

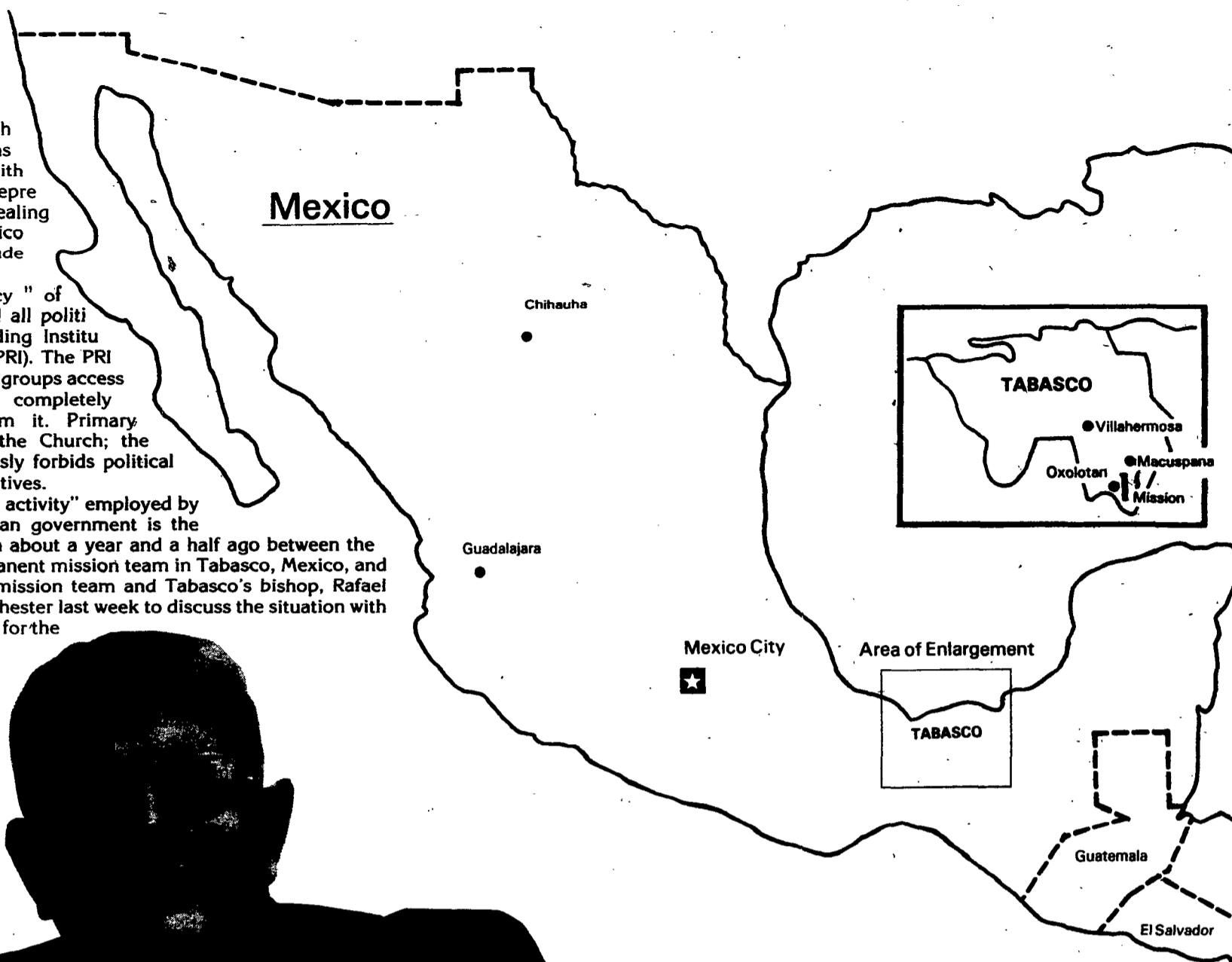
The separation of church and state dictated by the U.S. Constitution has long been a source of frustration to various Church agencies, but such restrictions seem minor in comparison with the difficulties Church representatives encounter in dealing with the constitution of Mexico and that country's attitude toward the Church.

The one-party "democracy" of Mexico attempts to channel all political activity through the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The PRI is structured to allow certain groups access to political power and to completely exclude other groups from it. Primary among those excluded is the Church; the Mexican constitution expressly forbids political activity by Church representatives.

The definition of "political activity" employed by some officials of the Mexican government is the focus of conflicts that began about a year and a half ago between the Diocese of Rochester's permanent mission team in Tabasco, Mexico, and the local government. The mission team and Tabasco's bishop, Rafael Garcia Gonzales, were in Rochester last week to discuss the situation with diocesan officials and to plan for the future of the mission team.



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal



'First steps are always baby steps. Therefore, anything you try to do that has depth has difficulties, especially when there is such a great gap in cultures.'

Bishop Rafael Garcia Gonzales

Ministry vs. politics: A question of prudence

By Karen M. Franz

"In Mexico, any work in social ministry that the Church embarks on is looked upon with some suspicion even if it is done by Mexicans, with even more suspicion if it is not done by natives," said Rafael Garcia Gonzales, bishop of the Diocese of Tabasco, Mexico, of the difficulties Rochester missionaries have encountered with the government in his diocese.

The Diocese of Rochester sent its first permanent mission team to its sister diocese of Tabasco in October of 1983. The team, led at that time by Father Neil Miller (now pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help parish), settled in Oxolotan, a town of about 15,000 inhabitants in the parish of Tacoltpa, and began its work.

About a year and a half ago, strife broke out in the *rancheria* (small farming community) of Mexiquito over the right to farm certain parcels of land.

The Mexican government has dedicated certain areas as peasant farming lands. Although such lands cannot legally be purchased, one leader of the community claimed ownership of a certain parcel and tried to drive the peasants off, Bishop Rafael said.

The mission team informed the peasants of their legal rights, and Father Miller tried to intercede with the "landowner."

Trouble soon began brewing and came to a full boil in May of this year when the team (now under the leadership of Father Paul J. Ryan) was detained by Mexican Immigration officials. The reason cited for their arrest was two violations of Mexican constitutional regulation of Church activity: that Church ministry be conducted solely by Mexican natives and that Church representatives of any nationality not intervene in political affairs.

Moreover, officials noted that the tourist-class visas under which the team entered the country are insufficient for foreigners doing any type of work in Mexico. Team members were told that they needed visitor-class visas, although officials of the Diocese of Rochester have

learned that for many years several religious orders have operated missions in Mexico under tourist visas.

Despite the charges, Bishop Rafael explains that the conflict is not really related to the government. Instead, he said, it can be traced directly back to the "landowner" and two other local leaders who were accustomed to manipulating the poverty and political ignorance of the peasants to their own advantage. To regain their control of the peasants, they manipulated the mission team's situation as well in representing it to the government.

Bishop Rafael said that, in part, the conflicts developed because the missionary team did not tread carefully enough. "They still lack an in-depth understanding of the

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political and economic situation," he said. "The warm reception the (Oxolotan) community gave the ministry team made them very secure and unaware of the dangers."

He said that this lack of understanding was not the fault of the mission team and that more care will have to be taken in preparing future team members with a clearer picture of the situation and more fluency in Spanish, a minor point that may have contributed to the problems.

On the other hand, Bishop Rafael said that the mission team threatened the powers that be in Oxolotan merely by their lifestyles. "In enabling the poor to be vocal, to understand their rights, they cannot be manipulated," he said.

He is still working to resolve the visa situation, but remains confident about the mission's future. "Both the mission team and the Church of Tabasco must keep working as much as they let you," he said. "You just try to understand what has happened and keep in mind your two aims: faith in God and evangelization."

Yet evangelization is no more popular with the government than is political education. "Whoever is evangelized is liberated," Bishop Rafael said. "An evangelization that does not liberate becomes — like Marx said — the opiate of the people."

Bishop Rafael's hopes for the mission team's work in his diocese are great. The Diocese of Tabasco encompasses 1.5 million people who are served by 60 priests and about 200 women religious. "Tabasco has parishes of 170,000 with only three priests," he said. "In some *rancherias*, Mass is said once a month; in others, once every three months or once a year."

But he claims that the Diocese of Rochester needs the mission more than Tabasco does. "Any church that opens itself to other churches is the one that receives benefits by broadening its horizons of the world Church," he said. "Tabasco is in need of pastoral assistance, and Rochester needs to open its horizons."

Therefore, he said, "the future of the team is to go back, understand what has happened and exercise prudence." The risk of government action is always present, but "prudence is not a matter of stopping ministry but of doing it in a different way — being aware of the dangers and being careful to go more slowly," he said.

Before returning to Tabasco, Bishop Rafael said he wished to convey his thanks to the people of Rochester for all they do for Tabasco. He cited Bishop Matthew H. Clark, the Office of Social Ministry, the mission committee and especially the past and present members of the mission team — Valerie Smith, Mark Kavanaugh and Yolanda Ramos — and their families "to whom I personally feel close and pray for."