

The Meaning of the Cristero Religious War Against the Mexican Revolution*

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Fighting in the name of "Christ the King," thousands of Catholics engaged in armed revolt against the Mexican Revolutionary regime from 1926 to 1929. The meaning of the *Cristero* rebellion has never been well understood because scholars have generally considered the Roman Catholic Church and the Mexican government as monoliths. In fact, Mexican hierarchical and lay Catholic groups were sharply divided over the nature of the Church-state conflict; and deep political differences existed among the leaders of the Mexican Revolution. Consequently, a *modus vivendi* was negotiated in 1929 as moderate Church leaders rejected Catholic military action and as government officials sought a welcome respite in the Revolution's campaign to regulate the Church.

The purpose of this study is to reexamine the origins of the Cristero conflict, to identify its goals, and to explain the strange outcome of the Church-state truce of 1929. Standard scholarly approaches to understanding the Cristero War, based upon the assumption of monolithic Church-state policy, have taken the following tacks. First, the Church's flagrant violation of the law forced the government suppression of unconstitutional practices of worship.¹ Alternatively, the government, searching for a pretext to crush the Catholic religion, purposefully forced the Cristeros into rebellion.² Recently a third, composite view has depicted the conflict as "inevitable" since "the lines had been drawn" between two intransigent forces "in agrarian reforms, in

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¹J. Lloyd Mecham, *Church and State in Latin America: A History of Politico-Ecclesiastical Relations* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1934), pp. 481-482; Ernest Gruening, *Mexico and Its Heritage* (New York: Century, 1928), p. 275.

²Elizabeth Ann Rice, *The Diplomatic Relations Between the United States and Mexico, as Affected by the Struggle for Religious Liberty in Mexico, 1925-1929* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1959), pp. 62-65, 192.

the formation of labor organizations, and in education." This view may be summarized as follows: "the conflict came in 1926 not because the Church wished to mix in politics, or because the revolutionaries were Bolsheviks (as some Catholics charged), but because the Church and state both wanted control of Mexican society, and neither was willing to share that control."³ While the latter view well explains the essence of the Church-state conflict, this study seeks to go a step further and to explore in depth the origins and outcomes of the Cristero War.

Assumption of monolithic Church and state policy has necessarily influenced scholarly conclusions concerning goals and results of the Cristero conflict. If the Church forced the Mexican government to suppress it, the rebellion by lay Catholics needed only to bring about the end of suppression in order to be successful.⁴ If the government purposefully forced the Cristeros into revolt, a peace in 1929 meant moral victory for the Church.⁵ Or, conversely, unless the Cristeros declined a truce and went on to defeat the government, the Church's struggle for control of society was lost.⁶ If, however, the position and goals of Church and state were not monolithically opposed, but rather mixed, the meaning of the Cristero War has had complex ramifications.

TWENTIETH CENTURY BACKGROUND OF THE CRISTERO WAR

In order to understand the meaning of the conflict from 1926 to 1929, it is first necessary to know how the rebellion started. Church and state had been sparring with each other since the first phase of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1911) when Francisco I. Madero terminated the long dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Ignacio Valdespino y Díaz, Bishop of Sonora, typified Church reaction to Madero. Condemning the Revolution for placing its faith in the anti-Christian philosophy of democracy, the bishop noted that authority comes not from the people but from God and the Church.⁷ On January 22, 1913, Mexico's hierarchy issued a

³Robert E. Quirk, "Religion and the Mexican Social Revolution," in William V. D'Antonio and Fredrick B. Pike (eds.), *Religion, Revolution, and Reform* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), pp. 69-70. This work resumes Quirk's "The Mexican Revolution and the Catholic Church, 1910-1929, An Ideological Study" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of History, Harvard University, 1950).

⁴Mecham, *op. cit.*, pp. 496-497.

⁵This view is implicit, for example, in Rice, *op. cit.*, p. 196, who concludes that the Church could probably not have gained better terms in 1929 than return to the pre-1926 status which it won.

⁶Quirk, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

⁷*Restauración Social*, April 15, 1911, p. 193.

collective pastoral letter opposing the "socialistic" threat which the Revolution offered to "religion and authority,"⁸ and since this letter appeared exactly one month before Madero's assassination by General Victoriano Huerta's men, the Church appeared to have stepped into the anti-Revolutionary camp and to have abetted the enemies of the movement.⁹ Revolutionary officials charged that the clergy loaned ten million pesos to Huerta's government to insure that several conservatives would become cabinet ministers.¹⁰ Actually, it appears that through the good offices of Archbishop José Mora y del Río a twenty-five thousand peso loan was obtained to pay the wages of Huerta's troops who were threatening to sack Mexico City.¹¹

Mexico's Catholic Party controlled the state legislatures in Jalisco and Zacatecas and did not repudiate Huerta's usurpation of the presidency, but neither did the party support it. According to Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra, a leader of the party, this failure to support the usurper led to Huerta's persecution of Catholic politicians.¹² Nevertheless, after its victory the Constitutionalist movement, which avenged the murder of Madero by driving Huerta out of Mexico, broke up the Catholic Party and forced its members into hiding to avoid arrest.

Instead of reestablishing the anti-clerical Constitution of 1857, the Constitutionalist decided to write a fundamental law that would strike even harder at the Church's traditional authority in Mexican society. Under the terms of the new Constitution of 1917, the state was empowered to regulate education. All primary education was to be secular, thus forbidding parochial education at this level. State legislatures were granted power to register and fix the maximum number of professional men (including clergymen) who could legally practice in each state. Foreign clergy were denied the right to practice; all priests were prohibited from appearing in public in their clerical garb; and

⁸*Ibid.*, March 15, 1913, p. 126.

⁹The trajectory of Church opposition to the Mexican Revolution can only be summarized here; a more detailed account by this author is currently in preparation and is entitled "Patterns of Church-Oriented Opposition to Mexico's Permanent Revolution Since 1910."

¹⁰Alfonso Toro, *La iglesia y el estado en México* (México, D. F.: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1927), p. 360.

¹¹Alicia Olivera Sedano, "Aspectos del conflicto religioso de 1926 a 1929; sus antecedentes y consecuencias" (unpublished Master's thesis, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1963), p. 34.

¹²Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra, Ohio State University Oral History Center for Latin America interviews with James and Edna Wilkie, April 29, 1964, México, D.F.: (Hereinafter cited as Oral History Interviews).

monastic vows were outlawed. Religious political parties were banned and churchmen were forbidden to participate in politics. The right of churchmen to own property was restricted, and all church buildings were declared to be property of the government. Public worship outside of church edifices was prohibited, and clergymen were denied the right to trial by jury for certain violations of the Constitution. These provisions were embodied principally in Articles 3, 5, 27, and 130.¹³

The Constitution of 1917 was written by the Constitutionalist faction of the Revolution, and the enemies of this group—such as the Church and its supporters—did not participate in the formulation of the document. Although never submitted to the populace for ratification, the new fundamental law was proclaimed on February 5, 1917, and went into effect on May 1 of that year. Strangely, ardent Catholic objections to the Constitution did not concentrate on the document's legitimacy; rather, they challenged the content of the above-mentioned four articles. Nevertheless, the issue of legitimacy tacitly underlay the positions of both Church and state in the ensuing debate.

In February 1917, the Mexican Episcopate signed a collective rejection of Articles 3, 5, 27, and 130.¹⁴ Originally issued in the United States, the statement was translated and circulated immediately in Mexico; but the Mexican government took no legal action since the protest had not been distributed officially in the country. Also, the Episcopate's protest antedated the Constitutions' effective date by three months. According to Emilio Portes Gil, the government was too busy reconstructing the country after seven years of civil war to make an issue over the constitutional provisions regarding the Church. The Episcopate understood this, ceased its protest, and adopted a pragmatic attitude of watchful waiting to see how thoroughly the government actually meant to regulate worship.¹⁵

The only real victim in the incident concerning the collective pastoral of 1917 was the Archbishop of Guadalajara, Francisco Orozco y Jiménez. He had been in hiding and thus was unable to sign the pastoral; therefore he issued his own letter on June 16, 1917, adhering to the original protest after the Constitution was in effect. Captured in Lagos, Jalisco, on July 5, 1918, Orozco y

¹³E. V. Niemeyer, Jr., "Anticlericalism in the Mexican Constitutional Convention, 1916-1917," *The Americas*, XI (July, 1954), 31-49.

¹⁴The document appears in Toro, *op. cit.*, pp. 399-402.

¹⁵Emilio Portes Gil, *La lucha entre el poder civil y el clero* (México, D.F.: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1934), pp. 99-100.

Jiménez was soon exiled from Mexico but was permitted to return to Guadalajara in July 1919.¹⁶ Ironically, it was Orozco y Jiménez who in 1917 had squelched an attempt by lay Catholics to organize a league in defense of religious liberty.

The idea for the establishment of a Catholic defense league came from Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra, a layman who since 1912 had participated in the highly successful Catholic Association of Young Mexicans (ACJM). In 1917 Palomar suggested to lay Catholics that the ACJM might well serve as the model for the foundation of a league of civic action to protest against the new Constitution. Father Bernardo Bergoend, a French Jesuit who had founded the ACJM, drew up plans for a league; these plans were approved by the Primate of Mexico, Archbishop José Mora y del Río. Theoretically, the Episcopate was supposed to have nothing to do with the league; but if the league were to defend Catholicism, it obviously needed the approval of the Church leaders.

The purpose of the league was conceived in terms of educating the people to defend their essential religious liberties. This organization would not be a political party, but would lend its moral support and votes to candidates who would guarantee the traditional rights of the Church. Archbishop Orozco y Jiménez tabled the plan because he felt that 1917 was not a propitious year to launch a broad, open controversy with the government.¹⁷ During his exile he undoubtedly looked with more favor on the project, but once back in Mexico there was little need for the hierarchy to authorize a lay movement.

THE CONFLICT OF THE 1920S

Church-state problems in Mexico simmered from mid-1917 to early 1923 before new controversy shook the country. During the quiescent period, it is true, some state legislatures passed laws which limited the number of priests to a certain ratio of population—as in Jalisco, Durango, Sonora, Coahuila, Tabasco, and Campeche—or otherwise limited the function of the clergy as in the state of Mexico;¹⁸ but these actions were disperse and not part of a concentrated attempt by the Revolution to restrain the

¹⁶Olivera, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50, 55.

¹⁷Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra, "Antecedentes de un libro; memorias," unpublished manuscript in 2 vols., I, 8, 10-12 (hereinafter cited as "Memorias"); also, Palomar y Vizcarra, Oral History Interviews, April 29, 1964; and Olivera, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-26, 90.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 43-46.

Church. It was the Church which took the initiative in creating new tension on January 11, 1923, when it held a mass open-air ceremony erecting a monument on top of El Cubilete, a mountain at the geographic center of the republic in the state of Guanajuato. Apostolic Delegate Ernesto Philippi led a winding procession of 50,000 pilgrims up the mountain to crown Christ as King of Mexico.¹⁹ The government viewed this ceremony, carried out in fulfillment of a vow made by Church leaders in 1914 when Huerta's counter-revolution was in power, as inflammatory. That the vow was made when Huerta was in power may have been only a coincidence, as the choice to fulfill the vow in 1923 while President Alvaro Obregón was seeking recognition from the United States²⁰ may have been happenstance; but the continued identification of the Church with "reaction" was apparently an easy one for the Revolutionary regime to make.

The government met this threat to its laws in two ways. First, it expelled Philippi from Mexico under Article 33 of the Constitution, which permits the executive to deport aliens in the national interest. Second, Obregón acknowledged the Church's role in trying to direct man to a better life, but he complained that the clergy refused to admit the Revolution's role in this regard. The President noted that the best solution for the populace would be the triumph of the programs of both Church and state. He asked churchmen to admit the legitimacy of government programs, thus creating reciprocal good will.²¹ The Church did not interpret Obregón's appeal, related as it was to the expulsion of the Apostolic Delegate, as a sign of good will. Neither the expulsion nor the appeal deterred the clergy from further flaunting of the law, and a new crisis was to develop the following year.

The Church's celebration of a national Eucharistic Congress in Mexico City from October 4 to 12, 1924, occasioned mounting bitterness between Church and state. The state insisted that the Church was deliberately testing its limits under the Constitution,²² but the Church, of course, questioned the validity of the Constitution in the first instance. With this clash of interpretations, trouble was bound to result. The government was especially concerned about the National Eucharistic Congress since the congregation of religious personages in Mexico City meant

¹⁹Gruening, *op. cit.*, pp. 224-225.

²⁰For background history see John W. F. Dulles, *Yesterday in Mexico, A Chronicle of the Revolution, 1919-1936* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1961).

²¹Portes Gil, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-102.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 100.

the celebration of what the Church termed one of the most solemn masses ever held in the country.²³ A great pilgrimage was scheduled to the Basilica of Guadalupe on the edge of the city, and this constituted a total failure of the Church to obey the warning of the previous year when the Apostolic Delegate was expelled from Mexico. The National Eucharistic Congress was no mere gathering of peasants in the hills; the government considered it to be a full-dress religious ceremony ostentatiously parading through the national capital, stronghold of the Revolution.

Under Minister of the Interior Plutarco Elías Calles, the government moved to prevent the pilgrimage to the Basilica by announcing that all foreigners who organized the congress were subject to deportation and all government employees who participated were subject to loss of their jobs. Though the National Eucharistic Congress suspended the pilgrimage, the government was convinced that it had little ammunition in its legal arsenal to regulate the Church. Thus the Revolutionary regime began to consider alternative ways to strengthen its position, especially since no regulatory legislation had been formulated to provide penalties for violation of the constitutional laws of worship.

Plutarco Elías Calles became President of Mexico on December 1, 1924, and within less than three months his government attempted to support covertly the foundation of an Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Mexican Church. Better known as the Schismatic Church, it was founded on February 18, 1925; and the government made available the church of Corpus Christi to be used as its cathedral. The purpose of the new Church was to encourage Catholics to accept a Mexican Patriarch who would be linked to the Revolution's nationalism.²⁴ No one doubted for a moment that the new Church could not succeed without government support, and it was the subject of hot words and several riots.²⁵ Clearly, the Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Mexican Church had no future. However, lay Catholics felt that this affront to Roman Catholicism by the government could not go without response.

Militant lay Catholics met on March 14, 1925, to dust off Palomar y Vizcarra's old plans for a Catholic civic league. Thus they founded the National Religious Defense League to "reconquer religious liberty."²⁶ Subsequently, Palomar y Vizcarra went

²³Congreso Eucarístico Nacional de México, *Album oficial*.

²⁴For a document giving the bases of the Schismatic Church, see Mecham, *op. cit.*, pp. 477-478.

²⁵Dulles, *op. cit.*, p. 300; Olivera, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-85.

to Rome to present the League's case to the Vatican. According to Palomar y Vizcarra, his representation was influential in eliciting an apostolic letter dated February 2 and released April 19, 1926, in which Pope Pius XI told the Mexican clergy to "develop united Catholic action" for defense against unreasonable laws which "do not seem to merit the name of laws." The Pope, however, told the clergy not to take part in any political action in violation of the Constitution, and he forbade lay Catholics to form any political party with the name "Catholic."²⁷ Thus the Pope's message appeared to stimulate rebellion, provided that the Church did not get directly involved.

By chance, the Mexican hierarchy had gotten involved in an explosive imbroglio only one week before the Pope's pronouncement. On January 27, 1926, a leading Mexican newspaper, *El Universal*, published the Mexican Episcopate's collective pastoral of February 1917, which promised to fight Articles 3, 5, 27, and 130 of the Constitution. The date of 1917 was changed to 1926 in order to make the Episcopate's protest current. All Mexico immediately became embroiled in an argument over the matter.

Calles' minister of education at the time, J. M. Puig Casauranc, has explained how this protest, though not released by the Church, could not be repudiated by it either. In this difficult position, the Church had no room to maneuver. According to Puig, an enterprising reporter for *El Universal*, looking for a sensational story, dug up the long forgotten protest of 1917, changed the date, and published it on the eve of the ninth anniversary of the proclamation of the Constitution. Archbishop Mora y del Río denied having issued any statement to the reporter or having changed the date on the old protest, and the resulting investigation by the Syndicate of Journalists found the reporter guilty of violating professional ethics. Threatened with expulsion from the syndicate and loss of his job, the reporter threw himself on the mercy of the archbishop by asking him if the statement he had made in 1917 were not true in 1926. Mora y del Río could only answer that the "Doctrine of the Church is invariable, because Truth is divinely revealed." Puig notes that once Mora y del Río had made such a statement to the reporter, he was surely moved to help the man by explicitly reaffirming

²⁶Palomar y Vizcarra, "Memorias," I, 16-26. The manifesto founding the League appears in Olivera, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-92.

²⁷Mecham, *op. cit.*, p. 481. Cf. Olivera, *op. cit.*, p. 130, who blames the hierarchy in Mexico for disobeying the Pope when it did not prevent war.

to the public that the Church would fight the articles in question.²⁸ Whether or not the archbishop was interested in saving the reporter, the fact that the League was demanding reaffirmation of the statement of 1917 is certain. On February 4, 1926, *El Universal* printed the new declaration, and the government was further infuriated.²⁹ Calles felt that the Church had finally gone too far, particularly since anything could upset his delicate negotiations with the United States over the oil rights of North American citizens. The Church could no longer plead that the protest of 1917 had been reopened by mistake.³⁰

Within one month Calles acted to penalize the Church for the declarations of the archbishop. Calles secularized all primary education, a constitutional provision which had not been effected previously. Deportation of foreign-born clericals was begun on February 10, 1926; and by September, 183 clergymen had been expelled. Also, by September, 73 convents, 129 schools attached to the convents, and 118 orphan asylums under religious control had been closed. In addition to wiring state governors in February to implement the law against the Church, Calles issued in July the Law Reforming the Penal Code for the Federal District and Territories.³¹ Of course this latter act was a declaration of open struggle which state and Church had hoped might be avoided since watchful waiting was begun by the Church in 1917. This "Calles Law" required registration of all clergy with civil authorities.

The next steps in the worsening Church-state relations were two retaliatory moves by the Church-oriented opposition to the Revolution. The hierarchy declared that it would be impossible for the Church to function under the conditions of the Calles Law, for registration of priests was deemed to interfere in the internal workings of the Church's organization. Both hierarchy and lay Catholics felt that registration was an attempt to take effective appointment of priests out of the Episcopate's hands. Consequently the Archbishop of Mexico, with Papal authority, ordered

²⁸J. M. Puig Casauranc, *El sentido social del proceso histórico de México* (México, D.F.: Ediciones Botas, 1936), pp. 196-199; the quotation is from *El Universal*, February 4, 1926.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰Calles' view was essentially the same as that espoused by Portes Gil during the truce negotiations in 1929; see the transcript of the negotiations made by the government in Portes Gil, *Autobiografía de la Revolución Mexicana* (México, D.F.: Instituto Mexicano de Cultura, 1964), pp. 575-577.

³¹Mechem, *op. cit.*, pp. 482-486.

priests to withdraw from the churches on the day the new legislation was to become effective (July 31, 1926), thus avoiding registration. Also, on the last day of July, the League undertook an economic boycott "to create in the entire nation an intense economic crisis" which would "paralyze" the social and economic life of the country. The League, backed by the Archbishop of Mexico, Mora y del Río, and the Bishop of Tabasco, Pascaul Díaz, thus hoped to force the government to "bring to an end the situation of legal oppression" of the Catholic Church. It soon became obvious, however, that these religious and economic strikes, even when undertaken simultaneously, had no chance of success. The masses were already purchasing only enough to keep body and soul together. Though some middle class and wealthy people may have stopped the operation of motor vehicles, use of electric current, and purchase of lottery and theater tickets as ordered, their action hardly constituted a real challenge to the government.³²

Acting for the Episcopacy, on August 19 Archbishop Leopoldo Ruiz y Flores and Bishop Díaz petitioned President Calles to grant freedom of conscience, thought, religion, instruction, association, and press. Although Calles acknowledged the right of the prelates to submit the petition, he pointed out that there had been no denial of these constitutional liberties. Further, he noted that since the hierarchy had suspended religious services in the churches on its own account, the government could not take an interest in the renewal of services because such concern would in fact "interfere in the liberty of beliefs."³³

Archbishop Ruiz y Flores and Bishop Díaz personally met with Calles on August 21 in an effort to prevent violence. Calles, a self-proclaimed anticlerical, was willing to see the conflict settled; he disavowed, as he had always disavowed, any intention of using registration to control appointment of priests. The two prelates responded that in order for the Church to renew worship, it would be sufficient if Calles simply made that statement public along with a clarification that the government did not mean to mix in matters of the Church's dogma and discipline. Calles answered that he could not concede the right of government ownership of Church property and that he would not give up the right of the government to register those responsible for such property, but he agreed not to mention this and was prepared to make the

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 486-489; Dulles, *op. cit.*, pp. 304-306; Gruening, *op. cit.*, pp. 276-277.

³³Mechem, *op. cit.*, p. 491; *El Universal*, September 20, 1926.

statement in the form requested by the bishops. According to Archbishop Ruiz y Flores, Calles approved of the Episcopal Committee's declaration for the press; but Bishop Díaz then insisted upon adding a clause which "indicated that the President, contrary to the conversation of the conference [of August 22], was ready to give up something.³⁴ The clause which Díaz added read as follows: "We hope that once the steps which conform to the prescriptions of the Church are fulfilled, there will be no difficulty in renewing divine worship in the temples, while the ultimate goal of recovering religious liberty is achieved." Calles retaliated by announcing the next day that he had said nothing to the bishops which he had not included in his written reply to their petition; and he stated that if the clergy wished to return to the churches, they would have to abide by the law. The bishops then claimed that no agreement had been reached, and negotiations collapsed. Calles had suggested that the bishops petition the federal congress for any change in the laws during the negotiations; and though the Episcopate did this in September, the Chamber of Deputies rejected the appeal by a vote of 171 to 1 on the grounds that the Church had no legal personality to petition the government under the Constitution.³⁵

The League was happy to see peace talks terminate as it, too, insisted upon a resolution to the conflict which would give the Church an apparent victory over the state. With victory not possible through peaceful arrangements, only armed rebellion remained. Four days prior to the Episcopate's appeal to the President of Mexico, the first revolt took place. On August 15, 1926, in Chalchihuites, Zacatecas, a Catholic merchant named Pedro Quintanar organized a group of armed men to rescue four ACJM members arrested by a military detachment. However, the soldiers executed the prisoners when faced with the possibility of their liberation, and Quintanar declared himself in open rebellion. Subsequently the Quintanar group sent a delegation to Mexico City to talk with the League about organizing a campaign of guerrilla warfare.³⁶

³⁴See transcript of the interview provided by Ruiz y Flores in Alberto María Carreño, *El arzobispo de México . . . Pascual Díaz y el conflicto religioso* (México, D.F.: Ediciones Victoria, 1943), p. 138. Cf. Rice, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-65; and Walter Lippman, "Church and State in Mexico: The American Mediation," *Foreign Affairs*, VIII (January, 1930), 187-207. Apparently Rice and Lippman did not consult, or did not have available, the Ruiz document when they wrote.

³⁵*El Universal*, August 22, 23, 24, 1926; concerning the petition to Congress, see Meham, *op. cit.*, pp. 490-492.

³⁶Olivera, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-124, 137-138.

According to Palomar y Vizcarra, as spontaneous armed movements spread to the states of Guanajuato and Durango, the League mobilized its organization to unite these small movements into a unified struggle for the reconquest of religious liberty. The goal of this movement which centered in the western states—particularly Jalisco, Michoacán, and Colima—was not to overthrow the government, but to win recognition of the “essential religious liberties.” Theoretically, once religious liberty were won, the war would be over.³⁷ The League proudly adopted the name “Cristeros” which the government disrespectfully applied to the rebels, and it set out to develop ideologically its position as defender of the faith.³⁸

INTERNAL DIVISION IN THE CHURCH POSITION

The League presented a memorial to the Mexican hierarchy on November 26, 1926, asking for the Episcopate to approve armed defense and to enable priests to serve canonically as military men. The League was especially interested in Episcopal action on the latter request in order that Mexican clergy who were not willing to back guerrilla war would be persuaded to act outside the canonical norm and support armed defense of religious liberty.³⁹ The Episcopate did not respond in writing; but within a few days Ruiz y Flores and Díaz, who was Secretary of the Episcopal Committee, orally informed the League that the Episcopate (including the Primate of Mexico, Archbishop Mora y del Río) approved of the memorial with the reservation that the Committee could not authorize priests to function as military men but would give permission for the clergy to minister to military detachments.⁴⁰

Church moderate Pascual Díaz, who later became the Archbishop of Mexico and who ended the Cristero War in 1929, subsequently affirmed that the League solicited hierarchial support; but he maintained that though the Episcopate did not stop the movement, neither did it give its approval to the war. Díaz noted that the hierarchy had no reason to interfere in the League's

³⁷Interview with Palomar y Vizcarra, May 11, 1964. In his *Autobiografía de la Revolución mexicana*, p. 568, Portes Gil states that Calles was convinced that the rebellion was intended to overthrow the government. Cf. Vicente Lombardo Toledano, *La constitución de los cristeros* (México, D.F.: Librería Popular, 1963).

³⁸Palomar y Vizcarra, Oral History Interviews, May 1, 1964.

³⁹The memorial is printed in Olivera, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

⁴⁰Palomar y Vizcarra, Oral History Interviews, May 1, 1964; a sworn statement concerning the information imparted by Ruiz and Díaz is printed in Olivera, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-117.

affairs since it was free to defend its rights in its own manner.⁴¹

This defense of Episcopal action by Díaz was a major factor in the split that was to emerge between militant lay Catholics and the hierarchy under Archbishop Díaz in 1929, for as the leader of the League, Palomar y Vizcarra, has cogently pointed out:

If the Episcopate did not feel that it could interfere with the commencement of a war, why did it sign a truce with the government to end the war on June 21, 1929? If it were not the province of the hierarchy to sanction the League's struggle, why did it step in and cut the ideological ground from under the League after over two year's of bloody struggle?⁴²

Change in the Church's official stance may be traced to the death of Archbishop Mora y del Río. The Primate of Mexico died in exile in San Antonio, Texas, on April 23, 1928. His death at the age of seventy-five brought to end a nineteen-year control of the Mexican Church and eliminated the pre-Revolutionary generation from hierarchical command. Apparently Mora y del Río had been chosen at the express wishes of the old dictator, Porfirio Díaz, to become Archbishop of Mexico in 1909. Fifty-six years of age in that year, Mora y del Río was young enough to adapt to new times once the Revolution got underway. He became known as a liberal churchman. For example, he was famous for giving in to the government to prevent clashes, as when he instructed the clergy not to perform the marriage ceremony unless the civil ceremony had been carried out as required by law.⁴³ In the 1920s when Church-state tensions increased Mora y del Río was in his seventies; he must have felt by then that his conciliatory policy had not been successful and that the Church might gain from a stronger stand. At any rate, under his leadership the hierarchy which supported militant action was in control of Church policy and a truce with the government was not possible.

The passing of Mora y del Río allowed Church moderates under Bishops Díaz and Ruiz y Flores to come to power. Díaz had played an important role in attempting to negotiate a settlement with the government as early as August 21, 1926. Since

⁴¹Carreño, *op. cit.*, pp. 95-96; Palomar y Vizcarra, Oral History Interviews, May 1, 1964.

⁴²Interview with Palomar y Vizcarra, October 7, 1963.

⁴³*New York Times*, April 23, 1928.

he was vocally opposed to the Cristero War, he obviously was a strong contender to become Primate of Mexico as the rebellion proved ineffective. Young and vigorous at age fifty-three in 1928, Díaz obviously felt that the religious strike had been a failure. If it continued, the Church might lose its voice forever among the people, and only a truce would restore the clergy to some leadership in Mexican society. It was evident that the Church would never regain the position that it had lost under Calles, but it was also clear that it would not do to cut itself off from all contact with the populace as this would be playing into the government's hands.⁴⁴ Díaz had backed the League's economic boycott, but argued against violence. Ruiz y Flores had taken a stronger stand, and as the Archbishop of Michoacán he had tried to block the establishment of the League in his diocese in March 1925.⁴⁵

Palomar y Vizcarra recounts the struggle for power that split the hierarchy and lay Catholics into two fundamental groups: those favoring continued war and those favoring peace. The hierarchical leaders who were ranged against the peace moves of Díaz and Ruiz y Flores included, among others, José Mora y del Río, Francisco Orozco y Jiménez, Leopoldo Lara y Torres, Jesús Manríquez y Zárate, José María González y Valencia, and Miguel M. de la Mora.⁴⁶ The Apostolic Delegate in Washington apparently sided with the former two bishops and the Pope leaned to their interpretation that the guerrilla war could lead to no successful conclusion, for it could do no practical good for the Church. The latter bishops, however, were not interested in such mundane matters; they found martyrdom for the cause glorious.

President-elect Alvaro Obregón was assassinated by a Catholic fanatic on July 17, 1928. Though the zealot apparently acted upon his own initiative, the government originally took the view that the Church was responsible for the murder. Ironically, ac-

⁴⁴This is essentially the view taken by Pope Pius XI in his Encyclical *Acerba Animi* dated September 29, 1932, in which he gave the reasons why the Holy See approved the truce of 1929. See Miguel Cruchaga Tocornal, "El conflicto religioso mexicano," *Revista Chilena de Historia y Geografía*, CXIII (January-June, 1949), 252-254.

⁴⁵Cruchaga, the Chilean ambassador to Mexico who participated in the truce arrangements, holds that Díaz had always opposed violent action; see *ibid.*, p. 227. For complaints drawn up against Ruiz and Díaz, see the circular by Rafael Ceniceros y Villarreal, México, D.F., September 10, 1930; a copy of this document is in the author's possession.

⁴⁶Interview with Palomar y Vizcarra, June 17, 1961; and oral History Interviews, May 1, 1964. Mora y del Río's militant position is considered in Morrow's dispatch to Secretary of State Kellogg dated July 23, 1928. See U. S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1928* (3 vols.; Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1943), III, 332.

ording to Ambassador Dwight Morrow who was trying to arrange a truce, Obregón had consulted with Calles on the day before he was assassinated in order to arrange a possible *modus vivendi* between Church and state as soon as he took office on December 1, 1928.⁴⁷

INTERNAL CRISIS IN THE REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT

Once the Cristero War was under way, Calles must have been tempted to pursue it to a successful conclusion; but a government can successfully confront only so many major problems at any given time, and early in 1928 Calles had realized the problems facing peaceful transition from his administration to a new Obregón regime. Morrow had persuaded and "pressed" Calles to resolve problems which gave Mexico a bad reputation,⁴⁸ and under this friendly push Calles had reoriented his view of government to a conservative one which matched the temper of a time when Wall Street appeared to have found the answer to economic well-being. Thus, Calles not only negotiated with Church leaders to establish a truce but also ruled against expropriation of the foreign-held oil industry and drastically cut land distribution to the peasantry.

Interim-President Portes Gil was intent upon renewing the distribution of land beginning December 1, 1928,⁴⁹ but he also had to face serious problems. Pressure from the United States against any renewed land reform program, as well as international complications over Mexico's support of the Sandino resistance to United States forces in Nicaragua, troubled diplomatic relations. Domestically, Portes Gil had to appease the Obregón wing of the official family which believed that Calles had ordered Obregón killed in order to prevent him from returning to the presidency. A serious military rebellion erupted in March 1929, which posed

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 331.

⁴⁸Morrow wrote Kellogg, "I feel that I have already pressed Calles to a point which is beyond that to which his own judgment would lead him." See *ibid.*, p. 334; and cf. Stanley R. Ross, "Dwight Morrow and the Mexican Revolution," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XXXVIII (November, 1958), 506-528; and L. Ethan Ellis, "Dwight Morrow and the Church-State Controversy," *ibid.*, pp. 482-505. Also see Harrison B. Malan, "Opinions in the United States on the Mexican Church-State Conflict, 1926-1929," (unpublished Master's thesis, Dept. of History, University of Arizona, 1957).

⁴⁹According to Morrow, land distribution dropped two-thirds between Calles' first year in office and 1927. See Morrow to Kellogg, U.S. Department of State Archives (microfilm), 812.51/1642, pp. 7-8. For a summary of land distribution by presidential periods, see James W. Wilkie, "The Mexican Revolution: Federal Expenditure and Social Change Since 1910," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of History, University of California, Berkeley, 1966), pp. 216-222.

a grave problem for the government as rebel army leaders tried to link up with the Cristeros. In May, a "rebellion" by National University students over the substitution of written for oral exams turned into a bloody battle between police and students; the ensuing protest of young intellectuals was soon linked to the tense political atmosphere. The cry went up that Calles and his followers had ruled Mexico too long, and the university became a focus of political opposition to the Revolution. With a heated special presidential election scheduled for November 1929, in which Catholics and other dissidents could effectively protest against a divided Revolutionary family, Portes Gil was determined to play down the religious problem.⁵⁰

THE TRUCE OF 1929

As Church and state each internally faced crisis, it is no wonder that a *modus vivendi* was reached on June 21, 1929. Although the government could not definitively defeat the Cristeros in the western states, neither could the League's forces rouse much spirit of support in other areas of Mexico.

Leadership on both sides was anxious for a truce,⁵¹ but the resultant agreement was a complete victory for the government. During truce negotiations between Portes Gil and Bishop Díaz and Archbishop Ruiz y Flores, Portes Gil made it clear that he could not discuss modification of legislation regulating the Church. Díaz, in response to Portes Gil's statement, said to Ruiz y Flores:

We should not ask of the President that which is not in his power to concede. Actually, he can make no reform in the present laws; but he can exert influence in order that the laws not be applied in a sectarian spirit and that they permit some tolerance in the exercise of religious duties. . . . I ask that the President be indulgent and permit us to open the temples in order that our faithful can exercise their religious rights. May God our Lord inspire us to find the formula which may put an end to these difficulties.

Portes Gil corrected Díaz's plea by noting that the government

⁵⁰Division within the government has been well presented previously, but it has not been discussed directly in the context of how it influenced the Church-state struggle; see Dulles, *op. cit.*, chaps. 41-54, for a full discussion of governmental problems. Portes Gil's *Autobiografía de la Revolución mexicana*, chaps. 8-9, excellently analyzes the stresses and strains following Obregón's assassination.

⁵¹See *ibid.*, pp. 570-572, for texts of statements that led to negotiations for a truce.

had not closed the churches, and since the clergy had suspended the sacraments, the clergy alone could renew them by returning to the temples, providing they obeyed the law. Portes Gil promised to follow the letter of the law with tolerance, and he offered an amnesty to all rebels who surrendered unconditionally.⁵²

No formal agreement was made between Church and state. Portes Gil released a statement to the press which declared that the government would only register priests named by the hierarchy and that clergymen had the right of all citizens to petition the government.⁵³ Though Díaz and Ruiz y Flores were satisfied, the League was not, because it had fought for more than a verbal concession which had no legal standing. The Cristeros had struggled in vain to force a change in constitutional provisions affecting the Church, and they felt that the word of any President to act tolerantly was hardly a guarantee of religious liberty. Also, it was not the presidency which had refused to hear the Church's petition in 1926; it was the federal congress.

The actual number of Cristeros who warred against the government from 1926 to 1929 has never been ascertained. Portes Gil, who noted during the truce talks that the Cristeros numbered 40,000 men, later stated that only 14,000 surrendered.⁵⁴ League archives show about 25,000 men in rebellion during 1927, but only 18,000 were well armed while the rest had little equipment.⁵⁵ Although the Cristeros were embittered over the truce, they obviously could no longer fight for the Church if the Church's leaders ordered them to make peace. The Cristeros were especially furious since they had won nothing from the government but had lost thousands of comrades in combat. No precise statistics concerning the number of Cristeros killed are available, but according to Portes Gil, the Ministry of War reported deaths on both sides as running about 800 to 1000 monthly, including participants and noncombatants.⁵⁶ Since the major action of the guerrilla war took place in 1927 and 1928 and in the first six months of 1929, total deaths may have reached 24,000 to 30,000. Assuming that the Cristeros suffered at least half of these casual-

⁵²For the government's transcript of the June 21, 1926, negotiations, see *ibid.*, pp. 575-577.

⁵³Also, the statement noted that the clergy could teach religious doctrine within church confines, but not in schools; *ibid.*, pp. 572-573.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 577; Portes Gil, *Quince años de política mexicana* (3rd ed.; México, D.F.: Ediciones Botas, 1954), p. 330.

⁵⁵Olivera, *op. cit.*, p. 174. The total of 20,000 Cristeros under arms is mentioned by Palomar y Vizcarra, Oral History Interviews, May 5, 1964.

⁵⁶Portes Gil, *Autobiografía de la Revolución mexicana*, p. 574.

ties, their losses would have reached 12,000 to 15,000. A figure of 12,000 dead for the Cristeros would be roughly in line with the surrender of 14,000 Cristeros in 1929, if we accept the League's own count of 25,000 followers in 1927. All of these figures seem high, however, for no major battles were fought in the guerrilla war. Loss of the Cristero leader, General Enrique Gorostieta, who was killed on June 2, 1929, was a blow to the movement on the eve of truce talks; and it no doubt took the heart out of the resistance even before the *modus vivendi* of June 21.

The League complained that the government did not live up to its amnesty, and it claimed that hundreds of Cristeros were executed or murdered after the peace. One Catholic writer estimates that 500 Cristeros were killed within a year after the truce;⁵⁷ but a recently published Catholic source lists a total of 164 Cristeros killed from the date of the truce through 1937, only 32 falling by the end of 1930.⁵⁸ The League appealed to the Vatican to nullify the truce;⁵⁹ and on March 1, 1930, the Bishop of San Luis Potosí, Miguel M. de la Mora, issued a statement to the press which recommended that the faithful join and support the League. The League sent out a circular on the next day to ascertain the Episcopate's opinion, and 16 out of the 37 ranking members of the hierarchy supported the Bishop of San Luis Potosí.⁶⁰ As bitterness within the Church and among lay Catholics mounted over the truce during 1930, Pascual Díaz, promoted to Archbishop of Mexico four days after the *modus vivendi*, was finally moved to reprove publicly the dissident elements. In September he announced that the *modus vivendi* of 1929 was no longer a debatable issue since the Pope's approval of the truce was the last word; he called for an end to the scandalous and discordant efforts to renew trouble.⁶¹ Díaz could call for harmony, but the fact of the matter was that he led a seriously divided Church. Peace had been obtained, but at an expensive cost to Church unity.

⁵⁷Joaquín Cardoso, S.J., *Los mártires mexicanos* (México, D.F.: Buena Prensa, 1953), p. 453.

⁵⁸See Andrés Barquín y Ruiz (pseud. Joaquín Blanco Gil), *El clamor de la sangre*, vol. II of *El caso ejemplar mexicano* (México, D.F.: Editorial Rex-Mex, 1947), *passim*.

⁵⁹On September 10, 1930, Palomar y Vizcarra wrote a thirteen-page, single-spaced letter to the Pope protesting the truce; a copy of this document is in the author's possession.

⁶⁰Archive of the League, March 1930; the Archive is in the possession of Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra. After the truce, the League had disbanded the Cristeros and had become a "civic group" working for educational liberty and other social aims; however, it remained the focus of militant opposition to peace.

⁶¹*Excelsior*, September 22, 1930.

Theoretically, the Church may have won the return of temples to its jurisdiction along with the government's promise to centralize authority at the federal level in questions relating to worship,⁶² but in practice the Church did not gain even these benefits. The governor of Veracruz, Adalberto Tejeda, who had been Calles' minister of interior in 1926 when the Cristero war started, wired Portes Gil to denounce him as a "coward and traitor" for making peace with the Church in 1929. In 1931 Tejeda announced, "I declare emphatically and before the entire world that my government will continue to comply with the revolutionary program." He deprived native-born priests of their legal right to practice, claiming that their prime loyalties were to the Vatican, a foreign power. On June 18, 1931, the number of priests permitted to serve in Veracruz state was set at a ratio of one per one hundred thousand inhabitants. Thus began a new round of Church-state conflict which was to trouble the 1930s.⁶³

SOME CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING THE CRISTERO WAR

The Cristero conflict began when Church and state relations deteriorated in the early 1920s, and both sides were responsible for the war which broke out in 1926. We may conclude that the Church was testing its limits under the new Constitution and that the state would sooner or later have had to show the Church that it meant to enforce its laws. Voices of moderation in the Church counted for little until the violence of militant Catholics was discredited as harmful to the Church's best interests. When intransigent leaders on both sides gained power, a war was the result. Unity broke down in each camp as the conflict continued, and moderates made peace in the name of Church and state in 1929. Whereas the hierarchy gave up its demands of constitutional revision in order that the clergy could return to the churches, it had to revoke the support that an earlier Primate of Mexico had given the Cristeros. The state conceded little and gained time to consolidate its position in a difficult period.

The result of the armistice meant that the division among lay Catholics and churchmen was to be damaging for decades. The trust of union was shattered by surrender of goals.

It was easy for the Revolutionary government to mount a new

⁶²Olivera, *op. cit.*, p. 229; Mecham, *op. cit.*, p. 497.

⁶³This chapter in the history of Mexican Church-state relations is covered in James W. Wilkie, "Ideological Conflict in the Time of Lázaro Cárdenas," (unpublished Master's thesis, Dept. of History, University of California, Berkeley, 1959).

offensive against the Church during the early 1930s, especially when the Church insisted upon celebrating the quadri-centennial of the Virgin of Guadalupe with a giant public celebration on December 12, 1931. The government's plans for establishing sexual and socialistic education in a decade influenced by social experiments in Russia found Church and state again at odds. In the new battle the state held all the cards, for it emerged from the Cristero truce ready and able to continue another round in a long struggle.

A real *modus vivendi* did not emerge between Church and state until President Lázaro Cárdenas found it necessary in 1937 to begin organizing his own "Popular Front" to combat the threats of communism and fascism in Mexico.⁶⁴ The new crisis in Revolutionary unity was generated by problems arising from Cárdenas' rapid redistribution of land to the peasantry and stimulation of organized labor to strike for its rights, especially in the foreign-owned oil industry which was finally expropriated by the government on March 18, 1938. The religious issue receded as the government faced these new problems in the late 1930s; and since that time Church and state have found it convenient to live in peace, regardless of the legal provisions severely limiting the Church.⁶⁵ The failure of the Cristero War was clear, which explains the non-violent posture of the lay Catholic *Sinarquista* movement organized in the mid-1930s.**

⁶⁴Cárdenas' "Popular Front" as it was reflected in the Partido Revolucionario Mexicano is analyzed in Lyle C. Brown's "General Lázaro Cárdenas and Mexican Presidential Politics, 1933-1940; A Study in the Acquisition and Manipulation of Political Power," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of Government, University of Texas, 1964), pp. 281-293.

⁶⁵See Wilkie, "Ideological Conflict in the Time of Lázaro Cárdenas," *passim*; and Lyle C. Brown, "Mexican Church-State Relations, 1933-1940," *A Journal of Church and State*, VI (Spring, 1964), 202-222.

**Editor's note: the following article by Albert L. Michaels deals with the Sinarquista movement.