

bent on robbing the churches and destroying true religion.

At present, and for over a year, the Mexican clericals in conjunction with the American clericals have joined in a campaign of vilification against the Mexicans and active propaganda for American Intervention.

It seems grotesque that the American clericals do not realize the immorality of their demands: that the United States Government should invade Mexico, kill several thousand Mexicans and Americans, spend several millions of the tax payers money for the sake of avenging the persecutions and death of foreign nuns and monks who were outlawed and the restoration of property which does not belong to them?

The American clericals are befogging the issue by trying to make it appear a religious instead of a political question. The American Catholics are not such children and dunces as to be forever deceived by evasions and misrepresentations. Truth, justice and morality will out, like murder.

One thing can be safely prophesied: the Mexicans have released themselves of the tyrannical yoke of the clericals and their political rule in Mexico and they will *never willingly* and freely place themselves under their rule again.

The American prelates and the American Catholic politicians had better keep away and not meddle in Mexican politics—or they might burn their fingers in the attempt.

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The Work of the Clergy

and the

Religious Persecution in Mexico

By ATTORNEY RODOLFO MENENDEZ MENA
Merida, Yucatán, Mexico

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FONDO HISTORICO
RICARDO COVARRUBIAS

THE WORK OF THE CLERGY AND THE RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION IN MEXICO.

Perhaps the principal argument employed by the reactionary party of Mexico before the government and in the press of the United States to attack and lower the prestige of the Constitutionalist Revolution, is the one which relates to the religious question.

Constitutionalism, especially since the rupture between the Convention party and Mr. Carranza—has been presented by its enemies before the American people, as an implacable and systematic persecutor of religion in all its forms and manifestations; as the vandalic destroyer of temples and images; as the insatiable and cruel executioner of timid and innocent priests; in one word, as an atheist and implanter and propagator of atheism in Mexico. They have even tried to demonstrate that this and several other dissolvent theories constitute the fundamental basis and the reason for existence of the constitutionalist policy, at least in that part which refers to the internal government of the Republic.

It is necessary to acknowledge that the infamous campaign carried on by the enemies of the Revolution must have impressed, and in fact has impressed, in a painful and profound manner, a nation so eminently religious as is the American people; a nation so zealous of freedom of thought and so respectful of another's beliefs; a nation where such freedom and such respect are considered, and justly so, as the most precious and glorious conquest of contemporaneous civilization and the most sacred property of human spirit.

The acknowledgment of this truth makes it imperative to expose in detail before the American people, the facts which constitute the religious persecution of which the Mexican reactionaries complain, and the role which the clergy has had and still seeks to have in the history of the country; because the struggle which Constitutionalism has waged and continues waging, is not and cannot be a struggle against religion in general and much less against the religious idea in abstract, an idea which is imminent in man; but it is a struggle exclusively against the clergy, against the *catholic* clergy in Mexico, since catholicism is, or attempts to be, almost to the exclusion of any other, the dominant religion in the Republic.

The people of the United States, protestant in its majority, and educated in a spirit of liberalism and democracy within that religion, cannot, without an exact and deep knowledge of the Mexican question, decide on it, and much less understand it. Our object is to furnish the American reader with the necessary data so that he become fully acquainted with the subject and judge it, not from the American point of view, from the point of view of a protestant, liberal, democratic, cultured, educated nation, a lover of freedom and of the free examination of things, but from the Mexican point of view; that is to say, from the point of view of a nation consisting of a small minority of wealthy individuals, fanatical, accustomed to despotism and tyranny, systematically opposed to all that aims to deprive it of its odious liberties and unjust privileges, a bitter enemy of all that spells freedom and education of the real people; and by a numberless majority of analphabet Indians, brought up in servitude, superstition and idolatry, slaves of routine and tradition, opposed to all innovation, on account of the inherent distrust and fear of subjugated races. Somber extremes among which sparkles as a bright sunbeam in a tempestuous sky, the so-called middle class, the only social element capable of strengthening the nation, of teaching and guiding it to progress. To this class belongs the intellectual and thinking class of Mexico, and this is the one which has produced, from the time of the viceroys, to date, the men who have been an honor to the country in the liberal political field, in literature, in sciences and arts, in the militia, in commerce and the industries. From it surged the illustrious men who undertook and carried out the tremendous work of independence and those who, for about a century, have continued struggling in an unequal fight, tenacious and terrible, with the aim of liberating the people from fanaticism and with the aim of democratizing it, helping it out of the abyss of oppression and ignorance where it has been kept by the clergy and the potentates, the so-called white aristocrats of Mexico, who still attempt to keep the people in subjugation. They are the elements which since the time of the emancipation are known in our national history under the fatidic name of *Reactionary Party*.

The territory which at present constitutes the Mexican Republic, was conquered and colonized about four centuries ago by the Spaniards of the times of Charles V and Philip II, that is to say, by the subjects of the most backward, absolutist and fanatical of all the monarchies which existed in Europe.

The Papate was at the height of its power at that time. The Roman Pontiff was considered as the king of kings and the unappallable and supreme authority in the world. The power of the Church was unlimited, and the Inquisi-

tion did not allow even a peep into the possibility of the day dawning in which the catholic nations might enjoy what is now called freedom of conscience. The friars and the priests were considered as envoys and representatives of the Divine Power, and as the only distributors of all spiritual grace and welfare. They, with the kings and the nobility, had part in the temporal power, and with them were the masters and absolute and indisputable owners of the masses, which were in a condition of stupor through the darkness of the Middle Ages. More than any other nation, the Spanish people adapted and moulded itself to the ideas of stupid fanaticism which it suited the royalty and the clergy to maintain, because the nefast influence of Rome was at work in spirits already accustomed to the fatalism which the domination of the Arabs had fostered in Spain.

This nation, fanatical and somber, despotic and frowning, accustomed to tradition and to religious and political tyranny, guided by audacious adventurers, sanguinary and filled with the lust of gold, and by lazy friars, ignorant and full of cupidity, was appointed by the hand of destiny to conquer and colonize America, at present unduly calling itself Latin, and to carry the light of European culture and Christianity to the Aztec people whose civilization, really advanced in many ways, was being wrecked on the breakers of the most ferocious despotism and the most ignoble idolatry.

This meant the assured failure of the Spanish work in America, as regards its political and sociological aspect which constitute the fundamental principles of all human organization, since History teaches that when the conqueror has the same capital defects that mark the conquered, these defects are added, while the good qualities characteristic of each, are deducted and slowly degenerate and finally disappear.

Closely united in ideas and interests, co-participants in public power in the colony, so much so that frequently bishops and arch-bishops were viceroys or governors of provinces, the conquerors and the clergy helped to establish what, to the shame of Spain and of mankind, is known in history under the name of *Spanish colonial system*, a system unique in the world, which consists simply in the division amongst the Spaniards, of the lands, mines and even persons of the Indians who were forced to work as beasts in the terrible "encomiendas" of the conquerors, to the exclusive benefit of the Crown and the Church.

The clergy, therefore, had a direct, personal interest in keeping the natives in a perpetual state of blind ignorance and absolute servitude, since these were essential conditions for the colonial domination.

The Spanish clergy not only did nothing to raise the intellectual and moral level of the Indian, about whom they had long and heated discussions as to his *being endowed* with a soul, a fact which many of them denied—but they made him sink deeper into the ignominious abyss into which he had been pushed.

The civilization work by means of the conquest, such as was understood and practised by the other people of Europe, did not exist in Spanish America. The disgusting absolutism of the aborigine monarchs and chieftains was replaced by the repugnant and brutal despotism of the Spanish government. The barbarous lords of the land, cruel, sanguinary, ferocious, gave way to conquerors and "encomenderos," no less ferocious, sanguinary and cruel. The Mexican priests were replaced by the Spanish friars, as fanatic as the former, and perhaps more ignorant. The monstrous Aztec paganism gave way to the fetichist Catholic polytheism. The Indian temples were destroyed in order to erect on their ruins other temples which often were built with the materials, still bloody, of the former. The idols of the natives were replaced by the foreign idols. The terrible Hitzilopochtli, the ferocious god of war of the Aztecs, merely was lowered from its rank, and became any Lord of Battles. The famous god of water was thereafter some vulgar St. Isidro, of Spanish manufacture, who has charge of irrigating the fields and protecting the crops. Each and every one of the Mexican gods was transformed into innumerable Christs, virgins and saints, disposed to grant the same favors under the same threats through the supplications of similar priests, but requiring richer offerings. If there was any difference, this consisted in the fact that, for the greater facility of the vile exploitation, instead of having one sanctuary for each god, almost all the gods were gathered in each temple. If any improvement was attempted, it was merely to replace the hard strong Mexican stone, difficult to cut and to chisel, by the easily handled paper and cotton goods, the clay and the pastes and the soft woods of the Spaniards. If any progress was made, it was to spread among the Indians the idea of the Catholic hell, the eternal suffering in punishing crimes committed on or by perishable beings, and the monstrous and blasphemous conception of the devil, that is to say, a spirit of eternal and infinite evil, created and tolerated by a God of infinite goodness and inexhaustible love, to tempt and cause the spiritual loss of man. It is true that they suppressed the bloody holocausts of the Indian divinitie, but it was merely to inaugurate their own persecutions, their own burnings, their atrocious torments and the horrible cells of the *Holy Inquisition*.

As to the social state, the low classes gained nothing, and lost much under the Spanish conquerors. The Indians status grew worse, for to personal slavery was added the political slavery of the whole race. The Indian had practically no home, and was considered as a domestic beast and not as an individual, being deprived even of that little personality which, according to natural principles, corresponds to man by the mere fact of existing. The Indian could not leave the "encomienda" where he belonged nor work at the labor he preferred or felt inclined to. He was not permitted to acquire instruction, even if he so desired, much less to learn an art, a profession or even a trade of those exercised by the Spaniards. He was forbidden to educate his children because these, and the wife he had taken, were merely the miserable companions of his hateful servitude.

Instruction, if we dare call it by this name, was entirely in the hands of the clergy, and as regards the Indian, he was taught the catechism, not Christian, but catholic, and this one in the native tongues, which missionaries and priests learned for that purpose; for the clergy had a particular care not to spread the Spanish language among the Indians in order to keep them more easily and securely in their condition of absolute ignorance, a system which had been continued until now, in several regions of the Republic. In Yucatan, for example, which is one of our richest states but also one of the most reactionary, the old colonial ways were religiously preserved and the frightful "encomiendas" of the old conquerors were maintained in fact until the establishment of the Constitutional government there. Out of a population of 300,000 more than half are pure Indians who are absolutely ignorant of the Spanish language and in regard to whom all effort for immediate civilization meets with immense difficulties. The natives speak a language which has become reduced to the minimum of words, absolutely lacking all literature and consisting only of the words most indispensable to carry on the business of the limited and mechanical life which they have carried on for four centuries, using only spoken words and employing interpreters, who were men often sold to reaction. These Indians, therefore, are unable to become acquainted with the liberating steps taken with regard to themselves, and it is an impossible task, until they learn to read, write and speak Spanish in which they are being instructed at present—to express to them in an exact and simple manner, with the corresponding explanations and advices, the knowledge of the law and their rights under it. Their language, however rich it may have been in ancient times, at present, due to degeneration and the slavery of the race, lacks all technical and scientific terms, and the dictions necessary

to translate modern ideas and even to represent the most usual things of our epoch.

The creoles and the few mestizos who obtained grace were taught to read and write in a very deficient way; generally, only the creoles were taught to write. Of these classes, the individuals who desired to follow a profession, could choose only that of arms or the Church. In the former, they were admitted as a special concession, while in the latter they had to endure the humiliations to which the high Spanish clergy submitted them, and which they, in their turn, inflicted on others.

The white woman was maintained in a condition of mediaeval restriction, in a state of ignorance and fanaticism which is still reflected in the modern Mexican woman. As a reminiscence of the Moorish customs implanted in Spain and maintained throughout seven centuries of Arab domination, the woman remained at home, guarded by the formidable iron gratings which still call the attention of the foreigner who visits Mexican cities, and her society was reduced to intercourse with her husband and her children, her immediate servants and naturally, her confessor and favorite friars. The Spanish saying: "the married woman, must be broken-legged and stay at home" contains a complete historical comment and paints a social condition; this proverb was pitilessly practiced, so that the home had no opening door except into the convent or the vestry. Similar to the Aztecs and the gentile of Greece and Rome, each family had its own house gods and in each house was a real temple more or less spacious according to the resources of the dwellers. The long idle hours of the woman and the children were consumed in the worship of a great variety of images, representing virgins and Christs and saints, and even the animals supposed to have been the companions of the latter. These images were placed on rich altars magnificently ornamented and constantly lighted by means of small oil lamps (another relic of paganism) which were considered sacred. This barbarous and anti-Christian custom was introduced and favored by the Church in order to affirm and maintain its domination; and we must acknowledge with shame that it is still prevalent in Mexico where it flourishes.

Thus the colony vegetated for almost three centuries, and during this time the labor and suffering of the Indians enriched the Crown, the Clergy and the upper class which was constituted of the Spaniards and the sons of Spaniards. Archbishops and bishops, canons, friars and monks of all known orders who participated, directly or indirectly in the government of the colony, were supported by public funds created by means of special taxes, and they exercised the highest offices in audiences, councils and

boards, having exclusive charge of the *moral and intellectual* direction of the whole country. Spaniards and creoles, mestizos and Indians, they all bowed to the friars and from the viceroy down, they all trembled with fright under the threat of excommunication and shuddered at the idea of being persecuted by the Inquisition. The weak and isolated efforts which almost always were made with interested ideas, both in Europe and in America to improve the condition of the natives, failed signally, and served only to provoke terrible reprisals on the part of the clergy. The few and inefficient dispositions which favored the Indians, and which were issued by some of the Spanish monarchs upon the recommendation of the celebrated "Council of Indies," invariably met with a firm opposition from the clergy, and even in the metropol itself gave rise to bitter intrigues wherefrom the Church always emerged triumphant and stronger than ever.

Thus the New Spain was surprised by the war of Independence in the United States and that bloody and glorious dawn of Liberty called the French Revolution. These two colossal events naturally had to produce a commotion in the Spanish colonies in America. The desire to become freed from the mother-country was favored by the state of debility to which the Napoleonic campaign had reduced Spain, and also on account of the internal strife which rent the Peninsula, and the tremendous administrative corruption which marked the fatal reign of the fanatical and imbecile Ferdinand VII.

In Mexico as well as in the other colonies, therefore, there started the long and bloody struggle for independence which, by a very particular coincidence, which later had a great influence in favor of the clergy, was headed by two unknown Mexican priests who belonged to the low clergy, so rebuffed and mistreated by the high Spanish clergy.

As was to be expected, the latter opposed with all its strength and all its influence the accomplishment of emancipation; disowned and excommunicated the insurgent priests, and when they at last fell in the struggle, degraded them publicly and ignominiously, ordering prayers of thanks when the chiefs of the revolt were finally sent to the scaffold.

The war of independence which lasted eleven years, would have lasted many years more if the Spaniards and the Clergy itself had not finally understood that the cause of Spain in the New World was definitely lost; when they decided to take part in the revolt against the government of the metropoli and take advantage of the benefits they could derive by assuming such an attitude and carefully watching the trend of the new order of things.

This is how that transcendental work was accomplished.