



History of the Catholic Church in Mexico

By Manuel Gomez.

CHAPTER II.

The Church as a Religious Institution.

ONLY one other thing is quite as absurd as the holy protestant bigotry of the ku klux klan, and that is the appeal of the Roman catholic church for "religious toleration." Rib-tickling as such an appeal must be even to Americans, the full humor of it can be appreciated only in a "catholic country" where the church has had its hour of domination.

The catholic church emigrated to Mexico in the first quarter of the sixteenth century and on November 4, 1571, the tribunal of the holy inquisition was established in the City of Mexico. Under the joint reign of Spanish viceroys and catholic archbishops "religious toleration" was a high crime, punishable by the most severe penalties. In the year 1649 history records that 106 people were burnt to death in one day by the inquisition for holding religious views somewhat at variance with those of the catholic episcopate.

Throughout the whole period of Spanish ecclesiastical rule the laws of the land forbade the exercise of any religion other than the Roman catholic.

Mexico secured her independence from Spain in 1841. The priests were in the saddle again, however, and the first constitution adopted declared:

The religion of the Mexican state shall be the Roman catholic apostolic to the exclusion of any other.

"Submission to Authority," the Clerical Slogan.

As a matter of fact the church could not be considered in any other way than that of an institution for the maintenance of authority. This authority might be called "religious" providing we understand that the church conceived of religion as linked up inexplicably with a definite social order—one in which the supreme virtue to be inculcated was obedience to constituted authority.

The church and the semi-feudal state, the reactionary state, the state of the landed aristocracy, were bound together in a single religio-political hierarchy. Not only did the clergy enjoy the vast economic and "spiritual" powers indicated in my first chapter, but also certain privileges which protected them from the reach of such civil law as there was at that time. These privileges, which were termed "fueros eclesiasticos," exempted the priesthood from retribution at the hands of the civil courts for any crimes committed by them. When special taxes were decreed the church was, of course, exempted from them, in spite of its great possessions. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that the catholic historian, Zamacois, was enabled to write that "more crimes against the civil authorities were headed off thru the medium of the confession box than thru any other agency."

As the years went by catholicism in Mexico did not become any more tolerant. Under pressure from liberal forces the church sometimes adopted new machinery, but its method remained the same—brutal suppression of any liberating tendency. In 1853 the head of the clerical party addressed a communication to President Santa Ana, in which we find, among

other things, the following:

Advice to the President.

We do not care, as some papers have said in order to discredit us, to establish the inquisition nor religious persecution, but it is understood that the duty of the public authority is to prevent the circulation of impious books. . . .

Under the leadership of the clerical party Santa Ana's administration promulgated the so-called "Lares Law," by which every publisher of newspapers, books or pamphlets were compelled to place with the government a bond of not less than \$3,000 to be confiscated at discretion for offenses against the ecclesiastical or civil authorities. The law proceeded to define such offenses as: Attacks upon the dogmas of the church, or expressions of doubt in regard to her creed; and criticism, however slight, directed against the government or of its officers. It likewise established a secret tribunal to deal with violations of its provisions. The operation of this measure immediately suppressed the liberal newspapers *El Monitor*, *El Instructor* *Del Pueblo*, *El Telegrafo* and *Biblioteca Popular Mexicana*.

It will be obvious by now that this "purely religious institution," the catholic church, at least interpreted religion in an extremely loose sense. The present Mexican government, which has prohibited attacks on the government by clerical publications, understands that interpretation very well, and is acting upon it. There can be no other interpretation.

Ceremonies, Mysteries and Legends.

If, however, with "christian" for bearing, we manage to isolate those activities of the church directly connected with the so-called spiritual world, we are confronted with such a degrading confabulation of mumbo-jumbo that we cannot fail to look for ulterior motives even here. Every church in Mexico had its miracle and every cathedral at least a hundred of them. Legends were—and still are—assiduously circulated, of people who had been raised from the dead thru the intercession of the catholic church. Lepers were cured and the blind were made to see. And all this as a reward to "the faithful" for their patient allegiance to the Roman catholic church. The overawing ceremonies of the church, embellished with Aztec pagan mysteries in the most cunning theatrical fashion, are still in vogue at the present time; but in the nineteenth century they constituted a veritable orgy of human debasement.

All of these spiritual exercises served a single purpose: to fix the authority of the catholic hierarchy before the powers of this and all other worlds, and consecrate the very principal of authority in all forms of life.

Consequently, the "purely religious" attributes of the church were the most dangerously reactionary of all its attributes.

But we have already sufficiently indicated that the influence of the church was by no means confined to these fields. As late as 1863 the pious Pope Pious IX addressed a mandatory letter to Maximilian, then about to begin his brief masquerade as emperor of Mexico.

A Letter from His Holiness.

"Your majesty is fully aware that

A PEEK EACH WEEK AT MOTION PICTURES

"THE LOVER'S DREAM."

"THE Lover's Dream" is a Chinese produced film made and acted by Chinese in Shanghai. The technic is bad. The acting is different from our western standards. Yet it is an extremely interesting picture.

I saw it in Chicago Chinatown. I don't think it will ever be handled by any of the regular bookers. The only way you can see it is to watch the movie house in your city nearest to Chinatown, if you have one.

I take it that the producers, the Great Wall Film Co. of Shanghai, made the film for profit. But there is also propaganda involved, and my impression is that the company must have been formed by a group of nationalists in which students predominated.

The plot of the story so far as the love part of it is concerned is adapted to the oriental modes. The lovers in this case happen to be husband and wife. Such a scenario would make a Hollywood producer throw several cat fits—but, as I say, this film was produced in Shanghai.

It is also notable that there is absolutely no kissing. After a three-year absence in an American military school the hero comes home and shakes hands with his mother and his wife. It's rather hard to get around at first, but you simply must get to understand that people don't kiss each other in China.

The hero enters the army of his province. He is colonel of a regiment.

He introduces new methods. The army, or his section of it, is turned at once into a school and workshop. He is making progress when war is declared with another province.

At a military council meeting prior to the declaration of war our hero tells the provincial war lord what he thinks of the impending campaign: that it is needless and criminal. This gets his stripes taken away, but returned again thru the intercession of a powerful friend. He goes to the front. His farewell to his family is touching—in spite of the lack of kissing.

In camp he still broods over his family and the war. Two soldiers stand in the shadows. One says to the other: "Do you know what we are fighting for?" The other says: "No, do you?" The reply comes: "I know only we were told that if we did not go to war we would starve." The colonel, our hero, overhears this and pities the poor soldiers.

In the very first engagement he is wounded. In his dream he sees his wife and mother and child. Then he dies. The news is broken at home and the family stricken with grief. In the evening the wife sees visions of the deceased husband. And that's the end.

Despite its deficiencies, the projector flicker of ten years ago, the badly translated titles (they were in both Chinese and English), in spite of these, the uniqueness of an all-Chinese film, the anti-militarist propaganda and the peak it allows of real Chinese life are worth while. T. L.

WEEKLY PICTURE SUMMARY

"Moana"—Beautiful—See it!

"Battling Butler"—Buster Keaton in "a half-baked knockout" says G.W. "The Son of the Sheik"—(With Rudolph Valentino and Vilma Banky) Hot papa on the burning sands.

"Padlocked"—According to G. W., it is "one of the epidemic of moralistic pictures," with Lois Moran.

"La Boheme"—With John Gilbert, Lillian Gish and Renee Adoree. La Boheme is as good a production in its own kind as the "Big Parade," says A. S. That's saying a great deal.

"The Road to Mandalay"—My gawd what they put Lon Chaney in!

"Mantrap"—"Was peculiar because it really had some good points," G. W. points out. Ernest Torrence in a Sinclair Lewis story.

"Variety"—"Different and good with Emil Jennings a good actor," according to "Smexico."

in order effectually to remedy the wrongs committed against the church by the recent revolution (Juarez's liberal reform movement) and to restore as soon as possible her happiness and prosperity, it is absolutely necessary that the catholic religion, to the exclusion of any other cult, continue to be the glory and support of the Mexican nation; that the bishops have complete liberty in the exercise of their pastoral ministry; that the religious orders be reorganized and re-established according to the instructions and powers that we have given; that the estates of the church and her privileges be maintained and protected; that none have authorization for teaching or publication of false or subversive documents; that education, public or private, be supervised and led by the ecclesiastical authorities, and, finally, that the chains be broken that until now have held the church under the sovereignty and despotism of civil government."

Thus it will be seen that it has been the consistent policy of the church to use state and other instruments for political purposes and for its own reactionary privileges. This policy continued when it was not contravened by liberal opposition right down to the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20. Juarez succeeded in breaking the official union between church and state once for all, but I pointed out in the first chapter of my narrative that many clerical privileges were regained under the long dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz. Openly and with the sanction and might of the governmental machine behind it where possible, by stealth where necessary, the church maintains its stand for special privilege and reaction. It has never ceased to struggle for the right to hold vast properties, and even at the present moment is engaged in open rebellion

against the Calles government largely to this end.

Such is the record of the catholic church in Mexico as a religious institution, with its ubiquitous religious ties feeling into every nook and cranny of the socio-political organism.

Toleration, for What?

Be not deceived by double-chinned catholic millionaires who have organized the "League for Defense of Religious Toleration" to carry on a struggle against President Calles. Nor be misled into the naive false liberalism expressed by such a commentator on Mexico as Carlton Beals, who writes:

The church in Mexico, if it is to be of national service to a stricken people, must, like St. Francis, divest itself of its wealth, its material power, and its luxury, and regain its spirit of self-sacrifice, self-immolation, and the desire to serve.

Vain hope! How can the church regain characteristics it never had. With the record of the church before us such sentimental phrases are the merest drivel, and, moreover, they serve as indirect support to the clericals in helping to perpetuate a false tradition.

In Mexico, as everywhere else, the catholic church fights for dominance. It is as tolerant as it has to be. At the present time it is calling for toleration. Toleration of what? For the right to establish parochial schools—which means for the right to fill children's heads with reactionary clerical bigotry. For the right to carry on political agitation in counter-revolutionary ecclesiastical organs. For special catholic privileges and attributes.

(Next week's installment of the "History of the Catholic Church in Mexico" will expose the record of the church in opposing every successive move toward Mexican political progress from the Spanish colonial period to the present day.)