

## The Catholic Church and the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920)

### *Introduction*

The Revolution of 1910 that ripped Mexico apart was originally a social movement against the long-standing dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, and in many respects, it tested the endurance of the Catholic Church in this country. Mexico had long been torn between liberals and conservatives, and one of the hallmarks of a liberal progressive viewpoint was pronounced anti-clericalism. Almost invariably, this meant that the Catholic Church, as in many other countries, had adhered itself to the forces of the right. Over time, this conflict became an uprising against clerical involvement in governmental affairs. Although many of the participants only wanted to reduce the church's influence in Mexico's political life, this conflict ultimately became a persecution of the Catholic Church.

### *Early Stages*

Widespread public outcry after the electoral fraud in the presidential elections of 1911 forced Díaz to resign in May 1911. Revolutionary leader Francisco I. Madero succeeded to the Mexican presidency. The Catholic Church saw Madero's advocacy of democracy as an opportunity to participate in Mexico's political life. Thus, in 1912, the church founded a new political party, the National Catholic Party (NCP). However, the NCP and Madero clashed. The NCP obtained several seats in the congressional elections of 1912, but Madero had the results legally cancelled. According to Professor Michael J. Gonzales, the NCP's success in the election had alarmed Madero, thus, leading to tensions between the church and Madero's regime.

On 18 February 1913, Francisco I. Madero was forced to resign after a *coup* by military strongman, Victoriano Huerta. A few days later, while being escorted to prison, Madero was assassinated by two policemen allegedly acting on Huerta's orders. Relations between the Catholic Church and Huerta grew strained after the publication of a letter in the National Catholic Party's newspaper by Archbishop Leopoldo Ruiz y Flóres – apostolic delegate and senior Archbishop of Mexico. The letter condemned Madero's assassination and expressed doubt concerning the legality of Huerta's regime. Huerta perceived this publication as an attack on his authority and ordered the imprisonment of Gabriel Fernández, the president of the NCP, in reprisal for approving the archbishop's publication. However, Huerta managed to keep the support of the NCP by promising them a hundred seats in congress.

### *The Constitutionalist Army (1914)*

In response to the overthrow and execution of Francisco I. Madero in 1913 by Huerta, revolutionary leader Venustiano Carranza formed a Constitutionalist Army to fight Huerta's

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Federal Army, which included numerous future political personalities. Among them, revolutionary leader Álvaro Obregón – future 39<sup>th</sup> President of Mexico – and his general, Plutarco Elías Calles – future 40<sup>th</sup> President of Mexico – stood out for their antipathy against the Catholic Church. Like many other Constitutionalist, Calles and Obregón believed that the Catholic Church was responsible in part for what many perceived as Mexico's backwardness and advocated for the elimination of its special privileges.

From its formation, there were numerous incidents between the Constitutionalist and the Catholic Church. Constitutionalist seized church property and often mistreated members of the church. Hostilities reached a boiling point on May 19, 1914, when Obregón demanded the church donate 500,000 pesos to alleviate the condition of the poor. This levy was paid to the Revolutionary Council for Aid to the People under threat of execution. Obregón's actions infuriated the church and Catholics worldwide, diminishing foreign support to the revolutionary cause. Requests were made by the United States and European ambassadors to Venustiano Carranza – the *de facto* president of Mexico – to remove Obregón from his leadership position. Carranza decided to disregard these petitions and appointed Obregón as Minister of War of his preconstitutional regime. Despite this appointment, after the gathering of the Constitutional Convention to draw a new constitution in September 1916, Carranza and Obregón quarreled over religious issues. Obregón supported the radicals in favor of a heavy anti-clerical articulation of the new constitution.

### *1917 Mexican Constitution*

After several drafts, the Constitutional Congress approved the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States on February 5, 1917. Although the constitution generally accorded civil liberties, there was a notable exclusion regarding the privileges of Catholics, which some regarded as crucial to prevent the forming of an expansive democratic majority. Some laws nationalized Roman Catholic Church properties. In addition, the government forbade public manifestations of Catholicism such as processions on religious feast days; dissolved monastic vows and orders; and banned Catholic education by prohibiting the religious communities of nuns, priests, and brothers from teaching even in private schools. The newly approved 1917 Constitution had a hostile approach to church-state relations.

### *Aftermath*

Carranza was forcibly deposed just a year later, and Obregón succeeded him as president in 1920. Even though the provisions of the 1917 Constitution were still alive as originally worded, the government did not effectively enforce these anti-clerical laws. This truce did not last long. In 1924, Plutarco Elías Calles was sworn in as President of Mexico. As a devout atheist with a nearly fanatical hatred of the Catholic Church, Calles aimed to extirpate superstition and eradicate religious practices from Mexico. In June 1926, Calles announced anti-clerical reform of Mexico's penal code, commonly known as the *Calles Law*.

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While this law was officially intended to reform Mexico's penal code, it was a clear attack on the Catholic Church. The Calles Law brought forward a series of restrictions for clerics; for example, it excluded clerics from political and public life and forced them to register with the state. This was an attempt to further the separation between state and church. Popular demonstrations against these measures soon turned violent and led to a counter-revolution against Calles's government. This popular uprising became a civil war known as the *Cristero War* or *La Cristiada*, which lasted until 1929.

The Cristero War represented the failure of church and state to restore balance between politics and religion and had deleterious consequences for both sides. This civil war cost lives on both sides; thousands of soldiers and civilians died with many more injured. Though Calles stepped down in 1928, subsequent administrations maintained the wall separating church and state and continued a policy of secularization of the country. However, the Catholic Church found strength and influence, especially when President Manuel Ávila Camacho, a devout Catholic, acceded as president in 1940. Since then, the Catholic Church in Mexico has experienced increasing popularity among the people, and Catholics have fully regained their civil liberties.

### Summary

- The Mexican Revolution of 1910–1920 was a social movement against the long-standing dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and against the deeply conservative Catholic Church.
- From the early stages of the Mexican Revolution, the Catholic Church suffered ill-treatment at the hands of the revolutionary leaders, such as Madero, Carranza, and Obregón.
- The Mexican Constitution of 1917 was an attempt to further the separation between church and state, but by doing so, it infringed on the civil liberties of the members of the Catholic Church.
- The Cristero War (1926–1929) was a popular counter-revolution against Calles's government and his anti-clerical reform of Mexico's penal code, commonly known as the *Calles Law*.
- Since 1940, after President Manuel Ávila Camacho was inaugurated, Catholics have fully regained their civil liberties and the church has experienced a revival.