

Christianity in Mexico

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One of the most important considerations in viewing the development of Christianity in Mexico is the fact that for a long time she was a colony of Spain. This fact has a bearing not only on the development of Christianity in Mexico but also in almost all of Latin America.

Catholicism was the first form of Christianity to come to the New World because of the activities of Spain, the chief supporter of the Roman Catholic Church in that era. Thus there is an intimate "connection" between the Christian religion and the discovery and the conquest of the major portion of the Western Hemisphere.

The "discoverer" of the New World is said to have been a religious man. His name, Christopher, means "the bearer of Christ". One of the ships in the first expedition to the New World was named for the Virgin Mary and the first bit of land which he discovered and claimed for the King of Spain was named San Salvador for the Savior.

Religion was of great importance to the country and the ruler backing the expedition of discovery. It has been said that Spain was "drunk with religion". Unfortunately this was not caused by a fullness of the Holy Spirit, but because she was "drunk on the brandy of the medieval Roman Catholicism". Though the chief purpose of the voyage that brought the discovery of the New World was to find a new trade route to the Indies, it was not without its religious purpose either. Columbus was charged to "search out the countries of India, to learn their disposition and the proper method of converting the people there to the "holy faith". There is no real proof that any clergy accompanied Columbus on the first voyage in spite of the avowed purpose mentioned above, but men of the cloth were present on the second voyage. The Pope was also involved in the new venture and granted Spain the Royal Patronage of India in 1508.

The religious conquest of the New World was started with as much gusto and enthusiasm as the political conquest. The priests and the friars, especially of the Franciscan and Dominican orders accompanied and followed the conquistadores. The Jesuits also came later. Baptism of the natives was performed in great numbers in an attempt to Christianize the heathen population. It is reported that Pedro de Gante, a Franciscan missionary in Mexico together with his colleague baptized up to 14,000 natives in a single day and up to 200,000 in a single year. This, of course, was done with little or no previous instruction and for the most part meaningless to those baptized. The resulting religion was something new. It was neither Christian nor Roman Catholic. In Mexico, especially, great effort was made by the Roman Church to adapt its Christianity to the customs and the culture of the people. They found the inhabitants of this land addicted to religious celebrations and holidays with ceremonies and special activities. The missionaries simply substituted their rites and festivals for the activities of the former religion, with the result that the new religion was a mixture of heathenism and Roman Catholicism. Any success that the church enjoyed was principally of an outward nature. Through their efforts the friars and the missionaries had managed to take their brand of Christianity to almost all parts of the New World. By the end of the 16th century there were 27 dioceses and 5 arch-dioceses in the New World. In 1598-99 Juan de Oñate, a Franciscan, had taken possession of the region around El Paso and had journeyed on farther. As a result of the missionary activities up to that time the Tarahumara Indians, living in the northern part of Mexico, thought of God as both masculine and feminine. For them God was "That God, our Father" and also "That God, our Mother (Mary)".

In many respects the life of the church in Spanish America fell short of the New Testament ideal. A large number of the clergy was known for its evil ways. The hybrid nature of the new religion, the passive nature of the newly "converted", the fact that there was no competition to battle or contend with brought about a rapid decline in the church which soon brought it to a very low level.

When the spirit of independence surged in Latin America the church suffered some because it was linked closely with Spain. By agreement with the Pope, the Spanish Crown controlled the church and for this reason was identified with the Spaniards who were dominating the new land with cruelty and little or no feeling. Non-the-less, the church managed to weather the storm of the struggle for independence and fell into line by recognizing the independence of the new countries as well as the new governments and the locally appointed bishops. At the same time Rome made preparations for more productive work in Latin America opening a college in Rome for the training of students from and for the work in Latin America.

In Mexico, as well as in the rest of Latin America, the propagation of Catholicism was an integral part of the Spanish colonial system and the clergy was virtually included in the members of the royal bureaucracy. The Spanish king was head of the Mexican church. He had the right to appoint all clerical offices, collect the tithes and reserve a portion of them for the expenses of his government as well as act as mediator between Mexico and Rome. In the 18th century there were in Mexico perhaps "five or six" thousand priests and six to eight thousand members of religious orders. They answered to no one but their own clerical courts. The church had gradually become owner of large amounts of property and had acquired power over the mind of the laity which was to endure long after the fall of the Spanish Empire.

The first forces to challenge the church were the rise of liberalism and the spirit for independence. The newly acquired independence of the colonies of North America and the invasion of Spain by Napoleon gave impetus to those who desired independence from Spain. A power struggle took place and sides were taken. It was the liberals against the conservatives supported by the church. Though Mexico gained its independence from Spain, the church emerged from the War for Independence with increased power and larger estates. The royal patronage, by which the king had controlled clerical appointments was no longer in force so the church became wholly independent of the state. It again became rich and powerful which led to the trouble that brought the War of the Reforma which was really a struggle of the people who lived in the rural area, the mixed-breeds against Mexico City, the towns, the clergy and the wealthy creoles. The result of the Reform and the Constitution of 1857 limited the influence and the activity of the Roman Church with many restrictions and at the same time opened the door to Protestantism.

Before 1857 Mexico was a typical possession of the Roman Catholic Church hermetically and deliberately sealed to all forms of Protestantism. Up until that time the practice of Protestantism was illegal in Mexico. The Constitution of 1857 stripped Roman Catholicism of its position as the official religion of Mexico and guaranteed freedom of worship to all. It is said that Benito Juarez and other reformers such as Melchor Ocampo, Miguel Lerdo and others supported the new faith. The first separation of the dominance of Rome is said to have been by a group of disgruntled priests who formed a group called the Constitutional Fathers and began to meet in Mexico City. Juarez is said to have favored the establishment and development of a Mexican church which would be in sympathy with the Reform that he was trying to carry out. He is quoted as having said "The future happiness and prosperity of my country depend on the development and growth of Protestantism." On another occasion he is said to have given some backing to the new movement which was starting by saying "I would like to see Protestantism become Mexicanized and gain the natives. They need a religion that would induce them to learn to read and not spend their savings on candles for the saints." This might have been a golden opportunity to gather up the discontented people who were not satisfied with the

Roman church at that time, but this was not done. While the Reform had limited the power and the activities of the Roman Church, at the same time the activities of the new groups were also under the same restrictions. Though the country was now open to Protestantism, not too much was accomplished during the Reform or between 1857-1880. Some protestant groups were at work in Mexico but their number was few. It was still difficult for Protestants to enter the country and there was a real lack of missionary responsibility on the part of the protestant churches in Europe and the U.S.A.

During the dictatorship of Diaz the Roman Catholic Church regained much of its power and prestige by entering into a partnership with the dictator. It was secretly agreed that the clerical appointments should be submitted to Diaz for approval and in return the Laws of the Reform passed under Benito Juarez would not be rigidly enforced. Monasteries and nunneries were again established. The church again began to accumulate property and wealth, but it was the dictator, Diaz, who was the chief beneficiary. The clergy gratefully used their influence to preach obedience to the dictator knowing that while the Laws of the Reform remained on the books since Diaz could choose to enforce them any time he pleased or whenever he was displeased with their cooperation. Because the Roman Church feared to antagonize the government, it could not identify itself with the people nor their cause. The people were seeking more freedom and fairness and this finally led to the Revolution.

At the end of the War of the Revolution, the Constitution of 1917 limited the activities of the church even more severely than the Reform of 1857 with the result that the clergy of the church was forbidden to found or direct primary schools, the establishment of religious orders was prohibited; all public worship was to be under supervision of the government; even the church buildings were to be government property; the clergy was required to register with the government. The clergy was disenfranchised and forbidden to hold public office. Aliens were prohibited from ministering to the Mexicans. Though these restrictions were directed primarily against the Roman Catholic Church they applied equally to other denominations. The restrictions were not always faithfully nor strictly enforced until about 1926 under Calles when opposition to the church was increased in order to give a semblance of credibility to the claim that the ruling government was still revolutionary.

The Roman Catholic Church retaliated with a strike and for a period of three years mass was not celebrated. In 1930 peace was restored, but the government remained anti-clerical. In 1931-32 Portes Gil, a henchman of Calles, passed laws limiting the number of priests in an area and other activities which seemed destined to destroy the church although the government claimed that this was not its intention. In Tobasco, for example, the governor, Garrito Canabal, decreed that no priest could enter the state unless he were legally married. By 1933 the number of priests allowed to officiate in the whole republic was reduced to less than 200. Cardenas, a succeeding president broke with Calles and relaxed the official opposition. By 1937 the Roman Church was giving guarded support to Cardenas regime and since then has not had any serious difficulty nationwide. The Roman Catholic Church is still the strongest religious influence in Mexico claiming about 95% of the population as its members, but knowing full well that they are not practicing Catholics.

The Protestant influence in Mexico began in the mid 19th Century. Before that time, as we have said, Mexico was sealed for all practical purposes to the influences of all forms of Protestantism. All sources do not agree as to the exact dates for the entrance of the different protestant denominations into Mexico. The Methodists, the Presbyterians and the Baptists were the first of the major denominations to enter Mexico. Some of the first protestant influence has been attributed to the Colportueis of the Bible Societies and also to a large number of Bibles which were carried into Mexico by General Scott's army during the War of 1845. At present almost every major denomination is represented in Mexico. In many Latin American countries the protestant

movement began with the entrance of immigrants who brought their religion or were soon attended by the churches from the homeland. Mexico did not have mass immigration but there were efforts by some churches to serve those who did move there.

When the protestant movement began in Mexico it did not enjoy an unobstructed course. In fact, it was sort of in double jeopardy. As may be expected, the Roman clergy offered vigorous opposition and the legal restrictions which had been imposed on the Roman Church were applied to the Protestants as well and were slow to be removed.

Most of the converts to Protestantism were from the lower classes partly because of the lack of a middle class in Mexico and partly because the upper class largely held Protestants in disdain. By 1915 the protestant communicant members numbered about 22,000 and were the strongest in the North, the South and in Mexico City. Not much success was enjoyed in Middle Mexico where the majority of the people were living. In an effort to reach the people much emphasis was given to education and in many places the mission school took the place of rural education. After a little over half a century of work, Protestantism was having some effect but it could not be called tremendous or revolutionary. Though the Roman Catholic Church was not as powerful and dominant as it had been during the colonial period, it was a force to be contended with. Religious skepticism had come from Europe and had created a new problem for the church in Mexico as it had done in other places where its influence was felt. There was also the problem of special groups hindering and disturbing the work. In the mid 50's a group called Sinarquistas took the stand that the greatest threat to Mexico was the growth of Protestantism. This group, however, was dealt with by the government so that it soon lost its influence.

The development of Protestant Churches in Mexico can be divided into the following five periods:

1. Before 1857 Mexico was sealed. Spain had successfully countered the Reformation at home and was determined that it should not enter its colonies.
2. The era of the Reform of Juarez between 1857 and 1880 little was accomplished but the country became open to Protestantism even though their number was small and there was no real interest in doing missionary work in Mexico. The spirit of liberalism and restrictions on religious activities hindered quick growth of the new work.
3. From 1800 to 1910 several mission boards, especially of the major denominations started work in Mexico and enjoyed a certain amount of success. Among the denominations at work at that time were the Methodists (12,470); Presbyterians (5,700); Congregationalists (1,540); Friends (670); Disciples of Christ (900); American Baptists (1,202); Southern Baptists (1,428); etc.
4. The period from 1911 to 1935 was difficult for all groups which were active at the time. The Revolution and the stringent laws passed (Constitution of 1917) at that time practically tied the hands of the groups which were at work. The Cincinnati plan was drawn up in an attempt to work more effectively by designating distinct areas to certain groups. This hindered work among groups which had already been established outside of their given areas in the agreement. Overall there was a clear decline in membership and activity caused not only by the upheavals of the Revolution but also by the fanaticism of the Roman Church and the general lack of confidence in the new denominations.
5. In this period from 1936 to the present there has been considerable growth for almost all of the Protestant churches in Mexico. One of the factors to consider in the growth of Protestantism during this period is the entrance of the Pentecostal Church. They sprang up rapidly. They received minimal support from abroad and grew along indigenous lines. A survey in 1965 indicates that the Pentecostal Churches account for over 67% of the reported Protestant members in Mexico as compared with just

over 20% for the traditional denominations although the latter had been at work much longer. Census of membership in Protestant churches in 1960 indicates total membership between five and six hundred thousand and projections to the 1970's indicate that this number was expected to double. An exact census is almost impossible because of the profusion of the groups at work and lack of accurate records and cooperation in a census by many. The Protestant churches are, however, a viable force in the religious life in Mexico today. The door to Mexico has been opened. The need is great. The need is for dedicated and trained workers for the harvest. Let us pray the Lord of the harvest that we may measure up to our task of preparing the workers and sending them out.

Rupert Eggert, March 1978