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Abstract

From Secret War to Cold War:
Race, Catholicism, and the Un-Making of Counterrevolutionary Mexico, 1917-1946

Ricardo José Álvarez Pimentel

2022

This dissertation examines the rise and fall of Catholic women's opposition to the secularizing efforts and seemingly progressive gender and racial politics of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and its nascent state apparatus. Through rigorous discursive analyses of state and Catholic print media published between 1917 and 1946, it traces middle- and upper-class women's ideological production and argues that their counterrevolutionary religious movement was both driven and un-made by gendered constructions of whiteness. The first half of this dissertation (Chapters 1-3) analyzes the Mexican Church-state conflict prior to 1930 as a transnational struggle between two racialized and competing forms of historical subjectivity, meaning-making, and world *being*—namely, religion (Catholicism) and secular “Revolution.” The second half of this work (Chapter 4-6) examines institutional development during the 1930s and 40s, demonstrating how Church and state institutions' lingering distrust of working-class mobilization gave way to their gradual convergence under hegemonic national discourses of mixed-race identity designed to subdue indigenous actors.

From Secret War to Cold War:
Race, Catholicism, and the Un-Making of Counterrevolutionary Mexico,
1917-1946

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
Of
Yale University
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

By
Ricardo José Álvarez Pimentel

Dissertation Director: Gilbert M. Joseph

May 2022

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|------------|
| <u>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</u> | <u>IX</u> |
| <u>INTRODUCTION</u> | <u>1</u> |
| THE COUNTERREVOLUTION | 6 |
| GENDERED WHITENESS | 20 |
| STRUCTURE AND CHAPTER OUTLINE | 35 |
| SOURCES AND ARCHIVES | 39 |
| TERMINOLOGY AND STYLE | 41 |
| PART 1: THE CONFRONTATIONAL PHASE, 1917-1929 | 44 |
| <u>CHAPTER 1: FIGHTING THE SECRET WAR, LAUNCHING THE COUNTERREVOLUTION, 1917-1923</u> | <u>48</u> |
| THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL DOCTRINE | 52 |
| PROTECTING FAITH AND WHITENESS | 61 |
| THE SECRET WAR OVER PUBLIC DISCOURSE | 71 |
| CONCLUSIONS | 85 |
| <u>CHAPTER 2: THE LIMITS OF CATHOLIC HISPANISM, MEXICO-SPAIN RELATIONS DURING THE CRISTERO REBELLION, 1922-1927</u> | <u>89</u> |
| HISPANISM AND THE JCFM | 94 |
| THE SECRET WAR IN SPAIN | 108 |
| THE LIMITS OF CATHOLIC HISPANISM | 120 |
| CONCLUSIONS | 128 |
| <u>CHAPTER 3: COLD WAR CATHOLICISM, MEXICO-U.S. RELATIONS DURING THE CRISTERO REBELLION, 1924-1929</u> | <u>130</u> |
| RACE AND SECULAR ACTIVISM | 134 |
| THE SPECTER OF COMMUNISM | 147 |
| THE SECRET WAR IN THE UNITED STATES | 157 |
| CONCLUSIONS | 168 |
| PART 2: THE INSTITUTIONAL PHASE, 1929-1938 | 173 |
| <u>CHAPTER 4: AUTHORITARIAN INSTITUTIONALISM AND THE FEAR OF RADICALIZATION, 1929-1934</u> | <u>177</u> |
| REVOLUTIONARY INSTITUTIONALISM: CALLES AND THE PNR | 179 |
| ROMANIZATION AND CATHOLIC INSTITUTIONALISM | 188 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| “SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY” AND FASCIST TENDENCIES | 199 |
| CONCLUSIONS | 208 |
| | |
| CHAPTER 5: “SOCIAL EQUILIBRIUM” AND THE FAILURE OF CATHOLIC MASS POLITICS, 1934-1939 | 212 |
| <hr/> | |
| CORPORATISM: CARDENISMO AND THE CHURCH | 214 |
| CATHOLIC MASS POLITICS | 221 |
| “SOCIAL EQUILIBRIUM” | 228 |
| HISPANISM AND MEXICANIDAD | 240 |
| CONCLUSIONS | 253 |
| | |
| PART 3: THE ACCOMODATIONIST PHASE, 1938-1946 | 256 |
| | |
| CHAPTER 6: THE EMBERS OF COUNTERREVOLUTION, REVOLUTIONARY COMPROMISE AND CATHOLIC INDIVIDUALISM, 1938-1946 | 261 |
| <hr/> | |
| ÁVILA CAMACHO AND REVOLUTIONARY COMPROMISE | 265 |
| CATHOLIC INDIVIDUALISM | 280 |
| RACE AND “RADICALISM” | 293 |
| CONCLUSIONS | 309 |
| | |
| <u>EPILOGUE</u> | <u>312</u> |
| | |
| <u>CONCLUSIONS</u> | <u>319</u> |
| | |
| CONTRIBUTIONS AND FURTHER INQUIRY | 324 |
| | |
| <u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u> | <u>329</u> |

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

IMAGES

| | |
|---|-----|
| 1.1: UNIÓN DE DAMAS CATÓLICAS (1922) | 48 |
| 1.2: PRESIDENT ÁLVARO OBREGÓN (1920-24) | 49 |
| 1.3: PARTIDO CATÓLICO NACIONAL (1911) | 56 |
| 1.4: PRESIDENT ELENA LASCURAÍN (1922) | 63 |
| 1.5: VICE PRESIDENT REFUGIO GORIBAR Y ZAVALA (1906) | 67 |
| 1.6: CÁRCEL “BELEM” JAZZ BAND (1925) | 68 |
| 1.7: CÁRCEL “BELEM” JAZZ BAND (1925) | 68 |
| 1.8: FÉLIX PALAVACINI WITH SPANISH IMMIGRANTS (1920) | 76 |
| 1.9: FÉLIX PALAVACINI WITH FRENCH AMBASSADOR (1920) | 76 |
| 1.10: REV. FRANCIS C. KELLEY | 80 |
| 1.11: JOURNALIST E.J. DILLON | 80 |
| | |
| 2.1: TEATRO ESLAVA, VALENCIA, SPAIN | 91 |
| 2.2: PRESIDENT PLUTARCO ELÍAS CALLES (1924-28) | 93 |
| 2.3: INSTITUTO DE CULTURA FEMENINA (1930) | 100 |
| 2.4: SOFÍA DEL VALLE (1926) | 106 |
| 2.5: CRISTERO REBELS RECEIVE COMMUNION (1926-27) | 121 |
| 2.6: NEWSPAPER CLIPPING (1927) | 122 |
| 2.7: PRAYER CARDS, CRISTERO MARTYRS (1927-28) | 126 |
| | |
| 3.1: DAMAS CATÓLICAS POLICE INSPECTION (1926) | 131 |
| 3.2: RENÉ CAPISTRÁN GARZA (1925) | 132 |
| 3.3: JOSÉ GÁNDARA | 135 |
| 3.4: SOVIET AMBASSADOR ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI (1926) | 150 |
| 3.5: SAMUEL GOMPERS WITH PRESIDENTS OBREGÓN AND CALLES (1924) | 153 |
| 3.6: CHANDLER P. ANDERSON (1914) | 158 |
| 3.7: U.S. AMBASSADOR JAMES R. SHEFFIELD (1924) | 161 |
| | |
| 4.1: ALFONSO ROMANDÍA FERREIRA (1926) | 184 |
| 4.2: JOSÉ VASCONCELOS PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN (1929) | 186 |
| 4.3: ARCHBISHOP PASCUAL DÍAZ BARRETO | 195 |
| | |
| 5.1: PRESIDENT LÁZARO CÁRDENAS (1935) | 219 |
| 5.2: UNIÓN NACIONAL SINARQUISTA (1937) | 236 |
| 5.3: <i>DE FRENTE</i> MAGAZINE (1937) | 243 |
| 5.4: <i>ASPIRANTE</i> MAGAZINE (1938) | 248 |
| 5.5: <i>ASPIRANTE</i> MAGAZINE (1938) | 248 |
| | |
| 6.1: PRESIDENT MANUEL ÁVILA CAMACHO WITH FDR | 276 |
| 6.2: SPANISH-OTOMÍ LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS | 299 |
| 6.3: SPANISH-OTOMÍ LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS | 299 |

MAPS

| | |
|---|-----|
| 1-1: MEXICO, BAJÍO REGION | 55 |
| 2-1: REGISTERED JCFM SOCIAS (1929-30) | 101 |
| 2-2: PRO-CRISTERO ACTIVISM, SPAIN (1926) | 116 |
| 5-1: JCFM SOCIAS AND “MONOLINGUAL” INDIGENOUS PEOPLES | 239 |

TABLES

| | |
|--|-----|
| 1-1: MEXICAN HEADS OF STATE DURING THE REVOLUTION | 60 |
| 4-1: MEXICAN PRESIDENTS DURING THE <i>MAXIMATO</i> | 183 |

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

ACM: Acción Católica Mexicana; translated as “Mexican Catholic Action”

ACdM: Acción Católica de la Mujer Española; no English-language translation used

ACJM: Acción Católica de la Juventud Mexicana; translated as “Mexican Catholic Youth Association”

AFL: American Federation of Labor

ANPF: Asociación Nacional de Padres de Familia; translated as “National Catholic Parents’ Association”

CNA: Campaña Nacional de Alfabetización; no English-language translation used

CNCT: Confederación Nacional Católica de Trabajadores; translated as “Mexican Catholic Labor Confederation”

CROM: Confederación Regional de Obreros Mexicanos; translated as “Mexican Federation of Labor”

DeCo: Departamento Confidencial; no English-language translation used

JCFM: Juventud Católica Femenina Mexicana; translated as “Young Catholic Women’s Association”

K of C: Knights of Columbus (distinctions are made between U.S. and Mexican chapters)

LNDLR: Liga Nacional Defensora de la Libertad Religiosa; translated as “National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty”

LSCM: Liga Social Católica Mexicana; translated as “Mexican Catholic Social League”

PCN: Partido Católico Nacional; translated as “National Catholic Party”

PLM: Partido Laborista Mexicano; translated as “Mexican Labor Party”

PNR: Partido Nacional Revolucionario; no English-language translation used

PRI: Partido Revolucionario Institucional; translated as “Institutional Revolutionary Party”

PRM: Partido de la Revolución Mexicana; translated as “Party of the Mexican Revolution”

SEP: Secretaría de Educación Pública; translated as “Secretariat of Public Education”

SSM: Secretariado Social Mexicano; translated as “Mexican Social Secretariat”

UCM: Unión de Católicos Mexicanos; no English-language translation used

UDCM: Unión de Damas Católicas Mexicanas; no English-language translation used

UILCF: L’Unión Internationale des Ligues Catholiques Féminines; translated as “International Union of Catholic Women’s Leagues”

UNS: Unión Nacional Sinarquista; no English-language translation used

UPE: Unión Patriótica Española; no English-language translation used

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Ricardo José Alvarez Pimentel
Bronx, New York
March 2022

In memory of democracy,
now in desperate need of a true people's revolution
and respect for the rule of law.

For Ricardo Gabriel,
your smile will heal the world
and your mind will take us where we've never been before.

INTRODUCTION

Printed in September 1937, the cover of *De Frente* magazine conveyed the complex history of Mexican Catholic women's activism to its young readership. The image showed five girls in uniform standing shoulder to shoulder and gazing forward to the horizon as disciplined soldiers. Resolute in attitude and conviction, the women sported confident smiles, modern hairstyles, and fashionable clothing. They clutched books to their chest and called on fellow *católicas* to “Come,” and “march in tight ranks.”



De Frente No. 30 (México, D.F.: Editores Buena Prensa, 1937).

Source: Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavijero. Archivo Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana, Serie: “Impresos, Publicaciones Acción Católica Mexicana,” Caja 56 “*De Frente* 1936, 1937, 1938.”

In a predominantly indigenous and mixed-race country, however, it was remarkable to see that the women on the magazine cover were all white. Their hair, make-up, and clothing all conveyed a certain degree of wealth, and the size of their books spoke to their relatively high level of education. These were neither the industrial working-class *obreras* of growing cities, nor the rural *campesinas* of the countryside. They were students and aspiring teachers from upscale neighborhoods, and the daughters of the country's most prominent families.

Twenty years earlier, the passage of the 1917 Constitution had marked an important turning point in the trajectory of Mexico's 1910 Revolution. It signaled the beginning of the end for the nation's watershed upheaval, but also inaugurated a thirty-year period of intense Church-state conflict. Fought between 1910 and 1920, the Revolution had resulted in the downfall of a thirty-year dictatorship and the subsequent inauguration of eight different presidents. Unfolding on all scales and levels of society—from the local to the international—the conflict had produced between 1 and 3 million casualties and involved at least a dozen military factions and a handful of foreign nations.¹

In some regions of the country, peasants had fought to reclaim their ancestral lands from domestic and foreign occupation. In others, the sons of well-to-do families had challenged longstanding corruption and an undemocratic system of rule that prioritized loyalty over principle. Eventually, politicians at the helm of dominant factions seemed to betray their professed ideals and turned their back on those who had once supported their rise to power. At the same time, the charismatic, controversial, and often misunderstood

¹ For a historical synthesis of the Mexican Revolution, see Gilbert M. Joseph and Jürgen Buchenau, *Mexico's Once and Future Revolution: Social Upheaval and the Challenge of Rule since the Late Nineteenth Century* (Duke University Press, 2013). For a thematic overview of the Revolution's extensive historiography, see Joseph and Buchenau's "Bibliographical Essay," pp. 227-238.

leaders of “the people’s Revolution” were martyred and canonized upon the altar of popular devotion.

As the country struggled to regain stability, the Cristero Rebellion of 1926-29 witnessed a second outbreak of mass violence, but this time between the state and the Revolution’s Catholic opponents. Fueled by the 1917 Constitution’s anti-clerical restrictions and calls for secularization, the Church-state civil war galvanized Catholics across geographic regions and sectors of society. It was during this formidable decade—between 1917 and 1926—that upper-class católicas first began to mobilize their ranks around a common political project and a shared set of religious values. By 1937, the cover of *De Frente* evoked a twenty-year history of women’s domestic and international activism as driven by unique ideologies and forms of racism.

My dissertation draws from an immense body of scholarship on Mexican Catholicism, race, and Revolutionary² state-formation to propose a new framework for understanding the conflict between lay activists and the nation’s burgeoning state institutions. Specifically, it argues that between 1917 and 1946, Mexico’s middle- and upper-class Catholics launched a counterrevolution that sought to restore the Church’s power in society and reverse the effects of the Mexican Revolution. Spearheaded by mothers, educators, and homemakers, this religiously motivated political movement

² Throughout this dissertation, I have decided to capitalize the terms “Revolution” and “Revolutionary” to reference the Mexican state’s evolving political project. By contrast, I use the term “revolutionary” as an adjective to connote transformative change. Although I do not subscribe to officialist renditions of the Mexican Revolution as a singular “event,” I do believe that the Mexican state effectively created a discourse of “Revolution” to serve its regime-building projects and state-formation efforts. I refrain from using terms like “postrevolutionary” because they assume a temporal end to the Revolutionary project that I do not see happening until the early 1940s, at the tail end of my work. For more on “the Revolution” as a political-cultural construct, see the introductory chapter of Joseph and Buchenau (2013). On Mexican state formation and the 1910 Revolution, see Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniel Nugent, eds., *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico* (Duke University Press, 1994).

rejected the state's economic nationalism, the anti-clerical 1917 Constitution, and the Revolution's seemingly progressive race and gender politics. By the early 1930s, lay women surpassed men as the leaders of religious resistance and fought for the erection of a state apparatus that would regulate public morality, uphold social hierarchies, and facilitate the spread of Church doctrine across the nation.

My work frames this organized opposition as the Counterrevolution of 1917-46. It argues that the movement occurred in three stages and periodizes these as the (1) confrontational, (2) institutional, and (3) accommodationist phases as the result of elite women's changing relationships to the state and their working-class counterparts. Between 1917 and 1929, the confrontational stage was characterized by the dramatic escalation of tensions between the federal government and upper-class activists in the Mexican Catholic Social League (LSCM). Both sides turned to their allies in the media and used newspapers to make the case for their respective political projects before domestic and international audiences. After 1925, the LSCM integrated itself to the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty (LNDLR). During the Cristero Rebellion (1926-29), the League established formidable covert networks of support that extended into Spain and the United States, two nations deeply affected by Mexico's Church-state conflict.

Following the peace settlement of 1929, both factions rejected violence and became increasingly concerned with subduing rogue militants and their respective internal opponents. During the institutional phase (1929-38), Church and state actors embraced authoritarian political projects that relied on the language of chaos and political instability to centralize power. As the newly established Mexican Catholic Action (ACM) organization became the chief vehicle of Church-backed activism, its upper-class *socias*

drew from European fascism and devised anti-democratic notions of spiritual community to preclude indigenous women's political mobilization. At the same time, these women shunned popular religious practices and mobilized against the alleged influence of foreign ideologies in government and society—namely, feminism, Marxism, and Protestant individualism. Galvanized by the specter of peasant radicalization, Mexican católicas were driven by conspiratorial thinking and racialized perceptions of crisis. As a result, the women of Catholic Action remained skeptical of mass politics and indigenous empowerment, even as they pursued a corporatist model of activism that claimed to represent (and supersede) class interests across a broad spectrum of society.

Finally, the accommodationist phase (1938-46) saw a new period of reconciliation wherein Church and state institutions implemented peasant re-education campaigns that relied on integrationist language to quell indigenous dissent. Couched in the discourse of mestizaje (or Spanish-indigenous hybridity), these projects were driven by a shared fear of working-class agitation and the belief that peasants' collective action ran contrary to national unity. By the early 1940s, the state relaxed its enforcement of anti-clerical policies and reached a compromise with the Church on the issue of religious education. As the conservative Manuel Ávila Camacho administration joined the Allies in World War II, Church-state actors coalesced around the language of individualism and liberal democracy to suppress workers' purported radicalism—most notably, right-wing peasant militants in the budding *Unión Nacional Sinarquista* (UNS).

Still, even as the Counterrevolution integrated itself into the nation's maturing state apparatus, its anti-indigenous racism limited its potential for success beyond elite circles. Specifically, middle- and upper-class activists' implicit claims to whiteness reinforced the

movement's insularity and exacerbated its inability to gain traction among popular sectors. During all three phases, Catholics asserted their whiteness through innuendo embedded in religious language. This allowed them to resist the state's homogenizing racial narratives without outwardly challenging mestizaje or openly expressing disdain for the working-class actors the government sought to integrate into the body politic. Published in magazines, newspapers, and instructional booklets, Catholic women's calls for "religious restoration" doubled as an unspoken defense of white elite privileges. At the heart of this project were gendered and racialized perceptions of class and "purity" that bolstered social hierarchies grounded in uneven relations of power.

The Counterrevolution

In terms of framing, my work aligns with historian Greg Grandin's analyses of counterrevolution as neither a "mechanistic reaction" to revolution, nor a conservative anti-politics opposed to all forms of social transformation.³ Instead, it approaches the Counterrevolution as a complex phenomenon that possessed both an ideology and a program for national society. Articulated in the language of spiritual regeneration, Mexican católicas used religious discourse to advance their political project. This involved the pursuit of racially charged moralization campaigns designed protect elites' economic power in times of unprecedented upheaval.

Like Grandin, my work argues the Counterrevolution emanated from middle- and upper-class perceptions of crisis. However, while he sees counterrevolutions as expanding

³ Greg Grandin, "Living in Revolutionary Time: Coming to Terms with the Violence of Latin America's Long Cold War," in Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph, eds., *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Long Cold War* (Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 16-17.

“outward and downward” to integrate foreign powers and popular sectors of society, my research demonstrates that Mexican católicas tried but ultimately failed to engage peasant actors at the grassroots. Even as these women succeeded in drawing the attention of foreign interests, the movement’s inherent racism prevented it from gaining significant traction among indigenous communities. At the same time, their aversion to working-class mobilization drove them to latch on to a Revolutionary government increasingly concerned with regulating peasant activism.

With regard to “downward” integration, I draw from scholar Bruce Lincoln to demonstrate how elite women wielded their specific brand of Catholicism as a hegemonic “religion of the status-quo.” Specifically, my research demonstrates how middle- and upper-class activists emerged as the bulwark of Church power by mobilizing against peasants’ ritualistic forms of devotion. By virtue of their opposition to these defiant “religions of resistance,” Catholic institutionalists hindered the Counterrevolution’s ability to overcome its own insularity and incorporate new adherents. Mexican Catholicism grew bifurcated along racial and class lines, rendering activists unable to produce a unified movement to challenge state power.⁴

In terms of outward expansion, my work uses espionage records from the Mexican government’s budding secret intelligence agency, the *Departamento Confidencial*, to reveal how both sides of the Church-state conflict established crucial partnerships with labor unions, political parties, and lay organizations in Spain and the United States. Despite their opposition, both factions demonstrated a vested interest in protecting capitalist

⁴ Bruce Lincoln, “Notes Toward a Theory of Religion and Revolution,” in Lincoln ed., *Religion, Rebellion, and Revolution: An Interdisciplinary and Cross-Cultural Collection of Essays* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1985), pp. 266-292. On the relationship between “religions of resistance, religions of revolution, and religions of the status quo,” see Lincoln, pp. 267-277.

relations of power and engaged in covert negotiations with bankers, industrialists, and other foreign business interests during their armed stand-off. Here, I draw from diplomatic correspondence and the U.S. Knights of Columbus' confidential records to expand on historian Friedrich Katz's study of the Mexican Revolution as an intense period of domestic tension shaped by behind-the-scenes conflict between international actors—or, Mexico's "secret war."⁵ Like Katz, I examine how the confrontational stage was influenced by international rivalries and a series of backstage compromises driven by the threat of foreign intervention. Still, even as foreign powers contributed to the escalation of domestic tensions, the Counterrevolution developed its own global reach and influenced like-minded movements around the world. By the late 1920s, Mexican Catholics had placed themselves at the center of a burgeoning anti-communist coalition between the international private sector and the global Church.

Subsequently, my work reveals how the Counterrevolution effectively set the stage for Mexico's "long" Cold War. It draws from Grandin and Gilbert M. Joseph's recent reframing of Latin America's century of upheavals (roughly, the period between 1910 and the late 1980s), and defines the Mexican Cold War as a period of heightened conflict originating in the early 1920s.⁶ Framed by Grandin and Joseph as a hemispheric phenomenon, the long Cold War involved the state's strategic use of violence to discipline and repress citizens, often at the behest of the United States, though not always or predominantly. Moreover, Joseph argues that this period witnessed elites' use of

⁵ Friedrich Katz, *The Secret War in Mexico: Europe, the United States, and the Mexican Revolution* (University of Chicago Press, 1981).

⁶ Gilbert M. Joseph, "Latin America's Long Cold War: A Century of Revolutionary Process and U.S. Power," in Grandin and Joseph (2010), pp. 397-414.

“racialized discourses and anti-communist rationales to buttress the legitimation of authoritarian regimes.”⁷ Even if my work does not examine political violence directly, it complements this new framework by demonstrating how, during the accommodationist phase, middle- and upper-class Catholics’ anti-indigenous racism led them to endorse state repression. As a result, I envision my study of Mexican católicas as crucial to understanding how the Mexican government, unlike any other in the region, was able to consolidate rule and maintain a veneer of relative stability for the remainder of the twentieth century. In the Mexican case, elites’ racially charged religious discourses provided the state with a crucial moral endorsement of its suppression of peasant mobilization. Consequently, racism and religion became the vehicles through which the Church and the nation’s broader Catholic public would come to approve of political violence during the Mexican Cold War proper, once the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) completed its rightward turn in 1946.⁸

In his study of Church-state relations, historian Roberto Blancarte Pimentel has proposed analyzing the convergence between the Mexican Church leaders and the PRI. However, Blancarte Pimentel limits the scope of his work to the study of negotiations

⁷ Ibid., pp. 400-402. Recently, historian Friedrich Katz proposed that the origins of Mexico’s long Cold War might actually date back to the 1910s, by virtue of the state’s dramatic leveraging of violence and terror during the armed phase of the Revolution (roughly, 1910-20)—see Katz, “Violence and Terror in the Mexican and Russian Revolutions,” in Grandin and Joseph, 2010. My work diverges from this periodization as it looks to Catholics’ global anti-communist networks and the state’s seemingly anti-imperialist foreign policy as the marker of a new era of national, regional, and global conflict. Regardless, both interpretations situate the Mexican Cold War as a dynamic conflict—cultural, social, and political—that was well underway by the onset of the post-War period.

⁸ As scholars Alex Aviña and Gladys McCormick have recently demonstrated, Mexican society was not immune from the horrors of torture and choreographed state terror associated with “dirty wars” elsewhere in Latin America. See Aviña, *Specters of Revolution: Peasant Guerrillas in the Cold War Mexican Countryside* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and McCormick, “The Last Door: Political Prisoners and the Use of Torture in Mexico’s Dirty War,” *The Americas* 74:1 (2017), pp. 57-81. On Catholic peasant violence and challenges to state rule see Gema Kloppe-Santamaría, *In the Vortex of Violence: Lynching, Extra Legal Justice, and the State in Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (University of California Press 2020).

between prominent institutional actors and abstains from in-depth analyses of lay activists' participation in these dynamic processes of political alignment. Furthermore, the periodization of his study, from 1929 through the 1970s, risks over-centering the Cristero Rebellion as the origins of Catholic opposition to the state.⁹ Instead, my work argues that this period of conflict did not represent the start of Catholics' anti-revolutionary resistance, but rather an overt explosion of deeper counterrevolutionary currents that emerged before, and continued well after, the Catholic armed struggle.

Still, the influence of *cristero* scholarship on the study of Mexican Catholic activism cannot be overstated. In one of his more recent analyses of the Cristero Rebellion, historian Jean Meyer has proposed the analytical frameworks of resistance (*Resistenz*) and armed revolution (*Widerstand*) to understand the relationship between the Mexican state and its Catholic opponents. Specifically, Meyer categorizes cristero peasant uprisings as acts of *Widerstand* by virtue of their religious violence. While *Widerstand* took the form of "great armed conflict" largely concentrated in the Mexican *Bajío* region, *Resistenz* emerged as the "pacifist, civic, and sociological resistance that characterized the rest of the country." Meyer attributes these differences to local politics and geographical differences, arguing for the necessity of contextualizing armed and non-violent forms of Catholic resistance at the diocesan level.¹⁰ Similarly, cristero scholars like Matthew Butler and Jennie Purnell have also interpreted these regional variations as being intimately connected

⁹ Roberto Blancarte Pimentel, *Historia de la Iglesia Católica en México* (Colegio Mexiquense/Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992). Also see Blancarte Pimentel, "Intransigence, Anticommunism, and Reconciliation: Church/State Relations in Transition," in Paul Gillingham and Benjamin T. Smith, eds., *Dictablanda: Politics, Work, and Culture in Mexico, 1938-1968* (Duke University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Jean Meyer, "Catholic Resistances in Revolutionary Mexico during the Religious Conflict," in John Gledhill and Patience A. Schell, eds., *New Approaches to Resistance in Brazil and Mexico* (Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 165-183.

to local factors, such as transformations in religious devotion, understandings of property ownership, and the Church's institutional presence during and after the Mexican Revolution.¹¹

Historian Alan Knight has also proposed that the differences between these two categories might best be understood as a question of thresholds and overlapping transitions. He argues that Resistenz becomes Widerstand only in the moments when acts of opposition transition from individual to collective action, “peaceful to violent, covert to overt, and local to national.” Knight also holds that unlike the self-interested survival strategies of Resistenz, Widerstand is characterized by “ambitious... utopian projects of social transformation.” Thus, Widerstand emerges when “low-level skirmishing gives way to broader and deeper social conflict” wherein “the stakes become greater... the goals become more radical... the social polarization sharper, [and] the sheer exuberance of contention more palpable.”¹²

Still, in its unprecedented study of Catholic women's activism, my work questions the utility of this binary paradigm to understand resistance and counterrevolutionary currents as they emerged within the upper echelons of Mexican society. Even if Resistenz and Widerstand provide a useful framework to examine the evolution of anti-revolutionary Catholicism *from below*, I refrain from endorsing this model for two important reasons.

¹¹ See Jennie Purnell, *Popular Movements and State Formation in Revolutionary Mexico: The Agraristas and Cristeros of Michoacán* (Duke University Press, 1999) and Matthew Butler *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico's Cristero Rebellion: Michoacán, 1927-29* (Oxford University Press, 2004). For an extensive history of the Cristero Rebellion see Jean A. Meyer, *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican People between Church and State, 1926-1929* [1976] (Cambridge University Press, 2013). For a transnational account of the conflict involving Mexicans in the United States, see Julia G. Young, *Mexican Exodus: Emigrants, Exiles, and Refugees of the Cristero War* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹² Alan Knight, “Rethinking Histories of Resistance in Brazil and Mexico,” in Gledhill and Schell (2012), pp. 325-353.

First, the binary presupposes the hegemony of state institutions and measures Catholic activism as a reaction to the state's free agency. Instead, my work argues that the relationship between elite Catholics and the Mexican state was one of shared interests despite moments of conflict and both factions' lingering animosities. Second, this model fails to accurately capture the complex forms of spiritual and political opposition pursued by middle- and upper-class Catholic women. By virtue of their social standing and religious views, Mexican católicas pursued political projects of spiritual restoration that involved covert and overt forms of armed and non-violent struggle at all levels—local, national, and transnational.

As a result, my work rejects oversimplified portrayals of Catholic resistance to state formation. Instead, my research demonstrates that these processes were intimately connected and mutually constitutive, often driven by dialogue and reciprocity. Thus, even as upper-class Catholics failed to build a viable counterrevolutionary coalition that bridged the nation's racial and class divides, they successfully used the specter of indigenous peasant radicalism to converge their interests with those of the state's burgeoning institutions. Despite both factions' incendiary rhetoric, Mexican Church and state drew from similar discursive strategies—and often the same means, networks, and people—to consolidate power and promulgate their visions for society.

By the late 1930s and early 1940s, this growing alignment between the Catholic Church and the Mexican state inaugurated a new era of institutional consolidation. Meanwhile, as both factions grew increasingly aligned with foreign and domestic business interests, they developed a powerful Cold War politics bent on regulating working-class activism and suppressing indigenous mobilization. As documented in my work and recent

scholarship, this triangular web of relationships developed over the course of two decades and seven presidential administrations—if not longer.¹³ In fact, as early as the tumultuous presidencies of Venustiano Carranza (1916-20) and Álvaro Obregón (1920-24), the federal government engaged in a series of public and private negotiations over foreign property claims and debts incurred during the armed phase of the Revolution (roughly, 1910-20). Notwithstanding the anti-imperialist rhetoric of the ruling Mexican Labor Party (PLM), this trend continued well into the Calles administration (1924-28), the establishment of the National Revolutionary Party (PNR) in 1929, and the interim presidencies of Emilio Portes Gil (1928-30), Pascual Ortiz Rubio (1930-32), and Abelardo Rodríguez (1932-34). By the onset of World War II, even the nationalist Lázaro Cárdenas administration recognized Mexico's dependence on global trade and bartered for U.S- and German-manufactured products in exchange for access to domestic oil reserves.¹⁴

Similarly, although Church-state hostilities culminated in the outbreak of the Cristero Rebellion, virtually all presidents between Carranza and Cárdenas had engaged in some form of compromise with the Vatican and the Mexican Episcopate. Thus, despite presenting a facade of irreconcilable opposition, the Catholic Church and the federal government successfully brokered crucial agreements over the issues of public worship,

¹³ See María del Carmen Callado Herrera, *Dwight D. Morrow: reencuentro y revolución en las relaciones entre México y Estados Unidos, 1927-1930* (Instituto Mora/SRE, 2005); Ariadna Guerrero Medina, “Católicos mexicanos en el extranjero: la Unión Internacional de Todos los Amigos (VITA México) de la Liga Nacional Defensora de la Libertad Religiosa, 1925-1934,” PhD diss. (Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora, 2021); Yves Solís Nicot “Genesis of Anticommunist Catholic Networks in Central America during the 1930s” in José Ramon Rodríguez Lago and Natalia Núñez Bargueño, eds., *Beyond National Catholicisms: Transnational Networks of Hispanic Catholicisms* (Silex Ediciones, 2021); and Solís Nicot, “La intervención ‘silenciosa’: el Senador Borah, los Caballeros de Colón y la implicación de los Estados Unidos en la cuestión religiosa mexicana (1935)” in Solís et al., eds., *Cruce de Fronteras: La Influencia de los Estados Unidos y América Latina en los proyectos de nación católicos en México, siglo XX* (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2020).

¹⁴ For an overview of the Mexican government's evolving political projects see Joseph and Buchenau (2013).

Church property, ecclesiastical appointments, and religious education.¹⁵ Furthermore, my work reveals the extent to which private business interests actively supported—i.e., funded—Mexican Catholics’ peaceful and armed struggles against state anti-clericalism. Motivated by a shared distrust of the Mexican government and its powerful labor syndicates, U.S. investors became indispensable to Catholic militants’ clandestine networks of resistance, even as Catholics and capitalists alike continued to pursue separate negotiations with state leaders.

By emphasizing these moments of Church-state alignment, my dissertation challenges prevalent misconceptions of Mexico’s armed and institutional (1920-46) revolutions as strictly anti-religious enterprises. Recently articulated by Alan Knight, this view assumes a false dichotomy in Church-state relations that erases crucial points of dialogue, alignment, and negotiation between the Catholics and the state. Knight’s emphasis on the government’s “anticlerical Jacobinism” as a marker of the Revolution’s relative strength or weakness relies on linear, misleading, and monolithic notions of “official anticlericalism.” By contrast, recent scholarship reveals crucial processes of mutual cooperation between Mexican Church and state wherein both sides enabled each other’s survival and nurtured the co-existence of their overlapping institutional hegemonies.¹⁶

¹⁵ For more information on Church-state conflict and compromise during the 1930s, see the essays by Massimo de Giuseppe, Pablo Mijangos y González, Ben Fallaw, Paolo Valvo, and Cecilia Bautista Garcia in Massimo de Giuseppe ed., “Entre modernización y tradición: cultura, sociedad, Iglesia y política en el México de los años Treinta,” in *Modernism: Rivista annuale di storia del riformismo religioso in età contemporanea* VI (2020). See also, Ben Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Duke University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ Alan Knight, “The End of the Mexican Revolution? From Cárdenas to Ávila Camacho, 1937-1941,” in Gillingham and Smith (2014). On the overlapping institutional and cultural hegemonies of Mexican Church and state, see Fallaw (2012) and Laura Pérez Rosales, *El final de la intransigencia mutua: Luis María Martínez y el Estado mexicano* (Bonilla Artigas, 2020).

Furthermore, with regard to women's activism, my work rejects prevalent categorizations of upper-class católicas' non-violent forms of resistance as moderate or apolitical. Specifically, it challenges scholars who portray Mexican Catholic Action—an institutionalist lay group dominated by elite women activists—as an organization that remained detached from politics and pursued a strictly “religious” and “social” mission crafted by the clergy. Although Knight classifies the women of the ACM as paramount agents of Resistenz, his definition of the term effectively denies them the opportunity for political ambition, radicalism, and broader perspective beyond their immediate grievances with local governments. Scholars in Mexico and the United States have produced similarly gendered portrayals of Catholic Action, which inadvertently masculinize politics and deny women any sense of agency or ideological autonomy from the clergy.

For instance, historians Stephen J.C. Andes and María Luisa Aspe Armella have recently portrayed the predominantly female ACM as an apolitical religious organization. However, these depictions are largely the result of missteps in their respective historical methodologies. First, they reduce “political” activism to the realm of male-dominated electoral politics. Second, they overemphasize the importance of official documents written by and for Church leaders while overlooking the vantage point of women and youth groups in their analyses—though Andes's most recent work on activist Sofia del Valle provides an important corrective to this. By not questioning the archive or considering new voices, these accounts reproduce prevalent Church narratives about the nature of Catholic activism. After 1929, the Church purposefully depicted lay groups as “apolitical” to safeguard concessions made by the federal government.¹⁷

¹⁷ See Stephen J.C. Andes, *The Vatican and Catholic Activism in Mexico and Chile: The Politics of Transnational Catholicism, 1920-1940* (Oxford University Press, 2014), and María Luisa Aspe Armella, *La*

Consequently, Andes writes of a “clear distinction between Catholic Action and politics.” He claims that Catholic Action “acted as the religious and social training ground where the laity learned how to defend religion and subsequently used this training for the good of civil society.”¹⁸ To account for this degree of separation between “civil society” and “religious and social training,” he turns to clerical instructions written by Archbishop Pascual Díaz Barreto in 1932. There, the Archbishop “prescribed how Catholics should operate in the arena of partisan politics,” urging priests and members of the laity to refrain from resurrecting the failed National Catholic Party (PCN). Andes takes this as evidence of Catholic Action’s apolitical role in society. Unlike the PCN or the male-dominated National Action Party (PAN) of the late 1930s, he concludes that Catholic Action became “an organization primarily concerned with education, catechism, and the promotion of family values.” By virtue of women’s exclusion from the ballot box, Andes dismisses their activism as mere “training.” Subsequently, he suggests that the ACM became an ineffective medium for the mobilization of more outspoken clergy and radical activists.

Similar to Andes, my dissertation demonstrates how Catholic Action’s rejection of religious violence bolstered the Church’s public disavowal of right-wing militant groups. However, my work also argues that the ACM’s educational, family, and religious initiatives all comprised the very platforms from which middle-and upper-class women launched larger, and even radical, political projects imbued with spiritual meaning. For this reason, Aspe Armella’s characterization of the ACM as a strictly “social” and

formación social y política de los católicos mexicanos: La Acción Católica Mexicana y la Unión Nacional de Estudiantes Católicos, 1929-1958 (Universidad Iberoamericana, 2008). Also see Andes, *The Mysterious Sofia: One Women’s Mission to Save Catholicism in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019).

¹⁸ See Andes, (2014), pp. 161-162.

“fundamentally religious” organization remains all too reductive. Even if the ACM never established a political party or attempted to overthrow the government, it still enabled women to use their faith to assert their power.

Recently, Elizabeth Cejudo Ramos has criticized these approaches for reinforcing Catholic women’s “dual erasure” and prioritizing male modes of political participation within the secular public sphere. Women’s religious activism is not only deemed apolitical by virtue of its religiosity, but also omitted from the narrative of Church-state conflict as a result of their limited access to the partisan public arena. By contrast, Cejudo Ramos’s work demonstrates how even the physical home itself became an important and equally public and private social space that nurtured católicas’ mobilization. Similarly, historians Patience Schell, Kristina Boylan, Sofía Crespo Reyes, and Margaret Chowning have all argued that Catholic women’s activism produced complex sites of negotiated political autonomy from Church institutions and male clergy.¹⁹

My work draws from these scholars and Robert Curley’s recent study of lay Catholics’ political activism to examine the evolution of Catholic women’s politicization. Whereas the first and final stages of the Counterrevolution were shaped by women’s

¹⁹ Elizabeth Cejudo Ramos, “*El Gobierno No Puede Más Que Dios*”: *Género, ciudadanía y conflicto Iglesia-Estado en el Sonora posrevolucionario* (Universidad de Sonora, 2021). See also, Patience A. Schell, “Gender, Resistance, and Mexico’s Church-State Conflict,” in Gledhill and Schell (2012), pp. 184-211; Kristina Boylan “The Feminine ‘Apostolate in Society’ versus the Mexican State: The Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana, 1929- 1940” in Paola Bacchetta and Margaret Power, eds., *Right Wing Women: From Conservatives to Extremists around the Globe* (Routledge, 2002), pp.169-82; Boylan, “Gendering the Faith and Altering the Nation: Mexican Catholic Women’s Activism, 1917-1940,” in Jocelyn Olcott, Mary Kay Vaughan, and Gabriela Cano, eds., *Sex in Revolution: Gender, Politics, and Power in Modern Mexico* (Duke University Press, 2006); Sofía Crespo Reyes, “Entre la Filantropía y la Práctica Política: La Unión de Damas Católicas Mexicanas en la Ciudad de México (1860-1930),” PhD diss. (Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luís Mora, 2016); Margaret Chowning, *Catholic Women, the Catholic Church, and Catholic Politics in Mexico, 1750-1940*, book manuscript under review (2022). On Catholic women’s activism in the mid-twentieth century see Nichole Sanders, “Women, Sex, and the 1950s Acción Católica Campaña Nacional de Moralización del Ambiente,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* (2020) Vol. 36 Iss. 1-2: 270-97.

alignment with the Mexican Episcopate, the institutional phase (1929-38) saw young female activists use their mission of “religious restoration” to experiment with new ideologies and develop unique visions for the nation. Specifically, these young women drew from Catholic integralism, which centered faith as the basis of civil society, to find moral solutions to the nation’s social, political, and economic ills. They turned to fascist notions of “spiritual community” and built peasant moralization campaigns around new notions of “social equilibrium,” or the belief that indigenous women should forgo their material aspirations, find spiritual uplift in their labor, and reject the “vitriolic” class politics that kept them from embracing their standing in society. As Curley writes, this “distinctly modern *political Catholicism*” advanced a new politics that drew direct inspiration from religious experience. Consequently, young Catholic activists acted as spiritual subjects and political agents when defending their respective class interests.²⁰

Stephen Andes and Julia G. Young have recently proposed that this Catholic politicization dates back to the late nineteenth century and intensified in the decades prior to the Vatican II Council of 1962-65. Like Curley, my work leans toward the earlier portion of this periodization and suggests a broader understanding of political Catholicism that includes non-partisan and non-violent forms of public activism. Still, my dissertation aligns with Andes and Young’s categorization of this new religious politics as the product of transnational processes. Rather than acting in isolation, Mexican católicas formed part of

²⁰ Robert Curley, *Citizens and Believers: Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Jalisco* (University of New Mexico Press, 2018).

longstanding global conversations by virtue of the Church's own historical cohesion as a transnational religious network.²¹

As such, my work demonstrates how upper-class women found themselves at the crossroads of several political and intellectual currents, some new and others centuries in the making. These transatlantic dialogues included debates over the nation's Spanish Catholic heritage, the relationship between individuals and the state, the role of women in promoting the Catholic faith, and the very aims and nature of Catholicism itself. My dissertation examines how Mexican women's relationships with coreligionists in Spain and the United States led them to experiment with a variety of political ideologies. From their defense of liberal democracy in the 1920s to their embrace of fascism and authoritarian politics in the 1930s, these women devised unique national projects of moral regeneration built on complex notions of divine order, moral authority, and spiritual community.

As self-proclaimed "soldiers in Christ," Mexican católicas navigated multiple temporalities and perceived their defense of faith and nation as part of a larger religious reconquest that spanned centuries of time. Consequently, they summoned the legacy of Spanish Catholic missionaries and mobilized against the specter of communism as agents of spiritual conquest. As political actors and women of faith, they engaged the world in existential terms and developed specific strategies to safeguard their social privileges amid the unique challenges posed by their immediate national circumstances. Of all these responses, the most consequential involved the gendered construction of whiteness through the languages of class and moral purity.

²¹ Julia G. Young and Stephen J.C. Andes, eds., *Local Church, Global Church: Catholic Activism in Latin America from Rerum Novarum to Vatican II* (Catholic University of America Press, 2016).

Gendered Whiteness

As part of the emerging field of Hispanic and Lusophone whiteness studies, my work is part of a new generation of scholarship that seeks to understand how whiteness has been expressed, invented, and reproduced in Mexico and Latin America. Specifically, my analyses of race draw from cultural theorist Stuart Hall, as well as scholars of white racial formations within and beyond the historical discipline: namely, Mónica Moreno Figueroa, David R. Roediger, J.M. Persánch, and Pamela Perry, among others.²² On the one hand, my work treats whiteness as an expression of class politics through which groups historically benefiting from systemic disparities attempted to maintain or reassert their political, social, and economic power. On the other, it insists that racial identity was ideological, situational, and relational, meaning that white racial formations were constantly reconfigured as a result of the dialogical everyday interactions between individuals and the frameworks they used to understand the world—in this case, religious experience. Thus, I argue that whiteness is best understood as a privileged position of power obtained through the language and knowledge structures (the discourses) that actively racialized difference to legitimize long-standing social hierarchies. Whiteness depended on racial and other discourses for its very existence and used these overlapping

²² See Stuart Hall, “The Whites of their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media” [1981], in Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, eds., *Media Studies, A Reader* Second Edition (New York University Press, 2000), 271-282. Also see, Mónica Moreno Figueroa, “Distributed intensities: Whiteness, mestizaje, and the logics of Mexican racism,” (2010) *Ethnicities* 10:3, 387-401; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (Verso, 1991); J.M. Persánch, “Neither Your Hispanic, Nor Your White: Transitioning between Whiteness from Spain to the United States,” (2020) *Journal of Hispanic and Lusophone Whiteness Studies* 1:2, 1-28; Pamela Perry, “White Means Never Having to Say You’re Ethnic. White Youth and the Construction of Cultureless Identities,” (2001) *University of California Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 30:1, 56-91; Anoop Nayak, “Critical Whiteness Studies,” (2007) *Sociology Compass* 1(2): 737-755.

systems of meaning-making—e.g., race and religion—to justify and perpetuate the unequal distribution of power and resources in society.

By introducing the concept of “whiteness” to my study of early-twentieth-century Mexico, my work strives to push back against a mountain of scholarship that reinforces state narratives of mestizaje. Aside from legitimizing racial discourse and glorifying sexual violence against indigenous women, this mythology portrays Mexicans as the racially homogenous descendants of Spanish and indigenous peoples while depicting Mexican society as being immune from racial conflict. Mexico is not alone in this regard, as virtually all Latin American nation-states have relied on similar myths of racial genesis to invent hegemonic discourses of inclusivity. A product of the early twentieth century, these frameworks have allowed societies to eschew the issue of racism by creating illusions of unity against the backdrop of a visibly segregated and racially beleaguered United States. Thus, historians like Alejandro de la Fuente demonstrate how in 1920s Cuba, intellectuals and state institutions used frameworks of racial synthesis to craft images of a mixed-race Afro-Cuban nation that obscured, marginalized, and even antagonized black activism. Similarly, scholarship on the Brazilian myth of “racial democracy” reveals the contradiction between public discourses of racial harmony and society’s long-standing racial hierarchies.²³

²³ Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001). For critiques of Brazilian racial democracy, see Darién Davis, *Avoiding the Dark: Race and the Forging of National Culture in Modern Brazil* (Ashgate, 1999), and Davis, “De opresivo a benigno: Historia comparada de la construcción de la blancura en Brasil en la época de la post-abolición,” (2020) *Journal of Hispanic and Lusophone Whiteness Studies* 1:3, 30-46. See also, Stanley R. Bailey, *Legacies of Race: Identities, Attitudes, and Politics in Brazil* (Stanford University Press, 2009), and Jeffrey Lesser, *Immigration, Ethnicity, and National Identity in Brazil, 1808 to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Still, recent scholarship on Afro-Mexican identity argues that mestizaje's gradual erasure of blackness from the nation's racial imaginary has enabled Mexicans to claim immunity from these contradictions. Furthermore, scholars have also shown that even within Afro-diasporic communities, black Mexicans have strategically adopted "Indian" or *moreno* (black-indigenous) identifiers to claim a symbolic national belonging. While blackness remains invisible, the mestizo racial narrative continues to be reinscribed as the dominant framework of an allegedly homogenous nation. Consequently, Mexican exceptionalism, or the belief that Mexican society is immune to racial conflict, thrives on the perceived absence of black Mexicans.²⁴

Studies of whiteness similarly threaten Mexicans' claims to racial blindness and remain all too uncommon in comparison to work that examines white racial formations in the United States or other Latin American societies. Even as scholars of Afro-Mexico continue to make crucial inroads by analyzing the relationship between blackness, indigeneity, and mestizaje, the study of white racial formations remains noticeably absent from the academic landscape. In the last decade, only a handful of scholars have tried to examine Mexican whiteness, or *blanquitud*, from the disciplines of sociology, film studies,

²⁴ Laura A. Lewis, "Blacks, Black Indians, Afromexicans: The Dynamics of Race, Nation, and Identity in a Mexican 'moreno' Community (Guerrero)," *American Ethnologist* (2000) 27:4, 898-926. See also, Theodore W. Cohen, *Finding Afro-Mexico: Race and Nation after the Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Ben Vinson III and Matthew Restall, eds., *Black Mexico: Race and Society from Colonial to Modern Times* (University of New Mexico Press, 2009). Also see, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La Población Negra de México, 1510-1810, Estudio Etnohistórico* (Ediciones Fuente Cultural, 1946).

and critical race theory.²⁵ However, whiteness's historical evolution remains virtually unexamined, especially as it pertains to the twentieth century.²⁶

As a result, some historians of Mexico continue to reinforce myths of race-blindness. In 2004, the eminent scholar Enrique Florescano advanced this view and called for a re-interpretation of mestizaje as a process that functioned “independently” of race relations. Specifically, Florescano argued that mestizaje could be redefined as a race-less form of syncretism and cultural hybridity. He claimed that race played virtually no role in determining the flow of technologies between Europeans and indigenous peoples, but failed to provide any reasoning for ignoring race relations in his study of *saberes* as competing knowledge structures. Instead, he resorted to outdated models of cultural “destruction” to explain the alleged disappearance of indigenous traditions during colonization. Ignoring the racially charged history of these analytical frames, he reinforced narratives of European supremacy.²⁷

²⁵ Moreno Figueroa (2010); Mónica del Carmen García Blizzard, “The Indigenismos of Mexican Cinema before and through the Golden Age: Ethnographic Spectacle, “Whiteness,” and Spiritual Otherness,” PhD diss. (The Ohio State University, 2016); Monica Wooters, “*Ius Mexicanum*: Revealing Mexico’s Settler Colonial Identity through the Law,” MA Thesis (California State University, 2020); Ricardo Álvarez-Pimentel, “Unspoken Whiteness: #Whitexicans and Religious Conservatism in Mexico,” (2020) *Journal of Hispanic and Lusophone Whiteness Studies* 1:4, pp. 48-69; Rosa Navarro, “Settler Colonialism in Mexico: Mestizaje as a Project of Elimination in Mexico,” MA Thesis (State University of New York at Albany, 2021).

²⁶ I make this distinction to emphasize recent attempts to examine “whiteness” as a product of the Spanish colonial period, as seen in Ann Twinam’s analysis of whiteness in Spanish legal precedent: *Purchasing Whiteness: Pardos, Mulattos, and the Quest for Social Mobility in the Spanish Indies* (Stanford University Press, 2015).

²⁷ See Florescano and Virginia García Acosta, eds., *Mestizajes tecnológicos y cambio culturales en México* (CIESAS/Porrúa, 2004). For frameworks of indigenous cultural “destruction,” see Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, trans. Lesley Byrd Simpson (University of California Press, 1966), and Eric Wolf, *Sons of the Shaking Earth* (University of Chicago Press, 1959). For important rebuttals to these interpretive frames, see Charles Gibson, *The Aztecs under Spanish Rule: A History of the Indians of the Valley of Mexico, 1519-1810* (Stanford University Press, 1964), and James Lockhart, *The Nahuas after the Spanish Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford University Press, 1992).

The framework of mestizaje cannot be divorced from race precisely because it originated as a racial construct designed to explain the perceived evolution of national identity. A product of nationalism and eugenics, Mexican intellectuals defined mestizaje as the centuries-long process of miscegenation through which the nation as a racial collective had “ascended” to higher levels of civilization and reached “modernity.” Despite some variations in their approach, proponents of this new narrative pointed to racial hybridity as the foundation of national unity. In 1902, historian Justo Sierra argued that mestizaje had resulted in cultural synthesis and the subsequent disappearance of divisions between indigenous and Spanish culture. In 1909, Andrés Molina Enríquez depicted the Mexican mestizo as an “improved Indian” given his alleged mental evolution and natural selection.²⁸

Still, for all its rhetoric of unity and racial transcendence, mestizaje gestured to racism both openly and implicitly. Like Brazilian racial democracy, it was a contradiction in terms by virtue of its inclusive language and racist logic. By holding out the promise of racial “improvement,” mestizaje assumed the inferiority of marginalized communities. It simultaneously reinforced social hierarchy while branding itself as a democratic project of racial inclusivity.²⁹ For this reason, Molina Enríquez claimed that Mexican mestizos would uphold democracy only insofar as the latter personified “the totality of indigenous races as

²⁸ Justo Sierra, *México: Su evolución social* (Balleza y Comp. Editores, 1900-1902); Andrés Molina Enríquez, *Los grandes problemas nacionales* [1909] (Era, 1981). For histories of mestizaje, intellectuals, and the Mexican state, see Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World's Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation* (University of California Press, 1996), and Rick A. López, *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans and the State after the Revolution* (Duke University Press, 2010).

²⁹ Peter Wade et al., eds., *Mestizo Genomics: Race Mixture, Nation, and Science in Latin America* (Duke University Press, 2014).

modified by Spanish blood.”³⁰ Similarly, even if Sierra did not explicitly portray indigeneity as an inferior condition, he presented it as something to be “abandoned” as society moved forward (“progressed”) through historical time.

Following the Mexican Revolution, José Vasconcelos’s 1925 treatise on the evolution of mixed-race identity effectively rendered mestizaje as a project of civilizational uplift that affirmed Spaniards’ purported superiority and racial openness. As Mexico’s Secretary of Education and a steadfast opponent of North American imperialism, Vasconcelos drew contrasts between the histories of Mexico and the United States, praising Spanish colonization as the paramount “fusing of all peoples.” In 1947, his thesis of contrasting (and disconnected) racial regimes entered the mainstream of U.S. scholarship through Frank Tannenbaum’s comparative study of slavery in the Americas. An ally of Mexico’s Institutional Revolution, Tannenbaum argued that Spain’s American colonies had developed a more humane system of slavery than their English counterparts, thereby reinforcing the myth of Latin American racial benevolence.³¹

Still, even the framework of benevolence itself was eventually supplanted by an academic consensus on the absence of racism in Latin America. By the 1960s, race had all but disappeared from scholars’ field of vision, leaving studies of racism to be subsumed under analyses of class conflict. By 1967, sociologist Pierre L. van den Berghe’s hemispheric study of racism concluded that Mexico “had evolved from a racially stratified Colonial society... to a class stratified one, *without* [emphasis added] going through a competitive era of race or ethnic relations.” He further remarked that Mexico’s “remaining

³⁰ Molina Enríquez, [1909] (1981), pp. 110.

³¹ José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race* [1925] trans. Didier T. Jaen (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen* [1946] (Beacon Press, 1992).

Indian minorities [had become] increasingly assimilated into the mestizo mainstream of the national culture.”³²

Van der Berghe confined racism to the colonial period and gave credence to the notion that racial stratification had all but disappeared from Mexican society as a result of national independence in 1821 and the abolition of slavery in 1829. However, even if his diagnosis of twentieth-century racism was inaccurate, he was right to identify Spanish colonization as a process rife with racial conflict. Mexico’s colonial historiography has long corroborated this observation through innovative analyses.³³ The latter are largely grounded in Church records and legal documents that either use explicitly racial language or can be interpreted as racial in nature by virtue of their production within the contexts of slavery, the Spanish caste system, and other forms of racialized oppression. Still, even within colonial scholarship, historians like Ann Twinam have recently revealed the extent to which race (specifically whiteness) thrived within the informal processes, unwritten contexts, and unforeseen consequences that often surrounded the creation of physical documents.³⁴ This framing informs my own thinking and challenges the so-called “explicitness” of race as a necessary condition for studying how racism worked in society.

Most importantly, Van der Berghe’s observations should not be taken as running contrary to Mexicans’ contemporaneous perceptions of racism. Rather, his conclusions

³² Pierre L. van den Berghe, *Race and Racism, A Comparative Perspective* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1967), p. xxv.

³³ On race and racism in Mexico during the colonial period, see María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford University Press, 2008); Ben Vinson III, *Before Mestizaje: The Frontiers of Race and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); David Tavarez, *The Invisible War: Indigenous Devotions, Discipline, and Dissent in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford University Press, 2011); and Matthew D. O’Hara, *A Flock Divided: Race, Religion, and Politics in Mexico, 1749-1857* (Duke University Press, 2010), among others.

³⁴ Twinam (2015).

accurately speak to decades-long processes whereby state institutions attempted to erase racial conflict by rewriting it in the language of class struggle within a racially homogenous society. As I and other historians argue, Mexico's institutional revolution was successful in both racializing class politics and de-racializing political oppression. Thus, as the state used the language of mestizaje to articulate a vision for social reform, it actively suppressed indigenous mobilization by claiming to defend the nation from working-class radicalism. Furthermore, my work demonstrates how Mexico's concurrent processes of industrialization and urban migration added to the blurring of racial and class discourses. Ultimately, mestizaje became the nation's dominant racial frame precisely because Mexicans came to articulate their perceptions of difference through the use of seemingly non-racial languages—specifically those of class and religion.

Recently, Mónica Moreno Figueroa's pioneering work has not only recovered racism as an object of study, but also re-examined mestizaje as a hegemonic discourse informed by whiteness. A sociologist, Moreno Figueroa argues that mestizaje might be best interpreted as both a process of whitening and a racial framework that performs the work of whiteness in a predominantly non-white society. To support this view, she draws from North American scholarship and emphasizes parallels between mestizaje and white racial formations in the United States. Specifically, she demonstrates how whiteness and mestizaje both function as dominant racial discourses that exclude marginalized communities from the symbolic and material benefits of national citizenship. Like whiteness, mestizaje claims itself as the nation's desired racial norm and centers Spanish-indigenous hybridity as *the* marker of collective belonging. Consequently, it renders indígenas, Afro-Mexicans, immigrants, and other non-conforming groups as foreign and

racially deviant. Still, Moreno Figueroa contends that mestizo identity should not be understood as a fixed category, but rather as an ambiguous and situational site of privilege. She holds that the rewards of mestizaje become available to an individual only in the moments when they are perceived as occupying racially-mixed (and metaphorically “whitened”) bodies.³⁵

By introducing the concept of “whiteness” to the study of Mexican racial formations, Moreno Figueroa’s analysis adds an important new dimension to racism scholarship. However, while her portrayal of mestizaje as a normalized framework helps to explain the racial exclusion of subordinate groups, her comparison of mestizo privileges to Roediger’s “wages of whiteness” only applies to those with a vested interest in belonging to the national collective. As a result, Moreno Figueroa’s proposed framework clearly explains why, as Laura A. Lewis demonstrates, Afro-Mexicans often adopt “Indian” identities as a way to anchor themselves to the mestizo nation. Similarly, Jason Oliver Chang has used a similar framing of mestizaje to examine how the Mexican state racialized Chinese Mexicans as foreign “Others” deserving of violence. In these two cases, vulnerable groups suffer on the basis of their respective distance from mestizo privilege. This model falls short, however, when it comes to explaining the relationship between mestizaje and those who see little gain—if any at all—in claiming a mixed-race identity.³⁶

For the middle- and upper-class católicas who *already* enjoyed the wages of whiteness (both literally and figuratively), mestizaje offered little symbolic reward and virtually no new material recompense. If anything, this group perceived mestizaje not as a

³⁵ Moreno Figueroa (2010).

³⁶ See Roediger (1991); Lewis (2000); and Jason Oliver Chang, *Chino: Anti-Chinese Racism in Mexico, 1880-1940* (University of Illinois Press, 2017).

wellspring from which to extract social privileges, but rather a set of discursive rules to be followed for the purposes of avoiding ostracization from the national body politic. As a result, elite Catholic women appealed to mestizaje through Hispanist ideologies emphasizing Iberian contributions of Mexicans' mixed-race heritage. At the same time, they couched their claims to whiteness in religious language and relied on innuendo, connotation, and implicit meaning to convey their racism. Stuart Hall identified this as inferential racism on the grounds that it remains "largely invisible to [the world and] even those who formulate the world in its terms."³⁷ Thus, while Hispanism openly relied on anti-indigenous prejudice to convey specific vision of mestizaje, whiteness worked silently to safeguard its own power.

By underscoring the differences between Hispanism and white racial formation, my work abstains from falsely equating whiteness with Hispanicity. Although Hispanist ideology certainly played a role in furthering Mexicans' anti-indigenous racism, creating this false equivalency would be both reductionist and historically inaccurate. On the one hand, this approach reinscribes racial paradigms by oversimplifying whiteness as a *kind* of race or ethnicity—in this case, Spanish or Hispanic. On the other, it overlooks the fact that unlike whiteness, Hispanism generally worked within the frameworks of mestizaje rather than outside or against them. Recent work on Mexican conservatism affirms this distinction and grapples with the intricacies of analyzing Catholic Hispanism within the mestizo paradigm. Rather than portraying *hispanismo* as the ideology of a select few, scholars have demonstrated its reliance on the universalizing language of national unity.

³⁷ Hall [1981] (2000), pp. 273-74.

For instance, in her study of Mexican religious conservatism, historian Beatriz Urías Horcasitas refutes widely accepted portrayals of Catholic Hispanists as “fascist, anti-Mexican reactionaries” working outside the national interest. Instead, she argues that Hispanism might best be understood if interpreted as an expression of *mestizaje* that consciously emphasized Catholic tradition and the nation’s Iberian legacies in the face of modern challenges—namely, the growth of state power and the perceived erosion of family values and public morality. Instead of rejecting mestizo nationalism, Hispanists sought to counter the state’s appropriation of indigeneity, or *indigenismo*, by creating an alternate discourse of mixed-race identity grounded in Catholic religious tradition. Thus, even as some Hispanists turned toward authoritarian political models during the 1930s and 40s, they still envisioned these as national projects that would be inclusive of all Mexicans by virtue of their shared Spanish ancestry.³⁸

Similarly, historian David Tamayo’s recent study of *hispanidad* reveals the extent to which Mexican Hispanists believed that indigenous peoples’ “assimilation” represented an integral part of nation-building. For the members of the Catholic Sowers of Friendship social club, national assimilation meant indígenas’ conversion to Catholicism, their adoption of the Spanish language, and their embrace of the “traditions [and] values” of Catholic Spain. According to Tamayo, these proponents of *hispanidad* claimed that state-sponsored *indigenismo* discriminated against indigenous communities because it reduced indigenous people to “exotic and picturesque beings” outside of mainstream society. By

³⁸ Beatriz Urías Horcasitas. “Una pasión antirrevolucionaria: el conservadurismo hispanófilo mexicano (1920-1960),” *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* Vol. 72 No.4 (2010): 599-628. For more recent work on Mexico’s conservative Hispanist intellectuals and their relationship to *mestizaje*, see Carlos Sola Ayape “Entre el Catolicismo y la Españolidad. Las Claves del Pensamiento del Hispanista Mexicano Jesús Guisa y Azevedo,” in Laura Alarcón Menchaca, Austreberto Martínez Villegas, and Jesús Iván Mora Muro, eds., *Intelectuales Católicos, Conservadores y Tradicionalistas en México y Latinoamérica, 1910-2015* (Guadalajara: El Colegio de Jalisco, 2019).

contrast, they argued that Spanish Catholicism transcended this type of racial division, for it had empowered the peoples of Iberia and Spanish America to “forge a common spirit and cultural bond” despite indigenous “savagery.” Despite their racial prejudice, Hispanists adopted the language of nationalism and upheld the importance of Mexicans’ cultural autonomy. Rather than replicating Europe, they sought to *Mexicanize* Iberian culture.³⁹

Nevertheless, my work demonstrates that Hispanism was not an ideological current confined to Mexico, but a transnational flow of ideas that were consistently redefined for specific political purposes. Specifically, my study of the confrontational phase documents how Mexican católicas and their allies in Spain and the United States used Hispanist language to racialize anticommunist ideologies and advance anti-indigenous prejudices grounded in scientific racism. This supports Juliet Hooker’s recent interpretation of mestizaje as “selectively decolonial.” Despite their superficial messages of racial unity, Hispanists prioritized the very colonial knowledge structures that legitimized racial hierarchy—e.g., Catholicism, eugenics, etc.⁴⁰

In this regard, Hispanism remains a useful lens from which to study the survival of racism within the seemingly inclusive language of racial integration. From a transnational perspective, my work also reveals that Hispanist ideologies enabled the development of global currents of racism, as seen in Mexican Catholics’ respective relationships with U.S. and Spanish counterparts. And yet, Hispanism does not fully explain how Mexicans

³⁹ David Tamayo, “From Rotary Club to Sowers of Friendship: The Conservative Rebellion through Service Clubs in Monterrey, 1920s-1960s,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* (2020) Vol. 36 Iss. 1-2: 68-96. With regard to the relationship between Hispanism and Mexican national identity, the Unión Nacional Sinarquista presents an important deviation from the norm, as sinarquistas’ right-wing nationalism rejected mestizaje but still claimed a Hispanist Mexican identity that was, inherently, mixed-race.

⁴⁰ Juliet Hooker, *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, DuBois, and Vasconcelos* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 159-160.

constructed new and implicit forms of whiteness. Because Mexican historiography has yet to take up the issue of inferential racism, I have turned toward the methodologies of Brazilian historiography to study Mexicans' implicit expressions of whiteness.

Specifically, Barbara Weinstein's recent study of whiteness and *paulista* identity in twentieth-century Brazil offers both a compelling intervention and an important contemporaneous case study that complements my analyses of Mexican whiteness. Focused on the middle- and upper-class denizens of São Paulo, Weinstein documents how paulistas constructed a racialized regional identity that acted as a marker for their whiteness without relying on explicitly racial language. For paulistas, region—not race—became the dominant public discourse of difference. However, Weinstein argues that regional identity was indeed a racial category “given its recourse to innate or natural characteristics” to rationalize differences among people. Thus, without overtly challenging dominant narratives of racial democracy, paulistas' regional exceptionalism allowed them to center their whiteness. They subsequently reproduced negative constructions of blackness and used them to legitimate narratives of modernity and backwardness.⁴¹

Drawing from Brazilianists⁴², my work argues that Mexicans' white racial formations, though reinforced by anti-indigenous racism in Hispanist ideology, were neither restricted to the language of hispanidad nor relied upon Hispanism for their existence. Instead, Mexican católicas constructed whiteness implicitly, through racial innuendo embedded in class and religious discourse. Whiteness thrived within the

⁴¹ Barbara Weinstein, *The Color of Modernity: São Paulo and the Making of Race and Nation in Brazil* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 5-6, 11-14.

⁴² Like Weinstein, anthropologist Jennifer Roth-Gordon has recently examined the role of language in the construction of racial discourse and racialized bodies; see *Race and the Brazilian Body: Blackness, Whiteness, and Everyday Language in Rio de Janeiro* (University of California Press, 2017).

languages of class and moral “purity” as deployed by elite Catholic women to denounce the alleged social ills of secular modernity—namely, anti-clericalism, sexual liberation, and the politicization of indigenous working-class women. In all of these instances, the concept of purity acted as a signifier for whiteness and the implicit racial frameworks that associated immorality with non-white Otherness, or in this case, indigeneity.

By examining the aims and scope of Catholic moralization campaigns, my project seeks to understand Mexican católicas’ motivations for devising racialized discourses of class and purity. Once more, Brazilian historiography provides compelling explanations as to *why* middle- and upper-class actors turned to whiteness and *how* the racialization of a subordinate “Other” allowed for the consolidation of white identity. In his study of Brazilian educational reform, historian Jerry Dávila demonstrates how Brazilian educators, scientists, and intellectuals ascribed “degeneracy” to blackness as a way to affirm whiteness’ perceived superiority. As a result, Brazil’s seemingly progressive reform efforts concerned themselves more with safeguarding white privileges than they did with the educational empowerment of non-white groups. For this reason, Dávila argues that blackness and degeneracy came to be regarded as “remediable conditions” incompatible with wealth and culture. Through access to education, individuals could hope to escape their black status and become socially white—a category associated with power and reserved for the privileged few.⁴³

My work similarly contends that, for all their rhetoric of national moral uplift, Mexican católicas spoke of spiritual regeneration to reaffirm their perceived superiority. As a result, these middle- and upper-class women symbolically whitened themselves by

⁴³ Jerry Dávila, *Diploma of Whiteness: Race and Social Policy in Brazil, 1917-1945* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 4-7.

reinforcing images of indigenous sexual impropriety for the purposes bolstering their claims to a religious and moral superiority. Even in the rare instances when they called for indigenous women's empowerment, elite activists still found ways to mark their dominance—be it through racial paternalism or the doctrine of social equilibrium. Their goal, then, was not the uplift of non-white counterparts, but rather the molding of “good” indígenas that would not challenge their power.⁴⁴

Subsequently, my work draws from gender studies scholarship and exposes the gendered dimensions of Mexican católicas' white racial formations. It specifically turns to Anne McClintock's study of gender, sexuality, and colonialism, and uses the concept of “borrowed power” to examine how these upper-class women appropriated the language of patriarchy to suppress their indigenous female workers. As McClintock argues, “white women were not the hapless onlookers of empire.” Rather, they were “ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting.”⁴⁵

Aside from its racial connotations, the concept of “purity” reinscribed oppressive notions of femininity by invoking the Church's centuries-old praxis of regulating interracial relations and women's sexuality. However, although white católicas' moral activism spoke to this form of gendered subjugation, their simultaneous racialization of patriarchal discourse granted them a higher degree of social standing. Consequently, religion became the intersectional site where indigenous women experienced the

⁴⁴ My most recently published article, “Unspoken Whiteness,” elaborates on these arguments and emphasizes whiteness's relative inflexibility; see Alvarez Pimentel (2020). On “good” racial subordinates, see Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2008).

⁴⁵ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (Routledge, 1995), pp. 5-6.

simultaneous effects of racism and patriarchy as overlapping systems of oppression. By contrast, Catholicism became a medium for white women to reap the privileges of racism and achieve an ambiguous form of empowerment as complicit agents of gendered patriarchal norms.

Thus, my work aligns with anthropologist Saba Mahmood's analyses of Muslim women's spiritual agency and cautions historians against using a secular feminist lens to dismiss católicas' religious empowerment as submission to patriarchy.⁴⁶ Instead, I argue that Catholic women's construction of "the pious self" allowed them to effect meaningful change both within themselves as religious subjects and throughout the spiritual world around them. As historians Paola Bacchetta and Margaret Power demonstrate, "right-wing women" often found empowerment by policing sexuality and affirming traditional gender roles as ways of "defending" the world they knew.⁴⁷ For this reason, Mexico's elite Catholic activists should not be underestimated as the victims of false consciousness.

Structure and Chapter Outline

In terms of structure, the body of my dissertation is divided into six chapters and a final epilogue. These chapters cover four- to eight-year time periods and run chronologically through the three stages of the Counterrevolution. Specifically, Chapters 1-3 examine the confrontational phase of Church-state conflict. Chapters 4 and 5 analyze the institutional phase, and Chapter 6 and the Epilogue focus on the accommodationist period.

⁴⁶ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ Bacchetta and Power (2002).

The first chapter frames the years between 1917 and 1929 as a crucial transition point between the armed and institutional phases of the Mexican Revolution. By studying language and print media, it examines racialized ideological production by the state and its Catholic opponents. With regard to the former, my work traces the state's reliance on the language of indigeneity to construct discourses of proletarian "Revolution." Specifically, it analyses how allies of President Álvaro Obregón made sense of the Revolution as both a racial and class struggle while positioning the state as an agent of national liberation. At the same time, this chapter examines how upper-class women in the Mexican Catholic Social League waged a divine crusade against decadence, secularism, and the alleged corruption of Church doctrine by folk religious practices. I draw from the field of religious studies and analyze how Mexican católicas sense of world *being*, as influenced by their religious experiences, moral discourses, and perceptions of spiritual "crisis," led them to reinvent whiteness in times of profound social transformation.⁴⁸

Chapters 2 and 3 then examine how Mexicans in the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty (LNDLR) and their U.S. and Spanish allies understood the Cristero Rebellion in both racial and existential terms. First, I demonstrate how the discourses of religion and "Revolution" presented the Church-state civil war as part of a broader struggle between secular states and the divine. Then, I analyze Catholics' use of Hispanist language to denounce the government's purportedly communistic tendencies and contrast this to the Labor Party's portrayal of the conflict as part of a global struggle against Western hegemony. Still, these chapters also expose the limits of Catholic Hispanism in fostering grassroots support or forging bonds between Mexican Catholics and their U.S.

⁴⁸ On world being see Robert Orsi, *History and Presence* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

and Spanish counterparts. They demonstrate that Catholics' Hispanist posturing ultimately contributed to the Counterrevolution's domestic insularity and did not exempt Mexicans from Spanish prejudices or U.S. racial paternalism. At the same time, my work also reveals that Church and state actors forged overlapping underground networks with private business interests in Europe and North America. Despite their discursive antagonism, the Catholic Church and the Calles government both had a vested interest in protecting capitalist relations of power during the armed conflict.

By exposing this contradiction between discourse and material realities on the ground, my work lays the foundation for understanding both sides' future alignment and consolidation. Chapter 4 examines this process during the early 1930s and analyzes how Church and state turned to the language of political instability (state) and the racialized discourse of spiritual crisis (Church) to centralize authority among a handful of institutions. I borrow from historian Matt Karp and identify these as interconnected processes of "apocalyptic institutionalism" whereby elites on both sides pursued aggressive forms of institutional consolidation to safeguard their power.⁴⁹ Subsequently, I demonstrate how the government's budding National Revolutionary Party and young women in the Catholic Action organization turned to authoritarian political models as a way to regulate and suppress popular mobilization.

Next, Chapter 5 documents how Church and state institutions worked to subdue indigenous workers. While the nationalist Cárdenas administration promoted indígenas' political integration into the corporatist state, Mexican católicas turned to the doctrine of social equilibrium to argue for indigenous women's material conformity and political

⁴⁹ See Matt Karp's description of apocalyptic institutionalism in his article, "51 Percent Losers" (2018) *Jacobin*.

inaction. By focusing on the ACM's peasant moralization campaigns, I argue that elite women's embrace of anti-indigenous racism effectively un-made the Counterrevolution from within and rendered it an insular movement of and by the white elite. Consequently, the ACM failed to establish a viable Catholic mass politics, which allowed the Unión Nacional Sinarquista (UNS) and other right-wing fringe groups to outpace the Church's efforts to galvanize supporters at the grassroots.

Chapter 6 argues that this presented a crucial opportunity for Church and state actors to mobilize against the perceived threat of peasant radicalization. As a result, both sides worked to dismantle the UNS during the early 1940s and coalesced around the shared objective of ending religious violence in the rural countryside. Specifically, this chapter examines how educational campaigns designed by the women of Catholic Action and the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) relied on the languages of mestizaje and individualism to thwart indigenous peasants' collective organization. While the SEP targeted rural workers, Mexican católicas pursued vigorous religious instruction campaigns designed to prevent female domestic employees from "succumbing" to subversive ideologies.

As lay groups aligned with the conservative Ávila Camacho administration, they cemented the budding triangular partnership between the Catholic Church, the federal government, and their allies in the private sector. During and after World War II, this new generation of Mexican conservatives envisioned themselves as protecting the nation against the dangers of foreign radicalism. However, the Epilogue suggests that this alignment was not absolute. The embers of Counterrevolution survived among the Catholic

middle classes and manifested themselves in new ways, particularly among student activists in university spaces.

Sources and Archives

My work relies on an international multi-archival source base of print publications and confidential records—which amounted to thousands of pages of individual documents—to trace the Counterrevolution’s ideological and political trajectory. To access these sources, I conducted research in public and private archives located in Mexico, Spain, Great Britain, and the United States. This process involved working with previously overlooked materials and applying new lenses of analysis to examine well-known collections over the course of three summers and a research year abroad. Aside from reading these sources for their explicit content, my methodology also considered each document’s biases, subtext, and reception, as well as the historical circumstances surrounding its production and archival storage.

In Mexico City, I visited the Francisco Xavier Clavigero Library at the Universidad Iberoamericana to work with magazines, pedagogical materials, and internal correspondence printed by upper-class women’s lay groups. Housed in the “Acción Católica Mexicana” and “Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana” collections, these documents were instrumental to my study of Mexican católicas’ unspoken claims to whiteness, their evolving political ideologies, and the reach of their international network. To account for the state’s role in influencing—and ultimately aligning with—the Counterrevolution, I worked with archival collections in the Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE), the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN), and the Fideicomiso y Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca (FAPECFT). Accessing these

archives allowed me to use espionage and secret intelligence records to examine the Mexican government's establishment of covert surveillance networks around the world, as well as the state's response to the Counterrevolution and both factions' opposition to peasant activism. Finally, my trips to Mexico also led me to the LNDLR's internal records in the Archivo Histórico UNAM (AHUNAM) and the "Unión Nacional Sinarquista" document collection in the Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia (BNAH). These archives were useful in gauging grassroots activists' discontent with Church institutions and the latter's perceived failure to adequately challenge the government's anti-clerical policies.

In Spain, newspaper articles, diplomatic correspondence, and confidential state records stored in Madrid's Archivo Histórico Nacional (AHN) corroborated findings in Mexico City. Specifically, these sources revealed the extent to which Mexican Catholic activists and state officials worked with Spanish counterparts at the local level to sway international public opinion in their favor. Most of this evidence pertained to the confrontational phase and the 1920s, as the violence of Spain's Second Republican Period (1931-39) and the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) resulted in the destruction of a large number of government documents. In London, the confidential British Legation records in the British National Archives (BNA) revealed the extent to which Mexican Catholics and the state pursued simultaneous negotiations with foreign capitalist interests despite both sides' nationalist rhetoric.

Similarly, confidential correspondence in the Knights of Columbus (K of C) archival collection in New Haven, Connecticut revealed the extent to which U.S. media and private interests covertly involved themselves in Mexico's religious conflict. On the

one hand, the Luke Hart papers contained espionage records outlining pro- and anti-Calles public opinion campaigns among prominent U.S. newspapers, labor unions, and local governments. On the other hand, the “Friends of Catholic Mexico” collection allowed me to trace the extent of pro-cristero Catholic activist networks within the U.S. Church. Furthermore, the publications, pamphlets and propaganda pieces housed in both collections provided a crucial glimpse into the Knights’ Hispanist ideology. Bolstered by *Columbia* magazine, the Knights’ racialized brand of anti-communism effectively placed Mexico at the center of the budding Cold War.

Terminology and Style

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “Catholic activist/s” to refer to middle- and upper-class people who mobilized in defense of the Church, religious education, freedom of worship, etc. By contrast, the term “Catholic partisan/s” denotes Catholics who were directly involved in partisan politics, while “Catholic militant/s” refers exclusively to those who chose to take up arms in the name of a specific cause (most often working- and middle-class actors, though sometimes people from more affluent social sectors).

More generally, “Catholic/s” refers to those in the general population whose adherence to Catholicism—popular or institutional—superseded other identifiers (e.g., class, ideology, ethnicity, etc.) at specific points in time. On the other hand, I use the term “religious conservative/s” to connote people, most likely Catholics, who held conservative political ideologies (defined differently at different points in time), but did not necessarily mobilize in defense of the Catholic Church. In Mexico and Spain, this includes conservative members of government. In the first and second chapters, the term “Conservative” refers specifically to members of the Mexican Conservative Party of the

1850s and 60s. The same logic applies to “Liberal” and “liberal,” which I use to identify members of the Liberal Party and those who adhered to the tenets of liberalism (defined throughout the work), respectively.

I use the term “Church” to refer to the Mexican Church, while the terms “Roman Church,” “Catholic Church,” and “Vatican” are used interchangeably—unless explicitly modified by term “global” (i.e., “global” Church), by which I denote the global Catholic Church as an international system of interconnected networks and institutions. By contrast, “Mexican Church” refers to Mexico’s clerical institutions, while “Mexican Episcopate” and “Mexican high clergy” connote the body of Mexican bishops and other high-ranking Church members. The terms “clergy,” “clergymen,” and “priests” are used synonymously, while the terms “lay,” “laity,” “lay activists,” and “lay groups,” all refer to ordinary people (i.e., non-ordained members of a religious community). At the same time, I use the term “secular” to refer to “non-religious” people, processes, and institutions (e.g., secularization, secular education, secular newspapers, etc.), as opposed to non-monastic members of the clergy (e.g., priests, deacons, etc.).

By “state,” I denote the body of institutions devoted to regulating political (i.e., resource driven) relationships between groups and individuals. Though the term “state institutions” may seem redundant, I use it to refer to governments, labor syndicates, political parties, educational systems, etc. When appropriate, I have used the term “state” and “government” interchangeably (e.g., state/government officials). I have also refrained from capitalizing “state” in “Church-state” conflict.

Terms like “Congress” and “Convention” (capitalized) are used to denote events of particular importance, even if they have not been recognized as such in English-language

historical writing (e.g., the Damas Católicas' 1922 Congress). Some specific Spanish-language adjectives and proper nouns connoting ideological movements have been left in Spanish lower-case to reflect use of the term in its native language (e.g., “cristero,” “callista,” “cardenismo”). Throughout the work, improper nouns and phrases derived from outside the English language (mostly Spanish) have been italicized upon first mention then written in standard format (e.g., *socias*, *católicas*, etc.).

PART I

PART I: THE CONFRONTATIONAL PHASE, 1917-1929

“It remains to be seen whether powerful outside interests may eventually take advantage of these nuclei of disorder... and finally organize Catholics into a revolution. Interference by any great power would wipe out the present administration in a very short time.”

—Colonel Edward M. Davis, U.S. Military Attaché. Confidential letter to Ambassador James R. Sheffield. Mexico City, October 19th, 1926.¹

By the fall of 1926, the Cristero Rebellion threatened to tear through the fabric of the nation and its recently restored republic. Over a three-year span, the Church-state civil war would produce hundreds of thousands of casualties and serve as an undeniable reminder of Catholic resilience and the fragility of Mexico’s Revolutionary experiment. Still, even before the conflict and Davis’s proposed insurrection, General Álvaro Obregón feared a plot to oust him from the presidency. By 1923, he had sent dozens—if not hundreds—of secret agents to consulates around the world in an effort to initiate communication with like-minded labor syndicates, socialist parties, and communist organizations. To gauge international opinion, Obregón's Foreign Relations Secretary, Alberto J. Pani, had charged Mexico's legion of spies with the task of surveilling newspapers in France, Great Britain, Spain, and the United States. Specifically, Pani hoped to measure public perceptions of Obregón's expropriation of private property, his restrictions on the clergy, and his curtailment of religious education—three controversial measures in Mexico’s 1917 Constitution.²

¹ Fideicomiso y Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles Fernando Torreblanca (FAPECFT). Fondo: Anexo, Serie: 0905, Exp.: 24, Inv.: 1536, “México Política, Estabilidad del Gobierno.”

² Archivo Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE). Fondo: Relaciones Consulares y Diplomáticas, México-España: siglo XX. Folio 270. Expedientes: 334, 344.

The armed phase of the Mexican Revolution (1910-20) had left Mexicans deeply divided. As military factions from all sides of the political spectrum jockeyed for power, international developments exacerbated domestic tensions. Seven months prior to the Russian Revolution of 1917, former President Venustiano Carranza had enacted a secularist constitution that drew from socialist European influences. Subsequently, the specter of communism heightened political divides and a fear of “Russianization” penetrated almost all aspects of Mexican culture and society.

For the president’s Catholic opponents, “bolshevism” became a catch-all term used to convey distrust in the government’s pursuit of economic nationalism and secular reform. Aside from mandating secular education, the new Constitution restricted public worship and the clergy’s political participation. Amid simultaneous processes of urban migration and industrialization, religious conservatives feared that the state’s eradication of religion from society would leave workers and youth defenseless against modern challenges. Of pressing concern was the lure of city life and “radical” foreign ideologies.

Mexican católicas responded to these issues by developing national moralization campaigns that targeted women in all sectors of society—particularly middle-class youth, indigenous peasants, and urban workers. Through re-education, they strived to combat state incursions and popular religious traditions threatening the Church’s power. Beyond Mexico, religious activists used Hispanist language to establish partnerships with lay groups and business interests in Spain and the United States. While these countries were among Mexico’s largest sources of foreign investment, recent domestic challenges had made U.S. and Spanish Catholics particularly receptive to the struggles faced by their Mexican coreligionists.

On the other side of the conflict, President Obregón grew increasingly suspicious of a “reactionary” world. Driven by conspiratorial thinking, he monitored domestic and international opponents while pressuring foreign diplomats to formally recognize his administration. Between 1920 and 1929, Obregón and his successor, Plutarco Elías Calles, effectively expanded the reach of the state’s intelligence agencies. Through discourses of proletarian upheaval and national liberation, they grew the power of state-backed labor syndicates and the nation’s ruling political party to suppress dissent.

As tensions escalated, both sides turned to Catholic and secular press outlets in hopes of influencing public discourse in their favor. While the government claimed to “emancipate” indigenous workers from the Church’s tyranny, Catholics warned of a “Bolshevik” encroachment on individual liberties that could only be stopped through the nation’s spiritual renewal. At the core of these divergent worldviews were longstanding debates over race, history, and national identity. And yet, even as the confrontation finally exploded into violence, each faction eventually found room for compromise and negotiation.

Chapter 1: Fighting the Secret War, Launching the Counterrevolution, 1917-1923

On Saturday, November 4th, 1922, Mexico's wealthiest families gathered in the heart of Mexico City to reclaim their country. Just a few steps away from the presidential residence in the National Palace, one hundred and twenty Catholic women assembled in the three-story colonial house on 24 Guatemala Avenue to launch a religious restoration—a political counterrevolution—that openly defied the legacies of the Mexican Revolution. The delegates had arrived from cities across the nation. After a decade of upheaval and hiatus, the *socias* met to officially re-establish the *Unión de Damas Católicas Mexicanas* (UDCM), an upper-class women's lay group that strived to “restore all through Christ.”¹



Image 1.1: Unión de Damas Católicas Mexicanas, Inaugural Congress (1922).
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia).

¹ Universidad Iberoamericana, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavijero (FXC), Archivo Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana (UFCM), Caja 18 “Colección de Impresos,” Folder 1-10. “El Congreso de Damas Católicas Mexicanas,” *El Universal* Segunda Sección, México D.F., Domingo 5 de noviembre de 1922.

Located across the street from the National Cathedral, the venue evoked the grandeur of the nation's Catholic heritage and colonial history. However, the *socias* looked to the future with uncertainty and suspicion. From their perspective, President Álvaro Obregón had waged a ruthless war on faith by enforcing anti-religious laws in the country's 1917 Constitution. These incursions included the confiscation of Church property, the outlawing of religious worship in public spaces, restrictions on the clergy's political participation, and the secularization of Mexican education. Led by President Elena Lascuráin, the women vigorously called for the restoration of Catholicism to the center of Mexican culture and politics. The language militancy permeated the inaugural congress and culminated in the *Damas* proclaiming themselves "soldiers in Christ."²



Image 1.2: Mexican President Álvaro Obregón, in office 1920-24.
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

The Convention of 1922 marked the UDCM's first official gathering since 1912.

Aside from family members, clergy, and members of the Mexican Episcopate, the activists

² Ibid. On Álvaro Obregón, see Jürgen Buchenau, *The Last Caudillo: Alvaro Obregón and the Mexican Revolution* (Wiley Blackwell, 2011).

were joined by the leaders of the Mexican Catholic Social League (LSCM), a federation of affluent lay groups founded that same year. These individuals included René Capistrán Garza, President of the middle-class Mexican Catholic Youth Association (ACJM),³ and President Luis G. Bustos of the Mexican Knights of Columbus.⁴ They also included leading members from the National Association for Catholic Parents (ANPF) and the co-presidents of the National Catholic Labor Confederation (CNCT), Máximo Reyes and Manuel de la Peza.⁵

As delegates arrived, they were greeted by Fathers Leopoldo Icaza and Alfredo Menéndez Medina. Decades earlier, Icaza and Menéndez had been among the legion of outspoken clergy who had rallied their parishes to civic action under the tenets of Catholic social doctrine. A product of nineteenth-century industrialization, social doctrinaires proposed finding moral solutions to modern problems. They fought for workers' improved living conditions, but prioritized social harmony over "revolution." Now, Icaza and Menéndez bestowed their blessing upon the Damas and officiated a two-hour mass to commence the proceedings. From the Church's perspective, the women brought new lifeblood to social Catholicism and the Church's prolonged struggle against secularism and anti-clerical reform.⁶

³ Founded in August 1913, the ACJM was a middle-class student organization that openly served the interests of the clergy. Its motto, "¡Viva Cristo Rey!" or, "Long Live Christ, the King!" evoked the organization's popular monarchism and aims of religious counterrevolution.

⁴ Founded in the city of New Haven, Connecticut in 1892, the Knights of Columbus was an international Catholic fraternal society. During the Church-state conflict, the Knights were among Mexican Catholics' most steadfast allies. For more, see Julia Young, "Knights and Caballeros: Cross-border Catholic Activism During Mexico's Cristero War," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* (2017) Vol. 33 No. 2: 245-271.

⁵ "El Congreso de Damas Católicas Mexicanas," *El Universal* 1922.

⁶ Ibid. On Father Leopoldo Icaza and the Damas Católicas, see Patience A. Schell "Of the Sublime Mission of Mothers of Families: The Union of Mexican Catholic Ladies in Revolutionary Mexico," in Mitchell and Schell eds., *The Women's Revolution in Mexico, 1910-1953* (2007), pp. 115-117. On Father Alfredo Menéndez Medina and the clergy's Mexican Social Secretariat (SSM), see Stephen J.C. Andes, "A

The convention began with a widely celebrated keynote address from the ACJM's René Capistrán Garza. Before a closed-door audience, he alleged that "Jews, Protestants, and atheists" secretly controlled the government and conspired to spread "communist doctrine" across the nation. For the remainder of the week, the Damas met to discuss the most pressing issues of their time. In addition to the state's religious regulations, Catholics debated the best way to confront budding feminist movements and protect the Mexican family from the temptations of city life.⁷

Similar to Capistrán Garza, the Damas engaged in conspiratorial thinking and proposed implementing a national moralization campaign to protect workers from the lure of "radical foreign ideologies." They constructed an image of Catholic womanhood that not only empowered female activists, but also adhered to traditional gender roles and prioritized women's defense of faith within the home. At the same time, the Damas' calls to religious restoration relied on the racialized language of class and morality to justify *socias* perceived superiority. Through racial paternalism, the Damas affirmed their virtue by creating an indigenous Other in need of saving.⁸

By 1923, these upper-class activists had turned to their allies in the press to wage a war against the government. The struggle drew from decades, if not centuries, of animosity, but also presented the Church-state conflict in unprecedented racial terms. In an effort to obtain diplomatic recognition from foreign governments, the Obregón administration portrayed itself as the defender of indigenous workers and a vehicle of proletarian

Catholic Alternative to Revolution: The Survival Catholicism in Post-Revolutionary Mexico," *The Americas* vol. 68 no. 4 (2012), pp. 529-62.

⁷ "El Congreso de Damas Católicas Mexicanas," *El Universal* 1922.

⁸ *Ibid.* Also: FXC, Archivo UFCM, Caja 18, Folder 1-10. "El Congreso de Damas Católicas: La Historia de la UDCM," *Excelsior*, México D.F., 8 de noviembre de 1922.

liberation. Specifically, Obregón and his allies condemned the Church's abuses of power and accused Catholic activists of working to subvert Mexican democracy. By contrast, Mexican Catholics worked with allies abroad to defend the Church's historic role in guiding "Indians" toward moral uplift. They denounced the Mexican government for striving to perform the Church's work in society and for weakening religious education at the expense of public morality.

Throughout the conflict, the Damas recognized the importance of the press in shaping national discourse and swaying international public opinion. They subsequently trained their members as catechists and propagandists, and even developed a unique style of journalism guided by religious principles. Still, despite both sides' public hostility, their distrust of peasant "radicalism" created possibilities for alignment. While the Damas' convention set the stage for confrontation, it also planted the seeds for convergence in the long-term.

The Mexican Revolution and Catholic Social Doctrine

In the fall of 1910, General Porfirio Díaz's reluctance to relinquish the Mexican presidency catalyzed calls for political revolution and the consolidation of the National Catholic Party (PCN). However, debates over the role of religion in national politics had emerged among Catholic intellectuals, clergy, and political activists as early as 1891, following Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* encyclical and his call to Catholic social action. By the early 1900s, Catholic social doctrine had become a viable "third way" alternative to address the challenges of industrialization and urban modernity—namely, vice, unemployment, and economic exploitation. While social doctrinarians condemned the ills of capitalism, they distrusted socialist models of government and feared

empowering the state at the expense of Church institutions. Instead, Catholic social doctrine insisted that religious unity could foster harmony between different sectors of society—particularly, labor and capital. It called on all classes to work together for the common good and unite under the auspices of shared Christian values. Specifically, religious activists emphasized workers’ spiritual development over profit and material gain. They established schools, field hospitals, and public kitchens to improve the living conditions of urban and rural laborers.⁹

Still, by the time Francisco I. Madero challenged Díaz for the presidency, Catholics recognized the limits of social activism and the need for political action to reassert the Church’s primacy in society. The Porfirian regime had limited the clergy’s ability to participate in politics and established a system of secular education that rivaled religious instruction offered by lay groups and Catholic schools. By 1915, the influential Monseigneur Francisco Banegas Galván rejected the notion that relations between Díaz and the Church had been mutually beneficial. He denounced the government for failing to protect freedom of worship and other universal liberties.¹⁰

A historian and the future bishop of the Diocese of Querétaro, Banegas Galván questioned the informal system of reciprocal relationships known as *modus vivendi*. For thirty years, the clergy had abstained from mobilizing Catholic peasants in exchange for the government’s disregard of anti-clerical measures in the 1857 Constitution. Banegas argued that the arrangement had become a strategy of suppression designed to suffocate

⁹ Rodrigo Ruiz Velasco Barba, “El Partido Católico Nacional y el Catolicismo Político Ulterior: Afinidades y Contrastes,” in *II Jornada Académica Iglesia-Revolución Mexicana, El Partido Católico Nacional, 1911-1914* (Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara/Arquidiócesis de Guadalajara: 2012), pp. 199-201. On *Rerum Novarum* and Catholic activism, see Andes and Young eds., (2016).

¹⁰ Velasco Barba (2012), pp. 202-03.

the clergy. He claimed that the government “had become an enemy,” and that its favors and toleration depended on absolute loyalty.¹¹

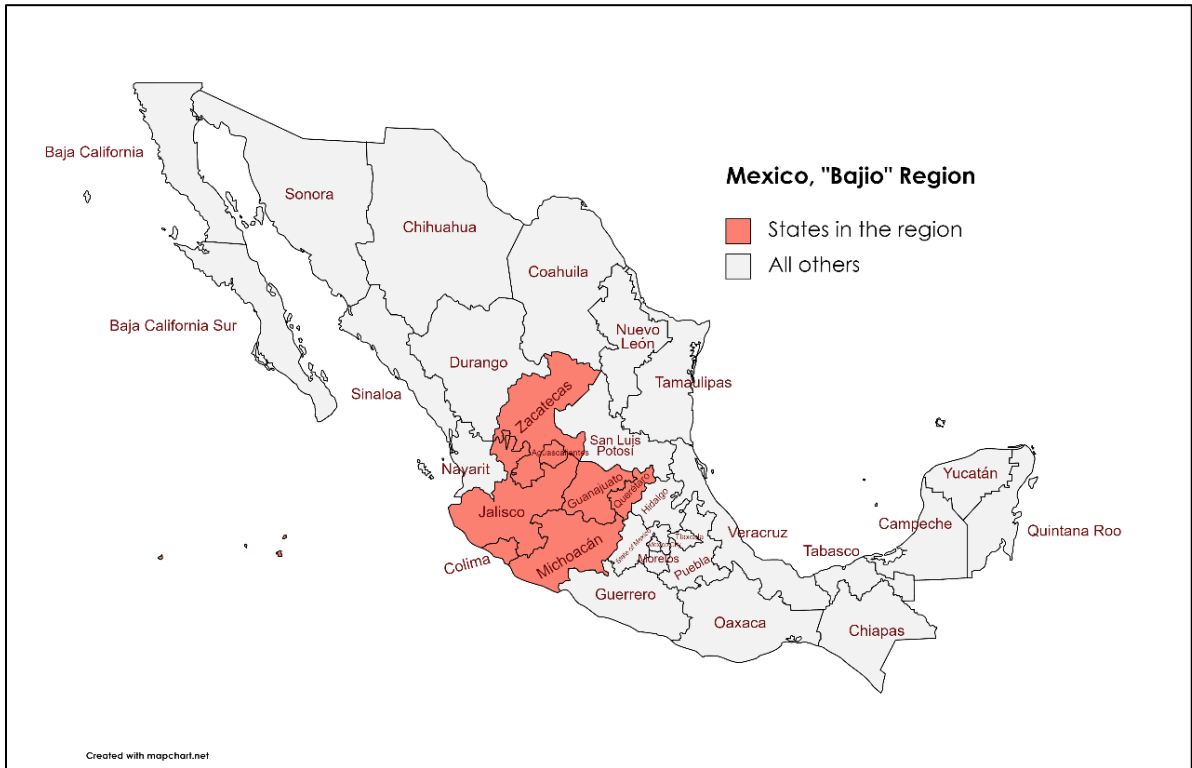
Supported by prominent Liberals like Díaz and Benito Juárez, the 1857 Constitution had established individual rights under the law. These included freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and freedom of conscience. The Constitution also called for the secularization of public education and for the establishment of strict limitations upon the Church’s ownership of property. Its passage sparked a three-year civil war, a Church-backed French intervention, and an additional decade of fighting between liberal and conservative factions.¹²

In response to the Church’s loss of influence, the Archbishop of Mexico City, José Mora y del Río, summoned a meeting between delegates from the nation’s two prominent lay groups—the National Catholic Circuit (CCN) and the *Operarios Guadalupanos* (OG). Held in April 1911, the Convention revealed Catholics’ demographic and ideological diversity. On the one hand, the members of the CCN emanated from wealthy neighborhoods in major urban centers. They endorsed laissez-faire capitalism and were more sympathetic to Porfirian clientelism and secular politics. *Guadalupanos*, on the other hand, hailed from the rural nucleus of Catholic Mexico: the central-west region of *el Bajío*, which included the states of Jalisco, Michoacán, Guanajuato, Queretaro, and Aguascalientes, among others. In terms of ideology, *Guadalupanos* called for bolstering the welfare state and integrating Christian values into Mexico’s capitalist system. Despite their working-class origins, they eventually grew to represent all sectors of society—from

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² For more on the 1857 Constitution, see *La Constitución de 1857 y sus críticos* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2007).

wealthy landowners to peasant farmers, industrial workers, and middle-class professionals.¹³



Map 1-1: Mexico, “Bajío” Region.
Source: Author

The Convention of 1911 undertook the herculean task of integrating these disparate factions to the National Catholic Party. Disgruntled by Díaz’s abuses of power, the PCN supported Madero’s calls for non-reelection and recognized him as the true winner of Mexico’s presidential contest. Party leaders believed that the *maderista* revolution was an ideal opportunity to break free from Díaz’s grip on power. Should Madero’s calls for democracy prove successful, the PCN would formally enter electoral politics and codify social doctrine into law.¹⁴

¹³ Velasco Barba (2012), pp. 203-04.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

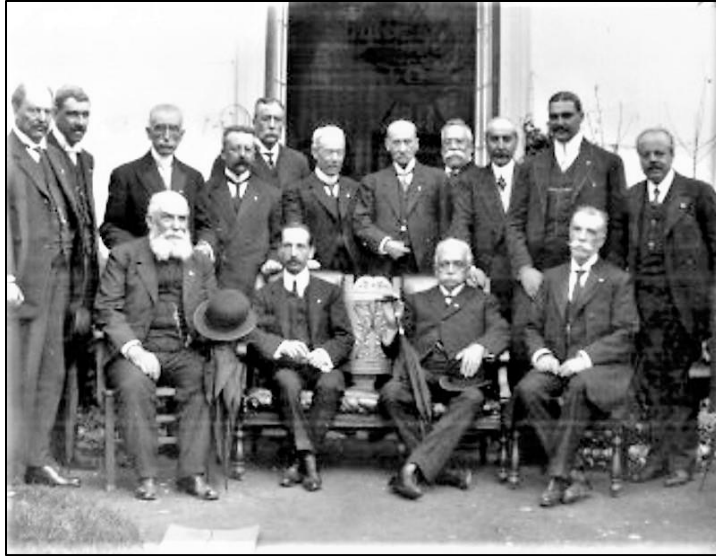


Image 1.3: Members of the Partido Católico Nacional (1911).
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

Still, establishing a political party with an explicitly religious platform was a profoundly drastic action. As a result, the Catholic newspaper *La Nación* reported that the Convention had grown divided between secular “moderates” and religious “radicals.” Within days, radicals had taken control of negotiations and virtually ignored proposals from the moderate wing. They suppressed calls for a secular political party and insisted that the PCN align itself with Church doctrine and the clergy.¹⁵

Under the direction of the Mexican Episcopate, the PCN strived to abolish the 1857 Constitution’s anti-clerical provisions. The party’s inaugural platform also called for the protection of religious education and improved working-class living conditions. Still, social doctrinarians argued that national harmony could only be achieved through the equal protection of labor, capital, and private property. As a result, the PCN proposed the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-06. To bolster the nation’s Catholic press, *La Nación* became a platform for the PCN; see Eduardo J. Correa, *El Partido Católico Nacional y sus directores* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991).

establishment of low-interest credit unions to help small businesses expand job creation and “free” Mexico’s unemployed from the lure of theft and sloth.¹⁶

Although Presidents Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles would later brand the PCN as "reactionary" and “conservative,” the party actually received Madero’s support and represented a crucial rupture from the Porfirian status quo. While Díaz had originally ascended to power as a Liberal, his government adopted a conservative anti-politics that prioritized clientelism and expediency over ideological principle. This strategy strived to strengthen the nation’s political establishment by stifling mobilization around shared class interests, ethnic identities, and religious values. Díaz’s “conservatism” translated to status-quo politics and a careful balancing act designed to maintain a fragile peace that solely benefitted the nation’s elite. Although the PCN's more moderate faction looked to retain certain aspects of Díaz’s system, the PCN broke from Porfirian tradition. By 1912, the party had achieved important electoral victories in three gubernatorial races, twenty-six congressional elections, and numerous other state- and municipal-level contests.¹⁷

Still, Catholic uncertainties towards Madero’s democratic experiment emerged as early as 1911. Following the PCN's inaugural convention, the president-elect extended an olive branch to Catholic partisans and identified their commitment to non-reelection as common ground for partnership. Madero knew that any form of political mobilization would require the Church’s support, even if only to prevent the clergy from working against the goals of his administration. However, despite initial collaboration, Madero's reformism stirred suspicions among many within the Church hierarchy. As Madero formally took

¹⁶ Velasco Barba, (2012), pp. 207-209.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 206.

office in November 1911, he appointed José María Pino Suárez to the Vice Presidency. The latter called for secular reform and further alienated religious conservatives.¹⁸

Finally, as the Zapatista Rebellion broke out within the same month, the PCN lost hope in Madero's ability to tame the flames of radicalism among peasant workers. Led by Emiliano Zapata, this indigenous peasant insurrection engulfed the southern state of Morelos in what many perceived to be a violent class war with racial overtones. Although the Zapatistas remained faithful to the Virgin of Guadalupe, members of the clergy feared peasant reprisals against Church property. Insecurity loomed large among party members and many branded the peasants' demands for the return of ancestral lands as "communistic thievery" running contrary to Christian values.¹⁹

By February 1913, Madero's overthrow and execution proved to be a decisive turning point in the precarious relationship between Church and state. Although historians now agree that the PCN was divided on whether to join General Victoriano Huerta in his ousting of Madero, Mexican revolutionaries alleged that Huerta's coup was part of a larger Catholic conspiracy to take back the reins of government. In reality, Catholic partisans did not agree on whether to support or condemn Huerta's coup d'état and seventeen-month presidency. For many in the party, Huerta's connections to the Taft administration and the governments of Britain, France, and Germany aroused distrust in his ability to defend national sovereignty. Still, the coup had ignited the passions of many young Catholics.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 209-210.

¹⁹ Ibid. On the Zapatista Rebellion, see John Womack, Jr. *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (Knopf, 1968). On tensions between Madero and rural peasants, see William H. Beezley, "Madero, the 'Unknown' President and His Political Failure to Organize Rural Mexico," in George Wolfskill and Douglas W. Richmond, eds., *Essays of the Mexican Revolution: Revisionist Views of Its Leaders* (University of Texas Press, 1979).

Among them, a young Elena Lascuraín, future president of the Damas Católicas, organized food and clothing drives for Huerta's counterrevolutionary forces.²⁰

By the time of Huerta's fall in 1914, the PCN had dissolved as a national party and only remained active regionally. The party's disintegration resulted largely from internal divisions over Huerta's coup, and from the latter's own decision to disband the Mexican Chamber of Deputies—the lower legislative house wherein PCN representatives occupied a small but important minority. Given Huerta's restrictions on electoral politics, the PCN was left with little room to grow or survive. By the early 1920s, the party would be overtaken by a constellation of local militant groups, secret societies, and grassroots organizations.²¹

As the victorious Constitutionalist Army fought to pacify the country after 1914, its leader, Venustiano Carranza, cautiously approached the issues of secular and agrarian reform. As head of the nation's pre-constitutional government, Carranza hoped to legitimize rule by assuaging capitalists and religious conservatives. Nevertheless, the Church and the private sector looked unfavorably upon the 1917 Constitution's anti-clerical provisions and economic nationalism. At the same time, Carranza faced backlash from progressive allies for pursuing negotiations with international business interests and adopting a more pragmatic policy of "toleration" toward Church institutions.²²

²⁰ Velasco Barba (2012), 211-213. See also see Sofia Crespo Reyes, "La Unión de Damas Católicas Mexicanas. Una organización de derecha en la Ciudad de México (1912-1930)," in *Con-Temporanea* vol. 5 num. 9 (2018), p. 4.

²¹ Velasco Barba (2012), pp. 211-213. See also, Robert Curley "Los Legados del Partido Católico Nacional" in *Diálogos de la Comunicación* ed. 90: "Reflexiones en torno a la historia de la prensa y el periodismo en Iberoamérica" (2015), pp. 143-59.

²² On Carranza, see Katz (1981) and Douglas W. Richmond, *Venustiano Carranza's Nationalist Struggle, 1893-1920* (University of Nebraska Press, 1983).

Despite ideological tensions, Carranza and his Catholic opponents shared a mutual distrust of indigenous peasant uprisings. While the president publicly supported land reform, his placating of regional caciques and local hacendados had earned him the enmity of the Zapatistas since Huerta’s defeat. Culminating in Zapata’s assassination in 1919, Carranza’s “anti-radicalism” created a brief space for negotiation between civilian elites of all political persuasions. The moment was short-lived, however, as Church and state factions continued to fight over the issue of secular education and Carranza’s own military forces—then led by Generals Obregón, Calles, and Adolfo de la Huerta—ultimately betrayed his command.

| Table 1-1: Mexican Heads of State during the Armed Phase of the Revolution (1910-1920) | | |
|---|------------------------|--|
| Name | Dates in Office | Notes |
| Porfirio Díaz | 1876-80; 1884-1910 | Member of the Liberal Party before dissolving it in 1884 |
| Francisco León de la Barra | 1911 | Interim president, Foreign Relations Secretary under Díaz and Huerta |
| Francisco I. Madero | 1911-13 | Toppled and executed on February 22 nd , 1913 |
| Pedro Lascuráin | 1913 | Interim president, Foreign Relations Secretary under Madero |
| Victoriano Huerta | 1913-14 | Launched coup d’état against Madero |
| Francisco Carbajal ²³ | 1914 | Interim president |

²³ During the 1914 Convention of Aguascalientes, delegates recognized three interim presidents following Huerta’s defeat: Eulalio Gutiérrez, Roque González Garza, and Francisco Lagos Cházaro.

| | | |
|---------------------|---------|---|
| | | |
| Venustiano Carranza | 1914-20 | Head of Executive Power, Leader of the Liberal Constitutionalist Party. Toppled and executed on May 21 st , 1920 |
| Adolfo de la Huerta | 1920 | Interim president |
| Álvaro Obregón | 1920-24 | Leader of the Mexican Labor Party |

Protecting Faith and Whiteness

By 1922, the Damas Católicas encountered similar challenges to those faced by the PCN. After decades of activism and partisan engagement, Catholic activists drew inspiration from social doctrine and used the Damas’ inaugural convention to launch an international campaign against state incursions and modern challenges. Once again, the nation’s new constitution threatened to abolish religious education and diminish the Church’s power. By 1920, the Obregón administration enforced these regulations and aggressively monitored its Catholic opponents. Aside from reckoning with this new set of laws, the Damas grappled with the rise of modern urban spaces that threatened to erode public morality and traditional gender roles. They called for a renewal of the nation’s faith in Christ and devised moralization campaigns imbued with racial undertones.

Since the Damas’ inception in 1912, the group’s upper-class socias had worked with Archbishop Mora y del Río to safeguard faith amid uncertainty. The archbishop called on the “distinguished Catholic ladies of society” to mobilize in defense of Catholic principles and argued that “only unity among women could save the soul of the nation.” To foster this spiritual reawakening, the Damas proposed strengthening religious instruction and bolstering traditional family values—e.g., loyalty, honesty, faith, discipline,

and morality. While this required the group's own internal development, *socias* believed that it also required a multipronged offensive against budding feminist movements and compulsory secular education.²⁴

Since the early 1900s, progressive Mexican women had organized under the Mexican Liberal Party²⁵ to oppose Díaz's re-election efforts. By 1916, they summoned the First Feminist Congress in the city of Mérida, Yucatán and gathered to debate property rights, marriage, and the meaning of feminine citizenship. The delegates expressed their support for women's suffrage and economic autonomy. They encouraged women to work outside the home and discussed European debates on the issue of divorce.²⁶

Aware of the global dimensions of Mexican feminist movements, the Damas partnered with the French-based International Union of Catholic Women's Leagues (UILCF) to counter feminists' "ideological radicalism." Founded under the guidance of Pope Pius X in 1913, the Union fostered dialogue between women's lay groups and strived to nurture its members spiritual development through public works. The UILCF called for the establishment of Catholic educational institutions and urged women to volunteer in medical centers and public kitchens. Within the private sphere, it argued for the "necessity" of women's domesticity and identified the home as the true moral center of society. Led

²⁴ "El Congreso de Damas Católicas: La Historia de la UDCM," *Excelsior* 1922. See also, Laura O'Dogherty, "Restaurarlo Todo en Cristo: Unión de Damas Católicas Mejicanas, 1920-1926," in *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México* vol 14 (1991), pp. 129-58.

²⁵ Not to be confused with Porfirio Díaz's "Liberal Party," which the president dissolved in 1884 to form the *Partido Porfirista*, the *Partido Liberal Mexicano* brought together workers, left-wing intellectuals and agrarian interests (e.g., the Zapatistas). For a recent transnational history, see Claudio Lomnitz, *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

²⁶ Like the Damas' convention, the 1916 Congress was dominated by urban elites. Despite their egalitarian rhetoric, the feminists required that all attendees show proof of having completed primary education; see Jocelyn Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Duke University Press, 2005).

by “mothers, wives, and homemakers,” the Union emphasized “the divide between the sexes” and portrayed Catholic motherhood as vital to children’s upbringing and public morality. It opposed divorce and fought against a seemingly decadent youth culture by monitoring popular art forms for immoral content.²⁷

By 1922, Mexico’s nationally-circulated Catholic daily, *El Amigo de la Verdad*, praised the Damas as “the kind of feminist activists that Mexico desperately needed.” In a front-page opinion piece, Father José Cantú Corro lauded the UDCM as a feminist organization that galvanized Catholic women to faithful social action. Still, Cantú Corro upheld gender differences and placed spiritual nurture at the center of women’s empowerment. He argued that women’s faith could inspire men in position of power and bring about change on a large scale.²⁸



Image 1.4: President Elena Lascurain delivers food to a local hospital.
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

²⁷ FXC, Archivo UFCM, Caja 18, Folder 1-10. “Statuts: L’Union Internationale des Ligues Catholiques Féminines. 18 juillet 1913.”

²⁸ FXC, Archivo UFCM, Caja 18, Folder 1-10. José Cantú Corro, “La Mujer: La influencia social de la mujer en los congresos feministas,” *El Amigo de la Verdad* México, D.F., 7 de noviembre de 1922.

Written for middle- and upper-class audiences, *El Amigo de la Verdad* was printed by the *Buena Prensa* publishing house under the direction of the *Congreso de Periodistas Católicos* (CPC) and the *Prensa Católica Nacional*. Formed by clergy and lay activists during the late nineteenth century, these organizations strived to broaden public discourse and provide a counterpoint to Díaz’s official news outlets. “La Buena Prensa” specifically derived its name from Pope Leo XIII and his calls to combat secular news with “good” Catholic journalism. A product of social doctrine, *El Amigo de la Verdad* pursued an “honest” brand of journalism that rejected incendiary reporting and prioritized unity through faith.²⁹

Since the fall of 1912, the UDCM had found itself at odds with secular newspapers over issues of purity, honor, and womanhood. In one of its first press releases, the Damas published an aggressive defense the Virgin Mary’s chastity and turned to the language of gender and sexuality to describe the perceived relationship between secular journalism and the Catholic faith:

We formulate this protest as Catholic Mexican women before those belonging to the noble institution of the press, that they should be the most chivalrous and gentlemanly... and respect this sublime woman [the Virgin], before whom the most creative of geniuses, the most distinguished wisemen, and the most noble and chivalrous of men have all kneeled out of respect and love for womankind... We cannot resort to violence or repressive means because the dignity and the decorum of our sex will not allow it. We therefore resolve to work incessantly so that our homes are never again penetrated by these types of publications, which look to profane the mystery of Immaculate Conception and the sanctity of our Virgin...³⁰

Published on October 12th, 1912, the Damas’ statement defended the Virgin of Guadalupe against incursions—in this case, figurative penetration—by a predominantly

²⁹ For more, see Dinorah Velasco Robledo. “La Lectura de la ‘Buena Prensa.’ El Periodismo Católico a Finales del Siglo XIX,” in *Diálogos de la Comunicación* ed. 90: “Reflexiones en torno a la historia de la prensa y el periodismo en Iberoamérica” (2015), pp. 7-9.

³⁰ FXC, Archivo UFCM, Caja 18, Folder 1-10. “Protesta de las Damas Católicas Mexicanas,” 10 octubre de 1912.

male secular press. They portrayed the home as a site of conflict between public discourse and private piety, and drew contrasts between male aggression and women's decorum. For *socias*, the home became a space where they could embody Christian dignity in the fight against modern skepticism. Just as the Virgin's chastity remained unharmed by journalists' assaults, so too did the *Damas* remain faithful amid widespread uncertainty.³¹

During the Revolution, Lascuraín and her *compañeras* viewed the preservation of family and morality as crucial battlegrounds. As a result, they partnered with the ACJM and the Knights of Columbus to establish the National Association for Catholic Parents (ANPF) in 1917. The ANPF responded directly to Article 3 of the Constitution, which mandated secular public instruction for all children. While the Constitution prohibited the Church from establishing educational institutions "without government consent," obtaining the right permissions often proved difficult, if not impossible.³²

Within the first year of its inception, the ANPF grew and expanded dramatically. By 1918, the organization had established a myriad of municipal delegations, state- and regional-level organizations, and a national governing body. The ANPF argued that the Constitution misrepresented secularization. It proposed that secularism did not imply the total absence of religion in society, but rather the openness and tolerance for all faiths without interference from the state. The government, therefore, had a fundamental obligation to preserve and safeguard religious freedom. It could not dictate the prohibition

³¹ Ibid. On masculinity in the Mexican public sphere, see Pablo Piccato, *The Tyranny of Opinion: Honor in the Construction of the Mexican Public Sphere* (Duke University Press, 2010).

³² FXC, Archivo UFCM, Caja 18, Folder 1-10. "Asociación Nacional de Padres de Familia," 27 de abril de 1917.

of any religion into law, nor could it directly control the activities of religious educational institutions.³³

Furthermore, the ANPF held that parents had a sacred duty to monitor their children's learning and safeguard their innocence. It portrayed Catholic schools as an extension of the family and argued that parents had the natural, God-given right to educate their children in accordance with principles of their choosing. Whether public or private, children's education had to conform to religious doctrine and promote the survival of propriety and *buenas costumbres* (good manners). Without proper spiritual development, children and youth would be left vulnerable to drinking, gambling, and promiscuity.³⁴

By 1922, the Damas Católicas made similar calls to protect religious education and public morality. Leaders like Rosa Lavín argued passionately for the freedom of worship and urged the UDCM to support religious schooling for children and adults of all ages. During the Convention, the Damas' Vice President, Refugio Goribar de Cortina, published a scathing condemnation of the modern city on the front pages of *El Universal* newspaper.³⁵ Her treatise relied on racism and the language of class, xenophobia, and propriety to infuse the Damas with new energy after a decade of inactivity.³⁶

Specifically, Goribar condemned new dance styles imported from the mixed-race working-class neighborhoods of Paris, New York, and Buenos Aires. She expressed

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid. Also, "El Congreso de Damas Católicas Mexicanas," *El Universal* 1922.

³⁵ A secular newspaper, *El Universal* had been founded by Félix Palavacini, a businessman and politician, just five years earlier. It was frequently criticized by President Obregón's supporters for its seemingly conservative biases.

³⁶ FXC, Archivo UFCM, Caja 18, Folder 11-20. Refugio G. de Cortina, "Los Bailes Modernos, las Modas Imperantes, y la Trata de Blancas," *El Universal*, 1922.

nostalgia for more traditional European ballroom dances and branded contemporary styles like the tango, the shimmy, and the foxtrot as diabolical *danzas exóticas*. Goribar denounced “dance hall decadence” for corrupting Mexican youth and leading respectable young women to moral depravity. She claimed that without proper religious instruction, Mexican youth would be left defenseless against urban temptation. Goribar cautioned against public immorality and the purported *males incurables* that resulted from provocative movement. Citing medical testimonies from prominent physicians, she warned that “excessive agitation” resulted in women’s sterility, neuroses, and loss of maternal instinct.³⁷

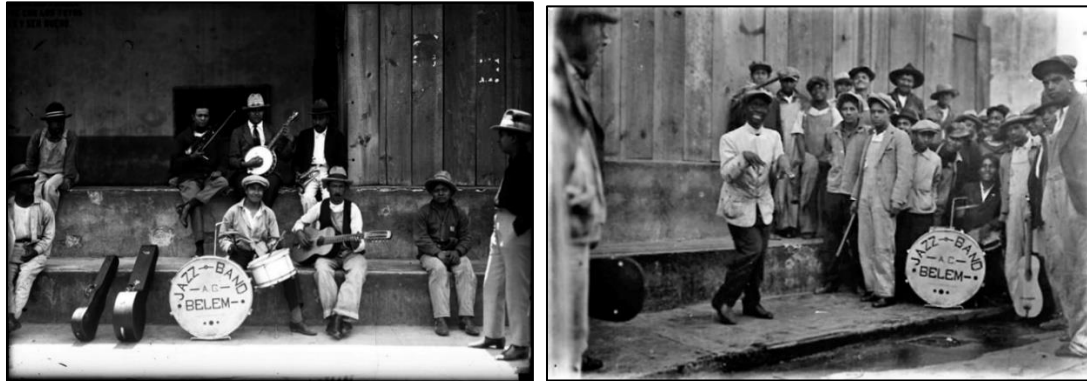


Image 1.5: Refugio Goribar y Zavala, wedding announcement (1905-1906).
Source: Rafael Fierro Grossman.

Jazz music in particular had become synonymous with deviance and criminality by the early 1920s. Under the direction of progressive reformers, inmates in the *Cárcel de Belén* were given the chance to play popular music as a form of recreation—a spectacle that soon caught the media’s attention. Originally a detention center for Díaz’s political

³⁷ Ibid.

opponents, the jail became a space for “second-class” criminals after the Lecumberri prison complex opened its doors in 1900. The non-white prisoners took to jazz and even performed in blackface in a perverse nod to the music’s African-American origins and the popularity of North American minstrelsy across the continent.³⁸



Images 1.6-1.7: “Belem” Jazz Band. Cárcel de Belén, Colegio de San Miguel de Belem, Mexico City (1925).

Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

From Goribar’s perspective, jazz and other foreign art forms enabled young women to become sexually uninhibited and deviate from buenas costumbres. As urban slumming threatened to subvert racial hierarchies and disrupt traditional gender norms, the Damas feared losing the power that came with elite respectability—a racialized concept drawing from colonial notions of chastity, honor, and moral purity. In response, Goribar summoned upper-class *socias* to set the right example for indigenous and mixed-race workingwomen. She claimed that the group’s “respectable ladies” had a sacred responsibility to guide humble *obreras* toward faith and dignity:

It is not fashion that should dictate the direction of culture, but our example. The humble *obrero* strives to imitate *la gran señora*, and if the latter fails to preserve her dignity, even if the slightest

³⁸ Carlos Villasana and Ruth Gómez, “Cuando los presos caminaban por las calles del Centro,” *El Universal*, México D.F., 16 de agosto de 2017. See also, Arturo Aguilar Ochoa and Juan Alfonso Milán López, “Una cárcel que se decía penitenciaria: La cárcel de Belem en la Ciudad de México durante el Segundo Imperio, 1863-1867” *Revista de Historia de las Prisiones* no. 9 (2019), 7-28.

of details, then the former, by fault of her ambition and lack of judgement will take a step further [in] her own moral demise.³⁹

Beneath the language of class and propriety, Goribar's critique of the modern city implicitly racialized moral deviance and feminine respectability. To assert the Damas' superiority, she invented a non-white "Other" in need of saving. Through words like *imitar* and *ejemplo*, Goribar channeled racial paternalism and portrayed indigenous and mixed-race women as morally vulnerable. At the same time, she symbolically whitened the Damas by deeming them keepers of public morality and granting herself and fellow *socias* a significant amount of power over their working-class counterparts.⁴⁰

Echoing Capistrán Garza, Goribar turned to xenophobia and accused French fashion houses—allegedly under the direction of Jews, communists, and free-masons—of drawing women away from their femininity. She condemned the new feminist wave for its attacks on domesticity and denounced its calls for sexual liberation. Goribar drew on the Damas' recent activism and accused feminists of "masculinizing" women. Specifically, she condemned young women's short, "androgynous" hairstyles for threatening to erase gender and racial differences.⁴¹

Finally, Goribar chastised parents and husbands for allowing young women to partake in sinful activities that would stray them away from matrimony and "respectable family life." Her claims spoke to centuries of patriarchal tradition through which Mexican elites had relied on religious discourse to regulate women's sexuality. As a gendered praxis,

³⁹ Refugio G. de Cortina, "Los Bailes Modernos...".

⁴⁰ For a more theoretical analysis of symbolic whitening, as it pertained to the Damas Católicas of 1922, see Álvarez-Pimentel (2020).

⁴¹ Ibid. See also, Anne Rubenstein, "The War on 'Las Pelonas': Modern Women and their Enemies, Mexico City, 1924," in Olcott and Vaughan eds. (2006), pp. 63-64.

whiteness called for the protection of power and privilege through the obstruction of interracial relations. Subsequently, marriage became a means to conjoin “respectable” families and consolidate social dominance.⁴²

A critique of feminism and secular modernity, Goribar’s condemnation of urban culture also doubled as a defense of historical racial hierarchies. As multiracial urban spaces threatened to subvert the privileges gained from a system of racist and patriarchal social relations, elite women looked for new ways to exert power over their working-class counterparts. As a result, the Damas obsessively monitored feminine propriety. They proposed closing dance halls and called for establishment of “cultural commissions” to monitor fashion and music.

In the long-term, Goribar insisted on the creation of a national re-education program to develop sound moral judgment among indigenous women and Mexican youth. She envisioned moralization campaigns that would promote chastity and impart Catholic instruction in rural schools, union headquarters, and other everyday spaces. In solidarity with the ANPF, the Damas pledged their undying support for Mexico’s Catholic Teachers’ Union, the *Profesoriado Católico Nacional*. Together, these three organizations called for the establishment of a national commission to address the issues of religious education and modern culture.⁴³

Be it through social interactions, cultural exchanges, or sexual relations, the Damas feared the prospect of interclass race-mixing. Aside from dance halls, the UDCM identified

⁴² Refugio G. de Cortina, “Los Bailes Modernos...,” p. 8. See also, Socolow (2000), pp. 66-69; Martínez (2008), p. 4.

⁴³ Refugio G. de Cortina, “Los Bailes Modernos...,” p. 8. See also, “Asociación Nacional de Padres de Familia,” 27 de abril de 1917; and UFCM, Caja 18, Folder 11-20. “El Congreso de Damas Católicas se Preocupa por el Bienestar de la Sociedad,” *El Amigo de la Verdad*, México D.F., 9 de noviembre de 1922.

schools and the home as battlegrounds in the culture war against unholy modern evils. Still, scholars should refrain from interpreting the Damas' inaugural platform as part of an intransigent and regressionist Catholicism. Instead, the UDCM's empowered women to nurture their spirituality and assume new public responsibilities—not least of which included shaping national discourse.

The Secret War over Public Discourse

To bolster the initiatives laid out in the 1922 Congress, the Damas developed a plan of action to transform public discourse. This involved the establishment of small professional circles designed to train *socias* as journalists and propagandists. Known collectively as the *Comisiones de Propagandistas*, these professional groups adopted an educational model that combined religious instruction, intellectual development, and practical training. Like the social doctrinarians of earlier decades, the Damas strived to infuse Catholic doctrine into journalistic practice.⁴⁴

Specifically, the *Comisiones* required that all aspiring propagandists receive at least two months of spiritual instruction from a religious sponsor—most likely a member of the clergy from their local parish. By strengthening students' faith in Christ, the Damas hoped that *socias* would be well-equipped to ward off “ideological corruption” in their future roles as “defenders of truth and knowledge.” To further this goal, the *Comisiones*' educational curriculum required participants to devote an additional twelve hours per week to formal academic study. Aside from the catechism, the subjects covered included history, philosophy, sociology, literature, and rhetoric. Finally, the program called on students to actively engage in professional training over the course of two years. As journalists, they

⁴⁴ FXC, Archivo Acción Católica Mexicana (ACM), Sección 2: Junta Central/Nacional de Acción Católica, Serie 2.6: Comisión de Propaganda.

would learn to develop their own lines of argument while learning to appeal to diverse audiences, respond to criticism, and discern fact from fiction.⁴⁵

In founding the Comisiones, the Damas recognized the importance of print media in shaping public discourse and generating support for their mission of spiritual restoration. However, President Elena Lascuráin also understood that the Obregón administration relied heavily on the press to discredit domestic opponents and tarnish the Church's reputation. In response to the state's manipulation of the media, the Damas tightened their influence over *El Universal*. Building on the newspaper's recent support for the UDCM, Lascuráin personally sought to ensure that its reporting remained friendly towards the Catholic cause. Specifically, she petitioned editorial director, Miguel Lanz Duret, to join the fight against state-led disinformation campaigns. She argued that the state's attempts at distortion had knowingly targeted her personal integrity and misrepresented the UDCM's social agenda. In a series of private letters, Lascuráin expressed her frustration at the government's efforts to brand her as a "fanatical reactionary." She denounced progressive newspapers for portraying the Damas as unpatriotic and for labeling socias' commitment to Catholicism as antithetical to women's empowerment.⁴⁶

In response to these accusations, Lascuráin urged Duret to discredit false information and allow for the regular publication of press releases approved by her office. The latter would affirm the Damas' commitment to women's advancement in the public sphere, but only insofar as it did not interfere with familial "duties." Lascuráin pointed to the UDCM's positive relationship with the secular newspaper *Excélsior* as evidence of the

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ FXC, Archivo UFCM. Sección: Correspondencia, Serie: Comité Central, Caja: 1921-25, Folder 10: 1925. Carta 27 de julio de 1925, E. Lascuráin de Silva a Don Miguel Lanz Duret.

Damas' appeal beyond Church circles and the Catholic press. During the 1922 Congress, *Excélsior* had introduced readers to the UDCM's history and portrayed Lascuraín as a sincere and charismatic leader.⁴⁷

However, even as the UDCM garnered support in the Mexican press, the Damas remained vigilant of state surveillance. As Obregón ascended to the presidency in 1920, his administration monitored Catholics' journalistic activities through a variety of different means. By 1922, the federal government required all publications to register the location of their print headquarters, their breadth of circulation, and the names of all individuals in their respective editorial boards. This information was stored in an official registry known as the *Estadística de Prensa*, or the Bureau of Press Statistics, which operated under the administration of the *Secretaría de la Economía Nacional*. In reality, however, the Bureau shared its data with the state's secret intelligence agencies. It was then customary for them to send undercover agents to listed locations, oftentimes disguised as taxi cab drivers and chauffeurs.⁴⁸

Aware of these covert operations, lay activists provided false addresses and misleading information. Many spies reported stumbling into pharmacies, grocery stores, and vacant lots when following their leads. In light of these failures, the state devised other strategies of surveillance. In the Damas' case, undercover agents contacted the UDCM's headquarters as part of a larger effort to gain personal information pertinent to its members. In these instances, agents would assume fake identities and write letters of inquiry claiming

⁴⁷ Ibid. Also, "El Congreso de Damas Católicas: La Historia de la UDCM," *Excélsior* 1922. Founded in 1917, *Excélsior* had been established by elite families and commercial business interests in the religiously conservative state of Puebla. Following the Damas' inaugural congress, it was carefully monitored by the Obregón administration.

⁴⁸ FXC, Archivo ACM, 5.6.3 Revista *Juventud* Suscripciones. Correspondencia 7 y 15 de abril de 1925, E. Lascuraín de Silva y E. Enríquez de Rivera.

to represent large department stores seeking to provide *socias* with catalogues, coupons, and sample merchandise. They petitioned for *socias*' home addresses but remained unsuccessful.⁴⁹

The government's insistence on infiltrating the *Damas* reflected deeper anxieties. During the 1922 Congress, representatives from prominent lay groups in Europe and the United States had pledged to support *socias* in their struggle against the Mexican Revolution. These included the UILCF and Spain's *Acción Católica de la Mujer* (ACdM). In the United States, the Knights of Columbus committed itself to mobilize resources in support of Mexican *católicas* and the LSCM.⁵⁰

In the months following the Convention, the Undersecretary of Foreign Relations, Alfonso Reyes Ochoa, alerted Secretary Pani of Spain's interest in supporting Catholic dissidents. In a series of coded telegrams, Reyes Ochoa proposed several reasons for Spain's possible involvement in an alliance with the Vatican and the governments of Italy, Great Britain, and the United States. These factors included the Mexican government's expropriation of Spanish private property and its pursuit of anti-clerical policies targeting Spanish-born clergy. Spain had also suffered a large number of civilian casualties during the armed phase of the Revolution and experienced a wave of anti-clerical violence in its own cities.⁵¹

By 1922, Obregón's calls to nationalize foreign land holdings had driven frustrated British officials to indefinitely suspend diplomatic relations with Mexico. Despite five

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ For more on the *Damas*' relationship with the ACdM, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation. On the Knights of Columbus, see Chapter 3.

⁵¹ Archivo Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE), Fondo: Relaciones Consulares y Diplomáticas, México-España: siglo XX. Folio: 270. Expedientes: 334, 344.

years of negotiations, British diplomats urged members of the Spanish legation to refrain from recognizing Obregón as head of state. As Spanish officials moved to renew diplomacy, the British legation issued a stern warning, claiming that “Spain [would] only live to regret” its decision. Anxieties heightened as Reyes Ochoa relayed unconfirmed reports of a plot to invade Mexico from the U.S. border and use smuggled weapons to ignite a Catholic insurrection.⁵²

As early as 1918, Mexico City’s Spanish businesses community had petitioned Spain’s government to fully resume relations with Mexico. However, Spanish officials remained unsatisfied with President Carranza’s moderate property concessions and refused to recognize his administration. In a series of confidential letters to the Spanish Ministry of State, Antonio de Zayas, the Spanish Minister in Mexico City, expressed the urgency of defending Spanish business interests throughout Mexico. Bolstering diplomatic relations was crucial to strengthening a weak Spanish economy and maintaining its competitiveness in Latin America amid the flurry of economic incursions by French, British, German, Italian, and U.S. capitalist interests.⁵³

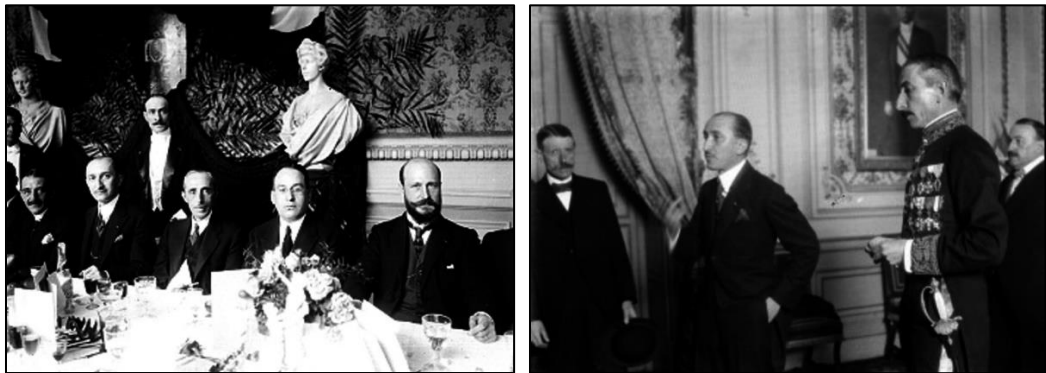
By November 1919, Mexican officials took advantage of Spanish insecurities. They exploited Spaniards’ lingering resentment of the United States and portrayed Mexico as a key ally in the struggle against U.S. imperialism. In a series of confidential letters, Mexico’s Ambassador in Madrid, General Francisco Aguilar González, warned of North American attempts to tarnish Spain-Mexico relations. He emphasized the need for

⁵² SRE, Fondo: Relaciones Consulares y Diplomáticas, México-España: siglo XX. Folio: 270. Expediente: 344. On British-Mexican relations, see Lorenzo Meyer, “Su Majestad Británica contra la Revolución Mexicana,” *Nexos* (1987).

⁵³ Archivo Histórico Nacional (AHN) Madrid. “Política Exterior, México, 1918-1924, 1925-1927, 1928-29.” Legajo 2563: “Correspondencia sin fecha 1918.”

diplomatic relations and offered Spanish companies exclusive access to Mexican oil reserves to no avail.⁵⁴

Following Carranza's ouster in May 1920, President Adolfo de la Huerta extended an olive branch to the Spanish government. In an effort to ease tensions, he appointed a practicing Catholic, Félix F. Palavacini, as a special envoy to the European continent. A testament to Church-state convergence, Palavacini was the founder of *El Universal* newspaper, one of the Damas' unofficial secular press organs. He toured Europe during the summer and leveraged oil and property concessions to make in-roads with seemingly hostile governments.⁵⁵



Images 1.8-1.9: Left image: Félix F. Palavacini attends a ceremony organized by Mexico City's Spanish-immigrant community (seated second from the left; 1920). Right image: Palavacini (center) in the company of French Ambassador Victor Ayguessparse (right, in military uniform; 1920).
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

Still, just days after the start of his interim presidency, de la Huerta preemptively elevated the status of Spain's officer corps from legation to embassy. The move caught diplomats off guard, as no one expected any serious discussion of Mexico's diplomatic situation until after the presidential election in November. For the next three weeks, Palavacini used the front pages of his newspaper to circulate stories of celebration among

⁵⁴ Legajo 2563: "Correspondencia: 15 de noviembre de 1919."

⁵⁵ Legajo 2563: "Correspondencia: 30 de junio de 1920 - 20 de septiembre de 1920."

Mexico's Spanish-immigrant communities. The articles hailed him as a hero and lauded him for "saving" Mexico from international isolation.⁵⁶

By contrast, Spanish legation officers expressed their surprise and consternation. They wrote coded telegrams to the Ministry of State and reported that they had been "left without words" by such an unprecedented development. For the next three months, letters from European diplomats flooded the Spanish State Ministry. As Palavicini gallantly made his way through European capitals, representatives from France, Italy, and Switzerland anxiously asked if Spain would formally recognize the interim government. Despite the pressure, the Spanish government held its position and waited to make an official decision until after the presidential election. However, Spanish officials feared being outmaneuvered by their North American rivals and thus kept a watchful eye on U.S.-Mexican relations.⁵⁷

To de la Huerta's dismay, Obregón's election to the presidency resulted in serious setbacks. As the new president pushed to nationalize private property and impose stricter limits on the Catholic Church, Revolutionary Mexico seemed to isolate itself further from the international community. Still, rumors of Spanish recognition resurfaced in May 1922. This time, the Mexican newspaper *La Raza* published an extensive exposé on a series of secret meetings held to establish a commercial treaty between the two nations. According to *La Raza*, the details of these encounters had been leaked by Carlos Badía Malaguida, the Spanish consul in the oil-rich state of Veracruz. However, given that the state essentially controlled *La Raza* and used it to disseminate its own news—as it did with

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

nearly all progressive newspapers at the time—the details of the purported “leak” probably came from the Obregón administration itself.⁵⁸

Badía was reprimanded by Joaquín Fernández Prida, the Spanish Minister of State, who by then suspected that the consul had been bribed by the Mexican government. In his defense, Badía claimed that his intent was to bolster Spain’s image in Mexico and reduce any lingering suspicion of hostilities. Badía warned Fernández of a surge in anti-Spanish sentiment throughout the country, a concern that echoed consular reports from southern states like Yucatán. Coupled with the leak of an unfinished treaty, the rise in tensions forced the Spanish government to once again reckon with the issue of diplomatic recognition. Nevertheless, Spanish officials waited on the U.S. government’s response to chart their own course of action. They did not know that United States was in the midst of its own “secret war” with the Obregón administration.⁵⁹

According to Mexico’s British legation, the president-elect had successfully bribed left-wing journalists writing for influential U.S. and British newspapers. Among others, these included *The New York Times*, the *London Times*, the Hearst Newspaper Syndicate, and the *New York Journal of Commerce*. Obregón hoped that these publications would stir the sympathies of workers, intellectuals, and progressive activists toward the goals of the Mexican Revolution. Subsequently, he hoped that favorable international opinion would pressure the U.S. and British governments to formally recognize his presidency.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Legajo 2563: “8 de mayo de 1922.”

⁵⁹ Legajo 2563: “3 de junio de 1922.”

⁶⁰ British National Archives (BNA). Foreign Office (FO) 204/578.

British espionage records also alleged that Mexican officials had bribed state legislators in Arizona, California, and Texas to oppose another U.S. invasion of Mexico.⁶¹ Furthermore, by the spring of 1923, spies reported that Obregón’s network of influence had reached all the way to the U.S. Congress. According to British intelligence, the Mexican president had rewarded U.S. Senators Edwin Ladd and William Borah with access to land and a stake in Mexican oil companies. In return, Obregón sought the promotion of “pro-Mexican” foreign policies.”⁶²

In line with these reports, Right Reverend Francis C. Kelley published a scathing condemnation of transnational corruption in the widely circulated pamphlet, *A Sociologist in Mexico*. Published in 1923 by the Paulist Press in New York City, Kelley’s *Sociologist* was widely circulated by the Knights of Columbus. Kelley echoed Mexican Catholics’ distrust of the Revolution and expressed disdain for Obregón’s supporters in U.S. academic circles. He exposed corruption in U.S. journalism and revealed that the Mexican government had long engaged in the practice of bribing editors and reporters. Kelley wrote of lavish parties, luxurious cars, and clandestine transactions. He revealed how Mexican officials regularly presented gifts to American journalists in exchange for their approval in the printed press.⁶³

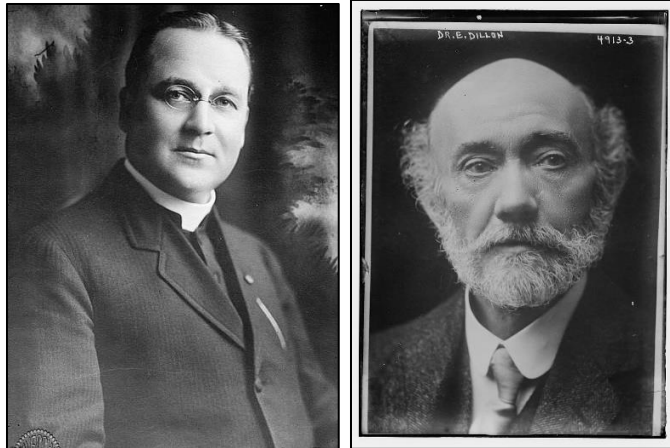
Kelley took issue with reporters’ lack of integrity and the biases of American news institutions. He cast doubt over the credibility of secular journalism and condemned the “hypocrisy, dishonesty, and unreliability” of investigative reporting on Mexican affairs.

⁶¹ The United States had invaded Mexico—specifically, Veracruz—in 1914, during the armed phase of the Revolution.

⁶² British National Archives (BNA). Foreign Office (FO) 204/578.

⁶³ Knights of Columbus (KofC) Archives, Coll 006, Box 290, SC-11-2-57 “Mexican Persecution Pamphlets (1923).” Right Rev. Francis C. Kelley, *A Sociologist in Mexico* (New York: Paulist Press, 1923), pp. 3-4.

However, Kelley also criticized Irish Catholic journalist, Dr. Emile Joseph (E.J.) Dillon, whose 1921 *Mexico on the Verge* offered a sobering analysis of the precarious future of U.S.-Mexican relations. “I had some hope of a real statement of fact,” he wrote, “when Dr. E.J. Dillon went [to Mexico].” “I lost it when I saw Dillon’s picture with a ‘party’—the dignified doctor in shirt sleeves—made up chiefly of government officials.”⁶⁴



Images 1.10-1.11: Reverend Francis C. Kelley (left) and Dr. E.J. Dillon (right).
Source: Library of Congress and *The Irish Times*

Kelley’s disbelief stemmed from knowing that even respectable Catholic journalists could succumb to temptation. Dillon himself had once trained for the priesthood and used his academic writing to criticize the Mexican government’s expropriation of private property. Kelley’s calls for an “honest and moral” journalistic practice echoed the *Damas Católicas* and *La Buena Prensa*. He lamented Dillon’s fall from grace and claimed that “the doctor,” much like journalists of the time, “ran true to ‘investigator’ form.”⁶⁵

Following Kelley’s lead, the U.S. Knights of Columbus relied on their allies to reveal Mexican attempts to infiltrate news outlets and academic institutions. According to

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

informant Joseph N. Fining, the founder of the Fining Press Syndicate in St. Louis, Missouri, Obregón routinely bribed prominent journalists and dispersed “agents of propaganda” throughout American universities. In his secret reports, Fining identified the *New York World*, the *New Republic*, *The Nation*, and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* among the nationally-circulated newspapers “under Mexican control.” He alleged that secret agents operated out of the Mexican consulate in New York City and warned that “a radical and well-known socialist college in New York” served as the breeding ground for anti-American propaganda. Here, Fining took aim at Columbia University and accused historian Frank Tannenbaum of being “one of many university professors on Obregón’s payroll.” He branded U.S. academics’ “anti-imperialist propaganda” as inherently un-American and argued that critics of foreign policy only bolstered the Mexican president’s nationalist agenda.⁶⁶

Kelley’s *Sociologist* echoed Fining’s confidential report and condemned the influence of anti-clerical propaganda on U.S. scholarship. He specifically saw this in the work of Dr. Edward Alsworth Ross, an American sociologist based at the University of Wisconsin and the “sociologist in Mexico” Kelley hoped to discredit. Kelley found himself at odds with Ross’s seeming defense of the Obregón administration’s “significant, yet slow progress.” He argued that Ross’s assertions were tainted by anti-Catholic prejudice and lacked historical support. By contrast, Kelly defended the Church of colonial times for establishing a long-standing commitment to universal education. He blamed the 1857 Constitution for the closure of educational institutions and Mexican peasants’ subsequent decreases in literacy. Kelley argued that public education and freedom of the press were

⁶⁶ K of C Archives, Coll 006, Box 293, SC-11-2-97 “Luke Hart - Joseph N. Fining.” Correspondence June 23, 1927.

Spanish Catholic values. He noted that the first Archbishop of Mexico, Juan de Zumárraga, had founded the first open and free printing press in all of the Americas.⁶⁷

Finally, Kelley criticized Ross for taking officialist narratives at face value. He accused the Mexican government of defaming the Church and dismissed claims of Catholic opulence as untrue. Kelley cited statistics obtained from a 1920 U.S. Senate investigation into Mexican government's expropriation of private property. He discredited "figures made by the enemies of the Church" and used data from the U.S. Senate probe to prove that the Mexican Church was actually less wealthy than many American religious institutions—and not nearly as financially well-stocked as the Mexican government itself. At the same time, Kelley looked to provisions in the 1917 Constitution and warned that Obregón's assurances of religious freedom could not be trusted. The litany of grievances was long, but he enumerated each of the state's restrictions upon members of the clergy.⁶⁸

Kelley's condemnation of Mexican anti-clericalism might best be interpreted as a response to Obregón's controversial expulsion of Monsignor Ernesto Filippi, the Vatican's apostolic delegate to Mexico. On January 11th, 1923, the president charged Filippi with violating constitutional restrictions on public worship and gave him seventy-two hours to leave the country. The previous day, Filippi had held an open ceremony to publicly bless the first stone in a statue of "Cristo Rey." The monument was located on a nine-thousand-foot mountaintop, just outside the city of Silao, Guanajuato.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Kelley, *A Sociologist in Mexico* (1923), pp. 4-5.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15-18.

⁶⁹ See Matthew Butler (2004), pp. 125-27.

Following Filippi's expulsion, Mexican lay groups called on the international community to repudiate Obregón's anti-clerical policies. On January 14th, the leaders of the Mexican Catholic Social League published a joint statement to condemn the president's actions and expose anti-Catholic violence perpetrated by Guanajuato's local police. The Catholic manifesto detailed recent instances wherein local authorities had refused to protect Catholic worshippers from violent attacks by "hordes of Red instigators." In some cases, police partook in the violence and became complicit in the "outright suppression of the Catholic faith, the destruction of Christian civilization, and the most conspicuous act of anti-clericalism since the passage of the 1917 Constitution."⁷⁰

In response to the LSCM, the state-backed Mexican Anti-Clerical Federation (FAM) used the front pages of *El Herald* newspaper to defend Obregón's decision. Printed on January 16th, 1923, the FAM's open letter alleged that the Filippi controversy was part of a larger plot to provoke conflict between Church and state. The FAM defended Guanajuato's state police and claimed that local officials had warned clergymen against mounting a public ceremony. It held that the Church had knowingly broken the law and used Filippi to trigger an international controversy. The FAM questioned the legitimacy of Catholic outrage and claimed that only a handful of upper-class activists felt indignation over the nuncio's expulsion. It labeled Mexican lay groups as popish conspirators and even accused the Damas of paying off newspapers to defend their interests.⁷¹

Made up of labor leaders and progressive intellectuals, the FAM proposed a complete overhaul of "the traditional customs of the Mexican race." It emphasized the

⁷⁰ FXC, Archivo UFCM, Caja 18, Folder 1-10. "Manifiesto a la Nación" 14 de enero de 1923, México D.F.

⁷¹ FXC, Archivo UFCM, Caja 18, Folder 11-20. "Más Papistas que el Papa," *El Herald*, 16 de enero 1923.

Church's historic abuses of power and argued that religion had only prolonged the historic "exploitation, suppression, and superstition" of indigenous peasant workers. By contrast, the FAM set out to liberate workers from economic enslavement, emphasizing the importance of secular education in breaking the clergy's grip on knowledge. It branded Catholic activists as enemies of "the people" and accused them of using the specter of "bolshevism" to engage in class warfare.⁷²

Under the leadership of General Manuel Navarro Angulo, an outspoken *obregonista*, the FAM vowed to use the media and the press to "break from the chains" of Catholicism. Subsequently, the group leveraged its influence in *El Heraldo* to wage a vigorous campaign against the Damas Católicas and their allies. Through gendered language, the FAM portrayed the Damas as submissive agents of the clergy. It denounced the National Catholic Labor Confederation (CNCT) for attacking state-backed labor unions and hindering the advancement of the nation's working classes. Turning toward the Knights, the FAM branded its members as rich aristocrats and undercover emissaries of the Vatican. It channeled anti-Catholic prejudices and argued that the Knights strived to undermine national sovereignty and establish papal authority over the government.⁷³

By the time of Filippi's expulsion, the secret war over public discourse was well underway. The confrontation was decades in the making and involved diplomats, activists, journalists, and members of the clergy. Driven by conspiratorial thinking, the Damas Católicas and the Obregón administration leveraged their connections in the press to disseminate images of a nation in crisis. As part of broader efforts to sway public opinion

⁷² FXC, Archivo UFCM, Caja 18, Folder 11-20. "Declaración de Principios, Federación Anticlerical Mexicana," diciembre 1922, México D.F.

⁷³ Ibid.

in their favor, both sides resorted to disinformation and extra-legal means to achieve their goals. Kelley's observations reflected these realities and exposed the international magnitude of Mexico's Church-state conflict. His work attested to Catholicism's global reckoning with secular modernity and spoke to deep-seated anxieties in Mexican society.

Still, the government's pursuit of negotiations with Spanish capitalist interests reveals contradictions between geopolitical realities and the discourse of Revolution. While the FAM used the nationalist language of proletarian upheaval, the Obregón administration sought to legitimize itself abroad by appealing to foreign governments and the international private sector. Rather than dismissing this ambivalence as a "failure" of Revolutionary politics, historians might best interpret it as a product of the state's hegemonic project. As the state worked to influence public discourse and expand the reach of its covert apparatus, it also altered the meanings of "Revolution."

Conclusions

Despite escalating tensions, the governments of Spain, France, Italy, and the United States all resumed negotiations with Mexican government. With the exception of Great Britain, most of the international community formally recognized and re-established diplomatic relations with the Obregón administration by the spring of 1924. As Obregón's Secretary of Finance, former president Adolfo de la Huerta had set the stage for reconciliation. Through the de la Huerta-Lamont Treaty of September 1922 and the Bucareli Accords of August 1923, the Mexican government agreed to respect foreign oil claims, resume external debt payments, and pay reparations for property damages incurred during the Revolution.

By December 1923, Álvaro Obregón prepared to leave office and personally hand-picked General Plutarco Elías Calles as his successor. Prior to serving as Obregón's Interior Minister, Calles had been elected Governor of Sonora and served alongside then-General Obregón in Carranza's Cabinet and the Constitutionalist Army. Upon learning of the news, Adolfo de la Huerta staged a short-lived military rebellion against the president's undermining of democracy. The uprising was quelled by February and became widely regarded as the *rebelión sin cabeza* for its lack of unity.

De la Huerta's failed insurrection spoke to the simultaneous strength and fragility of Mexico's Revolutionary experiment. A former obregonista, the former Finance Secretary leveraged his influence among international business interests and called on disgruntled Catholics to take up arms against Calles's alleged usurpation of power. The federal army moved swiftly, but Obregón and Calles feared that Mexican sovereignty was once again under siege by foreign conspirators and the Church. Despite de la Huerta's exile in the United States, the incoming administration would grapple with these anxieties for the remainder of the decade.

Still, divisions between the Mexican state and its Catholic opponents were neither rigid nor absolute. Rather, the Mexican Revolution and its ensuing crisis of rule allowed the two factions to briefly converge around specific issues. During the armed phase of the conflict, the PCN aligned with Madero's calls for democracy and Carranza's distrust of indigenous peasant "radicalism." Similarly, the National Association for Catholic Parents supported constitutional calls for Church-state separation, but adopted a vision of religious toleration that differed dramatically from the FAM's condemnation of Catholic tyranny. The Damas' alliance with *El Universal*, along with de la Huerta's betrayal of Obregón, all

speak to the fluidity of competing factions in the Mexican culture war. Together, these instances are visible enough to challenge binary narratives of Church-state conflict.

And yet, during the early 1920s, these ambiguities were subsumed under the storm of public discourse. As Catholic activists and government officials turned to their allies in the press, Mexican society grew increasingly polarized by the language of spiritual reconquest and proletarian struggle. Amid the turmoil, the Damas Católicas launched a counterrevolution to restore public morality. They defended family values and identified religious education as the antidote to secularization and modern temptations.

Beyond Mexico, both sides turned to the language of Hispanism as a way to obtain international support for their respective agendas. Mexican state officials proposed a pan-Hispanic alliance against U.S. imperialism as a way to bolster relations with Spain. On the other hand, figures like the Reverend Francis C. Kelley defended Mexico's Catholic Spanish heritage as the engine of national civilization. Despite its international appeal, the next two chapters will demonstrate that Hispanism was an imperfect vessel given its insularity and anti-indigenous racism.

By the mid-1920s, the Mexican religious conflict had come to be understood in racial terms. While the Anti-Clerical Federation claimed to fight for indigenous workers' liberation, the Damas invented a non-white Other to re-affirm their perceived superiority. Through this symbolic whitening, social racialized class, decadence, and morality. They imbued social doctrine with racial paternalism and set out to "save" the nation's indigenous and mixed-race "masses."

Eighteen months after Obregón left office, the Mexican powder keg finally exploded. After decades of polarizing public discourse, armed violence over the issue of

religious freedom engulfed the Mexican countryside. As a fractured nation plunged into the chaos of a Church-state civil war, President Calles alienated the world's major powers. Catholic activists saw openings for a viable counterrevolution and relied on racial discourse to promote its cause.

Chapter 2: The Limits of Catholic Hispanism, Mexico-Spain Relations during the Cristero Rebellion, 1922-27

On the morning of November 27th, 1926, the Mexican Consul in Valencia, José Alabarda, urgently informed Mexico's Minister in Madrid of a series of secret meetings recently held by Spanish lay activists in support of Mexican *cristeros*. Galvanized by President Plutarco Elías Calles's ban on public worship, cristero peasant rebels and their middle- and upper-class allies had mobilized to topple Calles's anti-clerical regime under the newly formed National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty (LNDLR). Known collectively as the *Ley Calles* (or Calles Law), the President's anti-religious measures authorized the seizure of Church property, the expulsion of foreign-born clergy, and the closure of religious educational institutions. Enacted in June 1926, the new laws imposed fines on clergy who publicly donned religious garb and called for the five-year imprisonment of any priest who criticized the government.¹

The Mexican clergy responded to these restrictions by suspending religious services indefinitely. As the Calles Law went into effect on July 31st, federal troops pillaged local parishes in the states of Jalisco and Michoacán. By August 5th, violence erupted between cristeros and the federal army. The skirmishes ignited a three-year civil war known as the Cristero Rebellion, an armed conflict between Mexican Church and state that claimed somewhere between 50,000 and 250,000 lives between 1926 and 1929.²

¹ Secretaría Relaciones Exteriores (SRE). Fondo: Relaciones Consulares y Diplomáticas, México-España: siglo XX. Expediente: 336, Folios: 312-19.

² Scholarship on the Cristero Rebellion is extensive. On the Calles Law and the outbreak of armed conflict at the local, regional, and transnational levels, see Butler (2004), Guerrero Medina (2021), Meyer (1973), Purnell (1999), Young (2015), among others.

In a series of confidential telegrams, Alabarda described ongoing efforts to shut down a pro-cristero rally scheduled for the following day in Valencia's Teatro Eslava. Weeks prior to the event, he had petitioned the civil governor to disband the demonstration, only to be denied on the grounds that the event would constitute a peaceful protest. The governor further added that he had already interceded in favor of the Calles administration by ordering local press censors to obstruct the publication of news favorable to cristeros. Still, in efforts to appease Mexican officials, he proposed a deal. The rally would continue as scheduled, but Alabarda would have an opportunity to publish a defense of Calles's religious "regulations" the following morning. The rebuttal would be printed in the front pages of *El Pueblo*—Valencia's nationally circulated socialist newspaper.³

Within hours, however, the governor suspended the Catholic demonstration, only to be met by disgruntled protesters outside his office the next day. Among them were priests and members of the local nobility, prominent landowners, students, and representatives from Valencia's *Partido Católico* (PCV). After this wave of protests dissuaded the governor from his decision, the rally took place as scheduled. At precisely 11:00 AM on Sunday, November 28th, two thousand Spanish Catholics poured through the doors of the Teatro Eslava, summoned by a public invitation printed in the city's leading religious newspaper, *El Diario de Valencia*.⁴

³ SRE. Expediente: 336, Folios: 312-19.

⁴ Ibid.



Image 2.1: Teatro Eslava, Valencia, Spain (1908-1961).
Source: Universitat de València

To the Mexican government's dismay, the Counterrevolution had now arrived in Spain. While Catholic militants waged war against the federal army, Spanish lay activists took to the streets and defended the *cristeros* as martyrs in a global crusade against anti-clerical reform. Since 1922, the *Damas Católicas* had forged crucial partnerships with like-minded lay groups to sway international public opinion in the rebels' favor. These included Spain's *Acción Católica de la Mujer* (ACdM), a women's organization directly involved in the Valencia demonstration.

To garner Spanish support, Mexican *católicas* relied on the power of Hispanist ideology. The *Damas* touted Mexico's Spanish heritage and appealed to their counterparts' shared Catholic faith. Similarly, students in the LNDLR claimed that "Spain, our mother, [could] not remain indifferent" to their cause. They petitioned Luis Aramburu, a Catalan

priest, to intercede on their behalf and deliver confidential documents to King Alfonso XIII.⁵

News clippings suggest that Hispanist racial language permeated the Valencia demonstration. Even as *valencianos* acknowledged their unique cultural heritage, they identified Iberian Catholicism as cause for solidarity between the two nations. In his opening address, law student Vicente Jiménez argued that Spain had a “racial obligation” to defend Mexico from Calles’s “bolshevist incursions.” Subsequently, the influential Count of Trigona expressed concern over the prospect of Mexican parents sending their children to study in U.S. religious institutions. Specifically, the Count feared that Mexican youth would adopt “Anglo-Protestant racism” towards Spain and the “Latin race.” He blamed Calles for leaving parents no choice but to send their children abroad to receive a spiritual education.⁶

The rally carried into the evening hours and closed with an emotionally charged chanting of the cristeros’ battle cry, “Viva Cristo Rey!”. Subsequently, the PCV’s president sent meeting minutes to the Vatican and members of the Mexican Episcopate, attesting to the strength of Catholics’ budding transnational network. By contrast, Alabarda’s rebuttal failed to see daylight on the morning of November 29th. In a telegram wired at 2:00 in the morning, the editor of *El Pueblo* informed the Mexican consul that neither the press censor nor the governor’s office had approved its publication. Not until December, in fact, did the spread on the Calles administration appear in the pages of *El Pueblo* as part of a larger

⁵ On the relationship between Aramburu and the LNDLR, see Guerrero Medina (2021), p. 428.

⁶ SRE. Expediente: 336, Folios: 317.

piece on Valencia's Socialist-Republican Party (PSRV). However, the editors restricted the piece to a brief paragraph of text accompanied by Calles's official photograph.⁷



Image 2.2: Mexican President Plutarco Elías Calles, 1924-28.
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

Tensions in Valencia spoke to the success with which Mexican lay activists deployed racial discourse to gain the support of their Spanish counterparts. This unique brand of Hispanism emphasized the nation's Iberian legacies and portrayed institutional Catholicism as both the engine of Mexican civilization and the final line of defense against the erosion of faith and public morality. Hispanists summoned the legacies of Spanish missionaries and framed the Cristero Rebellion in racial terms. With the backing of the Mexican clergy, these upper-class activists denounced popular Catholicism and mobilized to protect the country's "vulnerable indigenous masses" from state atheism and the lure of "false" religion.

Within Mexico, elites' racialized discourses of class and doctrinal purity doubled as the language of whiteness. However, while this underscoring of difference enabled

⁷ SRE. Expediente: 336, Folios: 318-19.

católicas to affirm their collective sense of superiority, it also exposed *all* Mexicans to Spanish prejudices. Religious conservatives in the Spanish government criticized the Mexican Church for allowing peasants to stray from Catholic doctrine. They condemned cristeros' purported fanaticism and voiced skepticism towards the rebellion's long-term viability. Even as Spanish lay activists embraced cristero martyrdom at the grassroots, government officials argued that the Cristero Rebellion did not represent a "true" Catholic movement. By 1927, Spaniards turned to notions of religious purity and argued against supporting Mexican rebels.

Hispanism and the JCFM

As the Church-state conflict intensified in the spring of 1926, the Damas Católicas developed educational campaigns designed to integrate peasants into the fold of institutional religion. These measures called for formal instruction in the catechism and required Spanish-language education for all indigenous and mixed-race workers. The Damas' call for religious restoration became synonymous with cultural Hispanization projects geared toward indigenous communities. While this process spoke to centuries of colonialism, the relationship between Hispanism, religious conservatism, and national identity remained nuanced and complex.

Since the Mexican War of Independence (1810-21), political leaders had remained loyal to the Church even as they experimented with new models of government. They deemed Catholicism a pillar of the new nation and defended the clergy's economic privilege despite its colonial baggage. While calling for popular sovereignty and an end to Spanish tyranny, José María Morelos supported tithes and pushed for a zero-tolerance

policy toward other faiths. Similarly, the monarchist Agustín de Iturbide declared Roman Catholicism the nation's official religion in 1824.⁸

Not until the mid-nineteenth century did support for the Church become associated with conservatism and opposition to secular reform.⁹ At the same time, Latin American intellectuals drew on the region's shared Catholic legacies and developed notions of *iberismo*, or Iberian unity, to counter U.S. aggression. A precursor to Hispanist racial ideologies, *iberismo* established contrasts between North American materialism and Latin American spirituality. It placed religion at the center of this hemispheric duality and depicted geopolitical conflict as the product of longstanding tensions between Spanish Catholicism and Anglo-Saxon Protestantism.¹⁰

Following Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* encyclical (1891), Mexican religious activists defended institutional Catholicism as a force for political stability. They drew from Catholic social doctrine and denounced industrialization for dehumanizing laborers and creating economic disparities that led to working-class radicalization. As middle- and upper-class actors, Catholic Hispanists racialized "the masses" as credulous and violent

⁸ For abridged translations of Morelos's *Sentimientos de la Nación* (1813) and Iturbide's 1821 Plan of Iguala, see Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson, eds., *The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, and Politics* (Duke University Press, 2002).

⁹ For more on the nineteenth-century conflict between Mexican Liberals and religious Conservatives, see Jan Bazant, "From independence to the Liberal Republic, 1821-1867," in Leslie Bethell, ed., (1991). For more on the consequences of the liberal 1857 Constitution and its impact on Church-state relations, see Bazant's earlier work, *Alienation of Church Wealth in Mexico: Social and Economic Aspects of the Liberal Revolution, 1856-75* (Cambridge University Press, 1971). Also see, Guy P.C. Thomson and David LaFrance, *Patriotism, Politics, and Popular Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Mexico: Juan Francisco Lucas and the Puebla Sierra* (Rowan and Littlefield, 2001); and Florencia E. Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (University of California Press, 1995).

¹⁰ On *iberismo*, see Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Latin America: The Allure and Power of an Idea* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 42-46. See also, Diana Arbaiza, *The Spirit of Hispanism: Commerce, Culture, and Identity across the Atlantic, 1875-1936* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020). Specifically, Arbaiza examines contradictions between Hispanist portrayals of Catholic spirituality as a rejection of materialism and Hispanists' own pursuit of commercial relationships between Spain and the Americas.

indigenous “Others.” They established Catholic labor syndicates to uphold working-class faith and used the specter of “communism” to regulate workers’ mobilization.¹¹

As historian Beatriz Urías Horcasitas argues, Hispanists of all political stripes developed projects of *mestizaje* that sought to Hispanize indigenous communities to achieve a national “racial regeneration.” These calls to Hispanization usually involved Spanish-language educational campaigns and, for religious conservatives, formal instruction in official Church doctrine. Regardless of ideology, Hispanists used the language of *mestizaje* to depict Spanish Catholicism as the engine of civilization and social harmony. However, while Hispanists claimed to promote national unity, their praise of Iberian religion also worked to advance racial prejudice.¹²

In his *Historia Antigua y de la Conquista de México* (1880), the prominent historian Manuel Orozco y Berra portrayed the nation’s indigenous communities as savage, barbaric, and morally degenerate. He praised the arrival of Christianity to the Americas and argued that “sweep[ing] the Aztec cult from the earth had been an immense benefit on the road to civilization.” A member of Liberal and Conservative governments, Orozco y Berra was frequently cited by the Damas Católicas and the Knights of Columbus. At the same time, his work inspired Revolutionary intellectuals like José Vasconcelos, Manuel Gamio, and the proponents of *indigenismo*.¹³

An intellectual movement of the Institutional Revolution (1920-46), *indigenismo* strived to “re-discover” native traditions and embrace indigenous actors as more than just

¹¹ Urías Horcasitas (2010), pp. 602-03.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ As cited in Kelley, *A Sociologist in Mexico* (1923), pp. 6-7.

the passive recipients of Spanish cultural “enlightenment.” However, even as intellectuals exalted pre-Columbian civilizations, they upheld natives’ alleged inferiority and portrayed indigeneity as a stepping stone toward a more “advanced” and Euro-centric modernity. In his 1925 treatise, *La Raza Cósmica*, José Vasconcelos praised Aztec culture but argued that Spanish colonists’ “Latinization of the Indian” had birthed an “improved” mestizo race. As Secretary of Public Education, he advocated for a Spanish-language curriculum that acknowledged Mexico’s mixed-race heritage but prioritized European history and the Greek and Roman classics. For Gamio, seasonal labor and migration constituted crucial aspects of modernization. He believed that agricultural work could be revolutionized as workers returned from the United States and brought “advanced” techniques to otherwise disconnected rural communities.¹⁴

Historian Rick A. López has recently demonstrated that indigenismo encouraged subordination by sanitizing otherwise “subversive” popular traditions. To integrate indigenous peoples into the nation, intellectuals engaged in processes of cultural appropriation and re-packaged the state’s hegemonic projects as racially democratic enterprises.¹⁵ By the mid-to-late 1920s, these initiatives included Gamio’s rural modernization projects and the Spanish-language educational campaigns pursued by Vasconcelos’s Secretariat of Public Education (SEP). They also included indigenous workers’ syndicalization under the state-backed Mexican Federation of Labor, the *Confederación Regional de Obreros Mexicanos* (CROM), and peasants’ gradual

¹⁴ José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race* [1925] (1997). Also, Manuel Gamio, *Mexican Immigration to the United States: A History of Human Migration and Adjustment* (University of Chicago Press, 1930).

¹⁵ On official indigenismo, see López (2010) and Tenorio-Trillo (1996).

incorporation in Calles's Mexican Labor Party (PLM)—the nation's ruling political institution.

Still, despite indigenismo's internal contradictions, religious activists accused *indigenistas* of manipulating racial narratives to advance anti-Catholic state projects. They denounced the government's embrace of indigeneity as racially divisive and claimed that indigenismo relied on nationalist rhetoric to conceal state radicalism. By contrast, Hispanists defended Catholicism as a vehicle for natives' cultural assimilation. They argued that the Church had historically educated the nation's indigenous "masses" and protected them from elites' abuse of power.¹⁶

In this regard, Hispanists condemned the government for attempting to perform the work of Catholic institutions. They argued that indigenismo strived to grow the power of state institutions at the expense of workers' religious conviction. By the summer of 1926, Hispanists denounced Calles's ban on public worship and religious instruction as a strategy to grow the power of organizations like the CROM and the SEP among working-class communities. Consequently, they looked to the nation's Spanish Catholic heritage as the antidote to indigenous "barbarism" and the president's alleged communist aggression.

Still, even as Catholic activists preached national unity, Hispanists' anti-indigenous prejudice remained prevalent among the nation's lay groups. Specifically, upper-class católicas' calls to doctrinal uniformity relied on the racialized images of peasant radicalism to galvanize *socias* into action. This was particularly the case among members of the *Juventud Católica Femenina Mexicana* (JCFM). Although the group pursued peasant re-

¹⁶ See Urías Horcasitas (2010) and Tamayo (2020).

education under the banner of national integration, its specific brand of Hispanism ultimately promoted insularity.

Founded in Mexico City in May 1926, the JCFM was formally established by the Damas Católicas and members of the clergy around the shared goal of promoting young women's alignment with Church doctrine. Made up of young women aged 13 to 35, the group's upper-class *socias* joined the ranks of the LNDLR and eagerly participated in petition drives that called for the abolition of the Constitution's anti-clerical provisions. However, as tensions escalated during the summer of 1926, the JCFM took on the mission of educating indigenous workers. In pursuit of women's moral uplift and cultural enlightenment, *socias* donned the mantle of religious missionaries and set out to "liberate" *indígenas* from their allegedly "backward and insufficient spiritual practices."¹⁷

As a first step, the group's aspiring teachers established the *Círculos de Catequistas* to promote religious instruction among rural *campesinas* and industrial *obreras*. Next, the activists founded the *Instituto de Cultura Femenina* (ICF), a Spanish-language educational institution that would mold "ideal" Catholic women who could retain their faith in times of crisis. Members of the JCFM pursued these initiatives out of fear that "false ideologies" would proliferate among indigenous peasants. Subsequently, they moved to expand the ICF's Spanish-language libraries across the JCFM's diocesan chapters. Designed to promote an affinity for Catholicism and Hispanic culture, these parish *bibliotecas* boasted copies of Spanish history books, Golden Age literary classics, and translations of canonical

¹⁷ FXC. Archivo ACM. Comité Central J.C.F.M. Actas, Caja 1: 1926-1938. Libro de Actas de la Juventud Femenina Católica Mexicana, 1926: "25 de mayo," "8 de junio," "15 de junio," "13 de julio," "20 de julio," "24 de agosto." See also, Álvarez-Pimentel (2017).

religious texts. The libraries also housed Spanish-language instructional booklets that *socias* used to promote literacy among local communities.¹⁸

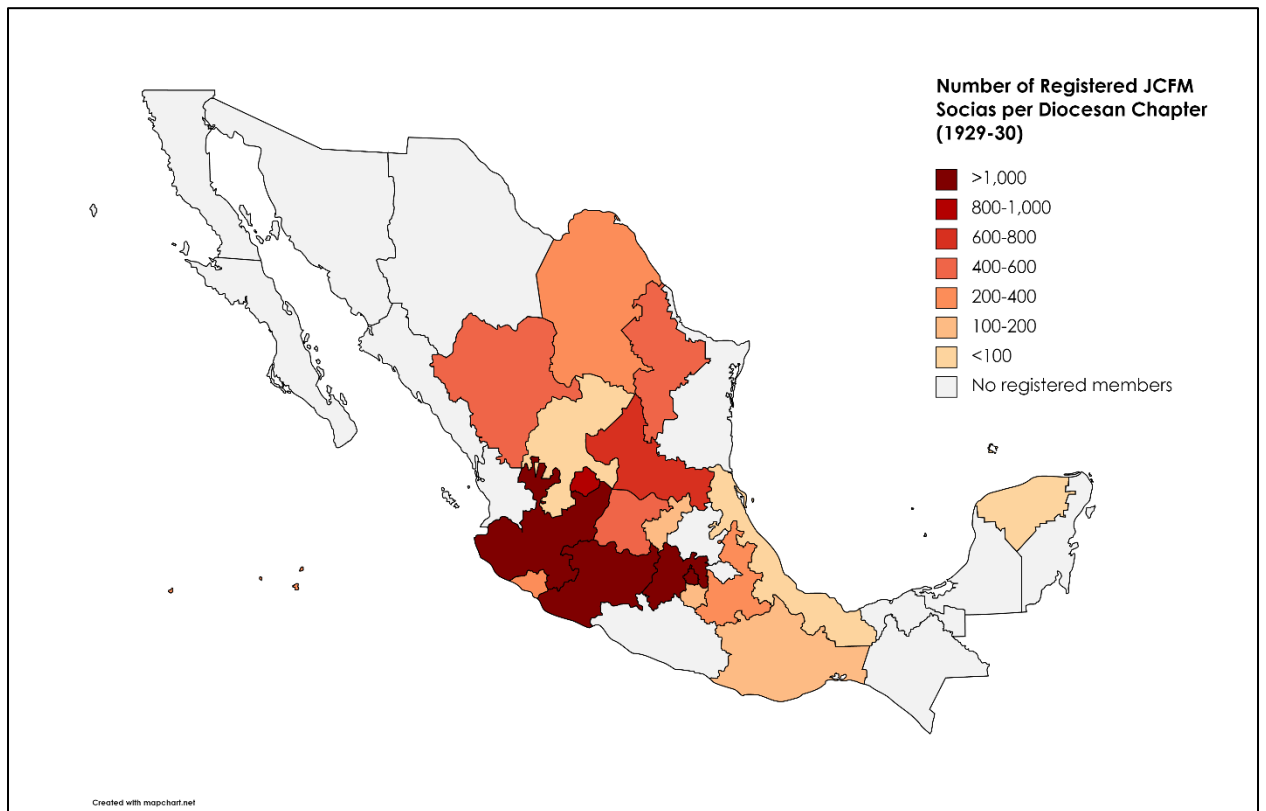


Image 2.3: Future teachers in training at the Instituto de Cultura Femenina (1930).
Source: Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de México, Base Miguel Darío Miranda.
Printed in Stephen J.C. Andes, *The Mysterious Sofía* (2019)

Initially based in Mexico City, the JCFM's two dozen members managed to dramatically expand their reach during the Cristero Rebellion. By December 1929, their organization had grown to include nearly 9,000 members scattered across hundreds of parishes in 22 diocesan chapters. The expansion was deemed a miracle by the Mexican clergy. In the face of persecution, *socias* had brought their Instituto de Cultura Femenina to cristero strongholds. These included the Dioceses of León, Puebla, Morelia, and Zamora. By 1929, the JCFM had even founded a chapter in Los Angeles, California and established

¹⁸ Libro de Actas de la Juventud Católica Femenina Mexicana: "22 de junio," "7 de septiembre." Álvarez-Pimentel (2017), Andes (2019).

library spaces across the beleaguered Diocese of Guadalajara and local parishes in Aguascalientes and the Los Altos region of Jalisco.¹⁹



Map 2-1: Number of Registered JCFM Socias Per Diocesan Chapter (1929-1930).
For state names, see Map 1-1.
Source: Author.

As the daughters of wealthy cosmopolitan families, JCFM activists Sofía del Valle and Juana Arguinzóniz petitioned *padres de familia* to support the ICF. By the fall of 1926, the JCFM saw its second-largest wave of growth among the country’s northern business elite in the Dioceses of Saltillo, Durango, and Monterrey. Absent from these trends were the predominantly indigenous dioceses in Mexico’s Gulf Coast and southern countryside. With the exception of the Diocese of Oaxaca, the Dioceses of Yucatán, Huejutla

¹⁹ FXC. Archivo UFCM. Serie Impresos. Publicaciones Acción Católica Mexicana. Caja 74: “Juventud.” “Crónica de la Primera Asamblea General de la J.C.F.M.,” *Juventud: Boletín del Comité Central de J.C.F.M.* Año 2 Número Extraordinario (Mexico, D.F., octubre 1932), pp. 12-13.

(Veracruz), and Huajuapán de León (Oaxaca) saw virtually no growth during the three-year span—a pattern that would haunt the JCFM for the next decade.²⁰

Under the guidance of the influential Father Miguel Darío Miranda y Gómez,²¹ JCFM activists strived to represent a European feminine ideal—wealthy, educated, and morally pure. Like Refugio Goribar and the Damas Católicas of 1922, the young *socias* hoped to inspire indigenous and mixed-race workingwomen to pursue cultural refinement and invest in their spiritual development. Toward the end of the Cristero Rebellion, del Valle and Arguinzóniz traveled across Europe and met with delegates of Catholic Action organizations in Italy, Belgium, France, Germany, and Spain. They drew inspiration from these groups' struggles and hoped to learn new strategies to mobilize youth. The daughter of a Spanish-immigrant father, del Valle's eleven-month trip included some brief work with young women in northern Spain. Upon her return to Mexico City, she was lauded as a cultural ambassador and heralded by fellow *socias* as the “personification of the Mexican Catholic ideal.”²²

As historian Stephen Andes argues, del Valle and her *compañeras* perceived themselves as imparting working-class women with “the apostolic mission [they] received from the male Church hierarchy.”²³ However, their channeling of Hispanism was driven more by suspicion of *indígenas*' political activism than a genuine desire to “elevate”

²⁰ *Ibid.* See also, Álvarez-Pimentel (2017).

²¹ Aside from his leadership of the JCFM, Miranda had been appointed as the new head of the *Secretariado Social Mexicano* (SSM) in 1925. There, he sought to coordinate a unified propagation of Catholic social doctrine by consolidating a vast constellation of lay organizations. For more, see Aspe Armella (2008).

²² “Crónica de la Primera Asamblea General de la J.C.F.M.,” (1932), pp. 8-9.

²³ Andes (2019), p. 311.

workers through literacy or moral instruction. During del Valle's European tour, the JCFM's acting president, Aurora de la Lama, lamented that Mexico's religious conflict had turned the nation on its head and unleashed a tempest of prejudice, anxiety, and distrust. Fearful of the CROM's courting of urban and rural workers, she worried that indigenous women had lost their connection to God in pursuit of material aspirations.²⁴

Equally concerning to Miranda were obreras' new forms of spiritual empowerment. The Cristero Rebellion had allowed working-class women to assume positions of leadership within their religious communities, and some had even gone as far as officiating the Mass from their homes. Specifically, Miranda kept a watchful eye on *Las Brigadas Femeninas de Santa Juana del Arco*. A militant workingwomen's secret society, the group's penchant for unorthodox rituals and loose constructions of martyrdom exemplified the type of "false religion" the JCFM sought to eradicate. Made up of seamstresses, secretaries, and retail workers from Guadalajara, the members of Las Brigadas had enthusiastically participated in the national boycotts staged by the LNDLR in 1925 and 1926. As the conflict intensified in the summer of 1927, the women embraced their role in waging war against federal forces and took to arms in support of the cristeros. According to the group's bylaws, the delivery and acquisition of weaponry represented one of several channels through which their organization would mobilize in defense of the Church. Other means included espionage, charity, and fundraising, in addition to the distribution of propaganda.²⁵

²⁴ "Crónica de la Primera Asamblea General de la J.C.F.M.," (1932), p. 10.

²⁵ Aspe Armella (2008), pp. 74-78; Meyer (1973), pp. 122-126.

In terms of ritual, the militants fashioned an elaborate system of ceremonies that infused symbolism and elements of freemasonry into their specific brand of Catholicism. One oath required members to kneel before a crucifix and pledge absolute secrecy as a testament of allegiance to the organization:

Before God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and before the Blessed Virgin of Guadalupe and *mi Patria*, I pledge that, even if I were to be slain or martyred [*aunque me martiricen*], and even if I were subject to flattery and promised all of the kingdoms of the world, I will keep the existence and activities [of this group] in absolute secret for however long necessary, including the names of all its members, their places of residence, symbols... With God's grace, I will die before becoming a traitor...²⁶

Evidenced by the oath's language of martyrdom, the women of Las Brigadas perceived death as both an honorable alternative to betrayal and a glorious sacrifice for the good of their religious sorority. At their core, the militants believed that any one of them could become a martyr by virtue of their refusal to succumb to earthly temptations. As scholars Marisol López Menéndez and Gema Kloppe-Santamaría demonstrate, the discourse of martyrdom became common among Catholic militants precisely because it often surrounded the death of individuals whose memory promoted a specific cause or cohered a distinct collective identity. Still, the rise of these narratives within popular memory proved worrisome for the institutional Church, as their acquisition of spiritual meaning enabled the rise of cults of personality that did not necessarily adhere to established doctrine and norms.²⁷

In response, organizations like the JCFM sought to remedy these issues by promoting workingwomen's realignment with institutional Catholicism. Socias established

²⁶ Meyer (1973), pp. 122-126. See Aspe Armella (2008), 76-77.

²⁷ See Marisol López Menéndez, "Masacres en México: Narrativas martiriales y movilización social," texto en proceso (2021), and "Martirio, milagros y memoria: Manuel Bonilla y Miguel A. Pro, dos mártires del conflicto religioso 1926-1929," in *Mártires, santos, patronos. Devociones y santidad en el México del siglo XX* (Universidad Iberoamericana, 2016). Also, Kloppe-Santamaría (2020).

a brief contact with Las Brigadas and by 1929 set up *bibliotecas populares* to foster knowledge of Church history, papal encyclicals, and Catholic doctrine on social issues. During that time, President de la Lama described relations with Las Brigadas as friendly and collaborative. She expressed pride in these efforts and hoped to expand the organizations' joint book club initiatives to foster dialogue among activists.²⁸

At first glance, Las Brigadas' decision to name themselves after the recently canonized Joan of Arc²⁹ would seem to have aligned well with the JCFM's endeavors to Europeanize Mexican Catholic activism. However, the secret society ardently defined itself as a "Mexican" organization and emphasized its autonomy from the Roman Church. Unlike the JCFM's reverence for Spanish missionaries, Las Brigadas limited their admiration to their worship of the Virgin of Guadalupe. They pledged allegiance to God, nation, and woman (the Virgin), but refrained from affirming their loyalty to the Church or its clergy.

A reflection of class differences, the contrast between Las Brigadas and the JCFM's respective trajectories could not have been starker. These disparities manifested themselves in each group's internal dynamics, collective identity, and respective relationship with the Mexican Church. For affluent young women, the JCFM became a space where mobilizing resources on behalf of the *cristeros* allowed activists to show off (and grow) their vast network of family and professional connections. Personal rivalries often erupted among the group's youngest activists, but usually involved trivial feuds over status symbols (fashion, etc.) among adolescent friend groups.³⁰

²⁸ "Crónica de la Primera Asamblea General de la J.C.F.M.," (1932), p. 14.

²⁹ Joan of Arc's beatification had taken place in 1909, culminating in her canonization by Pope Benedict XV in May 1920.

³⁰ FXC. Archivo ACM 5.3. Sección 5: "Junta Central JCFM," Serie 3: "Informes: 1936-39, 1946-48." "Informe sobre la Cuarta Asamblea Diocesana de Oaxaca, JCFM."

Some of the nation's leading clergymen were longtime personal friends of Mexico's elite families and gradually came to know *socias* through their parents' involvement in the Church. Throughout Sofía del Valle's adult life, Father Miranda affectionately referred to her as "hija," or daughter, and identified her as one of a handful of young *jóvenes* who comprised the small "nest" he had grown to love.³¹ As residents of Mexico City's upscale Colonia Roma neighborhood, Sofía's own family had been next-door neighbors of Pedro Lascuráin. A distant relative of the Damas' president, Elena Lascuráin, Pedro was a conservative Catholic who briefly served as the country's interim president and participated in General Victoriano Huerta's Church-backed coup d'état.³²



Image 2.4: Sofía del Valle (1926).

Source: Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de México, Base Miguel Darío Miranda
Printed in Stephen J.C. Andes, *The Mysterious Sofía* (2019)

³¹ Andes reveals that "the nest" was Miranda's nickname for the women who founded the Instituto de Cultura Femenina (del Valle, Arguinzóniz, etc.). Furthermore, Andes demonstrates that, what likely started as a paternal relationship between Miranda and del Valle, gradually evolved into something more "intimate" by the mid-1930s. See Andes (2019), pp. 86, 153-54, 320-21.

³² On the connections to Pedro Lascuráin, see Andes (2019), p. 33.

By contrast, Las Brigadas established an isolated community of working-class militants held together by their commitment to each other. Relying only on themselves, these women forged sacred bonds of mutual trust and asserted that treason not only defied God's will, but also violated the integrity of their sorority. However, as the Vatican moved to condemn secret societies during the winter of 1928-29, the militants found themselves at odds with the Mexican Church. Tensions escalated as the Archbishop of Guadalajara, José Francisco Orozco y Jiménez, ended his relationship with the organization and named Father Miranda as its acting director.³³

As the Cristero Rebellion reached a stalemate in 1928, Miranda and members of the Mexican Episcopate debated over the best way to demobilize Las Brigadas and integrate them into the Church's institutional fold. Historian Jean Meyer documents that, even as the group transitioned into becoming an *organización confederada* of the Mexican Catholic Action organization, figures like Miranda continued to fear their alleged proclivity for religious violence. By 1929, Mexican bishops had all but abandoned the cristeros. In addition to their disapproval of peasant rebels' popular religious practices, Church leaders feared that any form of aggression would jeopardize their negotiations with the state. Sometime between 1929 and 1930, Miranda allegedly discovered and set fire to Las Brigadas' secret headquarters in an effort to protect the Church's recent peace settlement. The militants moved their organization underground and maintained limited contact with JCFM leaders until 1935.³⁴

³³ Aspe Armella (2008), pp. 74-78.

³⁴ Ibid.

Even if the JCFM intended to integrate Las Brigadas into their ranks, their proximity to the clergy made this virtually impossible. Furthermore, as defenders of institutional doctrine, the *socias*' own suspicion of popular religion did not align with workingwomen's spiritual militancy. Imbued with anti-indigenous racism, the JCFM's classism furthered the divide between upper-class *socias* and the grassroots sectors of society. As a result, the group became increasingly insular and continued to prioritize the interests of the clergy and a small circle of affluent youth.

Still, the JCFM's appeals to Spanish-high culture and a cosmopolitan "feminine" ideal resonated with the Damas Católicas' vision for Mexican Catholic womanhood. Aside from domestic elites, these images were crafted to establish a common solidarity with European activists around a shared set of values—namely, the defense of faith, family, and nation through religious education. In Spain, Mexican *católicas* found a passionate audience. Even as upper-class *socias* remained skeptical of popular religious movements, the image of peasant *cristeros* helped them garner international support in their struggle against Calles.

The Secret War in Spain

Between 1923 and 1925, the women of the Damas Católicas used their membership in the International Union of Catholic Women's Leagues to forge partnerships with Spanish Catholic newspapers and laywomen's groups. These alliances were grounded in a shared commitment to Catholic social doctrine and a mutual desire to defend the Church from anti-clerical incursions. Following the Damas' 1922 Congress, the Spanish Condesa de Gavía, President of the ACdM, congratulated Elena Lascuráin on her courageous stand against President Obregón's attacks on the Mexican Church. Both activists emphasized

women's roles as "madres de patria," and reaffirmed their commitment as keepers of faith in their respective societies.³⁵

In the realm of print media, the Damas urged their allies in the Spanish Catholic press to expose the Mexican government's widespread harassment of Spanish-born clergy. During the following months, an avalanche of news articles revealed the prevalence of state-sanctioned violence against Spanish priests, which journalists attributed to the Obregón administration's alleged anti-Spanish prejudices. The stories appeared on the front pages of prominent Catholic newspapers. These included *El Debate* and *El Siglo Futuro* in Madrid, *El Diario de Valencia*, and *La Gaceta del Norte* in Bilbao.

Through private correspondence, the Damas conveyed their sense of racial and spiritual unity to Spanish counterparts. As the Obregón administration sought to formally renew diplomatic relations with Spain in 1923, the Damas petitioned Prime Minister Miguel Primo de Rivera to publicly denounce Obregón's incursions on religious freedom. By the summer of 1926, leading officials in Spain's Foreign Ministry expressed sympathy for the cristeros. "Spain being a Catholic nation," argued Minister Carlos Gil-Delgado, "it seems fundamental to intervene in the Mexican religious question, for it has affected many Spanish nationals."³⁶

From an ideological standpoint, Primo de Rivera seemed poised to support Mexican Catholics in their fight against anti-clericalism. After launching a successful military coup against the Spanish Parliament in September 1923, he ascended to the office of Prime Minister with the backing of the monarchy, the military, and the Roman Catholic Church.

³⁵ FXC. Archivo UFCM. Caja 13, Folder 62. "Correspondencia Liga Internacional Católica."

³⁶ FAPECF. MFN 796-98. Inv.: 1551 "Informes 10-B, julio 1926."

Subsequently, Primo de Rivera “suspended” the Constitution and dissolved the parliamentary *Cortes* system on the pretext of purifying government of “vices, dishonor, and immorality.” At the same time, he imposed a strict system of press censorship across the country and established the *Unión Patriótica Española* (UPE) political party to consolidate rule.³⁷

By 1924, the UPE proposed reorganizing society to protect faith, property, and traditional family values. Primo de Rivera denounced the “inherent corruption” of liberal democracy and pledged allegiance to “Nation, King, and Church.” Turning to discourses of spiritual regeneration, he attributed social decadence to the secularization of the public sphere. To remedy these ills, he proposed restoring Catholicism to the center of public life and national identity. The new government subsequently mandated religious instruction as part of secondary education, It recruited priests to vet textbooks for their adherence to doctrine and tasked Spanish católicas with new and more public responsibilities.³⁸

Since its inception, the UPE identified Catholic women as the engines of moralization amid the perceived rise of gambling, alcoholism, and prostitution in Spain’s growing cities. Similarly, prominent newspapers like *La Voz de la Mujer* portrayed Catholic women’s activism as the only antidote to men’s private and public failures. As early as 1924, the UPE rewarded católicas’ political loyalty by granting them suffrage and appointing them to powerful local offices. However, the party also held that women must adhere to their “feminine condition” and prioritize their “duties” as mothers and

³⁷ See Raymond Carr, *Spain, 1808-1939* (Oxford University Press, 1966) and *Modern Spain, 1875-1980* (Oxford University Press, 1980).

³⁸ Carr (1966), p. 564.

homemakers. The UPE ultimately recruited upper-class católicas to perform administrative jobs at the municipal level. It deemed these positions as both “natural” and “appropriate” realms of women’s political engagement given their supposed resemblance to work performed in the home.³⁹

The partnership between Catholic women and the government culminated in the UPE’s formal incorporation of the ACdM. Thereafter, Spanish católicas played prominent roles in developing national public health projects and youth educational curricula. Similar to the Damas Católicas, the ACdM established *centros culturales* to impart workingwomen with religious instruction. The group also published dozens of Catholic magazines and founded prominent Catholic women’s syndicates to draw workers away from left-leaning labor unions.⁴⁰

With an eye toward foreign policy, Primo de Rivera officially commissioned the ACdM to implement a vigorous propaganda campaign that would foster ties with Latin American nations. Even if the goal was to raise the Prime Minister’s international profile, Spanish católicas used this opportunity to denounce Mexican anti-clericalism before the world. At the same time, the ACdM worked to familiarize domestic audiences with the *cristeros*. They played to Spaniards’ collective memory of Carlist civil wars and portrayed the Mexican Church-state conflict as an extension of Catholicism’s centuries-long struggle against secularization. Subsequently, the ACdM partnered with the Juventud Jaimista, a Carlist youth group, to organize fundraisers, demonstrations, and public debates across

³⁹ Inmaculada Blasco Herranz, “Feminismo católico: una propuesta de ciudadanía femenina en la España de los años veinte,” in Morant, Isabel, ed., *Historia de las Mujeres en España y América Latina. Tomo III. El mundo contemporáneo* (Cátedra, 2006), pp. 55-75.

⁴⁰ Blasco Herranz (2006), pp. 69-71.

dozens of Spanish cities. By August 1926, Spanish monarchists had adopted the chant of “Viva Cristo Rey!” to convey their opposition to republicanism and liberal reform.⁴¹

Following the November demonstration in Valencia, the ACdM penned an open letter to Primo de Rivera, which appeared on the front pages of *El Diario de Valencia* on November 30th. They urged the Prime Minister to join other nations in publicly disavowing violence against Mexican Catholics, hoping that such an international demonstration of solidarity would dissuade Calles from pursuing his “Bolshevik agenda.” The letter ended by calling on all Catholics to participate in a national prayer campaign. Signed by “tens of thousands of Spanish women,” it alluded to the cristeros’ rising popularity among Spaniards.⁴²

Published at the urging of the Damas Católicas, the letter sent the Mexican and Spanish governments into a tailspin. Besides escalating tensions between Catholic activists and their opponents, the incident drew a wedge between Spanish and Mexican diplomats. Within days, junior officials in the Spanish government began to waver under the weight of public pressure. In a published response to the women’s group, Antonio Almagro, a deputy officer working in the Prime Minister’s staff, openly expressed sympathy for the cristeros. Specifically, Almagro joined the ACdM and called on Primo de Rivera to publicly denounce anti-Catholic violence in Mexico. He asserted that the King of Spain, Alfonso XIII, also deplored Calles’s religious persecution.⁴³

⁴¹ See Rebeca Arce Pinedo, *Dios, Patria y Hogar: La construcción social de la mujer española por el catolicismo y las derechas en el primer tercio del siglo XX* (Universidad de Cantabria, 2008).

⁴² SRE. Expediente: 336, Folios: 312-19, 333-34.

⁴³ SRE. Expediente: 336, Folio: 333-334.

Not until the morning of December 15th did the Spanish government denounce Almagro's letter via private telegram. There, José Yanguas Messía, the Spanish Minister of State, informed the Mexican Minister that Almagro's note had been drafted without approval. Yanguas assured his Mexican colleague that Almagro's opinions had been distorted by Catholic newspapers and did not speak for the Spanish government. He further added that Almagro had been reprimanded by his superiors and expressed hope that the incident would not harm relations between the two countries.⁴⁴

Still, González Martínez urged the Spanish government to publish an official refutation of Almagro's letter. As Yanguas vacillated, the Mexican Minister took matters into his own hands and circulated a note for immediate publication. In an open letter printed the next day, he requested Almagro's official resignation and declared that, on matters pertinent to the Cristero Rebellion, the Spanish state was fractured from within. He denounced Spanish officials and alleged that Primo de Rivera's administration was controlled by Catholic extremists.⁴⁵

Two days later, the Mexican Consul in Barcelona, Manuel Otálora, published a second letter. Otálora claimed that Almagro's note was a falsified document and part of a Catholic conspiracy to destabilize Spain-Mexico relations. With the support of Spanish republicans and local socialist organizations, the two letters were widely circulated among dissident circles and published in dozens of progressive newspapers. The Mexican Ministry even managed to win a small victory over Valencia's regional censor's office, convincing it to delay the publication of pro-Catholic news pieces so Mexican officials could have

⁴⁴ SRE. Expediente: 336, Folio: 360-62, 373-75.

⁴⁵ SRE. Expediente: 336, Folios: 373-79.

time to respond. Despite these victories, however, Mexican diplomats remained skeptical of local governments and the UPE. In Valencia, Alabarda expressed concern over the provisional governor's seeming favoritism toward Catholic demonstrations.⁴⁶

To retaliate against the ACdM, the Mexican Ministry pursued a relentless intimidation campaign targeting activists and priests. In Madrid, González Martínez turned to espionage and kept record of the women's private meetings. In a confidential letter to the Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary, Aarón Saenz, the Minister claimed to have discovered the location of the group's secret headquarters. He sent about a dozen spies to infiltrate their ranks and follow local clergy, many of whom were suspected of aiding exiled Mexican clergymen along the French border. Three weeks after the Valencia demonstration, González Martínez ordered his agents to send a "warning" to the alleged conspirators. Disguised as students, the spies broke character during a meeting, shouted back at speakers, and effectively disbanded the gathering with the help of local police.⁴⁷

Across every region of the country, the ACdM relied on local clergy and sympathetic newspaper outlets to disseminate publicity in support of the cristeros. However, when generosity did not suffice, consular correspondence suggests that the ACdM turned to bribery and other means in order to achieve its goals (though this could also reflect Mexican officials' own conspiratorial thinking). In the Mediterranean port of Málaga, for instance, the Mexican Viceconsul José González Rul informed the Minister in Madrid that local newspapers had begun to demand payment in exchange for the publication of pro-Calles articles. The Viceconsul alleged that editors had likely received

⁴⁶ SRE. Expediente: 336, Folio: 350, 353, 357.

⁴⁷ SRE. Expediente: 336, Folio: 335-38, 370-72.

a handsome sum of money from local lay groups. Similarly, in the coastal town of Vigo near the Portuguese border, the ACdM persuaded the local censor to print a series of pro-cristero articles in the local *Faro de Vigo* newspaper. This prompted the town's mayor, Alejandro Viana, to issue an apology to the Mexican Minister and assure the local Consul that the piece had never been sent to the censor's office for approval.⁴⁸

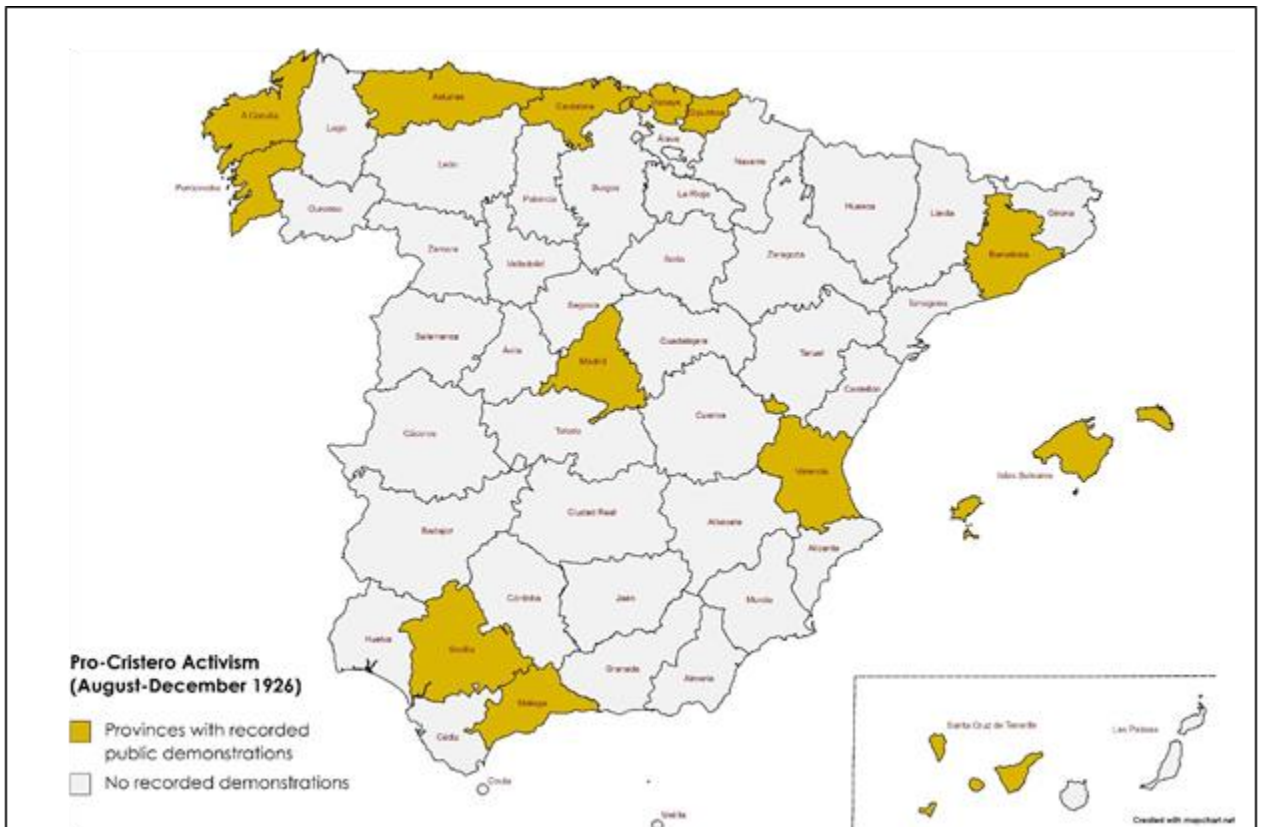
By the December 29th, Manuel de los Santos, the Mexican Consul in the Basque town of San Sebastian, admitted to having lost all confidence in the local censor. Even as local officials assured the Consul otherwise, the latter blamed "local Catholic elements" for pressuring the censor's office into printing pro-cristero articles. Throughout the Basque country, exiled members of the Mexican clergy had partnered with priests and lay groups to disseminate anti-Calles propaganda. The Consul blamed the federal government for its lack of organization and argued that the pressures on local offices were far too great for any one censor to control. Barely four months into the armed conflict, de los Santos had grown exasperated by the resilience of Catholic activism. He assured González Martínez that he would work with local governments to subdue demonstrations, but also made clear that he would no longer fight a losing battle against the Basque Catholic press.⁴⁹

Consular correspondence suggests that the Damas Católicas and the ACdM found receptive audiences in the provinces where republicanism and liberal reform were most popular. Aside from the Catalan regions of Valencia and Barcelona, these places included the northern provinces of Vizcaya, Asturias, and Cantabria; the southern provinces of Málaga and Sevilla; and significant parts of the Spanish Basque country. Embroiled in their

⁴⁸ SRE. Expediente: 336, Folio: 365, 395.

⁴⁹ SRE. Expediente: 336, Folio: 431.

own struggles against anti-clericalism, Catholics in these regions mobilized in solidarity with the cristeros from the start of the Church-state conflict. Their support for Mexican martyrs became a new way to voice opposition to secular reform and what they considered to be local attacks on freedom of speech.



Map 2-2: Pro-Cristero Activism, Spain (August-December 1926).
Source: Author

Despite its professed adherence to Catholic doctrine, the Spanish government struggled to subdue growing dissent among lay groups and members of the clergy. In addition to their dissatisfaction with the Prime Minister’s approach to the Mexican conflict, Spanish católicas found reason to defy Primo de Rivera after he repeatedly denied married women the right to vote in 1924 and 1925. The ACdM responded by launching a series of rallies, conferences, and educational campaigns designed to promote awareness of

women's moral and patriotic obligations to society. By the summer of 1926, pro-cristero activism allowed women to exercise political agency while nurturing their spiritual calling.⁵⁰

Aware of Primo de Rivera's unpopularity, Calles courted Spanish republicans, socialists, and communist dissidents. Specifically, he used consular offices to launch local publicity campaigns that would sway public opinion toward his administration. In Madrid, Secretary Sáenz tasked González Martínez with fostering relationships with the editors of the city's progressive and left-leaning newspapers—e.g., *El Sol*, *El Socialista*, *El Liberal*, *La Libertad*, and *El Heraldo de Madrid*. Mexico's Spanish Legation also established working partnerships with Basque and Catalan separatist groups, the Socialist Party of Valencia, and Madrid's own Republican Party.⁵¹

As early as 1924, Primo de Rivera had earned the enmity of Spanish progressives after adopting a “divide and conquer” strategy to keep prominent labor syndicates from unifying against the UPE. He specifically sought to suppress political agitation from anarchists and communist organizations, which had gained popularity among workers as Spain continued to industrialize. In May of that year, he outlawed the National Labor Confederation for allegedly promoting anarchist ideologies among unions and separatist ethnic groups. This move benefited the socialist General Workers' Union (UGT), which the Prime Minister gradually integrated into the national state apparatus. In exchange for its political compliance, Primo de Rivera granted the UGT crucial concessions in the

⁵⁰ Blasco Herranz (2006), pp. 69-71.

⁵¹ SRE. Expediente: 336, Folio: 103-08, 112, 195.

realms of social and economic policy. His “fascism from above” sought to grow the power of the state without mobilizing the masses.⁵²

By expanding obregonista networks, Calles hoped to capitalize on liberal and progressive opposition to Primo de Rivera’s regime. Even if the President’s Mexican Labor Party (PLM) did just as much to repress labor as the UPE, Mexican consular officials constantly “leaked” news articles that linked cristeros to Primo de Rivera and warned against a worldwide Catholic reaction against “the spirit of Revolution.” By contrast, Calles’s local supporters published influential pieces comparing the Spanish struggle for democracy to the Mexican Revolution. They revered Mexico as a “free state” and lauded the president’s anti-clerical policies as the key to national liberation.⁵³

Calles himself had become all too aware of the press’s importance during his 1923-24 presidential bid. As Álvaro Obregón’s influential Secretary of the Interior, he intimidated journalists into supporting his candidacy and offered news outlets preferential treatment in exchange for favorable coverage. The year prior to the election, the “Pro-Calles” campaign office received dozens of *cartas de adhesión* wherein newspaper editors vowed to support Calles’s run for office. Dispersed throughout all corners of the nation, these publications committed themselves to disseminating propaganda and supporting the general’s vision for the nation.⁵⁴

⁵² See Shlomo Ben-Ami, *Fascism from Above: The Dictatorship of Primo de Rivera in Spain, 1923-1930* (1983). See also, James H. Rial, *Revolution from Above: The Primo de Rivera Dictatorship in Spain, 1923-1930* (1986).

⁵³ SRE. Expediente: 336, Folio: 103-08.

⁵⁴ FAPECFT. MFN 422. Inv.: 1216 “Adhesiones Candidatura Presidencial PEC, Directores de Publicaciones. 1923.”

By the spring of 1924, the PLM had established the national Revolutionary Journalists' League (LER) to distribute propaganda among workers and peasants. The LER was organized regionally and devoted to developing a unique "school of journalism... that [was] essentially proletarian and oriented by *ideas libertarias*." At home, the LER's emphasis on everyday workers' empowerment found resonance among nationally-circulated newspapers like *El Laborista*, *El Socialista*, and a dozen others. Abroad, its calls for proletarian journalism found support among communist circles and groups like Valencia's Socialist-Republican Party.⁵⁵

Just months after the outbreak of violence, Spain had become a crucial battleground in the Mexican religious conflict and the secret war over public discourse. While lay activists leveraged Hispanism to forge partnerships with their Spanish counterparts, the Mexican government turned to the language of proletarian liberation to establish common ground with left-wing dissidents. Throughout the Cristero Rebellion, Mexican and Spanish Catholics strengthened their networks and positioned peasant rebels at the center of a global reckoning with the secular modern. At the same time, Calles used this as an opportunity to grow the power of the state and expand the reach of its covert intelligence apparatus. Still, Primo de Rivera's government remained hesitant to take a stand against the Calles administration. Influenced by racial prejudice, Spanish officials dismissed the cristeros as an unsophisticated, violent, and irreligious.

⁵⁵ Ibid., Also, FAPECFT. MFN 441. Inv.: 1234 "Comisiones Especiales, Delegados, y Propagandistas. 1923;" MFN 443. Inv.: 1236 "Documentación Electoral Distribuida en Campaña. 1923;" MFN 443. Inv.: 1238 "Jiménez Velasco, Jesús. 1923."

The Limits of Catholic Hispanism

Even as tensions escalated, Primo de Rivera never intervened on behalf of the *cristeros*. By September 1927, Calles used his yearly *informe de gobierno* to assure his supporters that Spanish-Mexican relations remained in “excellent” condition. This came as a surprise for many *callistas*, as some had feared that Primo de Rivera would support a U.S. military intervention on the side of Catholic rebels. Instead, the Spanish government resumed diplomatic relations with Mexico and continued to negotiate settlements over private property claims from the previous decade.⁵⁶

Contrary to perceptions within the Mexican government, the Calles administration’s ability to avoid a confrontation with Spain did not emanate from the president’s public image campaign. Rather, relations between the two nations remained cordial because prominent officials in Primo de Rivera’s government never fully trusted the viability of the *cristeros*’ insurrection. While many scholars attribute this trepidation to Spanish economic interests, the racial dimensions of Spanish non-intervention remain largely overlooked. Even as Mexican Catholics appealed to Hispanism, Spanish diplomats condemned peasant militants for their “inherent” proclivity for violence.

As early as April 1927, the Spanish *Encargado de Negocios* in Mexico City, Don Luis Depuy de Lôme y Vidiella, condemned the *Cristero* Rebellion as a “repugnant” display of fanaticism. He criticized the rebels’ public acts of aggression and denounced peasant militants’ for deviating from Church doctrine. In his reports to the Spanish Ministry of State, Depuy attributed the *cristeros*’ lack of ideological cohesion to an absence of leadership among lay activists and the clergy. He discredited rebels for their alleged

⁵⁶ AHN Madrid. Política Exterior, Méjico, 1925-1927. Legajo 2564. “Informe 1 de septiembre, 1927.”

disorganization and for their failure to garner sufficient international support to become a credible movement.⁵⁷

Critical of folk Catholicism, Depuy dismissed cristeros as “unfaithful Catholics led by immoral priests.” He lamented bishops’ acceptance of religious violence and condemned them for tolerating the veneration of slain militants as popular martyrs. Depuy also maintained that Mexicans remained a boorish and uncultured people who could easily stray from the word of God. As evidence, he pointed to cristeros’ alleged engagement in robbery, vandalism, and kidnapping, as well as more extreme cases where rebels had been accused of committing assault or rape.⁵⁸



Image 2.5: Cristero rebels receive communion before battle in the Los Altos region of Jalisco (1926-27).
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia).

Looking toward the future, Depuy warned of a possible schism between folk Catholicism and Church institutions. He argued that the conflict had severely diminished the Church’s public influence and resulted in a loss of decorum in social relations. Depuy

⁵⁷ AHN Madrid. Política Exterior, Méjico, 1925-1927. Legajo 2564. “Observaciones 11 de abril, 1927” and “Informe 15 de abril, 1927.”

⁵⁸ AHN Madrid. Política Exterior, Méjico, 1925-1927. Legajo 2564 “Observaciones 11 de abril, 1927.”

referred to this as a collective process of *descatolización*, or de-Catholicization. And yet, rather than blaming Calles for this perceived decline of faith, he condemned lay groups and members of the clergy for abandoning those at the bottom rungs of society. From his perspective, Church leaders had wagered heavily on the presumption that the indefinite suspension of religious services would enrage militants enough to topple the sitting president. He held that the clergy’s voluntary protest had actually backfired, and that Mexicans had fallen prey to violence, chaos, and lawlessness as the Church’s “retreated into irrelevance and obscurity.”⁵⁹

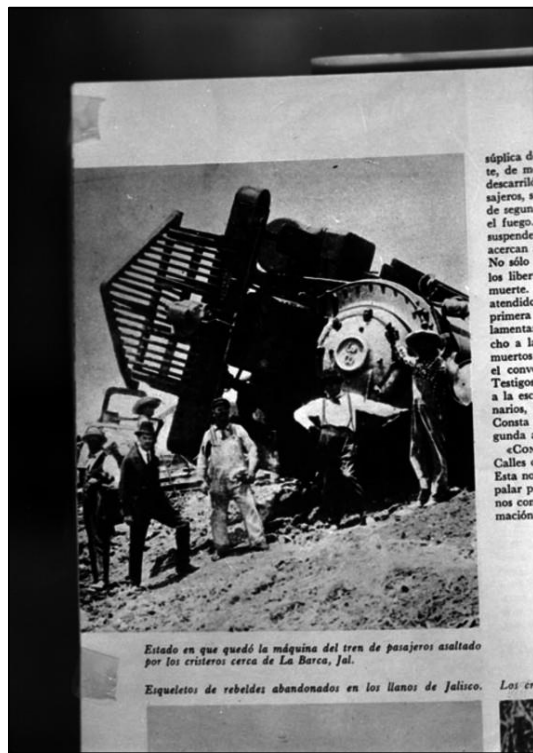


Image 2.6: Newspaper clipping: “Engine of passenger train attacked by cristeros near La Barca, Jalisco. Rebel bodies abandoned in the plains of Jalisco” (1927).
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Furthermore, Depuy criticized elite activists for leaving indigenous and mixed-race peasants to their own devices. He claimed that this negligence had only inspired the emergence of popular forms of religiosity to fill the spiritual void of a nation torn by violence and civil war. Depuy held that “no one” in Mexico’s indigenous *bajo pueblo* had mobilized out of true religious sentiment. Instead, he portrayed the conflict as nothing more than the tumultuous violence of uneducated people lacking moral leadership and sound religious values.⁶⁰

Finally, Depuy chastised the LNDLR for growing diffuse in its outlook and objectives. He questioned activists’ knowledge of military strategy and sarcastically described Catholic militias as a hodgepodge of “priests, hacendados, lawyers, and the occasional housewife armed with guns and a bandolier.” To overcome these challenges, Depuy emphasized the need for the League to garner support from members of the military or the nation’s political elite (*nombres de prestigio*). The latter would grant the movement a sense of credibility and enable Catholics to secure the backing of a foreign power.⁶¹

Still, Depuy reiterated that this could only happen if the LNDLR managed to convince members of the ruling class to openly support the insurrection. He acknowledged rebels’ impressive military campaigns, but branded these as hollow victories given the League’s failure to translate success on the battlefield into political leverage or effective diplomacy. Depuy further lamented the rebellion’s waning popularity among Catholic activists. He wrote of militants’ increasing sense of pessimism and the public’s own frustration with public acts of violence. Still, he believed that militants’ demoralization

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ AHN Madrid. Política Exterior, Méjico, 1925-1927. Legajo 2564 “Informe 15 de abril, 1927.”

could dissipate within a matter of days or weeks. With the proper political backing and international support, peasants could be mobilized (and funded) into a viable counterrevolution.⁶²

Although prejudice and racial paternalism influenced Depuy's perception the conflict, his rejection of popular religion actually resonated with some members of the Mexican Episcopate. Since the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, members of the Church had worried that popular actors' mobilization would inspire them to impose spiritual meaning upon the world without "proper" guidance. In Mexico, Father Miranda's experiences with Las Brigadas spoke to the clergy's apprehension toward popular martyrdom. In Europe, exiled members of the Mexican Episcopate distanced themselves from peasant militants' acts of violence.

As Spanish Catholics rallied in Valencia's Teatro Eslava in November 1926, the ACdM worked with local clergy to coordinate an interview between *El Pueblo Vasco* and a handful of exiled Mexican bishops living along the French border. These latter included Emeterio Valverde y Téllez from the Diocese of León, Guanajuato; Genaro Méndez del Río of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca; and José María González y Valencia from the Diocese of Durango. Speaking with journalists in the French-Basque town of Hendaye, just 15 miles north of the Mexican Consulate in San Sebastián, the bishops openly rebuked Calles' religious regulations and denounced actions taken by the state against the clergy. They expressed outrage at federal troops' public execution of priests and highlighted the army's pillaging of Catholic townships as evidence of the government's abuses of power. The bishops argued that the state was actively using violence to intimidate the nation's Catholic

⁶² Ibid. Also, "Informe 30 de abril, 1927."

public into submission. They praised the LNDLR's strategic use of boycotts and publicly appealed to the governments of Spain, England, France, and the United States for support.⁶³

Nevertheless, the bishops made no mention of cristeros' own embrace of violence as both an instrument of rebellion and a symbolic expression of religious conviction. Instead, they emphasized civic initiatives implemented by middle- and upper-class actors.⁶⁴ In most cases, cristeros turned to self-immolation as a simultaneous form of warfare and spiritual sacrifice. News clippings from the war describe the use of dynamite attached to the body to explode railroad trains or passenger cars. In both a literal and figurative sense, militants "weaponized" this type of assault. They turned to violence as both an attack meant to inflict physical and material harm against an enemy, and as an act of divine martyrdom designed to stoke religious sentiment and bring one closer to the divine.

In other instances, local parishes venerated priests, seminary students, and other individuals slain at the hand of federal forces. This occurred in the case of Jesuit priest Father Miguel Pro, one of the war's most recognized martyrs. In the face of a government firing squad, Pro raised his arms and used his body to make the form of a human cross. Holding a rosary in one hand and a crucifix in the other, he looked his executioners in the eye and shouted a defiant cry of "Viva Cristo Rey!" before the soldiers opened fire. As Pro's case indicates, the power and prevalence of myth enabled the idolization of individual clergy as popular saints. Mexico's church-state conflict thus gave rise to new forms of

⁶³ SRE. Expediente: 336. Folio: 273.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

popular Catholicism, for peasants' grassroots devotion granted everyday individuals an unprecedented degree of holiness.⁶⁵



Image 2.7: Prayer cards, cristero martyrs: José de la Luz Vélchez (left) and Leopoldo González G. (right). Photo captions: “He died a martyr on March 15, 1928 in León, Guanajuato” (left); and “He spilled his blood in defense of *Cristo Rey* on Friday, August 19, 1927” (right). Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia).

Still, despite these pivotal religious transformations, Mexican bishops elided any discussion of religious violence or popular Catholicism in their interview with *El Pueblo Vasco*. Familiar with Europe’s Catholic hierarchy, they likely knew that Vatican and Spain’s more orthodox religious conservatives would look unfavorably upon cristeros’ deviation from Church doctrine and institutional norms. Instead, the bishops portrayed peasant militants as the keepers of Western ideals in the face of “Bolshevik despotism.” They emphasized Catholic demands for the right to freedom of assembly, freedom of property and capital, and a true separation of church and state that would make room for religious liberty.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ See López Menéndez (2016).

⁶⁶ SRE. Expediente: 336. Folio: 273.

By January 1928, the Mexican Episcopate unequivocally distanced itself from religious violence. In a letter to Calles penned by the Bishop of Tabasco, Pascual Díaz Barreto, the bishops claimed to pursue “purely civic means of resistance” against state anti-clericalism. Specifically, they urged Calles to consider the LNDLR’s petition to amend the Constitution. They claimed that the document had garnered nearly two million signatures and embodied the kind of peaceful protest and civic engagement to which all “civilized nations” should aspire. Finally, the bishops’ denied having ever endorsed a “rebellion” against the government. They defended citizens’ freedom of conscience and argued that all Mexicans had the right to voice their opposition to government “by every licit means possible.”⁶⁷

Around the same time, Depuy reported on the failures of Mexico’s Cristero Rebellion directly to Primo de Rivera. He claimed that the Catholic insurrection had become largely unpopular among a majority of Mexican Catholics, and that the LNDLR had made a terrible mistake in renewing violence after former president Álvaro Obregón had attempted to renew negotiations with Church leaders during the summer of 1927. Although Depuy expressed virtually no sympathy for the Revolutionary state, he recognized that Calles had effectively navigated turbulent waters and managed to strategically position a relatively weak government to prevent direct intervention from any global power. By November, he confidently declared that the Cristero Rebellion and the anti-clerical phase of the Mexican Revolution were “completely over.”⁶⁸

⁶⁷ FXC. Archivo UFCM. Caja 13, Folder 63. “Mexican Bishops Address Letter to President Calles, January 17, 1928. National Catholic Welfare Conference, Bureau of Publicity and Information.”

⁶⁸ AHN Madrid. Política Exterior, Méjico, 1925-1927. Legajo 2564 “Informe 16 de noviembre, 1927.”

Still, despite his acknowledgement of Calles's geopolitical maneuvering, Depuy attributed cristeros' defeat to Mexican peasants' deviations from religious orthodoxy and their alleged lack of ideological coherence and political sophistication. Beneath these claims, however, was the racially charged assumption that Mexico's indigenous and mixed-race peasants would adhere to European religious norms or otherwise prove themselves unworthy of receiving Spanish support. From Depuy's perspective, the arrival of Dwight Morrow to the U.S. Embassy in October 1927 signaled the beginning of negotiations between Mexico, the Vatican, and North American capitalist interests. This, in turn, represented the end for any hope of a pro-cristero intervention by a foreign power.

Conclusions

Despite their attempts to unify Mexican Catholics during the Cristero Rebellion, upper-class activists furthered the divide between themselves and working-class actors. This was evident in the JCFM's failure to gain traction among indigenous communities, its emphasis on European high culture, and its divergent trajectory from Las Brigadas' militant workingwomen. At home and abroad, Mexican clergy rejected women's popular martyrdom and the cristeros' embrace of religious violence. Instead, they portrayed peasant rebels as the heirs of Western ideals and worked with the JCFM to re-educate the nation's indigenous and mixed-race workers.

Hispanists strived to promote social unity, but their adherence to institutional doctrine kept them from adapting to Mexico's racial, ethnic, and spiritual diversity. Imbued with racial meaning, the language of religious uniformity and cultural "enlightenment" ultimately bred insularity. By claiming to integrate indigenous peoples into the fabric of the nation, Hispanists of all political stripes reinforced racial paternalism and colonial

power dynamics inherent to projects of mestizaje. However, Catholic Hispanists also relied on the language of class, education, and religious orthodoxy to develop a racialized sense of superiority—a sense of whiteness—that spoke to their power and privilege in society.

As a result, upper-class activists used images of peasant martyrdom to grow their domestic influence and expand the reach of their international networks. Even as they rejected indigenous Catholicism, they appropriated images of peasant persecution to evoke sympathy for their cause. And yet, Mexican Catholics' cross-class coalition encountered similar forms of racism as Spanish officials denounced the Cristero Rebellion as an irreligious movement. Hispanism revealed itself a limited ideology because it was unable to foster unity among Mexicans or bridge the divide between Spanish conservatives and Mexican rebels.

If anything, Hispanism was most successful in bringing together upper-class youth and women's lay groups to combat shared challenges—specifically, secularization. However, even if Hispanist ideologies enabled these like-minded groups to work together, it still fell short in terms of recruiting new adherents into the fold of spiritual renewal and religious restoration. At the same time, the Calles administration managed to expand the power of the state in and beyond Mexico. While Catholics grew divided, Mexican consulates gathered intelligence on political opponents across the Atlantic and the president consolidated powerful domestic institutions designed to subdue opposition. Despite Depuy's predictions, the Cristero Rebellion continued for two years. During that time, Mexico's secret war would continue to grow in magnitude and significance.

Chapter 3: Cold War Catholicism, Mexico-U.S. Relations during the Cristero Rebellion, 1924-29

On Saturday, July 24th, 1926, President Elena Lascuráin of the Damas Católicas was detained by federal police on charges of sedition, libel, and conspiracy against the Mexican government. The previous day, Attorney General Romeo Ortega y Castillo had issued an official warrant calling for the arrests of leading members from the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty (LNDLR). Aside from Lascuráin, police took a handful of widely recognized activists into custody. Among them were Luis G. Bustos of the Knights of Columbus and the League's own presidents: Rafael Cenicerós Villareal, a former member of the *Partido Católico* (PCN), and René Capistrán Garza, president of the Mexican Catholic Youth Association (ACJM).¹

Despite their show of force, Mexican officials privately feared that the LNDLR had brokered an alliance with international capitalist interests looking to topple Calles. By July 1926, intelligence agents confirmed that the Liga had successfully channeled weapons from its U.S. allies to Catholic militants scattered across the country. As the activists were eventually released, the League's unwavering commitment to the Catholic cause earned it a myriad of public endorsements from clergy members and international lay groups. At the same time, the Calles administration kept a close watch over the group's political activities and increased its surveillance over the Catholic and secular press.²

¹ AGN. Caja 288, Expediente 33, Folder 249, Folio 61: "28 de julio 1926;" and Folio 76: "Siguen las investigaciones por la cuestión religiosa..." *El Universal*, 24 julio 1926. Also, AGN Caja 247, Expediente 21.

² AGN. Caja 228, Expediente 33, Folder 249, Folio 69: "En que se fundó el juez..." *Excelsior*, 28 julio 1926. Also, Caja 246, Expediente 8, Folder 5.



Image 3.1: Members of the Damas Católicas awaiting police inspection in Mexico City (1926).
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

As the Ley Calles was scheduled to go into effect on July 31st, the League and its affiliate organizations convened in Mexico City to redraft the group’s charter and re-think its mission. On July 14th, 1926, Catholic leaders had signed a petition that triggered the state’s retaliation. In this new document, the LNDLR called for the nation’s spiritual salvation and expressed the need to write a new Constitution that would safeguard religious freedoms. It warned of “Bolshevik and atheistic forces within the government,” and outlined a new trajectory for Catholic resistance—one that involved moving toward more aggressive forms of civic action and left open the possibility of armed conflict.³

³ AGN. Caja 228, Expediente 33, Folder 249, Folio 81: “14 de julio 1926.”

Prior to his detainment on July 24th, René Capistrán Garza had secured the backing of sympathetic newspapers. Following his arrest, *Excélsior* openly questioned the Attorney General's decision and called on readers to scrutinize state intimidation tactics. While Capistrán Garza underwent questioning by state police, *El Universal* reported on the LNDLR's new plan of action. Specifically, it detailed the League's proposed changes to the Constitution and its new strategy for civic activism following the Ley Calles' implementation.⁴



Image 3.2: René Capistrán Garza (1925).

Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

Still, the League knew that any chance of success required the support of the international community. As a result, the Damas Católicas appealed directly to U.S.

⁴ “En que se fundó el juez...” *Excélsior* 1926; “Siguen las investigaciones por la cuestión religiosa...” *El Universal* 1926. Also, AGN. Caja 228, Expediente 33, Folder 249, Folio 85: “Agente Num. 9 al Jefe del Departamento Confidencial, 1 de agosto 1925.”

government officials in hopes of persuading them to publicly denounce Calles's religious restrictions. In June 1926, the Damas wrote directly to Ambassador James R. Sheffield, his wife Edith, and the First Lady of the United States, Grace Anna Coolidge. They used anti-communist language and labeled the Calles administration as "tyrannical, uncivilized, and un-American." Specifically, they accused the Mexican president of trampling upon individual civil liberties, among them freedom of speech and freedom worship. With the help of the prominent American Catholic activist Mary G. Hawks, they also requested a public statement from U.S. President Calvin Coolidge in defense of Catholicism and human rights.⁵

While the Spanish government wavered in its position towards the Cristero Rebellion, Mexican lay activists pursued the backing of the U.S. State Department, the American Catholic Episcopate, and the U.S. Knights of Columbus. The League branded Calles as an emissary of the Soviet Union and presented the Church-state conflict as an "American" struggle against "communist" incursions. Specifically, the League and its allies took aim at the Mexican president's economic nationalism and friendly relations with the U.S.S.R. By contrast, they portrayed peasant cristeros as the defenders of liberal ideals and presented the Liga as a "secular" organization committed to property rights and individual freedoms.

At the same time, the League's U.S. interlocutors developed notions of Catholic Hispanism that resonated with elite Mexicans' calls for workers' cultural "enlightenment." On both sides of the border, Catholics condemned "irrationality" and racialized communism as an ideological force that preyed upon non-white ignorance. By contrast,

⁵ FXC. Archivo UFCM. Caja 13, Folder 63. Mary G. Hawks, "Letter to His Excellency, Calvin Coolidge, President of the United States." December 27, 1927.

activists presented the legacies of Spanish Catholicism as the engine of Mexican progress and political stability. They channeled racial paternalism and invented an indigenous “Other” that remained vulnerable to radicalization.

Still, despite Catholic efforts, Calles continued to grow the state’s covert apparatus to consolidate rule. Specifically, he relied on the recently established *Departamento Confidencial* (DeCo) intelligence agency to monitor foreign instigators and domestic opponents.⁶ In the United States, the Mexican president turned to his allies in labor and government to push for favorable policies and defend his reputation. Even as Catholics and politicians accused Calles of furthering Soviet interests, Mexico managed to escape an armed standoff.

Race and Secular Activism

In a confidential letter from December 17th, 1926, Mexican businessman José Gándara urged the U.S. Secretary of State, Frank B. Kellogg, to support Mexican Catholics in their struggle against Calles. A member of the LNDLR and the Mexican Knights of Columbus, Gándara introduced the League as an organization that Americans would “certainly appreciate.” “I am connected with the organization of a national movement in Mexico against the present illegal and bolshevist Calles administration,” he wrote. “Although it is not a religious movement, it will have the whole hearted support and cooperation of the Mexican Catholics... [and] it will mean religious liberty and the separation between Church and state... such as you have in the United States.”⁷

⁶ For more on the Departamento Confidencial, see Joseph A. Stout, Jr., *Spies, Politics, and Power: El Departamento Confidencial en México* (Texas Christian University Press, 2012). See also, Young (2015).

⁷ Gándara, Joseph F. to Frank B. Kellogg, 12/17/26. National Archives and Records Administration, College Park. U.S. Department of State, Record Group 59, Microfilm M274 (Political Affairs in Mexico), Roll#85, Doc. 812.00/28132 Roll#85.

Gándara had just returned from a scouting trip in search of European allies. Although his letter emphasized the seemingly non-religious aspects of the League's mission, he also argued that it would be natural for Americans to sympathize with the Mexican struggle for religious freedom. In fact, Gándara depicted the League's fight for individual liberties as intertwined with U.S. interests. Aside from the right to worship, he claimed that the LNCLR had also worked to safeguard foreign investment and private property rights from state encroachment.⁸



Image 3.3: José Gandara, Catholic militant.

Source: Georgetown University.

Printed in Julia Young, "Cristero Diaspora" *The Catholic Historical Review* (2012)

Echoing Gándara's letter, sympathetic Mexican journalists described the League as an "non-religious association of civic character." In doing so, conservative news outlets

⁸ Ibid.

countered the state's portrayals of the LNDLR as a Church-backed missionary organization. Specifically, *El Amigo de la Verdad* described "La Liga" as an organization that drew from religious principles to engage in secular political action. It further held that the group looked to restore freedom of conscience for all Mexicans, and not just those who professed allegiance to the Catholic Church.⁹

Founded in March 1925, the LNDLR initially advocated for non-violent resistance against Calles's religious restrictions. Its earliest political activities included distributing propaganda and fundraising for local candidates backed by the Partido Católico. By the spring of 1926, the League began petitioning for constitutional reforms that would secure access to religious education for all citizens. As part of its first national campaign, the Liga also launched a boycott against the purchase of non-essential goods and services.¹⁰

Even if Gándara identified himself as part of a "non-religious movement," the League drew most of its members from middle- and upper-class lay groups in the National Catholic Social League (LSCM). Despite differences in their reach and scope, these organizations coalesced around a shared commitment to re-centering faith at the core of politics, education, and family life. Within the LSCM, these groups included the Mexican Knights of Columbus, the Damas Católicas, the Juventud Católica Femenina Mexicana (JCFM), and René Capistrán Garza's ACJM. However, the League also found support among leading members of the PCN and groups like the National Catholic Parents

⁹ AGN, Caja 228, Expediente 33, Folder 249, "Marzo, 1925: Liga Nacional de la Libertad Religiosa, Agente 18."

¹⁰ AGN, Caja 228, Expediente 33, Folder 249, Folio 67: "Agente Num. 7," julio 1926, and "Marzo, 1925: Liga Nacional de la Libertad Religiosa, Agente 18." Also, Velasco Barba, (2012), pp. 218-219.

Association (ANPF) and the middle-class *Unión Popular* (UP), a Catholic lay group devoted to promoting religious education among all social classes.¹¹

Although the League initially branded itself as a “civic” organization with “universal” objectives, intelligence agents reported that Archbishop José Mora y del Río administered the group’s foreign and domestic revenue streams. Immediately after the Liga’s inception, the state’s Departamento Confidencial (DeCo) also revealed that the LNDLR regularly received money from high-ranking officials within the Church. Aside from implicating members of the Mexican Episcopate, DeCo informants held that the U.S. Knights of Columbus and their allies in the crude oil industry actively funded Catholic dissidents. Spies accused the League of using this money to bolster the nation’s dissident Catholic press and to purchase favorable coverage in prominent conservative newspapers—specifically, *Excélsior* and *El Universal*.¹²

On the ground, the LNDLR divided itself into regional councils directed by local delegates, or *jefes locales*. However, DeCo agents identified *agentes de cuadro* as the League’s most vital soldiers. Made up of women and student activists, the latter were tasked with transferring funds, drafting propaganda, and mobilizing supporters at the grassroots. Spies cautioned the government against underestimating *ligueros* (members of the League), and identified the provocation of armed conflict as one of their principal objectives.¹³

¹¹ Velasco Barba, (2012), pp. 218-219.

¹² AGN. Caja 228 Expediente 33, Folder 249, Folio 61: “28 de julio 1926,” and “Marzo, 1925: Liga Nacional de la Libertad Religiosa, Agente 18.”

¹³ AGN. Caja 228 Expediente 33, Folder 249, Folio 61: “28 de julio 1926,” and “Marzo, 1925: Liga Nacional de la Libertad Religiosa, Agente 18.” Also Velasco Barba (2012), pp. 207-209.

Evidenced by Gándara's letter, the LNCLR depicted the struggle for religious freedom as being essential to safeguarding individual liberties and private property rights. In doing so, the League leaned toward individualism and moved away from Catholic social doctrine's commitment to inter-class harmony and collective spiritual progress. This calculated move was part of a larger strategy to gain the support of capitalist interests in Europe and the United States. To make the Cristero Rebellion comprehensible to Western audiences, the League decried Calles's alleged Bolshevik incursions and portrayed itself as Mexican democracy's final line of defense against communist incursions.

Domestically, the League insisted that the strict separation of Church and state would protect Catholics from Calles's abuses of power. While religious conservatives had previously called for greater alignment between government and the Church, *ligueros* now argued for the necessity of Catholic institutional autonomy as a counterweight to Revolutionary statism. Coupled with its defense of democracy, private property, and individual liberties, the League seemed poised to carry the banner of Mexican liberalism into the mid-twentieth century. Even among state party circles, prominent *obregonistas* and former members of the *Partido Liberal Mexicano* voiced their distrust of Calles's authoritarian tendencies.

Still, scholars should refrain from equating the League's calls for Church autonomy with nineteenth-century secularism or the liberal philosophies religious conservatives had long opposed. Whereas "Liberals" sought to restrict the clergy's political power and economic privileges, *ligueros* called for separating Church and state out of a desire to strengthen Catholic institutions. Furthermore, recent scholarship suggests that social

Catholicism remained central to the League's mission. Like social doctrinarians, *ligueros* opposed anti-clerical reform and envisioned religion as a force for national unity.¹⁴

Instead, the League's decision to frame the issue of religious liberty within broader discourses of democracy, individualism, and material politics might best be understood as Catholics' own expansion of the meaning of political citizenship. For *ligueros*, the right to worship was just as important as freedom speech or the right to private property. Along these lines, historian Robert Curley argues that the Liga's "secular" politics actually held deep religious meaning. From boycotts to calls for institutional reform, *ligueros* furthered their faith by making secular demands and mobilizing as citizens *and* believers.¹⁵

Thus, while the Liga distanced itself from religious language, *ligueros* and their allies readily adopted Hispanist discourse to defend their faith. As the previous chapter demonstrates, activists in the JCFM, the Damas Católicas, and the LNDLR all appealed to the nation's Spanish heritage to sway domestic and international public opinion in their favor. As Mexican lay activists forged partnerships with U.S. allies, Hispanism became the language of anti-communist solidarity. However, even as North American Catholics embraced bonds of common ancestry, their efforts to aid Mexican counterparts remained tainted by racism.

For instance, on December 12th, 1926, the U.S. Episcopate published a pastoral letter that relied on Hispanist language and racial paternalism to argue for non-intervention in the Mexican conflict. Although the bishops decried Calles's religious restrictions, they did not believe that a U.S. invasion would stop violence south of the border. Instead, they

¹⁴ Velasco Barba (2012), pp. 207-209. See also, Curley (2018).

¹⁵ Curley (2018),

argued that Mexicans had “earned” the right to demand respect for their sovereignty, but only because they had adopted Catholicism and contributed to its expansion across the hemisphere. They held that Mexico had proven its “inherent worth” as a nation and commended its “rapid advancement into Christian civilization.”¹⁶

Furthermore, the bishops praised Mexicans for their contributions to American society. They lauded the spiritual conquest of California and glorified Spanish missionaries as the original defenders of human rights, universal education, and freedom of speech. Consequently, they claimed that Mexicans were in no need of “saving” by the United States. Instead, they proposed leveraging their influence in the International Catholic Truth Society to expose anti-clerical abuses on the ground. Subsequently, the bishops would use this platform to “reveal Calles as an emissary of the Soviet Union.” and “sound a warning to Christian civilization.” They emphasized the need for fraternal Catholic peoples to coalesce around common principles and depicted the war in Mexico as an attack on global Christianity.¹⁷

By contrast, the U.S. Knights of Columbus pushed for intervention and readily embraced the League’s overtures to North American capitalist interests. They distributed propaganda throughout the United States and portrayed the League as a heroic band of Catholic “brethren” engaged in a vigorous crusade in defense of “the fundamental principles of Christianity and civilization.” Like the bishops the U.S. Episcopate, the Knights held that “Soviet Mexico” had become a bastion for Russian communism in North

¹⁶ K of C Archives, Coll 006, Box 288, SC-11-2-002-02/ACC 2002-019 “Mexican Persecution.” “Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Episcopate of the United States on the Situation in Mexico. December 12, 1926,” written by “The Cardinals, Archbishops, and Bishops of the Catholic Church in the United States of America,” published by the Committee of the American Episcopate, December 1926, pp. 3-5, 27.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

America. They condemned Calles as a “Christ hater” and denounced his war against property, religious freedom, and family values.¹⁸

Based in New Haven, Connecticut, the Knights worked to foster support for the League among U.S. news outlets. They strived to raise awareness of Mexico’s religious conflict and engaged in a bitter struggle against a “conspiracy of silence.” Aside from condemning the U.S. government’s “un-American complacency,” the Knights criticized progressive newspapers for condoning Calles’s abuses of power. They argued that the American Catholic press was among the League’s most important allies in its fight to protect civil liberties.¹⁹

With regard to race, Reverend Francis C. Kelley used his widely distributed pamphlet, *A Sociologist in Mexico* (1923), to further Hispanist ideologies. An ally of the Knights and the future Bishop of Oklahoma City, Kelley argued against North American academics’ perceived anti-Catholic biases. Specifically, he rebuked prominent historians like George Bancroft and William H. Prescott for unjustly condemning Catholic missionaries in their accounts of the Spanish conquest. Kelley criticized American university circles for their anti-Catholic prejudices and denounced their perceived veneration of Protestant England.²⁰

¹⁸ K of C Archives, Coll 006, Box 290, SC-11-2-55 “Mexican Persecution Pamphlets, undated.” Pamphlet titled “The Christ-Haters,” Columbia Press, New Haven, Connecticut. See also, Coll 006, Box 290, SC-11-2-58 “Mexican Persecution Pamphlets, 1926.” Pamphlet titled “Red Mexico: The Facts,” Columbia Press, New Haven, Connecticut, p. 3.

¹⁹ The Knights identified these sympathetic newspapers as *Catholic World*, *The Living Church*, *The Outlook*, and *The Christian Century*. They also reprinted editorial pieces from conservative news outlets like *The Wall Street Journal*, which often presented legal arguments against Calles’s religious regulations. See Pamphlet titled “Red Mexico: The Facts.” Also, K of C, Coll 006, Box 290, SC-11-2-58 “Mexican Persecution Pamphlets, 1926.” “Bolshevism in Mexico,” editorial reprinted from *Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 1926, pp. 22-25; “Editorial,” reprinted from *Catholic World*, September 1926, pp. 2-11.

²⁰ Kelley, *A Sociologist in Mexico* (1923), pp. 5-7.

Kelley argued that historians' vilification of Spain was problematic precisely because it validated Revolutionary narratives of Church abuses against the Mexican people. He held that these biases fueled support for the "Russianization" of Mexico and chastised U.S. scholars for approving of the Revolution's anti-clerical state projects. In his condemnation of sociologist Edward A. Ross, Kelley argued that Ross "put all the blame for Mexico" on Spain. "It simply does not occur to Professor Ross," he wrote, "that the blame might lie at the door of the revolution... for which [Ross] is an open apologist."²¹

Like Ross, Kelley's work examined the origins of economic inequality and low literacy rates among Mexicans. However, Kelley attributed these issues to Mexico's own secular reformers and to the "radical" Constitutions of 1857 and 1917. Kelley turned to racial paternalism and argued that the Church had "civilized the Mexican Indian" by granting indigenous communities access to universal education. He added that Catholic institutions had played an instrumental role in curbing the interests of wealthy Spanish landowners, whose proclivity towards abuse had been the focal point of injustice toward natives. Kelley subsequently claimed that the secular Constitution of 1857 had only worked to further corruption and social decline by stripping the Church of its educational influence, economic clout, and political power. Still, he held that the "Bolshevik" Constitution of 1917 threatened to eradicate religion from society entirely and thus represented an unprecedented danger to Mexico's future.²²

²¹ Ibid., p.6.

²² Ibid. See also, K of C Archives, Coll 006, Box 290, SC-11-2-59 "Mexican Persecution Pamphlets, 1927." Reverend Michael Kenny, S.J. "The Mexican Crisis: Its Causes and Consequences," *Truth: The Official Organ of the International Catholic Truth Society*, pp. 5-6.

Turning to eugenics, Kelley added that interracial relations had propelled Mexican civilization toward modernity. He cited “intelligence testing” at Stanford University and informed Catholic audiences that the “mental acumen of the American Indian” was “not greatly superior to [that of] the average Negro.” With regard to Mexico, Kelley extrapolated and argued that the “Mexican population, which is largely of Indian extraction” would make “little, if any better showing” than indigenous communities in the United States. Still, Kelley speculated that whatever racial “improvements” were to be seen among Mexicans, their “slightly better showing” resulted from their “white admixture” and Spaniards’ long history of interracial relations. Kelley glorified Spanish colonization for its ability to “enhance” Mesoamerican culture through religious instruction and interracial marriage. He erased Spanish colonial violence and exalted Catholic missionaries for “working on what [they] found, in spite of its poor quality, and produc[ing] rather remarkable results.”²³

Finally, Kelley condemned the Aztecs’ alleged proclivity for “violence, cannibalism, and cultural destruction.” He cited Susan Hale’s *The Story of Mexico* (1891) and characterized the Aztec empire as “a few handfuls of ‘pitiful Indians’ quarreling with one another for supremacy.” At the same time, he praised Hernán Cortés and the Franciscan missionary, Bernardino de Sahagún, as “white Gods.” However, Kelley also claimed that Spanish traditions had “gradually degenerated” and became “submerged by Indian blood.”²⁴

²³ Kelley, *A Sociologist in Mexico* (1923), pp. 9-11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

By the fall of 1926, the U.S. Knights of Columbus offered their own rendition of Mexican history. In a series of pamphlets, they detailed the government's confiscation of Church property, its limits on the clergy's political participation, and its suppression of religious education. Drawing from Mexican Hispanists, the Knights praised the conservative general-turned-emperor, Agustín de Iturbide, for leading a "bloodless revolution" and "liberating" Mexicans from the "radical" Spanish Constitution of 1812. They condemned the Díaz regime and argued that secularism had driven unchecked reformers to outlaw religious instruction to the detriment of democracy.²⁵

Without the Church's guiding light, the Knights worried that Mexico's radical Revolution would usher a "return to pre-Columbian barbarism." They feared that Mexican "Indians" would be left to their own devices and ultimately succumb to "bolshevism and rebellion." The Knights argued that the gradual disappearance of Catholic education had resulted in the "ruin" of the Mexican people. They defended the Church for historically expanding literacy and lamented the transformation of Catholic colleges "into jails and barracks."²⁶

As a Mexican emigrant, Gándara was all too familiar with North American racism. Consequently, he used significant portions of his letter to present Kellogg with his "American" credentials while making subtle, albeit powerful statements about Mexican identity. "I am a Mexican, born in Chihuahua and have lived in your wonderful country for fourteen years," he wrote. "The leading American business men... of northern Mexico have known me since a child and if your honor would want to ascertain my integrity and

²⁵ Pamphlet titled "Red Mexico: The Facts."

²⁶ K of C Archives, Coll 006, Box 290, SC-11-2-58 "Mexican Persecution Pamphlets, 1926." "The G.X.Q. of the Present Crisis in Mexico," pp. 5-9.

sincerity, I am sure that any of those well-known men or almost any Bank in El Paso would recommend me.”²⁷

While Gándara claimed to represent the “real” Mexico, he often cited his family’s connections to U.S. private companies. He claimed that the League was guided by “American principles” and expressed his desire for the Mexican government to emulate its U.S. counterpart. Gándara suggested that the Revolution did not actually represent Mexicans’ political will. To a certain extent, he even argued for the Americanization of Mexican society.²⁸

Like Gándara, the Damas Católicas sought to “rationalize” Mexican Catholic activism to elicit support from foreign audiences. They emphasized the importance of workingwomen’s cultural uplift and drew from statements made at the U.S. National Catholic Welfare Conference to push for the establishment of coeducational institutions of higher learning. During the June 1926 conference, U.S. Labor Secretary James J. Davis argued that the Church’s educational institutions had “stood like a wall... against the vicious advocates of ‘revolution’ who abhorred all religion, and believe[d] neither in God nor life eternal.” He held that Catholic institutions had protected American workers from communism and condemned “materialist ideologues” for seeking to take advantage of the working classes.²⁹

Subsequently, the Damas circulated Davis’s remarks in a series of private memos. They underscored the urgency of transcending a “rudimentary catechism” and developing

²⁷ Gándara, Joseph F. to Frank B. Kellogg, 12/17/26.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ FXC. Archivo UFCM. Caja 13, Folder 63. “Condición de la Mujer Trabajadora Intelectual, 1927.” Also, Caja 13, Folder 62. “Coolidge y El Congreso Eucarístico, El Secretario Davis Representa al President de los Estados Unidos, Libertad de Culto y de Conciencia para Todos, 21 junio 1926.”

a holistic educational model that could be “deeply Christian and highly rational.” The women held that religion was indispensable for workers to resist the lure of “bolshevism” and other radical ideologies. However, they recognized that faith alone could not effectively defend vulnerable obreras, and that women were in desperate need of cultural “uplift.”³⁰

In their efforts to “enlighten” workingwomen, the Damas echoed the JCFM’s peasant re-education campaigns and the Mexican clergy’s rejection of popular Catholicism. As Chapter 2 documents, both of these groups attempted to Westernize working-class militants as a way to placate Spanish racism and assert their own power. In the case of U.S.-Mexico relations, Catholics portrayed cristero peasant rebels as the defenders of liberal ideals. At the same time, lay activists racialized “communism” and portrayed the “Bolshevik threat” as preying upon the purported savagery, ignorance, and irrationality of indigenous and mixed-race workers.

As a result, the language of anti-communism became a site where Mexico’s upper-class Catholics could affirm their commitment to religious principles while distancing themselves from non-white actors. In both Mexico and the United States, anti-communism became the language of whiteness, as it allowed clergy and lay activists to condemn indigeneity from a place of self-proclaimed superiority. Still, activists like José Gándara turned to anti-communist discourses to claim a cultural proximity to the United States. Similarly, the Knights of Columbus fashioned a communist “Other” to reaffirm their patriotism during turbulent times.

³⁰ FXC. Archivo UFCM. Caja 13, Folder 63. “Condición de la Mujer Trabajadora Intelectual, 1927.”

The Specter of Communism

By August 5th, 1926, the U.S. Knights of Columbus had passed an emergency resolution to reaffirm their support for cristeros and the LNDLR. They decried the alleged “Russianizing of Mexico” and argued that the League’s mission closely aligned with the principles of the U.S. Declaration of Independence. The Knights also claimed that the anti-clerical provisions of the 1917 Constitution had been forced upon the Mexican people “in the heat of passion and at the point of a gun.” They implored the Calvin Coolidge administration to intervene on behalf of the League and publicly support its proposed changes to Mexican law.³¹

Like to Gándara, the Knights used this as an opportunity to reaffirm their adherence to “American” principles. This involved defining themselves as an anti-communist organization through opposition to a Russian “Other.” Twelve years earlier, the Ku Klux Klan had circulated pamphlets depicting the Knights as a subversive and anti-American secret society. In response, the Knights sued the Klan for defamation and compared its anti-Catholic prejudice to Calles’s religious persecution.³²

By the late summer of 1926, the Knights produced a series of widely-circulated pamphlets that emphasized connections between Calles’s religious regulations and the

³¹ K of C, Coll 006, Box 290, SC-11-2-58 “Mexican Persecution Pamphlets, 1926.” “Resolution on the Mexican Situation: Adopted Unanimously by the Supreme Council of the Knights of Columbus; Philadelphia, PA. August 3-5, 1926,” pp. 3-6; “Calles and Catholicism,” pp. 26-29. See also, Pamphlet titled “Red Mexico: The Facts.”

³² Aside from legal action, the Knights established a Commission on Religious Prejudices and even adapted their bylaws (“decrees”) to emphasize their patriotism. “K. of C. to Prosecute Six for Bogus Oath; Supreme Advocate Declares That It Is Still Circulated, Especially in South. ORDER CONSIDERS MEXICO Conditions in That Country Are Brought Before Supreme Council in Cleveland,” *The New York Times* (1928). For more on the 1914 “Bogus Oath” controversy, see Christopher J. Kauffman *Faith and Fraternalism: The History of the Knights of Columbus, 1882-1982* (Harper & Row Publishers, 1982). On U.S. anti-Catholicism, the Knights’ conflict with the Ku Klux Klan, and U.S.-Mexico relations, see Matthew A. Redinger *American Catholics and the Mexican Revolution, 1924-1936* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

Soviet Union's "state-sanctioned atheism." One of these publications used re-printed fragments from the Associated Press and highlighted similarities between Calles's policies and the Soviet anti-religious laws of 1918. Aptly titled "Mexico and Russia," the pamphlet brought renewed attention to a recent interview with the Soviet Minister in Mexico, Stanisław Pestkowski. According to the Knights, even Pestkowski perceived Calles's religious restrictions as containing "the same principal traits" as the laws implemented in the U.S.S.R.³³

Specifically, the Minister held that the Russian Orthodox Church had exercised a great deal of influence over policymaking prior to the Revolution of 1917. He noted that the Russian clergy had refused to comply with the government's regulations and alleged that religious reactionaries had secretly partnered with foreign enemies. Sympathetic to the Ley Calles, Pestkowski imparted lessons learned from Soviet attempts to outlaw religious instruction and nationalize Church property. He expressed pride in the growth of the Soviet state apparatus and the latter's recent success in forcing religious activists into submission.³⁴

The pamphlet concluded by citing published remarks wherein Pestkowski described Russia's Church-state conflict as being "almost identical to that of Mexico." It highlighted the Soviet Union's recent arrests of priests and religious dignitaries and compared these developments to events unfolding in Mexico. Through the language of anti-communism, the Knights linked Soviet re-education campaigns to Calles's push for

³³ K of C, Coll 006, Box 290, SC-11-2-58 "Mexican Persecution Pamphlets, 1926." "Mexico and Russia," Associated Press dispatch reprinted from *La Prensa*, New York, August 16, 1926, p. 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

secular education. They identified these as “bolshevist” projects designed to grow state power at the expense of religious freedom.³⁵

Aside from Pestkowski, the Knights took aim at the recently-appointed Soviet ambassador in Mexico City. As the world’s first woman ambassador, Alexandra Kollontai had been appointed to her post just two years after Álvaro Obregón inaugurated diplomatic relations with the U.S.S.R. In 1924, Mexico became the first country in the Western Hemisphere to receive a Russian diplomatic corps since the 1917 Revolution. Subsequently, the Knights feared the formation of a Soviet-Mexican axis that would disrupt U.S. interests in the hemisphere.³⁶

While Kollontai publicly insisted on her desire to build trade relations between the two nations, the Knights held that she actively conspired to disseminate “red propaganda” and tighten the Soviet Union’s ideological hold over Mexico. They subsequently launched a series of sexist attacks against the Ambassador and labeled her as both a “bitter and relentless revolutionist” and “the world’s greatest exponent of atheism and free love.” The Knights drew from the *Damas Católicas* and expressed their concern over Kollontai’s alleged adherence to “radical feminist ideals.” They portrayed Calles as her puppet and the “unfortunate mouthpiece” for communism in the Americas.³⁷

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ K of C. Coll 006, Box 290, SC-11-2-59 “Mexican Persecution Pamphlets, 1927.” Pamphlet titled “A Woman Comes from Russia,” Columbia Press, New Haven, Connecticut.

³⁷ Ibid. For a broader history, see Daniela Spenser, *The Impossible Triangle: Mexico, Soviet Russia, and the United States in the 1920s* (Duke University Press, 1999).



Image 3.4: Soviet Ambassador Alexandra Kollontai (left) with Mexican President Plutarco Elías Calles (right) (1926).
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia).

Still, realities on the ground attested to the Mexican Revolution’s own aversion to Soviet intervention. Even as the state used the language of proletarian upheaval to assert its autonomy, its leaders established organizations designed to steer workers away from the lure of communism and “radical” politics. Prior to his election in 1924, Calles and his allies—most notably, union leader Luis N. Morones—had worked to forge crucial relationships with labor syndicates operating at the grassroots. Both leaders recognized the importance of expanding support for the Revolution and viewed workers’ integration to state institutions as crucial to the consolidation of rule. In 1918, Calles and Morones founded Mexico’s National Federation of Labor, the *Confederación Regional de Obreros*

Mexicanos (CROM). The following year, they established the Mexican Labor party (PLM) as the nation's ruling political institution.

From its inception, the CROM monopolized union membership and organized workers of all skills and industries under a central national syndicate. As the union's national director, Morones pledged to fight for democracy, workers' rights, and social equality. In theory, the CROM set out to mobilize laborers at home while promoting solidarity with working-class movements abroad. In reality, the labor federation positioned itself at odds with the Mexican Communist Party and "anarchist" ideological currents emanating from Europe and Southeast Asia.³⁸

By 1919, Morones had managed to establish an important partnership with the American Federation of Labor (AFL). He subsequently persuaded AFL President, Samuel Gompers, to fully embrace the establishment of a Pan-American Labor Federation. By the time of Calles's presidential inauguration, Mexican labor officials had forged a formidable history of cooperation with their North American counterparts. Throughout the early 1920s, CROM delegates actively participated in conferences, meetings, and annual gatherings organized by the AFL.³⁹

The Knights responded by condemning the American Federation of Labor for encouraging "un-American activities." They argued that the AFL had positioned Calles as a rising international leader who would "successfully implement and export the programs of Mexico's Soviet Revolution around the world." By December of 1924, the Knights used

³⁸ See Rocío Guadarrama, *Los sindicatos y la política en México: La CROM, 1918-1928* (Ediciones Era, 1981). As a prominent opponent of the CROM, Félix Palavicini, the founder of *El Universal* newspaper, vehemently resisted state efforts at syndical integration. He feared the CROM's potential for suppression and fought for the creation of a non-partisan labor syndicate designed to protect journalists—the Federación de Trabajadores de Artes Gráficas.

³⁹ FAPECFE. MFN 668, Inv. 1434.

their leverage in the press to reveal the AFL's participation in Calles's inaugural celebration. They described how the Federation's annual convention had hastily adjourned its deliberations so that hundreds of delegates could travel to Mexico City from El Paso, only to be "wined and dined" by CROM functionaries.⁴⁰

The Knights condemned the AFL for allegedly lauding Calles as "the first pro-labor president in the Americas." They denounced the Federation's former Secretary of National Publicity, Chester M. Wright, as both a Calles sympathizer and an apologist of "Soviet-style socialism." The Knights took issue with Wright's writings on the Mexican Revolution and his praise of Calles for "bringing peace and stability to an unstable republic." To make the case against the AFL, they cited Wright's articles in progressive labor journals and scholarly publications:

... To Publicity Secretary Wright, Calles seems like some strange mixture of prophet, crusader, engineer, and Father. The articles read like some of those propaganda reports of economic progress that occasionally come from the pen of Socialists who visit Moscow on behalf of the World Revolution, with a big R... [There is an] idealized concept of the Calles regime. Probably it is Mr. Wright's sympathy with the socialism of Calles that prompts this representative of the AFL to deal vaguely with facts...⁴¹

Suspicious of the AFL, the Knights pursued their own investigation into the nature and functions of the CROM. They claimed that the Mexican labor federation was not a genuine workers' syndicate, but rather a "paper organization" and "an integral part of the present government machinery that [was] subject to the president's will." Unlike the AFL, the CROM did not operate independently of the Mexican government. Rather, the Knights claimed that it had been formed by an inner circle of state elites who relied on the workers'

⁴⁰ K of C, Coll 006, Box 290, SC-11-2-58 "Mexican Persecution Pamphlets, 1926." Pamphlet titled "Mexico and the A.F. of L," Columbia Press, New Haven, Connecticut. "A Defense of the Federation's Policy; A Criticism of that Policy by a Member," pp. 2-3, 5.

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 6. See also, Wright, "Mexico the Hopeful," in *The American Federationist* (1925).

exploitation for political gain. The Knights also alleged that the federation's compulsory membership required all workers to relinquish their right to public religious expression. They asserted that the CROM was primarily concerned with outmaneuvering rival Catholic syndicates, and that it looked to instill an atheistic cult of "Revolution" among Mexico's working classes.⁴²

While taking aim at Wright, the Knights denounced Gompers for his alleged complicity in the consolidation of the Obregón and Calles presidencies. They argued that Gompers' political ambitions had led him to partner with the CROM as early as 1918. The Knights also claimed that the lure of this new partnership pushed Gompers to repeatedly petition the U.S. government to formally recognize Presidents Carranza, Obregón, and Calles. They concluded that the AFL was single-handedly responsible for the United States' official backing of Mexico's "irreligious regimes."⁴³



Image 3.5: Plutarco Elías Calles (left), Samuel Gompers (center), Álvaro Obregón (right) (1924).
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

⁴² Pamphlet titled "Mexico and the A.F. of L." "An Investigation," pp. 29-31.

⁴³ Ibid.

With an eye toward controversy, the Knights alleged that Gompers had been a “guest of honor” at Calles’ presidential inauguration. They accused Gompers of making frequent appearances in Mexico’s Presidential Palace and criticized his personal involvement in the transition of power between Obregón and Calles. Still, the Knights held that Gompers was both ill-informed and disingenuous, claiming that he had no interest in Mexico’s labor situation beyond the information presented to him by paid Mexican agents. The Knights claimed that the AFL had fallen prey to Obregón’s manipulations and that U.S. labor groups now worked at the behest of the Mexican government.⁴⁴

Still, despite accusations of Mexican alignment with the Soviet Union, the Calles administration grappled with its own struggles against Russian influence in domestic politics. In September 1925, the CROM’s General Secretary, Ricardo Treviño, alleged before the Mexican Congress that Russian emissaries had received money from the Soviet Commissar of Foreign Affairs to provoke conflict between Mexico and the United States. The following month, CROM delegate Roberto Haberman, a socialist intellectual and Romanian-American lawyer based in Mexico City, used the AFL’s annual congress to openly denounce Russian meddling in Mexican affairs. He called on AFL delegates to stand by the CROM and support its actions against “subversive communist agitators.”⁴⁵

By March 1926, the CROM used its seventh annual congress to openly renounce Soviet interference. During the gathering, leaders claimed that the Russian government had provided economic support to the Mexican Communist Party for the purposes of

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “A Defense of the Federation’s Policy...,” pp. 11-12. See also, K of C. Coll 006, Box 290, SC-11-2-59 “Mexican Persecution Pamphlets, 1927.” “The Text of Secretary Kellogg’s Statement on January 12, 1927 to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations,” pp. 9-10.

infiltrating the CROM and “radicalizing” its agenda. CROM officials turned to the language of self-determination and argued that the workers of each country “must organize according to their own options and necessities.” They held that “no nation ha[d] the right to impose nor to lay down for another the doctrine that must control its activities.”⁴⁶

Still, despite the CROM’s nationalist posturing, Calles invited Soviet diplomatic representatives to become permanent members of its central committee. In doing so, the president hoped to neutralize challenges to Revolutionary rule by draining the Communist Party of any future political support. With Russian diplomats on his side, Calles expanded the CROM’s reach. As he outlawed the Communist Party in 1926, the CROM obtained the backing of like-minded movements abroad.⁴⁷

In August 1926, the Workers Party of America (WPA) announced its unequivocal support for the Calles administration on the front pages of *The Daily Worker*—a Chicago-based newspaper and an organ of the Communist Party USA. The endorsement came on the heels of the outbreak of the Cristero Rebellion and in a published statement from the party’s General Secretary, Charles E. Ruthenberg. Ruthenberg commended the Mexican President on his heroic fight against “the Vatican and Wall Street’s combined offensive.” He criticized the U.S. government and argued that American officials’ recent attempts at re-negotiating Mexican oil and land concessions represented a “clear and revealing imperialist maneuver.” Subsequently, Ruthenberg called on the WPA to unite with the CROM in “revolutionary resistance against Mexico’s enemies.” He claimed that the

⁴⁶ “The Text of Secretary Kellogg’s Statement on January 12, 1927 to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations,” p. 10.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

struggle against global capitalism would only succeed by developing an international workers' movement grounded in solidarity.⁴⁸

The Knights circulated Ruthenberg's note as evidence of a broader anti-Catholic conspiracy between Calles, the CROM, and the Communist International. This pressured the AFL's Second Vice President, Frank Duffy, to take an official position on the Federation's partnership with Mexico's national syndicate. At first, Duffy dismissed the statement and argued that the WPA did not have a right to speak for U.S. workers. He branded Ruthenberg as an "agitator" and insisted that the AFL was the only organization that truly advocated for working-class interests. Still, by October 1926, Duffy urged AFL President William Green to use the group's annual congress to rethink the issue. The following month, the AFL's Executive Council launched an official investigation into the CROM's alleged abuses of power.⁴⁹

Although the AFL did not sever ties with the CROM, Duffy published an official condemnation of its alleged attacks on religious freedom. The Knights scrutinized Duffy's statement, but also reprinted it as a testament to their own investigation. Duffy claimed that the AFL had an "inherent duty as an American organization" to promote religious tolerance and protect workers' individual freedoms. He channeled racial paternalism and described the Mexican labor movement as being "in dire need of guidance" and "still in its formative stages." While Duffy upheld the importance of international cooperation, he noted that the CROM's support for Calles's anti-religious policies had sparked tensions between union

⁴⁸ "A Defense of the Federation's Policy..." pp. 9-11.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

leaders and Catholic-American workers. As a result, he promised to end the AFL's relationship with the CROM if Calles's actions continued to divide its members.⁵⁰

Regardless of escalating tensions, the Knights and the AFL both relied on the language of anti-communism to reinforce their American identity. In Mexico, Calles used the specter of Soviet intervention to bolster the power of the CROM and other state institutions. Soviet Russia had become a foil against which each of these factions defined itself and its political opponents. While religious conservatives feared Mexico's "Russianization," the Mexican government and its U.S. allies claimed to pursue a workers' liberation movement—a "Revolution"—that still respected national sovereignty and individual freedoms.

Within the context of Mexico's Church-state conflict, the global Red Scare contributed to the climate of anxiety driving antagonism between Calles, Catholics, and each sides' North American allies. Mexico's secret war over public discourse permeated North America and even assumed new Cold War dimensions. From the outside, growing animosities seemed to point toward an open confrontation that extended well beyond Mexico's borders. However, each side was plagued by internal discord and opted for compromise over war.

The Secret War in the United States

As early as the winter of 1925-26, the Calles administration had begun to monitor routine monetary transactions made by Chandler P. Anderson, an American lawyer and Counsel to the U.S. Claims Commission in Mexico. According to Mexican spies, Anderson represented "powerful clients with a vested interest in Mexican oil acquisitions worth over

⁵⁰ Ibid.

one hundred million dollars.” To keep track of Anderson’s activities, Calles enlisted a handful of DeCo agents to infiltrate his office in Washington, D.C. Disguised as secretaries and custodial service staff, these informants regularly searched the facilities and relayed information in coded telegrams.⁵¹



Image 3.6: Chandler P. Anderson (right) with son, Chandler (1914).
Source: The Library of Congress.

In February 1926, the spies claimed that Anderson had wired a sum of \$4,625 USD to an American operative working under the alias of “Mr. George Merrill.” They alleged that that Merrill had purchased arms for the LNDLR from a “Major Charles Russell” in the U.S. army. At the same time, Mexican Ambassador Manuel C. Téllez informed Calles that Anderson’s office had secretly provided economic support to General Enrique Estrada, a political rival who now planned to launch a national rebellion from his exile in Texas.

⁵¹ FAPECFT. Fondo: Anexo, Serie: 08, Exp: 1, Inv. 1391 “Actividades en Estados Unidos por Caballeros de Colón.”. See also MFN 3655, Fondo: APEC, Gaveta; 43, Exp.: 40, Inv: 2905 “Inspección General de Policía.”

Intelligence reports corroborated these assertions, as Estrada appeared in confidential documents detailing Anderson's expenses pertinent to "the Mexican religious situation."⁵²

By November 1926, Anderson had wired approximately \$87,000 USD to over a dozen people. Records indicate that the money had been divided among spies, informants, and weapons suppliers across the entire continent. In addition to Merrill's \$4,600USD, General Estrada had collected about \$5,000USD for unspecified services. At the same time, Anderson allocated \$1,700USD for the purposes of "printing and distributing literature," while spending an astonishing \$47,500USD on the acquisition of "material" from Major Russell. Anderson also wired \$9,827USD to "General Agents" and sent a sum of \$8,500 to a group of Mexican instigators identified as "our people in San Antonio." Anderson himself kept \$1,500USD and allotted \$2,050USD to his Canadian informant, "Maxwell Sherwood," leaving the remaining \$7,000USD to legal and miscellaneous expenses.⁵³

In addition to Anderson's ledger, DeCo agents obtained a series of records wherein Anderson billed James A. Flaherty, Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, for his services. Other clients included George F. Baker of the First National City Bank of New York, and Edward L. Doheny, an Irish-American Catholic oil tycoon who had recently founded the Pan American Petroleum and Transport Company. According to the DeCo's North American informants, Doheny had used the Knights' propaganda to raise nearly \$5 million USD for the LNDLR. The spies also noted that the Knights themselves had collected about \$1 million USD from fundraising amongst their members.⁵⁴

⁵² FAPECFT. Fondo: Anexo, Serie: 08, Exp: 1, Inv. 1391 "Actividades en Estados Unidos Caballeros de Colón."

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Calles kept a close watch on Anderson's activities and suspected that he regularly wired funds to René Capistrán Garza and the League's high-ranking members. Although Anderson's records made no explicit mention of Capistrán Garza, the latter appeared in numerous intelligence reports as an elusive fugitive conspiring to topple Calles from abroad. Prior to the Cristero Rebellion, Mexican agents alleged that Capistrán Garza actively sought the support of Vatican officials and leaders in the U.S. government. While some spies placed him in Washington, D.C., others warned that he was assembling militias along the U.S.-Mexico border. At the same time, a handful of intelligence reports followed Capistrán Garza into "the jungles of Central and South America." They described his meetings with local clergy and his quest to form "Bolivarian" alliances with the U.S.-backed governments of Nicaragua, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Venezuela.⁵⁵

By June 1926, DeCo agents claimed that Capistrán Garza had relied on the U.S. Ambassador in Mexico City to broker a series of underground meetings between the Mexican Episcopate, the U.S. State Department, and the Vatican's Apostolic Delegate to Mexico, George J. Caruana. During these encounters, Mexican bishops petitioned Ambassador James R. Sheffield to speak out against Caruana's expulsion and condemn Calles's establishment of a national registry of Catholic clergy. In a confidential telegram, Sheffield urged Kellogg and U.S. President Calvin Coolidge to release a formal statement denouncing the Mexican government. At the same time, spies warned that the Caruana affair had led the U.S. government to send more spies into Mexico.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ FAPECFE. Fondo Anexo, Serie: 0904, Exp; 6, Inv.: 1499 "Capistrán Garza, René." Also, MFN 804-06, Inv.: 1554 "Informes 10-B, octubre 1926;" and MFN 810-12, Inv.: 1556 "Informes 10-B, diciembre 1926."

⁵⁶ FAPECFE. MFN 791-95, "Informes 10-B, marzo-junio 1926."

DeCo operatives alleged that U.S. officials were fully aware of the League's partnership with the Knights and Capistrán Garza's efforts to provoke a war between Mexico and the United States. Nevertheless, by December 1926, intercepted correspondence between Sheffield and the American Consul in Veracruz revealed that the U.S. Ambassador remained skeptical of Catholics' political mobilization in Mexico's oil-rich regions. Sheffield feared that the League's calls for open rebellion would disrupt industry and irreparably damage American property claims. To prevent a loss of profits, the U.S. government would be forced to intervene on behalf of American investors. The Ambassador hesitated as the League continued to seek the official backing of the U.S. government during the winter. In the end, Sheffield's office abstained from implicating itself directly in the conflict.⁵⁷



Image 3.7: U.S. Ambassador James R. Sheffield (left) meets with Mexican President Álvaro Obregón (right) Obregón (1924).
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

⁵⁷ FAPECF. MFN 810-12, Inv.: 1556 “Informes 10-B, diciembre 1926.”

Still, during a press conference held in March 1927, Calles announced before the world that he had indisputable evidence of an American conspiracy. He held that U.S. agents worked to undermine his presidency and even alleged that the international press corps had been infiltrated by agitators working for outside interests.⁵⁸ For almost a year, DeCo agents had gathered confidential information from Sheffield's office. Among them, agent Miguel Ávila (or "10-B") had regularly received classified intelligence from William Lionel Copeland, an army lieutenant who reported to the U.S. Military Attaché in Mexico City.⁵⁹

Since October 1926, 10-B had intercepted private correspondence between Sheffield and the U.S. State Department. In a series of letters, Washington officials informed the Ambassador that a band of exiled Mexican generals planned to launch a counterrevolution from San Antonio, Texas.⁶⁰ Specifically, 10-B obtained a petition that had been signed and circulated among the conspirators. They included Adolfo de la Huerta, Félix Díaz (nephew of the former president, Porfirio Díaz), and Pablo González, a Mexican

⁵⁸ In his correspondence with the Calles administration, 10-B identified three reporters in the president's foreign press corps as "persons of interest." They included Joseph de Courcey of *The New York Times*, Stan Hunt of the *New York Herald Tribune*, and Peter Duboise of the Associated Press. In June 1926, 10-B alleged that Hunt was an informant to prominent figures like Sheffield, Coolidge, and Archbishop José Mora y del Río. He described Hunt as a messenger between Coolidge and Mora y del Río on matters pertinent to Mexico's religious persecution. Furthermore, 10-B exposed Duboise as an emissary of the U.S. State Department and revealed that de Courcey was an active sympathizer of Arnulfo R. Gómez—an army general and presidential hopeful. According to 10-B, de Courcey actively used *The New York Times* as a platform to promote Gómez's presidential candidacy among U.S. audiences. He claimed that *The New York Times* positioned Gómez as a potential U.S. ally and a promising opponent of the Calles-Obregón axis of power. For more, see FAPECFT. MFN 791-95, "Informes 10-B, marzo-junio 1926." MFN 799-801, Inv.: 1552 "Informes 10-B, agosto 1926." MFN 807-809, Inv.: 1555 "Informes 10-B, noviembre 1926." MFN 819-21, Inv.: 1559 "Informes Confidenciales 10-B, marzo 1927."

⁵⁹ FAPECFT. MFN 816-18, Inv.: 1558 "Informes 10-B, febrero 1927." MFN 819-21, Inv.: 1559 "Informes 10-B, marzo 1927." Also, for more on 10-B and Mexican espionaje under Calles, see Friedrich Katz, "El gran espía de México," *Boletín* 20 (1995); Lorenzo Meyer, "El espionaje mexicano al servicio del antiimperialismo," *Boletín* 55 (2007).

⁶⁰ Most likely "our people in San Antonio," from Chandler Anderson's records.

general earmarked by U.S. officials to challenge Obregón's claim to the presidency in 1920. 10-B revealed that the petition solicited funds and supplies from Kellogg. The conspirators had also sent representatives to meet with William F. Buckley, a Texas oil developer who supported Victoriano Huerta's ill-fated coup d'état in 1913. By 1924, Buckley had been expelled from Mexico. Still, the rebel exiles assured him that U.S. land and oil claims would be protected should their revolt prove successful.⁶¹

In addition to the Texas conspiracy, 10-B informed Calles of a series of confidential telegram exchanges between Sheffield and Colonel Edward M. Davis, the U.S. Military Attaché, between August and October 1926. Angered by Calles's support for Nicaraguan Liberals and his alleged "flirtation" with the Soviet Union, Davis proposed a military intervention in support of the cristeros. Specifically, Davis suggested lifting the U.S. arms embargo. He expressed frustration at Coolidge's "ambivalence" and claimed that skirmishes between cristeros and the federal army signaled the beginning of Calles's demise.⁶²

By April 1927, Calles's public announcement had triggered an internal investigation by the U.S. government. At Coolidge's behest, the State Department swiftly probed Sheffield and high-ranking officers in the U.S. military corps. While the army dismissed the Davis files as forgeries, Sheffield expressed an unrelenting desire to physically acquire the documents. 10-B claimed that the Ambassador even proposed purchasing the files for the sum of \$1000 Mexican pesos. In the meantime, Secretary Kellogg feared that U.S. operations had been severely compromised. By the end of April,

⁶¹ FAPECFT. MFN 804-06, Inv.: 1554 "Informes 10-B, octubre 1926."

⁶² FAPECFT. Fondo: Anexo, Serie: 0905, Exp.: 24, Inv.: 1536, "México Política, Estabilidad del Gobierno."

Coolidge placed Copeland under military surveillance and summoned Sheffield and Davis back to Washington, D.C. Despite Sheffield's protestations, Kellogg ordered him to send all confidential materials back to Washington. In June 1927, Coolidge removed Sheffield from Mexico City and quietly appointed Colonel Frank C. Woodruff to replace Davis. Copeland was quietly dismissed from the officer corps, but remained the focal point of a confidential investigation. Meanwhile, the U.S. Embassy remained without a leader for nearly five months.⁶³

Even as Dwight W. Morrow assumed the role of Ambassador in October 1927, a second crisis unfolded as leaked documents seemed to expose Calles's covert arms sales to insurgent Nicaraguan Liberals. At the forefront of the controversy, newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst publicly alleged that the Mexican president conspired against U.S. interests in Central America. An outspoken critic of Calles and Obregón, Hearst owned a vast 1,625,000-acre ranch property in the northern Mexican state of Chihuahua. *TIME* magazine revealed that he had inherited the property from his father, U.S. Senator George Hearst, who had "acquired the land for peanuts" during the Porfiriato. Distrustful of the Mexican Revolution, Hearst condemned the government's appropriation of land. He claimed to have obtained the documents from "preoccupied" officials who strongly disagreed with Calles's domestic and foreign policies.⁶⁴

True to his style of yellow journalism, Hearst shocked U.S. audiences with his discovery and branded the incident as an open declaration of war. For Hearst, however, the

⁶³ FAPECFE. MFN 822-23, Inv.: 1560 "Informes 10-B, abril 1927." MFN 824-26, Inv.: 1561 "Informes 10-B, mayo 1927."

⁶⁴ FAPECFE. MFN: 715, Inv.: 1477. See also Arno Burkholder de la Rosa, "El Presidente Calles y el Ciudadano Hearst. Prensa, Petróleo, y Revolución Mexicana" *Boletín* 69 (2012), pp. 10-12; and "Mexico: The End of an Empire," *TIME* (1953).

scandal represented a culmination of a six-year undertaking that exposed an intricate paper trail connecting the Mexican government to Nicaraguan rebels and a handful of prominent U.S. lawmakers.⁶⁵ As tensions escalated, Arturo M. Elías, President Calles's half-brother and the Mexican Consul in New York City, warned of yet another American conspiracy to invade Mexico.⁶⁶ He expressed hope that Morrow's arrival would usher in a new era of diplomacy, but warned against Hearst's attempts to exacerbate tensions between the two nations.⁶⁷

Earlier that year, the Knights of Columbus had also published a series of confidential letters wherein Coolidge and Kellogg expressed concern over Mexican involvement in the Nicaraguan Civil War. The Knights reprinted excerpts of a presidential address delivered before Congress and distributed fragments of Kellogg's report to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, aptly titled "Bolshevik Aims and Policies in Mexico and Latin America." In November 1926, Coolidge had accused the Calles administration of undermining the U.S. arms embargo and smuggling weapons to Nicaraguan Liberals. Led by Juan B. Sacasa, Liberals fought against Adolfo Díaz's U.S.-backed regime and

⁶⁵ Since the early years of the Obregón presidency, journalists writing for the Hearst Press Syndicate had begun to uncover documents implicating U.S. Senator William E. Borah as a "direct beneficiary" of the Revolutionary payroll. At the same time, newspapers like the *New York American* and the *New York Daily Mirror* published a series of controversial exposés connecting Borah's pro-Mexican positions to his apparent friendship with Mexican oil companies. By the mid-1920s, Hearst openly suggested that Borah and Congressman William LaFollette, Jr. worked at Calles's behest. This marks a clear contrast to Borah's "silent" intervention on behalf of Mexican Catholics in 1935, which might speak to differences between the covert partnerships pursued by Presidents Calles and Cárdenas and the nature of U.S.-Mexico relations under Republican and Democratic U.S. presidential administrations. On Borah's "silent" intervention, see Solís Nicot (2020). On Borah, LaFollette, Jr., and the Mexican government: FAPECFT MFN: 836, Inv.: 1571 "Elías, Arturo M., 1927;" and MFN 637, Inv.: 1403.

⁶⁶ Aside from identifying Morrow as a possible ally, Elías alleged that 10-B was a double-agent. Specifically, he accused Ávila of leaking the Nicaraguan documents to U.S. journalists working for the Hearst Press Syndicate. Among them, John Page of the *Los Angeles Examiner* became the first to break the story on November 14th, 1927. For more, see Burkholder de la Rosa (2012), pp. 11-12.

⁶⁷ FAPECFT. MFN 816-18, Inv.: 1558 "Informes 10-B, febrero 1927." MFN 824-26, Inv.: 1561 "Informes 10-B, mayo 1927." Burkholder de la Rosa (2012), pp. 9, 16, 18.

called for the end of foreign intervention in their country. Coolidge criticized the Calles administration for recognizing Sacasa over Díaz. He denounced the Mexican government as the only one in the hemisphere to openly defy American interests.⁶⁸

Similarly, Kellogg claimed that Calles had played a role in establishing the All-American Anti-Imperialist League (AAAIL). He alleged that the AAAIL was a puppet organization of the Soviet Union and part of a larger effort to launch a global communist “Revolution.” Kellogg argued that “American imperialism” was an ideological creation of Soviet leaders seeking to tarnish the United States’ reputation. He looked past tensions between Calles and the U.S.S.R. and warned the Senate that Mexico had become a “red base” for Russian activists seeking to destabilize U.S. primacy. Kellogg called on U.S. agents to monitor the AAAIL’s political activities and the group’s monthly magazine, *El Libertador*. In Mexico, he ordered the surveillance of journals like *El Machete*—the Communist Party’s weekly gazette—which Kellogg feared had been widely circulated among migrant workers in the United States.⁶⁹

Although Calles dismissed the Hearst documents as forgeries, hostility between the two nations had escalated to a seemingly irreversible degree. As a result, a dozen third-party nations urged Calles and Coolidge to take matters into international adjudication by the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Calles’s inner circle believed that this opportunity could work in the president’s favor by steering American public opinion

⁶⁸ K of C. Coll 006, Box 290, SC-11-2-59 “Mexican Persecution Pamphlets, 1927.” Pamphlet titled “Mexico,” Columbia Press, New Haven, Connecticut. Also, “Excerpts from President Coolidge’s Message to Congress, January 10, 1927,” pp. 1-2; “The Text of Secretary Kellogg’s Statement on January 12, 1927 to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations,” pp. 3-10. See also, Jürgen Buchenau, “Calles y el movimiento liberal in Nicaragua,” *Boletín* (1992). For a broader history: Buchenau, *In the Shadow of the Giant: The Making of Mexico’s Central American Policy, 1876-1930* (University of Alabama Press, 1996).

⁶⁹ “The Text of Secretary Kellogg’s Statement on January 12, 1927 to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations,” pp. 3-10.

toward non-intervention. Furthermore, 10-B reported that the U.S. State Department feared formal arbitration by The Hague, as it could result in a scaling back of recently acquired oil and land concessions from Mexico.⁷⁰

By January 1928, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee concluded that the Hearst documents had been falsified. This revelation followed a two-month investigation wherein Mexican consular officials revealed glaring inconsistencies in the leaked reports. Mexico's leading newspapers claimed that the controversy had been fabricated by Hearst and the U.S. oil industry to push for Morrow's removal. At the same time, U.S. progressives condemned Hearst for using the specter of Soviet "communism" to provoke an armed standoff.⁷¹

Still, U.S.-Mexico relations were not as bellicose as public discourse seemed to indicate. Calles continued to negotiate with U.S. private interests even after nullifying the Bucareli Treaty of 1923 and supporting the expropriation of foreign-owned property. As the U.S. government refrained from taking an official position on the Mexican religious conflict, a full-scale military invasion remained highly unlikely. However, this left room for covert action by groups like the Knights of Columbus, which not only worked to weaken Calles's bargaining position, but also bolstered connections between the Knights and the LNDLR.

In the end, Morrow brokered a compromise favorable to American capitalist interests and the Calles administration. However, the rise of the Calles government on the

⁷⁰ FAPECFT. MFN 813-15, Inv.: 1557 "Informes 10-B, enero 1927."

⁷¹As early as November 1927, American journalists from twenty-six newspapers in the Scripps-Howard News Syndicate signed a public editorial denouncing Hearst's fabrication of an alleged Soviet-Mexican conspiracy. See Burkholder de la Rosa (2012), pp. 14, 16-18.

world stage had become abundantly clear. In the span of eight months, Calles had repeatedly confronted the U.S. government from behind the scenes. Despite Catholics' best efforts, the president had used the press and the state's covert apparatus to prevent an overt violation of Mexican sovereignty.

Conclusions

While the U.S. Embassy pursued trilateral negotiations between the international private sector and Mexican Church and state, the spring of 1928 witnessed cristeros' final resurgence prior to the end of armed conflict.⁷² However, even amid this belated streak of military victories, Catholics became embroiled in a sea of internal schisms following Álvaro Obregón's shocking assassination. Upon returning to Mexico City on July 17th, 1928, the former president was gunned down by a radical Catholic sympathizer named José de León Toral. As one of Calles's chief advisers on matters of Church and state, Obregón remained a powerful leader in government and handily won the 1928 presidential election two weeks earlier, despite previously adhering to Revolutionary calls for non-reelection.

At Obregón's behest, Calles had ordered DeCo agents to increase their surveillance of political opponents since the spring of 1927. Specifically, the DeCo kept track of Generals Francisco Serrano and Arnulfo Gómez's burgeoning influence in the oil-rich coastal states of Veracruz and Tamaulipas. A popular war hero and a key player in the

⁷² According to scholar Jean Meyer, the cristeros' 1928 resurgence resulted from two important developments. First, by 1927, Calles had summoned troops away from the *Bajío* region (see Map 1-1) to quell a series of uprisings by the Yaqui indigenous community in the northwestern state of Sonora. Second, by the summer and fall of 1927, Mexico's Revolutionary coalition had become irreparably fragmented from within, as the looming 1928 presidential election exacerbated personal rivalries and sparked a multitude of military rebellions that called for a shifting of state resources. On cristero enthusiasm in 1928, see Julia Young, "Mexican emigration during the Cristero War, 1926-29," PhD Diss, Chicago, 2009, pp. 32-34, 39. Furthermore, with regard to the Yaqui indigenous rebellions, Julia Young documents that cristero leaders "began purchasing supplies of arms and ammunition and rounding up local supporters—many of whom were from the Yaqui Indian communities in the region—to join in the [cristero] revolt," p. 129. See also, Meyer (1976), p. 53.

suppression of Adolfo de la Huerta's failed uprising, Gómez was a vocal opponent of the CROM. As Obregón's former Secretary of War, Serrano had received pivotal endorsements from CROM leader Luis Morones, the Yucatecan Socialist Party, and disgruntled members of the Partido Laborista. To Calles' dismay, Gómez and Serrano both entered the race upon learning of Obregón's controversial bid for re-election. With the president's approval, the candidates were arrested, jailed, and executed in the fall of 1927, leaving Obregón as the uncontested winner.⁷³

Even as Calles's political coalition grew divided from within, Obregón's assassination exacerbated tensions among Catholic militants, the Mexican clergy, and middle- and upper-class lay groups. Upon learning of the news, Mexican bishops immediately denounced Toral and disavowed all "radical elements" awakened by religious violence. By contrast, peasant rebels regarded the gunman as a slain "martyr." Still, members of the LNDR remained split in their responses to the magnicide. Though some praised Toral's bravery, most *ligueros* denounced his actions while others insisted that the controversy was a cover-up designed to hide Calles's own involvement in the assassination. The waning months of the Cristero Rebellion left Mexico's Catholic activists deeply fragmented. Tensions over the issues of popular Catholicism and religious violence revealed underlying racial and class divides that would only intensify over the next decade.⁷⁴

The Catholic coalition had ironically come undone just as Morrow finalized a series of accords between Church and government officials in the summer of 1929. Still, the

⁷³ FAPECFE. MFN 633, Inv. 1400; MFN: 799-801, Inv.: 1552; MFN 804-06, Inv.: 1554; MFN 810-12, Inv.: 1556; MFN: 819-21, Inv.: 1559.

⁷⁴ Aspe Armella (2008), pp. 104-110.

League's anti-communist rhetoric had allowed the Mexican Church to gain the support of North American industrialists and approach negotiations from a position of relative equality. As part of the compromise, the Mexican government eased its restrictions on the clergy's ownership of property and political participation while allowing religious education to continue within parishes. In addition to these concessions, President Emilio Portes Gil, Calles's interim successor, vowed to pursue a non-interventionist policy with regard to Church appointments and even permitted members of the clergy to establish a direct line of communication with the Vatican. Finally, the government granted amnesty to all priests and rebels who ceased military activity. In return, Church officials called on the cristeros to lay down their weapons and obey the laws established in the Constitution.⁷⁵

In December 1929, the government declared a ceasefire and officially ended the Cristero Rebellion. However, even if the secret war seemed to dissipate with the embers of armed conflict, Mexico's long Cold War was already underway. For nine years, Presidents Calles and Obregón had worked to consolidate rule by leveraging the language of "Revolution" to grow the power of the state's intelligence agencies, labor syndicates, and political parties. As the first national uprising since the end of the Revolution, the Cristero Rebellion became a testing ground for future strategies of surveillance, repression, and violence.

Over the next two decades, the state would refine its methods when confronting challenges from right- and left-wing militants—particularly peasant agrarians and fringe religious extremists. The Mexican Church had now been "officially" sidelined and would eventually align with state efforts to quell working-class mobilization. As seen in

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-110.

Gándara's appeals to the U.S. government and Mexican officials' condemnation of Soviet intervention, the language of anti-communism permeated both sides of the Church-state conflict. Mexicans situated themselves within the global Red Scare and gradually adapted anti-communist rhetoric to convey their opposition to religious and political "radicalization."

However, aside from enabling hegemonic state projects, the confrontation between Church and state also revealed the underlying fragility of Revolutionary rule and its reliance on Catholic compliance to achieve stability. This was evident in lay activists' ability to establish formidable networks of opposition and pressure the Calles government to pull back on its own agenda. Whether in the arena of property rights or secular education, the president's final position on these issues was a far cry from his administration's initial posturing. In the meantime, Catholics had managed to restore a significant degree of the clergy's privileges and the Church's ability to pursue, implement, and dictate religious education.

Although Mexican lay activists adopted the language of secular liberalism in their appeals to U.S. allies, their counterrevolution remained a religious movement guided by the principles of Catholic social doctrine. The LNDLR underscored its struggle for individual liberties, but still saw religion as a force for social unity and a vehicle for the protection of other fundamental rights. Like their Mexican and Spanish counterparts, U.S. Catholics channeled racial paternalism in their expressions of Hispanism. By creating a "vulnerable" working-class "Other," groups like the Liga, the Damas Católicas, and the Knights of Columbus all effectively racialized communism and the nascent global Cold War.

As the confrontational phase came to a close, Mexican católicas had asserted their influence at home and on the world stage. During the following decade, they and the government would draw from international influences to establish competing—though at times convergent—authoritarian projects. In Mexico, whiteness survived in the language of class, morality, education, and religious orthodoxy. Abroad, it took the form of prejudice and racial paternalism, embedding itself in new anti-communist discourses.

PART II

PART II: THE INSTITUTIONAL PHASE, 1929-1938

“The Archdiocese has discovered that a crisis of ideology, born of a diverse and abundant series of propaganda imbued with *errores religiosos*, has contributed to the growing wave of corrupt religious customs and the unleashing of passions that obscure and pervert judgement. These passions are fanned by numerous groups and causes, all of which lead the soul astray from their true purpose...”

Archbishop Pascual Díaz Barreto, “Carta Pastoral del Ilmo. Señor Arzobispo de México a Todos los Fieles Católicos,” *Juventud: Boletín del Comité Central de J.C.F.M.* Año 1 Núm. 2 (México, D.F., mayo 1930), p.1.

In an open letter published nearly six months after the end of the Cristero Rebellion, Archbishop Pascual Díaz Barreto warned young católicas against the “false” religious practices embraced by the same peasant militants the Church had recently supported. Subsequently, the women of Sofia del Valle’s *Juventud Católica Femenina Mexicana* (JCFM) renewed their calls for working-class “re-education” and worked with members of the clergy to bolster their nascent moralization campaigns—an integral component of the group’s restorative religious project. However, just as the *socias* distanced themselves from religious militants, they also turned their back on the democratic and individualist discourses previously advanced by the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty (LNDLR). Instead, they embraced a new authoritarianism grounded in oppressive notions of “spiritual community.”

These ideological shifts manifested themselves in the activists’ organizational strategy. While the JCFM had previously celebrated individual *socias* for their embodiment of Catholic womanhood, the group’s new institutionalism underscored the importance of subjugating women’s personal aspirations for the benefit of the parish, the clergy, and the Roman Church. At the helm of these centralizing efforts was the newly-formed Mexican Catholic Action (ACM) organization. As members of the high clergy called on the militant

LNDLR to disband, it left the nascent ACM to take up the issue of popular Catholicism in a doomed effort to resolve Catholics' internal schisms and promote doctrinal alignment.

While the Counterrevolution's confrontational stage (1917-1929) had seen activists readily embrace the prospect of war with the federal government, Catholics' new calls for institutional development prioritized education over violence as the means to religious restoration. At the same time, Catholics remained suspicious of the state and feared the rise of communism and "dangerous foreign ideologies" among rural peasants and middle- and upper-class youth. By 1934, the issue of secular education took center stage as the nation's new arena for Church-state conflict. Six years after formally leaving office, former president Plutarco Elías Calles emphasized the importance of youth in Mexico's "unfinished" Revolution and proclaimed that the latter now entered a "psychological phase" in its struggle against the forces of religious conservatism. Since 1929, the Mexican state had undergone a similar period of consolidation wherein Calles had sought to rein in personalist military leaders and promote party loyalty over individual ambition. Despite democratic discourses, however, Calles used the budding *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR) to retain a considerable amount of power even after formally leaving office.

As Church and state actors mobilized to promote their respective institutional projects, they adopted a mass politics approach and corporatist model of activism that sought to equally galvanize all sectors of society. For populist president Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40), this translated into a new statism that strived to reward peasants' political participation in state-backed channels. For Catholic Action, it meant re-structuring and establishing a new constellation of lay organizations to unify Catholics under a common religious experience. Both sides turned to print media as a way to make their case before a

national audience. Both turned to racial discourses and remained suspicious of communism, militancy, and working-class radicalism.

As Mexicans transitioned from secret war to Cold War, they turned to the languages of race and “Revolution” to reject democracy and communism while centralizing power away from popular actors. Mexicans grew increasingly divided along class lines, but also turned to the language of race as a way to make sense of these divisions and what they meant for national identity. For Catholic women, Hispanism remained a potent ideological influence and the driving force behind the JCFM’s revamped moralization campaigns. However, even as *socias* openly embraced the discourses of *mestizaje*, they turned to the language of religious orthodoxy and anti-democratic notions of “social equilibrium” to assert their moral superiority and thereby solidify a collective sense of whiteness.

Chapter 4: Authoritarian Institutionalism and the Fear of Radicalization, 1929-1934

In October 1932, the JCFM embarked on a bold new direction as its members openly waged war on the Enlightenment. With the formidable Catholic press as their weapon, the group's 13- to 35-year-old *socias* had taken to the pages of *Juventud* magazine—the group's official monthly publication—and published a scathing condemnation of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's treatise on "the natural goodness of man." Penned by the organization's Commission on Family Education, the young activists' repudiation of Rousseau's philosophy was printed by the thousands, swiftly making its way to each of the JCFM's more than thirty diocesan chapters. Their manifesto called for a rejection of secular individualism and argued that Rousseau's portrayal of human rationality undermined the Church's role in society.¹

Nearly three years after the passage of the 1929 peace accords, the JCFM had now abandoned the LNDLR's democratic and individualist ideals. Though *socias* still embraced the League's anti-communism, they now pursued authoritarian and openly anti-democratic projects that called for religious uniformity and women's personal subjugation. More broadly, the activists called for the restoration of a national spiritual community grounded in the family, the physical parish, and the doctrines of the Roman Church. They targeted working-class actors, but also developed a new distrust toward middle-and upper-class youth grounded in antisemitism and anti-Protestant xenophobia.

At the core of these projects, *socias* feared the prospect of "radicalization" as driven by religious militancy, working-class mobility, and "dangerous foreign ideologies." They

¹ Biblioteca FXC. Archivo UFCM. Serie: Impresos, Publicaciones Acción Católica Mexicana. Caja 74: "Juventud." "Círculo de Formación Familiar, Segundo Ciclo: La Educación," *Juventud: Boletín del Comité Central de la J.C.F.M.* Año II Num. 26, octubre de 1932 (México, D.F.), pp. 14-16.

drew from European integralists and underscored the need to unify the nation through a uniform Catholic faith that would permeate all aspects of civil society. Six years earlier, the Cristero Rebellion had exposed the fragility of Church power by unleashing a constellation of Catholic peasant movements whose ideologies and spiritual practices did not adhere to doctrine. By December 1929, the Church found itself caught between the state and popular religious actors, heeding new calls to rein in militants and combat external threats.

On January 1st, 1930, the Mexican Catholic Action (ACM) organization responded to these challenges and entered public life as both an institution of the clergy and a spiritual lay movement of social, ideological, and political import. Founded by the Vatican and the Mexican Episcopate, the ACM consolidated the nation's prominent lay groups and mobilized activists around the goals of doctrinal alignment, non-violent activism, and national religious instruction. Upon its inception, the ACM moved to subdue militants and demobilize Catholic fringe groups. Next, it tasked JCFM and the Damas Católicas—now organized as the *Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana* (UFCM)—with developing a national instructional curriculum for Catholic families. On matters of doctrine, Catholic Action looked to Rome and strived to align itself directly with papal decree. However, it also acknowledged the importance of social action at the grassroots and emphasized return to the physical parish as the center of spiritual community.

Still, the ACM failed to assuage its critics and gain the trust of disgruntled militants. Though considerably successful among upper-class women's groups, Mexican Catholic Action struggled to integrate students, workers, and men's groups into its ranks. As a result, Mexican católicas assumed new leadership roles and received an unprecedented amount of

support from the clergy to pursue ambitious national projects. They renewed their pursuit of national moralization campaigns and developed complex political projects that drew from fascist ideologies on the other side of the Atlantic.

At the same time, the Revolutionary state had undergone a similar period of consolidation and established the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR) in an effort to transcend conflict between quarreling factions. Shaken by Obregón's assassination and the *escobarista* rebellion of 1929, former president Plutarco Elías Calles devised a new spiritual language of "Revolution" and turned to notions of *fuerza popular* to present civic institutions as the bulwark of democracy. To make the case for the PNR, Calles called on allies in the press who then used the language of political stability to consolidate public opinion around his agenda. He looked to the military and urged those loyal to him to embrace a new politics that placed loyalty before personal ambition.

Thus, between 1929 and 1933, Mexico's Church and state actors engaged in simultaneous processes of institutionalism that channeled discourses of crisis and political instability to consolidate power among a handful of institutions. Unlike previous decades, however, this new institutionalism was more a response to internal opposition than the biproduct of Church-state conflict. Still, even as both sides reached a tenuous peace at the end of Cristero Rebellion, they also intensified their respective political, spiritual, and ideological entrenchment. They embraced authoritarian politics, but neither of them returned to their militant tendencies.

Revolutionary Institutionalism: Calles and the PNR

As federal forces moved to end the war against cristero militants in the spring of 1929, General José Gonzalo Escobar launched a military insurrection against the nation's

interim president, Emilio Portes Gil. The rebellion broke out within hours of the PNR's inaugural convention and relied on the language of "renewal" to reject corruption and callista politics. Launched from the northwestern state of Sonora on March 3rd, 1929, Escobar's rebellion proclaimed him the "supreme leader" of the nation's *Ejército Renovador*. Subsequently, Escobar marched eastward and vowed to remove all legislators, governors, and court justices who refused to recognize him as the nation's leader.²

A former ally of Presidents Obregón and Calles, Escobar hoped to take advantage of the power vacuum caused by Obregón's assassination. He looked for support from disgruntled Catholics along the U.S.-Mexico border and even petitioned members of the incoming Herbert Hoover administration for political backing. Still, Escobar's uprising presented Presidents Calles and Portes Gil with an opportunity to rein in the military and make the case for civic institutions as "pillars of Revolution." To suppress the threat of insurrection by strongman *caudillos*, this new institutionalism prioritized party loyalty over personal ambition.³

Following Escobar's defeat in May 1929, Calles recognized the need to promote unity among the nation's ruling elites as a means to achieve stability. He turned to spiritual language and described the PNR's founding as a "noble enterprise that call[ed] for the disappearance of men [and] a generous spirit of sacrifice, serenity, and negation of self."

² Doralicia Carmona Dávila, "Gonzalo Escobar se levanta en contra del gobierno de Emilio Portes Gil, exige respeto a las organizaciones campesinas y obreras del país, marzo 3 de 1929," in *Memoria Política de México* [Online] (Edición Perenne, 2021). URL: <https://www.memoriapoliticademexico.org/Efemerides/3/03031929.html>. Accessed 26 February 2021. ISBN 970-95193.

³ Young reveals that radical Catholics on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border secretly participated in the rebellion, even as they remained outwardly neutral toward Escobar's uprising and expressed ambivalence about his ability to abolish state-mandated secular education. Julia Young, "Mexican emigration during the Cristero War, 1926-29," PhD Diss, Chicago, 2009, pp. 241-49.

Since December 1928, the former president had gradually moved to finalize the party's establishment. He urged followers "not to lose heart in forging an institutional life for Mexico" and claimed that the PNR would stand above the individualist political interests of civilian and military leaders. Moved by Obregón's death, Calles argued that the founding of enduring institutions would foster the very peace and stability for which Mexicans had yearned since the outbreak of violence nearly twenty years earlier. Despite ideological divisions, the PNR would embody the nation's "Revolutionary spirit" and the "sole political force capable of unifying a fractured nation."⁴

By the summer of 1929, Calles ended his tenure as interim Secretary of War and reiterated the need for robust institutions to safeguard civic integrity. Among them, he identified the military as "the keeper of popular will" and a "natural and organic institution of the Revolutionary spirit." Still, Calles argued that the survival of public trust required the sublimation of individual ambitions to a higher power. He held that any military officer seeking to enter political life should first relinquish their hold over local regiments and wholly submit themselves to the "will of the nation." Any failure to carry out this "essential patriotic duty" would further the public's feelings of distrust and alienation. It was therefore imperative that the military maintain its image as "a pillar of legitimacy," rather than a "brutal and intolerable instrument" of "capricious individuals bent on suppressing liberty and democracy."⁵

And yet, Calles lamented the state's inability to protect the integrity of the democratic process from insurrectionists. While he lauded the Mexican government's

⁴ Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca (FAPECFT). MFN 79, Inv. 773: "Discursos, 1921-1929."

⁵ Ibid.

economic legacies and social accomplishments, Calles also believed that the state had failed to successfully defend the sanctity of the vote as the principal means by which to promote the people's will. Given the significance of the military in bringing the Mexican Revolution to fruition, Calles now envisioned the federal army as being responsible for promoting the public's investment in, and loyalty to, the nation. At the same time, he claimed that the nascent PNR would "connect Revolutionary ideals to the great masses." Still, Calles cautioned fellow generals against the impulse of directing the party in autocratic fashion. He warned against the arbitrary selection of candidates and rejected self-serving styles of party leadership as both ant-democratic and anti-Revolutionary. Instead, Calles claimed that the "real" Revolution would emanate from the people and "so thoroughly permeate the party that it would become a true vehicle of *fuera popular*." From his perspective, this would cement the Revolution's "integral triumph" for future generations.⁶

Still, despite free-flowing discourses of institutional integrity and popular democracy, Calles remained a dominant figure in Mexican politics and held his grip on the PNR through three interim presidencies spanning roughly six years. Known as the *Maximato* (1928-34), this institutionalist period witnessed the suppression of military upheavals and a retreat from the personalist politics that once dominated the armed Revolution. By 1933, Calles's informal tenure as *Jefe Maximo* would see the PNR's consolidation as one of the state's instruments of rule. Even as Calles's influence over the

⁶ Ibid.

presidency waxed and waned over the years, he still managed to orchestrate the total unification of the party.⁷

| <p style="text-align: center;">Table 4-1: Mexican Presidents during the <i>Maximato</i> (1928-1934)</p> | |
|--|-----------|
| Emilio Portes Gil | 1928-1930 |
| Pascual Ortiz Rubio | 1930-32 |
| Abelardo Rodríguez | 1932-34 |

To make the case for a centralized state, Calles courted news outlets through extra-legal means. In one of these efforts, journalist Alfonso Romandía Ferreira, a long-time ally of Calles and Obregón, publicly outlined the role of the press in “rehabilitating” the state and consolidating national institutions. From the pages of *El Universal*, Romandía Ferreira warned news outlets against providing a platform for *políticos pescadores*. He identified the latter as Calles’s adversaries and shrewd political leaders who—like fishermen after their prize—purposefully sowed chaos to instigate confusion and take advantage of the public.⁸

⁷ Joseph and Buchenau (2013), pp. 105-107, 123.

⁸ FAPECFT. Fondo Soledad González. MFN 660, Inv. 638: “Romandía Ferreira, Alfonso, 1924-1932.”

In response, Romandía Ferreira summoned journalists to Calles's aid and argued that consensus in the media had become indispensable to achieving political stability. He claimed that the state was responsible for guarding the public trust and should therefore rely on the press to establish order in the realm of national discourse. By denying news coverage to Calles's political opponents, Romandía Ferreira believed that newspapers had the power to manufacture unanimity in public opinion. An instrument at the PNR's disposal, the new mass media would become a *factor coayudante* in Calles's project of "reconstruction."⁹



Image 4.1: Alfonso Romandía Ferreira (1926).
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

⁹ Ibid.

Since Obregón's assassination, the "Revolutionary family" had grown fractured from within. Portes Gil was the first Mexican president to represent the PNR and had been handpicked by Calles after serving as Interior Minister. Still, as Portes Gil assumed office in December 1928, the Mexican Congress called for a special election that would allow him an opportunity to step down by 1930. Scheduled for November of the following year, the controversial election of 1929 became a new source of conflict among leading political figures.

An early opponent to Obregón's controversial re-election bid, the former Secretary of Education, José Vasconcelos, presented himself as the "true" heir of Revolution. Just three years earlier, Vasconcelos had advocated for the expansion of the state's cultural institutions, but now labeled the nascent PNR as anti-democratic and warned that the party would only further the interests of its leaders. Reminiscent of Madero's campaign against Díaz, Vasconcelos positioned himself as a messianic savior opposed to the oppressive politics of Mexico's state apparatus. As the presidential campaign ensued, his political supporters became frequent victims of harassment by local police and state agents.¹⁰

After launching his presidential campaign under the banner of the National Anti-Reelectionist Party (PNA), Vasconcelos was immediately backed by prominent Revolutionary youth groups. Among these, the *Frente Nacional Renovador* established the influential *Comité Orientador Pro-Vasconcelos* to unify dissatisfied elements within the government. Aside from this initial wave of support, Vasconcelos's anti-communist Hispanism earned him the approval of tens if not hundreds of thousands of Catholics in the

¹⁰ Doralicia Carmona Dávila, "José Vasconcelos Calderón, 1882-1959" in *Memoria Política de México* [Online] (Edición Perenne, 2020). URL: <https://www.memoriapoliticademexico.org/Biografias/V CJ82.html>. Accessed 26 February 2021. ISBN 970-95193.

nation's middle and upper classes. He subsequently traveled to the nation's *Bajío* region and delivered lectures and speeches across the states of Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Michoacán.¹¹

By contrast, Calles personally “recruited” Pascual Ortiz Rubio, Mexico's then-Ambassador to Brazil, to participate in the 1929 election on behalf of the PNR. Prior to launching Ortiz Rubio's candidacy, however, Calles and his allies had seriously considered nominating the former Foreign Relations Secretary, Aarón Sáenz, as the party's candidate. Still, Calles ultimately decided against Sáenz's nomination under the pretext that the Secretary's economic conservatism called his loyalties to the Revolution into question. In reality, however, Calles realized that Sáenz's Protestantism would make him an easy partisan target for Vasconcelos's Catholic allies.¹²



Image 4.2: José Vasconcelos attends a campaign event (1929).
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See Joseph and Buchenau (2013), pp. 105-106.

After months of aggressive campaigning, official results showed a landslide victory for Ortiz Rubio even as many within and outside of the government denounced the election as fraudulent. Vasconcelos declared himself the contest's legitimate winner and called on Mexicans to take up arms against Calles. Written from Sonora, his 1929 *Plan de Guaymas* denounced Calles's attacks on Mexican democracy. These incursions, he alleged, were embodied in the state's use of the military for political intimidation, and in the emergent tradition of presidential imposition as part of the PNR's electoral strategy. By contrast, Vasconcelos pointed to his sustained grassroots support and claimed that his candidacy represented an unprecedented achievement in the history of the Americas. He condemned international corruption and criticized the U.S. Embassy for officially recognizing Ortiz Rubio's victory even before voting in Mexico had officially ended.¹³

Though ultimately exiled and defeated, Vasconcelos's surge in popularity attested to Hispanists' ability to put forth an electorally viable movement that both integrated and transcended Catholic circles. In less than a decade, Hispanism had gone from an ideological current largely confined to lay activists and the Church to a political project that had been openly embraced by more conservative factions within the government.¹⁴ As a result, Vasconcelos joined the ranks of figures like President Adolfo de la Huerta and diplomat Felix Palavacini, whose relative degree of conservatism had enabled them to call on disgruntled Catholics as a way to both oppose and "regenerate" Revolutionary politics.

¹³ Doralicia Carmona Dávila, *Memoria Política de México: José Vasconcelos Calderón, 1882-1959* [Online] (2020).

¹⁴ For more on Hispanism and Mexico's Institutional Revolution, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

However, Vasconcelos soon exited the partisan arena and eventually turned toward fascist models of race and nation.

And yet, the election of 1929 also marked the beginnings of the PNR's decisive establishment of one-party rule at the federal level. It was a pivotal victory for the Revolutionary state and for Calles's institutionalist politics of presidential succession. By defeating Vasconcelos, the PNR had succeeded in establishing itself as the keeper of democracy and stomping out the individualist political aspirations of internal rivals. Forged in the shadow of magnicide and rebellion, the party now worked to align its interests and establish an orderly system of power that rewarded loyalty to its leaders.

Even though some rivalries remained unresolved, the PNR established a culture that publicly rejected *caudillismo* in favor of institutional rule. The party projected an image of stability and held that the promise of "Revolution" superseded the aspirations of individual leaders. As noted by both Calles and Vasconcelos, the Mexican military played a pivotal role in forging and safeguarding this new system. While rivals of the *Jefe Máximo* criticized this move as despotic and anti-democratic, his supporters lauded it as an expression of patriotism and civic duty.

Romanization and Catholic Institutionalism

As Mexican Catholics anticipated Ortiz Rubio's inauguration in February 1930, the Damas Católicas and the Mexican Knights of Columbus prepared for imminent transformations. Effective January 1st, the Mexican Catholic Social League (LSCM) would officially disband and make way for the newly-formed Mexican Catholic Action (ACM) organization. Thereafter, the Damas would begin a process of internal transition and become a part of Catholic Action as the Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana (UFCM).

Similarly, the JCFM would be integrated into Catholic Action and now operate under the guidance of Archbishop Pascual Díaz Barreto.¹⁵

At the helm of the nascent ACM were President Luis G. Bustos of the Mexican Knights of Columbus and UFCM President Clara G. Arce. Founded by the Vatican and the Mexican Episcopate, Catholic Action was both an institution of the clergy and a lay religious movement that preached spiritual renewal and religious uniformity. As part of the Church's new institutionalism, the ACM rejected popular martyrdom, religious violence, and working-class militants' ideological "radicalism." Instead, it engaged in processes of Romanization, which sought to foster realignment with the Roman Church through doctrinal instruction.

Altogether, the ACM consisted of four "core" organizations led by a Central Board. It operated at every level of society and attempted to absorb a constellation of activists under the banner of social action. Since its inception, Catholic Action was dominated by upper-class women. However, aside from the UFCM and JCFM, its core included a vestige of René Capistrán Garza's Mexican Catholic Youth Association (ACJM), and the recently-founded *Unión de Católicos Mexicanos* (UCM).¹⁶

Legally unable to exercise the right to vote, upper-class católicas turned to Catholic Action as a vehicle of opposition to state-backed secular education. As a result, the ACM quickly grew dominated by women lay activists hailing from Mexico City's urban elite

¹⁵ FXC. Archivo ACM. Sección 2: Junta Central/Nacional de Acción Católica, Serie 2: Correspondencia, "Presidencia, 1930-1939." Carta 13 de mayo de 1930, Clara G. Arce.

¹⁶ The product of a decade-long initiative, the UCM was made up of adult men who had been recently recruited into the fold of Catholic Action from a regionally-based Catholic secret society known as "la U" (short for "La Unión"). See Aspe Armella (2008), pp. 79-81. There, Aspe Armella cites Salvador Abascal, founder of the *Unión Nacional Sinarquista*, whose father had been a founding member of the secret society in 1918. See Abascal, Salvador, *Mis recuerdos, Sinarquismo y Colonial María Auxiliadora* (Tradición, 1980).

families. A series of reports written by the ACM's Treasury Subsecretary, Juan Lainé, reveal that between 1930 and 1932 the UFCM comprised between 35 and 40 percent of Catholic Action's membership base. The JCFM, on the other hand, made up over 20 percent of the ACM's members. Furthermore, in terms of Catholic Action's revenue stream, Lainé noted that the women of the Unión Femenina effectively raised more than half of the ACM's discretionary funds. This was largely achieved through fundraisers and propaganda campaigns, and by facilitating the establishment of crucial alliances with the Mexican clergy and conservative business interests. In this regard, historians like Gabriela Cano, Kristina Boylan, Margaret Chowning, and Patience Schell have cogently demonstrated how Catholic lay organizations acted as political platforms for Mexico's electorally marginalized women—even as discourses of “social action” portrayed their mission as one that “transcended” politics. Whereas men channeled their energies into bolstering conservative political parties like the emergent Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), disenfranchised Catholic women increasingly turned to religious activism as a means to exercise a unique form of citizenship.¹⁷

However, despite this appearance of seamless transition, the ACM's founding was bitterly contested. The Cristero Rebellion had officially ended, but many of the nation's prominent lay groups refused to surrender their autonomy. Such was the case with the Mexican Knights of Columbus, who feared losing their independence but were eventually

¹⁷ FXC. Archivo ACM. Sección 2: "Junta Central o Junta Nacional de la Acción Católica (Presidencia)," Serie 3: "Tesorería," Expediente: "1928-1933." Juan Lainé "Causas del malestar económico de la ACM," 10 de mayo de 1932; and "Téseras o Credenciales: Veamos el resultado..." 10 de mayo de 1932. See also, Gabriela Cano, "Debates en torno al sufragio y la ciudadanía de las mujeres en México," *Estudios Sociológicos* vol.31: número extraordinario (2013) and *Democracia y Género. Historia del debate público en torno al sufragio femenino en México* (Instituto Nacional Electoral, 2019). Also, Kristina Boylan "The Feminine 'Apostolate in Society'..." in Bacchetta and Power, eds., (2002); and Patience A. Schell, "Gender, Resistance, and Mexico's Church-State Conflict" in Gledhill and Schell, eds., (2012).

pressured by the Vatican to become one of Catholic Action's *organizaciones confederadas*. At the same time, many of the LNDLR's leading members refused to lay down their weapons or align behind the ACM's calls to "civic" protest—ironically, one of the League's original organizing principles. In the coming years, the League would absorb disgruntled militants from secret societies and the student-led ACJM. Thus, like the personal rivalries that drove Calles's founding of the PNR, the establishment of the ACM witnessed a considerable amount of friction among competing factions.¹⁸

At the heart of these disputes were debates over the most effective means to forge a collective opposition to state-backed secular education. As Catholic Action strived to establish a viable movement grounded in unified institutions, tensions over the issue of armed violence exposed Mexicans' ideological diversity. The ACM channeled social doctrine and called for a renewal of youth religious instruction and working-class moralization campaigns. Members of the clergy attempted to reconcile Romanization with grassroots activism, but the Vatican's authority over the ACM made negotiations difficult to pursue. At the same time, right-wing militants remained resentful of the Church's 1929 peace agreement. They perceived the ACM's proximity to the Mexican high clergy as counterproductive and criticized its inability to establish a successful opposition to PNR rule.¹⁹

¹⁸ These internal tensions are thoroughly documented in Velasco Barba (2012); Aspe Armella (2008); Andes (2014); and Yves Solís Nicot, "El origen de la ultraderecha en México: la 'U'" *El Cotidiano* vol. 23 num. 149 (2008), pp. 25-38, among others. For more the LNDLR's militancy during the 1930s, see Yves Solís Nicot, "Genesis of Anticommunist Catholic Networks in Central America during the 1930s" in Rodríguez Lago and Núñez Bargueño, eds., (2021).

¹⁹ On the relationship between the ACM and the Vatican, see Andes (2014).

The very concept of “social action” had stemmed from the tenets of Catholic social doctrine as formulated in papal encyclicals. Most notable among these were Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (1891)²⁰ and Pius X’s *Il Fermo Proposito* (1905). In *Il Fermo*, Pius X had established a model for a non-violent religious movement that would restore the Church’s teachings within the family and broader society. Across the world, lay groups would work to reform the secular realm while operating under the direction of clergy, bishops, and the Vatican. By 1922, Pius XI’s *Ubi Arcano* responded directly to the menace of the Russian Revolution and the horrors of World War I. There, the Pope declared that humankind had lost sight of its own spirituality and now found itself driven by violence and class conflict. He claimed that the rise of modern secular nation-states had led people to believe that “the laws of men” were equal to those of God. However, the Pope held that the Church remained the only global body that could guarantee “natural rights” and “universal liberties.”²¹

At the same time, *Ubi Arcano* formally established the global Catholic Action movement to promote the Church’s institutional alignment. Through youth and family education, national chapters would re-establish the centrality of the Roman Church in their respective social and political contexts. Nevertheless, Pius XI’s call to action also revealed a deeper struggle between the institutional Church and popular religious practices. Romanization called for centralization and, as historian Rodolfo R. de Roux has argued, the “unification of all the world’s Catholics around the figure of the Pope and according to the directives of the Roman Curia.” As de Roux demonstrates, the process of Romanization

²⁰ On *Rerum Novarum*, see Young and Andes, eds., (2016) and Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

²¹ Aspe Armella, pp. 60-62 (2008), 112-118.

was animated by a “comprehensive and even fundamentalist Catholicism” that promoted a renewal of ecclesiastical structures. For the first time since the Middle Ages, the Church assumed a religious absolutism that not only rejected secular modernity, but also positioned itself at odds with the world’s folk religious traditions.²²

In Mexico, the clergy initially expanded the ACM’s influence as part of a larger effort to rein in “radical” student activists. As Catholic Action tightened its grip on the ACJM, the latter witnessed a gradual exodus of some of its more outspoken members. This trend was personified in Jesús María Dávila’s departure from the once vibrant Mexican Catholic Youth Association. As the group’s former vice-president, Dávila’s gravitated toward *Las Legiones* secret society and eventually assumed a key leadership role in the McAllen, Texas chapter of the militant Unión Nacional Sinarquista (UNS), a Catholic and right-wing nationalist organization.²³

Like Dávila, José Antonio Urquiza, a liaison of Las Legiones in the United States, also grew frustrated with Catholic Action’s perceived limitations. By 1936, he openly criticized the ACM for stymying mobilization and lacking any real power to challenge the state. As the clergy tightened its grip on the ACJM, Urquiza came to perceive Catholic Action as little more than an organ of symbolic opposition. He wrote:

²² Ibid. See also, Rodolfo R. de Roux, “The Romanization of the Catholic Church in Latin America: a long-term political-religious strategy. *Pro-Posições* [online]. 2014, vol.25, n.1, pp.31-54. ISSN 1980-6248. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0103-73072014000100003>.

²³ Nathan Ellstrand, “The Spread of Sinarquismo in the United States, 1936-1940,” dissertation chapter in-progress (2020), pp. 23-24. On the ACJM’s seeming decline, see Aspe Armella (2008), 81-91. On Las Legiones, see Servando Ortoll, “Las Legiones, La Base, y El Sinarquismo, ¿Tres organizaciones distintas y un solo fin verdadero? (1929-1948)” in *El PDM: Movimiento Regional* (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1989) and “Los orígenes sociales del sinarquismo en Jalisco (1929-1939),” *Encuentro: Movimientos Sociales* 1, no. 3 (1984). See also, Jean Meyer, *El Sinarquismo, El Cardenismo y La Iglesia* (Mexico City: Tusquets Editores, 2003). I will analyze the UNS more thoroughly in the following two chapters of this dissertation.

Catholic Action, such as we are allowed to have, is not enough to save Mexico. The enemy has large daily newspapers, we have a few sheets of propaganda issued weekly; the enemy conveys his message in the plaza, the theatre and by radio, [but] Catholic Action must use the small reference room; the enemy has thousands of public schools, Catholic Action must use small home schools.²⁴

Hyperbole aside, Urquiza's criticism spoke to a prevalent distrust of Catholic institutions. For middle- and working-class militants, Catholic Action was but another instrument of the Church designed to consolidate elite power. And yet, Urquiza recognized the importance of religious instruction in bringing about the nation's spiritual renewal. Like his ACM counterparts, he viewed the classroom as a vehicle of Catholic restoration.

Since the ACM's inception, activists and members of the clergy had recognized the importance of youth education in the struggle against the threat of ideological radicalism. Still, they believed the threat emanated from Catholics themselves and had only grown as a result of armed popular movements unleashed by the Cristero Rebellion. As early as 1930, Archbishop Díaz Barreto condemned rural working-class militants for their "perverted ideals" and "religious ignorance." From the pages of *Juventud* magazine, he warned against their ideological corruption and denounced their perceived defiance of the clergy's spiritual authority.²⁵

In a racially charged tirade against popular Catholicism, the archbishop claimed that peasant ignorance had resulted in the spread of "false" religion. He held that the masses were driven by uncontrolled passions and deeply estranged from the word of God. At the same time, he alleged that working-class actors prioritized material satisfaction over

²⁴ Cited in Ellstrand (2020), pp. 5-6. José Antonio Urquiza, "Brief History of the Legionnaires in in Mexico," 1936, Box 150, Folder 28, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) General Secretary Files, Catholic University of America (CUA) Archives.

²⁵ Pascual Díaz Barreto, "Carta Pastoral del Ilmo. Señor Arzobispo de México a Todos los Fieles Católicos," *Juventud: Boletín del Comité Central de J.C.F.M.* Año 1 Núm. 2 (México, D.F., mayo 1930), p.1.

spiritual salvation. He denounced peasants’ “earthly motivations,” which included the acquisition of land, the pursuit of material riches, and the glorification of vice, violence, and pleasure.²⁶



Image 4.3: Archbishop Pascual Díaz Barreto (1930).

Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

In response to this seeming crisis of faith, the JCFM’s Commission on Family Education reiterated the need to intensify moral education and youth religious training. Writing in the fall of 1930, the Commission argued that prior to the establishment of Catholic Action, lay groups had failed to inspire any meaningful form of spiritual awakening or “national Christian flourishing.” Conveying the urgency of its mission, the JCFM characterized Mexican religious life as “weak” and suffering from “enormous deficiencies,” not the least of which included a widespread popular “idolatry” characteristic

²⁶ Ibid.

of “uncivilized peoples.” The Commission labeled Mexico as a *pueblo en formación* and depicted working-class Mexicans as an in-between people in need of moral uplift.²⁷

In addition to the archbishop’s letter, *Juventud*’s second issue featured an open call to action written by prominent activist Sofía del Valle. There, del Valle addressed socias and encouraged them “to organize, Christianize, and educate themselves and their *patria*.” Specifically, she urged jóvenes to stand behind Mexico’s ecclesiastical hierarchy and promote collaboration between the bishops, activists, and local clergy. She argued that religious education constituted the foundation of citizenship and pointed to the lack of a national and truly comprehensive Catholic system of instruction as the cause behind the rising appeal of *errores religiosos*.²⁸

In this regard, Pius XI’s 1929 encyclical, *Divini Illius Magistri*, proved particularly influential given its portrayal of the Church as the sole engine of childhood education. The role of the state, argued Pius XI, was not to mandate an instructional curriculum of its own, but rather to promote society’s “common good” by working as a vehicle of the Church. Pius drew from integralism and maintained that the Catholic faith should be the foundation of civil society. Whereas modern secularism relegated religion to the private sphere, integralists called for the full integration of faith and politics through national religious uniformity. As a result, the Pope proclaimed that faith ought to be the basis of all social and political action. His calls for religious restoration not only implied a rejection of

²⁷ “La Acción Católica; Según la mente del Papa Pio XI,” *Juventud: Boletín del Comité Central de J.C.F.M.* Año 1 Núm. 5 y 6 (México, D.F., agosto y septiembre 1930).

²⁸ Sofía del Valle, “Nuestro Programa,” *Juventud: Boletín del Comité Central de J.C.F.M.* Año 1 Núm. 2 (México, D.F., mayo 1930), pp. 10-11.

Church-state separation, but also encouraged a reformulation of government to re-position Catholicism as a state-sanctioned religion.²⁹

Following Pius XI's calls to "Catholic social action," the ACM defined *la cuestión social* as "matters pertinent to all social relations formed between and amongst individuals within the family, the workplace, the city, and the nation." Catholic Action maintained that all modern issues emanated from a crisis of individual faith, which then permeated the family and broader society. To solve contemporary social ills, the women of UFCM strived to restore justice, fraternity, and charity as "Mexican values." "Person to person and parish by parish," it entrusted activists with the sacred duty of evangelizing a country in peril.³⁰

Furthermore, *socias* argued that state secularism had failed to resolve social problems precisely because it treated them as political and economic challenges devoid of spiritual meaning. They claimed that injustice and inequality were actually moral issues reflecting society's deeper spiritual crisis and could only be remedied through proper religious instruction. The group also alleged that the state knowingly portrayed political and economic problems as secular issues in order to encourage social division and strengthen its political parties. This strategy sustained radical ideologues and exacerbated civil unrest by amassing workers into a "faithless proletariat."³¹

The women of Catholic Action blamed the state for appropriating national wealth and furthering the divide between rich and poor. They argued that the rise of the PNR had resulted in an increase in workers' exploitation and unethical abuses of power. The *socias*

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ FXC, Archivo Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana (UFCM). Caja 11, Folder 52: "Apuntes: cursos de educación familiar." Mariano Alcocer, abogado "Notas para un cursillo sobre la cuestión social," pp. 1-43.

³¹ Ibid. pp. 3-8.

alleged that a handful of government officials were now responsible for granting workers and peasants access to property, capital, and employment benefits. Lacking in sound Christian values, the state worked toward its own furtherance and neglected its social responsibilities at the expense of the people.³²

In response to these developments, the ACM's Central Board established local educational commissions to promote youth's religious education. Known as *Comisiones Escolares*, the latter were parish-level committees made up of priests and members of the local laity. Specifically, the Board tasked the commissions with instructing Catholic youth on the Church's ideological positions. This included fostering a knowledge of doctrine and papal encyclicals among teenage students.³³

Still, the commissions also held that securing the integrity of the Mexican family required parents' own re-education. As "guardians of the nation's future," Catholic parents needed to be instructed on how to exercise their rights and obligations as they pertained to their children's learning. As a result, the Board integrated the National Catholic Parents Association (ANPF) into the ranks of Catholic Action. It rebranded it as the *Unión Nacional de Padres de Familia* (UNPF) and tasked it with developing an entire curriculum for mothers with the help of the UFCM.³⁴

By 1930-31, the establishment of the *Comisiones Escolares* marked the start of Catholic Action's mobilization around institutional religious education as an engine for moral regeneration. The Central Board held that the movement would begin at the parish

³² Ibid.

³³ FXC, Archivo UFCM. Caja 11, Folder 52: "Apuntes: cursos de educación familiar." "La Comisionada Central de Educación Escolar Redactó estos Apuntes Para las Clases del Curso Nacional de Propagandistas," pp. 1-8.

³⁴ Ibid.

level and grow organically, with local clergy serving as vital links between Catholic institutions and everyday members of the laity. As one of its main objectives, the commissions sought to rectify the damage done by state-imposed secular education, emphasizing the “refutation of historical and scientific errors” in the government’s instructional curriculum. At the same time, it strived to counter the influence of popular religion and underscored the importance of doctrinal instruction in quelling militancy and radicalization. Through institutionalist discourses, the women of Catholic Action developed authoritarian projects that remained distrustful of youth and rejected the LNDLR’s recent emphases on individual liberties. Similar to European fascism, they developed new notions of “spiritual community” grounded in xenophobia, patriarchy, and the rejection of democracy.³⁵

“Spiritual Community” and Fascist Tendencies

By the spring of 1931, Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo Anno* encyclical identified class conflict as the product of spiritual crisis. The Pope emphasized the Church’s need to address economic disparities and urged activists to become more aware of the issues affecting workers around the world. He warned against ideological extremes and defended the Church as the sole institution that could equally protect private property and safeguard public prosperity. He held that executing “God’s moral law” required that Catholics strive toward this type of universal “common good.”³⁶

To achieve this goal, the Pope emphasized the need to establish Catholic labor syndicates and restore religious education for all. In response, Mexican Catholic Action

³⁵ Ibid., pp.1-2.

³⁶ Aspe Armella (2008), pp. 124-28.

developed a grassroots approach to religious instruction to solve the nation's economic and political challenges. Specifically, the ACM underscored the importance of personal spiritual uplift as an antidote to "workers' proletarianization" and the "atheistic tenets of Marxism." However, it also developed authoritarian ideologies that called for young women's subjugation for the benefit of "spiritual community."³⁷

On the issue of class conflict, the JCFM relied on anti-Protestantism and antisemitic prejudice to define Catholic Action as an anti-communist religious movement that also opposed secular individualism. Contrary to the LNDLR's pro-American activism, the JCFM portrayed Mexican Catholic values as being under siege by U.S. Protestant missionaries and Jewish-American "labor radicalism." Echoing the Damas Católicas of 1922, *Juventud* warned young women against the perils of a "ruinous state atheism" and the purported immorality of a life devoid of formal religious guidance. Instead, the JCFM emphasized the importance of family relations and promoted young católicas' involvement in parish life.

As early as July 1931, the JCFM used the front pages of *Juventud* magazine to publish a scathing condemnation of "Jewish Marxism." Penned by anonymous members of the JCFM's *Círculo de Empleadas*, the article addressed female domestic workers and borrowed from centuries-old tropes of a global "Jewish conspiracy." The magazine branded Marx as a "neo-messianic Jew" whose followers strived to subvert national governments and conquer the world. It dissuaded indigenous and mixed-race

³⁷ Ibid.

workingwomen away from the internationalist rhetoric of unionization and portrayed non-Catholic labor activism as both unpatriotic and anti-Christian.³⁸

At the same time, the JCFM held that Catholicism faced similar incursions from the proponents of “Protestant ideology.” It adopted a specific brand of anti-Americanism, or *antiyanquismo*, and depicted Protestant missionaries as agents of cultural empire. During the late 1920s, the Mexican government had established partnerships with U.S. missionary groups to curb the Church’s influence in the countryside. By the early 30s, U.S. Protestant missions had considerably empowered indigenous actors and bolstered their claims to local autonomy in defiance of Church and state. Drawing from Archbishop Días Barreto, *socias* argued that Protestantism had spread “false” religion and awakened peasants’ “fanatical” impulses. As missionaries began courting middle- and working-class families, the JCFM denounced “American influences” within the Mexican family.³⁹

Specifically, the JCFM’s Commission on Family Education waged a vigorous campaign against Protestants’ purported misunderstanding of “human nature” and its effects on children’s moral upbringing. In October 1932, *Juventud* published extensive criticisms of this alleged *teoría protestante*, which Catholics identified as inherently distrustful and conducive to vigilance on the part of parents and educators. According to the JCFM, Protestants believed that human nature was fundamentally immoral and inextricably sinful. Citing John Calvin’s theological teachings, *Juventud* argued that the “error in Protestant philosophy” came in thinking that free will was perpetually enslaved

³⁸ “La Verdad Sobre el Soviet, Por una socia del Círculo de Empleadas,” *Juventud: Boletín del Comité Central de la J.C.F.M.* Año II Num. 12, julio de 1931 (México, D.F.), pp. 2-3.

³⁹ See Todd Hartch, *Missionaries of the State: The Summer Institute of Linguistics, State Formation, and Indigenous Mexico, 1935-1985* (University of Alabama Press, 2006). See also, Kathleen McIntyre *Protestantism and State Formation in Postrevolutionary Oaxaca* (University of New Mexico Press, 2019).

to evil, and that there was virtually no room for good works to alter the course of one's spiritual condition. The JCFM concluded that the Protestant model of education sacrificed students' free will for the sake of dogma, as opposed to empowering youth and arming students with the skills to bolster their faith. Consequently, Catholics feared that Protestant-educated children would either turn to radicalism as a form of rebellion, or grow up to become "empty" adults lacking in true faith.⁴⁰

The JCFM blamed U.S. cultural influence for Mexico's perceived crisis of moral authority. Socias argued that the "false doctrine" of American individualism fueled Protestants' belief in "justification by faith alone" (*Justificatio sola fide*), which emphasized personal conviction at the expense of community and social action. Specifically, the JCFM feared that Protestants' individualized model would produce feelings of isolation and sever young women's connection to a broader spiritual community. "To live in community," *Juventud* declared in February of 1932, "is one of man's essential necessities."⁴¹ As a result, socias underscored the importance of young women's engagement in parish and family life as a means to further their spiritual development. The Commission argued that order and authority would then flow naturally and in accordance with the will of God, "from the Divine to the Church, and from the Church to parents and youth, ultimately back out into society."⁴²

⁴⁰ "Círculo de Formación Familiar, Segundo Ciclo: La Educación," *Juventud: Boletín del Comité Central de la J.C.F.M.* Año II Num. 26, octubre de 1932 (México, D.F.), pp. 14-16.

⁴¹ "La Voz del Asistente Eclesiástico: Formación Social," *Juventud: Boletín del Comité Central de la J.C.F.M.* Año II Num. 18, febrero de 1932 (México, D.F.), p. 1.

⁴² *Ibid.* Also, see "Círculo de Formación Familiar: La Autoridad," *Juventud: Boletín del Comité Central de la J.C.F.M.* Año II Num. 21, mayo de 1932 (México, D.F.), pp. 9-11.

Still, scholars might best interpret the JCFM's Protestant "Other" as a foil by which activists defined what Catholicism ought to be, instead of an earnest attempt to accurately represent a divergent belief system. Rife with internal contradictions, *socias* portrayed Protestant education as conducive to children's disenfranchisement *and* over-empowerment. Still, the JCFM's focus on youth education reveals Catholic Action's broader concern over young people's potential to undermine the Church. As the ACM encouraged challenges to secularization, it also remained vigilant of youth's potential to subvert religious authority.

Through anti-Protestant discourses, the women of Catholic Action expressed fear over the prospect that young people's rebellion against their parents would lead them toward "radical politics." In turn, *socias* responded by publishing dozens of monthly issues devoted to inspiring young women's adherence to family values. To further assuage its own anxieties, the JCFM used *Juventud* magazine to develop a patriarchal model of authority built upon parish life, religious uniformity, and hierarchical Church power. Despite furthering discourses of spiritual activism, *socias* emphasized commitment toward the nation's moral regeneration at the expense of personal agency.

Emphasizing gender difference, the Commission developed discourses of "spiritual motherhood" that simultaneously conveyed messages of domesticity and women's empowerment. Even as *socias* encouraged women to exercise their spiritual agency, they also restricted the scope of their activism to the confines of their home and the sexual and social limits established by patriarchal social relations. Thus, activists constructed notions of "spiritual sterility," which they identified as the consequence of women's unwillingness to serve others or sacrifice for the benefit of a greater collective. They argued that women

who failed to “reproduce” their faith entered a “despondent state of inaction” and ultimately became “spiritually sterile.” By connecting religiosity to motherhood and fertility, activists constructed a model of “womanhood” grounded in Catholic social action. Though perhaps empowering to some, this model of piety also subjected all women to their husbands’ authority and that of male clergy.⁴³

Specifically, the JCFM adopted a male-dominated model of authority that likened a father’s supposed command over his wife and children to God’s authority over humanity. As early as May 1930, Archbishop Díaz Barreto used the second issue of *Juventud* to establish a direct line between male father figures and the divine, arguing that “God the father, as the focal point of all fatherhood, has imparted upon *el padre de familia* the sacred responsibility of molding his children’s souls so that they may attain eternal happiness.” The archbishop held that only a father could instill upon his family the desire to “love and follow God by using his own *vida ejemplar* as a living example of Christian teachings.” He held that “women’s work” remained essential to “molding young hearts,” but consistently identified fatherly authority as indispensable, “primordial,” and the “first” line of defense against moral corruption.⁴⁴

By November 1932, *Juventud* published an open letter expressing the importance of the physical parish as Catholics’ “spiritual home.” Written by *socias* and the JCFM’s ecclesiastical liaisons, the letter argued that the parish was a living community—a “family”—that shared a common spiritual suffering and required constant investment. At

⁴³ “La Voz del Asistente Eclesiástico: Formación Social,” *Juventud: Boletín del Comité Central de la J.C.F.M.* Año II Num. 18, febrero de 1932 (México, D.F.), p. 1.

⁴⁴ “Carta Pastoral del Ilmo. Sr. Arzobispo de México a Todos los Fieles Católicos,” *Juventud: Boletín del Comité Central de la J.C.F.M.* Año II Num. 21, mayo de 1932 (México, D.F.), p. 1.

the same time, the Commission on Family Education condemned young women's divergence from the Church and positioned male clergy as the "fatherly" nucleus of spiritual authority. Through gendered discourses of sin and shame, *socias* denounced expressions of individuality and held that young católicas must sacrifice themselves to save their communities.⁴⁵

To bolster its attack on individualism, the JCFM criticized the French Enlightenment and argued that Rousseau's political philosophy, specifically his treatise on the "natural goodness of man," encouraged the rejection of Church authority. The group held that Rousseau had "mistakenly assumed man's inherent goodness," and undermined the need for guided spiritual development to combat original sin. Furthermore, *socias* claimed that Rousseau's philosophy ignored "man's perpetual state of moral turmoil," and positioned individual conscience as being equal to, or greater than, the power of God. They condemned Rousseauian notions of "natural and individual reason," and maintained that "true" virtue was the product of faith's mastery over sin.⁴⁶

Subsequently, the Commission on Family Education rejected secular democracy on the grounds that any model of government founded upon "misinformed" notions of human reason risked producing a "fragile" national morality. As an alternative, the Commission proposed a system of governance wherein the state would act as a facilitator of Church doctrine. Modeled after Pius XI's *Divini Illius Magistri* (1929), this unique brand of statism argued for the edification of robust institutions that would monitor morality and safeguard

⁴⁵ Ibid. Also, "La Voz del Asistente Eclesiástico: La Parroquia," *Juventud: Boletín del Comité Central de la J.C.F.M.* Año II Num. 27, noviembre de 1932 (México, D.F.), p. 1.

⁴⁶ "Círculo de Formación Familiar, Segundo Cielo: La Educación," *Juventud: Boletín del Comité Central de la J.C.F.M.* Año II Num. 26, octubre de 1932 (México, D.F.), pp. 14-16.

religious education. It held that the state lacked doctrinal authority to establish its own educational curriculum and should instead function as a vehicle for families to exercise their “natural right” to mold children according to religious principles.⁴⁷

With regard to youth, the Commission rendered childhood and adolescence as pivotal stages in life when the battle for the soul was either won or lost. They alleged that individualism led to debauchery and that youth’s subservience to the parish was crucial to the survival of civil society. Specifically, the JCFM envisioned the nation as a spiritual community: a hierarchical network of social relations dictated by a religious uniformity that would be enforced by the state and defined by the suppression of difference and dissent. As a result, the negation of youth’s potential for individuality, coupled with a rejection of rationality at the individual level, became the foundation of the group’s anti-liberal, anti-secular, and anti-democratic model of nationhood.⁴⁸

And yet despite its density of discourse, the JCFM did not entirely perceive the world in terms of dialectical relationships. Rather, it argued for a unique kind of national society that transcended linear dichotomies between empowerment and subservience, faith and rationality, and individualism and community. Socias held that individual reason was acceptable to the extent that it adhered to religious principles. Similarly, Catholic Action allowed for individual empowerment, but only insofar as individual agency submitted to Church institutions and worked toward the spiritual uplift of community and nation.

⁴⁷ “Círculo de Formación Familiar, Segundo Ciclo: ¿A quién pertenece el Derecho de Educación?” *Juventud: Boletín del Comité Central de la J.C.F.M.* Año II Num. 27, noviembre de 1932 (México, D.F.), p. 12-14.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

In this regard, the JCFM's notions of spiritual community held a lot in common with contemporary fascist ideologies. Also published in 1932, the Italian treatise *La dottrina del fascismo* argued that the nation represented a spiritual community in and of itself, and that fascism was the only religion whereby the individual, the state, and the national collective could achieve unity.⁴⁹ Drawing from integralists, fascists believed that class conflict represented a crisis of faith wherein isolated individuals prioritized their material interests over collective harmony and national uplift. Still, whereas fascists claimed that faith in the nation (as manifested in the state) would liberate the individual from alienation, Catholic Action held that faith in God and Church—as furthered and facilitated by a supportive state body—would give rise to a national spiritual community.

Thus, the ACM's adherence to Catholic institutions kept it from fully endorsing a vision of society wherein state and nation acquired an intrinsic spiritual meaning separate from the Church. Catholics held that neither state nor nation could obtain religious significance on their own, as only the Church could determine the nature and sites of divine presence in the world. Still, the JCFM's call for Church-state convergence left open the possibility for national society to become an expression of collective spirituality. Though this differed from fascists' "religion of the nation," it still called for individual subjugation for the benefit of a spiritual community.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ See Benito Mussolini, *The Doctrine of Fascism* [1932] trans. E. Cope (Vallechi Publisher, 1938). For more on fascismo in Mexico, see Alan Knight, "No mencione la palabra que empieza con F: el fascismo mexicano en panorama comparativo," in Javier Garcíaadiego Dantán and Emilio Kouri, eds., *Revolución y exilio en la historia de México. Del amor de un historiador a su patria adoptiva: Homenaje a Friedrich Katz* (Era, 2010).

⁵⁰ It is worth noting that clear and open tensions did exist between fascists movements and the Roman Catholic Church. This was most palpable in Pius XI's launch of the Italian Catholic Action movement as a counter to Benito Mussolini's anti-clericalism. For this reason, historian Franco Savarino warns scholars against equating Latin America's more authoritarian Catholic social movements with European fascism. Instead, Savarino's "avatars of fascism" approach emphasizes fascism's own ability to adapt to local

To further its nationalist project, publications like *Juventud* provided young women with a unique kind spiritual agency that affirmed the power of the individual qua religious subject while negating individuality as an expression of resistance to, or divergence from, Church authority. By fashioning a foreign and irreligious Other—e.g., the Marxist Jew, the North American Protestant, and the French philosophe—the JCFM offered *socias* an opportunity to work toward the permanence of the clergy’s authority on the pretext of safeguarding the nation against outside incursions. Consequently, *Juventud* magazine became a laboratory for the development of authoritarian ideologies. *Socias* drew from contemporary trans-Atlantic dialogues, but also adopted their political project to meet the challenges of their specific national circumstances.

Conclusions

In a confidential letter written to Plutarco Elías Calles in December 1931, former president Emilio Portes Gil, now Secretary of the Interior, privately expressed his disapproval of President Pascual Ortiz Rubio’s economic policies and “ineffective relationship” with the Mexican clergy. He urged Calles to return to political life and described Ortiz Rubio’s administration as weak, indecisive, and downright conservative to the point of betraying the PNR’s Revolutionary ideals. Portes Gil argued that his successor had responded to the devastating effects of the 1929 financial crisis by pursuing economic policies that further enriched the nation’s capitalist elite. Subsequently, he lambasted the current president for coming to the rescue of Mexican landowning industrialists at the

conditions as nations grew increasingly disillusioned with liberal democracy. See Franco Savarino, “Los avatares del fascismo en México,” in Xóchitl Patricia Campos López and Diego M. Velázquez Caballero, eds., *La derecha mexicana en el siglo XX: Agonía, transformación, y supervivencia* (Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2017), pp. 149-170.

expense of the nation's peasant workers, thereby betraying what he saw as a decades-long project of agrarian reform, democratic governance, and economic justice.⁵¹

Portes Gil criticized Mexican elites for allegedly funneling their wealth back into Church and its "fanatical" anti-secular campaigns. He declared that "Catholic radicalism still pose[d] the most pressing danger toward the Revolutionary project" and claimed that the clergy now sought to exacerbate the PNR's internal divisions to its own advantage. Even as Portes Gil maintained a cordial correspondence with the nation's most prominent archbishops, he argued that Mexican religious fanaticism had survived the Cristero Rebellion and now disguised itself in new forms. His conspiratorial thinking and anti-clerical discourse reveal the extent to which, even after the establishment of the PNR, Mexico's most powerful political figures were still plagued by uncertainty over how to navigate a precarious Church-state relationship.⁵²

Despite his monolithic and unfavorable portrayal of the nation's Catholics, Portes Gil's images of religious fanaticism actually resonated with Catholic Action's institutionalist discourses. Since the waning of the Cristero Rebellion, working-class militants had been condemned by lay activists and members of the clergy for adhering to "false" religion and furthering spiritual corruption. With the support of Catholic Action and the Mexican Church, JCFM *socias* sought to dissuade workers, families, and youth from engaging in and with divergent forms of religiosity. As an answer to the quandaries of popular martyrdom and religious violence, upper-class lay groups doubled down on

⁵¹ FAPECFE. Anexo: Fondo Presidentes. MFN 97, Inv 791 "Portes Gil, Secretario de Gobernación."

⁵² *Ibid.*

papal calls to religious uniformity and argued for the restoration of Catholicism as the guiding force in society.

Amid ideological differences, both sides of the Church-state divide perceived religious fanaticism as a threat to their respective institutional projects. At the same time, both leveraged discourses of spiritual crisis and political instability as means to centralize authority and quell internal opposition. As in previous decades, the press remained crucial to reproducing the very narratives that justified each side's push for centralization. This was evident in Romandía Ferreira's calls for the establishment of a pro-callista state press, and in the JCFM's use of *Juventud* magazine to realign youth with Church doctrine.

This apocalyptic institutionalism prioritized the concentration of power within and among a handful of individuals. To stifle dissent, Church-state actors negated individual ambition and personal agency in favor of ideological, political, and religious alignment. The JCFM subsequently abandoned the LNDLR's previous calls for the defense of democracy and individual liberties. Instead, it called for subjugating the individual for the benefit of a national "spiritual community," thereby establishing new and unprecedented conversations with European fascism.

In this regard, both Church and state actors channeled spiritual language to make their case before skeptical audiences. To establish the PNR, Calles turned to notions of "Revolutionary spirit" and *fuera popular* as a way to bring former militants into the fold of partisan consolidation. This reliance on spiritual discourse and redemptionist narratives of "Revolution" could certainly be interpreted as paving the way for the development of a Mexican "state religion." As the state adopted a corporatist model of organization and more populist forms of nationalism during the remainder of the decade, it moved closer toward

authoritarian statism than the democratic model of politics Calles had once hoped to protect.⁵³

And yet, even after the PNR's consolidation and Catholic Action's rise to prominence, state leaders and lay activists continued to grapple with questions regarding the meaning of faith and "Revolution." The fruits of apocalyptic institutionalism were fragile and at times even contradictory. As General Lázaro Cárdenas, a charismatic populist, assumed the Mexican presidency in 1934, the PNR grew fractured between pro- and anti-Calles factions. At the same time, the Catholic Action movement of the mid-to-late 1930s became increasingly insular despite its claims to universality, reinforcing rigid class hierarchies and anti-indigenous racism. Even as Church and state turned toward authoritarianism, institutions like the PNR and the ACM remained unable to fully integrate, co-opt, and adapt to popular demands. As Calles's 1934 "Grito de Guadalajara" thrust the issue of secular education back into the national spotlight, the nation was plunged into a period of renewed violence and political anxiety.

⁵³ In this regard, this chapter gestures toward a growing historiography on the spiritual dimensions of Mexican state formation, thereby complicating prevalent perceptions of the Revolutionary state as a political project devoid of religious meaning. This assumption risks reinforcing a false dichotomy between religion and "secular" politics. By contrast, Ilene V. O'Malley's work on "the myth of Revolution" has sought to thoroughly analyze the role of state textbooks in the development hero cults, hagiography, and spiritual symbolism around myths of the Mexican Revolution. More recently, historians like Franco Savarino have used the fluidity of fascism as an analytical lens from which to study the state's manipulation of historical narrative and popular nationalism as vital components of a state-centered civic religion. See Savarino, "Los avatares del fascismo..." in López and Velázquez Caballero, eds., (2017); and Ilene V. O' Malley, *The Myth of Revolution: Hero Cults and the Institutionalization of the Mexican State, 1920-1940* (Greenwood Press, 1986).

Chapter 5: “Social Equilibrium” and the Failure of Catholic Mass Politics, 1934-1938

In August 1932, the President of the Mexican Knights of Columbus and Catholic Action’s Central Board, Luis G. Bustos, expressed his concern over Catholic Action’s inability to garner adequate support from clergy and lay groups outside of Mexico City. Although Bustos praised the ACM’s gradual expansion into the countryside, he attributed its lack of grassroots appeal to several obstacles. First, he pointed to peasants’ distrust of Catholic Action and rural clergy’s “lack of influence and preparation for the work of the Apostolate.” However, he also emphasized harassment from state police and lingering anti-Catholic prejudice in local governments. Bustos argued that even though the Cristero Rebellion had officially ended, “consciences were still agitated... as a result of prolonged persecution.” Still, he attributed the “false zeal” of indigenous *campesinos* as the leading cause behind the ACM’s dismal levels of popularity among the nation’s rural peasant workers.¹

Over the course of the next decade, Mexican Catholic Action would grapple with the issues of class and race as the JCFM expanded the reach of its moralization campaigns into the rural countryside. The group’s upper-class *socias* held a deep distrust of peasant indigenous actors and used their educational programs to suppress *campesinas*’ spiritual practices and political mobilization. By the mid-1930s, the ACM’s Central Board worked directly with *socias* to “Hispanize” peasants and align them with established Church doctrine. Tainted by class prejudice and racial paternalism, these processes reflected a broader institutional rejection of cristero legacies.

¹ Catholic University of America (CUA) Archives. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). General Secretary Files, Box 148, Folder 14, “Memorandum to Father Burke from ‘Mr. Montavon,’ Mexican Catholic Action,” August 25, 1932.

In this regard, the image, influence, and legacies of Catholic Spain became crucial components of the ACM's political project. As lay activists equated cultural Hispanism with peasant moralization, they drew inspiration from Spanish *falangismo* and its explicitly religious politics. Despite their ideological differences, Mexico's Church-state actors turned to racial discourses and bolstered the dialogical cultural projects of Catholic Hispanism and indigenismo. Still, even as politics grew increasingly articulated in racial terms, class tensions and material conflict remained at the center of religious and cultural struggles over the "essence" of national identity.

Specifically, Mexican Catholic Action sought to establish a viable corporatist politics that would rival President Lázaro Cárdenas's expansion of state power. Similar to the *cardenista* state, the ACM turned to corporatism, or the organization of society into corporate interest groups with shared class interests, as a means to mobilize Catholics from all sectors of society. By launching this new Catholic mass politics, the ACM hoped to establish itself as a thoroughly regimented organization capable of promoting religious uniformity and uniting Catholics from various class backgrounds. However, despite its commitment to a national project of moral regeneration, Catholic Action became an insular organization given its commitment to social hierarchy and anti-democratic political projects.

Whereas proponents of Catholic social doctrine had once attempted to mobilize workers into spiritually meaningful social action, the ACM developed new notions of "social equilibrium" that dissuaded indigenous campesinas from private property ownership and other forms of social, political, and economic mobility. In doing so, *socias*' created a sense of whiteness grounded in anti-indigenous prejudices and a sense of moral

superiority. As Church and state institutions worked to regulate, co-opt, and stifle peasant activism, they used anti-communist identity narratives to mobilize their ranks against the prospect of peasant radicalization. In doing so, they cemented Mexico's Cold War turn toward institutional authoritarianism.

Corporatism: Cardenismo and the Church

On January 12, 1936, Hernán Laborde Rodríguez, the Secretary General of the Mexican Communist Party (PCM), delivered an impassioned speech before dozens of party leaders in commemoration of the twelfth anniversary of Vladimir Lenin's passing. Speaking in Mexico City's *Teatro Cívico*, Laborde decried the presence of Calles loyalists in President Lázaro Cárdenas's cabinet and claimed that the survival of *callismo* in national public life was a testament to the lingering strength of former President Plutarco Elías Calles's pro-business politics. Just thirteen months earlier, in December 1934, Cárdenas had assumed the presidency and assigned several of Calles's family members and most influential supporters to key positions in his administration. Looking to ensure continuity in government and a peaceful transition of power, Cárdenas gestured to the former president as a means to promote unity among members of the PNR after a divisive internal contest for the presidential nomination. Nevertheless, as Cárdenas distanced himself from Calles and began to fill the cabinet with his own supporters in the summer of 1935, prominent figures like Laborde and others in Mexican left-wing circles called upon their ranks to support the new president and push him towards a "truly democratic and socialist revolution." Using the communist newspaper *El Machete* as a political platform, Laborde

labeled *callismo* as “counterrevolutionary” and antithetical to the goals and legacies of the Mexican Revolution.²

According to Laborde, Calles and Cárdenas differed most significantly in their treatment of workers’ unions and labor strikes. On the one hand, Laborde identified Calles—once deemed an agent of Soviet communism by U.S. Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg—as a puppet of foreign capitalist interests and an enemy of the nation’s *movimiento huelguístico*. He portrayed Cárdenas, on the other hand, as a champion of the Mexican worker and claimed that the political force of *cardenismo* could potentially be harnessed as a catalyst for “genuine revolution” despite some flaws in the new president’s current political posturing.³

Even as Laborde expressed his support for much of Cárdenas’s political project, he reiterated that the Cárdenas presidency should not be seen as a cradle of revolution in and of itself. Instead, Laborde expressed a noticeable degree of skepticism toward the Mexican government and urged fellow party members to refrain from falsely equating cardenismo with the communist cause. “Our support of the President,” he wrote, “does not mean that we are now cardenistas. We are communists and we support Cárdenas as conscious allies given our shared interests and common objectives.”⁴

Still, by December 1935, Cárdenas’s growing popularity among left-wing circles became increasingly evident as socialist labor groups aligned themselves behind the new president’s efforts to cleanse the Mexican presidency from Calles’s influence. In the fall of

² Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles Fernando Torreblanca (FAPECFT). Fondo Soledad González. MFN 337, Inv. 356. “Laborde, Hernán, 1936.”

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

1935, the *Alianza de Trabajadores Unificados* boldly declared *callismo* all but dead, and even dismissed Calles as a non-threat to Cárdenas's new agenda. Instead, the Alianza warned its members against the dangers of "false" cardenistas looking to infiltrate the government and disrupt the political process. Power over the state was Cárdenas's to lose, and prominent Mexican labor groups openly voiced their commitment to helping the new administration execute its vision for national society.⁵

While Laborde and the PCM approached cardenista politics with caution, workers' growing affinity toward cardenismo spoke to the Mexican government's own reckoning with the legacies of "Revolution" and labor's increased political mobilization. As Joseph and Buchenau argue, "to the Mexican worker laid off during the Great Depression, it became ever more apparent that the existing political system was a revolution in name only... [thus] the common people demanded real rather than symbolic benefits." Whereas the pro-business interim presidents, Pascual Ortiz Rubio (1930-1932) and Abelardo Rodríguez (1932-1934), had struggled to pacify disgruntled workers, Cárdenas's record as governor of Michoacán positioned him as a champion of labor and the heir-apparent to the nation's Revolutionary mantle. As governor, Cárdenas had expropriated more than 350,000 acres of land and converted them to *ejidos*, or communal cooperatives, at a time when the pace of land redistribution at the federal level had declined significantly. Furthermore, Cárdenas effectively organized his state's workers into mass syndicates and labor organizations, ultimately foreshadowing the corporatist politics he would pursue at the national level after becoming president.⁶

⁵ FAPECFE. Anexo Presidentes. MFN 84, Inv 778. "Declaraciones de Prensa, 1927-1935."

⁶ Joseph and Buchenau (2013), pp. 119-121.

In the years prior to Cárdenas's election, the number of labor strikes registered by the Mexican government had increased from 13 in 1932 to more than 100 in 1933 and up to 202 in 1934. Given the level of dissatisfaction among rural peasants and industrial workers, the cardenista politics of corporatism, which divided and organized society into corporate interest groups on the basis of shared class interests, appealed to both the federal government and working-class Mexicans for different, albeit interconnected reasons. For the average laborer, the rise of more inclusive national syndicates like the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) in 1936 and the National Campesino Confederation (CNC) in 1938 led to the inclusion of the working-class interests in federal policymaking. For the Cárdenas administration, the corporatist re-organization of national society allowed the state to harness workers' activism under the leadership of the president and his ever-growing institutional party—namely, the PNR of 1929 and, after 1938, the *Partido de la Revolución Mexicana* (PRM). Cárdenas's creation of a national corporatist party ultimately increased the power of the presidency and its statist party. Cárdenas and his allies organized the PRM into four sectors (workers, agrarians, public employees, and the army), and ensured that the party operated vertically so that all popular organizations worked within the PRM framework and each sector negotiated directly with the president, thereby enabling party leaders to mediate social conflict behind closed doors.⁷

Still, even as President Cárdenas centralized and expanded the state's institutional power, his populist discourses and personalist style of politics resonated with workers and peasants who eagerly saw him as an ally of everyday Mexicans. As scholar Arturo Anguiano argues, Cárdenas's "search for the masses," as embodied in his travels to the

⁷ Joseph and Buchenau (2013), pp. 122, 128-129, 134.

most remote parts of the country, effectively allowed him to ally himself with the nation's working classes and win the confidence of "the people." Specifically, Cárdenas approached labor, farmers, and other working-class groups with the intention of "beginning a new relationship of apparent equality." By encouraging mass mobilization within state-backed channels, he adopted a "mass politics" approach where the state conceded crucial social reforms designed to appease the nation's working classes while reinforcing their allegiance and vested interest in government. Nevertheless, Anguiano concludes that Cárdenas's push to "connect" with working-class Mexicans was really driven by a desire to "guide them along institutional channels [and] to control them and regulate their struggle, [thereby] snuffing out any rebellious tendencies and winning a broad base of support." Like Calles before him, Cárdenas turned to state-backed labor syndicates as a means to stifle dissent, surveil popular mobilization, and steer working-class activism away from the threat of political and ideological radicalization.⁸

As a result, corporatism and mass politics served more as vehicles for authoritarian political projects than platforms for popular democracy. As a political system, corporatism aimed to supplant the electoral and parliamentary systems of liberal democracy with the legislative and advisory institutions directed by "organic" bodies under the purview of a ruler or high executive. Historian António Costa Pinto defines these "organic units" as professional associations, special interest organizations, and state-backed institutions, among others. He argues that corporatism was a system of governance based on "an

⁸ "Cárdenas and the Masses" from Arturo Anguiano, *El estado y la política obrera del cardenismo* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1975), 46-52. Translated by Tim Henderson in Joseph and Henderson, eds., (2002), pp. 456-460. For more on Calles, the CROM, and the Mexican Labor Party's attempts at co-opting labor interests, see Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

organic-statist vision of society in which organic units replaced individual[ist]... models of political representation.”⁹

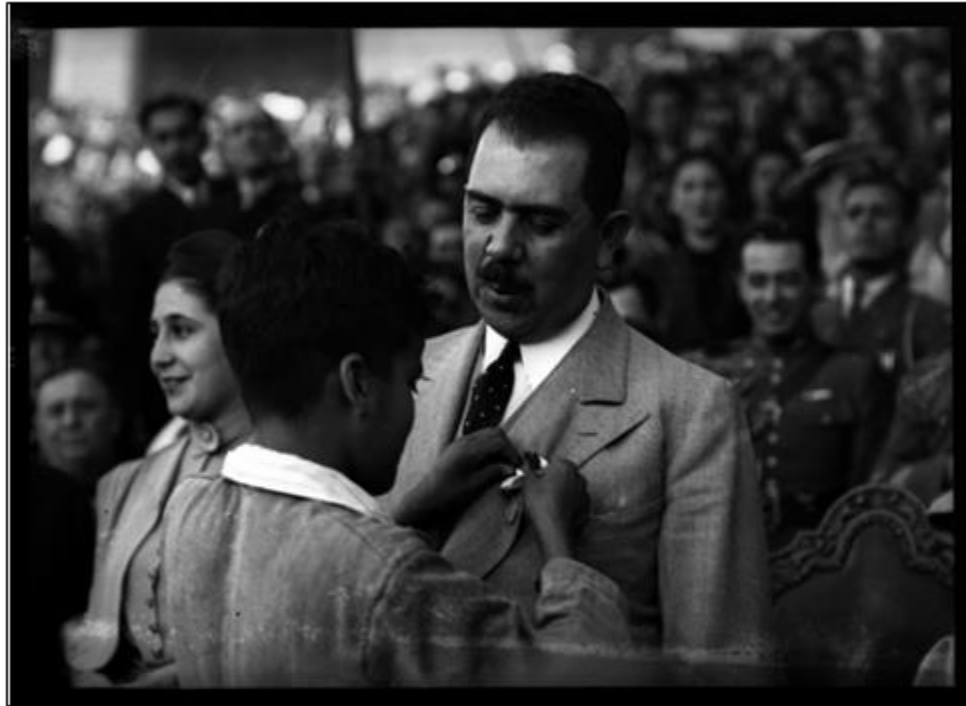


Image 5.1: President Lázaro Cárdenas in Mexico City (1935).
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

In Mexico, Cárdenas’s corporatist model of governance imposed a top-down model of authority that relied on discourses of “democratic revolution” to empower a small statist party elite. Consequently, cardenismo positioned the state above the Mexican Communist Party and other divergent (and potentially “radical”) organizations as the nation’s principal vehicle of social transformation and “Revolution.” Thus, Costa Pinto contends that Cárdenas’s presidency was a “regime based on presidentialism, the corporatist party, and nationalism.” The cardenista style of politics, he writes, “imposed social democracy...

⁹ António Costa Pinto, *Latin American Dictatorships in the Era of Fascism: The Corporatist Wave* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 9, 11.

[and] led to a single authoritarian corporatist experience associated with the dominant party.”¹⁰

Finally, Costa Pinto reveals that twentieth-century corporatism actually originated from nineteenth-century social Catholicism. As the Church encouraged the proliferation of lay organizations to mobilize different class groups into public forms of religious activism, social Catholicism enhanced lay Catholics’ involvement in the political structures of specific national societies. Thus, Costa Pinto argues that Papal encyclicals such as *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) called on the Roman Church and lay groups like Catholic Action to “become central transnational agents in the introduction of corporatist alternatives to the excesses of liberal capitalism.” In response to the rising global influence of socialism, secularism, and Protestant missionary activity, the Church turned toward a corporatist model of politics in an effort to bring about a thorough re-Christianization of society and offer a viable alternative to the perceived failures of morally bankrupt liberal democracies.¹¹

In Mexico’s case, Catholic corporatism and the statist mass politics of cardenismo developed simultaneously. Most notably, the issue of secular and religious youth education remained at the center of both sides’ efforts to integrate different social sectors under their vision for the nation. As documented in the previous chapter, the hierarchical nature and authoritarian tendencies of corporatist politics appealed to Catholic integralists and the proponents of top-down institutionalism. By calling for the consolidation of a Mexican

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 85-86. Joseph and Buchenau also allude to this when documenting Cárdenas’s “carefully concealed authoritarian streak.” See Joseph and Buchenau (2013), p. 119.

¹¹ Costa Pinto (2020), pp. 17-18, 20-21.

spiritual community, the corporatist model of Catholic social action reinvigorated projects of national spiritual regeneration.

Catholic Mass Politics

Drawing from Cárdenas's model of mass politics, Mexican Catholic Action strived to bring the Church closer to "the people" and appeal to a broad range of class groups and local experiences. By 1937, in fact, the ACM had established more than 30 diocesan chapters responsible for the management and administration of hundreds of branches at the parish level. In the style of cardenista corporatism, the JCFM formed specialized sectional commissions to unify specific sectors of the population both locally and nationally. Known as *secciones*, *comisiones*, and *especializaciones*, these commissions were largely organized by professional occupation and devoted themselves to mobilizing specific class groups in accordance to their shared Catholic faith and respective class interests.¹²

In addition to these "organic" professional groups, the ACM also incorporated parents of both genders and children of all ages into the ranks of its numerous affiliate organizations. At the core of this move toward institutionalist integration *en masse*, the Church and upper-class lay groups sought to unite Mexican Catholics around a uniform religious education and a common spiritual experience. Consequently, the ACM used its *Comisiones Escolares* and *Comisiones de Propagandistas* to disseminate educational propaganda designed for different social sectors. Since its inception in 1930, the ACM had partnered with La Buena Prensa publishing house, and printed tens of thousands of copies of its influential magazines, journals, and propaganda pieces. These included *Catolicismo y Comunismo*, a weekly designed for workers; *La Infancia y la Oración*, a journal written

¹² FXC. Archivo ACM 5.3. Sección 5: "Junta Central JCFM," Serie 3: "Informes: 1936-39, 1946-48." "Juventud Católica Mexicana, Año de 1937."

by and for Catholic parents and educators; and *La Cruzada Eucarística*, a monthly publication printed for Catholic children. Overall, these publications were pivotal in keeping a constellation of social constituencies in ideological lockstep with the Mexican Church. However, women's groups went a step further and published their own pedagogical materials in an effort to "protect" children—specifically young girls—from the perceived immorality of the state's secular curriculum.¹³

Galvanized into action in the summer of 1934, the women of Catholic Action responded directly to Calles's final decree as the self-proclaimed *Jefe Máximo* of the Mexican Revolution. Known as the "Grito de Guadalajara," Calles declared that the Revolution itself remained "unfinished," and that the PNR now entered a "psychological phase" wherein the minds of Mexican youth had become the new battleground between the forces of Church and state. Accompanied by President-elect Cárdenas and the Governor of Jalisco, Sebastián Allende, Calles argued that Catholic schools constituted the last stronghold of religious conservatism. As a result, he called for a more aggressive enforcement of Article 3 of the Constitution, which guaranteed that all secular public education would be grounded in secular scientific principles and remain free of "fanaticism" and all forms of religious influence.¹⁴

In response to Calles's polemical proclamation, the ACM's Central Board established the national *Agrupación de Niños de Acción Católica* (ANAC) to educate children under 10 years of age in "doctrine, culture, morality, and social etiquette." The

¹³ FXC. Archivo ACM, "Publicaciones ACM." Caja 1: UFCM. Also, María Luisa Aspe Armella *La formación social y política de los católicos mexicanos* (México, D.F.: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2008), pp. 364-66.

¹⁴ Velasco Barba (2012), pp. 223-25. Also see Joseph and Buchenau (2013), pp. 107-109.

Board identified these lines of instruction as the “four pillars” of children’s spiritual development and tasked the women of the Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana (UFCM)—formerly the Damas Católicas—with developing the ANAC’s curriculum. The UFCM proudly envisioned the ANAC as a healthy counterweight to secular instruction imposed by the government’s Secretariat of Public Education (SEP). Designed to ensure the survival of Acción Católica for future generations, participation in the ANAC also served as a stepping stone towards membership in the ACM’s various youth groups.¹⁵

Aside from the ANAC, the ACM also founded formidable gender-specific children’s legions such as the *Sección Infantil* for girls under five years of age and the *Sección de Aspirantes* for young upper-class girls aged six through twelve. Both of these *secciones* were placed under the purview of the JCFM’s influential 13- to 35-year-old *socias*. In 1939 alone, the *Sección Infantil* registered 7,500 new pupils. Meanwhile, the *Sección de Aspirantes* documented approximately 6,000 new recruits and over 3,500 new subscriptions to *Aspirante* magazine—a monthly publication for upper-class girls that infused religious pedagogy with anti-communist propaganda and Hispanist narratives of national identity.¹⁶

Finally, the women of the ACM responded to Calles’s “Grito de Guadalajara” by intensifying their calls to protect the sanctity of the home and the integrity of the Mexican family. The UFCM emphasized motherhood and organized the national *Comisión Central de Madres de Familia* (CCMF) to mobilize Catholic mothers into action. In their

¹⁵ FXC. Archivo UFCM. Caja 11, Folder 52: “Apuntes: cursos de educación familiar.” “La Comisión Central de A.N.A.C. redactó estos apuntes para las clases del Curso Nacional de Propagandistas.”

¹⁶ FXC. Archivo ACM 5.3. Sección 5: “Junta Central JCFM,” Serie 3: “Informes: 1936-39, 1946-48.” “Juventud Católica Mexicana, Año de 1939.”

publications, the CCMF channeled prevalent discourses of cultural conflict and religious restoration while portraying Mexican mothers as simultaneously occupying positions of strength and weakness. On the one hand, the UFCM portrayed Mexican mothers as powerless amid the onslaught of unholy challenges jeopardizing their children's innocence and husbands' morality. Specifically, they identified divorce, infidelity, and the rise of new contraceptive methods as "avatars of communism" and formidable threats to the survival of "respectable" Catholic families. On the other hand, the UFCM argued that only Mexican mothers were powerful enough to instill children with sound religious values necessary to ward off the lure of modern temptations. It empowered women to view themselves as beacons of propriety and pillars of the nation's new moral regeneration.¹⁷

By positioning the nation as a spiritual community governed by Church doctrine, the women of Mexican Catholic Action blurred the lines between citizenship and religious subjectivity. They turned to publications like *Aspirante* and *De Frente* to push back against state secularism and promote the restoration of Catholicism in national society. The magazines' calls for the supremacy of Church over state were particularly evident in their *Juramento a la Patria*, a regularly published profession of faith and national allegiance. The oath not only affirmed young women's adherence to religious doctrine, but also renounced modern conceptions of secular nationhood:

As the angel of your household, you must do all within your reach to foster within your family a respect for the traditions, authority, and beliefs of our Church... God remains absent from too many homes and Christ is under siege in too many schools looking to tear Him from children's souls... But remember that you are not only an *hija de familia*, but that you also have a second mother: the *patria*. And you must work and pray and learn for the good of your family and your country... You

¹⁷ FXC. Archivo UFCM. Caja 11, Folder 52: "Apuntes: cursos de educación familiar." "La Comisión Central de Madres de Familia redactó estos apuntes para las clases del Curso Nacional de Propagandistas."

must impart your faith on to others for the good of your great Mexican family... And do all of this with great love for God and your *patria*.¹⁸

The 1937 Juramento tasked young women with promoting the Catholic faith and upholding the authority of Church doctrine in both public and private spheres. It promoted a specific brand of patriotism grounded in religious fidelity within the home and portrayed love for country as an extension of faith and love for one's family. The oath denounced secular education and argued that *patria* and family both remained subject to divine authority. It imbued citizenship with spiritual meaning and declared that all girls could perform God's work as both "angels of the home" and missionaries of the nation.

As part of its new mass politics approach, the JCFM worked to expand its influential Institutos de Cultura Femenina¹⁹ at the diocesan and parish levels. Since the mid-1920s, these local cultural centers strived to integrate religious teachings into young women's *formación política y educación social*. By the 1930s, the JCFM's cultural institutes sought to align local pedagogical campaigns with Catholic Action's broader goal of expanding doctrinal education. At the same time, the institutes promoted young católicas' development as female citizens, spiritual subjects, and the indispensable agents of meaningful social action.²⁰

In response to Calles's "Grito de Guadalajara" and Cárdenas's reinvigorated commitment to secular education, JCFM activists emphasized the importance of uniform religious instruction as the necessary foundation from which to build a formidable mass

¹⁸ FXC, Archivo UFCM, Serie: "Impresos, Publicaciones Acción Católica Mexicana," Caja 56 "De Frente 1936, 1937, 1938." *De Frente* No. 30 (México, D.F.: Editores Buena Prensa, 1937), pp. 3, 7. As cited in Álvarez-Pimentel (2017).

¹⁹ For more on the Instituto de Cultura Femenina, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

²⁰ Álvarez-Pimentel (2017), p. 4.

politics from the grassroots. Thus, throughout the 1930s, the group invested heavily in the training of religious educators and the establishment of parish-level *Centros de Instrucción* throughout all of the ACM's diocesan chapters. By 1939, the JCFM had established 965 parish-level educational centers dedicated to providing religious education to children and adults throughout the country. In addition to these *Centros de Instrucción Religiosa*, *socias* had also founded 200 new parish libraries and 124 new parish-level instructional groups while forging partnerships with 621 affiliate schools. In terms of pedagogy, the JCFM registered 959 new local committees on religious instruction dedicated to training and supporting approximately 10,000 new female educators. Subsequently, these teachers instructed over 240,000 children and nearly 4,000 adults from local communities.²¹

At the same time, the JCFM's 1939 registry also attested to the group's implementation of a corporatist organizational model as a means to galvanize Catholics across the nation in accordance with their respective class and professional interests. That year, the JCFM documented the official establishment of 357 new local commissions, or *comisiones*, devoted to disseminating propaganda and pedagogical materials designed to mobilize distinct sectors of the population. Of these 357 *comisiones*, eleven distributed propaganda geared toward the needs of religious educators while thirty-eight were tasked with imparting high school and university students with the skills necessary to counteract anti-Catholic biases in the classroom setting. Moreover, nine of these *comisiones* devoted their efforts to the spiritual instruction of domestic workers—whom the JCFM deemed especially prone to the lure of theft, extramarital affairs, and other workplace-related temptations—while seventy-two sought to educate industrial obreras on the perils of

²¹ FXC. Archivo ACM 5.3. Sección 5: "Junta Central JCFM," Serie 3: "Informes: 1936-39, 1946-48." "Juventud Católica Mexicana, Año de 1939."

communism and state syndicates. Still, the overwhelming majority of these commissions targeted campesinas, or female peasant workers, and constituted more than 220 of the newly formed commissions. Under the direction of the JCFM's national *Especialización de Campesinas* (EdC), the proliferation of grassroots commissions designed to "re-educate" peasant women revealed the extent of JCFM's distrust of the rural countryside and the prevalence of anti-indigenous racism within the ACM's larger project of religious restoration.²²

Like cardenista corporatism, the ACM's mass politics approach to Catholic social action ultimately served to bolster top-down institutional mechanisms despite its veneer of populism and democratization. Even as Mexican Catholic Action sought to mobilize and connect with different class groups at the grassroots, its efforts to bring the Church closer to the people actually worked to strengthen the power of elite lay groups like the JCFM, who in turn held a significant degree of proximity to the clergy, the Mexican Episcopate, and the Roman Church. Subsequently, these predominantly upper-class organizations worked to consolidate Catholic activism across class lines in order to impose their own standards of morality, regulate religious expression, and exercise doctrinal authority at the expense of popular indigenous actors. With specific regard to women's activism, the JCFM's contentious relationship with rural campesinas not only exacerbated palpable racial and class tensions between elite activists and working-class peasants, but also revealed the extent to which elite católicas' disdain for their indigenous counterparts figured prominently in their vision for society.

²² Ibid.

“Social Equilibrium”

Following Calles’s 1934 “Grito de Guadalajara,” Mexican Catholic Action publicly distanced itself from militant groups looking to wage a second armed conflict, or a *Segunda Cristiada*, against the federal government. These organizations included none other than the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty (LNDLR), which still held considerable influence within Catholic Action’s student-led ACJM. Following the ACM’s inception, the League openly defied orders from the Vatican and refused to disband. Instead, the Liga expanded its militant religious activism into Europe and Central America while forging crucial relationships with right-wing groups and disgruntled members of the Mexican clergy.²³

In the countryside, militant groups like the rural women’s *Cruzada Femenil Guadalupeana* took to arms and openly embraced popular martyrdom as expressed in their motto, “My Life for Christ.” Founded sometime between 1933 and 1936, *La Cruzada* operated out of the state of Guanajuato, but quickly spread southward, toward the states of Puebla, Guerrero, and Oaxaca, and north toward the states of Aguascalientes, San Luis Potosi, Durango and Chihuahua. Specifically, *La Cruzada* identified itself as an anti-communist and spiritually monarchical organization looking to “restore Christ’s kingdom across the nation.” The group kept a brief correspondence with Catholic Action, but also funneled weapons to the *Ejército Popular Libertador*, a group of working-class militants loosely allied with the LNDLR.²⁴

²³ For more on the Second Cristiada, see Meyer (2013), pp. 177-193. Also, on the Liga’s militant religious activism, see Guerrero Medina (2021) and Solís Nicot (2021).

²⁴ Archivo Histórico UNAM (AHUNAM). Fondo Aurelio Acevedo Robles. Caja 1: Circulares, Nacional. Expedientes 1-6: Actas, Circulares, Boletines. Folios 34-65. See also, Caja 2. Expediente 11. Folios 54-70.

Faced with internal opposition and President Cárdenas's looming expansion of the SEP's secular curriculum, Mexican Catholic Action embarked on a dual mission to "save" Catholicism from state incursions *and* religious militants. The ACM waged war on cardenista "bolshevism" and pursued a relentless crusade to pacify militants, re-educate peasants, and "reconquer" the nation on behalf of the established Church. However, rather than unifying Catholics around a common cause, organizations like the JCFM promoted notions of moral propriety and "social equilibrium" that exacerbated the nation's class and racial divides. Specifically, the group's peasant re-education campaigns reinforced *socias'* sense of moral superiority and subsequently enabled their construction of white identity at the expense of indigenous peasant actors.

Founded in 1936, the JCFM's *Especialización de Campesinas* (EdC) was a national council tasked with planning and implementing national moralization projects that specifically targeted indigenous *campesinas*. It reinforced racial paternalism and identified hygiene, nutrition, literacy, and family planning as the pillars of *campesinas'* alleged moral "rehabilitation." As part of its responsibilities, the EdC would oversee the printing and dissemination of *Mi Tierra* magazine across parishes in the nation's most rural regions. A monthly publication designed to combat indigenous women's perceived immorality, *Mi Tierra* strived to thwart the spread of hybrid forms of Catholicism and the rising influence of Protestantism on indigenous communities.²⁵

Within its first three years of activity, the EdC's dramatic expansion spoke to the urgency with which upper-class *católicas* perceived the purported decadence of the nation's

²⁵ FXC. Archivo ACM 5.11.1. Sección 5: "Junta Central JCFM," Serie 11: "Campañas/Especializaciones," Subserie 1: "Movimiento Nacional de Campesinas," Expediente: "Movimiento Nacional de Campesinas." "En el campo todo es tranquilidad..." and "Reglamento General de la Especialización de Campesinas de la JCFM." Also, Álvarez-Pimentel (2017), pp.10-11.

rural peasantry. Consequently, the EdC swiftly overshadowed the JCFM's other national councils, which included the urban *Especialización de Obreras* and the middle-class *Especialización de Maestras y Estudiantes*. *Socias* envisioned the rural countryside as an initial testing ground from which to establish a model for conservative religious activism. Once the EdC perfected its instructional strategies, activists would then export and implement them among the country's burgeoning middle classes.

By 1939, the EdC had become the JCFM's largest national council. Membership records indicated that the EdC constituted 227 parish-level commissions and boasted approximately 16,000 members nationwide—or, roughly, 17 to 18 percent of the JCFM's 91,000-person membership base. By contrast, the *Especialización de Obreras* accounted for 72 local commissions and 5,100 *integrantes*, or about 5 to 6 percent of the JCFM's members. Similarly, the *Especialización de Maestras y Estudiantes* had established 49 commissions but only comprised about 4 percent of the organization's membership.²⁶

Still, beneath their push to “reconquer” the countryside, affluent católicas maintained a deep-seated suspicion of indigenous and mestizo peasants. They dismissed popular rituals as “superstitions, enchantments, and fanatical ceremonies,” and branded indigenous religion as *actos de fe inculta*. Steeped in racial paternalism, the EdC argued that these popular forms of religious expression only enabled the rise of “atheistic” ideological movements that strived to corrupt impressionable and uneducated campesinas. It held that the survival of popular religion would only contribute to processes of moral

²⁶ FXC. Archivo ACM 5.3. Sección 5: "Junta Central JCFM," Serie 3: "Informes: 1936-39, 1946-48." "Juventud Católica Mexicana, Año de 1939." Also, Álvarez-Pimentel (2017), p. 10.

corruption whereby “true faith [would] be tainted” and the nation’s peasants would “lose” their cherished Catholic values.²⁷

At the same time, the ACM feared the disruption of gender roles as state syndicates and feminist movements called upon indigenous women to mobilize for increased wages. This was not a new concern, however, as even the Damas Católicas of 1922 had condemned “feminist labor radicalism” for actively contributing to workingwomen’s “increasing masculinization.” Still, the re-emergence of a “feminist threat” effectively breathed new life into *socias*’ spiritual crusade. The EdC adopted a reinvigorated antifeminist agenda that relied on anti-communist discourses to reject material politics.²⁸

As a result, the JCFM used *Mi Tierra* magazine to develop notions of “social equilibrium” that dissuaded campesinas from mobilizing around their class and gender identities. Specifically, *socias* held that the “preservation of a national social equilibrium” required that young rural women forgo their material aspirations and “conform to socio-economic realities.” At its core, the doctrine of social equilibrium urged peasant counterparts to transform their social outlook. It channeled anti-individualist discourses and emphasized conformity and spiritual fulfillment over personal ambition and material reward.²⁹

Through outlets like *Mi Tierra*, *socias* published numerous propaganda pieces that spoke *for* campesinas without considering peasants’ real economic needs. Even as the EdC claimed to understand the plight of rural workers, it rendered a reductive vision of deep

²⁷ FXC. Archivo ACM. “En el campo todo es tranquilidad...”.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

structural inequalities. Campesinas, in turn, were depicted as sacrificial lambs whose labor would contribute to the eventual spiritual uplift of their communities. They were branded as both “generous souls” and patriotic citizens:

What are the issues we presently face? Our labor is heavy and always the same. We lack luxury [and] have little time for amusement... [And yet] We have grown accustomed to labor and toil! Our souls are generous! We love our land and all that surrounds us! And we would do anything for our *pueblo* and *rancho*!³⁰

Evidenced in the above passage, the EdC acknowledged that peasant dissatisfaction emanated from “heavy” toil and monotonous labor. Still, it portrayed these working-class struggles as easy-to-solve problems grounded in campesinas’ ephemeral and even capricious desire for “luxuries” and “amusement.” As an alternative, *socias* proposed that the very monotony and incessant nature of peasant work actually served to harden the spirit and humble the soul, thereby representing its own form of spiritual reward. They depicted perpetual and unrewarded labor as both an end in itself and an essential component of campesinas’ dutiful sacrifice for the good of their local *rancho*, their *pueblo*, and the nation at large.

Through the tenets of “social equilibrium,” the JCFM turned a blind eye towards the realities of economic exploitation. It called on their indigenous counterparts to forgo the struggle for higher wages and disqualified material solutions to rural poverty as communistic and “irreligious.” *Socias* subsequently argued that peasant women’s involvement in these “radical” forms of activism would result in campesinas’ acquisition of a “false concept of superiority.” They held that indigenous women would fall prey to

³⁰ Ibid.

“vanity, licentiousness, and the erosion of morality,” and ultimately contribute to the “downfall of womankind.”³¹

Aside from calling for the suppression of working-class activism, the JCFM used *Mi Tierra* magazine to dissuade peasants from migrating to Mexico’s rapidly-growing cities. The EdC openly denounced rural emigration and claimed that campesinas’ permanence in the countryside actually comprised a crucial component of maintaining “equilibrium.” Socias held that urban migration would only lead youthful peasant down a path of sin and immorality. They argued that campesinas’ “ignorance,” allegedly grounded in their “limited exposure to ‘true’ faith,” made them particularly vulnerable to establishing dishonorable sexual liaisons with both married and unmarried men.³²

In all, the doctrine of social equilibrium relied on racialized discourses of class, gender, and sexuality to thwart indigenous mobility. It became central to the paradox of Catholic mass politics, as it effectively called for the permanence of longstanding social hierarchies just as the ACM attempted to galvanize Catholics *en masse*. The JCFM’s attempt at mass politics grew plagued by internal contradictions precisely because it established a religious anti-politics wherein “social equilibrium” hindered rural mobilization and peasant empowerment. As upper-class socias called for campesinas’ economic conformity and political demobilization, they bolstered a collective sense of whiteness based on their perceived sense of spiritual, economic, and social superiority.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. See also, Álvarez-Pimentel (2017), p. 11.

In this regard, the predominantly male Unión Nacional Sinarquista (UNS)³³ became a formidable ideological counterpart to the ACM's largely female, upper-class, and Mexico City-based activism. Founded in the state of Guanajuato in the spring of 1937, the UNS's landed *hacendados* and middle-class professionals adopted a radically different vision of the countryside that embraced private property and peasant land ownership as God-given rights under siege by the cardenista state. By the late 1930s, *sinarquismo* had spread southward, effectively reaching the *tierra caliente* regions of states like Michoacán, Guerrero, and Estado de México. In a series of pamphlets published between 1939 and 1940, the UNS actively called on *agrarista* militants to join their “noble” and “fraternal” ranks as they embarked on a colonization project in Baja California Sur:

To the *campesinos* of the *tierra caliente* region: ... *Sinarquismo* contends that you should be a free man, owner of your person and livelihood, of your honor, of your life and, above all else, of the land you labor, so that the parcel you toil should become yours... *Sinarquismo* wants you to own *títulos de propiedad* to the property you labor so that tomorrow it will become your family's *patrimonio*... [Thus] *sinarquismo* calls on the government to respect the autonomy of *el pueblo*, for our *gente del campo* [people of the countryside] have always been good and noble but the *el campo* is no longer the peaceful paradise it once was, tainted by the hatred and the poison once confined to the cities... And now, *el campesino* has grown tired of being good towards those who exploit him... which is why *sinarquismo* looks to restore faith in justice...³⁴

As evidenced by the above passage, the UNS presented an idyllic, even utopian, vision of the countryside as a former “paradise” corrupted by the spread of social tensions emanating from city spaces—a criticism, perhaps, of the nation's increasing urbanization.

³³ For more on the UNS, see Héctor Hernández García de León *Historia política del sinarquismo, 1934-1944* (Universidad Iberoamericana, 2004). See also, Jean Meyer *El sinarquismo, el cardenismo y la iglesia* (Tusquets, 2003); José Gustavo González Flores, “Los motivos del sinarquista. La organización y la ideología de la Unión Nacional Sinarquista” *Culturales* Vol. 3 No. 1 (2015); Rubén Aguilar and Guillermo Zermeño eds. *Religión, política y sociedad: el sinarquismo y la iglesia en México* (Universidad Iberoamericana, 1992); Julia Young *The Revolution is Afraid: Mexico's Sinarquistas and their Fight for a Catholic Nation* (manuscript in progress); and Nathan Ellstrand, “Reclaiming *La Patria*: Sinarquismo in the United States, 1937-1946,” PhD diss. (Loyola University Chicago: 2022, expected).

³⁴ “A Los Campesinos de la Región de Tierra Caliente,” not dated (though the letter appears in the same folder as correspondence from 1939-1940). Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia (BNAH). Archivo Unión Nacional Sinarquista (UNS), microfilm roll 41.

Furthermore, whereas the EdC assumed indigenous campesinas' "tendency" toward immorality, *sinarquismo* suggested that the male campesino was inherently "noble" and only driven toward "hatred" by those who exploited him. Thus, Mexican rurality took on different meanings even as Catholic Action and the UNS both devised national projects of political and religious import around the need to "save" the nation's working-class peasants. While *sinarquismo* held that individual land ownership was indispensable to peasant freedom, the women of Catholic Action believed that such materialistic aspirations would ultimately lead to peasant women's moral corruption. As a result, the UNS made the case for a politics of local autonomy grounded in families' possession of private property. Sinarquistas empowered campesinos to claim the land they labored and save themselves from economic exploitation and other external social pressures. By contrast, the EdC held that indigenous campesinas had no need for materialistic aspirations or "masculine" ambitions. Instead, they instructed peasant women to focus on bettering their spirit and conform to their social realities.³⁵

In addition to these important contrasts around the issue of property ownership, Catholic Action and the UNS differed in their responses to practices of popular martyrdom emanating from the countryside. Whereas the Mexican Episcopate and the ACM unequivocally denounced religious violence and popular martyrs, the UNS relied on the

³⁵ Here, further research needs to be conducted to better gauge if or how gender differences played a role in both the UNS and the ACM's respective perceptions of the Mexican countryside, for it could well be the case that the Unión Nacional Sinarquista, like the JCFM, also rejected peasant women's potential for property ownership. Likewise, it is also worth exploring if the men's groups in Catholic Action ever addressed the issue of private property in a way that was similar to or different from the UNS at this time. Regardless, the contrasts alluded to in the text still hold. Whereas the women of Catholic Action shunned the possibility of campesinas' economic empowerment, the UNS encouraged male campesinos to take ownership of the land they labored. For more on women in the UNS, see Roxana Rodríguez Bravo "Mujeres sinarquistas en México. Historia de una militancia católica femenina (1937-1948)," PhD diss. (El Colegio de Michoacán, 2011).

memory and symbolism of slain coreligionists to build a collective identity and bolster grassroots support for its cause.³⁶ Furthermore, sinarquistas went as far as developing their own language and lexicon when communicating internally and writing about their activities. The term “*sinarquizar*,” for instance, became ubiquitous in UNS correspondence and was often used by members when referring to someone’s ability to effectively recruit new supporters from their local communities. In the end, however, the UNS was more successful in establishing a growing and sustainable movement that effectively spread throughout the Mexican countryside. Given the clear contrast in messaging geared toward rural peasant communities, it is evident that campesinos viewed sinarquismo and its calls to land ownership as having more to offer than the JCFM’s doctrine of social equilibrium.³⁷



Image 5.2: Peasants at a rally held by the Unión Nacional Sinarquista (1937).
Source: Mediateca INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia)

³⁶ For more on martyrdom and the UNS, see Eva Nohemi Orozco García, “Teresa Bustos, ‘la mujer bandera’: los caídos sinarquistas, su simbología religiosa y la mártir que traspasó las barreras de género” *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* Vol. 31 No. 1 (2020).

³⁷ Ibid.

Thus, by August 1939, the JCFM's racialized approach to peasant re-education had led to the rise of divisions along ethnic and class lines between members of the EdC and local peasant communities in the Diocese of Oaxaca. Specifically, the JCFM's diocesan president observed that outward tensions, personal rivalries, and internal discord actively hindered the development of the Catholic Action movement throughout the rest of the state and Mexico's indigenous southern regions. According to administrative correspondence, the prevalence of Oaxaca's popular religious traditions created an urgent need for Catholic schools that would promote institutional religious uniformity. Nevertheless, realities on the ground revealed the EdC's "lack of preparation" to meet local challenges and Oaxaca's unique position as one of Catholic Action's most difficult sites for implementing projects of religious re-education:

Overall, our time in Oaxaca has allowed us to observe the following deficiencies in our efforts: First, our mission's utter lack of preparedness, not only in terms of *Acción Católica's* training of educators, but also with regard to the region's *cultura general* [general culture], which is rudimentary and underdeveloped among young women from the area largely because of the absence of Catholic schools. Second, the lack of communication between parish committees and diocesan councils. Third, the prevalence of social divisions along class lines and the presence of personal rivalries among our members... And fourth, the predominant idea among our ranks that Oaxaca represents an extraordinarily different and difficult environment when compared to other dioceses, thus hindering *Acción Católica* from flourishing as it has elsewhere. This idea, regardless of hyperbole, has some grounding in truth...³⁸

This excerpt from the JCFM's diocesan report reveals the flaw in the EdC's approach to campesinas' moral instruction. While the diocesan president attributed some culpability for the mission's failures to the EdC's lack of pedagogical preparation, it also blamed Oaxaca's "rudimentary and underdeveloped general culture" for indigenous women's supposed inability to learn institutional doctrine and adapt to more traditional forms of Catholic education. Furthermore, the passage provides valuable insight into

³⁸ FXC. Archivo ACM 5.3. Sección 5: "Junta Central JCFM," Serie 3: "Informes: 1936-39, 1946-48." "7 de agosto de 1939, Informe sobre la Cuarta Asamblea Diocesana de Oaxaca, JCFM."

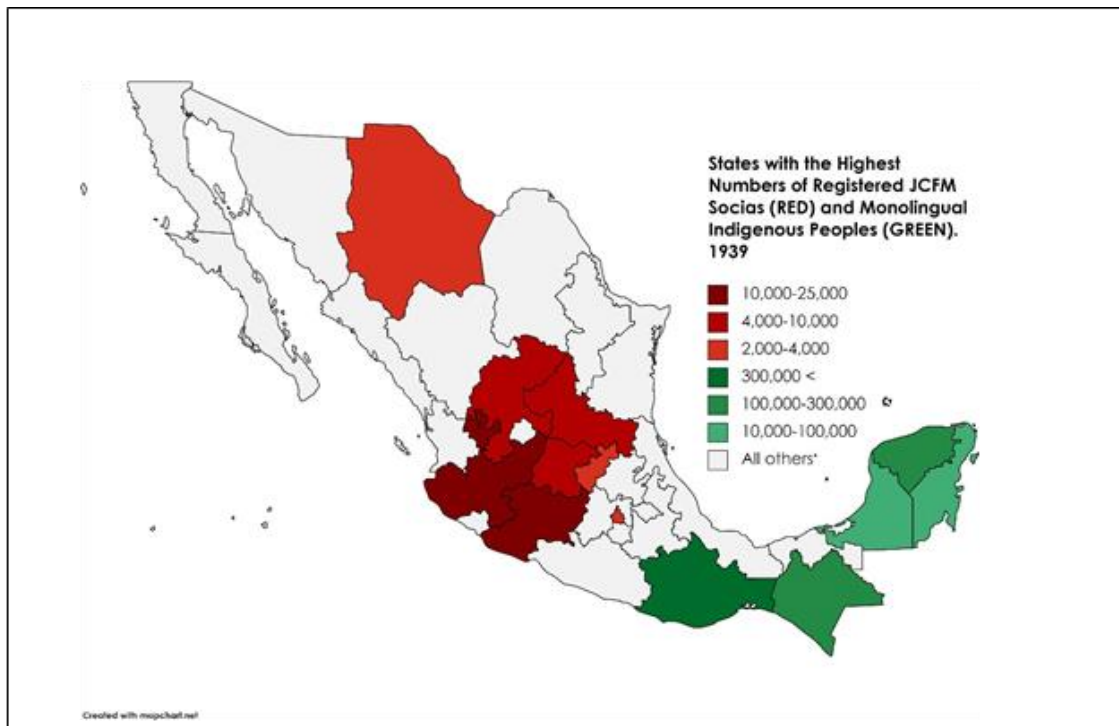
socias' collective imaginary by alluding to prevalent images of a "foreign" Oaxaca as a "different" and "difficult" space for the flourishing of Catholic Action. This process of Othering indigenous rurality was present throughout most of the EdC's educational campaigns, as the JCFM's upper-class activists had seldom worked with indigenous communities or ventured into the nation's southern countryside.

Trends in 1939 Oaxaca pointed to the JCFM's broader grappling with issues of class and race within its mission of Catholic restoration. As the JCFM launched its second Spanish-language education campaign since 1926, internal records reveal that the EdC's obsession with eradicating popular indigenous culture from the countryside represented more of a white elite fantasy than an actual reality. In its pursuit of Hispanization, the EdC formed local instructional teams tasked with establishing schools that would enforce the supremacy of institutional religious practices and instruct peasants in the Spanish language. To document the prevalence of native languages at the local level, socias produced a registry of "*Habla Indígena*" wherein individual dioceses documented the number of "monolingual" indigenous-language speakers and "bilingual" speakers of both Spanish and native languages.³⁹

Organized by state, the JCFM's internal records indicate that most "monolingual" indigenous-language speakers resided in the southern and eastern coastal states of Oaxaca, Veracruz, and Chiapas. Nevertheless, membership records from 1939 reveal that the vast majority of EdC members hailed from the northern and central-western states of Michoacán, Jalisco, Estado de México, Aguascalientes, Colima, Chihuahua, and Guanajuato. It stands to reason, then, that for all its rhetoric of educational outreach, the

³⁹ FXC. Archivo ACM 5.3. Sección 5: "Junta Central JCFM," Serie 11: "Movimiento Nacional de Campesinas." "Especialización de Campesinas: Hablan lenguas indígenas."

majority of the EdC's upper-class women did not reside in close proximity to monolingual indigenous peoples. Instead, members hailed from predominantly Spanish-speaking regions whose monolingual indigenous-language communities comprised a small percentage of each states' respective population: less than one percent in Jalisco, Aguascalientes, and Guanajuato, for example, and approximately 6.3 percent in Michoacán.⁴⁰



Map 5-1: Registered JCFM Socias and Monolingual Indigenous Peoples (1939).
Source: Author

These figures⁴¹ indicate that the most enthusiastic proponents of JCFM's peasant re-education campaigns remained socially and physically distant from the nation's rural countryside, perhaps training to serve as future "missionaries" in one of the UFCM's

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Figures obtained from FXC. Archivo ACM 5.3. Sección 5: "Junta Central JCFM," Serie 11: "Movimiento Nacional de Campesinas." "Especialización de Campesinas: Hablan lenguas indígenas;" and FXC. Archivo ACM 5.3. Sección 5: "Junta Central JCFM," Serie 3: "Informes: 1936-39, 1946-48." "Juventud Católica Mexicana, Año de 1939."

educational delegations. Consequently, the widening divide between elite católicas and campesina counterparts shaped dominant perceptions of indigenous peasants as distant, foreign, and immoral “Others.” Unlike the sinarquistas, the women of Catholic Action attempted to build a mass movement grounded in the principles of peasant conformity, social hierarchy, and working-class moral development, emphasizing spiritual uplift over economic mobility. However, the paradox of Catholic Action’s model of “mass politics” emanated from its pursuit of two seemingly conflicting goals—namely, galvanizing different class groups around projects of religious renewal, but refusing to mobilize the nation’s indigenous peasants in any form of meaningful material politics. To resolve this tension, the ACM designed a racially charged religious pedagogy that actively dissuaded working-class sectors of society from political action. The doctrine of “social equilibrium” was crucial to this endeavor, as it called on indigenous campesinas to relinquish their individual material aspirations as part of a sacrificial effort to save the nation.

Hispanism and Mexicanidad

Like the EdC, the Cárdenas administration grappled with the issue of indigenous assimilation and engaged in a cultural project of *indigenismo* that sought to integrate the nation’s “Indian” population into broader society. Even as Cárdenas’s agrarian reforms returned ownership of land to indigenous communities, peasants’ increased dependence on the state and their lack of access to private property ownership created an “Indian problem” that government officials were determined to resolve. Cárdenas held that the solution to these issues was not to make “the Indian ‘stay Indian,’ nor [to] Indianize... Mexico,” but rather to “Mexicanize the Indian himself.” A testament to the president’s corporatist ideology, Cárdenas held that the nation’s collective sense of identity, or *Mexicanidad*,

required indigenous peoples to act as “members of a social class taking part in the collective task of production.” Thus, the federal government invested heavily in peasant modernization campaigns that sought to “revolutionize” nearly all aspects of agriculture, labor, and technology. These processes of Mexicanization also required that indigenous campesinos be educated in the Spanish language and immersed in the SEP’s secular curriculum, often relying on the misleading discourses of inclusivity to argue for the rejection of divergent local customs.⁴²

By 1938, Cárdenas’s populist brand of nationalism reached an apex as the president moved to nationalize the Mexican oil industry and subsequently antagonized foreign capitalist interests. Facing domestic food shortages, falling production rates, and rising commodity prices, Cárdenas hoped to demonstrate the continuing strength of his reform agenda amid an economic crisis stemming from recession in the United States and the implementation of land reforms across the country. Subsequently, the president resurrected the decades-old conflict over control of the Mexican oil industry, leveraging discourses of national patrimony to make an example of the nation’s most powerful economic lobby and breathe new life into the public’s sense of Mexicanidad. However, this bolstering of cardenismo alarmed religious conservatives who pointed to Cárdenas’s pursuit of expropriation as yet another sign that Mexico was turning toward “communism.” At the heart of the president’s policies was a protectionist vision for society that emphasized public ownership of natural resources, the growth of domestic industry, and solidarity with the same indigenous peasants that Catholic Action approached with suspicion. As the JCFM wrote of social equilibrium, the Mexican government spoke to campesinos’ needs

⁴² Joseph and Buchenau (2013), pp. 188-189. For more on official *indigenismo* and the “sanitizing” of indigenous traditions see López (2010).

while actively negotiating with rural communities and mass organizations powered by peasant activists.⁴³

In response to these developments, *socias* pursued identity-formation projects that exalted Mexico's Spanish heritage and glorified the nation's colonial past. Specifically, the JCFM's youth publications drew from the Hispanist ideologies of the previous decade and portrayed Spanish Catholicism as a viable alternative to state-sponsored indigenismo. Published under the guidance of the ACM's Central Board, the magazines sought to mobilize young upper-class women into "proper forms" of opposition against the rise of secular public education. In October 1938, for example, the influential *Aspirante* magazine warned affluent readers against anti-Catholic biases in the government's educational curriculum. Printed six months after Cárdenas's oil expropriation and two years after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), its Hispanist messaging resonated with the Catholic opponents of cardenista nationalism and supporters of Francoist political ideology:

Every year, the month of October commemorates *La Fiesta de la Raza* across the Spanish Americas. But, what do we really mean when we proudly speak of *nuestra raza*? ... Seldom do we find Mexicans without Spanish ancestry. Why, then, are we not taught of the glories of *la Vieja España*? Why does such hostility prevail toward the *Madre Patria* who imparted us with life and Christian civilization? For years, Mexico has been the victim of systemic propaganda that seeks to strip us of our Faith and our beautiful Hispanic traditions... But how the virtues of indigenous races are venerated! How their "advanced" pagan "civilization" is praised and exaggerated! ... Through its religion, Spain taught us her language. Faith and tongue: two links that bind us eternally, for the unity of the race requires a spiritual unity and a unity of thought, as expressed through a shared language ...⁴⁴

⁴³ Joseph and Buchenau (2013), pp. 130, 132-133, 189. With regard to negotiated rule, Joseph and Buchenau point to the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) and the Cárdenas's need to negotiate with this organization as it pursued its own attempts at organizing the Mexican *campesinado*. The authors hold that "Cardenismo was not just the result of top-down efforts," but rather "messy and uneven... because the state remained weak." See Joseph and Buchenau (2013), p. 130.

⁴⁴ FXC. Archivo UFCM. Serie: "Impresos, Publicaciones Acción Católica Mexicana," Caja 56 "De Frente 1936, 1937, 1938." *Aspirante*. México, D.F.: Editorial Buena Prensa, octubre 1938.

This excerpt from an article titled “Nuestra Raza” speaks to the JCFM’s efforts to reclaim the nation’s Spanish heritage and safeguard the Church’s legacy from incursions by the SEP and other secular institutions. It emphasized the importance of missionary activity and portrayed Catholicism as both the focal point of the hemisphere’s Hispanic identity and the fulcrum of Mexican racial unity. By contrast, the JCFM lamented the Cárdenas government’s “exaggerated” praise of “pagan indigenous races.” It branded the SEP’s curriculum as “systemic propaganda” and sought to galvanize activists around the defense of a shared religion.

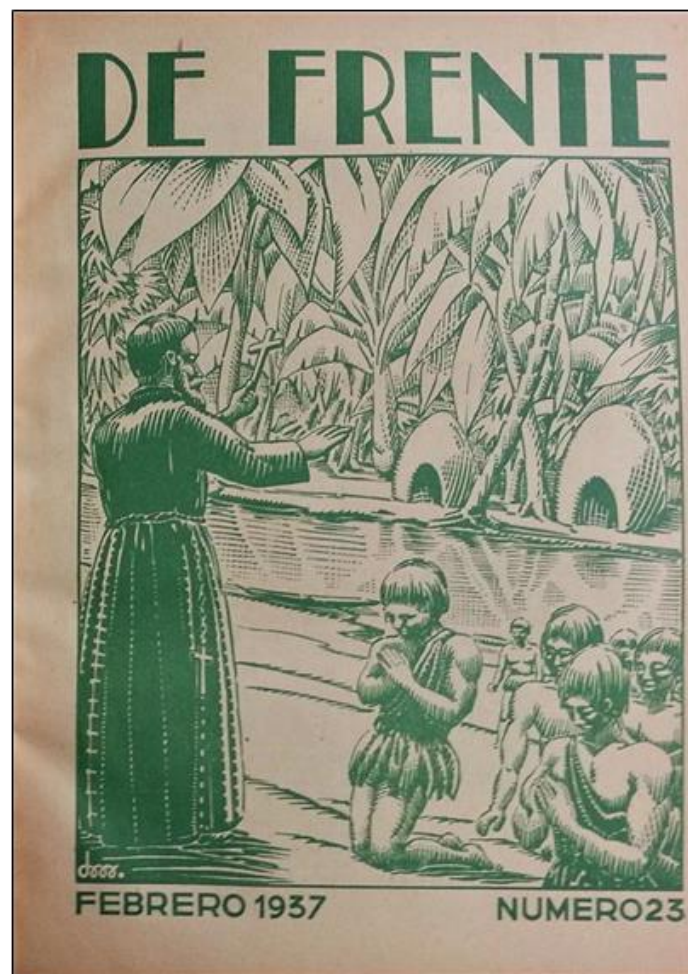


Image 5.3: *De Frente* magazine (1937).

Source: FXC. Archivo UFCM. Serie: “Impresos, Publicaciones Acción Católica Mexicana,” Caja 56 “*De Frente* 1936, 1937, 1938.”

In this regard, the authors of *Aspirante* channeled Francoist ideology and emphasized Mexico's Catholic roots as part of the continent's pan-Hispanic identity. Socias wrote in defense of the nation's Christian traditions and called for the redemption of *la Vieja España* in the public imagination. As part of these efforts, the magazine exalted conquistador Hernán Cortés and depicted Spanish conquerors as intrepid adventurers who miraculously built an empire from a loose band of explorers. It glorified colonial violence and honored the "brave and vanquished Indian" for his "proud" opposition to the inevitable processes of "civilization."⁴⁵

Since the mid-1930s, Francoist ideology had been particularly appealing to the members of Mexican Catholic Action, given its adherence to the tenets of integralism, or the belief that the Catholic faith should permeate all aspects of civil society. For this reason, Mexican lay activists looked favorably upon General Francisco Franco's national project of Christian revival in response to anti-clerical violence and the secularization laws enacted by the Spanish Second Republic. As historian María Luisa Aspe Armella argues, Catholic Action viewed Spanish Nationalists' *labor restauradora* as a model to emulate in the struggle to reconstruct the nation's "Christian social order"—especially once the Cárdenas administration openly expressed its support for Spanish Republicans and socialist exiles. At the heart of Franco's *sueño novohispano* was an authoritarian traditionalism that positioned Spain as Christendom's greatest defender against communism and secular incursions.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Aspe Armella (2008), pp. 208-209. For more on connections between Mexico's Catholic intellectuals and the Spanish Civil War, see Cris Culton, "Civilization in Crisis: The Mexican Catholic Right during the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939" BA Thesis (University of California, Santa Cruz 2018).

Furthermore, as war erupted across Europe, Catholic intellectuals and the Mexican clergy positioned the pro-Church politics of Franco's *Falange Española* as a viable alternative to the anti-clerical fascism of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. In the influential *Hispanidad y germanismo*, conservative intellectual Jesús Guisa y Acevedo approached Francoism favorably and held that "Cárdenas's Mexico" had become an authoritarian regime more repressive than Nazi Germany given the state's monopoly over youth education and its control of the national economy. By contrast, Guisa y Acevedo argued that Nationalist Spain had managed to safeguard the public's freedom of thought by expanding the powers of the Church. However, rather than calling for a linear adoption of Francoist ideals, he turned to notions of mestizo identity and urged Mexicans to find their own national solutions to the threat of cardenismo.⁴⁷

Similarly, *Aspirante* magazine recognized that Mexicans' mixed-race heritage connected them to both European and indigenous ancestors. Situating Catholic Hispanism within prevalent narratives of mestizaje, the JCFM acknowledged that the "Mexican race" was both Spanish and "Indian," thereby originating from the warrior cultures of "armored Spaniards and plumed Natives." Nevertheless, *socias* described the colonial processes of mestizaje as "heroic" and ignored the nation's histories of rape and sexual violence.

⁴⁷ For more on Jesús Guisa y Acevedo, see Carlos Sola Ayape "Entre el Catolicismo y la Españolidad. Las Claves del Pensamiento del Hispanista Mexicano Jesús Guisa y Azevedo," in Laura Alarcón Menchaca, Austreberto Martínez Villegas, and Jesús Iván Mora Muro, eds., *Intelectuales Católicos, Conservadores y Tradicionalistas en México y Latinoamérica, 1910-2015* (Guadalajara: El Colegio de Jalisco, 2019). See also, Doralicia Carmona Dávila, "Guisa y Acevedo Jesús, 1899-1986" in *Memoria Política de México* [Online] (Edición Perenne, 2021). URL: <https://www.memoriapoliticademexico.org/Biografias/GAJ99.html>. Accessed 20 May 2021. ISBN 970-95193.

Instead, they rewrote the history of colonization as that of a benevolent enterprise pursued by European *civilizadores*.⁴⁸

As early as 1936, JCFM activists had used young women's magazines to disseminate national identity-narratives glorifying Catholic Spain. In dozens of monthly issues published during the mid-to-late 1930s, authors emphasized the importance of Mexico's colonial past and relied on images, artwork, and other visual elements to appeal to prevalent notions of mixed-race identity. Thus, in one of its commemorative September issues celebrating Mexican Independence, *De Frente* magazine proudly displayed images of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a symbol of Catholic mestizo nationalism. However, the affluent girls' magazine also dedicated pages of text to the deification of conservative "national heroes" hailing from the Spanish Empire—namely, Hernán Cortés, Queen Isabel I of Castile, Miguel de Cervantes, and Emperor Agustín de Iturbide.

Still, while *socias* made tepid appeals to notions of mestizaje, they also used the image of *Isabel la Católica*, or Spain's Queen Isabel I (1474-1504), to make subtle, albeit powerful claims to Spanish identity that often ran contrary to mestizo nationalism. Their publications subsequently transformed Isabel I into a symbol of opposition to cultural indigenismo and peasant Catholicism. Echoing the LNCLR, *socias* portrayed Mexicans' Hispanic roots as the antidote to the perils of Revolutionary modernity—namely, communism, moral decline, and religious impurity. Nevertheless, whereas Hispanism's prior iterations had positioned Spanish Catholicism as the progenitor of individual liberties, the JCFM's Hispanist narratives now adopted a more authoritarian outlook. Specifically,

⁴⁸ FXC. Archivo UFCM. Serie: "Impresos, Publicaciones Acción Católica Mexicana," Caja 56 "De Frente 1936, 1937, 1938." *Aspirante*. México, D.F.: Editorial Buena Prensa, octubre 1938. For more on Vasconcelos and *The Cosmic Race*, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

De Frente magazine depicted Isabel's Spanish Inquisition as both a precedent to the nation's spiritual crisis and a "noble enterprise" that sought to "defend true faith and eradicate evil." *Socias* rewrote history as an expression of God's will and glorified the monarchy's "heroic" oppression of Judaism, Islam, and "New World heathenism." Consequently, *De Frente* urged young women to follow the Queen's example and wage a modern holy war to defend the nation. This time, however, activists were summoned to protect the sanctity of their homes from the threat of "false" religion, sexual immorality, and the ever-present *amenaza bolchevique*.⁴⁹

On issues of gender and religious militancy, *socias* equated Hispanicity with feminine propriety and portrayed Isabel I as the exemplar of Catholic women's activism—militant, yet faithful, proper, and "feminine" above all. They broke from peasant *cristeros* and praised the Queen as the nation's matriarch, thereby positioning her on equal footing with the mixed-race Virgin of Guadalupe. According to *De Frente*, Isabel I embodied the best of both masculine and feminine styles of leadership. While she rivaled the best statesmen in bravery, ambition, and intellect, the Queen also epitomized a quintessentially "female" form of compassion, loyalty, and purity. Thus, contrary to the EdC's messages of peasant conformity and social equilibrium, the JCFM leveraged the Queen's image to encourage proper—i.e., "educated," "prudent," and nonviolent—forms of activism among upper-class youth. *Socias* also held that any acceptable form of religious mobilization would require that all women adhere to these standards of propriety in order to retain their femininity.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ FXC. Archivo UFCM. Serie: "Impresos, Publicaciones Acción Católica Mexicana," Caja 56 "De Frente 1936, 1937, 1938." *De Frente*. No. 30. México, D.F.: Editorial Buena Prensa, septiembre 1937, pp. 8-9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* See also, Álvarez-Pimentel (2017), pp. 5-6.



Images 5.4-5.5: *Aspirante* magazine. October 1938 (left) and June 1938 (right).
 Source: FXC. Archivo UFCM. Serie: “Impresos, Publicaciones Acción Católica Mexicana,”
 Caja 56 “*De Frente* 1936, 1937, 1938.”

In this sense, JCFM activists echoed the Damas Católicas of 1922 and identified elite women as gatekeepers of morality, exemplars of propriety, and pillars of the nation’s new spiritual regeneration. Even as the JCFM attempted to embrace Mexicans’ mixed-race cultural heritage, many of the images and texts scattered throughout the pages of its magazines left little room for embracing mestizo identity or indigenous culture. In fact, both *De Frente* and *Aspirante* regularly flooded readers with photographs of young white women in an effort to convey a sense of the desirable attributes to which all Catholic had to aspire—poise, elegance, and European beauty. Moreover, the magazines used elaborate artwork to gesture towards Hispanist and Eurocentric tropes. As a result, the publications filled their pages with maps of Spanish cities and visual references to the stories of Don

Quixote. Moreover, the magazines showcased photographs of European Cathedrals and sketches of the Vatican's own Saint Peter's Square.

Through these Hispanist renderings of *mestizaje*, JCFM activists fashioned subtle, albeit powerful claims to European whiteness. Though these claims were partially conveyed through Hispanist language, they were often embedded within discourses of propriety and hidden beneath layers of innuendo, subtext, and double meanings. This nuanced form of race-making was the product of Catholic activists' attempts to strike a balance between Catholic Hispanism and *mestizo* patriotism. Nevertheless, even as *socias* publicly embraced Mexicans' mixed-race identity, they also held an implicit disdain for indigenous culture and popular religion fueled by distrust of working-class empowerment.⁵¹

At their core, Hispanism and *indigenismo* comprised the ideological products of a dialogical process whereby class politics became increasingly racialized and articulated in cultural terms. Whereas the statist politics of peasant mobilization sought to nationalize indigeneity, the Hispanist response to *cardenismo* used images of Catholic Spain as a means to prioritize elites' retention of power above *campesinos*' more popular forms of spiritual, political, and economic activism. Despite these differences, however, both Hispanism and *indigenismo* functioned within the authoritarian political frameworks established by Catholic Action and Cárdenas's PRM. Furthermore, both of these racial ideologies wrestled with the nationalist demands of *Mexicanidad*, which simultaneously called for a cultural "Mexicanization" of indigenous peasants and required that Hispanists acknowledge indigeneity as part of the nation's historic mixed-race origins.

⁵¹ For more on upper-class Catholics' nuanced claims to whiteness, and the relevance of these historic processes of race-making in contemporary Mexican society, see Álvarez-Pimentel, (2020).

Still, whereas officialist expressions of Mexicanidad emphasized its purported universality among Mexicans of all backgrounds, Hispanists believed that they had yet to properly re-introduce the vast majority of Mexicans to the “civilizational” Spanish elements of their culture. As a result, the JCFM’s peasant moralization campaigns sought to “reconquer” the rural countryside and instill indigenous campesinos with the nation’s allegedly “Hispanic” virtues. Specifically, Catholic activists understood Hispanicity as the engine behind cultural enlightenment, sexual purity, and social propriety. Above all, however, Hispanism became a platform from which to advocate for peasants’ strict adherence to the institutional Church and established religious norms.

Nevertheless, for all its discourses of peasant spiritual development, *socias*’ Hispanist narratives depicted a nation in perpetual spiritual turmoil, thereby calling on young activists to channel the energies of prominent figures like Cortés and Isabel I in their never-ending struggle against indigenous “fanaticism” and state incursions. This reveals that peasants’ religious re-education represented neither a fixed nor a truly attainable objective, particularly if one considers that the JCFM seldom wrote about indigenous campesinas as cultural agents or co-creators of faith. Instead, youth magazines regularly portrayed peasant women as the passive recipients of doctrine and inferior subjects in need of salvation. Thus, the relentless cultural suppression of campesinos became the true aim of the ACM’s moralization campaigns—an indigenous re-education project that was never meant to end or subside, but rather endure and intensify.

As demonstrated by magazines’ prevalent Hispanist discourses, notions of race and identity became integral to the JCFM’s missionary project. Channeling racism as a means to further class politics, Hispanism galvanized elite católicas into subjugating working-

class counterparts under the pretext of “enlightening” morally deviant and ideologically vulnerable indigenous women. In the end, however, *socias*’ racialized discourses, together with Catholic Action’s top-down model of social activism, effectively rendered these organizations’ project of national moralization unrealistic and unattainable. As President Cárdenas build state institutions and turned to the language of indigenismo to further his populist agenda, the women of Catholic Action launched an unsustainable religious movement that embraced coloniality, reproduced longstanding racial prejudices, and unequivocally supported class hierarchy.

Consequently, organizations like the JCFM were outpaced by the federal government and competing religious factions (e.g., *sinarquistas*, Protestant missionaries, etc.) in their efforts to recruit working-class adherents to their ranks. As historian Ben Fallaw documents, even the cardenista state proved a more advantageous ally than upper-class lay groups in promoting the hegemony of the established Church among peasants in predominantly indigenous states like Guerrero and Campeche. Specifically, Fallaw argues that the Church provided the Cárdenas administration with crucial support in suppressing popular peasant uprisings—most notably, the *Segunda Cristiada*—while continuing to “indirectly undermine” state-formation efforts culturally and socially.⁵² Thus, even as the government emphasized secularization, it still managed to align itself with the Church and integrate Catholic institutions into its efforts to negotiate state rule across specific local and historical contexts.

Contrary to cardenista corporatism and the president’s personalist brand of populism, the ACM’s model of Catholic “mass” politics failed to deliver a comprehensive

⁵² See Fallaw (2012), p. 2.

mobilization of class groups or any meaningful model for integrating peasant militants into the ranks of Catholic Action. Instead, the ACM's Hispanist rhetoric rendered it an insular organization controlled by the clergy and the nation's elite. As cited earlier, administrative records reveal that by 1939 the overwhelmingly majority of the JCFM's membership base hailed from cities in predominantly Spanish and European regions of the country. By contrast, membership numbers across southern Mexico's rural (i.e., indigenous) states remained stagnant and virtually non-existent.⁵³

In all, the demographic realities of JCFM membership, when properly contextualized within the failures of Catholic mass politics, raise a number of pivotal questions that historians need to answer in order to understand the shortcomings of this social and religious movement. Most notably, the JCFM's inability to mobilize educators and reach indigenous communities in the southern countryside—despite its emphasis on peasant re-education—forces scholars to think critically about *why* upper-class women insisted in pursuing a racially charged agenda incapable of rivaling Cárdenas's proximity to "the people." As I suggested earlier, their motivation becomes more evident once historians treat the notion of a national moralization campaign as a useful exercise in racial fantasy rather than a realistic or tangible undertaking. The idea of Hispanizing the nation, in other words, should be thought of as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Subsequently, this perspective reveals that upper-class católicas waged a war against religious impurity and peasants' purported radicalization to assert their own power as religious subjects and racial saviors. Thus, the allure of indigenous re-education emanated from its ability to empower elite women at the expense of campesina counterparts,

⁵³ FXC. Archivo ACM 5.3. Sección 5: "Junta Central JCFM," Serie 11: "Movimiento Nacional de Campesinas." "Especialización de Campesinas: Hablan lenguas indígenas."

ultimately enabling upper-class activists to develop a sense of whiteness that placed them on equal footing with Catholic missionaries and Spanish conquerors as the agents of “civilization.”

Conclusions

Despite its roots in the tenets of Catholic social action, the corporatist model of mass politics really expanded under the Cárdenas administration given the president’s ability to consolidate one-party rule and promote working-class actors’ investment in government. As the power of national syndicates grew under the cardenista state, the Mexican Church pursued contradictory goals in an effort to keep up with the president’s populist agenda and oppose his reinvigorated push for secular education. In response to Cárdenas’s appeal among the masses, JCFM activists identified religious unity and ideological alignment with established Church doctrine as the basis for spiritually meaningful forms of Catholic mass action. As a result, the Church turned to Mexican Catholic Action as the chief institutional platform from which to promote educational uniformity and galvanize all sectors of national society in defense of a common faith. Still, corporatist politics also required that the ACM establish a model of political organization wherein messages of religious restoration could be adapted to the needs of specific class groups across demographically diverse regions of the country. Suspicious of campesinas’ popular religiosity and increasing politization, JCFM activists negated their very efforts to mobilize Catholics *en masse* by arguing for the permanence of social hierarchy and rejecting the possibility of indigenous peasants’ economic empowerment (i.e., “social equilibrium”).

In all, the limits of Mexican Catholic Action's unique brand of mass politics—Hispanist, authoritarian, urban and elite-driven—can and should be attributed to two interconnected dynamics. These processes are important to consider not only to understand Catholic Action's limitations during its first decade of existence, but to also delineate the broader trajectory of Mexican Church-state relations and the role played by both factions' eventual alignment in the consolidation of authoritarian rule. First, the JCFM's moralization campaigns failed to attract working-class support largely because of their overt reliance on anti-indigenous racism and their leveraging of religious discourses to stifle campesinos' economic mobility. Consequently, right-wing groups like the Unión Nacional Sinarquista proved more successful in appealing to peasant interests, even as the UNS's embrace of working-class private property ownership antagonized both the state and the institutional Church at the same time. Second, upper-class activists' contempt for campesino counterparts reveals that the true aim beneath the ACM's rural re-education campaigns was not to forge a collective sense of Catholic solidarity between elite and peasant actors. Rather, the JCFM used its campaigns to fashion an immoral indigenous "Other" against which Mexico City's white upper-classes could continue to measure their perceived moral (and racial) "superiority." Thus, the ACM's model of mass politics failed not only as a result of its insularity, but also because its emphasis on moral uplift as a solution to material inequality provided no viable political outlets for a rural *campesinado* already moved to political action by the state. While the cardenista government attempted to regulate material political processes and consolidate peasant activism within state channels—or at least create the impression of doing so—Catholic Action promoted images of politically docile and culturally assimilated (i.e., Hispanized) campesinos.

In advocating for peasant conformity in the face of economic exploitation, the ACM's lay activists had abandoned the tenets of Catholic social doctrine and adopted anti-communist discourses to push for the bolstering of class and racial hierarchies throughout society. This enabled the Cárdenas and Ávila Camacho administrations to position themselves as allies of the institutional Church and take advantage of upper-class prejudices as the federal government waged war on indigenous "fanaticism" in the rural countryside.⁵⁴ Ultimately, the anxieties of Mexico's Church-state conflict birthed a Cold War politics wherein both factions attempted to suppress dissent and consolidate institutional power under the pretext of defeating radical "foreign" ideologies—namely, communism and "Protestantism." Even as these dynamics varied across specific local contexts, the period between the late 1930s and mid-1940s witnessed a national convergence between Church and state that dealt a significant blow to urban elites' decades-long efforts to galvanize a viable counterrevolution.

⁵⁴ As recent historiography begins to explore how the Mexican state mobilized military resources to quell peasant guerrillas in the countryside during this time period, the role of the Catholic Church in these violent processes of state formation and authoritarian rule remains relatively understudied. Still, Ben Fallaw's recent work (cited above) begins to explore the Church's role in state formation efforts across the peasant countryside. Furthermore, Gema Kloppe-Santamaría's *In the Vortex of Violence: Lynching, Extra Legal Justice, and the State in Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (University of California Press 2020) offers a deep dive into the complex triangular relationship between religious violence, the institutional Church, and cardenismo.

PART III

PART III: THE ACCOMMODATIONIST PHASE, 1938-1946
(Chapter 6 and Epilogue)

Printed in December 1937, the eleventh monthly issue of *Acción Femenina* magazine embraced a new kind of Catholicism that seemed to deviate from Catholic Action's commitment to institutional religion and its previous advancement of spiritual community over the individual. As the official publication of the Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana (UFCM), the women's magazine embraced popular sainthood and personal spirituality. Printed on the back of the magazine, an advertisement by La Buena Prensa Jesuit press listed the names of its most recent titles available for purchase. That month, it announced the publication of two different biographies about widely known "saints," in addition to three "guidebooks" written to impart individual readers with religious knowledge.

Specifically, La Buena Prensa branded *La Vida del Padre Pro* as "a book that every Mexican Catholic ought to know." At the same time, it advertised Antonio Dragón's new biography of María de la Luz Camacho as the story of "Catholic Action's first martyr." A 27-year-old religious educator, Camacho had been a member of the JCFM and slain just outside the parish of St. John the Baptist in Mexico City's middle-class Coyoacán neighborhood. She was the victim of a left-wing militant group known as the "Red Shirts," and her death had pushed President Cárdenas to exile prominent members of his cabinet for their suspected involvement in orchestrating the attack on the church.

Camacho was revered by the Buena Prensa as a model socia and *una apóstol de nuestros días*. The simultaneous appearance of her and Pro's biographies on the pages of *Acción Femenina* revealed that Catholic Action had grown more flexible toward

popular martyrdom and folk religion. At the same time, Camacho's veneration spoke to UFCM's new embrace of the individual woman. This was a recurring theme in the Buena Prensa's new book series, which advertised two manuals designed to "teach" women about the sacrament of Communion, along with a spiritual guidebook intended to show readers "how Christ lives in each of us, and how we each live in Him."

Beyond the advertisements section, the contents of the magazine spoke to a new kind of religious experience that deviated from the JCFM's prior emphasis on the physical parish. *Acción Femenina* embraced a "do-it-yourself" attitude and regularly published at least two articles that outlined the structure of the mass or explained the meaning of the sacraments for middle-class homemakers. Aside from these and other articles on cooking and childrearing, *Acción Femenina* featured re-printed children's stories and sections written specifically for domestic workers. Light, portable, and easy to share between a woman and child (or a woman and her domestic *sirvienta*), the magazine was a religious text that had been specially designed for the home. In between recipes, it imparted to the reader knowledge about God and faith. It addressed domestic workers directly and imbued the middle-class living room with spiritual meaning.

Between 1938 and 1946, *Acción Femenina*'s embrace of individualism reflected larger currents within Mexican Catholicism. Unlike the JCFM's prior advancement of individual subjugation, the UFCM now preached personal empowerment for middle- and working-class women. This seeming "Protestantization" of Catholicism responded to decades of U.S. missionary activity. At the same time, the magazine's nod to popular sainthood spoke to *socias*' emerging sense of compromise with popular religious practices.

Similarly, the state now promoted individualist models of secular education and even amended the 1917 Constitution to allow for “democratic and just” moral instruction. Elected to the presidency in 1940, Manuel Ávila Camacho preached “gradual Revolution,” and worked with members of the Church to protect public morality and dismantle militant right-wing groups—among them, the influential Unión Nacional Sinarquista. Throughout the Mexican Cold War, the convergence of Church and state would enable the repression of working-class actors despite both sides’ outwardly “democratic” discourses. Originating in the late 1930s, this period of compromise and accommodation was galvanized by changes in Church leadership and the new president’s desire to repudiate fascism while turning toward the United States during the Second World War.

Throughout these processes, race remained an organizing principle behind Church and state efforts to integrate individual “creyentes”—as citizens *and* believers—into the fold of gradually converging institutions. Both sides reinforced racial paternalism and engaged in educational initiatives designed to promote indigenous people’s personal uplift *within* authoritarian frameworks. For the state, this meant using Spanish-language education campaigns to produce “modern” citizens who would embrace the Mexican nation-state over ancestral forms of collective mobilization. For Catholic women, it meant empowering indigenous and mixed-race domestic workers for the purposes of quelling dissent and bolstering homemakers’ claims to whiteness.

And yet by the early-to-mid 1940s, this Church-state consolidation produced new challenges and methods of resistance among student youth. Mexico had become an industrial and middle-class nation, and the state now imported its strategies of repression

from the countryside to the college campus. As young women entered the nation's university system, the JCFM engaged in new conversations about the role of religion in the public sphere. The fear of communism endured and youth activists challenged secular education in new ways.

Mexico's Church-state conflict had now given way to Cold War anxieties around the specter of youth, women, and workers' radicalization. While the state strengthened its covert apparatus to combat new challenges, Catholic youth rebelled against the nation's emerging Church-state order. Still, those who remained averse to religious militancy turned toward new platforms to voice their opposition. Under the weight of institutional consolidation, the Counterrevolution found ways to endure.

Chapter 6: The Embers of Counterrevolution, Revolutionary Compromise and Catholic Individualism, 1938-1946

In the spring of 1945, lay activist Esther Velázquez presented an “urgent” report for the leaders of Catholic Action (ACM) detailing the “problem, defects, and moral needs” of indigenous working-class women. Published fifteen years after the ACM’s founding, the study lamented the organization’s shortcomings on the issue of education and identified “radicalism” as the most pressing threat to peasants, industrial workers, and domestic employees. A member of the Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana (UFCM), Velázquez attributed female workers’ “precarious social condition” to their alleged ignorance and immorality. Specifically, she argued that indigenous women’s alienation from the Church contributed to feelings of “deep personal turmoil,” which made them inherently prone to political extremism and sexual impropriety.¹

As a solution to this perceived moral crisis, Velázquez emphasized the need to amend Catholic Action’s failed spiritual instruction campaigns and establish more rural schools and women’s educational centers. She also called on middle-class homemakers to transform their homes into places of spiritual learning for their children and domestic workers. Still, even as Velázquez made the case for extending the ACM’s educational initiatives, her analysis of the nation’s “principal moral problems” differed from previous studies of its kind. Although the Church had previously used racial tropes to galvanize lay activists around the threat of working-class radicalization, Velázquez’s study now

¹ FXC. Archivo Acción Católica Mexicana (ACM). Sección 5: "Junta Central JCFM," Serie 11: Comisión de Especializaciones, Sub-Serie 1: “Movimientos/Delegación de Campesinas, 1939-1945, 1952-53.” Esther Velázquez, “Breve Estudio Sobre los Principales Problemas, Necesidades Morales y Físicas, Defectos, etc. de las Campesinas, Obreras y Empleadas.” 20 April, 1945.

portrayed society's moral turmoil as stemming not from external threats, but from individual struggles against temptation.²

For the first time in three decades, members of Catholic Action refrained from linking the actions of the federal government to the specter of communism or condemning influence of "North American Protestant ideology." Instead, the report identified the nation's perceived social crisis as a consequence of spiritual conflict emanating from *within* indigenous workers themselves. Socias underscored the importance of personal empowerment on the part of middle-class educators *and* the working-class actors they purported to "save." Contrary to the ACM's previous anti-individualist discourses, Velázquez called for spiritual regeneration at the personal level and suggested that women from all sectors of society could learn piety and improve their faith through education.

Prior to the release of Velázquez's report, the UFCM had used the pages of *Acción Femenina* magazine to develop a unique brand of Catholic individualism that sought to slow the spread of "North American" Protestant influence among workers. As historian Kathleen M. McIntyre demonstrates, the rise of indigenous Protestant conversions threatened longstanding Church-state power structures by fueling discussions of local autonomy and personal salvation. In response, the UFCM underscored the importance of individual faith and promoted new democratic visions of saintliness that elevated the private sphere as both a space for religious instruction and a site of deep spiritual meaning. Despite these new adaptations, however, *Acción Femenina* defended the Church's

² Ibid.

centrality and emphasized the need for working-class women to participate in the sacraments and remain loyal to the priesthood.³

Aside from this new approach toward Protestantism, the absence of the federal government in Velázquez's report attested to the gradual easing of tensions between Mexican Church and state. By 1945, both factions effectively worked together to suppress the threat of working-class radicalism and establish what historian Laura Pérez Rosales calls "a new national morality" among youth, labor, and women. On the one hand, this alignment had been facilitated by President Lázaro Cárdenas's political moderation, his preference for compromise over militancy, and his personal friendship with Luis María Martínez, the new Archbishop of Mexico after 1937. On the other, Martínez's disdain for religious violence, coupled with his conciliatory approach toward the federal government, actively dissuaded right-wing organizations from seeking the Church's institutional backing in their lingering struggle against the state.⁴

By 1940, the presidential election between Generals Juan Andreu Almazán and Manuel Ávila Camacho revealed the extent to which religious militants and Catholic

³ See Kathleen M. McIntyre (2019). This chapter complicates historians' understanding of Catholic-Protestant conflict by revealing the extent to which this intertwined relationship was also shaped by a desire for negotiation and political compromise. This raises an important counterpoint to recent historiography, which prioritizes the views of prominent institutional actors and often reproduces linear notions of binary confrontation that do not question the extent to which these perspectives actually reflected realities on the ground. For instance, historian Laura Pérez Rosales relies extensively on primary documents written by, for, and about Archbishop Martínez to argue that Catholics continued to perceive Protestantism as "the enemy and antipode of national identity" well into the 1950s. Similarly, McIntyre's analysis of religious "competition" between Catholic priests and Protestant missionaries denies proponents of either religion the possibility for adaptation and assumes the permanence of irreconcilable tensions between "competing conceptualizations of tradition and ritual." Neither of these interpretations leaves room for a nuanced understanding of dialogue and negotiation between the two sides. As a result, historians risk overlooking the subtle transformations within Catholicism that allowed for a new embrace of the individual. See Laura Pérez Rosales, *El final de la intransigencia mutua: Luis María Martínez y el Estado mexicano* (Bonilla Artigas, 2020), p. 15.

⁴ Pérez Rosales (2020), pp. 103-04.

institutionalists swayed policy debates and even played a role in legitimizing state rule. As Ávila Camacho ascended to the Mexican presidency, he spoke of a “gradual Revolution” that guaranteed religious freedom, civilian rule, and the “democratic and just moral instruction... of the individual citizen.” The new president’s democratic rhetoric was intended to appease disgruntled Catholics and strengthen Mexico’s strained relationship with the United States. Throughout his presidency, Ávila Camacho’s economic and foreign policies remained closely in line with U.S. interests and culminated in Mexico’s entry into World War II as part of the Allies. With regard to religious violence, the Ávila Camacho administration, the Church, and the U.S. government all shared a vested interest in suppressing Catholic militants in the Unión Nacional Sinarquista (UNS), a transnational right-wing organization. As the president moved to topple UNS leaders in 1944, he cemented the Mexican state’s triangular relationship with Church leaders and the international private sector, thereby inaugurating a new era of institutional consolidation against popular resistance—a hallmark of the Mexican Cold War.⁵

As part of these efforts, Ávila Camacho launched the *Campaña Nacional de Alfabetización* (CNA) to suppress peasants’ collective mobilization in favor of individualized models of labor and instruction. Through Spanish-language education, the CNA strived to “mold” indigenous communities into “modern” citizens.⁶ Thus, between 1938 and 1946, Church and state pragmatists coalesced around a racially charged individualism that not only furthered their own alignment, but also facilitated an important

⁵ On the Ávila Camacho administration and its relationship to the Mexican Revolution, see Alan Knight, “The End of the Mexican Revolution? From Cárdenas to Ávila Camacho, 1937-1941,” in Gillingham and Smith, eds., (2014).

⁶ Julieta Vivar Payas, “El Lugar del Indígena en la Política Mexicana de Alfabetización: Un análisis crítico de las Cartillas de Alfabetización para Indígenas Monolingües (1944-1949),” Master’s Thesis (Universidad de Chile, 2012), p. 44.

dialogue with the U.S. government and Protestant religious currents. For Mexican católicas, the language of personal empowerment also became a means to obtain a symbolic whiteness grounded in racial paternalism and perceptions of virtue.

Still, even as Church and state embraced democratic discourses, their adoption of individualism also bolstered each faction's authoritarian tendencies. Both sides elevated the individual as both citizen and religious subject, but only insofar as they adhered to institutional authority and refrained from dissent. By prioritizing conformity to Church institutions aligned with the state, notions of Catholic individualism gradually subdued opposition to the government and stamped out the fire of counterrevolution. Even if the spirit of rebellion survived among peasant militants and middle-class students, the loss of institutional support reduced the once formidable movement to embers.

Ávila Camacho and Revolutionary Compromise

As President Lázaro Cárdenas neared the end of his six-year term (1934-1940), the nation's political stability appeared to hang in the balance for the first time in over a decade. Although the Cárdenas *sexenio* had witnessed a strengthening of the nation's state apparatus, the politics of corporatism—or the organization of society into corporate interest groups with shared class interests—quickly approached its limits. Despite the president's efforts to mobilize the masses and unify the country, Mexican society had grown ideologically polarized and increasingly divided along class lines. As war erupted throughout Europe in 1939, Mexicans of all political stripes looked to nation-building projects implemented across fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, Francoist Spain, and the communist Soviet Union with both fear and admiration.⁷

⁷ For more on corporatism, state formation, and *cardenismo*, see Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

Navigating turbulent waters at home and abroad, Cárdenas rejected ideological extremes. Instead, the president engaged in negotiations with his domestic opponents and maneuvered precarious relationships with the Axis Powers and Western Allies. However, even as Cárdenas moved to consolidate state rule and bolster Mexico's standing in the world, everyday Mexicans grappling with economic crisis and social unrest grew dissatisfied with the *cardenista* politics of compromise. As Joseph and Buchenau document, Cárdenas's tendency toward moderation and "cooperation with those who would otherwise have been inveterate enemies" had failed to placate those on his political left and right.⁸

As a result, fascist paramilitary groups like General Nicolás Rodríguez's *camisas doradas* channeled xenophobia and anti-communism in their unsuccessful efforts to overthrow the president in 1936. Similarly, as Cárdenas moved to nationalize the oil industry in 1938, General Saturnino Cedillo staged a short-lived military rebellion from the state of San Luis Potosí, effectively allying himself with foreign oil companies and Nazi sympathisers before his defeat at the hands of the federal army. On the other side of the political divide, communists decried Cárdenas's crackdown on labor strikes, his abandonment of socialist education, and his gradual slowing of land redistribution to peasants in the countryside. Moreover, the president's tenuous alliances with conservative interests and ruthless political operatives at the grassroots earned him the enmity of former allies, even if his pivoting toward the political center prevented more explosive forms of opposition from religious militants and right-wing extremists.⁹

⁸ Joseph and Buchenau (2013), p. 135.

⁹ Ibid., p. 136.

Held during the waning phase of *cardenismo*, the presidential election of 1940 pitted Cárdenas's former Secretary of National Defense, General Manuel Ávila Camacho, against Juan Andreu Almazán, an investor, business owner, and fellow revolutionary general who had become one of the country's wealthiest citizens during the Cárdenas sexenio. Similar to the presidential contest between Pascual Ortiz Rubio and José Vasconcelos in 1929, the 1940 election was characterized by intimidation and hyperbolic rhetoric from both sides of the partisan divide. Despite these tensions, however, Ávila Camacho's victory marked a pivotal moment of evolution for Mexican politics and a decisive final step in the solidification of one-party rule. Although both candidates accused each other of ideological extremism, their relatively conservative political positions reflected the gradual, albeit growing alignment between the Mexican state, private business interests, and the Catholic Church.

Consequently, the 1940 election brought these entanglements to the fore of national politics. Drawing support from a diverse coalition of peasant agrarians, private business interests, labor unions, and conservative religious militants, General Almazán fittingly personified the complex and circuitous trajectories of those in Mexico's political establishment. Throughout the Mexican Revolution, Almazán's opposition to Carranza's Constitutionalist Army had driven him toward a series of opportunistic and contradictory military maneuvers. An intermittent ally of quarreling revolutionary factions led by Francisco I. Madero (1910-1911), Emiliano Zapata (1911-13, 1914-16), and Álvaro Obregón (1919), he also commanded militias on the side of counterrevolutionary forces under the direction of Generals Victoriano Huerta (1913-14) and Félix Díaz (1916-18). Almazán was subsequently promoted to the rank of Division General during the Obregón

presidency. As the *jefe de operaciones militares* in the northern state of Nuevo Leon, he invested in real estate and began to build a small fortune as the director of a contracting firm assigned to oversee public works projects. There, Almazán's wealth grew exponentially as he exited the army and served as Secretary of Communications and Public Works in the Ortiz Rubio administration. By the end of the Cárdenas sexenio, his holdings in the silver industry had made him one of the richest people in Mexico.¹⁰

Nevertheless, Almazán took to the campaign trail and decried cardenista reforms for hindering private enterprise despite the president's refusal to impose major regulations on Mexican industrialists. Consequently, he proclaimed himself an ally of the nation's business elite and the champion of middle- and upper-class interests. At the same time, however, Almazán took advantage of the president's declining popularity among workers and called for an end to state-controlled labor unions. He appealed to *cardenistas* dissatisfied with Ávila Camacho's nomination and even sought the backing of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt.¹¹

One year prior to the election, Almazán formed the *Partido Revolucionario de Unificación Nacional* (PRUN) to unify a fragile anti- Cárdenas coalition that brought together a constellation of partisan militants with opposing ideologies, competing class interests, and seemingly incompatible political projects. Founded in July 1939, the PRUN was rife with internal contradictions but managed to establish a temporary "détente" between three influential, yet openly hostile political entities—namely, the socialist

¹⁰ On Almazán's military career, see John Womack, *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (New York City: Vintage Books, 1968). For a trajectory of Almazán's civil and military service, see Doralicia Carmona Dávila, "Manuel Ávila Camacho" in *Memoria Política de México* [Online] (Edición Perenne, 2021). URL: <https://www.memoriapoliticademexico.org/Biografias/ACM97.html>. Accessed 2 July 2021. ISBN 970-95193. See also, Joseph and Buchenau, pp. 137-138.

¹¹ Carmona Dávila, "Manuel Ávila Camacho" (2021). Joseph and Buchenau (2013), pp. 137-138.

Partido Nacional Agrarista (PNA), the Mexican Labor Party (PLM), and the conservative *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN). On the issue of land reform, Almazán vowed to safeguard peasants' right to private *and* collective property ownership. This earned him a formal endorsement from socialists in the PNA and the unofficial backing of anti-communist militants in the Unión Nacional Sinarquista. With regard to labor, the PRUN supported workers' strikes and called for unions' autonomy from Cárdenas's Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM). Formed by the president in 1936, the CTM was the state's chief labor syndicate and a "purified" version of the Labor Party's Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM)—the bulwark of Calles's anti-Catholic presidency. Consequently, Almazán's rejection of cardenismo won him the approval of the PAN's Catholic union leaders and prominent callistas in the PLM. Although both parties held diametrically opposed visions for the future of Mexican labor and its relationship to the Church, their opposition to the CTM drove them to unite their efforts behind Almazán's candidacy.¹²

Contrary to Cárdenas's populist commitment to the nation's urban and rural workers, Almazán swore to protect the investor class and undo federal regulations hindering local and regional commerce. Ironically, however, many of the land and labor laws Almazán opposed actually protected the agrarian and working-class interests that the PRUN claimed to represent. Almazán side-stepped these tensions by positioning himself as a federalist in support of local self-rule. He denounced Cárdenas's expanding corporatist

¹² Carmona Dávila, "Manuel Ávila Camacho" (2021).

apparatus for infringing upon states' rights and promised to halt the federal government's centralization of power, thereby seeking to "purify" Mexico's democracy of corruption.¹³

Lastly, with regard to religion and Church-state relations, Almazán gained the PAN's endorsement by announcing his support for religious education and "liberty of conscience." Despite his military service in previous anti-clerical administrations—particularly under Presidents Obregón, Calles, and Ortiz Rubio—Almazán now declared himself a defender of religious freedom and denounced the secular reforms backed by Cárdenas and his predecessors. A staunch anti-communist, Almazán branded cardenismo as a "*comunazi*" political movement given its authoritarian tendencies and purported eradication of faith. By contrast, he positioned himself as a proponent of liberal democracy and progressive labor politics, though his views on religious freedom and private enterprise also appealed to the PAN's pro-business interests and Catholic *sinarquistas* with a penchant for fascist ideologies.¹⁴

Despite the abundance of ideological tensions within the PRUN, Almazán's candidacy gathered enough support from conservatives to sway Cárdenas's selection of a successor. Exercising pragmatism under pressure, the president refrained from endorsing his mentor, Francisco J. Múgica, for the party nomination.¹⁵ A proponent of the continued expropriation of private landholdings and foreign-owned properties, Múgica was perceived as a "radical" who would move presidential policy toward Cárdenas's political left. As a

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. Joseph and Buchenau (2013), pp. 137-138.

¹⁵ In an interesting coincidence, Múgica served as Cárdenas's own Secretary of Communications and Public Works for nearly five years, from 1935 through 1940. This was the same cabinet post held by Almazán roughly a decade earlier, in 1930-32, which speaks to the relative influence and power of this particular position.

result, the president prompted Múgica to withdraw his candidacy and threw his support behind Manuel Ávila Camacho, a conservative middle-class general from the state of Puebla.¹⁶

According to Joseph and Buchenau, Cárdenas's decision to formally back Ávila Camacho was largely motivated by the fear that an Almazán victory over Múgica—or a post-defeat insurrection with formidable backing from right-wing militants—would effectively “unravel the political stability that... Cárdenas [and his predecessors] had assiduously built over the preceding twenty years.” As a result, the president took a step further in the consolidation of one-party rule by prioritizing the survival of the nation's political system over his own personal or legislative agenda. Still, by the mid-1960s, the venerated Mexican intellectual, Daniel Cosío Villegas, lamented Ávila Camacho's nomination as the “end” of the Mexican Revolution. In a series of essays criticizing the Revolution's institutional rigidity, he branded Ávila Camacho's presidency as a “regressive” *cambio de rumbo* and dismissed conservatives as lacking in “popular spirit” and preparation to govern.¹⁷

Drawing from Cosío Villegas, historian Alan Knight has recently re-examined the nature and causes of the “end” of the Revolution. He differs slightly from Cosío Villegas and holds that the final years of the Cárdenas presidency witnessed a crucial downturn for progressive politics stemming from the fragmentation of the cardenista coalition, the stalling of important social and economic reforms, and the rise of right-wing movements

¹⁶ Carmona Dávila, “Manuel Ávila Camacho” (2021). Joseph and Buchenau (2013), p. 138.

¹⁷ Joseph and Buchenau (2013), p. 138. See also, Daniel Cosío Villegas, “Mexico's Crisis,” *Extremos de América* (1964), Américo Paredes trans. In Joseph and Henderson, eds., (2002), pp. 470-82; and Cosío Villegas, *Ensayos y notas* (2 vols.) (Editorial Hermes, 1966), vol. I, p. 113.

on the national stage—namely, the formation of the UNS in 1937 and the founding of the PAN in 1938. As a result, Knight calls on scholars of Mexican politics to avoid the type of sexennial histories strictly demarcated by presidential administrations. He argues, instead, that the waning of the Revolution actually occurred gradually, following the apex of nationalist reforms in 1937-1938 and beginning several years prior to Ávila Camacho's election to the presidency.¹⁸

Nevertheless, Knight's emphasis on the government's "anticlerical Jacobinism" as a marker of the Revolution's relative strength or weakness remains misleading. By relying on linear and monolithic notions of "official anticlericalism" to advance his arguments, Knight's view assumes a false dichotomy in Church-state relations that erases crucial points of dialogue, alignment, and negotiation between the Catholic Church and the Mexican state. The Revolution, in other words, was not always—and not everywhere—a strictly anti-clerical enterprise. In fact, recent scholarship reveals crucial processes of cooperation between Mexican Church and state wherein both sides enabled each other's survival and nurtured the co-existence of their overlapping institutional hegemonies.¹⁹

Thus, rather than dismissing the Ávila Camacho sexenio as regressive, reactionary, or anti-Revolutionary, the period between 1940 and 1946 should be re-interpreted as a necessary moment of adaptation to the formidable challenges to state rule posed by a highly polarized society. As the compromise candidate representing Cárdenas's Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM), Ávila Camacho assumed office at a time when Mexico

¹⁸ Alan Knight, "The End of the Mexican Revolution?" p. 48. See also Enrique Krauze, *La Presidencia Imperial: Ascenso y caída del sistema político mexicano, 1940-1996* (México, D.F.: Tusquets Editores, 2009), p. 33. On the causes behind the "end" of the Mexican Revolution, see Knight, "The End of the Mexican Revolution?" pp. 50, 62-63.

¹⁹ See Fallaw (2012); Pérez Rosales (2020); Curley (2018), and Butler, ed., (2007).

became an increasingly urban, middle-class Catholic nation grappling with the cultural, political, and economic repercussions of war-time industrialization and a galvanizing global Cold War. Whereas figures like Almazán capitalized on social divisions, Ávila Camacho called for national unity and effectively placated prominent Catholic lay groups. Blurring the lines between religion and “Revolution,” he succeeded in growing the power of the state and stifling political dissent despite the strength of his opponents.

Unlike Almazán’s circuitous military career, Ávila Camacho had built his career as a loyal subordinate to Generals Calles, Cárdenas, and Obregon during the armed phase of the Revolution. Specifically, he had led military campaigns in his native state of Puebla and worked with then-Governor Calles to “pacify”—i.e., suppress—indigenous Yaqui rebellions in the northwestern state of Sonora. During Adolfo de la Huerta’s rebellion in 1923-24, Ávila Camacho commanded forces under Cárdenas’s orders and fought to defend the Obregón-Calles presidential faction in the state of Michoacán. Ten years later, President Cárdenas rewarded his loyalty by assigning him top posts in the Mexican Secretariat of National Defense—a crucial appointment at a time when right-wing groups actively plotted against the president and anti-Catholic violence engulfed the southern state of Tabasco.²⁰

Despite his civil and military service under anti-clerical presidents, Ávila Camacho never supported the expansion of state power at the expense of the Church’s autonomy or individual religious freedom. In fact, throughout his tenure as general during the Cristero Rebellion of 1926-29, he decried the violence stemming from the Church-state conflict and refused to execute Catholic rebels captured by federal forces. Stationed in the pro-Catholic

²⁰ Carmona Dávila, “Manuel Ávila Camacho” (2021).

states of Colima and Jalisco, he married into a prominent local family and established a temporary peace with cristero militants. These decisions would later earn him the affectionate nickname of *el presidente caballero*, or “the gentleman president,” among his Catholic supporters.²¹

As the PNR’s compromise candidate, Ávila Camacho argued for the need to end the government’s anticlerical streak while imbuing Revolutionary discourses with religious tropes and conservative ideology. Moreover, he embraced a new *política de comprensión*, which called on citizens to respect civic institutions and choose “democratic persuasion” over military upheaval. In an effort to curb the wave of political violence gripping the nation, Ávila Camacho used the campaign trail to preach benevolence, sympathy, and respect for human life. He channeled liberal discourses once used by Plutarco Elías Calles’s Catholic opponents and encouraged tolerance and solidarity around the common principle of individual freedom. Subsequently, he advocated for the strict separation of the nation’s public and private spheres in matters of family life and religious education. Even as he attested to the importance of the state’s secular education in molding an informed citizenry, he defended the right of individual families to determine the nature of their children’s moral upbringing and spiritual instruction.²²

On the topic of labor relations, Ávila Camacho preached moderation and became the first and only one of Mexico’s Revolutionary generals to invoke the tenets of Catholic social doctrine in his approach to economic disparity. Contrary to the Calles and Cárdenas administrations’ discourses of proletarian empowerment, Ávila Camacho spoke of a

²¹ Ibid. See also, Joseph and Buchenau (2013), p. 144.

²² Carmona Dávila, “Manuel Ávila Camacho” (2021).

national “common good” that superseded class interests and partisan ambitions. While campaigning in the city of Chihuahua, he called on the Mexican business community to envision itself as a co-creator of national prosperity whose success depended not on the exploitation of labor, but on the fraternal bonds forged between workers and captains of industry. The resurgence of the *patria*, he claimed, would only emerge from a unique form of interclass collaboration motivated by a “new social sentiment” concerned with the whole public’s general welfare.²³

Still, unlike his Revolutionary predecessors or Catholic social doctrinarians, Ávila Camacho embraced capitalism unequivocally. An ally of Puebla’s business elite, he promoted workers’ empowerment within Mexico’s consumer economy and identified “free enterprise” and private property ownership as the engines of national prosperity. Looking to reassure a distrustful public, Ávila Camacho reiterated the absurdity of Almazán’s false equivalence between Soviet communism and cardenismo. Consequently, he softened the image and discourses of the Revolution from violent class struggle to benevolent collective enterprise. Throughout the campaign, Ávila Camacho reinforced his commitment to liberal democracy and called for a government for all citizens. He positioned himself as an ally of the United States and branded Almazán as a right-wing “fascist” bent on furthering the oppression of the working class.²⁴

In the spirit of trilateral compromise between Church, state, and the private sector, Ávila Camacho claimed that the nation’s future would be guided by the “tempering of

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid. For more on U.S. business interests and their considerable influence on Puebla’s local politics—specifically, the Ávila Camacho political dynasty—see Andrew Paxman, *En busca del señor Jenkins: Dinero, poder y gringofobia en México* (Mexico City: CIDE/Debate, 2016). See also, Joseph and Buchenau (2013), p. 138.

political attitudes,” “generous ideals,” and the “gradual” implementation of his administration’s legislative agenda. Although he held that the “people’s liberation” could not be deterred, he also argued that the Revolution should be implemented in the spirit of national unity and through democratic channels. As a political strategy, Ávila Camacho’s moderate rhetoric allowed him to publicly distance himself from his predecessor’s authoritarian tendencies, even if only superficially and temporarily. He acknowledged that cardenismo had alienated key sectors of the country and sought to build a new coalition that balanced progressive reform with conservative interests.²⁵



Image 6.1: Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ávila Camacho in Monterrey (1943).
Source: National Archives and Records Administration

Ironically, scholars now agree that the 1940 election was not entirely democratic and probably fraudulent given the lopsided electoral margin in Ávila Camacho’s favor.

²⁵ Carmona Dávila, “Manuel Ávila Camacho” (2021).

According to the official results, nearly 95 per cent of the vote went to the PRM while Almazán garnered most of the remaining ballots. As the federal army engaged in a few isolated skirmishes with disgruntled *almazanistas*, Almazán himself fled to the United States but soon returned to Mexico City and formally relinquished his political aspirations. Despite a heated campaign season and decades of political violence, the most polarizing election since the Revolution ended with a whimper.²⁶

In spite of their differences, the similarities between Almazán and Ávila Camacho's respective ideological positions reveal the degree to which the political ground had shifted during the Cárdenas sexenio. Most notably, both candidates campaigned on the promise of reinvigorating liberal democracy while actively placating the president's conservative opponents at the expense of progressive and socialist reforms championed by figures like Múgica. As both sides debated the role of the federal government in local politics and the national economy, each candidate sought the backing of industrial elites and regional business interests. Neither of the candidates challenged global capitalism or questioned the benefits of Mexico's burgeoning consumer economy. Instead, both called for a closer relationship with the United States and the privatization of land and labor.

On the issues of religion and Church-state relations, both Almazán and Ávila Camacho viewed anti-clericalism as the divisive, outdated, and unsustainable project of previous administrations. As a result, the two candidates openly supported religious education while recognizing the importance of appealing to groups like the PAN and the UNS. In response to prominent *sinarquistas*' support for Almazán, Ávila Camacho's chief of staff (and presidential successor), Miguel Alemán Valdés, engaged in a series of

²⁶ Ibid. See also, Joseph and Buchenau (2013), p. 138.

clandestine negotiations with UNS leaders to prevent the organization from formally endorsing the PRUN. Similarly, Alemán Valdés also traveled to Nuevo León and dissuaded the PAN's northern industrialists from coalescing around their fellow *empresario*.²⁷

By the fall of 1940, President-elect Ávila Camacho proclaimed himself a firm “believer,” or *creyente*, in the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. One month prior to his inauguration, he delivered this public announcement as part of the PRM's broader efforts to mitigate conservative frustration following Almazán's defeat. In response, the Mexican press criticized the move as disingenuous and published a myriad of political cartoons mocking anti-clerical *políticos* who now professed an appreciation for their faith. According to *TIME* magazine, even the popular comedian Cantinflas built a skit around a gun-toting politician who traded his pistol for a rosary. He quipped, at one point, that *políticos* were now “buying holy water instead of tequila!”²⁸

Notwithstanding public skepticism, the president-elect's declaration of faith caught the attention of Mexican Archbishop Luis María Martínez, who described the remarks as sincere, honorable, and “in line with national sentiment.” As Cárdenas's personal friend, Archbishop Martínez had taken a conciliatory approach to Church-state relations and gradually coaxed the former president into lifting Calles-era restrictions on public worship. In spite of his efforts, however, the government continued to ban Catholic seminaries and actively regulate the appointment of priests. Still, while addressing the National Catholic Welfare Council just days before Ávila Camacho's inauguration, Martínez vowed to

²⁷ Carmona Dávila, “Manuel Ávila Camacho” (2021).

²⁸ “Religion: I Am a Believer” *TIME* (1940). For more on the press and the election of 1940, see Silvia González Marín, *Prensa y poder político: la elección presidencial de 1940 en la prensa mexicana* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI/UNAM, 2006).

cooperate with the incoming administration in “fortifying and perfecting” the progress made on the issue of religious liberty.²⁹

In Martínez’s view, Cárdenas’s support of Ávila Camacho revealed the extent to which the Mexican government had now become amenable, at the very least, to the nation’s conservative religious interests. As Ávila Camacho assumed office in December 1940, the Mexican “Revolution” continued to expand its political tent by integrating the private sector and the established Church into the nation’s maturing state apparatus. Furthermore, the 1940 election exposed the degree to which right-wing militants and Catholic institutionalists played a role in vindicating presidential candidates and legitimizing state rule. This was evidenced by Martínez’s public activism and Alemán’s efforts to subdue the *sinarquistas*.

As a result, Mexico’s Catholic lay activists realized their own stake in state projects and gradually relinquished their hostility toward the government in favor of alignment and cooperation. Although prior administrations had privately courted global business interests and the Church, the Ávila Camacho presidency witnessed a new and more definitive public convergence between conservatism and the state. The embers of anti-clerical Revolution fused with the dying flame of counterrevolutionary Catholicism once brandished by the Mexican Church and the nation’s middle and upper classes. Although the president’s posturing enabled processes of negotiation, these social, political, and cultural transformations were also the product of changes within Mexican Catholicism itself.

²⁹ Pérez Rosales (2020), pp. 20-22.

Catholic Individualism

Three years prior to Ávila Camacho's election, the Mexican Catholic Church underwent a pivotal moment of transition that coincided with President Cárdenas's move to the political center and the waning of cardenismo. After his passing in 1936, Archbishop Pascual Díaz Barreto was immediately succeeded as the head of the Mexican Church by Luis María Martínez, the pragmatist Bishop of Morelia and a long-time Cárdenas ally. This change in institutional leadership dramatically transformed Mexican Church-state relations and reflected the complex evolution of Mexico's Cold War. While both archbishops agreed on the importance of combating the specter of communism at home, Martínez's new emphasis on reconciliation supplanted Díaz Barreto's hostility toward the federal government.

Despite their differences, Martínez aligned with Díaz Barreto's rejection of religious violence and reiterated the need for peaceful relations with the state. As a result, he denounced militant groups like the UNS and more broadly discouraged ideological extremism. Nevertheless, whereas Díaz Barreto had branded Cárdenas as an agent of "Soviet communism," Martínez now envisioned the government as an indispensable partner in the battle against the purported radicalization of youth and women. He acknowledged, furthermore, that Calles's defeat of the Cristero Rebellion had virtually eliminated the viability of Catholic nation-building projects, thereby forcing the Church to negotiate with the Cárdenas administration to regain its influence in the public sphere.³⁰

Still, despite the archbishop's pragmatic posturing, a large number of clergy and many of the nation's most formidable lay organizations remained vehemently opposed to

³⁰ Pérez Rosales (2020), pp. 19-20.

the government and its “anti-Mexican bolshevism.” Some of these groups included the student-led ACJM and the National Union of Catholic Parents (UNPF). Founded in the 1910s, these organizations had recently mobilized against Cárdenas’s socialist education mandate and his support of U.S. Protestant missionaries. However, the ACJM had also become a hotbed of right-wing extremism, as many of its leading members continued to reject the 1929 peace accords.³¹

Subsequently, prominent ACJM activists abandoned their organization and established militant groups that operated beyond the Church’s purview. These included organizations like the UNS and Las Legioneras,³² which branded Catholic institutionalists as “false” opponents to state secularism. As Pérez Rosales documents, the *arreglos* of 1929 were “viewed as a call to reconcile with the enemy and openly shunned by many within the Church.” Nevertheless, Martínez continued to look for new forms and spaces of engagement with Mexico’s secular state, for he realized that Church-state institutions must work together to meet the challenges of an increasingly urban and industrialized society.³³

To achieve this goal, Martínez recognized the centrality of the Mexican Catholic Action (ACM) organization in restoring public morality, defending Church autonomy, and securing a place for religious instruction among youth. As part of the archbishop’s conciliatory approach to Church-state relations, UFCM activists pursued youth moralization campaigns that complemented the government’s educational curricula. This presented a striking contrast to Díaz Barreto’s prior opposition to the Secretariat of Public

³¹ Ibid., p. 20.

³² For more on Las Legioneras, see Chapter 4. On the UNS, see Chapter 5 and the next section of this chapter.

³³ Pérez Rosales (2020), p. 20.

Education (SEP). As Pérez Rosales argues, this new overlap of Church-state projects resulted in the creation of a “national morality” that integrated Catholic principles and civic virtues. Although Church and state actors did not explicitly collaborate in their moralizing endeavors, they ceased to antagonize each other as enemies of the nation. Instead, they adopted similar perceptions of radicalism and social crisis.³⁴

By the late 1930s, the Catholic Church and the Mexican government recognized the need to combat “decadent” foreign influences in modern entertainment—e.g., music, dance, cinema, fashion, and nightlife. Moreover, both factions worked to reinvigorate citizens’ commitment to liberal democracy and publicly decried the “atheistic tendencies” of fascism and communism. On the one hand, state curricula looked to instill youth with a “disciplined work ethic” that would nurture students’ commitment to social justice. On the other, Church pedagogy emphasized individual religious liberty, which the JCFM had previously shunned given its purported connection to “Protestant ideology.”³⁵

Overall, Martínez’s leadership of the ACM differed from his predecessor’s in the relative amount of autonomy he granted to Catholic Action’s women and youth groups. Whereas the JCFM had directly echoed Díaz Barreto’s distrust of Protestantism, Martínez’s UFCM more readily adapted to meet the challenges of institutional Catholicism’s declining influence in society—even as Martínez himself continued to voice public concern over the nation’s alleged Protestant “threat.” Earlier in the decade, the JCFM’s racially charged activism and anti-democratic class politics had effectively alienated rural peasant communities. Subsequently, grassroots organizations like the UNS

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15, 103-04.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 103-04. For more on the JCFM and anti-individualism, see Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

took advantage of the Church's relative loss of influence in the countryside and successfully integrated disgruntled campesinos into their ranks. Aware of these challenges, Martínez recognized the importance of burgeoning middle-class urban spaces as the final bulwark in the battle for the nation's soul. As a result, the ACM redirected its efforts toward renewing Catholicism's centrality among university students and women in the domestic sphere.

With specific regard to middle-class women, the UFCM's influential *Acción Femenina* magazine played a vital role in promoting the renewal of Christian values within the home. However, the monthly publication also became a site where the Unión Femenina developed a more nuanced form of Catholicism that seemed to deviate from Church doctrine in two subtle, yet significant ways. First, the magazine experimented with notions of sainthood and fashioned itself as a space where audiences could learn how to "practice" piety and acquire saintly attributes. In this regard, *Acción Femenina* acted as a sacred text for individual readers, for it ultimately taught them new ways to bolster their faith from home. This process gave way to the UFCM's second alteration of Catholicism—namely, its seeming Protestantization, which emanated from the magazine's emphasis on individual spirituality within the private sphere. For activists, *Acción Femenina* became a site of religious compromise between adherence to Church doctrine and the rising influence of Protestantism and popular religiosity.³⁶

Published for the first time in 1933, *Acción Femenina* was a pedagogical magazine written by and for members of the UFCM to discuss family life, childhood religious

³⁶ FXC. Archivo Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana (UFCM). Serie: Impresos, Publicaciones Acción Católica Mexicana. Caja 1: "*Acción Femenina*."

instruction, and women's purported domestic responsibilities. In addition to these topics, *Acción Femenina* circulated international news and published critical review pieces aimed at the nation's "immoral" fashion and film industries. Although the UFCM initially published 6,000 *ejemplares*, historian Pedro Espinoza Meléndez documents that, by the early 1950s, the magazine circulated over 30,000 annual copies. Still, he holds that these numbers represented but a small fraction of the UFCM's actual membership base. In 1938, the organization had approximately 114,000 members. By 1944, the number of *socias* increased to about 190,000 and grew to comprise 400,000 by the mid-1950s—or roughly 80 percent of all members in Catholic Action.³⁷

With regard to religion, *Acción Femenina* adopted a democratic approach to saintliness and individual piety. Printed in June 1938, the article "Hagámonos Santos" revealed the extent of católicas' newfound religious empowerment and their eagerness to claim their place as co-creators of faith. Written for middle-class women and domestic workers, the article exposed católicas' efforts to rebrand saintliness as an attainable state of spiritual development. Given the UFCM's rising influence within Catholic Action, the piece attested to activists' broader attempts to reshape Catholicism into a more

³⁷ Pedro Espinoza Meléndez, "Antifeminismo y feminismo católico en México. La Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana y la revista *Acción Femenina*, 1933-1958." *Revista interdisciplinaria de estudios de género de El Colegio de México* [Online] (2020). Through a series of rigorous discursive analyses, Espinoza Meléndez examines *Acción Femenina*'s treatment of controversial topics like divorce, women's suffrage, and Catholic *obreras*' push for independent unionization. His study of the magazine exposes the complexity of conservative women's empowerment and the intricacies within their religious and political ideologies. Specifically, Espinoza Meléndez calls on historians to refrain from characterizing the UFCM's opposition to secular feminism as a static and linear "anti-feminism." Instead, he emphasizes the existence of multiple "feminisms" and draws on recent scholarship (including my own) to argue for a more nuanced vision of *católicas*' religious activism. According to his analysis, the UFCM used *Acción Femenina* to pursue a form of politicization that simultaneously challenged and reinforced patriarchal social relations. Thus, although the magazine encouraged readers to exert themselves as "defenders of Christ" in the public sphere, it also opposed feminists' purported attack on "Christian" values and traditional gender roles. Also see, Álvarez-Pimentel (2017).

approachable religion that could easily adapt to individual women's specific circumstances.³⁸

Calling on readers to “become saints,” the article urged them to refrain from conceiving of sanctity as an unchanging quality begotten at birth and exclusively reserved for extraordinary individuals. Instead, it reminded *socias* that all saints had once erred, but ultimately *became* saintly by changing the nature of their words, deeds, and actions. Saints, in other words, had transformed themselves by continuously working to develop their faith. In that same vein, the article suggested that any woman, in spite of her imperfections, could also aspire to become saintly by furthering her devotion to God in everyday life.³⁹

Subsequently, *Acción Femenina* instructed *socias* on how to refine their piety to approximate saintliness. In a recurring series of articles fittingly titled “Piedad Práctica,” readers learned the meaning of religious ceremonies and the appropriate rituals to perform during mass. Even as the UFCM upheld the importance of the Sunday Eucharist, its lessons on “practical piety” depicted Catholicism as a series of practices that women could learn at church *or* from the comfort of their living rooms. This message, however, ran contrary to *Juventud* magazine’s prior emphasis on the importance of the physical parish as the source of God’s power in society. Contrary to Díaz Barreto’s JCFM, *Acción Femenina* now elevated the home as a space for the everyday praxis of ritual by readers looking to approach divinity and eventually develop their own forms of sanctity. Thus, despite its seeming adherence to institutional norms, the UFCM left open the possibility for

³⁸ FXC. Archivo UFCM. Serie: Impresos, Publicaciones Acción Católica Mexicana. Caja 1: “*Acción Femenina*.” “Hagámonos Santos,” *Acción Femenina: Órgano de la “Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana”* Tomo IV Núm. 6, junio de 1938 (México, D.F.), p. 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

individuals to deviate from established doctrine and for the magazine itself to acquire spiritual meaning as a text imparting religious knowledge.⁴⁰

In addition to its essays on sainthood and practical piety, *Acción Femenina*'s discussions of Church sacraments also attested to the UFCM's alterations to Catholicism. Specifically, the magazine's articles on "El Sagrado Viático y la Extrema Unción"—or the holy sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick—spoke to the Unión Femenina's redefinition of the household as a physical space that individual women could effectively "make" holy. As the only sacrament administered outside of the parish, the Anointing of the Sick provided an opportunity for homemakers to transform the home into a site where priests could mediate contact between God and individuals. In addition to instructing *socias* on how to adequately prepare their household for the sacrament, the magazine imparted deep spiritual meaning to the home's mundane physical spaces and material objects.⁴¹

As a result, *Acción Femenina* described the ways in which everyday household items acquired religious significance. These included the bedding and clothing of an ailing family member, as well as the candles, flowers, linens and crucifixes that were to be displayed on a makeshift altar assembled by the *ama de casa*. By strategically placing candles throughout different parts of the house, *socias* could transform the home's otherwise mundane physical structures. Doorways and thresholds became divine gateways,

⁴⁰ "La Piedad Práctica" *Acción Femenina: Órgano de la "Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana"* Tomo IV Núm. 2, febrero de 1938 (México, D.F.), pp. 9-10. See also, "La Piedad Práctica" *Acción Femenina* Tomo IV Núm. 3, marzo de 1938, p.9; and "Piedad" *Acción Femenina* Tomo III Núm. 11, diciembre de 1937, pp. 5-6.

⁴¹ "El Sagrado Viático y la Extrema Unción," *Acción Femenina: Órgano de la "Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana"* Tomo IV Núm. 5, mayo de 1938 (México, D.F.), pp. 6-7.

as dying candlelight illuminated darkened hallways and revealed a trail of flower petals on the ground that guided “el Santísimo... Jesús, el Rey de Reyes” to *la pieza del enfermo*.⁴²

Although the magazine’s emphasis on sacred relics echoed the Church’s established norms, the UFCM’s guidelines for the Anointing of the Sick also nodded toward folk religious customs emanating from the nation’s peasant Catholicisms. This was particularly evident in *Acción Femenina*’s embrace of informal altar-building and the trail of cempasuchil flowers commonly associated with indigenous rituals practiced on the Day of the Dead. Whereas Díaz Barreto’s JCFM had once accused indigenous campesinos of succumbing to “primitive and false religion,” the UFCM now encouraged middle-class homemakers to “salvage” and adopt peasant traditions. Subsequently, the authors of the magazine openly embraced popular influences and referred to them as “splendid and pious customs that should not go extinct.”⁴³

Furthermore, *Acción Femenina*’s advice to homemakers attested to the emergence of a new Catholic individualism whereby avid lectoras could acquire the knowledge necessary to sanctify their home and create sacred spaces within their domestic spheres of influence. Even if the magazine’s discussion of the sacraments stayed true to Church doctrine, this newfound spiritual empowerment also granted *socias* a considerable amount of authority over their personal religious experience. Still, rather than interpreting these changes as working to upend Catholicism from within, scholars should read these processes of Protestantization as the byproduct of the UFCM’s efforts to regulate women’s religious praxis as it emerged in the middle-class home. As *Acción Femenina* attempted to

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

standardize ritual, its emphasis on homemakers' innate ability to work towards divinity validated the power of individual readers outside the parish community. Thus, unlike the JCFM of the early 1930s, the UFCM now envisioned the religious subject as possessing an inherent spiritual agency. In its attempt to prescribe piety, the Unión Femenina left open the possibility for individuals to make decisions and claim ownership over their faith.

Despite these subtle adaptations, however, *Acción Femenina* still adhered to Catholic Action's institutionalist objectives. This was evident in the magazine's calls to expand the "secular apostolate," or *apostolado seglar*, as a means to uphold the Church's standing across the nation. In an article published in March 1938, Vice President Refugio Goribar de Cortina defined the secular apostolate as an informal body of lay activists who worked for the clergy. Alluding to Pius XI's *Ubi Arcano* encyclical, she embraced the Pope's branding of the laity as "the living foundation of the house of God," and identified *socias* as the nucleus of lay efforts to "bring the Church's teachings to all souls who hungered for spiritual nurture."⁴⁴

Nevertheless, even as Goribar reaffirmed the UFCM's loyalty to Church institutions, she also continued to advance a more individualist vision of Catholicism. Specifically, she emphasized notions of personal devotion and individual responsibility when describing the spiritual commitments shouldered by priests and *socias*. Echoing the magazine's discussions of sanctity, she portrayed the priesthood as a spiritual calling that did not emanate from a person's "nature." Rather, she characterized this vocation as the product of "an intense personal love for Christ" and the "rigorous internal development"

⁴⁴ Refugio Goribar de Cortina. "El Apostolado Seglar, Vocación Divina," *Acción Femenina: Órgano de la "Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana"* Tomo IV Núm. 3, marzo de 1938 (México, D.F.), pp. 4-7.

of ordained individuals. Emphasizing the “personal” and “internal” dimensions of piety, Goribar portrayed faith as a private, intimate, and isolated phenomenon. She portrayed devotion as the product of internal work and allowed *socias* to integrate elements of personal faith into their adherence to the Church.⁴⁵

These shifts in rhetoric and religious ideology enabled the women of the UFCM to exert their own influence *within* the confines of Church-led activism. Rather than undermining Church institutions, Catholic individualism reinvigorated lay activists’ commitment to institutional religious authority. By ceding some spaces for individual freedom, Catholicism could finally be seen by its followers as striking a balance between society’s collective good and a person’s spiritual needs. This type of compromise, in turn, represented the only way for the Church to avoid ideological extremes while navigating the world’s turbulent political waters.⁴⁶

Drawing from this new pragmatism, the UFCM negotiated between promoting individualism and adhering to its institutional responsibilities. As members of the largest and most influential lay group in Catholic Action, *socias* took on an active role in shaping local education campaigns implemented by the clergy. In the winter of 1937-38, for instance, members of the UFCM participated in a congress convened by the Diocese of Huajuapán, Oaxaca to address Protestantism’s growing influence in the region. Bringing together indigenous leaders, local priests, and members of the UFCM, the pedagogical conference discussed how to best tailor the Church’s catechism to reach the region’s most

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ For more on the Church’s search for an ideological “middle ground” between the individual and society, see my discussion of Pius XI’s 1931 *Quadragesimo Anno* encyclical in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

“vulnerable” peasant communities. At the core of the dialogue, the UFCM’s religious educators pitched multiple proposals designed to enhance indigenous religious instruction. These included the need to train indigenous catechists and develop instructional materials in local languages. According to *Acción Femenina*, the proposals were “thoroughly discussed and debated until the most efficacious initiatives were approved” by members of the clergy. As the magazine disseminated news of the conference, it not only highlighted *socias*’ clout within the Church, but also underscored individual members’ potential to perform similar work “on behalf of God.”⁴⁷

While the UFCM’s embrace of individualism certainly empowered women to take a more active role within the Church, it also turned their attention away from the state as the supposed enemy of religion. Instead, it encouraged *socias* to focus on the conflict within themselves as the most important site of spiritual turmoil. Subsequently, *Acción Femenina* warned religious educators, or *catequistas*, against the lure of forgoing regular prayer and their participation in Holy Mass. According to the magazine, these personal “omissions of faith” proved not only harmful to the individual instructor, but also to those within the community who depended on her commitment to God for devotional inspiration—namely, children, students, domestic workers and family members. Labeling these instances as moments of moral “desertion,” the authors claimed that *catequistas*’ “abandonment of spiritual responsibilities” reflected sloth and excessive pride. They turned to discourses of

⁴⁷ “Frutos del Apostolado,” *Acción Femenina: Órgano de la “Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana”* Tomo IV Núm. 3, marzo de 1938 (México, D.F.), pp. 15-16. For more on Protestantism and Oaxaca’s indigenous communities, see Kathleen McIntyre (2019).

guilt and shame, and portrayed *socias* as responsible for the uplift or downfall of their immediate communities.⁴⁸

To promote personal development, *Acción Femenina* identified individual charity as the most effective way to protect society's spiritually "vulnerable"—particularly youth and indigenous communities. This presented a clear contrast to the UFCM's previous messaging, as the Unión Femenina no longer called for the insertion of religion into the secular public sphere or an overhaul of the nation's anti-clerical state apparatus. Instead, individual actions became the principal means through which Catholics would remedy social ills and save the downtrodden from misery. Personal acts of *caridad* now became moments of spiritual regeneration that not only benefited those on the receiving end of the UFCM's generosity, but also enriched individual *socias* who saw charity as a means to attain moral redemption.⁴⁹

Like the Cárdenas and Ávila Camacho administrations, the women of Catholic Action responded to new challenges through pragmatism and compromise. Rather than prolonging Díaz Barreto's antagonism of Protestantism and popular religiosity, the UFCM used publications like *Acción Femenina* as platforms from which to adapt Catholicism to meet seemingly hostile ideological influences. Though subtle, these transformations allowed the UFCM to embrace individualism without abandoning its commitments to established doctrine or institutions. If anything, these changes reinvigorated *socias'* commitment to the Church while empowering women to take on active roles within and beyond Mexican Catholic Action.

⁴⁸ "La U.F.C.M. y la Caridad" *Acción Femenina: Órgano de la "Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana"* Tomo IV Núm. 5, mayo de 1938 (México, D.F.), pp. 1-4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Furthermore, *Acción Femenina*'s embrace of individualism allowed the magazine to become a more neutral space that did not outwardly antagonize Protestantism or the United States. This made for a striking contrast to the JCFM's *Juventud* magazine, whose Hispanist posturing appealed to critics of U.S. imperialism and North American culture. As the Ávila Camacho administration increasingly aligned itself with the United States' wartime foreign policy, Mexican Catholics negotiated between their disdain for "North American Christianity" and their aversion toward anti-clerical fascist projects. By the time Mexico entered World War II in 1942, the Church openly supported the president's "polished democratic discourses... [which] promoted a politics of national conciliation to legitimate state power."⁵⁰

Published two years prior to the 1940 campaign, the *Acción Femenina*'s embrace of individualism preceded Ávila Camacho's calls for "gradual Revolution" and the defense of individual freedoms. Similarly, as the UFCM adopted more democratic visions of saintliness, the incoming president touted Mexico's commitment to liberal democracy and gravitated toward the United States. Rather than interpreting the relationship between these processes as linear or causal, historians should read them as part of a broader trend toward institutional compromise in the face of crisis. As Church and state grappled with national disunity and the threat of political upheaval, they adopted new strategies of negotiation over antagonism.

For the Mexican Church and state, this new pragmatism resulted in a gradual turning away from the authoritarian tendencies of the early 1930s. Instead, both factions now openly called for safeguarding individual liberties, even if only to conceal the

⁵⁰ Carmona Dávila, "Manuel Ávila Camacho" (2021).

perdurance of their anti-democratic exercises of authority. As the Ávila Camacho administration moved to subdue its sinarquista opponents in the summer of 1944, the Church's political alignment with the state only grew stronger. The specter of working-class radicalism remained a formidable concern for both sides, and the rise of urban domestic spaces called for new strategies to combat radicalization across racial and class lines.

Race and “Radicalism”

Unlike the UFCM, the pro-Catholic militants of the Unión Nacional Sinarquista (UNS) did not adopt a pragmatic approach to Protestantism's rising influence in society. Instead, sinarquistas responded to this challenge by intimidating North American missionaries and attacking peasant converts across the countryside. For instance, on May 21st, 1944, Father Hermelindo Alegre of La Gloria, Veracruz led a band of sinarquistas to burn a number of Protestant homes and murder three local children with clubs and machetes. Similarly, on July 3rd, *El Popular* newspaper reported that a group of peasant villagers inflamed by sinarquistas' anti-Protestant propaganda wounded several Protestants while damaging their houses.⁵¹

As a nationalist, right-wing organization, the UNS's embrace of religious violence had bred hostilities with the Mexican Church since its founding in 1937. Furthermore, sinarquistas' attacks on American citizens, coupled with the movement's growing appeal among peasants and Mexican immigrants in the United States, ultimately prompted the Mexican government and the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) to monitor UNS

⁵¹ “Crisis in the Mexican Sinarquista Movement.” Confidential report from the Office of Strategic Services, Research and Analysis Branch (R&A) No. 2246 [Online] (September 1944), pp. 15-18. Accessed: 28 Jul, 2021. URL: https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000206837.pdf.

operations. A wartime intelligence agency and predecessor to the CIA, the OSS surveilled UNS publications and cross-border recruitment efforts on the pretext of protecting the U.S. government from the threat of “fascism.” The Office also reported on Ávila Camacho’s response to sinarquista violence and kept track of public opinion as it pertained to the UNS’s anti-American platform. By 1944, the OSS claimed that the Mexican public had become “distinctly hostile to the intensification of Sinarquista agitation.” Moreover, it noted that the Mexican president shared in this indignation as a result of a failed assassination attempt by another faction of political extremists.⁵²

On their end, sinarquistas condemned Protestant educators for allegedly furthering an aggressive American politics that undermined national sovereignty. The UNS articulated this conflict in racial terms and positioned “Anglo-Saxon Protestantism” as being morally decadent and inferior to Mexican Catholicism. As historian Héctor Hernández García de León argues, sinarquistas relied on anti-Protestant ideologies to keep their organization intact. UNS leaders also emphasized Protestantism’s German roots to distance themselves from fascism and denounced Nazism as the “arrogant offspring of Luther’s Protestant revolution.”⁵³

Still, by the summer of 1943, sinarquistas had grown internally divided over the Protestant question, World War II, and the future of UNS’s relationship to the United States. This added to evolving tensions over the organization’s prospects as a political party, which ultimately resulted in a schism among its leaders. One year later, one of the

⁵² Ibid., p. 16.

⁵³ Héctor Hernández García de León, “The Sinarquista Movement with Special Reference to the Period 1934-1944,” PhD diss. (University of London/London School of Economics and Political Science, 1990), pp. 388-89, 407, 502-03, 512-13. See also, Hernández García de León *Historia política del sinarquismo, 1934-1944* (México, D.F.: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2004).

factions called upon the public to rebel against the government. Through the UNS's nationally-circulated weekly newspaper, *El Sinarquista*, the group condemned the president's apparent lack of authority and inability to govern. Specifically, sinarquistas accused Ávila Camacho of "abandoning his people" in the fight against communism. They also decried the president's alignment with the Church, his cuts to land redistribution, and his pro-American economic and foreign policies.⁵⁴

As industrialization fueled rural emigration, the Ávila Camacho administration feared that peasant radicalization in the countryside would breed working-class agitation in the nation's growing cities. Weary of sinarquista militancy since the 1940 election, the president now took decisive measures to curtail UNS influence among indigenous and mestizo peasants. According to the OSS, the government indicted the conspirators and banned all UNS meetings. It also forbade any further publication of *El Sinarquista* and restricted the distribution of UNS propaganda. By September 1944, the OSS even speculated that Archbishop Martínez had "privately intervened" and played a vital role in "persuading" UNS founder, Salvador Abascal, to relinquish power. To that end, scholars like Rodrigo Ruiz Velasco Barba argue that Ávila Camacho's move to topple the sinarquista organization effectively cemented his alignment with the Church and the U.S. government.⁵⁵

Fearful of peasant radicalism, Ávila Camacho moved to "homogenize" the Mexican working classes by extending the Cárdenas administration's Spanish-language

⁵⁴ "Crisis in the Mexican Sinarquista Movement," pp. 17-18.

⁵⁵ Hernández García de León, "The Sinarquista Movement...", pp. 491-94. See also, Velasco Barba (2012), p. 231.

education campaigns. Dating back to the SEP's inception in 1921, the state's pedagogical initiatives sought to implement instructional strategies that would integrate and subdue the nation's rural and urban indigenous communities. During the 1940 election, Mexico's "racial problem" had emerged as a key issue between the candidates. Regardless of ideological differences, both sides ascribed to the notion that "the Mexican Indian [was] a social pariah hindering national consolidation." As president, Ávila Camacho declared illiteracy as the nation's "greatest domestic enemy" and connected Mexico's "war against ignorance" to the global struggle against fascism. Fearing the radicalization of society's most "vulnerable," he identified monolingual indigenous communities as sites where stagnant literacy rates bred misinformation and political extremism.⁵⁶

Prior to the 1940s, former President Lázaro Cárdenas had viewed Mexican indígenas as "members of a social class taking part in the collective task of national production." By contrast, Ávila Camacho adopted a less egalitarian stance toward indigenous education and rejected Cárdenas's vision of solidarity. In one of his first radio addresses to the nation, the new president lamented that indigenous *iletrados* constituted more than half of the Mexican population. He argued that reading and writing were indispensable to solving "national social problems" and urged citizens—specifically, middle-class educators—to support fellow *compatriotas* by volunteering in the government's pedagogical efforts.⁵⁷

At its core, Ávila Camacho's attempt to mobilize civilian sectors of society formed part of larger efforts to rein in the federal army and free Mexican politics from the influence

⁵⁶ Carmona Dávila, "Manuel Ávila Camacho" (2021). See also, Vivar Payas, pp. 31-32.

⁵⁷ Joseph and Buchenau (2013), p.188-89. Vivar Payas, p. 55.

of military intervention. Known as *civilismo*, this move toward citizen-led initiatives sought to promote stability by bolstering civic institutions and providing the nation's burgeoning middle classes with new platforms from which to participate in state-building projects. Subsequently, the president barred army generals from participating in electoral politics and established the *Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Populares* (CNOP) to organize the middle-class sectors of the PRM. These groups included business professionals, small farmers, students, artisans and homemakers. By 1941, Ávila Camacho's Secretariat of Public Education established a citizen-led literacy campaign known as the *Campaña Nacional de Alfabetización* (CNA). The CNA galvanized middle-class educators around the issue of peasant "re-education" and channeled past decades of racial paternalism in its efforts to "modernize" indigenous workers.⁵⁸

Drawing from the work of scholars Patience Schell and Valentina Torres Septién, historian Julieta Vivar Payas argues that the CNA's pursuit of "literacy" involved complex processes of cultural, social, and political "de-indigenization." Specifically, the CNA discouraged indigenous oral traditions and taught urban and rural indígenas to "conceive of their reality in materialistic terms." This meant using the Spanish written language to reject ethnic cultural identifiers and embrace a more "modern" class consciousness. Through the language of citizenship, the CNA taught indigenous workers to operate within state channels and tasked middle-class actors with "elevating" indígenas' civic participation.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Carmona Dávila, "Manuel Ávila Camacho" (2021).

⁵⁹ Vivar Payas, p. 103. See also, Valentina Torres Septién, "En busca de la modernidad," in Fernando Pérez Correa ed., *Historia de la Alfabetización y de la Educación de Adultos en México: el México de los grandes cambios, La época contemporánea* Vol. 3 (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1994); and Patience A. Schell, "Nationalizing Children Through Schools and Hygiene: Porfirian and Revolutionary Mexico City," *The Americas* (2004), 559-87.

As a result, the CNA allowed the state to maintain its claims to “Revolution” while enforcing racial hierarchies. Whereas the CNA operated under the premise that “any indígena... regardless of ethnicity or language origin could claim membership within the national collective,” it also held that citizenship required “the unequivocal adoption” of the Spanish language over local customs. Similar to Rick López’s analysis of indigenismo, Vivar Payas outlines how the CNA strived to mold quintessentially “Mexican” citizens who adhered to the state’s sanitized visions of indigeneity. Furthermore, her analysis reveals the extent to which notions of individualism influenced Ávila Camacho’s repressive educational project.⁶⁰

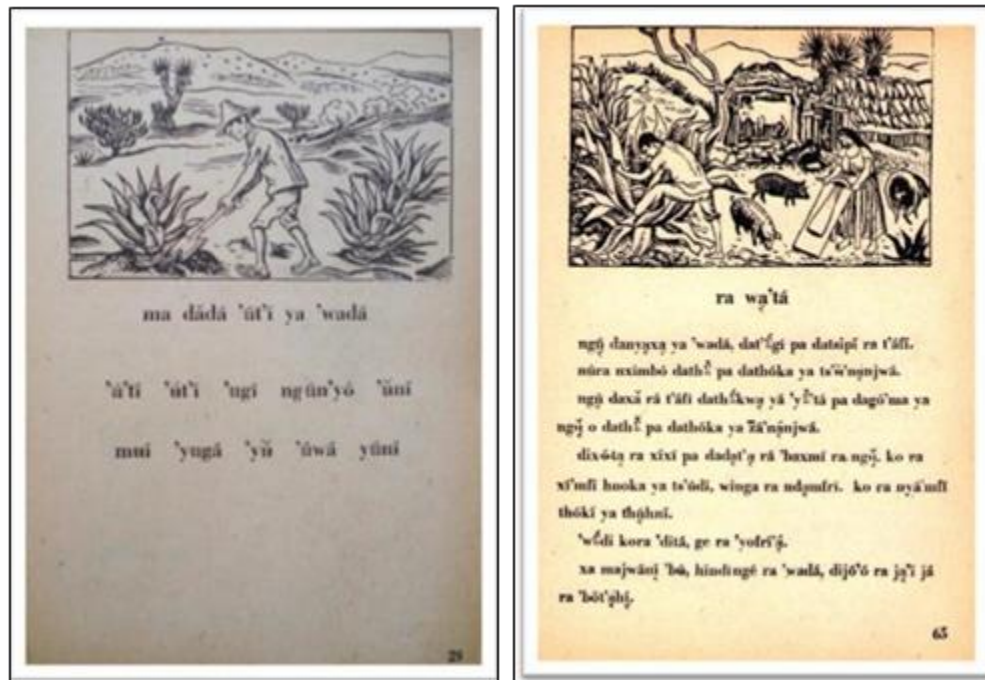
During his sexenio, Ávila Camacho had managed to reform the Mexican Constitution and abolish its calls for a national “socialist” education. Instead, Article 3’s newest iteration called for the “humane, democratic, and just moral instruction... of the individual citizen.” In line with the president’s constitutional reform, the CNA devoted its efforts to advancing individualism over the “archaic, deficient, and socially harmful traditions” of “indigenous collectivism.” Thus, between 1941 and 1945, the CNA published *millions* of leaflets, booklets, and other instructional materials that portrayed indigenous actors as individuals “living separate lives and engaging in parallel activities.”⁶¹

Vivar Payas’ analysis of the CNA reveals its attempts to present rural indígenas as self-sufficient individuals in bilingual, Spanish-Otomi textbooks. Emphasizing the absence of peasant organization in the booklets’ illustrations of rural field work, the CNA advanced notions of individualism that supplanted potentially subversive forms of collective

⁶⁰ Vivar Payas, p. 103. See also, López (2010).

⁶¹ Vivar Payas, pp. 42-44, 56.

mobilization. Similarly, historian Valentina Torres Septién documents how the SEP’s implementation of individualized instructional methods initially struggled to provide a viable alternative to longstanding local practices of *enseñanza colectiva*. As a result, the CNA worked to instill indigenous students with a “desire” for individual learning in order to counter their purported familial “impulses” and proclivity toward communal organizing.⁶²



Images 6.2-6.3: Spanish-Otomí language textbooks depicting individualized indigenous labor.
Source: Julieta Vivar Payas (2012)

Certainly, the president’s rejection of socialist education spoke to his conservative political tendencies and his desire to reassure Church leaders of his commitment to anti-communist ideals. After all, Article 3’s new pedagogical model sought to hinder workers’ collective action by isolating peasants as self-sufficient and detached citizens. Still, the state’s new individualism also echoed recent debates within Catholic lay organizations

⁶² Ibid., pp. 86-89.

around the desirability of—and potential danger in—peasant actors’ personal empowerment. In their ambivalence, Mexican Church and state actors actively negotiated between endorsing indígenas’ individual freedom and actively working toward the suppression of dissent.

Contrary to the sinarquistas, the UFCM had devised a more flexible form of Catholicism to meet the challenge of indigenous mobilization fueled by rising Protestant influence. Its nuanced individualism sought to strike a balance between Catholic subservience to Church institutions and Protestants’ emphasis on personal belief. Learning from the JCFM’s recent failures in the countryside, the UFCM outwardly rejected anti-indigenous class politics when addressing urban workers. Instead, as early as 1937-38, the Unión Femenina extended its discussions of *santidad* to include women from all sectors of society and even instructed indigenous domestic employees, or *sirvientas*, on how to approach saintliness.

However, despite this pretense of benevolence, the UFCM’s approach toward the city’s working-class women mirrored the CNA in its conservative anxieties and racial paternalism. Fearful of domestic workers’ alleged promiscuity and radicalization, middle-class homemakers envisioned the salvation of “vulnerable” indigenous counterparts as contingent upon two factors. First, the UFCM held that workers must adhere to Church sacraments and remain loyal to the priesthood. Second, the group made homemakers responsible for imparting their employees with moral instruction as part of securing their own spiritual ascendancy.

Thus, the authors of *Acción Femenina* worked with the UFCM’s *Asociación de Sirvientas* to publish a monthly editorial designed to guide domestic workers through daily

religious exercises. Known as the “Santificación del Día,” or daily sanctification, the column acted as a religious manual that closely mirrored the magazine’s articles on “Practical Piety” for middle-class *amas de casa*. Still, whereas the magazine encouraged homemakers’ spiritual agency, the articles geared towards employees underscored the importance of servility. Even as *Acción Femenina* granted domestic workers a certain degree of freedom, it also reiterated their need to participate in Church sacraments and obey Catholic institutions.

In June 1938, for instance, the “Santificación del Día” underscored the importance of employees’ regular observance of Church sacraments to maintain a “state of grace” that remained free from sin. Of all the sacraments, however, the column depicted communion and confession as the only sacraments over which domestic workers could exercise a certain degree of control. With specific regard to communion, the magazine held that domestic employees must attend church in order to participate in the Eucharist. However, it also proposed that those unable to leave home could engage in daily prayer as an alternative means to nourish the spirit. Even if *Acción Femenina* never intended to portray individual devotion as a substitute for communion, its authors openly drew comparisons between the holy Host to the “daily bread” derived from personal prayer. This empowered the individual worker and elevated the private sphere as a site of spiritual development that was both connected to and distinct from the physical parish.⁶³

Similarly, the column identified prayer as a crucial component of the sacrament of Reconciliation. Calling on workers to communicate directly with God before Penance, the magazine argued that confession was virtually meaningless if done without individual

⁶³ “Para las Asociaciones de Sirvientas: La Santificación del Día,” *Acción Femenina: Órgano de la “Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana”* Tomo IV Núm. 6, junio de 1938 (México, D.F.), pp. 12-13.

intention or in the absence of a direct relationship with the divine. As a result, *Acción Femenina* instructed domestic workers to “allow Jesus to enter [their] heart[s]” and “speak to Him directly of [their] defects... and suffering.” Moreover, it prompted them to “ask God to bless them and their parishes with full trust and confidence...”⁶⁴

By encouraging workers to forge a personal connection to God, the magazine called on them to adopt a more active role in the process of Reconciliation. Even if the sacrament affirmed priests’ centrality as mediators between individuals and God, the authors suggested that women could also experience God’s love directly and *prior to* receiving confession. Still, the UFCM’s insistence on employees’ adherence to the sacraments attested to its lingering distrust of the indigenous working classes. Though the column rejected visions of domestic laborers as the passive recipients of forgiveness, the magazine remained part of Catholic Action’s larger efforts to bring workers into the fold of institutionalized religion.

As a result, *Acción Femenina* underscored the importance of Church sacraments as the only means through which employees could “fill [their] hearts with faith, humility, love and zeal.” Specifically, the magazine turned to discourses of shame and described the Eucharist as instilling domestic workers with enough religious fervor to keep passions in check and maintain their spiritual virtue. Upholding the importance of the Mass, the authors characterized any attempt to approach saintliness as futile if pursued without proper participation in Holy Communion. They argued that the sacraments replenished individual

⁶⁴ Ibid.

devotion and were therefore indispensable to workers' "ongoing struggle" against temptation.⁶⁵

At the core of this inner turmoil, homemakers claimed that their employees' lack of sound moral judgment would lead them to pursue inappropriate sexual relationships with married men. Socias cited divorce statistics as evidence of the traditional family's vulnerability and branded domestic workers' perceived licentiousness as a threat to society's moral fabric. Through its moralizing discourses, the Unión Femenina channeled its members' social anxieties and contributed to longstanding notions of indigenous sexual deviance. It emphasized spiritual fulfillment over pleasure and presented labor as the "cure" to indigenous women's sexual impulses.⁶⁶

Drawing from notions of social equilibrium, *Acción Femenina* published multiple articles that portrayed domestic labor as an everyday activity imbued with deep religious meaning. Specifically, socias held that employees' fulfillment of work obligations brought them closer to God and imparted them with a Christian sense of duty toward others. Invoking Saint Martha and Saint Zita as the patron saints of servitude, the magazine encouraged domestic workers to practice "self-denial" when completing daily tasks. The authors compared their labor to Christ's carpentry and argued that, in emulating the work of *Jesús Obrero*, workers acted as apostles to the world by personifying Christian abnegation.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ "La Santificación de mi Día" and "La Sagrada Comunión," *Acción Femenina: Órgano de la "Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana"* Tomo IV Núm. 6, junio de 1938 (México, D.F.), pp. 16-17.

⁶⁶ Ibid. For more on white elite women and the fear of indigenous sexual deviance in urban spaces, see Chapters 1 and 5 of this dissertation. For more on social equilibrium, see Chapter 5.

⁶⁷ "Cualidades de la Sirvienta Cristiana: El Amor al Trabajo," *Acción Femenina: Órgano de la "Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana"* Tomo III Núm. 11, diciembre de 1937 (México, D.F.), p. 15.

First published in 1937, *Acción Femenina's* treatise on *amor al trabajo* differed from social equilibrium in that it directly identified domestic work as divine. Whereas the JCFM had portrayed peasant labor as a necessary antidote to sexual impropriety, the UFCM depicted the individual “sirvienta” as the quintessential example of Christian servitude. Certainly, both organizations used religious discourses to glorify exploitative labor relationships and encourage indigenous working-class women to embrace their stagnant social standing. Still, while the JCFM had preached peasant conformity, the UFCM elevated workers as part of the nation’s secular apostolate. Thus, the magazine held that domestic employees’ continued service toward others would mold their souls into living examples of grace. The authors declared that workers could become spiritual emissaries of Christ and that God would use the image of their labor to guide others toward moral enlightenment and salvation.⁶⁸

Certainly, the contrasts between the doctrines of social equilibrium and “amor al trabajo” might be attributed to differences in leadership style between Archbishops Martínez and Díaz Barreto. However, the distinction between suppressing peasants and elevating domestic labor can also be explained in terms of social and geographical proximity. While the JCFM’s Mexico City-based activists envisioned rural campesinas as geographically distant “Others,” the UFCM grappled with the fact that homemakers and their employees often shared a private living space with newfound spiritual significance. As a result, the Unión Femenina assigned both sets of women complementary roles in their

⁶⁸ “El Amor al Trabajo (Continúa),” *Acción Femenina: Órgano de la “Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana”* Tomo IV Núm. 1, enero de 1938 (México, D.F.), p. 15.

pursuit of moral uplift: amas de casa became saviors while domestic workers remained subservient actors whose virtue emanated from their servility.

Subsequently, *Acción Femenina* prompted workers to act courteously and exercise “cleanliness and moderation” when in the company of their supervisors. As Christians, domestic employees held a responsibility to themselves and those they served to uphold the highest standards of behavior while fulfilling daily obligations. Subsequently, the magazine reiterated the importance of addressing *patrones* in the proper tone and refraining from “vulgarity.” The latter, in turn, included any “distasteful or offensive actions” that called into question workers’ virtue as women of faith—from the use of profanity to the absence of cleanliness in their personal habits. Purity, subservience, and prudence became Christian ideals to which employees had to aspire. Fashioned by the homemakers they served, these standards of morality ultimately coerced workers into a docile obedience toward amas de casa.⁶⁹

By contrast, *Acción Femenina* imparted upon homemakers the responsibility of nurturing their morally vulnerable employees through spiritual instruction. The magazine echoed the Damas Católicas’ previous activism and prompted amas de casa to come to the aid of the clergy by taking charge of religious education within the home. In December 1937, the UFCM tasked *socias* with “cultivating religious sentiment” among their children and workers. As *madres catequistas*, individual homemakers had to “speak of God’s love, impart Christian virtues, and... lead by example through the vigor of their own religiosity.” “Faith,” the authors wrote, “will give rise to faith. Love to love. And virtue to virtue.” They

⁶⁹ “Para las Asociaciones de Sirvientas: La Cortesía (Continúa),” *Acción Femenina: Órgano de la “Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana”* Tomo IV Núm. 2, febrero de 1938 (México, D.F.), pp. 12-13. See also, “Para las Asociaciones de Sirvientas: Concluye” *Acción Femenina* Tomo IV Núm. 3, marzo de 1938, p. 17.

emphasized loving communication between homemakers and members of the household, placing *amas de casa* at the helm of her dependents' moral upbringing.⁷⁰

Along these lines, Vice President Refugio Goribar declared that the Mexican Church extended well beyond parish walls and members of the clergy. Alluding to homemakers' efforts to renew faith within the private sphere, she argued that the Church had been "reinvigorated by [socias'] heroism, prayers, and sacrifice." Thus, even as the vice president lauded the priesthood as a "glorious and beautiful" vocation, she praised *amas de casa* as pillars of the Church whose work included the spread of sound moral principles within the home. True to her penned manifesto from 1922, Goribar envisioned *la gran señora* as the engine powering religious institutions and workers' spiritual renewal amid the turbulence of social transformation.⁷¹

The vice president ultimately held that the UFCM had a moral obligation to work toward the "Christianization of... our less fortunate sisters, imparting on them the knowledge necessary for a more humane life... and their salvation from ignorance and misery." Specifically, she wrote of the complex problems faced by the nation's urban workers and *campesinas*, whose constant exposure to "ideologies of hate and resentment" had purportedly distanced them from the Church and stripped them of their faith. In response to these challenges, Goribar encouraged UFCM socias to become missionaries of the Church's *labor moralizadora*. She claimed that sacrifice and "superhuman effort"

⁷⁰ "Cultivo del Sentimiento Religioso," *Acción Femenina: Órgano de la "Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana"* Tomo III Núm. 11, diciembre de 1937 (México, D.F.), p. 11.

⁷¹ Refugio Goribar de Cortina, "Año Nuevo," *Acción Femenina: Órgano de la "Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana"* Tomo IV Núm. 1, enero de 1938 (México, D.F.), pp. 3-4.

would enable *socias* to “save” their indigenous sisters and ascend closer toward divinity as apostles of the Church.⁷²

At their core, the UFCM’s calls to safeguard working-class morality were driven by *socias*’ desire to claim religious virtue and affirm their own righteousness. For this reason, the organization’s *Comisión Central de Clases Campesinas* emphasized the transactional “rewards” of social service and portrayed rural missionary work as providing solace to educators who imparted vulnerable students with moral judgment and religious knowledge. Rather than focusing on the real material issues affecting *campesinas*, *Acción Femenina* outlined the ways in which *socias* themselves would grow from the experience of working with peasants. Among these benefits, Commission President Angelina Arce highlighted patience, generosity, and perseverance as the spiritual fruits of their “sacrifice.”⁷³

Despite its flaws, the UFCM’s racial paternalism remained a more effective and pragmatic strategy against radicalism than Díaz Barreto’s antagonism of popular sectors. In fact, if the *Unión Femenina*’s growth over time serves as any indication, then historians could certainly argue that Catholic individualism, when extended to all sectors of society, actually allowed Mexican Catholic Action to expand its influence among women and bring more working-class actors into the fold of Church institutions. Faced with the “problems” of rising Protestant influence and indigenous empowerment, the UFCM used outlets like *Acción Femenina* to highlight individual *sirvientas*’ ability to reach saintliness through

⁷² Ibid. See also, Goribar de Cortina, “La U.F.C.M., Colaboradora de la Iglesia Frente a los Problemas Contemporáneos,” *Acción Femenina: Órgano de la “Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana”* Tomo IV Núm. 6, junio de 1938 (México, D.F.), p. 2.

⁷³ “Oficial, Comisión Central de Clases Campesinas: Sed Apóstoles a Ejemplo de Cristo,” *Acción Femenina: Órgano de la “Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana”* Tomo IV Núm. 5, mayo de 1938 (México, D.F.) p. 5.

work and engagement in the sacraments. At the same time, however, the magazine emphasized the unfulfilled dimensions of working-class women's spirituality and underscored their need for guidance from moral and racial "superiors."

In its ambivalence, the UFCM of the late 1930s effectively paved the way for Ávila Camacho's moralistic and racially charged CNA. Specifically, the CNA's attempts at indigenous integration through individual education drew directly from the Catholic model of spiritual instruction as a means for indígenas to achieve personal empowerment within the frameworks established by existing institutions. Furthermore, as the CNA and the UFCM sought to incorporate indigenous actors into "Catholic" and "Mexican" national collectives, both held that membership in the nation's civic and religious communities required indígenas to renounce certain aspects of their culture. From the UFCM's perspective, this adaptation involved embracing the sacraments and remaining subservient to the clergy even as indigenous women formed their own personal connections with God. For the CNA, it meant relinquishing oral traditions and replacing communal identities with a more individualistic outlook driven by class and national concerns.

Thus, as the Mexican presidency and the Catholic Church grew increasingly aligned, a consequential dialogue emerged between Church and state efforts to combat the specter of radicalism. Although the CNA and the UFCM outwardly sought to empower working-class actors as both citizens and spiritual agents, they underscored the need to sublimate personal interests for the benefit of faith and nation. Ultimately, these strategies of indigenous integration served to consolidate institutional power through the active suppression of dissent. For this reason, Esther Velázquez wrote in her 1945 analysis of Mexico's "Principal Problems" that the goal of "elevating the working-class condition"

was to prevent the ambitions of indigenous *trabajadoras* from “inspiring unconformity” and subversive aspirations to upward mobility:

We must establish educational centers exclusively for the instruction of *obreras*... to instill in them a sense of social worth and undo the general feeling of inferiority that dominates their outlook... We must elevate her social standing so that she does not attempt to overcome it. Her aspirations must remain within her role as an *obrero* lest we risk conflict from her lack of conformity... ⁷⁴

Like Velázquez, the UFCM continued to leverage the rhetoric of individual empowerment to deter political, religious, and ideological opposition to longstanding social hierarchies. Mexican authoritarianism thrived in plain sight, as the rhetoric of “democracy” was continuously re-made by Church and state actors to work against working-class interests.

Conclusions

As evidenced by Church and state actors’ repudiation of the UNS, violence and religious militancy no longer represented viable forms of opposition to secularism and socialist education. In fact, a shared fear of national disunity, renewed civil war, and working-class extremism had driven the gradual alignment between Mexican Church and state since the late 1930s—a process that challenges Alan Knight’s view of state anti-clericalism but gives credence to his account of the late cardenista period as a denouement for the “Revolution.” After the election of 1940, Church and state actors converged around a new institutional conservatism that rejected militarism in favor of compromise, pragmatism, and civilian action. At the core of this rapprochement, both factions emphasized individualism as a way to peacefully mobilize citizens around national projects

⁷⁴ Esther Velázquez, “Breve Estudio Sobre los Principales Problemas, Necesidades Morales y Físicas, Defectos, etc. de las Campesinas, Obreras y Empleadas.” 20 April, 1945. FXC. Archivo ACM 5.11.1. Sección 5: “Junta Central JCFM,” Serie 11: Comisión de Especializaciones, Sub-Serie 1: “Movimientos/Delegación de Campesinas, 1939-1945, 1952-53.”

that were rife with class and racial tensions, but also imbued with deep civil and spiritual significance.

On the one hand, the Ávila Camacho administration bolstered the PRM's non-military sectors and launched the citizen-led CNA to promote literacy through individualized instruction. On the other, Archbishop Martínez encouraged the members of Mexican Catholic Action to embrace strategies of reconciliation, which called for negotiation with the state and inspired prominent lay groups like the UFCM to adopt a new flexibility in their approach to Protestantism. Emphasizing the importance of individual education, the CNA and the UFCM's pedagogical campaigns became key battlegrounds in the "war" against illiteracy, immorality, and the specter of radicalization. These organizations attributed political extremism to working-class "ignorance" and recruited middle-class actors to instruct indigenous workers in language, religion, and morality.

However, in addition to fending off the "threat" of working-class radicalism, the CNA and the UFCM also kept Mexico's burgeoning middle classes in check by calling on them to lead their respective re-education projects. Assigning educators, homemakers, and other middle-class actors with direct responsibility for the nation's alleged salvation, the CNA and the UFCM pressed the middle classes to prove their commitment to Church and state visions for society. For UFCM *socias*, becoming a catechist within the home enabled middle-class women to work toward their own attainment of saintliness while bolstering the Church's influence as members of the secular apostolate. By imparting indigenous employees with moral guidance, homemakers spiritually elevated themselves and claimed a symbolic whiteness defined through their perceived superiority to non-white workers.

Furthermore, the UFCM advanced a new Catholic individualism that emphasized personal empowerment and promoted the development of private faith within the confines of institutional religious frameworks. To strike a balance between spiritual community and personal morality, *Acción Femenina* emphasized individual piety but also urged *socias* to adhere to Church sacraments and remain loyal to the priesthood. This new compromise sought to ease tensions between Catholics and the adherents of “North American Protestantism” by underscoring women’s internal struggles as the true site of the nation’s spiritual turmoil. Contrary to *sinarquistas*’ anti-American nationalism, the UFCM did not outwardly antagonize the United States, but adopted a pragmatic, Cold War-era approach to the Protestant “Other” that echoed Ávila Camacho’s pro-U.S. discourses in its democratic portrayals of individual saintliness.

Still, despite its emphasis on personal empowerment, Catholic individualism all but extinguished the flame of counterrevolution. As evidenced by *Acción Femenina* and the UFCM’s efforts to subdue workers’ unconformity, this new individualism looked to preempt dissent by prioritizing conformity to Church institutions as the latter grew increasingly aligned with the nation’s authoritarian state apparatus. Under Martínez’s leadership, the Mexican Church continued to work with the federal government in hopes of steering it in a more conservative direction. Left without institutional support, the nation’s once formidable middle- and upper-class Counterrevolution was reduced to embers.

EPILOGUE

“We have an excess of imagination but lack real-life experience. We have yet to choose what or who we want to become and all paths call to us. We are at an age of making important decisions, and of choosing our path, our vocation, and adopt values that will guide the rest of our lives. This is the moment to get to know ourselves, as individual persons and as members of a society...”

Juventud Católica Femenina Mexicana (JCFM), Movimiento Estudiantil. April 1945.¹

By the spring of 1945, JCFM socias could no longer deny the inevitable. Since the 1930s, young women had gradually begun to enter the nation’s burgeoning university system and now faced unprecedented challenges. Among these were students’ encounters with new ideas, which socias feared could result in young católicas’ radicalization. The JCFM’s *Movimiento Estudiantil* warned against “admiring teachers who espoused communist ideologies,” and succumbing to a “culture of atheism” that encouraged skepticism.²

Over the last three decades, Mexico had transitioned from a rural society to a country of sprawling cities and growing industrial centers. By 1940, Mexico City was on its way to becoming the hemisphere’s first megalopolis and boasted a population of almost 1.8 million people, or about 10 per cent of the national population. At the same time, Mexicans were becoming significantly younger. As the end of the Revolution brought about new stability, families grew and the nation’s children survived long enough to come of age. By 1940, 15- to 24-year-old youth constituted about 19 percent of the population.

¹ FXC. Archivo ACM. Sección 5: Junta Central JCFM. Serie 11, Subserie 2: Delegación de Maestras y Normalistas. “JCFM: Movimiento Estudiantil, Notas.”

² Ibid.

By contrast, *all* Mexicans over 40 comprised roughly the same portion of the country while children under 15 constituted 41 percent of the population.³

With industrialization and the nation's post-revolutionary baby boom came a new generation of middle-class youth hungry for a university education. However, even as the state worked with Jesuits and members of the Mexican Church to bolster its National Autonomous University (UNAM) system,⁴ Catholics remained distrustful of secular education. Specifically, JCFM *socias* feared that university spaces would lead women to Marxism and other "materialist ideologies." They characterized the public university as hostile toward faith and condemned students who left their college experience "feeling indifferent, even skeptical, toward themselves and God."⁵

Unlike their predecessors, the JCFM's new generation of *socias* did not emanate from affluent neighborhoods or prominent families. Though by no means the majority of students on university campuses, these urban middle-class *universitarias* largely aspired to administrative white-collar employment as secretaries, typists, and office assistants. Through this newfound access to the public sphere, female students sought to make a name for themselves and gain a relative degree of social mobility. However, the JCFM's

³ "Sexto Censo de la Población, 1940," as published by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI). URL: <https://en.www.inegi.org.mx/programas/ccpv/1940/#Tabular_data>. Accessed January 14, 2022.

⁴ For more on Catholic activists, Jesuit priests, the UNAM, and the budding Universidad Iberoamericana, see David Espinosa, *Jesuit Student Groups, the Universidad Iberoamericana, and Political Resistance in Mexico, 1913-1979* (University of New Mexico Press, 2014). On youth and student martyrdom, Robert Weis, *For Christ and Country: Militant Catholic Youth in Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

⁵ "JCFM: Movimiento Estudiantil, Notas."

Movimiento Estudiantil criticized their “status-seeking aspirations” and condemned them for their alleged vanity.⁶

And yet, instead of rejecting the university altogether, the JCFM recognized that some *socias* genuinely pursued higher education as a means to “improve themselves and others.” They praised students who approached the university as a vehicle from which to contribute to society and even embraced the possibility of “approaching God through scientific inquiry.” As a result, the JCFM proposed a compromise between *socias*’ individual development and their responsibilities as “emissaries of God.” They embraced this newfound duality and held that women were now accountable for both private and public “duties.”⁷

At home, *socias* would continue to work towards motherhood and encourage their loved ones’ spiritual development. In the classroom, the women would strive toward the betterment of society and the eradication of “communism” from the minds of others. Still, the Movimiento warned *socias* against becoming “overly politicized” by university student life. It claimed that this would lead to women’s “masculinization” and that *socias* should never lose sight of their inextricable “feminine condition.”⁸

Within the broader context of Catholic women’s activism, the Movimiento Estudiantil sought to navigate overlapping ideological undercurrents that were decades in the making. At the core of Mexican *católicas* political-religious projects, the Movimiento spoke to different aspects of upper-class women’s thirty-year Counterrevolution. First and

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

foremost, the JCFM's distrust of student youth harkened back to the 1930s and *socias'* anti-Protestant posturing. Like its predecessor Commission on Family Education, the Movimiento Estudiantil warned against over-empowering individual youth at the expense of faith and a broader spiritual community. Still, the UFCM's recent embrace of Catholic individualism allowed for a reconciliation between personal uplift and religious adherence. Similarly, the JCFM now made room for *socias* to engage the world as students who strived to forge giving lives *and* a deeper sense of self.

Secondly, the Movimiento's anti-communist discourses connected the JCFM to a long line of religious activism that spanned back to the nineteenth century and the tenets of Catholic social doctrine. From the Damas Católicas 1922 Congress, through the founding of the LNDLR and Mexican Catholic Action, women's spiritual empowerment had long defined itself through its opposition to a communist "Other"—foreign or domestic, realistic or imagined. However, *socias* deviated from their previous attacks on the state's labor syndicates, secular feminist movements, or the peasant indigenous countryside. Though these remained prevalent concerns among Catholic women's circles, activists now held that "Marxism" emanated from the university classroom and turned their attention closer to home.

This change reflected a broader transformation in Mexican Church-state relations, which had now transitioned from a secret war against "external" enemies to a Cold War conflict that inspired vigilance and anxiety around one's more immediate surroundings. Though the outgoing Ávila Camacho administration had compromised with the Church and worked with members of the clergy to put out the fire of *sinarquista* mobilization, the president's bolstering of hegemonic institutions continued to inspire concerns over the

growth of state power. Even in the realm of higher education, the JCFM warned that the university campus had become a battlefield against the forces of secularization. In some cases, *socias* called on students to openly denounce their “atheist professors” and work as a *barrera defensiva* against the state’s alleged formation of an immoral citizenry.⁹

Toward the end of his term, Ávila Camacho moved to strengthen Lázaro Cárdenas’s *Oficina de Información Política*—an offspring of the Cristero-era Departamento Confidencial—and established the *Dirección Federal de Seguridad* (DFS), along with the *Departamento de Investigación Política y Social* (DIPS).¹⁰ Following their involvement in the UNS’s dismantling, the state’s secret police and covert intelligence agencies would continue to further repression in the countryside while turning their attention toward middle-class student movements in the nation’s growing cities. Still, Catholic *universitarios* responded by returning toward more militant and aggressive forms of resistance that rejected family and Church authority—a harkening to the ACJM’s schism from the Church following the end of the Cristero Rebellion and the LNDLR’s decline. As students embraced new forms of rebellion, Catholic activism grew increasingly bifurcated between “radicals” and the more submissive *niños bien*.¹¹

Furthermore, in response to the nation’s demographic transformations, Ávila Camacho established the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) to provide families with

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See Stout, Jr. (2012).

¹¹ See Jaime Pensado, “El Movimiento Estudiantil Profesional (MEP): una mirada a la radicalización de la juventud católica mexicana durante la Guerra Fría,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos*, Vol 31. No. 1 (Winter, 2015), 156-192. Also, see Pensado, *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties* (Stanford University Press, 2013). On the 1970s, see Luis Herrán Avila, “The Other ‘New Man’”: Conservative Nationalism and Right-Wing Youth in 1970s Monterrey,” in Jaime Pensado and Enrique C. Ochoa, eds., *México Beyond 1968: Revolutionaries, Radicals, and Repression During the Global Sixties and Subversive Seventies* (University of Arizona Press, 2018), 195-214

access to medical assistance, social services, and retirement pensions. An unprecedented expansion of the welfare state, the IMSS's founding relied on the languages of "Revolution" and Mexican identity to establish a clientelist relationship with working- and middle-class families. At the same time, the nascent Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) channeled latter-day cardenista corporatism and worked to integrate all sectors of society into its ranks. However, unlike Calles's PNR or Cárdenas's PRM, the PRI's anti-radicalism eventually managed to bring powerful elements of the Mexican clergy into the fold of institutional rule.¹²

And yet, the embers of counterrevolution managed to survive through a variety of different platforms. Suspicious of right-wing militancy, Mexico's middle- and upper-class Catholics mobilized in support of the emergent National Action Party (PAN) and hoped that Catholic institutions of higher learning such as the nascent *Universidad Iberoamericana* would offer a healthy counterweight to the state's public university system.¹³ In the field of journalism, the recently established Carlos Septién García School of Journalism harkened back to social doctrinarians and the establishment of the nation's formidable Catholic press apparatus. Founded by lay activists and members of the clergy, the school vowed to pursue a "new" kind of journalism "imbued with an ethical and humanist spirit that worked toward the benefit of society and the nation's democratic advancement."¹⁴

¹² See Blancarte Pimentel (1992) and (2014).

¹³ See Espinosa (2014).

¹⁴ Salvador Flores Llamas, "La Septién García, forjadora de periodistas profesionales veraces" (2009).

For Mexican católicas, social action and civic activism remained vehicles from which *socias* could exert their influence on the public sphere. Even after acquiring the right to vote in 1953, women still regarded their work through lay groups as the only viable way to integrate religion and politics. By the 1950s and 60s, the JCFM and UFCM would return to the languages of family and anti-communism to tackle the issues of birth control and reproductive rights under the emergent *Movimiento Familiar Cristiano*. During the 1960s and 70s, middle- and upper-class women would draw from the new currents of liberation theology and once again venture out into the countryside in hopes of “evangelizing” indigenous women under the budding CIDHAL initiative—i.e., the *Coordinación de Iniciativas para el desarrollo humano de America Latina*.¹⁵ Though self-proclaimed “progressives” in their mission, *socias*’ anti-indigenous racism permeated nearly all aspects of these initiatives. A vestige of the Counterrevolution’s racialized religious discourses, whiteness endured and expanded outward toward other sectors of Mexican society.¹⁶

¹⁵ See Sanders (2020) and Soledad Loaeza, “Mexico in the Fifties: Women and Church in Holy Alliance,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 33:4 (2005), pp. 138–160. Also, see Saúl Espino Armendáriz, “Disidencias feministas en la Iglesia católica mexicana: el movimiento para la ordenación de mujeres durante los setenta del siglo XX,” *Historia Mexicana* (2022), forthcoming. I also draw on the published and unpublished research of new scholars, friends, and colleagues in Mexico and the United States. Among them María Martha Pacheco Hinojosa in the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Edrea Mendoza at the University of New Mexico, and Natalie Gasparowicz at Duke University.

¹⁶ See Álvarez-Pimentel (2020).

CONCLUSIONS

Through rigorous primary source analyses informed by secondary literature, my dissertation has traced the evolution of upper-class Mexican católicas' counterrevolutionary activism. At its core, my work demonstrates that the Counterrevolution of 1917-1946 was both a religiously motivated political movement and a national campaign for spiritual renewal with undeniable political dimensions. Aside from Catholics' successes and failures, my research has strived to examine lay activists' moments of confluence and divergence from the Revolutionary state. I have treated the Counterrevolution as an aggregate of evolving historical phenomena and thus acknowledged its own contradictions and lack of completion, as well as its continuities and internal transformations.

Overall, my work demonstrates that the Counterrevolution was anything but static. From 1917 to 1946, Mexican Church-state relations transitioned from a secret war against "foreign" enemies to a domestic Cold War conflict that actively leveraged public anxieties to inspire the suppression of dissent. During the confrontational phase (1917-1929), Church-state hostilities were driven by incendiary public discourse, international espionage, and both sides' fear of foreign incursion. By contrast, the institutional (1929-38) and accommodationist (1938-46) phases saw Church-state actors coalesce around a shared distrust of youth and working-class actors to the point of bolstering hegemonic institutions of rule.

The 1940 election attested to Catholics' burgeoning electoral influence and the state's gradual transition toward more conservative positions on the issues of land reform, labor relations, and childhood education. Unlike the Obregón and Calles administrations,

Presidents Cárdenas and Ávila Camacho held cordial relationships with leading members of the Mexican Church and, in Ávila Camacho's case, even seemed to give members of the clergy a chance to exert their influence over policy. Just fourteen years earlier, the Cristero Rebellion had resulted in an explosion of seemingly irreconcilable violence between both factions. While peasant militants continued to wage a war against the government, Mexico's upper-class activists remained aligned with the clergy as the Mexican Church pursued simultaneous strategies of resistance and negotiation.

As my work demonstrates, the Catholic Counterrevolution ultimately failed to topple the Mexican government or reverse the effects of the 1910 Revolution. By the early 1940s, in fact, prominent figures like Archbishop Luís María Martínez readily embraced the fact that they now worked alongside the Revolutionary state to safeguard national morality. This newfound moment of convergence was largely the product of both sides' shared distrust of workers' "radicalization." However, even as members of the clergy seemed to carve out a niche for themselves in this new system of relationships, the role of the nation's middle- and upper-class laity remained ambiguous.

Whatever shortcomings the state saw in fully implementing its program, they were largely the result of internal conflict among the nation's ruling elite and not the product of Catholic social action. From the founding of the PLM to the PNR and the PRM, the state's aversion to working-class radicalism did more to change domestic policy than Catholic activists' anti-communist discourses. Similarly, the ceasefire that ended the Cristero Rebellion was as much the product of the state's negotiations with Church leaders and private-sector interests as it was the result of cristero militants' ability to lock the army into a stalemate. Caught between all of these factions, lay activists rejected violence and

remained loyal to the clergy, but still held reservations toward the prospect of Church-state compromise.

To be certain, middle- and upper-class activists did succeed in using Hispanist ideology and the language of anti-communism to forge viable networks of support in countries like Spain and the United States. Although U.S. and Spanish governments never fully intervened on behalf of cristero rebels, they did speak out against Calles's abuses of power and helped create the conditions for a ceasefire that would benefit the Church. But even as the Damas Católicas and the LNDLR successfully overturned Calles's religious restrictions, a skeptical historian would argue that the president's specific brand of anti-clericalism—violent and authoritarian—was actually an exception to Revolutionary rule and not the norm. Before, during, and after the Cristero Rebellion, all presidents since Díaz had engaged in some form of compromise with Mexican Church. And even after the *arreglos* of 1929, anti-clerical violence persisted at the local level under figures like Tabasco Governor Tomás Garrido Canabal, thereby calling into question the “success” of lay activists' mobilization against state persecution.

Furthermore, while Catholics effectively pushed the Ávila Camacho administration to amend the 1917 Constitution and abolish its calls for “socialist” education, Mexican Catholic Action remained unable to establish a national system of uniform religious instruction. Catholics failed to do away with the state's secular curriculum—or secularism at large—and ultimately abandoned the dream of someday restoring the Church as the nation's “supreme” institution. Instead, the women of Catholic Action developed a new pragmatism that conceded *socias*' “dual mission” in both the public and private spheres. This was reflected in the UFCM's embrace of Catholic individualism in the early 1940s

and the JCFM's acceptance of university education as both a source of personal uplift and a force for the public good.

Similarly, lay activists failed to overturn Cárdenas's labor and land reform programs or replace Obregón and Calles's secular institutions (e.g., the CROM, the SEP, etc.) with religious organizations. At the grassroots, the JCFM's doctrine of "social equilibrium" turned a blind eye toward the realities of workers' economic exploitation and ultimately drove indigenous campesinas away from the fold of Catholic Action. As a result, upper-class activists failed to produce a viable popular movement or pursue a spiritually meaningful material politics that promoted religious conviction while actively engaging with the issues of class and economic inequality. This anti-politics directly contradicted Catholic Action's turn to corporatism and its pursuit of a mass politics approach to galvanize workers. By the late 1930s, *socias* adopted a new authoritarianism and used notions of "spiritual community" to counter youth and working-class actors. By the late 1940s, they embraced more outwardly "democratic" visions of personal spiritual empowerment, but developed racially charged notions of piety and *amor al trabajo* designed to reinforce working-class women's subservience.

And yet despite these shortcomings, the women's Counterrevolution found some success in its ability to develop sophisticated political ideologies and establish powerful counternarratives to the discourse of "Revolution." From its nineteenth-century origins in Catholic social doctrine through the early 1940s, Mexican *católicas*' anti-revolutionary activism sought to strike a balance between *socias*' commitment to social harmony (i.e., hierarchy) and the defense of faith against secularism and state incursions. Though these women encouraged middle- and upper-class activists to engage in meaningful public

works, they remained distrustful of “the masses” and the prospect of “revolution.” Instead, they opted for a specific brand of civic action that promoted spiritual empowerment over material reward. As a result, the Counterrevolution was waged on spiritual terms. Whereas the state turned to the language of proletarian liberation, Catholics appealed to notions of spiritual reconquest, moral uplift, and religious restoration to advance their own notions of white class privilege.

Between 1917 and 1946, Mexican católicas adopted this strategy while adapting to unprecedented challenges. Among other examples, the influence of social doctrine can be seen in the Damas Católicas’ 1922 Convention, the ACM’s distrust of popular religion, and the JCFM’s doctrine of “social equilibrium.” Still, even within the confines of social Catholicism, laywomen’s activism changed dramatically during a short period of time. While the Damas of 1912 had largely engaged in charity work, the JCFM eventually developed a national system of religious instruction that ran parallel, if not contrary to, the government’s Secretariat of Public Education. Between the 1920s and 40s, furthermore, racially-charged moralization campaigns gradually gave way to individualized religious pedagogy that empowered indigenous women as spiritual agents. At the same time, upper-class *socias* moved away from a model of activism that deified individuals like Sofía del Valle, and instead opted to construct shared collective identities as members of a larger spiritual collective.

Throughout these processes, print media became the means through which Church and state actors expressed their mutual distrust and conveyed their respective projects. Race played a crucial role in shaping these discourses and manifested itself in both explicit and indirect ways. For Mexican católicas, Hispanist language became a means to channel anti-

indigenous racism while abiding by the nation's dominant discourses of mestizaje. At the same time, *socias* turned to the languages of class and morality as a way to develop a collective white identity grounded in a shared sense of virtue.

During the Cristero Rebellion, the language of anti-communism became a site for the production of whiteness and provided Catholics with an opportunity to denounce indigeneity as a “vulnerable condition” susceptible to radicalization. By the 1930s, upper-class activists' condemnation of popular religious practices enabled the language of religious orthodoxy to acquire newfound racial meaning. Similarly, notions of “social equilibrium” allowed *socias*' to develop white identities based on their perceived sense of spiritual, economic, and social superiority over indigenous *campesinas*. By the 1940s, activists reinforced racial paternalism and adopted a more individualist language of moral uplift to affirm their own righteousness in contrast to non-white “Others.”

Contributions and Further Inquiry

Throughout this dissertation, my study of Mexican *católicas*' counterrevolutionary activism has strived to expose the previously overlooked intersections between race, gender, politics, and religion within the context of modern Mexican history. In doing so, I have attempted to make a new contribution to historical scholarship on right-wing women, global Catholicism, Mexican state formation, and white racial formations. Still, this dissertation leaves open the possibility for further inquiry within its own framing and beyond. While original in its scope and methodology, my work could also be placed in fruitful dialogue with recently published work.

To begin with, the very structure and parameters of this work required careful reframing as a result of the current coronavirus pandemic. Travel restrictions, along with

growing health and safety concerns, all amounted to the cancellation of several archival research trips and the subsequent curtailment of my research agenda. The original periodization of my work spanned into the 1950s and specifically sought to examine Catholic women's activism within the context of university student life. As part of the final installment of my original project, I planned to draw from Chapter 4 of this dissertation and specifically analyze issues pertinent to female youth and gendered perceptions of "rebellion."

At the same time, I would have liked to further explore the clergy's role within the nascent PRI and Catholic activists' perceptions of peasant guerrillas during the Mexican Cold War proper. There, I would connect my analyses to Chapter 5 and trace the evolution of urban middle- and upper-class actors' perceptions of Mexican rurality, working-class radicalism, and the "indigenous" countryside. The relationship between the women of Catholic Action and the PRI remains equally underexamined (if such analyses exist) and overshadowed by studies about women and the National Action Party. I would thus be curious to explore how the women of Catholic Action related to the nation's emergent ruling party and if the PRI's courting of the nation's Catholic middle-classes resulted in any internal schisms—especially after the passage of women's suffrage.

Within the boundaries of the work I did produce, future research is needed to bolster the triangular dimensions of the Mexico-Spain-U.S. relationship, particularly as it pertains to the 1930s and 1940s. Archival limitations make this particularly challenging, as many documents produced during the Spanish Civil War period (1936-39) have either been lost or destroyed. Sadly, the window for oral history seems to have passed on either side of the Atlantic, though there could be possibilities to consult the work of other scholars and/or

existing museum collections. Another option would involve building a narrative from Mexican women's perspective, even if this means approaching the topic from a discursive perspective (the "idea" of the Spanish Civil War) and not engaging in the type of Katzian analysis I initially hoped to pursue.

With regard to the United States, there's a good amount of healthy new scholarship on the Knights of Columbus and their activism around Mexico's Church-state conflict, particularly as it pertains to Calles's 1934 "Grito de Guadalajara" and the Borah Resolution of 1935. Still, I would like to explore the connections between women's groups more deeply and analyze any potential parallels between Mexican católicas perceptions of rurality and U.S. women's views of Mexico, Native American reservations, the Jim Crow South, or any other geographic entity that could have been readily "Othered." Similar to Barbara Weinstein's analyses of Brazil's racialized geographies, this would shed new light on the relationship between racial discourse and spatial imaginaries. This would also be useful in sharpening my analyses of whiteness as a transnational analysis and might even bring Mexican racial dynamics into clearer focus.

Perhaps more importantly, however, is the need for this project to dive deeper into Catholic working-class life and culture so as to avoid reproducing the very monolithic constructions of indigeneity once fashioned and adopted by the women of Catholic Action. I fully recognize that in my decision to center my analyses of whiteness, this study has sacrificed a comprehensive analysis of working-class race relations, particularly as they pertained to indigenous and mixed-race women (mestizas). During my preliminary research, I identified useful documents in the ACM and UFCM archival collections, which I will be returning to during my next research trip. These sources specifically deal with the

Mexican Catholic Labor Confederation (CNCT) and its relationship to women's groups like the Damas Católicas. Furthermore, I will find it particularly useful to engage with diocesan records outside of Mexico City as way to get a fuller picture of moralization campaigns on the ground, and the relationships between forged between JCFM socias and local indigenous communities. The Diocese of Oaxaca seems like a particularly fruitful place to start, for it is mentioned extensively in the Mexico City sources and appears to have played a prominent role in elite women's imaginary.

Along these lines, I would like to move beyond institutional analyses and further explore the complex web of human relationships at the core of organizations like the UFCM or the JCFM. I would specifically prioritize analyzing moments of rivalry or friction to avoid portraying these organizations as monolithic. I would also like to further my analyses of Mexican masculinity and how it was produced within middle- and upper-class activist circles. Though this is a robust theme among scholars of *sinarquismo* and the Cristero Rebellion, I would like to examine how masculinity was produced outside the language of religious militancy. Scholars like Lilia Villegas have recently begun to explore the language of fatherhood and its role in molding Catholic masculinity. I would find it fruitful to engage with these kinds of conversations, as the relationship between family discourses and constructions of masculine identity remain relatively understudied.

On the topic of middle- and upper-class Mexican women's lay activism, my work resonates with recent studies published by scholars like Sofia Crespo Reyes, Elizabeth Cejudo Ramos, Saúl Espino Armendáriz, Margaret Chowning, Stephen J.C. Andes, Kristina Boylan, Nichole Sanders, Pedro Meléndez, Martha Pacheco, Vera García Núñez, and Susana Salazar, among others. At the same time, I have found that my

work's emphasis on non-militant laity makes for a productive counterpoint to the work of *sinarqueólogos* like Servando Ortoll, Nathan Ellstrand, Julia Young, Eva Nohemi Orozco García, and Austreberto Martínez. On a transnational scale, scholars like Rebecca Arce Pinedo, Inma Blasco Herranz, and Chiake Watanabe will find my analyses of women's activism particularly relevant to their work on Spanish women and youth during the 1920s and 30s. Similarly, my study of Hispanism will find a receptive audience among scholars like Daniela Arbaiza, Kirsten Weld, Ariadna Guerrero, Cris Culton, Julio Merino de la Cueva, José Ramón Rodríguez Lago, David Tamayo and Ethan Besser Frederick.

These are but a few interlocutors with whom I have been fortunate enough to engage during my graduate career. As it stands, the field of modern Mexican Catholic history is fertile ground for new studies of gender, race relations, nation-state formation, and transnational ideological currents, among other topics. My work has strived to demonstrate that the history of Mexican women's Catholicism lends itself to these and other kinds of analyses. At the same time, I remain humbled by some of the unfinished aspects of my work and look forward to building a career around answering many of these questions.

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