

THE CHURCH AND MEXICO

THE Holy Father has drawn the attention of all the faithful to Mexico by his appeal for prayers for the Church in that truly distressful land.

What exactly is happening in Mexico? The difficulty in answering this question arises not from lack of matter, but from the confused inability to sort out the overwhelming mass of information that has come from different sources. American and Canadian newspapers and reviews, representing the concern of people who are nearer the scene of all the trouble, are our chief informants, though it seems our own Press is beginning to take notice since we have an article on Mexico in *The Times* for April 21st.

For the ordinary Englishman, with a taste for reading, Mexico is always associated with the valiant Cortés, whose exploits are cherished memories of our boyhood reading and are familiar to all who have read Prescott's classic work. Mexico, which presented to Cortés its difficulties in the shape of orgies of human sacrifice, seems now to demand another Cortés to deal with orgies of another kind.

The Faith, planted by the Spanish missionaries who followed in the wake of the conquerors, took firm root; and in the three hundred years of Spanish influence a real Catholic tradition was formed and fostered, so that to-day ninety-nine per cent. of the entire population are said to be Catholic. Racially, the people are mixed. Of its fifteen million inhabitants, six million are pure-blooded Indians, one million pure-blooded Spaniards or Castilian Creoles, and eight million are Mestizos—the offspring of mixed Spanish and American-Indian parentage. This Indian-Spanish combination is the true Mexican.

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No doubt racial hatreds, which led to the revolt against Spanish domination and finally to the declaration of independence in 1821, have much to do with the present troubles. Spanish and foreign priests are singled out for attack; and the Church, always regarded as politically conservative and reactionary, is looked upon as the enemy (though it is interesting to remember that the standard of revolt against Spain, which culminated in Mexican emancipation, was first raised by two parish priests, Miguel Hildago y Costilla and José Maria Morelos).

Whatever be the causes that have brought about the present persecution, the undoubted facts are appalling. The first oppressive measures against the liberty of the Church began after the overthrow of Spanish rule and the formation of the Republic. In 1859, 1860, and 1873 laws were passed amounting to an entire severance of Church and State, and a virtual proscription of religion. These laws have been renewed and extended as recently as 1917; and the present expulsions of priests and religious, the closing of churches, schools and institutes served by priests and nuns only mean that the established laws of the Republic are being ruthlessly enforced. There is an attempt being made to complicate the issue by the assertion that American capitalistic enterprise and foreign exploitation of the Mexican oilfields are root causes of the trouble. If such evils exist—as no doubt they do—they furnish no justification of the fact that the law of this ‘free republican democracy’ is framed specifically to rob the Church of its liberty, and to stamp out religion in the land. One has but to read the articles of the Republic’s Constitution to see that this is true.

The law of the land prohibits any minister of any creed or religion unless he be Mexican born. Yet at the same time there is to be no religious education of

The Church and Mexico

any kind; and seminaries, where native priests might be trained, are being closed down and the students and professors dispersed. Religious vows and monastic orders are forbidden. The State claims the right to determine the maximum number of ministers of religion. In Tobasco the number of priests has been reduced to seven—seven priests for 180,000 souls! It was further enacted that these priests should not be less than forty years of age and married. The result has been that all except three priests (who are in hiding) have been exiled.

In this free Republic priests have no vote; they are incapable of inheriting property from any individual to whom they are not related by blood within the fourth degree. Anyone who violates these statutes is deprived of trial by jury. Every Church or religious building now existing, or ever to come into existence, in Mexico is the sole property of the State. No religious rite shall be performed except in buildings under government supervision. No priest may enter a school, nor may he or any of his dependents have anything whatsoever to do with any charitable or educational institution. This is the very briefest possible summary of what is the accepted and established constitution of the country.

The Catholics of Mexico are computed to be ninety nine per cent. of the entire population, and yet there is not a single Catholic representative in the Federal Assembly. The elections are a farce, and the governing body that framed this iniquitous constitution keeps itself in power by corrupt practice. For instance, in the State of Queretara the opposing candidate was not even permitted to be registered, so that no one could vote for him. In Morelia the ballot boxes were already filled when the polls opened. When other boxes were asked for, they were supplied; but, when the polls closed, their contents were burned.

Blackfriars

It is the story of Bolshevik Russia all over again. An armed junta holds sway, and anarchy runs wild. The nationalisation of the sources of supply and the re-distribution of estates of land-owners (without compensation) among the peons is a beautifully euphemistic way of describing pillage and spoliation. Meanwhile, the same sad results of misery and starvation threaten to follow in Mexico as came from the communistic experiment in Russia. For example, in the State of Morelos the sugar yield, which used to be 50,000 tons, is now nil. The rice and corn crops are one-tenth of what they were in 1910, and cattle raising has ceased. The cost of living is enormously excessive. Beggary and destitution are widespread; all the conditions favourable for the perpetuation of crime and disorder are being diligently fostered. The death rate exceeds forty to the thousand. The Government has money, power and guns and all the means of maintaining its prestige.

It is Russia all over again; and, as in Russia, so in Mexico, the one stabilising influence in society, the one sure bulwark against anarchy—the Christian religion—is singled out for attack.

The Times tells us that all the prohibited priests and nuns, Spanish, American and Irish, have departed. And we are left wondering where it will all end.

THE EDITOR.