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Story of Persecution Of Church in Mexico Told From Beginning

Conflict Was Started by Attempt of Calles to Enforce Drastic Anti-Clerical Provisions of 1917 Constitution—The State Exercised Dictatorial Authority Over All Religion, and Took Ecclesiastical Authority from Bishops—Pastors of Hierarchy of U. S. and Mexico Recalled, and Protests of the Christian World

CHURCH PROPERTY DESECRATED AND CONFISCATED BISHOPS EXILED, PRIESTS SHOT, NUNS IMPRISONED

(By the N. O. W. C. News Service) Washington, June 27.—The religious conflict in Mexico, although it dates back to the early days of the independence of that country in 1821, can be regarded as having had its culmination in the victory of the anti-clericals when the Constitution of 1857, which was openly hostile to the clergy and to the Church was adopted.

The religious problem in Mexico was given new life by the enactment in 1917 of the "Constitution of Queretaro" but became acute only when efforts were made to enforce its drastic provisions making impossible the exercise of numerous liberties.

Although adopted in 1917, during the Carranza regime, this Constitution of Queretaro was enforced only in part, and no effort was made to put into effect the provisions of Article 3 and Article 130, which sections denied freedom of education and gave to the Federal authority the power to legislate and to intervene in matters of religious worship in every part of Mexico.

Disregarded by Porfirio Diaz Porfirio Diaz, during the long period of his dictatorship, had "dead lettered" the anti-clerical provisions of the old constitution. When the Queretaro Constitution was written at a convention presided over by Carranza, its radical anti-religious provisions were believed to have been inserted at a time of revolutionary hysteria, and Carranza later recommended that they be "modified". He and his successors, through Oregon, made no effort to bring about their enforcement.

The religious persecution began to spread in 1925, early in the Calles administration. At first the acts of intimidation were purely local. As the violence increased protest was raised from all parts of the world. In July, 1925, the National Catholic Welfare Conference News Service sent Charles Phillips, a special correspondent to Mexico, to investigate and report on conditions.

Mr. Phillips' first story told of a systematic and complete proscription of the Faith that was going on in the State of Tabasco. Every church in the diocese was closed and the Mass interdicted. Only three priests remained and they dared not celebrate Mass openly, dared not baptize, officiate at marriages of administer any of the Sacraments publicly.

Mr. Phillips remained in Mexico more than a month, visiting nearly all of the dioceses and interviewing the majority of the members of the hierarchy. On one occasion he was subjected to assault by men believed to be secret Government agents and received painful though not serious injuries.

Bishop Pascual Diaz, Mr. Phillips revealed, was living in exile in Mexico City and could not return to Tabasco and resume his episcopal work unless he broke priestly vows of celibacy and married.

News Astounded Catholic World The Phillips revelations came as an astounding piece of news to Catholics in the United States and throughout the world. Previously the anti-clerical campaign in the states of Mexico had been veiled in secrecy and little news of its extent had been given by the secular news services.

The movement officially to de-Catholicize Mexico then grew bolder. With the support of Government troops, the Church of Coatepec, just outside the City of Mexico and in the environs of the national shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, was seized, the pastor driven out and the church handed over to an organized body of schismatics who then operated under the mask of a "national church" and who were popularly known as the "Cismaticos." The other churches thus were seized within a few months.

In its efforts to further the schismatic movement and establish a "national church," the Government turned over the Cathedral of Corpus Christi in Mexico City to Don Jose Joaquin Perez, aged renegade priest and "patriarch and primate" of the "Mexican Orthodox Catholic and Apostolic Church." Early in March, 1926, Don Perez celebrated "Mass" in the Cathedral—before a congregation of one. Every effort was made to attract persons to the church, but the efforts of the "patriarch" proved futile.

On July 27, 1925, Mexican government officials, supported by military force, raided the Diocesan Seminary at Guadalajara, expelled the students and closed the institution. The following day, during a demonstration of the students, they were fired upon by the police and two of their number wounded.

Acts of Terrorism Acts of terrorism followed swiftly. Churches were desecrated, confiscated, closed, converted into museums and theaters, or razed to the ground. Schools were interdicted, seized, their students expelled or jailed. Charitable institutions were raided and destroyed. The schismatic movement was launched and fostered and Catholic lay life was harassed and threatened at every turn.

Catholic workmen were denied employment; Catholic teachers in State schools were discharged; Catholics were denied the rights of citizenship, denied office, forbidden even to protest.

All of these persecutions, it was emphasized, were made possible under the Constitution of 1917. This held true especially of Articles 1, 3, 5, 24, 27, 37, 55 and 130.

Summarized, these articles contained the following provisions: Article 1 laid the foundation for absolutism by denying the existence of unalienable, natural rights. Article 3 denied freedom of education.

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