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Christian Rivas is a second-year history major with interests in Mexican and Indigenous history. He wrote his article in Dr. Cameron Jones's Colonial Latin America class. Christian hopes to pursue a teaching credential and become an educator.

# A Troubled Marriage: Colonial Imposition of the Catholic Church in Mexico

### Christian Rivas

Since the beginning of the Colonial Era in Latin America, the Catholic Church has imposed itself upon the region politically, economically, and socially. As a result, the domineering presence of the Catholic Church and its related branches—not excluding the notorious Holy Office of the Inquisition—disrupted Indigenous society through violence and conversion. However, Latin Americans—and more specifically, Mexicans—formed a pernicious relationship with the Catholic Church which fomented bloody anti-secularization conflicts like the Reform War and the Cristero Rebellion. In other words, an institution that once excommunicated, executed, and manipulated Indigenous Mexicans, became the leading institution for Mexican resistance.

To this day, the Catholic Church remains a unifying figurehead for Mexico, with its imagery present on nearly every street corner. As recently as a decade ago, more than three-quarters of the Mexican population identified themselves as Catholic.<sup>1</sup>

Considering the long and complex relationship that Mexican people originally held with the Church, their willingness to put their lives at risk in defense of Catholicism brings into question the ecclesiastical role that created this dynamic. The Catholic Church played an important—though often deleterious—part in the development of the socioeconomic and political sphere of the nation. Mexico's allegiance to the Church can be attributed to the imposition of Catholic and Spanish

<sup>1</sup> Juan Carlos Donoso, "On Religion, Mexicans Are More Catholic and Often More Traditional than Mexican Americans," Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, May 31, 2020), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/12/08/on-religion-mexicans-are-more-catholic-and-often-more-traditional-than-mexican-americans/.

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tradition, often adopted as a means of persistence and survival by Indigenous people. Social and educational programs that preached Catholicism and taught Spanish, the Church's focus on building trust by converting Indigenous nobility, and overseeing the adoption of Hispanic names resulted in the permanence of the faith in Mexico. In the pre-Hispanic Valley of Mexico, powerful Indigenous empires conquering neighboring communities was commonplace. The practices that took hold during this time—including ritual assimilation following a conquest—were major factors in the early acceptance of Catholicism in the region of modern-day Mexico. For instance, paying tribute to the conquerors' deities was the norm, which neighbors of the Mexica (Aztec) people were familiarized with as they were immersed into the various traditions of the empire.<sup>2</sup> Even so, the introduction of Catholicism into Latin America was met with Indigenous resistance on several occasions, which often resulted in the deaths of colonizers preaching their mendicant orders.3 Still, these orders continued to pursue a "spiritual conquest" and convert as many people as possible.4 One of the methods seen throughout the early stages of this evangelization of the Americas involved building a community tied together by faith from the top-down. Mendicant orders—like the Franciscans and Augustinians—utilized the preexisting social hierarchies of the Nahua populations (Nahuatl-speaking Indigenous groups) to their advantage by coercing the Tlatoani—the head of Nahua communities—to convert, thereby encouraging their people to follow suit.5

By making use of this top-down conversion tactic, conquistadors and mendicant priests alike could exploit the influence of the Tlatoanis and create figureheads for their communities to look to as models of piety. The Franciscans, in particular, achieved this through focused baptismal efforts. While eager to baptize as many people as possible, the order was aware of the difficulty to individually convince—or coerce—an entire Indigenous community to concede to the Catholic faith through the ritual. As a result, the Franciscans focused the baptisms on the

districts where the Tlatoani and other political leaders resided. Doing so allowed the rest of the community to look to the elite who underwent the ritual of their conquerors and feel more inclined to accept their new faith shortly thereafter.<sup>6</sup> For example, Hernan Cortes—the conquistador who led the expedition against the Aztec empire—used baptisms to cement alliances and spread Catholicism to the leaders of Tlaxcala. Acting in confirmation of their alliance, the Tlaxcala elder Xicotencatl—after agreeing to work together against the Aztec Empire—was baptized alongside his daughter.<sup>7</sup> Through this process, the various Catholic orders sent to the New World created an attachment to the Church that began with elites in conquered communities, and thus, made Catholicism more approachable than if they had attempted more forceful conversions.

As these conversions laid the foundations for Indigenous Catholic communities, attachment steadily grew as the Church continually and consistently introduced more of their traditions and staked their claim in the Americas. Not long after, the Hispanicization of names gradually invaded Indigenous spaces, replacing Nahua names with more Church-affiliated ones. A notable example of this practice is the case of Cuauhtlatoatzin—a peasant from Cuautlitlán, near present-day Mexico City—who was baptized and given the name Juan Diego. He spiritually galvanized his community following his baptism, claiming to have had a divine encounter with a dark-skinned Virgin Mary: The Virgin of Guadalupe, who remains at the forefront of Mexican Catholicism to this day. In another instance, the aforementioned Tlaxcala elder and his daughter were also subjects of this process; Xicotencatl became Don Lorenzo de Vargas, and his daughter subsequently adopted the name Doña Luisa. This practice detached the indigeneity of these communities and reinforced dependence on the Church as generations began to pass Hispanic names onto their children rather than Nahua names.

As Indigenous names slowly phased out of Mexican society, there also existed the presence of the Church through social means—namely ecclesiastical education—which led the people of present-day Mexico to embrace Catholicism.

<sup>2</sup> The Mexica people would have their conquered subjects pay tributes to the Aztec deities; in some cases, the Mexica would adopt some deities from these conquered polities into their own religion; Pohl John M D. and Martin Windrow, "Policy in Victory," in Aztec, Mixtec and Zapotec Armies (London England: Osprey, 2003), 14-16.

<sup>3</sup> Cameron D. Jones, "Rebellion, Religion and Reform," in In Service of Two Masters: The Missionaries of Ocopa, Indigenous Resistance, and Spanish Governance in Bourbon Peru (California: Stanford University Press, 2018), 55-88, 55-61.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Ricard, "The Catechism," in The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain: 1523-1572 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 96-108.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Cline, "The Spiritual Conquest Reexamined: Baptism and Christian Marriage in Early Sixteenth-Century Mexico," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 73, no. 3 (January 1993), 453-80.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> His daughter was also gifted to one of Cortes's men not long after their meeting; it was not uncommon for Indigenous women from elite families to be gifted to Spaniards following their baptisms; Bernal Díaz del Castillo, García Genaro, and Alfred Percival Maudslay, *The Conquest of New Spain* (New York: Penguin Books, 1967), 121-22, 308.

<sup>8</sup> LaVerne Harrell Clark. "The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico by Robert Ricard." Western American Literature 2, no. 1 (1967): 69–70.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Matovina, "The Origins of the Guadalupe Tradition in Mexico," *The Catholic Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (2014), 243-270.

<sup>10</sup> Díaz del Castillo, 121-122, 308

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The education of the Indigenous population through doctrinas—Indigenous parishes typically placing emphasis on religious instruction—taught the native non-Christians about the faith.<sup>11</sup> Although Spanish was not initially taught in these parishes as means of disenfranchising the Indigenous population, by the 18th century Indigenous people were beginning to learn Spanish in doctrinas. This provided a further step toward assimilation as those who could interpret Spanish were afforded more opportunities for social mobility—often working as scribes or translators.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, attachment to the Church granted some Indigenous people fluidity within the social hierarchies of the casta—a racial caste system imposed by the Spanish. However, while an education may have granted families opportunity to ascend the hierarchy—as succeeding generations assimilated—doing so involuntarily perpetuated the replacement of Indigenous tradition with Spanish and Catholic traditions.

Though hierarchical ascension took generations, the adoption of Catholic tradition implicated anyone who adhered to the faith as a "traitor" to their people, as they chose a path of assimilation. This landed Indigenous Mexicans who chose to follow Spanish tradition in a state of nepantla, a Nahua concept of in-between-ness or transition of identities.<sup>13</sup> Riding the line between indigeneity and Hispanicism, Nahuas with this positionality were renowned by Spaniards for their so-called civility—espousing Spanish tradition while unintentionally subduing their unassimilated counterparts.<sup>14</sup> In the years following the Mexican War for Independence from the Spanish crown (1810-1821), a similar concept befell the Indigenous Maya people in Yucatan. After refusing to assimilate under Spanish rule, thousands rebelled against the Mestizo and Creole upper classes who encroached on Indigenous land and mistreated Maya workers on haciendas. The uprising led to the

creation of an autonomous Maya state of Chan Santa Cruz, which Mexican forces recaptured just over three decades after its inception. The Maya Caste War encapsulated the feelings of discontent and mistrust of Indigenous communities towards the Catholic Faith. Thus, blurred lines between social advancement and social rejection from Indigenous spaces were further reinforced, once again complicating the ever-nuanced Mexican-Catholic relations. Unfortunately for the Maya, Mexican people continued conversions and baptisms by the thousands every day—even as far back as 1524. This rapid conversion meant that eventually Catholicism would surpass other faiths in Mexico by the sheer size of its following.

The Church and its relationship with poverty also made Catholicism more appealing to the Indigenous communities. For instance, in the early stages of the Colonial Era, some Indigenous converts appreciated the vows of poverty that many mendicant orders undertook, believing that missionaries were more receptive to the needs of the impoverished communities they served; though, colonial elites' understanding of the tribulations common folk faced had always lacked. <sup>16</sup> Alongside this, the Church provided social services to the communities where they resided. For example, the Franciscan and Augustinian orders founded several hospitals throughout modern-day Mexico. Friars like Pedro de Gante—one of the first established Franciscan missionaries in the New World—had hospitals built as tools for conversion, though some primarily wanted to stop the decimation of the "epidemic-prone" Indigenous populations. <sup>17</sup> Other services provided by the Catholic Church ranged anywhere from offering work and housing to education which made poor Indigenous populations more attuned to what the Church offered for their communities.

Importantly, operations created by the government to eliminate poverty or foster education unassociated with the Church tended to fail. One case was that of a poor house in Mexico City, just a few decades prior to independence. The poor house intended to educate orphaned and poor youths and put them to work. However, the Catholic Church's vision—for beggars to receive aid and charity from those who wanted to go to heaven—was so embedded in the culture of Mexican poverty

<sup>11</sup> Roco Corts. "The Colegio Imperial De Santa Cruz De Tlatelolco and Its Aftermath: Nahua Intellectuals and the Spiritual Conquest of Mexico." A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture, n.d., 86-105.

<sup>12</sup> The Spanish purposely did not teach the Indigenous populations Spanish until the 18th century, aiming to disenfranchise them and strip them of popular power this way; a notable example of an Indigenous person who learned Spanish and benefitted from their status as a chronicler was Felipe Guaman Pomo de Ayala from Peru—who denounced the ill treatment of Indigenous people through his work; Ricard, 39-60; Cline, 453-80.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth J. Andrien, *The Human Tradition in Colonial Latin America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 152-171; The use of nepantla when reflecting on identities was popularized by the Chicano movement in the United States, to describe a feeling of being in-between Mexican and American identity; Charles Scott and Nancy Tuana, "Nepantla: Writing (from) the in-Between," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 31, no. 1 (2017), 1-15.

<sup>14</sup> Laura E. Matthew, "Particularly Ladinos Language, Ladinization, & Mexicano Identity," essay, in *Memories of Conquest: Becoming Mexicano in Colonial Guatemala* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 231–68.

<sup>15</sup> Father Gante made mention of upwards of 10,000 people a day getting baptized in the New World; he and two other religious were among the first Friars to establish themselves in New Spain, though they met their demise not long after; Hubert Howe Bancroft, Volume X History of Mexico Vol. II 1521-1600 (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft and Company, Publishers, 1883), 170; Ricard, 2-14

<sup>16</sup> Cline, 453-80

<sup>17</sup> Ricard, 157-162

that the poor house eventually just acted as a shelter for orphans. <sup>18</sup> Thus, the ecclesiastical role in impoverished communities was all but certain, as even without direct intervention through social programs, the culture surrounding social welfare and charity was influenced by the Church. <sup>19</sup>

Moving toward the end of the Colonial Era in 1821, with independence achieved, marked a watershed moment in the history of Mexican relations with the Church. Despite the independence movement stemming from Enlightenment ideals, the aftermath proved conservative as it upheld many institutions from the Spanish Colonial Era, including the Catholic Church. Despite the Church's wrong-doings and at times malevolent presence in Indigenous spaces, the institution was cemented as a staple of Mexican society. The Mexican elite readily accepted independence because of its maintenance of clerical privileges, allowing the Church to continue to establish and ally itself with marginalized communities to gain popular power. Conservative Mexican elites used this to their political advantage by siding with the Church and garnering support from the religious lower classes.

By the mid-19th century, more liberal policies centering on land reform and secularization began to take shape in Mexico, but they vied with conservative elites that sought to maintain clerical and fiscal power. These reforms challenged the Church indirectly by limiting the privileges of the clergy; they also directly challenged the institution as the passing of the Ley Lerdo (Lerdo Law) and Ley Juarez (Juarez Law) meant that the Church had to sell any land not used explicitly for religious purposes.<sup>20</sup> These laws also targeted ejidos—communal Indigenous land—thereby creating a shared ecclesiastical and Indigenous discontent with liberal reforms. Not long after the passage of these laws, a more liberal constitution drafted in 1857 limited the power of the Church and separated it from the state. Almost immediately, higher class conservative holdouts declared the constitution null and civil war broke out. The Catholic Church and conservatives—with added support from Indigenous groups stripped of their land by secular reform banded together against liberal forces whose influence in the Mexican political sphere was at its peak since independence. This three-year conflict, known as The Reform War (1858-1861), marked one of the first times that Mexican people fought in the thousands to uphold the Church's power.

Although the civil war resulted in liberal triumph, Benito Juarez—the succeeding Mexican president—was unable to implement many of the reforms promised by the liberal constitution before the French began their imperial ventures in Mexico.<sup>21</sup> The aforementioned conflict brought about the conditions necessary for the French to come into power and form the Second Mexican Empire. As new wave of conservatism befell the region, the Catholic Church remained a staple of society after the failures of the liberal administration. For decades—even following the fall of the Second Mexican Empire in 1867 the Church continued to freely exercise its power and continue to garner the attachment of the common Mexican people through work, housing, and education. Consequently, a sense of proto-nationalism was brewing in Mexico at the turn of the 20th century and people began recognizing their Catholic faith as a factor that united them as Mexicans. With the erasure of their Indigenous roots and the cruelty through which the Church established itself in motion for centuries, Catholicism became an easy commonality. Regardless of hierarchical divisions separating the common and elite, Mexico was becoming unequivocally Catholic as religion and nationality began to go hand in hand.

However, threats to the Church's power became increasingly prevalent especially as the Mexican Revolution ushered in a new wave of radical, secular thinkers in Mexico who fought for labor rights, gender equality, and promotion of literacy. The 1917 constitution, drafted at the end of the revolution, outlined Mexico as a secular state with secular education and freedom of religion. But it was not until President Plutarco Elías Calles came into power in 1924 that the secularization of Mexico truly began to take shape, much to the dismay of the major Catholic centers—like those in the state of Jalisco. Mexican peasants were pitted against one another as they were forced to decide between accepting governmental land reforms—which granted them land in some cases—or protecting their faith which the government persecuted harshly. The divisions created between the proletarian class were apparent, but many chose to fight for the Catholic Church as their faith was the foundation of their communities. Many attended Catholic schools and practiced the rites and rituals of Catholicism on a weekly basis—traditions founded centuries beforehand during the Spanish Colonial Era. This relationship with the Church enticed common Mexican

<sup>18</sup> Silvia Marina Arrom, "The Experiment in Practice," in Containing the Poor: The Mexico City Poor House, 1774-1871 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 76-119.

<sup>19</sup> Marjorie Becker, Setting the Virgin on Fire: Lazaro Cardenas, Michoacan Peasants, and the Redemtion of the Mexican Revolution (Berkeley: Los Angeles, 1995), 4-11.

<sup>20</sup> Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, Ley Lerdo (1856); Benito Juarez, Ley Juarez (1855)

<sup>21</sup> D. M. Coerver, "From Confrontation to Conciliation: Church-State Relations in Mexico, 1867-1884," *Journal of Church and State* 32, no.1 (January 1990), 65-80.

<sup>22</sup> Julia G. Young, "Cristero Diaspora: Mexican Immigrants, the U.S. Catholic Church, and Mexico's Cristero War, 1926-29," The Catholic Historical Review 98, no. 2 (2012), 272-300.

<sup>23</sup> Reynaldo Mendoza, iViva Cristo Rey!, 1974, 313-323.

folk to fight for the Church and end its persecution by the Calles administration. It is estimated that tens of thousands of Cristeros gave their lives for the Catholic cause. Although the Cristero Rebellion ended in compromise which left anti-clerical laws in the constitution but offered Catholics a milder enforcement of these laws, it simultaneously strengthened the Catholic Church's place in Mexico as many Cristeros were martyred and the cause gained sympathy from Catholics from around the world.<sup>24</sup> Now, millions of Mexicans were behind the Catholic Church, fully prepared to fight and die for it.

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In more recent history, the popular power of the Church has hardly faltered, especially in the conscience of the working lower classes. Throughout the 1960s and 70s, a paradigm of ecclesiastical liberation for the working poor permeated throughout Latin America. Liberation Theology spoke on the destitute nature of poverty and marginalization in Latin America and the fundamental choice to achieve social justice and freedom from oppression through one's Faith.<sup>25</sup> In addition to Faith-based social justice, the Mexican population continually stood up for the Catholic Church en masse, even at the risk of opposing Mexican cartels. This was evident in 1993, when a cartel-related shooting led to the death of Mexican cardinal Juan Jesus Posadas Ocampo.<sup>26</sup> Despite fears of violence or retaliation, thousands of Mexicans took to the street and stood in support of the Catholic Church and against cartel violence running the country.

Since its introduction, the Catholic Church's dominant hold in Mexico shaped the development of the nation. From their politics to their wars, the Church imposed itself as a defender of every kind of person—the clergy, elite, conservatives, peasants, and Indigenous communities. Though its intent was undoubtedly deleterious and patronizing, the Catholic Church fostered tight-knit communities during the Colonial Era and established institutions and traditions which became a unifying standard in Mexican society. The Church cemented its place within Mexican nationalism and, despite all its colonial wrongdoings, was at the heart of the fight against secularization. An institution which erased generations before them became the reason they took up arms. An institution which stood for the subjugation and obliteration of the

first societies that called Mexico home, became an untouchable characteristic of what it meant to be Mexican in later centuries—and even to this day.

<sup>24</sup> They could also make movies about it for Mexican parents to show to their impressionable young children. I certainly cannot blame my mom though, For Greater Glory was an interesting flick, after all.

<sup>25</sup> Mario I. Aguilar, "Liberation Theology," Christian Theologies of the Sacraments, 2017, 2-11.

<sup>26</sup> Jennifer M. Hazen, Dennis Rodgers, and Gareth Jones, "12 'Hecho En México': Gangs, Identities, and the Politics of Public Security," in Global Gangs: Street Violence across the World (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 266.

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