

Mexico to grant religion legal status

By William Schomberg
Catholic News Service

MEXICO CITY — Mexico's majority party has published a series of proposed constitutional reforms which would grant religion legal status for the first time in decades.

The party action makes passage of the reforms in Congress virtually a foregone conclusion, and will open the way to Vatican-Mexican diplomatic relations.

The 30-page Institutional Revolutionary Party document, released Dec. 10, said Article 130 of the constitution — which stripped the church of its legal powers — will be rewritten to create a new legal entity called a "religious association."

"This initiative ... objectively recognizes the reality our country is experiencing," the report said. "It implies a new conception of religious associations, but does not alter the secular character that the state must have, and reaffirms the separation which should exist between the state and the churches."

The main proposed changes are:

- Recognizing the right of religious groups to run their own schools, within state guidelines.
- Lifting the ban on monastic orders.
- Lifting the ban on religious services outside religious buildings.
- Allowing churches to own property necessary for their work — such as seminaries, schools and nursing homes. Ownership of church buildings

would remain in state hands.

- Allowing clergy to vote.

The reforms are guaranteed a smooth ride through the PRI-dominated Congress. The conservative and traditionally pro-church National Action Party — which proposed identical reforms in 1989 — has pledged its support.

Members of the liberal Revolutionary Democratic Party are also in favor of the proposals.

Mexican religious leaders met Dec. 10 with President Carlos Salinas de Gortari in his official residence, Los Pinos. Salinas had set the tone for church-state rapprochement in his 1988 inauguration speech. The leaders left the meeting without comment.

The president's guests included the Catholic bishops, leaders of the numerous Protestant churches, and a group of rabbis.

With legal recognition now at hand, the Catholic Churches can press ahead with plans to set up radio and TV stations.

Moreover, full diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Mexico appear imminent.

Pope John Paul II's unofficial envoy to Mexico, Archbishop Girolamo Prigione, told reporters the day of the PRI announcement that relations could be crystallized as soon as January.

Pope John Paul was "extremely happy" with Salinas' "courageous and visionary reforms," the archbishop said. He dismissed suggestions that the ruling party was campaigning for the reforms to win electoral favors.

Retired Bishop Genero Alamilla Artega of Papantla, a past spokesman for the Mexican bishops' conference, said the church would now cease to be Mexico's "constitutional ghost."

"We have been living illegally for 74 years, and now we're about to become legal," he said.

Legal recognition is the crux of the matter, he said. With that established all the other changes, including full relations with the Vatican, will follow.

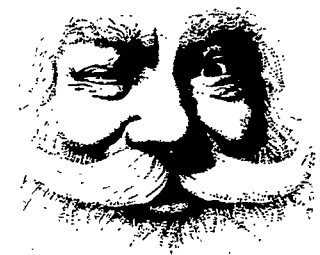
"There will be a new vigor to the church," Bishop Alamilla predicted. "We will be free to spread the Gospel."

But the state and church will have to learn to live together, the bishop said.

"We've been through times of conflict and tension," he said. "Now we'll see a new climate of agreement and coordination."

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