator. Farmers risked their lives bringing food to the troops, sometimes traveling up to twenty or thirty kilometers on foot. Women especially distinguished themselves above the rest of the population in this task, helping both individually and organized in brigades, which they named after Saint Joan of Arc. They gave assistance to the wounded and replenished provisions and supplies.

However, the Government showed no mercy for the women of the “brigands”. When they were arrested during round-ups, for retaliation, to obtain the freedom of their men, or while carrying

out tactical tasks in the Liberation Army as messengers or as carriers of provisions and munitions for the troops – they ended up in front of a firing squad, regardless of circumstances. Mothers, sisters, and wives sold their jewelry, furniture, clothes and blankets to buy food and munitions for the soldiers of Christ the King. These were brave women, like the countless others who crowded the prisons, who shed their blood, and who were victims of horrendous violence.

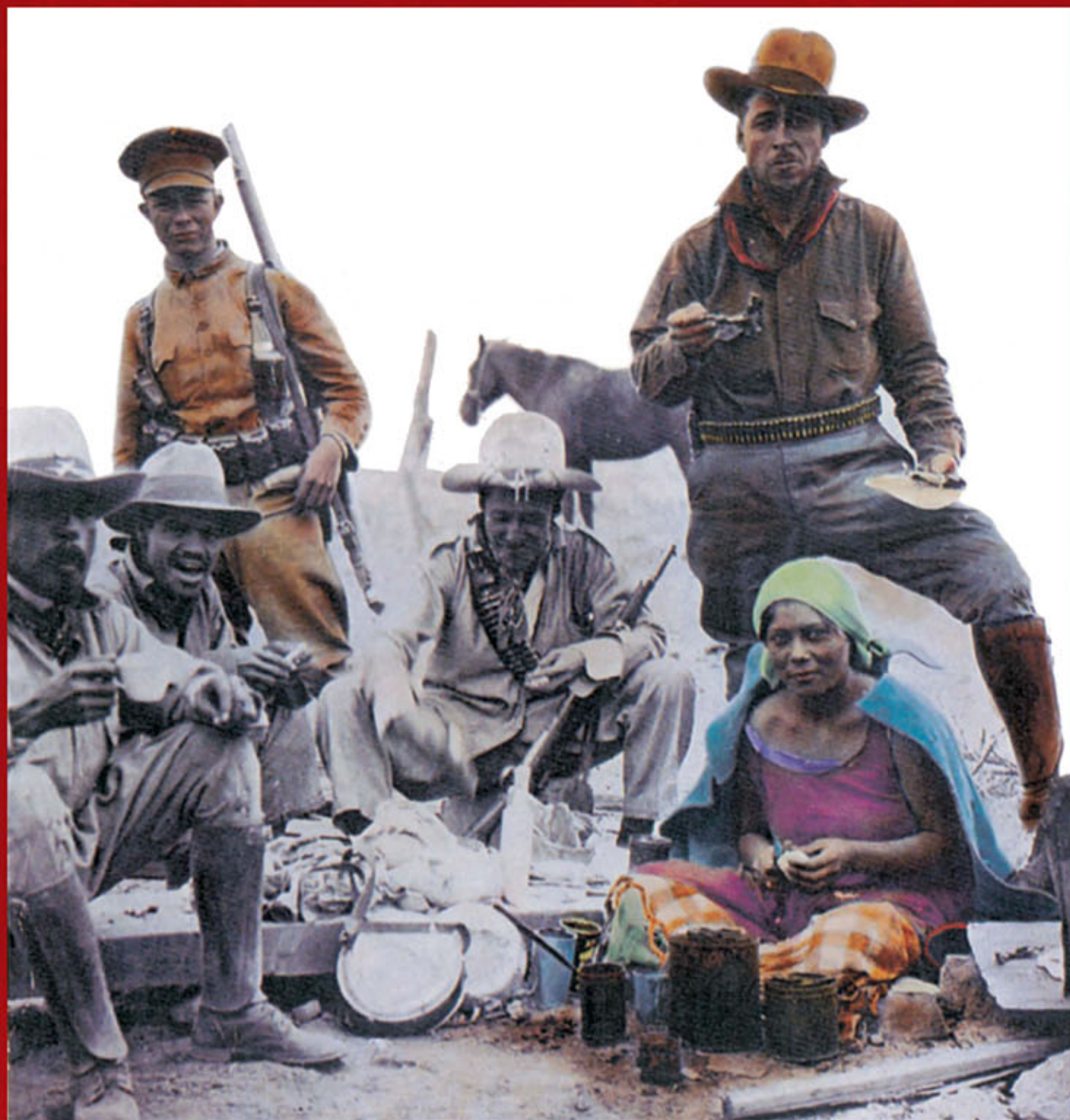
The Cristeros were anything but mercenaries or brigands; with the few means they had at their disposal, they fought valorously, keeping the enemy army in check for a long time. The most important problem was the shortage of munitions and the poor quality of the armaments, which were often made up of weapons taken from the enemy. Thanks to the tactical ability of Goroztieta, the Cristeros were able to organize them

selves in excellent guerilla formations, able to pass through the net of the government troops. The general was also able to provide his makeshift soldiers with good training and to extend his tactical and organizational model to spontaneous insurgent groups, thus forming a single unit of command and a more uniform military. At the beginning of the war the government boasted in front of the public opinion that it would quickly dispose of those few peasants. Things turned out quite differently.

Even when they did not fight personally, women paid an enormous tribute of blood by accompanying – often with their children – and supporting the Cristiada in every possible way.



Within the Cristiada, women, too, gave a tremendous contribution. It was a genuine popular struggle for the survival of the whole Mexican Christian civilization. They gave birth to military units exclusively for women, the Brigades of “St. Joan of Arc”. In the photo: shooting practice.



MARTYRS FOR THE FAITH

Calles had to work hard against the Christian fighters. In order to defeat the Cristeros he sent thirty thousand men, in the state of Colima alone, armed with aircraft, tanks and warships. Nonetheless, the Cristeros were able to resist for two years. Their motto was "God, Country, Freedom," their flag was the banner of Guadalupe, and their sovereign was Christ the King whose image they had constantly watched by two honor guards. One might smile at such display of proud and manly religiosity, thinking that these men were fanatics, new crusaders. But actually their cause was simple, realistic, and human; they were not under the spell of any deceitful utopia. In those years, there were other armies sharpening their weapons for a frightening conflict. They were burning incense and sacrificing victims to terrible idols: the utopias of race and of class struggle. The Mexican Catholics struggled to free themselves from the

yoke of one of these ideologies. They did not want to be victims of the madness of those who seek to wipe away history, traditions, and values, then create new ones in the abstract and realize them on the battlefields and in the extermination camps. In order to enter into and take part in the Freedom Army it was necessary to take the following oath:

I solemnly swear by Christ the King and by the Most Holy Virgin of Guadalupe, Queen of Mexico, for the salvation of my soul:
1) To maintain absolute secrecy about all that could compromise the holy cause that I embrace;
2) To defend, with arms in hand, the absolute religious freedom of Mexico. If I observe this oath, may God reward me; if I fail, may God punish me.

The oath was taken by the faithful during a simple but haunting ceremony: the aspirant, after having read it while holding a crucifix, kissed the flag of Guadalupe. The priest then put the cross around his neck and the new recruit went forth and embraced his comrades and joined his unit. He set off aware of the risk that he was to face, knowing also that he might not return. Their farewell was "See you in Paradise." They felt like the first martyrs of the Christian era, and they were not wrong: their adversaries displayed, quite disturbingly, the same hatred and destructive will as the ancient persecutors.



The text of the Cristeros's oath. A Christian witness all the way to martyrdom and beyond.

THE POSITION OF PIUS XI

In every time the Church has experienced the martyrdom of her children: under the Roman empire and in the medieval period, during the missions in the East and the revolutions of the modern age. But, until now, never before had the hate and the violence of persecutions, the will to crush and destroy the presence of Christ in the world, been as intense as the first persecutions. In this century the Church experienced again the catacombs. Mexico is a chapter of this tragic story, and not a less important one. Pope Pius XI sensed this with prophetic spirit. Amid widespread indifference, the Pontiff spoke in defense of the persecuted. What was happening in Mexico was a tragic and meaningful signal. Pius XI wrote an encyclical, published on November 18, 1926, entitled *Iniquis Afflictisque*, about the Catholics' situation. The Pope wrote: "If in the first centuries of our era and at later times Christians were

treated in a more barbarous fashion than now, certainly in no place or at no time has it happened before that a small group of men has so outraged the rights of God and of the Church as they are now doing in Mexico, and this without the slightest regard for the past glories of their country, with no feelings of pity for their fellow-citizens. They have also done away with the liberties of the majority and in such a clever way that they have been able to clothe their lawless actions with the semblance of legality." Unfortunately the appeal of Pius XI was not heard. His pontificate, from 1922-1939, saw the birth and development of the totalitarian systems. He raised his voice against the new idols in encyclicals of great intellectual weight and prophetic tone. *Quas Primas*, written in 1925, on the Kingship of Christ, made a great impression in the Catholic world and especially in Mexico. The *Mit Brennender Sorge* of 1931, *Divini Re-*

demptoris and *Non abbiamo bisogno*, both from 1937. These writings echo the voice of great medieval pontiffs, updated for the epoch of great technologies and political mass liturgies, to defend freedom of conscience and religion against a new type of aberrant paganism and worship of the state. To these threats these encyclicals oppose the Sovereignty of Christ, font of salvation and freedom. Facing the advance of totalitarianism the Pope proposed sanctity as the vocation of every Christian. This sanctity was to be sought in everyday life, in daily circumstances that were getting harder and harder, if not terrible, to the point of calling for heroism.

Pope Pius XI followed with constant attention the Mexican crisis, appealing not only to the governments directly involved, but also to the conscience of all of humankind, in favor of a peaceful solution of the crisis. The powers directly involved, including the United States ignored him completely.



USQUE AD EFFUSIONEM SANGUINIS...

W“Viva Cristo Rey!” Many fell with these words on their lips, which meant more than just a battle cry. It must have sounded quite strange to the soldiers of Calles to hear them uttered from the mouths of children. Yet, this happened on many occasions, as with little Jose Sanchez del Rio, who had just turned thirteen years old and belonged to the Catholic Youth, aspirant section. He was allowed to write to his mother: “Dear mother, they caught me and tonight they will execute me. The hour that I have desired for so long has come. I greet you together with my brothers, and I promise you that in Paradise I will prepare a good place for you all.” It was signed, Jose Sanchez del Rio, “who dies in defense of the Faith, out of love for Christ the King and the Queen of Guadalupe.”

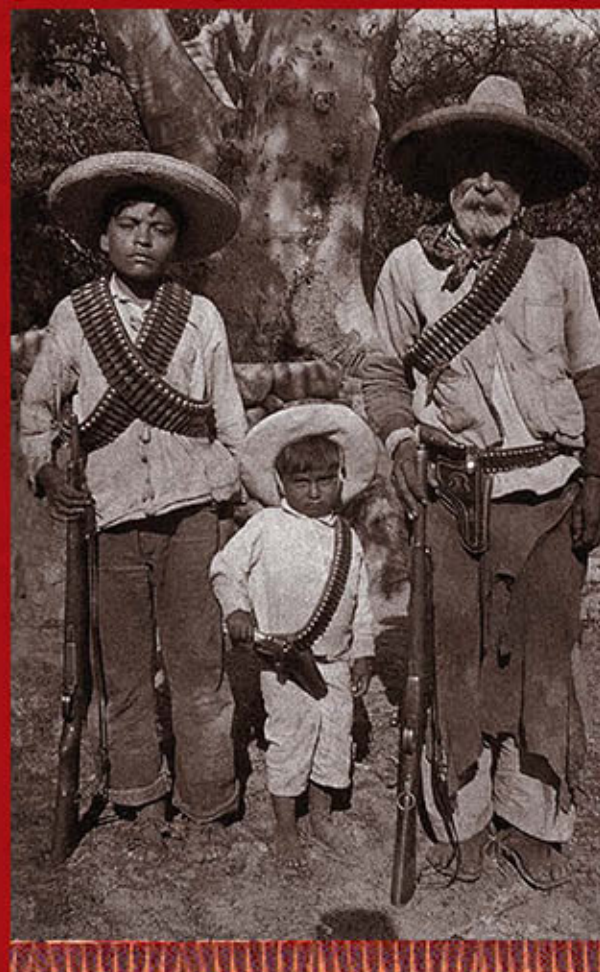
There was no shortage of young people and even children in the camps of the Cristeros. Their mothers brought them with them when they followed their husbands in the crusade. One moving example is the 5-year-old boy Guillermo

Solis. In the encampment of the Liberators of Colima, where he stayed with his mother and where everything was in short supply, he asked in vain for food and drink. “I did not find anything to give you, my son”, his mother said, “Then, tell it Baby Jesus that I will suffer hunger and thirst for him”.

Another boy whose name is included in the martyrology of the rebellion is Tomas de la Mora from Colima. Although he was only sixteen years old, he was one of the most active members of the Catholic Club. He taught catechism to the children of the poorest families. On August 15, 1927 he was arrested simply for wearing a scapular: a piece of cloth with a sacred image, the symbol of a religious confraternity. The commander of the garrison asked him if he was associated with “the fanatics”, meaning the priests, friars, Catholics and bandits. The commander then ordered that he be hanged on the Tree of Liberty - a gloomy throwback to the French Revolution - that had been recently erected on the main square of

Colima. Many citizens protested, in vain, appealing to the Constitution that did not allow for capital punishment for minors, but the boy was brought to the scaffold. When the soldiers were about to put the rope around his neck, Tomas said, “You fight against God, but God is stronger than you and will defeat you. Yes, only Christ wins, reigns, rules and triumphs!” Another Catholic who proved his loyalty to the Faith was Dionisio Edoardo Ochoa, who became famous as “general Nicho.” In the midst of the Callian persecution he helped found the Circle of Catholic Youth in his city, Colima. This circle was a true forge of apostolic and charitable activities. It published a weekly paper with a significant name: La Reconquista (The Reconquest). Although Dionisio was an employee of the government, he never made a secret of his identity and his commitment. After becoming a General of the Cristeros, he was killed by an explosion on November 12, 1927. With him, one of the noblest figures of the Cristiada died.

The Cristiada mobilized the whole Mexican Christian people under the white and blue flag of the Virgin of Guadalupe, without distinction of social class, age, gender. In the picture: three generations of fighters for freedom, in Durango.



All ethnic groups of the country contributed firsthand to the Cristiada. In the photo: a Cristeros Unit of the Huicholes Tribe, from Nayarit. The second from right is the Commander, Juan Bautista.

FATHER MIGUEL AUGUSTIN PRO

There are many stories that could be told from the chronicles of those months. All of them show the strong, virile faith of the Mexican people in front of massacres and horrors. Few Mexicans supported the government, and the Army of Liberators was successful in battle, causing the enemy many difficulties. The ruling class in Mexico realized that it had miscalculated. It had not succeeded in breaking the Catholic resistance; the Church was held in great esteem and the nation, in spite of the repression by the police, identified with the Church and not with the new revolutionary ideologies. 1928 was to be the year of the presidential elections and it had been decided that a president could not serve two consecutive terms. The ruling party, however, had agreed that Calles would hand over the power to General Alvaro Obregon, who would then give back to Calles at the end of his four year term, in a sort of relay race. The

USA, Mexico's ally, had asked for a semblance of a democracy.

To ensure their victory, Calles and Obregon, on top of the usual frauds, tried to take the moral high ground. They needed to discredit their principal enemy, the Church, by accusing Her of seditions and direct involvement in the political realm, in order to separate Her from the people. Press campaigns, and the rounds of endless calumnies and accusations were intensified. However, they wished to create some great scandal that would strike the Church in one of Her best known, most esteemed and greatly loved champions. At that time, many people were active in many diverse social and apostolic activities. Many priests who obeyed God rather than Caesar had become the heroes of the many moving incidents like the ones we discussed. But one man was especially hated by the regime, because his zeal and his profound, universally recognized hu-

manity made him unbearable. This man was a thirty-six year old Jesuit, Miguel Augustin Pro.

Who was this man who had become such a stumbling block for Calles, the pompous arrogant dictator? His personal story is symbolic of the history we are presenting, of the Calvary of his people and of his Church. At the same time it shows to what degree the Church really was the Mother of the nation and her sons' greatest treasure, for which it was possible to give one's life.



Fr. Miguel Augustin Pro, ordained a priest on August 31, 1925, at his office desk.

FROM THE MINES TO THE SOCIETY OF JESUS

He was born on January 13, 1891 in Guadalupe, a little town in the state of Zacatecas in central Mexico. He was the third of eleven children. His father was the director of a mine. A lively and intelligent child, but not particularly studious, he preferred games and music. The years of his childhood and adolescence went by quietly. His happy life was suddenly disrupted when his sister Maria de la Luz entered the convent of Aguas Calientes in 1910. Six months later, on the same day of Maria's investiture, his oldest sister, Maria de la Concepcion, entered the same convent as a postulant. Miguel was struck by the choice of his two sisters. Quite soon he began to change. Later, when he was already a priest, he would describe, during a catechism lesson, the transformation that had taken place in him: "One day I entered a church. A priest was preaching about the Passion of Our Lord. I heard him saying, 'Look what

the Lord has done and suffered for us; and what are we doing for Jesus?' These words impressed me deeply and while I was repeating them to myself, I asked myself, 'And I, what have I done for Jesus?' This question became so profoundly fixed in my heart that I finally decided to follow the Divine Master more closely. Shortly afterwards I entered the Society of Jesus." He became a novice in El Lano, in the state of Michoaran on August 10, 1911. Not without regrets, he left behind his family life and his work in the mine. His companions and superiors were immediately struck by his joyfulness and serenity. Soon his direct and jovial personality made him popular. A confrère of his, Father Adolfo Pulido, said about him, "The first time I spoke to him I was struck by his good mood and his friendly personality. I have never in my life met anybody like him. His jokes were never vulgar, but being refined and intel-

ligent, he expressed them with incomparable mimics. He was the ideal companion during recreation and the heart of our assemblies." Still, his companions soon discovered that besides the Miguel of jokes and gags there was also the Miguel of prayer and intense meditation. During the Spiritual Exercises the comedian became a Carthusian: he spent more time than the others in the chapel and took every care to complete all his spiritual practices. He would sometimes miss recreation in order to do his meditations well. He, who made jokes about everyone and everything including, first of all, himself, took the things of God extremely seriously.

Fr. Pro, disguised as a dandy, having his picture taken in front of one of Calles's official residences in Mexico City, even if he was a wanted man.



Fr. Pro disguised as a miner, in order to preach secretly the spiritual exercises to miners.



MEXICO CITY'S “SCARLET PIMPERNEL”

After completing his studies in Spain and Belgium, Miguel went back to his homeland. It was 1926, the decisive year for Mexico when the dreadful head-on-collision between Calles and the Catholic opposition took place. On April 3rd Calles gave a speech about his program: “Today we must engage in a terrible fight, a fight against a past which we must forever wipe away from the earth. There are people among the wealthy and the aristocrats who want to hinder our progress! It’s unbelievable that there can be reactionaries in this country who think it possible, in our age of social revolution, to raise again the banner of religion, and provoke a new civil war; and yet the government is firmly committed to carry out our agenda without taking into any account the grimacing of the sacristans or the protests of the lazy monks.” Father Pro arrived in Mexico in time to witness the calvary of his country. He was able to

embrace again his father and his siblings, except for Humberto, who had been arrested for disseminating religious propaganda. Father Pro immediately began his intense apostolate: “As soon as public service in the churches was interrupted, I organized what we called ‘Eucharistic stations’. I made known to the faithful several locations where I would distribute Holy Communion every day (...); I was named head of the preachers. Furthermore, since the majority of our Fathers were too well known and could not appear in public without danger of being arrested, I have to substitute for them and thus ran from Herod to Pilate, day and night. How can I endure – I, the weak and delicate one, the resident patient of two European clinics who spent my days lying in bed sipping light broths?! This proves without a doubt that if the Divine Hand did not intervene and used of me, I would have already dropped everything. I

say this with confidence: my vanity has nothing to be proud of, because I can touch my hand, experience directly the nothingness of my person and the good that is accomplished through me. Therefore, it is not me, but God’s grace within me. (...) The confessional is an exercise in humility for me, and I see myself so far from imitating those who come seeking from me spiritual direction!”



Fr. Pro in the mug shot taken in prison before his execution.

By a direct order of the dictator, Calles, the police and the military spent several months trying to capture at all costs the “white pimpernel”, Fr. Miguel Augustin Pro.

WITNESS TO THE TRUTH

On October 31st, the Mexican people challenged the regime by solemnly celebrating the feast of Christ the King. Father Pro participated in it and he left us a vivid account: "On the day of the feast of Christ the King, the most grandiose, sublime and divine celebration took place. Our Lady of Guadalupe truly is Queen of the Mexicans! The terrible trial that we are going through not only made the number of resolute Catholics to grow, but also gave us some martyrs – for we cannot otherwise call those twenty valiant young people of the Catholic Youth, who were so brutally assassinated, and the many others whose names we do not know because the press is not free to speak.... Victory is close and the fall of our powerful foes, who have money, weapons and lies on their side, is at hand. They will fall like the statue in Daniel's vision, hit by a small stone from the heavens. The staff that guides the unarmed people of

Guadalupe will soon strike down the head the Mexican government, and then Christ alone will reign, Christ alone will rule, Christ alone will win. We glimpse already the splendor of the resurrection, precisely because the darkness of the passion has almost peaked: the news of outrages and reprisals come in from all over, the victims are many, and the list of the martyrs grows longer every day. Oh, if only I could share such Fate!" Father Pro's mission, like that of other fearless priests and lay people, was carried out amongst all sorts of difficulties, living in hiding and sleeping at the homes of trusted friends. He wrote, "No one knows where I live; I receive letters, messages, and gifts for my poor families at four different places". Father Pro seemed to be facing dangers with the ease and joyfulness that had always characterized his person. Actually, there was something greater that sustained him, as he himself

said, "It's not I, but the grace of God working in me." He was supporting forty poor families at the same time, and so his work had no respite: "May Jesus be blessed! I have no time to breathe, I am up to my neck in work, giving meals to those who are hungry – and there are many of them! I run around like lightning, to and fro, very quickly (a privilege usually reserved for rascals!), and so when I receive a request I take it in stride... Usually my satchel is as empty and flat as the spiritual part of Calles' soul, but it is not worth worrying about it because our Heavenly procurator is always so generous."



Fr. Miguel Augustin Pro's family was entirely committed to the Cristiada and to faithfulness to the Church. In the photo: Miguel and his two brothers Humberto and Roberto, militants of the National League for Religious Defense; the former will accompany Fr. Miguel to his martyrdom.

THERE IS NO GREATER LOVE THAN THIS

M“My grace will suffice for thee,” this is what Father Pro felt in his heart as his hour was drawing near. He knew well the fate that awaited him if he persisted in his activity. “God seeks not our blood, but our faith”, says Saint Cyprian. By now, Father Pro was ready to give his life for the faith. Martyrdom is neither a surrender nor a provocation. The Church never canonized a martyr who imprudently exposed himself to torments and death. Christ demands courage from his disciples, not recklessness. Father Pro approached dangers with full awareness, and yet he was able to sneak away with surprising ability. For over a year he mocked police searches through disguises, tricks, and incredible escapes on foot or bicycle. He had told his friends, “An order to arrest me has been issued, but...this order has not been carried out yet! The reason is that I am not hiding at all. I do all I have to do in broad daylight

and even by artificial light, because the former is not enough. (...) I explained these reasons to Father Carlos; he is afraid for my life! My life? But what in the world is my life? Would not losing it for my brethren be equivalent to saving it? Surely one must not lose it foolishly, but would anyone be a true child of the Lord if he turned his back and ran at the first gunshot? Obviously, I am speaking in general because there are people who will be greatly needed tomorrow and we must carefully look after them.” His heroism was not improvised: the springs from which he had long been drawing his strength were his intimacy with Jesus and his very tender devotion for the Blessed Virgin. Through these means, God Himself performs miracles through souls like Miguel Augustin Pro, who only have to follow. On November 13, 1927 the event took place that gave the government the pretext for the harshest repres-

sion yet, and an opportunity to discredit the Church. As the presidential elections were nearing, they blamed Father Pro for an assassination attempt on Obregon, a presidential candidate. One of the people arrested revealed under torture that he had recently gone to Confession with Father Pro, and showed the police where he was living. The arrest of the Pro brothers was set for the night of November 17th and 18th. At 4 a.m. the police burst into the house, arresting the three brothers, who did not resist. On the way to the Police Headquarters, Miguel Augustin heard his brothers' confessions and gave them absolution.



On November 23, 1927, Fr. Miguel Augustin Pro, wrongfully arrested for a crime he never committed and condemned to death in spite of Mexico's laws, is lead to his martyrdom following a direct order from the dictator, Calles. His last desire was to gather in prayer.

THE MARTYRDOM

Mather Pro was used as a pretext to accuse the Church of undermining the highest institutions of the State: the idea of a Jesuit conspiracy familiar to anti-Catholic literature since the 1700s. Government newspapers triumphantly wrote that the Jesuit had already confessed his complicity in the attempts. Obregon had planned a quick trial to convict the Pro brothers, but he was advised that there was no concrete evidence against them – they were completely unrelated to the real attacker, Luis Segura. Since it was impossible to convict Fr. Pro, Obregon decided to execute him without a trial. On the evening of November 22, Obregon visited his friend President Calles asking him to order the immediate execution of the prisoners. Calles summoned General Cruz and gave him the order. When the general suggested that it might be better to provide some legal justification, Calles replied, “I do not want formalities; I want

action.” Cruz left with a document signed by the President, condemning Father Pro to death.

The execution was set for the next day, the 23rd of November. At 10:30 that morning, Father Pro was called from his cell. He bid farewell to his brother with a long handshake. On the way to the execution, one of the soldiers asked the priest for forgiveness. Father Miguel blessed him. In the courtyard where the execution would take place, Father Pro found soldiers bearing rifles at the ready. A photograph taken at that moment shows him standing erect with his hands folded on his chest, wearing a calm, grave expression. He went immediately to the place he was directed to, in front of the firing squad. The commander asked if he had any last wishes. Father Pro asked to pray. He knelt down, slowly made the Sign of the Cross, and, after a moment of meditation, he got up and devoutly kissed the

small crucifix he held in his hand. He refused to be blindfolded and turned to the government representatives and the soldiers. “God is my witness”, he exclaimed, “I am innocent of the crime you have charged me with!” With crucifix in hand, he traced the Sign of the Cross on the crowd saying, “May the Lord have mercy on you all!” He stretched out his arms in the shape of a cross and, holding a rosary in his left hand, he added, “With all my heart, I forgive my enemies!” The firing squad lined up and loaded their weapons. Raising his eyes to Heaven, Father Pro repeated the invocation dear to Catholic Mexicans and often chanted by their heroes and martyrs: “Long Live Christ the King!”



At approximately 10:30 in the morning, Fr. Miguel Augustin Pro ended his prayer, forgave his persecutors in a loud voice, extended his arms in the shape of a cross, and was shot to death while crying out, “Long Live Christ the King!”



The rosary that Fr. Pro held in his hand at the moment of his execution, along with other relics.

THE POWER AND THE GLORY

The news of the execution spread throughout the city, provoking dismay and sorrow: nobody believed that Fr. Pro was guilty. That same day, in an interview with Gen. Cruz in the daily newspaper Excelsior, the true reason for Fr. Pro's death could be read: "We've been informed by the general Police inspectorate that Fr. Miguel Augustin Pro, who was accused of being a conspirator in the attempted assassination of Obregon, was wanted by the security committee's agents for a long time. On three occasions they believed they had arrested him, but he had always been able to escape." Thus, Miguel Augustin Pro had ended his run, after fighting the good fight. Who could have imagined it, seeing the curious kid exploring the mines, or the playful novice, or the student laboring over the sacred scriptures? Who could have guessed his martyrdom, this unjust yet glorious end? Only many years later, on

September 25, 1988, were his heroic virtues and his sanctity officially recognized by the Church and was he proclaimed blessed by Pope John Paul II. Fr. Pro's goodness and charity had made him an unbearable 'stumbling block' for the regime's strong men, who claimed to be the representatives of the people and the liberators from the slavery of religion. Fr. Pro reaffirmed, in a way they found offensive, the irreducibility of Christ and the Gospels to the powers of this world. The future blessed died as a confessor and a martyr: he had confessed (i.e. witnessed) and professed, without uncertainties and betrayal, Jesus Christ as the Savior of mankind, the way, the truth and the life. At last, love for Christ made him a martyr, killed out of hatred for the faith. Fr. Pro's triumph began as soon as his sacrifice took place, when thousands of people gathered to pray. Many parents brought their children to the place of ex-

ecution, so that the image of the martyrs may be impressed on their memories. The funeral, rather than a grim procession, was the apotheosis of a winner. At the Dolores cemetery, Fr. Pro's coffin was placed in the tomb of the Jesuit Fathers and the sobbing crowd intoned the Te Deum. The following day, a newspaper reported this very significant detail about the funeral: when the procession passed by the U.S. Embassy, on top of which waved the stars and stripes flag, the crowd roared, "Long live Christ the King! Long live Mexico!"



The manly dignity of the elderly father of Fr. Miguel and Humberto Pro, captured on the day of their martyrdom. Their deaths was an example for all of Catholic Mexico; their funeral was defined, by independent observers, "a triumph" of people and Faith.

SHEDDING THE BLOOD OF A FAITHFUL PEOPLE

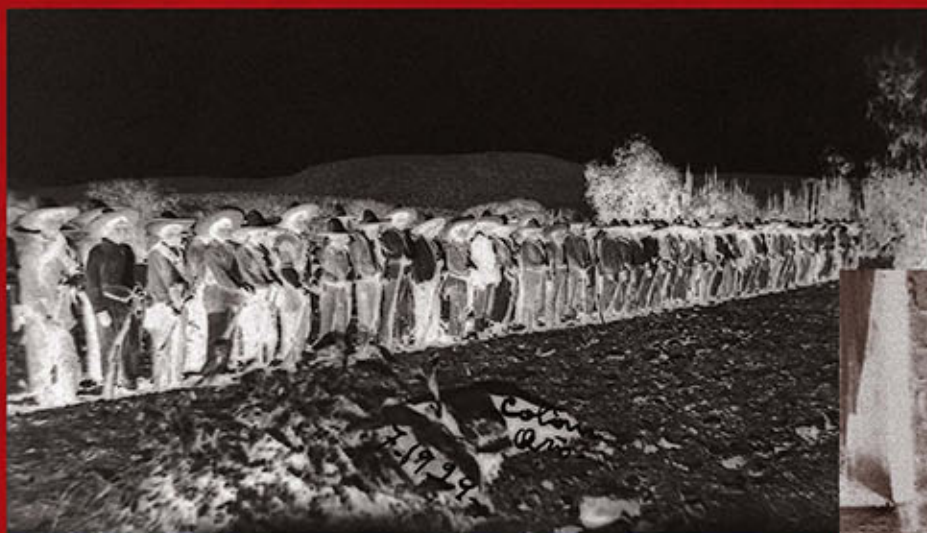
The Mexican people, the ignorant and superstitious 'low rabble' – as they were scornfully described by the enlightened reformists – had eloquently shown its faithfulness to the Church and demonstrated that they understood well what kind of project was being implemented in their country. Fr. Miguel Augustin Pro remains the most famous casualty of this period of merciless persecution, which claimed the lives of 30,000 victims among the Cristeros, plus 150,000 ordinary people and 40,000 members of the federal army.

This incredible anti-Catholic hatred was rooted in the attempt to impose an ideology inspired by the Enlightenment, a Masonic world view with utopian and socialist nuances, in which bourgeois intellectuals were supposed to lead a proletarian front. According to these reformers, Catholicism could not and should not find room in modernity. Obregon and Calles

often spoke about a "fight" to free themselves from the "slavery of Rome". "All misfortunes come from being Catholic and from the Spanish tradition", wrote one of their apologists. Calles saw Protestantism as a cultural alternative for the entire continent. The sentence "Poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States", was heard so often in those days that it became a popular motto. There was a large influx of Protestant ministers. They came favored by and under the auspices of the government and the press. On November 27 – four days after Fr. Pro's assassination – Alvaro Obregon gave a public address in Toluca in which he vigorously defended the Revolution's "moral and spiritual values". He invited everyone to keep watch against its enemies, principally the Church and the clergy: "When an ant stings us, we don't look for the ant that stung us to kill, but we take a bucket of

boiling water and we pour it on the ant-hill. When a scorpion bites us, we take a lantern to look for it and, if we find another scorpion, we don't let him live just because he did not bite us, rather we kill it as well, because it could kill us with his poison". Was Fr. Pro such an irritating and uncomfortable presence for the powers that be? Somehow, Georges Bernanos explains such rage and hatred. During those years he wrote, "Ultimately, people only fear saints, in whom their intelligence recognizes simple and irreducible beings, who are impossible to classify – true soul kidnappers".

A Cristeros Unit presents arms. The Cristiada took the lives of some 200,000 Mexican Catholic people, including both Cristeros and civilians. However, the oppressing army also paid the price of 40,000 dead.



The military repression also had a terrible cost in terms of destruction, while the resources of the country, particularly oil, were sold to Mexico's powerful neighbor, the U.S., in exchange for weapons, ammunition, and political support. Pictured is a campesino in front of his ruined house, in San Jose de Gracia, Michoacan.

THE *ARREGLOS*: THE END OF THE ADVENTURE

In spite of tragic losses, material and moral sufferings, and little means, in 1929 the Cristeros were close to victory. From March through May 1929, in a series of epic battles, they defeated the federal troops and conquered the cities of Aguas Calientes, Tepic and Guadalajara (among the unrestrained joy of the people). The federal army suffered another historic defeat in Jalisco state, during the Tepatiplan battle. The economic crisis, the popular support for the rebels, the steadfast Catholic opposition, and the witness of the martyrs, all seemed to point to the coming overthrow of the Revolutionary party. Formerly inconceivable, opened up for this nation which had been the victim of the interests of various oligarchies for too long. The civil and social values upon which the country had been built would be renewed. It seemed like a dream, and a dream it was decided it should remain.

It was unacceptable, in 1929, in a strategically important country like Mexico, to have a government of Cristeros – anachronistic leftovers from the Middle Ages, with their absurd worship of the regality of Christ and the ideas of society, politics, and economy that went with it. And so the snare was laid in which the ecclesiastic hierarchies fell, dragging down with them the unwilling Cristeros. It was the trap of the so called *Arreglos* (agreements). Their main architect was the U.S. Ambassador Morrow, a partner at J.P. Morgan and Co. who had sponsored the election of a new president, Emilio Portes Gil. His intervention did not come without cost. It included modifications of Article 27 of the Constitution, which made possible to grant American oil companies drilling rights in Mexico for 99 years. Morrow's mediations took place in the historic Chapultepec Castle, where, on June 21, 1929, the preliminary

agreements of the *arreglos* were signed. The Mexican Church agreed to peace even though the cause of the Cristeros, who had fought an impossible fight in the Church's name, seemed about to prevail. The most benevolent interpretation of the actions of the bishops and the Vatican diplomacy is that someone had convinced them that the victory would never come, even if it appeared close at hand, or, perhaps, that a victory on the battlefield would not necessarily translate into the ushering in of a new society.

Facing the very real possibility of a military victory of the Cristiada, American diplomatic pressures concentrated on the Holy See, which accepted the idea of a negotiated peace. Unfortunately, the so called *Arreglos* turned out to be a fraud for Mexican Catholics. Pictured is the Signing of the *Arreglos*, at Chapultepec Castle, on June 21, 1929. At the center, dressed as a layman (the cassock was prohibited), stands Monsignor Pascual Diaz y Barreto, the Apostolic Delegate.



IF THE WORLD HATES YOU....

The dramatic consequence of the agreements for Catholics was that, in giving up their weapons, they exposed themselves to a long and hidden genocide. Accepting the peace proposed by Portes Gil - which had the result of strengthening the government by securing it from possible future insurrections - meant the perpetuation, for the following decades, of the same power that had ordered massacres and prosecutions. Portes Gil, in contrast to his predecessors, was a capable and intelligent man. He introduced a different, more peaceful governing style, avoiding fights with the Church but pursuing the same goals through less violent means. He was not just supported by Morrow and by the American financial world, but also by Calles who for several years, having been convinced to act more discretely, remained influential in Mexican politics. The Constitution of Queretaro remained in force in all its articles,

but its application was changed and it became more "tolerant". This compromise allowed the reopening of Mexican churches on June 29, 1929, the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul. Bells began tolling again throughout the country as Mass was celebrated everywhere, amongst the fervor and enthusiasm of the people. The Cristeros gave up their weapons and came down from the mountains, disbanding the troops that for three years had fought Calles and Obregon. They returned to their villages and cities, where they became the victims, for years to come, of police and army revenge. After Obregon's and Calle's rough and brutal oppression ended, the new Mexican masters simply undertook another oppressive strategy: soft repression. Instead of trying to physically eliminate the Church, a costly project with little results, they focused their efforts on neutralizing it and making it harmless, by reducing it to a

mere place of liturgical worship. Since any public or social expression of the Church was still forbidden - including the teaching religion - the goal was to progressively push it to the margins of civil life and keep it there, allowing it to play a mere consolatory role of spiritual assistance for those who really could not do without it. Thus, the Mexican Church has experienced throughout this century, very rapidly and probably without fully realizing it, the same process of secularization that elsewhere took place in different times and in different ways.

On June 29, 1929 Mexican churches reopened for worship amidst general jubilation. However, the martyrdom of the Mexican people did not end. Their oppression continued at the hands of a Masonic and anti-Catholic government, which looked only after the economic interests of the landowners and of Mexico's powerful North American neighbor



PETER IN MEXICO: POPE JOHN PAUL II VISIT

Fear had prevailed, the fear of truly trusting Christ's promises that the gates of Hell will not prevail. Perhaps because of this fear, which is not unique to the Mexican Church, the Cristiada became the object of an enormous 'conspiracy of silence.' The Church was called on by the State to remove every residual danger of "fanaticism" in exchange for a barely tolerated survival. Yet, the Mexico of the martyrs continued to exist and was, once again, the object of special attention by the Vicar of Christ when John Paul II became Pope. His first papal trip was to Mexico, in 1979. The President of the Republic, Jose' Lopez Portillo, gave him a coldly formal welcome. This had to be the attitude of the successor of Carranza, Obregon and Calles towards the successor of Peter. The true welcome came from the Mexican people, when more than a million people waited for him along the streets of the capital and in Constitution Square.

According to police estimates, 18 million Mexicans traveled to see the Pope during his 7-day and to receive his blessing, which was still illegal in public according to the Queretaro Constitution. The capital, which 50 years before had witnessed the martyrdom of Fr. Pro and where the blood of other martyrs had fertilized the faith, encountered the Pope, the Vicar of Christ the King, for whom many men and women had sacrificed their lives. And when in the cathedral the Pope, speaking about the theme of fidelity, of "Virgo Fidelis", made a comparison between "semper fidelis Poland and "always faithful Mexico," a cry arose from the crowd, "Long live the Pope!" This cry reaffirmed, after so many years, the primacy of Christ the King. The Pope came to meet the poor, the campesinos, the sick, the children, and the common Mexican people that Fr. Pro, Lega's militants, and the Cristeros loved so much and for which they had given their lives. He addressed

all the oppressed, the poor, and the unknown for whom the Church has always provided help and mercy. In Guadalupe, in front of 300 Latin American bishops, Pope Wojtyla launched his mission for a new evangelization of the continent, declaring Latin American, even with its suffering and difficulties, the continent of hope. Thus the battle fought by the soldiers of Christ the King had not been in vain, if Peter's successor – the head of the Church – could come to their land and pronounce such words.



After a long period of silent resistance, Catholic Mexico gathered again publicly in the streets and city squares in 1979, on the occasion of the first visit of Pope John Paul II to Mexico. Eighteen million Mexicans traveled to receive his blessing. After that first visit, John Paul II returned to Mexico several times and beatified some of the martyrs of the Cristiada.