

# Mexican Church seeks state recognition, social change

By Michael Tangeman  
**Mexico City (NC)** — The Catholic Church in Mexico faces a number of major challenges which will shape its influence on Mexican society and its 67 million Catholics in the future, according to members of the hierarchy and church observers.

The Church's most-discussed and most-visible challenge is how to resolve Mexico's 175-year-old history of volatile church-state relations.

Mexico still has no diplomatic relations with the Vatican, and the country's constitution contains more anti-church provisions than any other in Latin America -- despite the fact that the population is 87 percent Catholic.

Perhaps less visible, but equally important for Mexican Catholicism, is whether the hierarchy will choose to continue the "opening up" of the Church to society begun by the Second Vatican Council and continued by the Latin American bishops' meetings in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968 and in Puebla, Mexico, in 1979.

The Mexican hierarchy in general has what one bishop termed a reputation for being "very traditionalist." Still, the "preferential option for the poor" stressed by many Latin American clergy and laity has made itself felt.

Tens of thousands of Mexican Catholics are now estimated to be members of the grass-roots, basic Christian communities which meet regularly to study in a biblical context the social problems of their daily lives.

The communities are small, local groups of Catholics which combine scriptural reflection, liturgical services and social action.

A vocal minority of Mexican bishops has called in recent years for a re-orientation of the Church's mission more in keeping with an "option for the poor."

But there are differences within the Mexican hierarchy over the Church's mission regarding social issues that show in support for the basic communities and other areas.

Of the 61 bishops and 12 archbishops, only one archbishop and fewer than a dozen bishops are regarded in Mexico as active promoters of the "option for the poor" and the basic Christian communities.

The result of episcopal support of the basic Christian communities has been the formation of 3,000-4,000 communities with 15-20 members each, according to Rogelio Gomez-Hermosillo, director of the Center for Ecumenical Studies and a lay member of a Mexico City community.

Nearly 200 such communities exist in the Mexico City metropolitan area, he said.

Most vocal in support of the basic communities have been the bishops of the Southern Pacific pastoral region, which includes the southernmost states of Chiapas and Oaxaca. Since 1977, the southern bishops have issued nine pastoral letters focusing on social problems faced by poor Mexicans.

According to Bishop Arturo Lona Reyes of Tehuantepec, the bishops' support of the

basic communities in the impoverished areas has yielded positive results. "These groups have awakened (in the people) a sense of human dignity."

"An indigenous person no longer arrives at my office with his head and shoulders stooped. They come with dignity to say, 'Padre Obispo, we need you to come to our community; we're waiting for you there,'" said Bishop Lona.

He said the local people are as bold with the government. "They've awakened this human dignity and, for me, as a bishop, that's the greatest possible thing."

The southern bishops' support of poor people's demands for minimal social services and fair treatment has drawn criticism and threats from local landowners and political bosses, Bishop Lona said. While many times the bishops' demands for justice coincide with those of political groups, he said that "the field of our struggle is part of our faith; our work always begins from our faith."

The more "traditionalist" bishops of the north have sometimes openly disagreed with the methods of the southern bishops, saying their emphasis on political commitment to change unjust social structures is too akin to socialism.

When an ecumenical group asked Christians to vote for the Mexican Unified Socialist Party in a 1982 election, the disagreement among the bishops made front-page news.

"To vote for a party which is inspired by Marxist philosophy... would be to vote against the Christian faith," declared Cardinal Ernesto Corripio Ahumada of Mexico City. "It is not possible to be a Christian and to be a Marxist."

But retired Bishop Sergio Mendez Arceo of Cuernavaca defended Christians' use of Marxist analysis in identifying unjust economic structures. He said that in "the variety of Marxist thought, it is possible to be both a Marxist and a Catholic faithful to Jesus Christ."

The Mexican Church's overall reputation for conservatism goes back to the days of Spanish colonial domination, according to Martin de la Rosa, church scholar and co-editor of the book "Religions and Politics in Mexico."

Because of the hierarchy's support of Spain during Mexico's War of Independence of 1810-21, said De la Rosa, there was "constant church-state conflict throughout the 19th century."

Anti-clerical feelings again surfaced in the 1910-17 revolution because the Church held a privileged, socio-economic position during the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz. The revolutionary leaders, said De la Rosa, took their reprisals by writing anti-church measures into the constitution of 1917.

The constitution banned church ownership of property, the establishment of religious orders and participation in education, while it forbade clerics from criticizing the government or any of its laws.

Catholic resentment of the legislation led

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to the "Cristero" rebellion in the late 1920s against the government. After many bloody reprisals by government and rebel forces, church and state reached an uneasy truce which has continued through today.

More often than not, the northern bishops have confined their social and political activism to speaking on questions of democracy and liberty.

But when they condemned electoral fraud and corruption during the recent mid-term elections, critics claimed they were trying to bolster the election prospects of the conservative National Action Party.

Southern Bishop Lona Reyes defended his northern colleagues, saying in a recent interview that: "In the north, if you tell the people they should vote for a candidate who will respond in overcoming the (economic) crisis and corruption," the critics say you are backing the conservative politicians, he said.

"Then they go to the south of the country where the bishops are saying you have to vote for honest people, people who will respond to your needs and aspirations, and they say you're favoring" the socialists.

What the government wants, said Bishop Lona, is for Mexican bishops to say "not even one word" about politics or social issues. "What the government wants is for us to stay within the four walls of our churches."

The social mission aside, virtually all the bishops agree on the importance of regaining legal status for the church in Mexico.

Political scientist Soledad Loaeza notes that while most of the anti-church measures remain on the books, the government has become less insistent on secularizing society. A 1945 constitutional amendment, for example, permits church-run private education.

The hierarchy ignores or violates "if not the letter, then the spirit of all the constitutional precepts," said De la Rosa.

The church will continue its quest for legal recognition, Cardinal Corripio said recently, "not in order to exercise power... but so that the fact that the church exists is recognized; at present, according to the constitution, it does not exist."

## Diocesan mission

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and to discuss its future.

In the course of their subsequent January meeting, officials from both dioceses decided to relocate the mission because of the tumult raised at Oxolotan.

Father Ryan is already living at Holy Spirit Parish with the parish priest, Father Jose del Carmen Gomez, familiar to diocesans as Father "Carmelo." Although Father Ryan now has the most-appropriate visa available to him, his position is only as stable as that of the Church in Mexico, which is without legal recognition.

Although the Diocese of Rochester is experiencing budget woes of its own, the mission team will not be affected, since they are funded by a special mission collection and not the Thanks Giving Appeal.

In fact, Father Firpo believes that the commitment to Tabasco will continue to grow. He hopes to create a sense of

ownership of the mission among diocesans.

"We have to become more systematic in planning and getting the word out about what we're doing and why -- that this is our Church's work, that we should be open to the gifts the Mexican Church can offer us," he said.

Among the gifts Father Firpo brought back from Tabasco was the gratitude of the people for the diocesan presence and assistance. Last September, funds from Operation Breadbox were sent for the first time to the Agricultural and Cultural Institute of Nacajuca. Eager to demonstrate the "fruits" of that aid, students took Father Firpo out in the fields to show him the tomatoes and beans they had grown. They also presented him with a huge papaya.

"It was as if they wanted to say, 'You're helping us learn how to do this, and this is our life - this is our future,'" he said.

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