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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—Pastorals 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. C. 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. Prior thereto the dispute had been largely one over Church benefices.

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 Carranaza later recommended that they be "modified". He and his successors, through Obregon, made no effort to bring about their

The religious persecution began to spread in 1925, early in the Calles administration. At first the acts of intimidation was 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

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 dioceze was closed and the Mass interdicted, . Only three priests remained and they dared not celebrate Mass openly, dared not baptize, officiate at marriages or administer any of the Sacraments publicly. "So far as outward appearances go," Mr. Phillips wrote, "one might easily think that the Catholic Faith had disappeared from Mexico."

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 Phillins 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 Coatenec, 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 seised within as many 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 Cathedralbefore 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 folice 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 workingmen 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 vere made possible under the Constitution of 1317. This held true especially of Articles 1, 3, 5, 24, 27, 37, 55 and 130. Summarized, these articles contained the follow-

ing provisions: Article 1 laid the foundation for absolution by denying the existence of unalienable, natural rights.

Article 3 denied freedom of education.

Article 5 prohibited monastic orders. Article 24 denied the right to conduct acts of public worship elsewhere than within the Church, and

placed such acts under governmental supervision.

Article 27 denied the right of the Church and of private, benevolent, scientific and educational institutions to own property.

Article 37 (III) was interpreted as citizenship to the Catholic clergy.

Article 55 limited the civil rights of the clergy. Article 130 gave to the Federal authority the power to legislate and to intervene in matters of religious worship in every part of Mexico, and obliged local authorities to act as agents of the Federal authorities in such matters, The Constitution also:

Denied validity of religious marriage.

Denied juridical personality to religious institu-

Declared the ministry to be a profession but in its interpretation denied to the clergy the rights en joyed by those exercising other professions. Local Supervision of Priests

Gave to State Legislatives power to fix the num her of ministers in their respective States "according to the needs of each locality," in enforcing this provision. State Legislatures acted arbitrarily.

Provided that only Mexicans by birth might be Denied liberty of expression to ministers.

Denied the right of the people to establish new places of worship.

Made the pastor responsible to a committee of ten citizens and obliged him to register before the civil authority, and thus destroyed the ecclesiastical author-

Denied official credit for education acquired in an ecclesiastical seminary. Denied to the Church the liberty of the press

which is granted by Article 7 to publications not of a confessional character. Prescribed limits within which ministers might

inherit property different from those prescribed for other citizens.

Denied the right of trial by jury to offenders against these provisions, though this right was granted

This Constitution, although seemingly rendering impossible the life of the Church, was tolerated by the Catholic people and the clergy of Mexico in the hope that, as revolutionary passions subsided, it would become possible to secure its amendment. In this belief they were encouraged by the Revolutionary leaders. particularly by President Venustiano Carranza, who actually introduced into the Federal Congress bills amending some of the anti-religious articles, especially Articles 3 and 130.

But by the beginning of 1926 it became certain that enabling acts providing for the enforcement of the religious clauses of the Constitution of 1917 were in preparation and would be passed.

Calles Acts to Subdue Church

Most convincing evidence of this purpose was given when President Calles requested and obtained from the Federal Congress an act giving him extraordinary power to amend and amplify the Penal Code.

In January, 1926, Archhishop Jose Mora y del Rio of Mexico City, speaking for the Hierarchy, stated in an interviewithat there was no change in the attiwith regard white provisions of the Queretaro Contude of the Hierarchy as expressed by him in 1917 stitution. At that time he had spoken in denunciation of the articles.

A meeting of the Bishops was called and meanwhile a decree regulating Article 3, resulting in the closing of the Catholic schools, was enforced.

There was then published a decree amending and amplifying the Penal Code, to become effective July 31. 1926. The Bishops, after deliberating, found it impossible to accept the terms of this decree. They appointed a committee to confer with President Calles and, acting upon President Calles' advice, they petitioned Congress. Their petition was endorsed by a large number of laymen all over Mexico, but it was rejected by the Mexican Congress on the grounds that the Bishops did not enjoy the right to petition, having lost their citizenship.

The Bishops, in their protest, laid special emphasis on that part of the penal code which refers to the registration of priests and also on that part of the Constitution which authorizes the local civil authorities to limit the number of priests.

(Continued Next Week)

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