



History of the Catholic Church in Mexico

By MANUEL GOMEZ

MEXICO has two great national holidays: September 16th, anniversary of the "grito de Dolores," or first declaration of independence from Spain in 1810, and May 5th, anniversary of the famous defeat of the French invading army at Puebla in 1862. The catholic hierarchy now pretending to speak "in the name of 10,000,000 Mexican catholics," was aligned with Mexico's enemies on both of these historic occasions.

Mexico has two outstanding national heroes: Miguel Hidalgo, known as "the Washington of Mexico," and Benito Juarez, often referred to, somewhat inaccurately, as "the Mexican Lincoln." The former was solemnly excommunicated from the Roman catholic church and the latter was fought by it more viciously than any other man in Mexican history.

Every step in Mexican progress, from colonial times to the present day, has been accomplished only in the face of bitter opposition by the organized forces of Mexican catholics. The record is indisputable. I propose to lay that record before the readers of The DAILY WORKER in the following brief summary of the history of the church in Mexico. For the purpose of securing greater emphasis I have disregarded the simple chronological form and have arranged the material so as to show:

1. The Social Basis of the Church in Mexico.
2. The Record of the Church as a Religious Institution.
3. The Record of the Church in Mexican Political History.
4. The Record of the Church with Regard to Foreign Intervention.

CHAPTER I.

SOCIAL BASIS OF THE CHURCH.

During the 300 years of Spanish rule in Mexico the Church of Rome was well-nigh omnipotent. A majority of the Spanish viceroys were drawn from the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The few who were not were army officers who represented the interests of the church quite as efficiently as the priests themselves.

Throughout this period the government worked solely in the interests of the big land owners, of whom the church itself was chief.

A Semi-Feudal Society.

It was virtually a feudal society, with the feudal church seated comfortably at the top of the feudal pyramid, along with the landed aristocracy on which its power was based. Far below them, and, indeed, far below the numerically insignificant "middle class," lay the peons, the toilers of the soil, immensely outnumbering all other classes, but plunged in the deepest misery and degradation.

The Spanish king had given to the various religious orders in Mexico great grants of land called "mercedes." Not content with their original land grants, the priests continually used their power to withhold extreme unction from the dying as a means of forcing deathbed bequests. By these and other religious practices the church during the long period of Spanish domination became the supreme economic power and the chief land monopolist in the country.

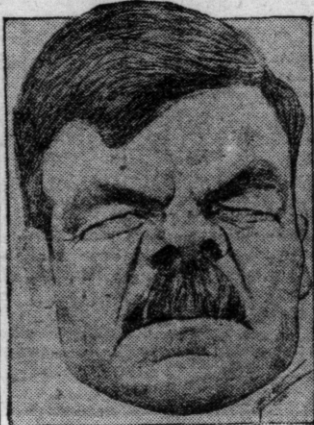
Great Wealth of the Church.

"The clergy, mainly the higher officials, had accumulated and taken out of circulation an incalculable quantity of riches. In 1809 the tithings of six bishops amounted to the sum of \$2,500,000—immense wealth in those days. There were bishops and archbishops whose salaries exceeded \$100,000 a year. Indeed, a careful survey of church property just previous to the war of independence showed its combined value to approximate \$50,000,000." (V. Riva Palacio, ed., "Mexico a traves

de los Siglos." Vol. IV., p. 317.)

From the Spanish period until the time of Juarez the church's wealth and power increased. In 1857, the year in which Mexico's first anti-clerical constitution was adopted, it was conservatively estimated that the church controlled over one-third of the material assets of the nation—lands, houses, mortgages, etc.

The 1857 constitution prohibited the church from owning property, just as the present constitution does. Nevertheless, under the long dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz (1877-1911) most of the laws curtailing the activities of the church became ineffective. It is said that property valued at many millions is held for the church, even today, by devoted catholics, who pass as the owners in the eyes of the law. Bishop Gillow of Oaxaca is understood to have left a personal fortune of \$60,000,000 at his death a year ago. Bishop Montes de Oca in the state of San Luis Petosi has an estate valued at \$40,000,000. Announcement by the



PLUTARCO ELIAS CALLES

Calles government that it is about to start a campaign to take over \$600,000,000 of church property indicates how much wealth was accumulated illegally by the catholic episcopate.

The Monster's Tentacles.

The backbone of church organization as far back as the colonial period lay in the 1,073 parishes with some 22,200 ecclesiastics; the 264 convents with more than 8,000 celibates; the 157 missions with their many exploited Indian worshippers.

From the church radiated all feudal authority in the villages and the church controlled the most diverse activities of the people. With forced labor, temples were erected in every community; with forced contributions they were enriched to ostentation. Ten per cent of the products of the land was for the church; the ground had to be blessed by a priest before sowing, processions and religious services were organized to pray for rain in times of drought. Baptism immediately after birth of a child, confirmation shortly afterward, meant its consecration to the church.

The mass in the morning, the rosary in the evening, confessions, communion, extreme unction, the benediction of the grave within a church cemetery, kept the people well under the control of the church, even after they were dead. Even domestic animals had to be taken to church once a year to be blessed. The priest was pastor, physician, chief of police, school teacher and judge.

Where Ignorance Was Bliss—

For Whom?

The church built upon the ignorance of the Indian masses. For 350 years the catholic hierarchy had complete charge of education in Mexico, and at the end of that time 90 per cent of the

A PEEK EACH WEEK AT MOTION PICTURES

"MOANA."

SOME time ago we read a series of interesting articles in "Asia" by Mr. and Mrs. Flaherty on their experiences of two full years in the taking of moving pictures of native life on an island in the Samoan group. It promised so much we have enviously begged our New York comrades, where the picture has shown for months, to review it for us. Critics have been lavish in praise of it and have counted it one of the most beautiful films ever made.

Suddenly a kind friend tells us that it is being shown in the small theaters in Chicago. A group of six comrades in all went to see it. The unanimous verdict was unstinted approval as being truly as beautiful as praised.

Here is something different—something really worth while. We (all six of us) hold the event of seeing it as a rare treat that comes but seldom, and we advise all those who together with us take "a peek each week at motion pictures" to be sure to see it.

In "Moana of the South Seas" Mr. and Mrs. Flaherty have given us a sympathetic picture of native life that is as beautiful as it is accurate. Here is primitive life truthfully recorded. Where nature is bountiful and the land and the sea furnish all the necessities of life, we are shown a whole people's mode of living.

The communal life of gathering food, making clothing and shelter, building up the character that will hold the tribe together, are all pictured sympathetically, dramatically and with rare beauty.

How cleverly a simple people adapt themselves to environment! You will marvel at everything, from the primitive way of making fire to the making of cloth, baking of food and the remarkable ability of the people in the water, rivaling the fish, which is the food they seek there. And, seeing this, you will not mind watching an attractive maiden coyly nibbling on a small live fish whose tail still wiggles.

A real unaffected native beauty is part of these people. Physically they are a treat to look at: fine bodies, intelligent, friendly faces of character. Here is man and woman, products of nature, living where nature is most generous in what it furnishes them. No factory scenes are here to spoil the charm of the picture, no evidence of a "superior" civilization where man is exploited and degraded by his fellow-humans. Peace and tranquility and communal effort, simple in what it produces, it is true, but beautiful in its simplicity and without the monstrous aspects of our own civilization.

The physical beauty of the people rivals the beauty of land and sea in the South Seas. A whole family chosen for this picture of Samoan life are remarkable. Old age is graceful, youth brimming with strength and vitality, and a boy, Pe'a, is a little lovable impish creature who climbs coconut trees hundreds of feet high, swims like a fish, knows how to make fire without matches (and without being a boy scout) and naturally and gracefully walks thru the picture and into your affections. "Moana," a graceful, beautiful specimen of man-



Central Press Photo

The screen's best known flapper, Clara Bow, in "Mantrap" she showed ability as well as beauty.

hood, dances, together with a girl, more gracefully and rhythmically than any professional you have ever seen. To the tune of primitive instruments they give you a vision of perfect motion.

A ceremonious but painful scene of tattooing is dramatically given in all its aspects and with full details in which the whole village takes part. This is a ceremony which admits tribal youth into full manhood, and the whole makes as splendid a piece of artistic treatment on the part of the Flahertys as has ever been done in picturing native life.

Chicago papers have given but little attention to this beautiful film, which means, no doubt, that it is being shown independently of the "distributing trust" channels. So you have to watch the papers carefully to find it showing at some small outlying theater. If it is in your city, comrade, go to see it. These clever, intelligent people, Mr. and Mrs. Flaherty, who have given us "Moana" are the same who made that wonderful picture of Eskimo life, "Nanook of the North." If you have seen "Nanook," and have also had the pleasure of having seen "Grass," that epic of a people's struggle with nature (not done by Mr. and Mrs. Flaherty) you will surely enjoy "Moana." It is a classic. W. C.



Mexican people could neither read nor write. Instead of schools, churches were built. The money that should have been devoted to educational purposes went to enrich the clergy. What elementary schools had existed in the first years of the Spanish period were closed and education was restricted to ecclesiastical training and the teaching of the sons of the wealthy. It was in this way that the church fulfilled its function as schoolteacher. Yet when the government of President Calles, which in three years has established 2,000 schools, insists on the constitutional provision that education must be secularized, the priesthood has the audacity to inquire how the Mexican people can be educated without the participation of the church!

Enough has been cited to prove beyond all doubt that for many years

the catholic church has been a vital prop of the prevailing social order in Mexico. Not only was the church a big property owner and therefore directly interested in perpetuating the semi-feudal system, but its hierarchical form of organization, its insistence upon authority, etc., made it the natural handmaiden of the ruling classes, to whom its higher officials were bound by ties of blood and family intimacy. It is, therefore, not to be wondered at that the church in Mexico, as everywhere else, has always distrusted progress.

The church continues to represent the interests of the old landed aristocracy. Its social basis is profoundly reactionary. We shall see that its activities are no less so.

(Second chapter will appear in the next issue of the magazine.)