

**THE MARTYRS OF MEXICO AND THEIR INFLUENCE IN THE NEW
EVANGELIZATION.**

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INTRODUCTION:

It is a privilege for me to present this talk to you about the martyrs and their influence in the New Evangelization. Both the Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in America, 1999* and the document of the V Episcopate Conference of Latin America in Aparecida 2007 have called us to the project of the New Evangelization. It had already been announced in 1992 by His Holiness John Paul II in Santo Domingo on the occasion of the 500 years of the first evangelization in Latin America and the IV Conference.

In Santo Domingo, His Holiness challenged us by saying that the New Evangelization must be characterized by a “new zeal, new methods, and new expressions,” and he cited the prayer of his predecessor, Paul VI “Lord Jesus, it will be our task to extend amongst all of us the treasure of your labor, your grace and your example.” And he added that for the disciple of Christ, the duty to evangelize is a duty of love.”

Our gathering of ANSH coincides with the Synod that takes place in the Vatican with the theme “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian faith. Additionally we are about to start the “Year of Faith” convened by the Holy Father to celebrate the 50 years of the Vatican II Council and the 20 years of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

The entire Church is called to renew its faith in Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Therefore, it is very appropriate that the topic of the convention this year be about the New Evangelization. Uniting this theme with the Mexican martyrs is a brilliant idea, since the memory of these witnesses to the Catholic faith inspired by Christ the King and the Virgen de Guadalupe, they can be an inspiration for us to embrace the same banner and proclaim, as they did “¡VIVA CRISTO REY! ¡VIVA LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE!”

I. THE CHURCH-STATE CONFLICT IN MEXICO AND ITS BACKGROUND

How could this conflict have happened, the persecution of the Church with all its violence and sadness, in a country that has, for centuries, been a traditional Catholic nation with devotions and practices and acceptance of ecclesiastical authority?

Behind this church/state conflict, there is a long history between clericalism and anti-clericalism. When there is anti-clericalism there is a reactions against extreme clericalism, the abuse of clerical power

What happened in Mexico during this time period (1926-1929) and between 1932 and 1936 had precedents. The liberal thinking, dramatically expressed in the French Revolution of 1789 had an influence in Latin America. That liberal thinking was the basis of the Reform Laws of 1859 and the Constitution of 1917 where you see intentions of its redactors, the weakening if not the disappearance of the Catholic Church.

During the XIX century, the Church was allied with bourgeoisie and the crown rulers of Europe. Being a colony, Mexico enjoyed the privileges of *el Patronato Real*, by which the royal and ecclesial authorities would support each other. The liberals would see the Church (referring to the Catholic hierarchy) highly enriched with ample properties and politically and economically powerful.

When the liberal movements rebelled against the kings and queens of the European countries, the hierarchy of the Church would invariably remain loyal with the king. Among the liberal movements one will find scientism with its roots in the Enlightenment of the XVII and XVIII centuries; Jacobean liberalism, the basis of the French Revolution; and masonry with its ever-hostile attitude toward the Church.

THE RELIGIOUS CONFLICT OF 1926

The young Republic of Mexico, officially instituted in 1824, after a long process of independence initiated by Miguel Hidalgo in 1810. A liberal revolution started when Benito Juarez (1855-1872) came into power. Influenced by American masonry, Juarez established his anti-clericalism in the Constitution of 1857 and the Reform Laws of 1859. He nationalized Church property, suppressed religious orders, and secularized cemeteries, hospitals and charitable institutions. He endorsed the creation of the schismatic Mexican Catholic Church. There was a popular Catholic movement that stood against these abuses, but the liberal and anti-clerical moments prevailed thanks in part to the support of the United States. In the subsequent years, with different nuances and intensities, presidents Lerdo de Tejada, Porfirio Diaz (reelected 8

times) and Venustiano Carranza, crystallized anti-Catholicism from a masonic model in the Constitution of 1917.

This Constitution established extreme anticlerical laws:

- Nationalization of the Church properties
- Suppression of religious orders
- Secularization of cemeteries, hospitals and welfare centers
- Restriction of worship inside churches
- Expulsion of the Jesuits
- Deportation and incarceration of bishops, priests and religious.
- Education could only be conducted by lay persons
- Vows and religious orders were declared illegal
- Confiscation of religious properties continued

President Obregon ordered a bomb to destroy the image of the Virgen de Guadalupe (miraculously the image did not get destroyed), he expelled the Apostolic Delegate, Mons Philippi for having blessed the first stone for the monument of Christ the King in Cubilete in the state of Guanajuato.

President Plutarco Elias Calles expelled foreign priests, he imposed fines on those that taught Catholic education, and he prohibited the use of clerical vestments. The governors of the states implemented these laws with vehemence. Some dictated that Mass would only be celebrated on Sundays, that no Masses for the dead would be celebrated, that baptismal water not be kept in the baptismal fonts, that the sacrament of penance not be administered to anyone but the dying.

The governor of Tabasco, Tomás Garrido Canabal promulgated a law that prohibited single, unmarried Catholic priests or any priest under the age of 40 years to minister. In November of 1925 the bishop of Tabasco and all his priests left the state and all of the Catholic services ended.

To these extreme laws against religious liberty, the Mexican bishops in a pastoral letter, promulgated on July 25, 1926, unanimously protested against the antireligious articles of the Constitution and that these be reformed. President Calles responded: "We are simply enforcing the existing laws. My government does not plan on removing the reforms and additions to the penal code."

A few days later on July 31, and with consultation to the Holy See, the bishops ordered the suspension of public worship in the entire nation. Immediately a dozen bishops, as well as the Archbishop of Mexico were abruptly taken out of their sees and without trial and expelled from the country.

THE CRISTERO WAR

Neither the government, nor the majority of bishops were expecting the reaction of the Christian people having been left without the Eucharist and other sacraments, seeing altars uncovered altars and the tabernacles empty with their doors left opened.

Mid August in 1926 after the murder of the priest in Chalchihuites and three lay Catholics that were with him, the first incident of the armed movement occurs in Zacatecas. From there it extended to Jalisco. Between August and December of that year there were 64 armed, spontaneous and isolated uprisings, most of them took place in Jalisco Guanajuato, Guerrero, Michoacán and Zacatecas.

The Cristeros left their families to go into battle. An eyewitness described it this way: "These men paid no attention to the fact that the government had many soldiers, a lot of weaponry and much money to fight them; they paid no attention to these, they were only interested in defending their God, their religion, their holy mother, the Church. The streams, the mountains, the forests and the hills are witnesses that those men spoke to the Lord our God with the holy name "¡VIVA CRISTO REY, VIVA LA SANTISMA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE, VIVA MEXICO!" Those same places are witnesses that those men who spilled their blood on the ground, gave their very lives in order that the Lord our God would return again. He deemed to return to their churches, to their altars and now I commend to young men that if in the future this were to occur again, that they not forget the example which our ancestors have left us. "

After much discussion among the Mexican bishops and with the Vatican, the Cristiada received approval from the Church on Feb. 2, 1927.

The BACKGROUND OF THE CRY "¡VIVA CRISTO REY!"

The Cristeros, those who took up arms in order to defend their faith, fought under the banners of the Virgen de Guadalupe and Christ the King. How do we explain the cry “¡VIVA CRISTO REY!”? In 1913 a group of Mexican Catholics sought permission from the Vatican that “the kingdom of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Mexico” be proclaimed. They asked that they be permitted to crown the image of Cristo Rey in the churches as an act of submission and allegiance to Christ the King. Permission was granted. In 1921 the project of erecting a monument for Christ the King began on the peak of the small mountain of del Cubilete in the state of Guanajuato considered a geographical center of the country.

The Archbishop of Mexico City Mora y del Rio, wrote these words in his Pastoral letter about Christ the King: “Behold your king, my venerable brothers and beloved sons, whom God has crowned with glory and honor, and whom God has placed over all creatures as their great king, for He is the heir of all things. The nations are his portion and his dominions extend to the ends of the earth and to the heights of heaven.”

The consecration to Christ the King was celebrated in the Cathedral of Mexico City on January 6, 1914, in the presence of civil and ecclesiastical authorities and it was then and for the first time that the Catholic people of Mexico cried out, “¡VIVA CRISTO REY!”

It was recognized that the gestures in honor of Christ the King were expressions of the temporal ascendance of the Catholic faith

in Mexico. In that same spirit Catholics declared the primacy of the Church-inspired *Acción Social* for revolutionary reform. The government understood totally the symbolism of Cristo Rey and as aforementioned, the Apostolic Delegate was expelled from the country for laying the cornerstone for the monument at Cubilete. It was considered a brazen political act.

RESOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT (Incorrectly named compromises)

From mid 1929 General Goroestieta, head of the Cristeros, wrote to the Mexican bishops warning that if there were a compromise this would be interpreted as ignoring all of their struggles and sacrifices.

In the meeting, to arrive at a compromise with president Portes Gil, the only bishops present were the Apostolic Delegate Ruiz y Flores and Bishop Pascual Diaz y Barreto. In these discussions neither the National League of Cristeros nor the Mexican Episcopacy were represented, neither were they able to obtain written promises that would protect the fate of the Cristeros once the weapons were deposited. The war had cost the lives of 20 to 30 thousand Cristeros.

As a result of the unfortunate compromises, the government ordered the killings of the leaders of the Cristero movement. Most of the anti-Catholic laws were contained in the Constitution of 1917. These laws were not modified until 1993.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE MARTYRS IN THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

The martyrs were witnesses till death and with their bloodshed gave their lives for the Church. These saints should be to us, in the New Evangelization, models of faith and sacrifice that entail being disciples and missionaries of Christ. Even if we weren't to die physically because of our faith, it is expected of us to give our all to the essential mission of the Church, which is to evangelize.

Some priests in ANSH have left their countries, families and their cultures to come and mission to this country, the United States. This gesture shows the gift of self to their vocation and indirectly can be considered a form of martyrdom.

All of the priests, by means of their priestly ordination, reproduce the person of Jesus Christ who gives his life for everyone. "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. ¹⁸No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

You should never underestimate popular religiosity. Neither the Mexican government, nor the ecclesiastical authorities were expecting the reaction of the people to the anti-Catholic laws of the Constitution. The faith of the Mexican people in those days was well-rooted in their hearts. Their love for God, for Christ the King, for the Virgin of Guadalupe, for the sacramental life and for the

Church was so immense that they were willing to die in their defense.

The role that popular religiosity plays in the Christian life should be considered in the New Evangelization. We must not forget that there is close connection between the official prayer of the Church, meaning the Liturgy, and the acts of piety. These acts, although not liturgical lead the faithful to the Eucharist and other sacraments. The Bishops gathered in Puebla in 1979 repeated the words of Paul VI: "Popular religion manifests a thirst for God that only the poor and the humble will recognize. It makes generosity and sacrifice possible to heroic proportions when it is an expression of faith. It shares a deep sense of the attributes of God: paternity, providence, the loving and constant presence. It creates interior attitudes, a patient sense of the cross in daily life."

"The religiosity of the people in its core is a heritage of values that respond with Christian wisdom to the great questions of life. Popular Catholic wisdom has the capacity of fashioning a vital synthesis. It creatively combines the divine and the human, Christ and Mary, spirit and body, communion and institution, person and community, faith and homeland, intelligence and emotion. This wisdom is a Christian humanism that radically affirms the dignity of every person as a Child of God, it establishes a basic fraternity, teaches people how to encounter nature, and to understand work, and it provides reasons for joy and humor even in the midst of a very hard life. For the common people, this wisdom is also a principal of discernment, an evangelical instinct through they spontaneously sense when the Gospel is served in

the Church and when it is emptied of its contents and stifled by other interests. (Puebla, no. 448)

In the New Evangelization we have to highlight the transmission of the faith through a solid formation and education of the teachings of the Church. As His Holiness Benedict XVI says in his Motu Proprio *Porta Fidei* faith entails two movements, one that is received objectively, which is the body of the teaching and the other assimilates and accepts those teachings in the heart of the people.

La Cristiada, with all the bloodshed of its martyrs, was not only a defense of faith, but also of human rights. There was hope that after the Revolution of 1910 life would be better for the poor. The Constitution of 1917, however favored the bourgeoisie and the dominant class.

The New Evangelization cannot forget the topics of social justice that have a long tradition in the life and the teachings of the Church. In this country we must continue to support legal and non legal immigrants, farm workers, the numerous poor Latin women and children.

Benedict XVI in *Sacramentum Caritatis* says the following: "Certainly, the restoration of justice, reconciliation and forgiveness are the conditions for the building of true peace." [243] the recognition of this fact leads to a determination to transform unjust structures and to restore respect for the dignity of all men and women, created in God's image and likeness. Through the

concrete fulfillment of this responsibility, the Eucharist becomes in life what it signifies in its celebration. As I have had occasion to say, it is not the proper task of the Church to engage in the political work of bringing about the most just society possible; nonetheless she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the struggle for justice."

CONCLUSION

We must seize the theme of Christ the King in the New Evangelization. It is Christ the King to whom we want the nonbelievers to go, and with whom to go to to strengthen their faith as believers.

How are we to understand the concept and person of Christ the King? We will find the answer in the Gospel of St. John when Pilate asks Jesus the question: "are you king?"

Jesus' answer is "Yes, I am King, that is why I was born and that is why I have come to the world, to give testimony of the Truth. All who belong to the Truth will hear my voice. We ask ourselves as Pilate did: "what is the truth that Jesus refers to?" The Truth of Jesus is the antithesis of the world, the world is dark, it does not get light and it excludes God.

The Johannine truth is the Light and the Life and covers all that is our salvation that which comes from God that which He reveals and in the end the Truth reveals that God loved his people so much that he gave up his Son and that God is love. Therefore, we

in the New Evangelization are called, like Jesus, to give testimony of word and life to the Truth of the God's love.

In the Old Testament there are always evil kings in that history, God says that he will come down and will be king. "I will come and I will shepherd the people and I will be king of Israel and I will attract the whole world, and the whole world will be under the lordship of God." This is the central focus of the Old Testament.

When Jesus comes, he announces that the Kingdom of God has come. It is the God that is proclaimed in the Old Testament as the King of the World. Christ the King is the opposite of the kingdoms of the world that are based on cruelty, violence, corruption and injustice. The struggle between Christ the King and the kings of the world reaches its climax on the cross; and there both kingdoms battle. Christ does not make war with the kings of the world on their own terms, with violence; his answer to violence is non violence.

Hence God swallows the darkness of the world. In the resurrection from death, God shows his victory over the powers of the world. The sign that Pilate nailed over the cross is right: yes he is the king of Jews and therefore in the minds of the Jews, if he is king of Jews then he is king of the world. Yahweh has come to reign over the world.

We preach the crucified Christ, we struggle against the world with the force of the cross, we announce the kingdom of Christ that

manifests a majestic God with his non violence and compassion. The cry: “¡Viva Cristo Rey!” is the cry of every Christian.

Tertullian said: The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians. You see this clearly during the bloody period of persecution. Religious congregations were born then and today contribute enormously to the evangelizing Mission of the Church. Some of these continue to exercise their charisms in this United States.

Additionally, the faith of the people was strengthened even more in the United States. I recall that in Texas, my birth state, we would sing hymns to Christ the King and we would celebrate processions in his honor each year during the feast of Christ the King. The vassals of Christ the King were in my parish in Texas.

Even if the government of the United State supported the anti-clerical movement in the Mexico, the Bishops of the United States sympathized with the persecuted Church, by giving them the Seminary of Montezuma in New Mexico, which for many years forms hundreds of priests, some of which became bishops. Throughout the border religious orders and congregations fled from the persecution. All of this enriched and continues to enrich the Church of the United States.

We must continue telling this heroic story. We do not want it to disappear from our memories. We must go beyond the feelings of sadness and continuously accept the invitation to go through the Door of Faith that is open to us daily. “¡VIVA CRISTO REY!
¡VIVA LA VIRGEN DE GUADALUPE!”

“I ask today’s youth, that if this ever happens again in the future,
not to forget the example that our ancestors left for us.”