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Consolidating the Mexican State: Constitutionalism during the Presidency of Plutarco Elías Calles

Pedro Gerson

University of Pennsylvania, pedgerson@gmail.com

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A Senior Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Honors in History.
Faculty Advisor: Kristen Elizabeth Stromberg Childers, and Ann Farnsworth-Alvear

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Abstract

This work presents an analysis of the presidency of Plutarco Elías Calles. It views Calles as a man of the Mexican Revolution and as an heir to the values promoted by the Constitution that came as a result of this movement. His respect for the constitution, pushed him to act on his anticlerical beliefs and to unify the Revolutionary movement under one party. Focusing mostly on the reasons and results of his anticlerical policy, we hope to gain insight into Calles' constitutionalism. By understanding Calles' policies, we can understand both the nature of the peculiar separation of Church and State in a very religious country, and the reasons for the formation of a party that would rule Mexico for seventy-two years.

Comments

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You can't compose revolutionary music with Church organs.

- David Alfaro Siqueiros

Introduction

On November 18th 2007, a group of supporters of the recently defeated presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador were united in the main square in Mexico City hearing their candidate's proposals for how to best handle the future of the country. At the same time, the main Cathedral, which is nearby, rang the bells for twelve o'clock mass. Arguing that the incessant pealing of the bells was a direct interruption of their meeting, López Obrador's supporters stormed into the main Cathedral in downtown Mexico City. The next day, the central Archdiocese in Mexico chose to close the doors of the Cathedral indefinitely until the safety of the clergy and the parishioners could be guaranteed. The doors were opened only five days later, after the city government agreed to protect the precinct and the crisis was stabilized. The last time that the clergy had decided to suspend its activities in Mexico was in 1926 prior to the outbreak of the Cristero War. On this occasion, the Church was answering to provocations from the administration of Plutarco Elías Calles that was aiming to undermine clerical influence in State affairs. Although it is impossible to equate the events of 2007 and those of 1926, one can use both these examples to see just how deeply State and Church relations affect the political history of Mexico.

The archives of President Plutarco Elías Calles and of Álvaro Obregon's private secretary Fernando Torreblanca are located in the basement of a large house in one of Mexico City's trendiest neighborhoods. The house has cement walls and is built mostly in a colonial type of architecture. It is not ostentatious at all, yet its attempt of severity is betrayed by the elegant doors, large windows, and discrete, yet charming mosaics. Although it is rarely visited, it has a staff of at least seven people, this not including the

two policemen that guard the entrance or the cook that seems to have been an employee of the Calles family itself. On the other hand, the archive of Mexican archdiocese is on the first floor of the building that administrates the entire Mexican archdiocese. It is small, has only a few employees and is uncomfortable for it has cramped spaces and poor design. It is fitting that the archive that holds a collection of documents of one of Mexico's most important presidents, finds itself in better condition, than the archive of the Church. Though there is nothing wrong with the Church archive, and it is evident that money has been invested for its upkeep, in appearance it is run down. This seems to be the way that President Calles would have liked for the institutions themselves to have been developed. An upright State in opposition to a weakening Church. Although present conditions are very far from this, Calles did strive for this goal.

Before outlining the objectives of this project it is important to define the conception of the modern State that I will use. The concept of State will come up throughout and it is important to have a working definition of what an ideal modern State should look like. Although there have been many definitions and manifestations of the State, and often contradicting ones, it has still been able to present "itself as a solid, stable and ultimately necessary form of social and political organization in modernity."¹ The main historical agents we will look at work under the assumption that the State is a necessary requirement for the progress of society. They may not have conceived of the ideal State in the exact same way as we do. Furthermore, the Mexican State that we will study does not take this form, and throughout the thesis we will see the many ways in which this State is far from the ideal State we describe. Nevertheless, the aim of the

¹ Daniel Chernilo, *A Social Theory of the Nation-State: The political forms of modernity beyond methodological nationalism*. (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1

historical actors we will look at was to create a State that resembled the one that we are now trying to define. It is therefore important to outline the basic characteristics of the ideal State, as we understand it. We will borrow the categories outlined by Gianfranco Poggi in defining the State.² The first requirement for a State is that it should be sovereign, meaning that it has monopoly of legitimate use of force. Also, it should be artificial, that is it rests on laws that are fabricated by the people and made as an artifice to govern society. It must have functionally specific agencies and ministries, which are all interdependent. Besides this, it ought to have a depersonalized and honest civil service. Finally, it should be abstract, which means that citizens, not individuals, to which all laws are applied to equally, form the State. This working definition should give us strong groundings to understand the project of President Calles and the formation of the State in Mexico.

The State that we described produces secular citizens, for they are not defined by their creed. By not recognizing religion it is thus pitted against the Church. “Religion was challenged by a new conception of the modern State, in which citizens without religion were supposed to live in a new, secular rational State.”³ This confrontation happened all over Europe and it spread into Mexico as well. Throughout the 19th Century and into the 20th, there was a constant struggle over the influence that the Church should hold in Mexican politics. The official position oscillated as leaders changed. Nevertheless, the conflict always remained real.

In the beginning of the 20th Century, Mexico was suddenly immersed in a Revolution. This Revolution proved to be transformative, not only because out of it came

² Gianfranco Poggi, *The state: its nature, development, and prospects*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990

³ Jonathan Steinberg, Lecture given on February 26th 2008: Church and State in Italy

the political leaders of the time period we will examine but also because its culmination was marked by the Constitution of 1917. Although the clauses of this Constitution proved to be very hard to enforce,⁴ it was still a document that would transform the policies of the governments to come. It is around this document that President Calles would base all of his policies. By focusing on the enforcement of the Constitution, Calles drove the country into a bloody conflict between the people who resented the values of the Revolution and its constitution and the State. These people, known as *Los Cristeros*, would drape themselves in the flag of Catholicism, claiming to defend its rightful position in the State. The war that ensued was obviously a war about the relationship between Church and State, but more fundamentally it was about the conflict between the values of change and tradition. The former was represented by the political heirs of the Revolution, and the latter by those who opposed the legacy of the Revolution.

Eric Hobsbawm describes the typical champion of the French Revolution as “not a democrat but a believer in constitutionalism, a secular state with civil liberties and guarantees for private enterprise.”⁵ We will understand Calles as being a man who held similar values, for he inherited the kind of education born out of the French Revolution. After gaining an understanding of Calles’ life and his ideological formation, we will focus our attention towards the Church-State issue in order to see what were President Calles’ political ambitions. By analyzing both the Cristero War and the formation of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Party), the PNR, we will try to see his political project as one centered on Constitutionalism. Though the main focus will

⁴ Berta Ulloa, “La lucha armada” in *Historia General de México*. (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 2006), 808

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 59

be on the Cristero War, we will look at the PNR to further solidify our notions of what Calles' goals were.

The first chapter is devoted to a survey of the history of Church-State relations in Mexico from the time of the Spanish colony until 1926. It will focus mostly on the 19th Century, for it is in these years that the institutions of the new independent nation struggled to achieve power. The conflict of the Cristero War was born out of the conflicts that were played out in these years and it is therefore important to know this history in order to contextualize the decisions of Church officials, of Catholic rebels and of Calles himself. Also, in order to understand why Calles pursued policies against the Church, it is important to briefly survey what had been the previous manifestations of anticlericalism in Mexico.

The second chapter sketches a small portrait of Calles' life. To understand aspects of his childhood, the positivist tradition he inherited from his education, and his political origins as a man of the Mexican Revolution will be key in explaining the reasons behind Calles' decisions in power. By putting his life in context, we will gain a better understanding of why he felt that most Mexicans endorsed the project of the Revolution, and why he pushed the country into a bloody internal conflict. Also, it will inform us when assessing his role in the formation of a party.

In the third chapter we move into the exploration of Calles' policies as president and in particular his actions toward the Church in the years prior to the Cristero War. We will look also at the way in which the Mexican archdiocese responded to the government. We will also explain the reasons behind the mobilization of people, mostly peasants, who were the ones who waged the conflict against the State. Focusing mainly on primary

documents we will try to outline the reasons behind Calles' open confrontation with the clergy. Using the insights gained from his biography it will be possible to see that what ultimately drove Calles to attack the Church was really an emphatic belief in the rule of law. For him, the Revolution had produced a document that outlined the path towards progress. Which meant the path towards a developed modern western country. This chapter will conclude with a look at the resolution of the Cristero War. We will see that the end of the conflict did not come about because of the military might of the Mexican army. Rather, it was the result of a pragmatic decision taken by the Vatican that forced the clergy to sign a peace with the administration of Calles' successor, Emilio Portes Gil. The end of the war gave the State a dominant position and thus allowed for its consolidation.

We will then move back and analyze the origins of the PNR. In this last chapter, we will see the parallels between the birth of the PNR and the religious conflict that was developing at the same time. We view the PNR as a product of Calles' Constitutionalism, and how its major objective was to consolidate the strength of the State. An understanding of the origins of the PNR will give us further insight into Calles' political ambitions and will also explain how it was that a divergent movement like the Revolution became institutionalized.

This work presents an analysis of the presidency of Plutarco Elías Calles and his role in the formation of the modern Mexican State. It views Calles as a man of the Mexican Revolution and as an heir of the values promoted by the Constitution that came as a result of this movement. It tries to explain Calles' belief in the project of the Enlightenment and the miscalculations that came out of this belief. It shows how a part of

the Mexican population responded to this project, and how this response led to a military conflict. It will show that the resolution of this conflict was not one orchestrated between the State and the rebels, but between the State and the Vatican, who had never supported the rebels, and who chose a diplomatic ending to the war in order to survive. It illustrates how at the end of the war, the State leaders perceived victory, when in reality they had overestimated how much they had actually weakened the Church. The final aim is to give the reader a greater insight into the formation of the one-party State system that dominated in Mexico for seventy years, and help explain how it is that an extremely devout country came to have a secular government.

La Iglesia: from Colonization to Revolution

The Catholic Church in Mexico is an institution that deeply affects the country's past and present. Historians, social scientists and the general population refer to this institution as *la Iglesia*, the Church, without specifying that it is the Catholic Church that they are talking about. That is because such specification is unnecessary. In this vein, I will speak about "the Church" throughout. Catholicism has become an integral part of Mexican identity, whether or not one is Catholic. The institution that bears this religion has thus become one of the most influential historical agents in the country. Historian Francisco Miranda argues that in order to construct an Ecclesiastical History of Mexico one must consider "the Church, not as the eternal rival of the State, or independent thereof, but as an integral part of our social, cultural, economic and political reality."⁶ Although we will see how the State and the Church clash, it is important to keep in mind Miranda's clarification of the role the Church plays in the Mexican collective unconscious. For even if the State and Church collide as institutions they both remain important foundations of the Mexican historical being.

The history of the Mexican Church is as long as the history of colonization of this country. The spiritual conquest of Mexico became the main justification for the conquest of Latin American territories. Theologians "justified the conquest [of Latin America] if indigenous tribes were converted to Christianity after it. Queen Isabel agreed to Christopher Columbus' pretension, thinking about the salvation of so many unfaithful."⁷ Throughout the period of Spanish rule, however, the Church had less power

⁶ Francisco Miranda "El mestizaje religioso en México." *Iglesia y Religiosidad en México*, (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1992), 1. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

⁷ Rueda Jiménez in Jack D.L. Holmes, "El mestizaje religioso en México." *Iglesia y Religiosidad en México*. (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1992), 82

than was apparent, for the Spanish crown kept a stronghold on its policies. Spanish power in Mexico, nevertheless, did rely on the Church. Once the Church removed its support of the Spanish government and joined the people, the Spanish crown surrendered to the movement for independence.⁸

The Bourbons, who controlled the country up until the fight for independence at the beginning of the nineteenth century, had a policy of separating, at least somewhat, Church and State. Inadvertently, this policy set the stage for the movement of independence for it allowed priests to mobilize the people in the uprising against the State. The Bourbons had alienated the lower, that is the poorer, clergy by taking away religious immunity and seizing funds raised by each individual church. Since the higher clergy was rich, Spanish policies did not infuriate them as much. Historian Jean Meyer argues that the lower clergy joined the insurgent movement for independence and saw that “since the beginning of the movement [of independence] the defense of religion and the Church was stated.”⁹

By 1820, after ten years of the war of independence, the Mexican economy was in shambles and the Church had suffered the effects of such devastation. Having no economic incentives to support the crown and fearing the Spanish liberals who controlled the country at the time, the entire clergy threw its weight behind Agustín de Iturbide (September 27th 1783- July 19th 1824), a conservative who led the insurgent movement, under the banner of “religion, union, independence,” against the Crown. Once independence was finalized and Iturbide gained control, he set back the innovations carried through by liberals and adopted more conservative ideas. “Above all, it [Iturbide’s

⁸ Jean Meyer. *La Cristiada. Vol 2. El conflicto entre la Iglesia y el Estado 1926-1929.* (Mexico City: Ediciones xxi, 2006), 10

⁹ Jean Meyer, Vol 2. 14

conservatist movement] was about defending the Church against reforms that threaten Catholic ideas by philosophically liberal pollution.”¹⁰This fight between those deemed liberals and conservatives would continue for the entirety of the nineteenth century.

Three years after the independence of 1821 was achieved and after much political turmoil, Mexican legislators got together in order to write the first constitution. The Mexican economy had depended up until that point on mining. This industry had not recovered, however, from the devastating effects of the eleven-year war of independence.¹¹Due to the heavy stress on the economy the Church once again became a focal point of debate. The liberals wanted to take ecclesiastical property and use it to stimulate the economy, the conservatives considered this possibility to be preposterous. Beside the monetary concern, there was also the preoccupation of how much the Church should be involved in state affairs. Some argued that the Church should have as little power as possible, whilst others, using colonial history as their justification emphasized that in order to establish public order the help of the Church was necessary. These divisions “proved critical in an intolerant Catholic country.”¹²

Liberal and Conservative regimes alternated in the nineteenth century for the first thirty years of the newly created federation. The religious struggle played into this confrontation of ideologies. The fight however did not remain ideological, for violence broke out numerous times. Most notably, in 1833 under president Antonio López de Santa Anna (February 21st 1794-June 21st 1876), decrees were issued that aimed at a

¹⁰ Luis Villoro, “La revolución de independencia” in *Historia General de México*. (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 2006), 520

¹¹ D.C.M Platt, “Finanzas Británicas en México (1821-1867)” in *La Economía Mexicana: Siglos XIX y XX*. Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1992

¹² Josefina Zoraida Vázquez, “Los primeros tropiezos” *Historia General de México*. (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 2006), 535

program of secularization and the end of religious political participation. A violent reaction put an end to the regime. Adding to the instability of these years was the Mexican-American war of 1846-1848 that resulted in the loss of almost half of the Mexican territory. In 1855 once again president Santa Anna, now supported by the conservative's side, was ousted by the movement of Ayutla that was headed by a new generation of liberals. These liberals "began by pledging the sincerity of their faith and the profound respect with which they professed to 'the Holy Church of Jesus Christ.'"¹³ Appreciating the divisiveness that anticlericalism could create, the liberals in power were much more careful than their predecessors and appeased the religious faction of the conservative movement.

This new government decided to create a new constitution. Before they arrived at the final draft of this constitution, they passed a few laws that would become pivotal in the relationship of Church and State and that still affect the way this relationship is viewed today. In November 1855, the Ley Juárez was passed. This law, coined after the then president of the Supreme Court of Justice and later president Benito Juárez (March 21st 1806-July 18th 1872), ended all the privileges and special court hearings that the clergymen had been entitled to. In a sense this law ended the *de facto* immunity of the Church. Then in June 1956 the Ley Lerdo, which prohibited the Church from owning or administering any property or good that was not directly linked to the necessities of the cult, was passed. These two laws directly affected the Church, but were only a few of all the reforming laws that were passed between 1855 and 1857, the year when the new constitution was drafted.

¹³ Jean Meyer, Vol. 2. 29

The constitution of 1857 was a very ambitious project. It included many new conceptions including the division of land, wage laws, education rights and it included for the first time a chapter devoted to individual rights and established the legal means to protect these rights. The Ley Juárez and Ley Lerdo were included in the constitution as articles 13 and 27 respectively. Besides these, articles 56 and 57 prohibited access to public posts (such as Congress or the Presidency) to any clergyman. Finally, article 123 allowed the State to interfere in Church affairs, basically giving the State authority over the Church.¹⁴ The movement that gave rise to such deep changes was known as *La Reforma*, the Reform. Historian Miguel Galindo y Galindo wrote, at the beginning of the twentieth century, on the importance of *La Reforma*: “the crisis that the Republic had arrived at, was too critical. Its salvation required energetic personalities and extreme measures: the Reform was thus an imperious necessity that one obviously had to attend to.”¹⁵ As a result of the new measures adopted in the new constitution the Church decided to excommunicate those who had signed the constitution. On the other hand, State officials who had refused to pledge allegiance to the new Constitution, were fired. Tensions were reaching a very high point.

President Ignacio Comonfort (March 12th 1812-November 3rd 1863) had had to withstand a series of unorganized movements across the country. With the new constitution and the uncompromising attitudes of both liberals and conservatives, these movements eventually organized into a formal revolution and the War of Reform ensued.

¹⁴ The full article says: “The federal power has the exclusive right to intervene, in the way the law dictates, in religious matters and in external discipline.” This does not clearly outline the degree of intervention. We can take it to mean that the State would have the right to overrule administrative decisions made by the Church, but would not necessarily take part in nominating and choosing bishops.

¹⁵ Galindo y Galindo, Miguel. *La gran década Nacional o relación histórica de la Guerra de la Reforma, intervención extranjera y gobierno del archiduque Maximiliano. 1857-1827. Tomo I.* (Mexico City: Fondo de cultura económica, 2006), 35

This war was very bloody. Galindo y Galindo describes it as bringing “endless suffering to the martyrs that had to confront it... [it was a war] that radically changed the Nation’s way of being.”¹⁶ The war lasted three years and ended with a victory by the liberal party on January 1st 1861. It ended with the famous *Leyes de Reforma*, (Laws of Reform) that would influence the drafting of the constitution of 1917, the same constitution used today. Benito Juárez took power and it was under his leadership that these new laws were passed. They proclaimed the separation of Church and State, prohibited the tithe, banned public officials from officially attending religious ceremonies, confiscated all ecclesiastic property and prohibited the recruitment for female orders.

The Church’s reaction to these laws was not completely unified. There was an official policy, backed by leading Mexican clergy and Rome that bitterly attacked the movement. Besides the official position, there were other voices within the Church.¹⁷ For example, the vicar of Tabasco asked that the new constitution be obeyed. The bishop of Monterrey had no quarrels with the new laws. Despite the differing voices within the Church, its official policies remained unaltered throughout the nineteenth century. The clergy felt that the liberals were attacking them directly and opposed any liberal policy. Historian Robert J. Knowlton writes, “the Mexican Church, due to its position of intransigency towards the Reform and its decided condemnation of liberals and their work, contributed significantly to the decade of disasters that the country went through.”¹⁸ In fact, the liberals were equally to blame. The differing ideologies were so

¹⁶ Miguel Galindo y Galindo, 71

¹⁷ Robert J. Knowlton. “La Iglesia y la Reforma” *Iglesia y Religiosidad en México* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1992)

¹⁸ Robert J. Knowlton, 171

deeply engrained that groups in society split and this led to the violence and confrontations that marked the latter half of the nineteenth century.

After their defeat in 1861, the conservatives sought of a new plan to establish their political ideals in the country. Guided by the desire to return to the times of European influence and Empire, conservatives went to Europe in search of a leader. They found Archduke Maximilian of Hapsburg, the brother of the Emperor Franz Josef of Austria, who became the emperor of Mexico on April 10, 1864. The conservatives who brought Maximilian to Mexico realized too late that they had made a mistake. Unfortunately for them, Maximilian was a classical liberal. His position on the separation of Church and State, alienated the conservatives and the Vatican.¹⁹ Maximilian wanted freedom for all religions, for the clergy to be looked at as a body of functionaries working for the State and that the emperor and his successors would have the rights Rome gave to the Kings of Europe. The Pope and the conservatives vehemently opposed this position, but Maximilian refused to compromise. In February 1865 Maximilian published a decree in which any papal bull or briefing would not be published unless it received his approval. With this decree, Maximilian separated himself completely from the papal nuncio and the richest and most influential Mexican clergy. Maximilian later on tried to have a concordat with the Vatican signed but failed. Maximilian's rule was plagued by a constant internal conflict between his army with the help of the French army until March 1867 and the Republican army (the liberal army which included men like Benito Juárez and Porfirio Díaz). With the departure of the French forces, the Imperial army was severely weakened. This allowed the Republican army to take over the Mexican territory

¹⁹ Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 32

and proclaim Benito Juárez as president in the city of San Luis, for Mexico City was still under siege. Juárez decided that Maximilian would be tried “under the law of 25th January of 1862 which condemned to death anyone who aimed to interfere with national sovereignty.”²⁰ On June 19th 1867 Maximilian was executed alongside his two most important Generals, Tomás Mejía and Miguel Miramón. A month later, Juárez moved as President into the capital and continued with his liberal program. The problems caused by years of war, and the fact that Maximilian had adopted and strengthened Juárez’s religious policies put the Church-State problems in the background.

The problems of Church and State were not reignited again until 1873 when the new president Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada (April 24th 1823-April 21st 1889) reformed the constitution of 1857 by incorporating the Laws of Reform into the text. The new government aimed to enforce the new laws, and this led to the imprisonment of a number of Jesuits, and of foreign priests. A series of popular uprisings came as a result of the administration’s actions. These uprisings were, for the first time, not organized behind a political ideology, and were different in nature according to the region of the country in which they were fought. The insurrection came to be known as “*religionera*” and the fighters the “*religioneros*” for they were fighting for their religion. The movement spread quickly, especially in the states in the center of the country. It was not a centralized movement, and it did not have any sort of coherent leadership, in essence it was a war of small guerrillas. A critic at the time wrote, “these uprisings have been considered as the product of the most irrational fanaticism, or it is said that these rebels

²⁰ Lilia Díaz, “Liberalismo Militante” in *Historia General de México*. (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 2006), 630

are just poor instruments of troublemaking priests.”²¹ Whatever the reasons were for fighting, it was undeniable that the movement was more powerful than anyone had anticipated and that it began to have its toll on the country.

After three years of war, Porfirio Díaz (September 15th 1830-July 2nd 1915), a man who had repeatedly attempted and failed to attain power, took control of the country in 1877. He claimed that he would follow the constitution of 1857, with an approach, however, that would appease the Catholics. Many saw Díaz as a man with a policy of conciliation. Others believed that, “Díaz had established a pact with the clergy, according to which he would be elevated to power through the *religionera* rebellion... and he would pay the Church,”²² once in power. Although this hypothesis was never proven it would much later become a reason for governments to accuse the Church of wrongdoing. The *religionero* movement was important not only because it changed the political leadership, but also because it transformed the nature of revolution in Mexico. This rebellion, as we shall see, was a direct predecessor for the Mexican Revolution and the *Cristero* movement.

Porfirio Díaz had one goal: order. As historian Jean Meyer writes, “order as the base, and not liberty, is the first hidden objective of Díaz.”²³ Díaz saw stability as the most important prerequisite to attain all of his other political goals. Following this ideology, Díaz used a skillful policy of strength towards anyone who threatened public order. When it came to Church and State relations however, Díaz took a much more conciliatory approach. He allowed the Church to be relatively free. Clerical leaders, in

²¹ Juan Panadero in Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 37

²² Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 43

²³ Luis González, “El liberalismo triunfante” in *Historia General de México*. (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 2006), 658

turn, supported him and his government. At the same time he did not change the law, and thus liberals were appeased because they considered that the separation of Church and State remained. Díaz thus “maintained the principles of liberalism, and avoided an abusive application of these principals.”²⁴ Meyer has coined this approach as “pax porfiriana”, introducing the notion that above all Díaz was an opportunist. Due to the nature of this approach the Church was allowed more and more public participation. Not only did it grow in numbers during these years, but also its presence was felt in official circles. In the final decade of the nineteenth century, Díaz made a number of symbolic gestures towards the Church. On January 1st 1888, Díaz sent a delegation of conservative Mexicans to Rome to join Pope Leo XIII in the public celebration of his 50 years as religious leader. Also, he sent Archbishop Antonio Pelagio de Labastido y Dávalos a present on his own 50th anniversary as priest. This Archbishop was a man known for his adherence to Pope Pius IX, who was an intolerant and conservative Pope, and for his desire for the return of empire. “The chief of Mexican liberalism, president Díaz, in search for a favor of the most conspicuous conservative leaders had sent a present,”²⁵ as a sign of great respect for the Church.

During the pax porfiriana anti-religious tendencies grew. Despite the fact that many liberals accepted the status quo of the situation, for they viewed the Church as still having limited powers, many others did not. A number of them, areligious from the beginning, turned toward philosophies of anarchic tendency. For others, however, such a denial of religion was not possible. Jean Pierre Bastian has argued that these liberals needed a religious identity, which they found in Protestantism. These liberals thought it

²⁴ Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 44

²⁵ Luis González, 671

was necessary to defend individual rights, including religious rights. “In this sense protestant societies were the religious face of radical liberalism.”²⁶ An odd consequence of Díaz was thus the growth of Protestantism and hence the rise of an alternative to Catholicism. In practice however, Catholicism remained by and large the greatest religious force in Mexico.

Towards the end of the 19th century, it was clear to everyone in Europe that socialism was a movement of importance. The *Rerum Novarum* Encyclical proved this to be true. Pope Leo XIII (March 2nd 1810-July 20th 1903) issued this encyclical in May 1891, which indicated that Catholicism would now take an interest in social problems. This encyclical was truly revolutionary, it even prompted French socialist, Jean Jaurés to proclaim it as a socialist program.²⁷ In Mexico, its effects were of great consequence. We have seen how Díaz’s policies made it easier for the Church to be accepted in Mexico. There were changes within the Church itself that also helped the revival of this institution. One big change had to do with a change in the structural organization of the Church. More dioceses were created which promoted greater autonomy for each particular church. Furthermore, the Church’s central authority had been transferred to the hands of a moderate and nationalistic man, Próspero María Alarcón. These internal changes, alongside with a new policy coming from Rome transformed Catholicism from a “traditionalistic, apolitical and inactive type, to a moralizing, activist and entrepreneuring type, with the conscience to offer a solution to social problems.”²⁸ This meant that Catholics went from simply donating to charity, to actually engaging in social

²⁶ Bastian, Jean-Pierre, “Oposición a Porfirio Díaz, 1877-1911” *Iglesia y Religiosidad en México*, (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1992), 208

²⁷ Chenu, M.D. in Manuel Ceballos Ramírez, “La encíclica Rerum Novarum.” *Iglesia y Religiosidad en México*, (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1992), 217

²⁸ Manuel Ceballos Ramírez. 220

organizations outside of the Church and thus having broader social impact. Although the *Rerum Novarum* called for significant political participation, the clergy was aware that Díaz maintained a policy of conciliation based on the fact that it had tacitly resigned political aspirations. Not only did Díaz not want any opposition whatsoever, but also the Church was in an especially precarious position when it came to this for after all it had been the conservative enemy of the liberalism that Díaz wanted to embody.

By 1908, after having been in power for twenty-eight years, Díaz's government had lost coherence. The economic revival he had given the country was ending, there were food shortages, increasing inequality, and Díaz had been left isolated. It is in this context that Díaz offered a now famous interview to James Creelman, then director of Pearson's Magazine. Among the many things he said in that interview that proved fateful for the country, Díaz said, "I will gladly welcome an opposition party in Mexico. If it appears, I will see it as a blessing."²⁹ This immediately sent a message for all those who had been waiting to create their own parties, amongst them the Catholics. Unfortunately for them they had to wait three more years for this to happen, because the instability that had been increasing finally reached its climax in 1910 with the beginning of the Mexican Revolution.

The Mexican Revolution is a very complex historical event that is not only the outcome of a thirty-three year dictatorship, but many view it as a conflict that marked the beginning of a century of socially oriented movements. In any case, this is not the place to outline the causes or events of the Revolution, for that is a far too ambitious project. In what is our main concern, Church-State relations, it is sufficient to say that the Catholics

²⁹ Porfirio Díaz in Luis González, 693

played no role whatsoever in the removal of the Díaz regime. Even though the lower clergy supported Francisco I. Madero (October 30th 1873- February 22nd 1913), who became the leader of the opposition, fear of what was to come after this upheaval was great and thus the Church and its men tried to stay as marginal as possible. It is surprising to note that the clergy did nothing to save the Díaz regime, for after all Díaz had been friendly towards the Church and had allowed the Church to regain some importance on the public stage. In any case, once Díaz had been ousted and Madero had gained control, Catholics felt encouraged to form a party. The birth of the National Catholic Party (PCN) came about in 1911. “The party denied being the heir to the conservative movement, or being a clerical organization and affirmed it searched for the common good.”³⁰

Despite the fact that “Madero’s government fought with might to end the blatant social injustice... [in what became] in the global theoretical framework the first attack on social and economic liberalism,”³¹ it was a short-lived government for many felt that his reforms were not enough. The PCN remained active only throughout Madero’s rule, in spite the fact that they had based their political policies on social initiatives. Madero was only in power for a very limited amount of time for on February 23rd 1913 he and his vice president, Pino Suárez, were murdered. Under the leadership of Archbishop Ruiz y Flores the Church and the PCN remained at an arm’s distance from the new president, Victoriano Huerta (December 22nd 1850-January 13th 1916), who they deemed as the usurper.³²

³⁰ Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 59

³¹ Berta Ulloa, “La lucha armada” in *Historia General de México*. (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 2006), 773

³² Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 64

In 1914, violence erupted once again, the common enemy had been Huerta up until that point, however once he was defeated Huerta's opposition turned on itself. It divided along two camps, those who followed Francisco Villa (June 5th 1877-July 23rd 1923) and Emiliano Zapata (August 8th 1879-April 10th 1919) and those who followed Venustiano Carranza (December 21st 1859-May 21st 1920), the former known as Villistas and Zapatistas and the latter as 'constituyentes.' Lack of organization from the Villistas and Zapatisas, their mixed goals, and poor military strategies all contributed to Carranza's victory in 1915. For Carranza and for his followers "everything that was Catholic had to be destroyed,"³³ and the Catholics were very aware of this. Carranza's camp did indeed persecute the Mexican Church, deporting bishops and imprisoning monks and priests.

Once Carranza had done his share to stabilize the country he realized that in order to make the transition to a post-revolutionary state he needed a project. "The winning groups defined their project for the country, they did this precisely through the Constitution of 1917."³⁴ This Constitution would bring stability and would shape the character of the newly formed State. This constitution was even harsher towards the Church than that of 1857. Article 3 called for the secularization of all primary education, both private and public. Article 130 denied the Church any juridical rights and allowed the government to interfere in religious matters. Religious orders and monastic votes were prohibited and all Church property was now considered State property. Finally, article 130 (a clause that still remains today), prohibited priests from making political speeches or from doing political proselytism; furthermore, it stated that any publication

³³ Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 69

³⁴ Javier Garciadiego, "La Revolución" in *Nueva Historia Mínima de México*. (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2007), 249

of a religious nature could not comment on a “political fact/event”, thereby nullifying completely the existence of a catholic press.³⁵ In a sense, by denying the Church a juridical identity, this new constitution solved the problem of Church and State. It denied the Church any role within the new State; it took away all its hopes of even mild political participation, thus confining its role to religion and that alone.

Jean Meyer brilliantly exposes the reasons behind Carranza and his followers’ attack on the Church. He argues that their attacks were firstly founded on the notion that it was under the auspice of the Church that Díaz was able to maintain his dictatorship. It was widely believed that a deal had been struck between Díaz and the clergy of mutual collaboration that would result in increased power for both. Another reason for mistrust of the Church was historical in nature. Constituyentes believed in the negative impact the Church had had in Mexico, blaming it for much of the problems of the nineteenth century and of the colonial period. Radicals within Carranza’s camp not only blamed the clergy but faith in general. Following the tradition of certain Enlightened thinkers they accused religion of being obscurantist and backward. Many called for the suppression of religion, whilst others simply wanted it under state control.³⁶

Once the Constitution of 1917 was approved, the clergy rose in rebellion. Since each state had a particular way of handling Church affairs, the response in each state was markedly different. After having attempted through legal means to reform the Constitution, the Church had reached an apparent roadblock. They decided that as a means of retaliation they would suspend all activities. On July 30th 1918, all churches were closed and Catholics went into a state of mourning. This policy lasted through the

³⁵ Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 69

³⁶ Ibid, 84

year and it ended up bringing positive results for the Church. Carranza, sensing that his anticlericalism could potentially bring about another uprising, decided that a policy of rapprochement with the Church would be beneficial. At first, he offered to introduce changes to the Constitution, an offer never carried out, but this was clearly a gesture that enticed the clergy and one that they would not forget. Carranza's government began to allow top Church officials back into the country and with this, emotions seemed to calm down. Quickly, the clergy began to back up the government and put their efforts to stop an American intervention that was in the making. Despite Carranza's personal anticlerical feelings, he had calmed down the situation through a policy of moderation and compromise. By this point however, Carranza's days were numbered. In May 1920, an insurgency ended up taking Carranza's life and overthrowing the government marking the end of the Mexican Revolution.

After a decade of military and sociopolitical upheaval, Mexico had gone through a profound transformation. The old elites and the oligarchy had been displaced to allow the rise of a middle class out of poverty. Although the State that had emerged was far from being democratic, it had a legitimate and stable government. Most historians agree that this revolution was the most transformative change in Mexican history of the twentieth century.³⁷ Álvaro Obregón (February 19th 1880-July 17th 1928) was elected president in December 1920 and he immediately set off to pacify the country and centralize control of the government. He was mostly concerned with two problems, difficult relations with the US who refused to recognize his government and military unrest. Nevertheless, the characteristic policy of the Obregón government was, like

³⁷ Javier Garciadiego, 255

Díaz's and Carranza's, conciliation. This included its relationship with the Church. One of his first moves was to reopen all the Churches that were closed between 1914 and 1919. Obregón did make sure however that states took matters into their own hands at times in order to remind the clergy that their position was dependent on the government's good will.³⁸ This led to an outburst of small guerrillas fought in certain states of the country between 1920 and 1924. After having gained political rights, Catholics were not as ready to be passive as they had been under Díaz and this instigated their desire to mobilize.

Besides the guerrilla movements, there were also more concrete events that kept the tension high between Church and State. In 1921, for example, in the central state of Michoacán after a school of nuns was closed by the army, and supported by the government, a conflict began between socialists who supported the state decision and some 300 Catholics who were protesting the decision. A socialist killed a Catholic in retaliation for the burning of the socialist flag. A crowd of about 7000 people marched down a main avenue chanting "¡Viva Cristo Rey! ¡Viva la Virgen de Guadalupe!"³⁹ The police, in an attempt to control the crowds, fired in the air which only increased the crowd's violence. A confrontation between the police and the protesters ensued, in which ten Catholics were killed. Violent events like this were not uncommon, especially in the central states of Michoacán and Jalisco. By 1923 the situation was one of extreme tension, thus president Obregón decided to offer the higher clergy, led by Archbishops José Mora y del Río (February 24th 1854-April 22nd 1928) and Leopoldo Ruíz y Flores (November 13th 1865-December 12th 1941), an alliance for "a program essentially

³⁸ Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 111

³⁹ Long live Christ the King! Long live the Virgin of Guadalupe!

Christian and essentially humanitarian.”⁴⁰ Although the situation seemed to calm down, at the root of the problem remained the Constitution of 1917. Catholics wanted reform, whilst anti-clericals demanded the strict implementation of these laws. The nature of the State-Church problem could be, in essence, boiled down to this issue. Points of view were incompatible “between a dynamic Church... and a Jacobin State jealous to regain its prerogative that would bring about a patronage or concordat, to control... the fanaticism of the masses.”⁴¹

Once Obregón had made it clear that he would support General Plutarco Elías Calles (September 25th 1877-November 30th 1928), to take over the presidency, a rebellion ensued. This rebellion, in 1923, was against the imposition of a ruler. However, the rebels were unorganized and they met with a very strong and skilled army, that also happened to be backed by the United States. By March 1924 this upheaval ended; with this triumph “the federal government sped up the process of centralization and political stabilization.”⁴² A conspiracy theory ran amongst many government officials including Calles, the man who would become president, that the clergy was involved in the rebellion against the government. Although it was never proven, this theory would prove to be important in the next government’s policy formation.

On October 5th 1924 the bishops organized a Eucharistic Congress in Mexico City. This event pulled in enormous crowds from all parts of the country and it consisted in cultural and religious events. This was a clear provocation by the Church towards the government. By using the capital, they were invading the federal government’s territory.

⁴⁰ Obregón, *El Universal*, 14th January, 1923 in Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 126

⁴¹ Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 128

⁴² Lorenzo Meyer, “La institucionalización del Nuevo Régimen.” in *Historia General de México*. (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 2006), 828.

In the Congress many messages were read, the last words spoken however showed the true policy of the Church and proved to be fateful. “We want, like the great St. Paul, to contribute with our misery to what is missing to the Passion of the Christ, so that Mexico, the maimed ‘child’ of Mary of Guadalupe, becomes also the bravest soldier of the dead King that rules alive!”⁴³ This statement asked for sacrifice in case the Church needed to be defended from the State. The government attempted to put an end to the congress, but did not succeed. The central government’s anger was great and it spread to other states. An attack on the Church followed, for they were accused of stimulating social unrest and failing to obey the laws of the country. The clergy denied having any political participation whatsoever, and continued its campaigning.

Plutarco Elías Calles took control of the country in December 1924. With his arrival, the crisis that had thus far been kept under some sort of control by Obregón’s efforts worsened. This was mainly due to the fact that Calles allowed the anti-clerical wings to gain greater influence in the new regime.⁴⁴ We now turn to look specifically at Calles in order to gain a more personal perspective on the events that would lead to the Cristero War, and the establishment of Calles’ State ideology.

⁴³ Sermon of priest Vicente M. Camacho, 12th October 1924. In Jean Meyer, 138

⁴⁴ Lorenzo Meyer, Vol. 2., 829

A man of the Revolution: Plutarco Elías Calles

The character of a man

Plutarco Elías Calles has become one of the most controversial figures in Mexican history. At first, he was characterized as a villain. Ramón Puente, an important Mexican historian and his earliest biographer, wrote, “in the circle of the Revolution, he is the man that engenders more hatred, that provokes the greatest number of enemies and that inspires the greatest amount of insults.”⁴⁵ On the other hand, ten years after Puente wrote this, in 1945, Dr. Enrique del Castillo, who had known Calles through their participation in a club of metapsychics said, “General Plutarco Elías Calles has always been and still is a patriot... Nobody better than this man, strong of character... can help the nation without selfishness or vanity.”⁴⁶ Within historiography he has also passed through a number of categorizations. At first he was seen by many as an example of a Revolutionary idealist turned authoritarian. Then in the 1970’s, in the aftermath of the Tlatelolco Massacre,⁴⁷ intellectuals began to see him as the roots of the authoritarian régime that gave the State the power to commit such an atrocity.⁴⁸ Finally, more recently, he has been seen as a modernizer and a reformer.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ramón Puente, *Hombres de la Revolución: Calles*. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994),

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⁴⁶ Enrique del Castillo in Enrique Krauze, *Reformar desde el Origen: Plutarco Elías Calles*. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1995), 146

⁴⁷ The Tlatelolco Massacre refers to the violent oppression of the student movement in 1968. Though figures of how many people were killed by the government are not known, most estimates place them somewhere in the 500’s.

⁴⁸ Examples of this can be seen in: Arnoldo Córdova, *La ideología de la revolución mexicana: La formación del Nuevo régimen*. Mexico City: Era, 1972 and Jean Meyer, “Revolution and Reconstruction in the 1920’s”, *Mexico Since the Independence*, ed. Leslie Bethell Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

⁴⁹ Jürgen Buchenau, *Plutarco Elías Calles and the Mexican Revolution*. (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), xxvi

Physically, Calles was a dignified and elegant man. For many, his physique resembled that of a dictator.⁵⁰ He had a round face, a conspicuous chin, a full head of neatly combed and gelled hair, big ears, chubby cheeks and a perfectly trimmed, thick mustache. On top of this, what was most salient and remarkable about Calles, was his stern and penetrating dark eyes. Many accounts talk about how his face got lost behind his impenetrable gaze. Not a large man, he was still able to evoke a sense of authority. At the same time however, an air of serenity surrounded his imposing physique. Rarely seen smiling, Calles had a hermetic poise; although when he smiled he was able to illuminate those around him.⁵¹ He was a man whose appearance was emblematic of his actions, a man whose physical description can be adapted to that of his personality. Words like stern, forceful, and penetrating come to mind in both instances. This fusion between exteriority and interiority is an odd quality, especially for a man who was so often misunderstood by his contemporaries.

His biographers portray him as a silent, reflective man. Puente describes him as a man who was able to understand others but did not allow others to understand him. He was a great politician for he was characterized by an impervious discretion,⁵² which gave him the trust of everyone around him. Many depict him as a cold and calculating man, who was always firm in asserting his will.⁵³ Though these descriptions fit very well with the way he carried out his policies, Calles' letters show him as a warm man who was very much liked and even adored by many. For example, in a simple letter exchange with

⁵⁰ Enrique Krauze, 39

⁵¹ Pictures of Plutarco Elías Calles are in the appendix.

⁵² Ramón Puente, 81

⁵³ Enrique Krauze, 39.

Francisco Villa, a Northern leader of the Revolution, Villa writes, “I take this opportunity to greet you with the same affection as always, and wishing you to get better from your illness.”⁵⁴ The letter continues in a personal, casual and informal style and never touches politics at all. Villa was a *caudillo* figure, characterized by his strong personality, his reputation for challenging authority and his ‘gangsterism’. That Villa wrote a personal letter to find out about Calles’ health situation shows the impression that Calles made even on the toughest of men. In a compendium of personal letters published by the Calles Family Archive, there are many examples of letters of this nature. From these letters we can say that despite being a politically calculating and reserved man, there was indeed a human side to Calles, a side that perhaps accounts for his ability to gain the trust of so many different figures.

In terms of political character some have said that he was authoritarian, populist, nationalist, reformer, positivist, opportunist, cunning, and ambitious. It is true that all these words help to describe an aspect of his politics. The aspect that was most salient about his politics however, was conviction. Calles believed in the projects he outlined and he trusted that the people did too. This sense of confidence is evident in his public speeches. In every speech he made, he had a very particular and convincing delivery. It is in his speeches that one sees the calculating Calles, the man of the steady gaze. In a speech published in a major newspaper in 1926 he said,

“Go to every Latin nation... and you will find the greatest carelessness from the families and the government for their children.... Political matters, economic problems and other things of this nature, deviate the government from the most transcendental and important goal, that is to prepare new generations through the

⁵⁴ Francisco Villa, Letter from February 20th 1922 in *Plutarco Elías Calles: Correspondencia Personal* ed. Carlos Macías. (Mexico City: FAPEC y Fernando Torreblanca, 1991), 55

light of knowledge, so that they can enter the struggle of life successfully, so that they can substitute us with advantage.”⁵⁵

In this brief excerpt from the speech we can see how Calles was a very calculating man. Although he was aware that his audience was concerned about the political unrest that was going on, and by the economic difficulties of the country, he was able to distract attention from that by setting up a convincing scenario in which what was lacking most were schools. When reading this speech one is convinced of the urgency at the time of building new schools and educating new teachers. This speech however came at a time when the country was beginning to suffer the instability arising from the tensions between Church and State. Despite the troubling political situation, because of speeches like this one, Calles was able to muster support for his programs of reform. Not having a charismatic character, Calles’ strength relied on a strong political base and the confidence that emanated from his words.

We will now turn to look at a brief sketch of the Calles’ biography up until the moment he became president. This outline should help to understand his origins as a man of the Revolution and his early political life. It will highlight some key elements of his policies and personality and thus pave the way for understanding his actions and his role as president and throughout the Cristero Movement.

A biography

In the late 19th Century, during the presidency of Porfirio Díaz, there was a culture that valued positivism. As of 1888 Díaz surrounded himself with a group of people that were labeled as “*científicos*,” the scientists. This group was “young,

⁵⁵ Plutarco Elías Calles, Public Statement in *El Universal Ilustrado*, May 27th 1926 in *Los Presidentes de México: Discursos Políticos 1910-1988*, (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 1988), 150-151

technical, urban and refined.”⁵⁶Díaz never allowed these men to have control on policy, but he used them to show his emphasis on the philosophy of scientific progress, and as pacifiers of the opposition. The scientists, coming from so many different professions, were able to appease all the divisive elements in society that threatened Díaz. One of their main contributions was that they implemented major educational reform. This reform was positivist and anti-clerical in nature. As a young student, Plutarco Elías Calles, inherited the education that came from this reform. Later on, as a teacher, Calles watched the educational conflict between Church and State closely, and as a convinced atheist he was partial to the State.⁵⁷

Born on the September 25th 1877, in the northern port of Guaymas, Plutarco Elías Calles did not have a very stable family life. His father barely cared for him, and all that remained from him was the last name Elías. Calles, his second last name was adopted from his aunt’s husband who raised him. By 1890 Calles had become a primary school teacher in Sonora, and he was known for his unbending attitude in the classroom. He was a very hard teacher to please.⁵⁸ Some historians claim that despite his success as a teacher, Calles still suffered from the fact that his father had never claimed him. He was in a sense illegitimate. Enrique Krauze cites a poem of his written amidst this epoch of confusion:

... the clarity
of my conscience and my soul
you have turned into night
terrifying ghost.
And you leave my brain

⁵⁶ Luis González, 672

⁵⁷ Enrique Krauze, 12

⁵⁸ Ramón Puente, 14

in chaos
and you leave my soul
amidst the pain.⁵⁹

The subject, the ghost, in this case is the father. The pain and confusion that the narrator feels, is attributed to him. For Krauze, this poem, written early in Calles's life, clearly shows the suffering that Calles' father inflicted on him. Krauze goes on to suggest that, the pain of being left alone, was only worsened by the fact that he was illegitimate by religious law. This, Krauze argues, could be the root of Calles' anticlericalism. He writes, "perhaps, his [Calles's] way of dissolving illegitimacy was denying the religious authority."⁶⁰

Calles married without the Church in the registry office, to Natalia Chacón in 1899. He attempted to lift his family out of poverty by holding many odd jobs in all types of industries, most famously in agriculture where he failed dismally. To enter politics at that time one had to be wealthy and properly educated; Calles was neither. On top of this, the Díaz government at this time "accentuated centralism, which is why the government became more and more authoritarian."⁶¹ Living in the north of the country, Calles had little hope of joining the Díaz régime.

Another feature of the Díaz regime that would influence Calles was the political environment that he developed. Despite espousing ideas of European liberalism, Díaz was far from achieving these politically. In Mexico the "formal democratic structures exist since the 19th Century, however the practice [of politics] has been that of variations

⁵⁹ Enrique Krauze, 14

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Elisa Speckman Guerra, Chapter 5: "El Porfiriato" *Nueva Historia Mínima de México*. (Mexico City: Colegio de México 2007), 200

of authoritarianism.”⁶² Later on, historians would claim that it is the inheritance of Díaz that gave Calles an authoritative style.⁶³ This remark, more intuitive than factual, does help us understand some of the traits that Calles would develop later on in life.

Throughout the Díaz régime, Calles occupied his life mainly by making ends meet. Having decided that he would not follow the footsteps of his father, he was dedicated to his family. When the Revolution began however, Calles finally got a new opportunity. By 1911, the Mexican Revolution had begun to take its toll. The movement was expanding and quickly all sectors of the country were getting involved in the uprising. In May, Francisco Villa, leader of the Revolution in the north, accompanied by other leaders, took over Ciudad Juárez in the state of Chihuahua and with this defeat, the Díaz government began to crumble. For some, this moment marked the end of the Revolution; for others, it signaled the beginning. The brief struggle ended with the Treaty of Ciudad Juárez on May 21st 1911 and with it came the resignation and the exile of Díaz.⁶⁴ Calles was present at the time when this treaty was created and signed. Having noticed the effervescence of the Revolutionary movement, he had gone to Ciudad Juárez. Ramón Puente writes, “At 36, with more disappointment than hope... with a little of that honesty that sees the reforms of the most deeply rooted institutions as easily plausible, he goes to Ciudad Juárez to mingle in the joy of the naïve crowds.”⁶⁵ Puente captures the Revolutionary spirit that Calles felt, and points out the moment in which Calles’ life was struck by political fervor and opportunity.

⁶² Lorenzo Meyer, *Liberalismo autoritario: Las contradicciones del sistema político mexicano*. (Mexico City: Oceano 1995), 22

⁶³ Ramón Puente

⁶⁴ Berta Ulloa, 762

⁶⁵ Ramón Puente, 19

After meeting other Revolutionaries and getting involved in the movement, in September of 1911, Plutarco Elías Calles began his political career in the city of Agua Prieta. The governor, José María Maytorena named him commissar. This position was not much unlike that of a sheriff in the Western states of the US. Agua Prieta was a shanty desert town that was nevertheless important due to its condition as a border town. After very little time as commissar, the power structure in the country was once again hit, this time by Victoriano Huerta's coup. Huerta took over the Madero régime with a coalition that was an "amalgam of almost all anti-Madero political groups."⁶⁶ A fierce opposition to the Huerta régime developed in the north of the country. In the State of Sonora, where Calles lived, leadership was entrusted to a number of middle-class men who had attained a high political status during the Madero government. Amongst them was Álvaro Obregón who would later become president. Obregón took in Calles as a military leader of the north. This way, two very different yet ambitious men became united in the cause against the political leadership of the time.

Hermosillo, Calles' new home and the capital of Sonora, became a hub for Revolutionaries at the time. Venustiano Carranza, Pancho Villa, among others, passed by there, and became acquainted with Calles. By 1913 Calles had struck a friendship with Carranza. Krauze writes that this friendship, "is not casual, both are tenacious, focused, reflective, disciplined, energetic."⁶⁷ By December that year Calles had been promoted to colonel and by 1914 he was named commander of Hermosillo and chief of the troops of Sonora. Calles had placed his allegiance behind Carranza, who would begin to face

⁶⁶ Javier Garcíadiego, "La Revolución," *Nueva Historia Mínima de México*. (Mexico City: Colegio de México 2007), 237

⁶⁷ Enrique Krauze, 20

confrontation with Villa. Carranza was grateful to Calles for having been faithful to him. Later on, two days after Carranza had defeated all opposition and declared himself president he would designate Calles as interim governor of Sonora. Calles was able to withstand the attacks of his opposition, most famously those of Villa due to his military intelligence. For Villa this defeat marked the beginning of his Revolutionary downfall. For Calles, on the other hand, the defeat of Villa signaled the “end of the armed revolution, and the beginning of his personal revolution, of his pedagogical dictatorship.”⁶⁸ Although he had gained his status partly by chance and by the connections he had forged throughout the revolution, Calles had ended on top and was now in a position to look for political unity.

As governor of Sonora, Calles had an opportunity to effect actual change for the first time. Puente writes that “it was his first attempt at a dictatorial government,”⁶⁹ for his leadership was almost uncontested. Though the elements of dictatorship are not evident, we can say that Calles already had clear visions of major changes that needed to occur. Perhaps it is because his ideology of change came mostly from his beliefs and not from dialogue that Puente argues that his style of rule was dictatorial. Calles pushed for a program of wide reform in the fields of education, transportation, agriculture and justice. His political program also focused heavily on moral issues. This was largely due to the fact that he took to Sonora a “Revolutionary optimism... [and] imposed social responsibility as the most advisable way of living.”⁷⁰ This attitude could be an

⁶⁸ Ibid, 27

⁶⁹ Ramón Puente, 63

⁷⁰ Carlos Macías Richard, *Vida y temperamento: Plutarco Elías Calles 1877-1920*. (Mexico City: Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca 1996), 308

inheritance of the Revolutionary feeling that Mexico was on the rise and that it needed willing citizens to progress. Or perhaps, it could be a simple response to the fact that his father had been a drunk. On his fourth day in power he decreed a law that prohibited the production, consumption or sale of alcohol and this was followed by an attack on gambling institutions. For Calles, “moralization had to arrive to politics and history.”⁷¹

Not only did Calles want to enforce a moral political program he also wanted to rid the government and the state from all the forces that had been against him. He did this by suppressing all the elements of his old enemies. One of his decrees forced all the goods of anyone who had supported opponents of Madero or Carranza to be seized for public use. Calles exemplified from very early on in his political career not only a desire for change, but a change that was strictly shaped around his own ideological convictions.

Whatever can be said about Calles as a ruler, one thing that cannot be denied is that Calles was above all a man of action. In Ramón Puente’s book on Calles’ life, he has an epigraph before the chapter on Calles’ politics that says: *El pensamiento engendra; la voluntad realiza* (Thought creates; will fulfills).⁷² This epigraph, sums up what became a reality of Calles’ political life, most of his promises quickly became decrees. We can perhaps attribute this feature to the fact that he was a politician born out of the Mexican Revolution, a time when action seemed not only possible but necessary. By May 1916, Calles had already passed 56 decrees, which amounted to about three new laws per month he was in power. Out of all his projects, Calles felt most strongly about his education reform. His emphasis on the importance of a properly constructed pedagogical

⁷¹ Enrique Krauze, 30

⁷² Ramón Puente, 62

program came from his years as a teacher and also from a desire to transform the lives of many. As someone who had risen out of poverty, Calles saw in education the chance to give new opportunities to those that had not had them. In a statement declaring his desire to build a new school he said, “I thought of the idea to create an asylum that... would make [poor and homeless children] into elements of order and progress giving back later as men to society, ready for work and morally strong and healthy.”⁷³ For Calles, creating a progressive educational program would continue the work of the Revolution in reforming the country. It must be emphasized that Calles was by no means trying to create a completely new program for education. Calles believed that his past played an immense role in shaping him and thus his program was not one of complete renewal, but rather of gradual reform. Calles did not “close his past, rather he integrates rationally and gives it back purified and imperious, to society.”⁷⁴ For him education did not need to abandon the focus on scientific progress and rationalism, it just needed to expand to cover all sectors of society. Calles saw in his own life what was productive and what needed to be improved, and from this he created a program. By mixing biography and politics, Calles carried out his plans with a very strong sense of commitment.

In May 1919, Carranza designated Calles as Secretary of Industry, Commerce and Labor. Although at first reluctant to do so, Calles accepted the job. In 1917 the new Constitution was passed and the Carranza government got off to a shaky start. After a thirty-year dictatorship and a seven year revolt, the country was not easy to govern. To make matters worse, Carranza had to still face opposition, and had to thus direct a

⁷³ Plutarco Elías Calles in Enrique Krauze, 33

⁷⁴ Enrique Krauze, 37

number of resources for military purposes. These wars affected the country economically as well as socially. Much of the labor force had perished during the Revolution or was engaged in military conflict. Moreover, “the exile of a number of landowners, businessmen and professionals had numbed the human capital of the country.”⁷⁵ Calles was brought into the government amidst this environment of uncertainty. Once within the government, Calles was in many ways opposed to Carranza’s policies. Calles was unapologetically a socialist, whilst Carranza was very much a conservative. Calles never “dissimulated his sympathies for the Soviet régime, or his tendency for the organization of the working class, or his insistence on the solution of the agrarian problem, or his anticlerical ideas.”⁷⁶ Calles was thus not very popular within the inner circle of the government. From the very beginning Calles had already figured out elements of his unwavering political program.

Towards the end of the 1919, Calles had felt so estranged from the president’s enterprise that he had abandoned his post to join Alvaro Obregón and help him in his presidential campaign. His feelings were so strong against Carranza that he planted in Adolfo de la Huerta the idea of creating military opposition to Carranza.⁷⁷ De la Huerta decided to mobilize in the north and create a plan that was later on labeled the Plan of Agua Prieta, in honor of the city in which it was written. Using this plan, de la Huerta took military action and defeated Carranza’s troops and ended by killing him in May 1920. De la Huerta succeeded Carranza until new elections were called and Alvaro

⁷⁵ Javier Garcíadiego, 252

⁷⁶ Ramón Puente, 69

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 73.

Obregón rose to power. “The death of Carranza symbolized, without a doubt, the necessity and urgency to look for a political mechanism that allowed the Revolution to take a positive shape.”⁷⁸ It is with this goal in mind that Obregón took control of the government and with which Calles saw his political ambitions.

Throughout Carranza’s rule, the middle class, that had been largely marginalized during the Díaz régime, had a claim to power. Carranza followed the desires of the middle class for he did not see his political program in the desires of the old oligarchy or the popular sectors. Nevertheless, after Carranza was assassinated, “the big goal of the victorious revolutionaries was the institutionalization of their system of political domination and the restructuring of the economic system.”⁷⁹ In essence the goal of the politicians coming after Carranza was to incorporate the popular sector into the political plan of the government without undermining the middle classes. A balance had to be struck, for even though those who were now in power had defeated Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, they still had to carry out some of their ideas and “systematically co-opt representatives [of the poor] or repress those who resisted.”⁸⁰

When Obregón took power in 1920, there was not even the semblance of political unity. He could impose his authority “due to the fact that he was – undisputedly – the military chief of greatest prestige.”⁸¹ Calles served as Secretary of Interior throughout most of Obregón’s rule. This position helped him develop certain relationships that would later on prove to be very useful. For example, one of his first efforts as Secretary

⁷⁸ Tzvi Medin, *El minimato presidencial: historia política del maximato (1928-1935)*. (Mexico City: Era 2003), 13

⁷⁹ Lorenzo Meyer, 825

⁸⁰ Ibid

⁸¹ Ibid, 827

of State was to create a relationship with the Regional Confederation of Mexican Workers (CROM). This was one of the major worker unions and would serve as a political base for the rest of Calles' career. Also, "the rapprochement of Calles to the CROM... was part of his vision and his economic politics of integrating the worker element, that way allowing for social peace and thus making room for economic development."⁸²To participate in Obregón's government was beneficial for Calles, for it situated him in a position in which he could outline a policy and also placed him in such a way that power was now within reach.

Despite the fact that the relationship between these two men was not good, Calles was able to use it to his advantage. Krauze helps to explain the reasons behind their troubled relationship. He writes, "deep down, Obregón hates Calles, because he holds men accountable only according to their military success."⁸³ Calles had only had marginal military achievements, and thus his accomplishments were not worthy for a man like Obregón. Nevertheless, although they were extremely different in character, background and style, Calles and Obregón, due to circumstances more than anything, were able to strike a relationship based on politics. Ramón Puente explains why this was enough: "politics, in the ultimate analysis is not friendship or sentimentality or affection – it is compromise."⁸⁴

In an effort to end the constant rebellions that had characterized the Mexican condition ever since the Revolution began, Obregón tried to diminish the political power

⁸² Tzvi Medin, 19

⁸³ Enrique Krauze, 45

⁸⁴ Ramón Puente, 80

of the army. By decreasing the number of generals, officers and troops and broadening the size of each chief operating body within the army, Obregón was able to dilute its power. The army was still able to create civil unrest in 1923 when Obregón had finally chosen Calles as his successor. Historian Lorenzo Meyer explains that the uprising that occurred in 1923 was a reaction to Obregón's anti-democratic near appointment of a successor. He writes, "the rebellion of 1923 carried the same flag as that of Obregón against Carranza three years back: the repudiation of imposition,"⁸⁵ which means the imposition of the next president. Due to his military intelligence along with the rebels' lack of organization, Obregón was able to defeat the faction of the army that fought against him. Throughout the campaign, although Obregón had not given Calles a prominent role, Calles was able to muster support from diverse groups, including some peasants and formed another army from this group. Once the military revolt ended, Obregón was more convinced that Calles was destined to be his successor.

By always aligning himself with those that had, for some reason, always ended up victorious, Calles had arrived at a position in which presidential power was close. We now turn to look at the years of the Calles presidency, in which he would carry out a policy that would, in his view, channel Mexico's potential for success. A part of this policy would be his proposed answer to the religious question.

⁸⁵ Lorenzo Meyer, 828

Constitutionalism and Change

1923-1926: A crisis in motion

On September 5th 1923, Plutarco Elías Calles was declared the presidential candidate of the Mexican Labor Party (PLM). On this occasion he gave a speech in which he outlined his ideology and goals. Although the speech never makes direct reference to a conflict with the Catholic Church, there is one line that, in hindsight, seems revealing. When praising Álvaro Obregón's administration, Calles said, "the current systematic campaign that this administration has been carrying out against vice, fanaticism, idleness and crime, is highly beneficial."⁸⁶ It is very possible that fanaticism here refers to religious fanaticism for during this period, although Obregón was trying to reconcile differences with the Church, he was still making sure that it would stay under his control. The speech however was one that went perfectly with Calles' Revolutionary background. The first issue that Calles raised in his speech was that of poverty. Calles alludes to worker movements going on around the world. Movements that for him aimed towards the "betterment and progress of the underprivileged classes."⁸⁷ Under Calles' leadership, Mexico would become a part of these movements. In order to achieve this goal, Calles outlined that he would continue agrarian reform and land repartition. Also, not betraying his origins as a teacher, he emphasized that education was the way towards prosperity for the poor. The content of the speech tells us that Calles' politics, or at least his rhetoric would aim to please the working class. More importantly, throughout the speech, Calles made a great number of allusions to the Constitution of 1917. He praised certain articles and claimed that he would make sure that the Constitution would be followed closely.

⁸⁶ Plutarco Elías Calles. Speech declaring his presidential candidacy, 5 September 1923. *Los Presidentes de México: Discursos Políticos 1910-1988 Tomo II*. (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1988), 124

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 123

Although such an allegiance to the Constitution seems inconsequential; it would become, later on, his main trump card against the Catholic Church.

Calles ran a presidential campaign against Ángel Flores, a Revolutionary General who had earned a reputation of being both brave and honorable. Article 83 of the new Constitution stipulated that the President would be elected by the popular vote, for a four-year term with no possibility of reelection. This article was considered very important for it was the Revolutionaries' attempt to constrain the Executive power and avoid dictatorships like the one of Porfirio Díaz. Calles ran on a platform based on enforcing article 83 and pledged to continue agrarian reform. With this promise he threw the weight of the Agriculture Union behind him. The campaign between these men was bitter. The supporters of Calles saw him as a firm man; capable of implementing all the reforms he wanted, including the more radical ones. On the other hand the opposition saw him as a man who summarized all their enemies for, having defeated Carranza and de la Huerta, he was a figure who caused resentment amongst all of those who had supported either of these men.⁸⁸

Amidst his campaigning, from August to October 1924, Calles made a trip to Europe. This trip would be very important for he would observe the European political and economic organizations. Europe, despite having been ravaged by the First World War, and still facing problems of reconstruction, represented for Calles all the positive that man could achieve. Owing perhaps to his positivist education, or to the indelible legacy of Porfirio Díaz, Calles was drawn to the European model. Calles visited Germany and France, and he would have liked to see England and Italy, for he saw an example in

⁸⁸ Ramón Puente, 82

the English Labor movement and in Mussolini's ability to mobilize the masses. The trip for him was indeed very fruitful. In Germany he focused his attention on the way in which each industry operated. He asked for drafts of every major study on any industry, from agriculture, to finance, to highways. For him, the social democratic Germany led by Friedrich Ebert was an example. It is here that he "became more of a social engineer than a socialist."⁸⁹In Europe he saw an example of how to have a functioning society that centered on labor. He had not abandoned his socialist ideals; yet he now looked for pragmatic ways to implement these ideals. Also in this trip, one can begin to see the beginnings of a populist rhetoric that would characterize his period of rule. In France he said, "I was elected president of my fatherland by the workers, and I am proud to have in my hand... the strong hand of the Mexican proletariat... If I cannot accomplish my mission, I will wrap myself in the flag of the proletariat and throw myself into the abyss."⁹⁰Making allusions to the proletariat in his speech, and having commemorated the goals of Zapata earlier on, Calles was making sure to emphasize that his project would be different from Obregón's, and that with him came, the truly positive legacy of the Mexican Revolution.

On December 1st 1924 Calles swore the oath in the new national stadium. This was the first time since 1884 that a president had handed over his presidency peacefully, and it was the first time there was a great ceremony. As Jürgen Buchenau explains, Calles arrived to power in a very fortunate situation, much more so than any of his predecessors. The country was at its greatest stability ever since the rule of Díaz. There were very few

⁸⁹ Enrique Krauze, 46.

⁹⁰ Plutarco Elías Calles, in Jürgen Buchenau, 112

elements of the anti-Calles camp, the US recognized his presidency, there was a certain economic boom promoted by exports, and the alliance he had forged with the CROM gave him the backing of one of the most powerful unions.⁹¹ During the ceremony Obregón, still asserting his position as a man of power, stood next to Calles as an imposing figure. Calles however, was also a figure of importance, a figure that in many ways stood opposed to Obregón.⁹²

Now, as president, Calles would push forward a program very similar to the one he had promoted as state governor, only this time in a national scale. This program of reform was partly created in order to escape the shadow of Obregón. By carrying out these policies, Calles wanted to create popular support and thus stop worrying about factions within the government that did not view him with a favorable light. He tried to improve the fiscal situation of the country by promoting education, economic development and social welfare and professionalizing the army.

In terms of reform one can point to some key moments of the Calles régime. On September 1st 1925, Calles created a national bank, *el Banco de México*. Every president since Díaz had wanted to create this bank, a bank that would finally centralize the economy. Mostly due to problems of stability and opposition however, it was not until Calles came that this bank became a reality. This bank, “ended the last vestiges of irresponsible printing of paper money that had marked the first years of the Constitutionalist government.”⁹³ Also, with the help of Obregon’s brilliant Finance

⁹¹ Jürgen Buchenau, 113

⁹² Ramón Puente, 87

⁹³ Jürgen Buchenau, 119

Secretary Alberto J. Pani, who had stayed on under Calles, Calles was able to maintain a high level of foreign investment and to lower foreign debt. Pani promoted a financial reform founded on liberal principals that aimed to increase tax revenue and implement a greater level of fiscal discipline. Also, measures were implemented in order to alleviate the debt, which included the first income tax.

Since efforts had been made to professionalize the army there was greater political stability, which allowed projects for the improvement of infrastructure to be launched. Calles achieved the improvement of roads, highways and railroads. The objective of these projects would be to increase agricultural output. This was helped by the creation on February 1st 1926, of the National Farm Bank Credit. A bank that gave loans to local credit institutions that would then loan money to small farmers, thus increasing productivity. This was a way in which Calles incorporated German ideals of cooperative societies into his government. It would be a decentralizing institution, and would follow very much on the footsteps of the institutions created in Germany.

The relationships that Calles had struck with the leaders of the CROM were very useful for him once in power. In fact, the CROM and the *agraristas*⁹⁴ would end up being his greatest source of support. In return, Calles gave the leader of the CROM, Luis N. Morones, a position as Secretary of industry commerce and labor. Some historians have even said that, “both leaders had reportedly signed a secret pact that committed Calles to assist the CROM labor union in exchange for Morones’ support of his presidential

⁹⁴ Agrarista is the term given to those involved in agriculture. More specifically, the agrarista movement is closely linked with Emiliano Zapata, whose legacy Plutarco Elías Calles had claimed.

campaign.”⁹⁵ Though there is no empirical evidence for this claim, it still remains a fact that Calles’ government did rely heavily on the support of the CROM. If Morones’ presence in Calles’ cabinet is not enough to demonstrate the prevalence of union leaders within the government, one could also look at the fact that leaders of the CROM’s political wing, the PLM, became governors and served in federal and state legislatures.⁹⁶

The importance of the support of the leader of the CROM cannot be overstated for it gave Calles the opportunity to install the reforms that had been mandated by the new Constitution but that had not been enforced. The conviction to this Constitution that Calles had demonstrated in his speech as candidate, was now becoming visible through policies because he was certain that by having the backing of the unions, the opposition would have a very hard time stripping him off power. Changes were made to the length of the workday, making it eight-hours long, mandating sick and vacation leave, overtime pay and a handful of worker benefits were granted. Stephen H. Haber points out, for example, that in the cotton textile industry nominal wages rose by 34% between 1925 and 1929 despite the fact that these were years of low inflation.⁹⁷

In another effort to uphold the clauses of the Revolutionary Constitution, Morones influenced oil policy and ran head-on against the American administration of President Calvin Coolidge. Article 27 of the Constitution made the land and water within the borders of the country, patrimony of the nation and gave only the government the right of

⁹⁵ Jürgen Buchenau, 115-116.

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ Stephen H. Haber, *Industry and Underdevelopment: The industrialization of Mexico, 1890-1940*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 151

granting concessions.⁹⁸ Due to the fact that oil production had plummeted between 1921 and 1924 by 53 million barrels,⁹⁹ there was great economic tension and disputes within the oil industry became ever more present. In order to increase tax revenues from the oil that Mexico was producing, Morones pushed for a series of protectionist policies that basically constituted oil regulation. Not surprisingly, private companies were appalled by the suggestion of this program. This in turn forced the American administration to act. Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg, in a statement made on June 12th 1925 said, “this government will [only] continue to support the Mexican government as long as it protects American lives and interests.”¹⁰⁰ The American administration attacked the Mexican government by claiming that the latter was aligning itself with the Soviets. In response to the American position, Calles was able to portray himself as a patriot and defender of national interests. He gained wide support in Mexico, and ultimately passed an “Oil Law” in December of 1925 that would force “foreign companies to forgo outright ownership of their wells and apply for confirmatory concessions valid for fifty years.”¹⁰¹ This event helps in demonstrating both the confidence that Calles had by having support from Morones. He had confronted the American administration in a very different way than most Mexican administrations had handled American pressure. Furthermore, it is an instance in which Calles staunchly defended the new Constitution. He backed up his opposition to American pressure, by knowing that the public opinion was behind him, and that oil regulation was permissible under the Constitution of 1917. Calles seized the

⁹⁸ Constitution of 1917. <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Mexico/mexico1917.html>, January 10th 2008

⁹⁹ Jürgen Buchenau, 117

¹⁰⁰ Frank B. Kellogg in Enrique Krauze, 61

¹⁰¹ Jürgen Buchenau, 118

opportunity to both give legitimacy to his claim and at the same time to the ‘magna carta’ that had up until that point not been enforced in its entirety. Historian Gastón García Cantú, in a compendium of documents of revolutionary movements in modern Mexican history, writes about Calles’ insistence in this episode of upholding the clauses of the Constitution: “the problem of Constitutional regulation became, once more, an issue of sovereignty.”¹⁰²

One other important area of reform was education. His main goal was to improve rural education, in particular making sure that indigenous communities received proper Spanish instruction in an attempt to assimilate them to central Mexican life. Finally, there was also the creation of a new department for public health, which did manage to tangibly improve health amongst the citizens. This progressive program did not come without its difficulties. As is usual, the creation of more departments and institutions opened the way for new channels of corruption. It is not the place here to examine in depth the ways in which these policies were implemented and the problems that they brought about.¹⁰³ It is still important to mention them in order to demonstrate that Calles’ presidency was marked by an impulse towards change. This impulse and the desire to defend the Constitution combined with a deeply rooted anticlericalism and paved the way for the outbreak of the Cristero War.

Ideology and the Outbreak of War

We have seen that Calles had a personal stake when it came to Church-State relations. Not only was he a self-declared heir to the Liberalism of Benito Juárez, but his

¹⁰² Gastón García Cantu ed. *El Pensamiento de la Reacción Mexicana: Historia Documental Tomo Segundo 1860-1926*, (UNAM: Mexico City, 1987), 323

¹⁰³ For a more detailed account of these reforms look at Jürgen Buchenau, Chapter 5.

biography can also give us hints as to some of the reasons behind Calles' anticlericalism. We can see think of his life as an illegitimate child, or his positivist schooling that made him a man of the Enlightenment and thus a man of reason and not of religion. Jürgen Buchenau suggests that, "the historian must conceive of Calles' attitude toward the Church as behavior that can only be fully appreciated in the idiosyncratic context of his own personal life."¹⁰⁴ It is my opinion however that his anticlericalism went beyond his personal life and that it was a part of a very well constructed vision of what Mexican society should look like. In order to understand this, we now turn to look at what Calles wanted from this confrontation.

The tension between Church and State in Mexico was in a latent stage throughout the Obregón presidency. Despite the fact that the new constitution stipulated very clearly that there was indeed a separation between both of these institutions, the presidents up until that time had been quite pragmatic. Nevertheless, there was a feeling of paranoia amongst government officials that the Church was planning to mobilize the people against Obregón. Jean Meyer tells us, for example that in August 1923 the mayor of San Juan de los Lagos was accused of helping religious fanatics attempt murder against the Revolutionaries, and later on that month a telegram was received in Mexico City that foreigners were distributing clerical propaganda and inciting a movement.¹⁰⁵ The situation was thus extremely tense throughout Calles' presidential campaign. Calles did not believe in appeasement however, and opposed the Church throughout this campaign. He

¹⁰⁴ Jürgen Buchenau, 126.

¹⁰⁵ Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 130

“justified his anticlericalism as a part of a populist agenda to redeem his country’s oppressed masses.”¹⁰⁶ He wrote,

“My enemies say that I am an enemy of the religions and cults, and that I do not respect religious beliefs. I... understand and approve all religious beliefs because I consider them beneficial for the moral program they encompass... I am the enemy of the political priest, the scheming priest, the priest as an exploiter, the priest who intends to keep our people in ignorance, the priest who allies with the hacendado to exploit the campesino and the priest allied with the industrialist to exploit the worker.”¹⁰⁷

This tells us that Calles was not against religion, he was only against the Church as an institution. This should not be surprising, for he was a man who believed in rigid moral codes, thus he saw in religion a way for these codes to be enforced. However, he also uses anticlericalism in a very populist manner.¹⁰⁸ He addresses the concerns of the poor by putting them in strict opposition to the Church. By doing this, Calles knew that he was pitting the lower and upper classes against each other. He was the candidate of the labor movement and as such he needed to muster support by providing the people with a rhetoric that would point out some enemies to the development of the working classes. We can appreciate here that Calles felt that he could use the Church as the unifying representation of everything that was holding the country back.

Although the Catholic Church did have a history of negative influence in Mexico, especially during the XIX Century, one cannot accept Calles’ claim that the Church had

¹⁰⁶ Jürgen Buchenau, 127

¹⁰⁷ Plutarco Elías Calles, in Jürgen Buchenau, 127

¹⁰⁸ Populism is a key concept that one needs to understand, in order to understand Calles and Latin American history as a whole. Skidmore and Smith define populist regimes as having two key characteristics. “For one thing they were authoritarian: they usually represented coalitions against some other set of interests...that were by definition prevented from participation, and this involved some degree of both exclusion and repression. Second... they represented the interests of classes –workers and industrialists- that were bound to conflict among themselves.” We will later on see how Calles fits into this definition.

Thomas E. Skidmore & Peter H Smith, *Modern Latin America*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 55

done nothing but wronged the Mexican people. Pope Leo XIII issued the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 in which he addressed the problems brought about by the Industrial Revolution for the working classes. Although he did not outline a solution, he did write, “by degrees it has come to pass that workingmen have been surrendered, isolated and helpless, to the hard-heartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition.”¹⁰⁹ Leo XIII wrote that the Church did not see socialism as the answer because the socialist solution “would hurt the worker, the family and wider society.”¹¹⁰ Instead he pointed to a Catholic solution which would not pit classes against each other, but would make sure the employer treated his workers fairly, gave them a good salary and that all the excesses of the wealthy be donated for charity. *Rerum Novarum*, however, also perpetuated the division between rich and poor by stating that both classes were necessary and also glorified poverty with statements such as “God Himself seems to incline rather to those who suffer misfortune” and “displays the tenderest charity toward the lowly and the oppressed.”¹¹¹ Nevertheless, as a response to this encyclical, both in Europe and in Mexico various Catholic organizations were created that cared for the poor. In Mexico one could point out, the Catholic Worker Circles that established charity boxes, and aimed to reduce alcoholism. In fact, four years before the Constitution of 1917, a priest organized the first modern workers’ union in Mexico. In this sense some Catholic groups were at the vanguard of reform movements.

The offshoots of these Catholic unions mobilized themselves in the 1920’s in order to create a national congress of union workers. This congress did in fact occur,

¹⁰⁹ Claudia Carlen, ed. *The Papal Encyclicals 1879-1903*, (Wilmington, North Carolina: McGrath Publishing Co., 1981), 242

¹¹⁰ Joe Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes confront the Industrial Age 1740-1958*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 179

¹¹¹ *Rerum Novarum* as cited by Joe Holland, 184

much to the displeasure of Obregón and Morones, who saw in this movement not a social revolution but a religious one. Although by 1924 this Congress had been dismantled, it is still testimony to the efforts made by the Church to attend to the needs of the working classes. This was also demonstrated by the Church's attitude to agrarian reform in the 1920's. Although the Church denied that there was a class conflict, it did recognize the right of land repartition. In certain states it took measures to make sure that it happened. Álvarez y Álvarez, a representative in Congress of the state of Michoacán said in 1924 that, "finding the enemy [the Church] in our same field of social conquest, we are disoriented... Today, in the most solemn manner, they confess the ideal of the social movement in Mexico."¹¹² This statement reveals the fact that the Church was indeed concerned with social improvement. Jean Meyer writes, "Inspiring itself in both German social Catholicism and in the teachings of Pope Leo XIII...The Mexican Church, animated by a spirit comparable to that of the revolutionaries, was en route to create the first example of Christian Democracy, before this concept even existed."¹¹³ Calles and his followers tended to see the Church in a very different light. They ignored the social actions of the Church and still saw it as an institution that aimed to hold back Mexican and world progress.

This view was not unjustified. Even though the teachings of Leo XIII had been followed, and had indeed produced a model of social action, Christian socialists and democrats were still a minority. Furthermore, even though Leo XIII had said that social action was important, he had also provided a model in which "liberalism was seen as the foundational enemy, with socialism and communism seen as the children of liberalism

¹¹² Álvarez y Álvarez, *Diario de los debates de la Hon. Cámara de Diputados 1924-1929*, 26th Dec. 1924

¹¹³ Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 230

and becoming the more radical and primary danger.”¹¹⁴The Church followed Leo XIII and tried to undermine anything viewed as socialist. Their antagonism towards communism and socialism only increased after the Russian Revolution. “The Bolsheviks saw religion as a sign of backwardness (the ‘opium of the masses’) and the Church as a rival to their power.”¹¹⁵ The Bolshevik attempt to eliminate the Church was proof of the crisis the Vatican faced in the modern world. In a book published in 1927 for the Chicago Theological Seminary Matthew Spinka wrote that the Russian Revolution was a more acute expression of a problem that Catholicism faced everywhere:

“it finds itself for the first time in its history, in a scientific-minded world... the assumption of an ordered universe made by these views in which law, and not a miraculous, supernatural caprice, is dominant, more and more differentiates the modern scientific attitude from the pre-scientific supernaturalism which was current throughout the previous epochs of Christianity.”¹¹⁶

The feeling of the time was that the Church had to face the crisis of staying alive. Combining this mentality of survival with the perception of communism and socialism as the great enemies, the Church pushed forward anti-socialist policies. Pope Pius XI had been elected on February 6th 1922 largely in part because he had been papal nuncio in Poland and had experienced the threat of communism first hand. “The cardinals judged Russian communism to be the single greatest danger to the Catholic Church.”¹¹⁷ Due to this belief Pius XI made great efforts to undermine any socialist movements. Even though Pius XI had publicly criticized some aspects of fascism and Nazism, he still “preferred a strategic alliance by which moderate fascists and church leaders would work together

¹¹⁴ Joe Holland, 210

¹¹⁵ Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 745

¹¹⁶ Matthew Spinka, *The Church and the Russian Revolution*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), 327

¹¹⁷ Joe Holland, 205

against liberal individualism and socialist collectivism, as well as against the anticlericalism of both.”¹¹⁸ Although the alliance between Pius XI and the Nazis had not occurred, Calles was still very aware that the Vatican under Pius XI was against liberalism (even the Mexican form of liberalism that he advocated¹¹⁹) and therefore against the ideas of the Mexican Revolution. We can see that it is hard to find a clear definition of the Church’s policy. The truth is that the Mexican Church combined both anti-liberal and socialist elements. Calles saw the Church however, as being fundamentally against the values of the Revolution and therefore as an enemy for his program for progress. It is this view of the Church, combined with Calles’ political ambitions that would drive the country to war in the summer of 1926.

One of the first events that put Calles’ anticlericalism to the test came about only 2 months after his election on February 21st, 1925. On this date, La Orden de los Caballeros de Guadalupe (The Order of the Knights of Guadalupe), a religious order created by the CROM in order to offset the influence of the Knights of Columbus;¹²⁰ entered into the church of the Soledad in Mexico City and forced its priest to leave. This in effect was an attack from the CROM on the central Catholic Church in Mexico, for not only did it attempt to strip away one of its Churches, it also claimed religious legitimacy outside the realm of the Church’s control. The general public opposed this move and only two days after the takeover of the church the new priest,

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 206

¹¹⁹ Here we distinguish between Classical Liberalism as espoused by thinkers such as Adam Smith or John Stuart Mill and Mexican Liberalism as espoused by Porfirio Díaz, Benito Juárez and Calles himself. Though there are some commonalities between the two, they are different in the sense that Mexican liberal thought is more about an idea of progress that saw the separation of Church and State, federalism, individual freedom and the search for a ruling middle class. For more on Mexican Liberal thought look at Jesus Reyes Heróles, *El liberalismo Mexicano*. Vol. 1-3. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994.

¹²⁰ The Knights of Columbus are a Catholic religious order founded in Connecticut in 1882. It was founded as a socially-oriented religious society and it expanded into Mexico. It was seen by many as promoting the influence of the central Catholic Church in Mexico.

Joaquín Pérez, was forced to hide. A petition signed by too many people for Calles to ignore, obliged the president to order the new religious order to leave the church of the Soledad. This did not mean, however, that the church was returned to its rightful owners. Even after Calles expelled the Priest Pérez and his followers from the parish, the damage had been done. The government had shown its allegiance to the CROM, and had allowed their religious order to found a new church: the Mexican Pentecostal Catholic Church (ICAM). This church, “with the support of the government was able to take over some of the other temples in the states of Puebla, Veracruz, Tabasco and Oaxaca.”¹²¹

Jean Meyer quotes a telegram that explains the goals of the ICAM to the Vatican. It says,

“By founding a Catholic Church in Mexico that is independent of the Vatican, we are inspired by a high patriotic ideal that Mexican priests have the same legitimate rights to occupy the governing body of their Church...for a just cause of consternation and discouragement is to see how Spanish priests and priests from other countries occupy the best temples in the Republic... Besides this, the alms that are given by the faithful are only used to make foreign priests richer and increase the Holy Father’s wealth in Rome.”¹²²

This is only a small excerpt of a very long telegram, but we can see here that the ICAM exposed a patriotic project, that condemned the Church for abusing the poor. If we put this side by side with Calles’ ruminations that were explored earlier we can see why Calles would defend the ICAM. Despite being a religious organization it deeply opposed the influence of the Vatican, as did Calles. Furthermore, it also adopted a populist rhetoric that put the interests of the Church in opposition to those of the people. It was, in a word, a religious organization that could have been created by Calles himself.

¹²¹ Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 148

¹²² Coronel Ernesto Higuera in Jean Meyer, 150

Calles supported the move by the ICAM, and in fact he accused the Catholic Church of being responsible for this whole episode.¹²³ This could not be farther from the truth, for after all, it was the Church that had been attacked, and their defense could have hardly been labeled an offensive. He gave the ICAM all the legislative and police support he could muster, but he was still not able to give them the church of the Soledad. Oscar Tenoria, a Brazilian journalist said of the episode: “taken over by revolutionary tempest, a part of the national clergy sympathizes with the policy of Plutarco Elías Calles about the Constitution... The ICAM recognizes the legality... of the current régime, practices the acts of Catholic cult and predicts the gospel, free of Roman taxation.”¹²⁴ This journalist was obviously pro-Calles, and thus approved of the ICAM. What he writes is revealing, however, because it brings us back to the issue of Constitutionalism. This journalist had recognized that Calles was preoccupied with making sure that the laws of the Constitution were abided, and thus applauded an effort by a group that he saw as fitting into Calles’ scheme.

The schism that was provoked by the crisis over the church of the Soledad, woke up a dormant conflict, for it gave Calles the will to act. Due to the fact that states had responded differently to the central government when it came to enforcing the Constitution in terms of religious practices, Calles asked on January 7th 1926 to be granted extraordinary powers to reform the penal code.¹²⁵ This was Calles’ response to what he had seen as the failures of a federation and the fears of having a Church challenging his authority. He saw that states were not responding to him, and he thus

¹²³ Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 153

¹²⁴ Oscar Tenorio in Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 153

¹²⁵ Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 240.

sought to centralize power. The president's suspicion that the Church was aiming to undermine his government was confirmed when Archbishop José Mora y del Río, the head of the Mexican clergy, gave a now famous interview to the journalist Ignacio Monroy. In it he said,

“The doctrine of the Church is unfaltering and invariable, for it is the divinely revealed truth. The protest that we, as the Mexican higher clergy, formulate against the Constitution of 1917, in regards to those articles that oppose religious liberty and dogma, remains firm. It has not been changed, but emboldened, because it deviates from Church doctrine. The information that was published in *El Universal*¹²⁶ of January 27th that stated that a campaign against unjust laws... would be launched, is perfectly true. We, the episcopate, clergy and Catholics; do not recognize articles 3 and 31 and the first parts of 5, 27 and 123 of the present Constitution. This idea we cannot, under any circumstance, change without betraying our Faith and our Religion.”¹²⁷

We see here the severity of the condemnation of the Catholic Church. Even though Mora y del Río is not calling for armed action against the government, for such a thing was implausible, by attacking the Constitution he was attacking the State. On this new Constitution rested the legitimacy of the post-revolutionary order and its institutions. Moreover, by challenging the Constitution he was challenging Calles directly. The government understood Archbishop Mora y del Río's words precisely as a confrontation. Calles' reaction to this declaration was, not surprisingly, one of anger. It is reported that he said, “it is a challenge to the government and the Revolution! I am not willing to tolerate it. Since the priests take this line of action, it is essential that we apply the law as it is written.”¹²⁸

Mora y del Río shortly afterwards, and right up until his death two years later sustained that he had not said this. Nevertheless, once again, the damage had been done.

¹²⁶ Mexican newspaper established in 1916, that enjoyed then, as it does now, one of the widest readerships in the country.

¹²⁷ Mora y del Río, in Gastón García Cantú, 323-32

¹²⁸ Roberto Cruz in Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 242

Calles felt provoked by a Church that had declared the Revolutionary Constitution, his source of legitimacy, a fraud. Whether or not Mora y del Río said this is still a mystery. What is not however, is the fact that this statement was deemed to be the Church's first openly confrontational declaration. The government's response came the day after the publication of this interview. The Secretary of Interior, Engineer Adalberto Tejada gave a statement in which he made it very clear that the State had a problem above all with the fact that the Church was challenging the constitution. He declared,

“The State allows the Catholic Church to exercise its functions up until the point that it does not present itself as an obstacle to the progress and evolution of our people; but it cannot and should not tolerate that the constitutional laws are unacknowledged and contradicted, just like they were in [Archbishop Mora y del Río's] declarations.”¹²⁹

Exercising their constitutional rights in March 1926, the episcopate addressed Congress. In its address, it made claims against certain articles in the Constitution. The most important concerns were the articles having to do with education, for they mandated a lay education even in private schools. They also denounced article 130, because it gave the federal government the right to assign the maximum number of ministers in each state. For the Church it was of utmost importance that Catholics themselves, through their demand, decided how many clergymen were needed. Finally, they claimed that “sensible public opinion, even the one alien to Catholicism, has energetically condemned all the acts that have recently been perpetrated against freedom of conscience, freedom of education and in general religious freedom.”¹³⁰ The request to change the constitution was not surprisingly denied by congress. Here is an example, however, that shows that the Church, aimed to reform the Constitution by exercising diplomacy. It was met by an

¹²⁹ Adalberto Tejada in Gastón García Cantú, ed., 324

¹³⁰ Address to Congress, March 1926. Archivo del Arzobispado de México. C-147, D-52.

intransigent government that refused to even consider the changes to the Constitution. To transform the Constitution in such a fundamental way, not even ten years after it had been drafted, and with the country still not finding itself in a completely stable place after the Revolution would be seen as a big blow to the Revolutionary movement. The Constitution of 1917 was the legitimizing document of this movement and thus of its victors, who were in power. To so drastically reform the Constitution would seem to be a recognition of some of the setbacks of the Revolutionary movement, a recognition that most were not willing to make.

In another example of the way in which Church and State interacted prior to the outbreak of the war we can look at an exchange of letters between Archbishop Mora y del Río and President Calles. On June 2nd, a few days after Mora y del Río had made a public statement to the press in which he outlined the policy that the people should take vis-à-vis the government, Calles sent a letter to Mora y del Río in which he accused him of instigating social unrest. He wrote,

“There is no road that is more wrong than the one that you are following... for neither the agitation that you pretend to provoke in the interior, nor the one that you are unpatriotically provoking outside... will be able to change the firm course of this government.... There is no other way for you to avoid difficulties and to save the government the trouble, than by submitting yourselves to the law.”¹³¹

To this, Mora y del Río replied two days later claiming that the president had misunderstood him. He stated that his letter was not written with,

“the twisted intention of provoking an agitation... rather to make the Catholic people aware of the respect and submission that they ought to have towards the authority... The Catholic Church has always defended the legitimate authority... for we know that only with obedience will there be peace and tranquility, order and progress.”¹³²

¹³¹ Plutarco Elías Calles, Letter June 2nd 1926, Archivo del Arzobispado de México. C-123, D-53

¹³² Archbishop José Mora y del Río, Letter June 4th 1926, Archivo del Arzobispado de México. C-123, D-53

This tone of conciliation is very common amongst all of the letters written by any Church officials to the president. Mora y del Río's statement to the press aimed to make an appeal to the strict enforcement of the laws whilst not renouncing the Constitution. This was the official line of the Church, and it did not change in any of the official letters that were exchanged between the episcopate and the president. Calles, nevertheless, saw the Archbishop's actions as a challenge and chose to ignore his tone of appeasement. Calles' characteristically aggressive tone shows that he aimed to have a stronger hand in this battle and thus see the State's will fulfilled.

In that same letter, Mora y del Río states that the Church has always refused to obey a mandate contrary to the laws of God, and that "we cannot betray this conduct... even if because of this we become persecuted and we have to seal our blood with our faith." This type of line is the one that surely caught Calles' eyes and this is why he felt that the Church was launching an offensive. In a sense, Mora y del Río is doing this for he is declaring that the Church would go to war over this issue. However, in the context of what was said before, it is evident that war was seen as a last resource. Earlier on, Mora y del Río used the word submission to describe the action he felt the people should take towards the State. This word connotes much more than obedience, for it implies obedience without challenge. This is precisely what Calles wanted to happen. He felt nevertheless that the claims of the Church were subversive, and that their pandering to him was illegitimate. It is for this reason that the president constantly asserts that the clergy looked to circumvent his authority. We can see that Calles took out what he wanted from the exchanges from the Church. Since he was not willing to accept any sort of subversive elements, especially not a Church that could influence millions of

Mexicans, he chose to see the clergy as a target. He chose to ignore their calls of conciliation, because the conciliation they proposed was not the one he envisioned for his State. In this conciliation, the Episcopate remains powerful, and that was something he could not accept. Calles' actions were dictated by a conception of the Church that came from his childhood and from the Vatican's policy that he saw. It is hard to say whether he was right or not in ignoring the Mexican Archbishop's appeals for conciliation. On the one hand there is evidence for the Mexican Church's good intentions, on the other, how could Calles accept the existence of an institution that he felt would undermine the strength of the State. Calles rejected the Archbishop's request for appeasement because he felt that compromise would not be useful in the advancement of the Revolutionary project.

A more tangible example of Calles' intransigence came soon after, when on July 2nd Calles reformed the penal code. The decree of July 2nd created a series of offenses related to cults, the press and education. It gave harsher punishments for any priest or religious leader who pronounced a political opinion. It made all education, both private and public, secular. Finally, it forced all the priests to register under the government. The move to close down religious schools, for example, was according to Alfredo E. Uruchurtu, the Secretary of education, a move made "for the precise observance of Article 3 of the Constitution."¹³³ The reform stipulated punishments harsher than those in the Constitution.¹³⁴ This new reform came to be known as la Ley Calles. It was seen as a direct attack on the Church, and many attacked it, including non-Catholics, as being authoritarian in nature. Nevertheless, Congress passed the law and it was declared that it

¹³³ Alfredo E. Uruchurtu in Gastón García Cantú, 325

¹³⁴ Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 263

would be placed into action by July 31st. In retaliation, Catholics founded the National League for the Defense of Religious Freedom (LNDLR) whose leaders aimed to boycott the government. This boycott deeply affected the government and the economy; it brought the peso down, diminished the value of the stock market and upset almost every industry, from entertainment to agriculture.¹³⁵

An interview given by the committee of Mexican bishops to the American Press can help clarify what the Church was arguing for. The bishops claimed that the Constitution,

“explicitly takes away the juridical statute of the Churches, and authorizes the federal powers to interfere in religious affairs... it does not consider the ministers as such, but merely as professionals... It prohibits the exercise of their political rights... it incapacitates the Church in general to exercise any sort of rule over real estate or property... It passes all Church property to the nation.”¹³⁶

They go on to explain that religious vows, public cult, religious teachings, and the recognition of Church property, are all in one way or another made crimes by the Ley Calles. The Church felt cornered. Not only did they see legislation that was utterly hostile to them, but they were met with an executive branch that evoked this same hostility.

The clergy, lead by the initiatives of the LNDLR, had on July 25th declared that all temples would be shut down and services would thus be suspended.¹³⁷ This move was an effort to provoke the people, and it worked. The people saw the Church responding to the government’s offensive and thus in the public eye, the government was responsible for this shut down. This measure was to be put in motion on July 31st, when the education laws would begin to be enforced. “The effect of this measure was traumatic for a broad

¹³⁵ Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 289

¹³⁶ Interview, Committee of Mexican Bishops to American Press, 6th of August of 1926. Archivo del Arzobispado de México. C-148, D-50

¹³⁷ Gastón García Cantú, 327

spectrum of the population, especially in rural areas, for in urban centers services continued, albeit in a more clandestine fashion.”¹³⁸ This meant that by August 1926, both the Church and the State had taken action against the other. In this context, it is not surprising that Calles would make claims such as the ones he did to the New York Times. In an interview on August 10th conceded to L.C. Speers of the Times, Calles declared that the Vatican was responsible for the fact that the church disobeyed the enforcement of the laws of the constitution. He asked, “What would the American government answer if the Pope, in some occasion, told the American people that it should disobey the laws of that country?”¹³⁹ Calles was making a statement about the sovereignty of his country. He was insinuating that the Catholic Church undermined his government’s authority to rule over the people. Furthermore, he was infusing the conflict with patriotism. By placing the Church as a representative of the interests of Rome, he was arguing that to defend the clergy would be tantamount to treason.

Ernest Lagarde, French chargé d’affaires to Mexico from 1924 to 1929, wrote in August of 1926 an entry in his journal about Calles. In it he said,

“At certain times, president Calles, despite his calculating mentality and realism, gave me the impression of being obsessed by the idea that he was under a moral obligation by swearing to be faithful to the constitution, and that he has taken the religious issue with an apocalyptic and mystical spirit.”¹⁴⁰

This reading of Calles, gives us an insight into the mind of the president. He had become obsessed with making sure he upheld the Constitution, and had driven his anticlericalism to the point of fanaticism. It seems as though there was no way of appeasing Calles, and the events that followed would demonstrate this to be true.

¹³⁸ Lorenzo Meyer, 829

¹³⁹ Plutarco Elías Calles in Gastón Carcía Cantú, 329

¹⁴⁰ Ernest Lagarde in Jean Meyer, 273

On August 16th, the Episcopal committee, headed by Archbishop José Mora y del Río and Bishop of Tabasco Pascual Díaz Barreto (June 22nd 1876-May 19th 1936), sent a letter to the president. This letter is similar in tone and conclusion to the one two months before. The difference was that now the situation was much more tense, for the Ley Calles had been enforced and all religious services had been suspended. In their letter, Mora y del Río and Díaz Barreto, say that they had been accused of being rebels for their decision to suspend cult. They wrote, “that a citizen suspends the exercise of his profession, for believing that the conditions that he is being imposed are unacceptable, cannot be called rebellious.”¹⁴¹ They continued by evoking their address made to Congress only a few months before, for they claimed that all they were asking was for President Calles to intervene in their favor, so that they could have “freedom of conscience, thought, cult, education, association, and press.”¹⁴² The letter was written in a cordial tone of conciliation, and of sincerity. They asserted that the goal of the Church was also the advancement of society and that they did not see themselves as rivals of the government. Calles’ response evoked a similar tone of cordiality and respect, but denied the requests of the Church. In Calles’ letter of August 19th he stated, “I am the least adequate to attend to this petition and begin the constitutional repeal and reform that you request; for the articles of the Constitution that you challenge are in perfect accord with my philosophical and political convictions.”¹⁴³ In this statement Calles is denying the Episcopal committee’s petition for him to intervene in Congress in their favor. His answer to this request is strikingly honest and thus revealing. By claiming both

¹⁴¹ José Mora y del Río and Pascual Díaz Barreto, Letter of the 16th of August 1926, Archivo Plutarco Elías Calles. Exp 137. Legajo 1/5. Foja 26-29

¹⁴² Ibid

¹⁴³ Plutarco Elías Calles, Letter of the 19th of August 1926, Archivo Plutarco Elías Calles. Exp 137. Legajo 1/5. Foja 26-29

philosophy and politics as the roots of his anticlericalism he revealed his positivist education. We see furthermore that his problem with the Church went beyond the recent escalation of events, for it was a problem that he contended to be essential in his worldview. To declare something to be outside one's philosophical perspective is to condemn it in such a manner that it cannot even coexist with one's ideology. Calles admitted that for him secularism came as a fundamental constituent of a mature State. This revelation shows us that, in a sense, Calles was ready for a war, for he believed the separation of Church and State to be so important that he could not even begin to imagine the Church intervening in anything remotely related to State affairs. He continued, "the acts that we consider and have considered to be rebellious, are those that consist in public uprisings and in open hostility to abolish the reform the Political Constitution of the Republic via procedures that are outside the Constitution itself."¹⁴⁴ Once more we are taken to the argument of Constitutionalism. It seems as though Calles is draping his actual interests, his total rejection of the Church, in statutes of the Constitution that up until that point had been ignored. In light of Calles' history, and of declarations like the one we saw of Lagarde, it is possible to argue that for him a defense of the Constitution is not a veil he uses for political goals. It happens to be that the Constitution was on Calles' ideological side, and he thus took advantage of it. In a word, Calles' vision of the ideal State was defensible through the Constitution of 1917.

Only two days after sending this letter, President Calles received Bishops Pascual Díaz Barreto and Leopoldo Ruíz in the national palace. This interview was the first formal meeting that the administration held with leaders of the episcopate. In it, both

¹⁴⁴ Ibid

Calles and the bishops followed the same line of reasoning that they had exposed up until then in public statements and personal letters. Díaz Barreto in his opening statement told the president that, “it is only natural that if we want to be respected and loved, we must also respect and love the legitimately constituted authorities.”¹⁴⁵ Later on, however, he asked the president to reform the new Ley Calles. Here Díaz Barreto was exposing what had become one of the main precepts of the Church, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s.”¹⁴⁶ Díaz Barreto asserts that the president has a legitimate claim to authority and that the Church will submit to this authority, but that the government should also give the Church the freedom to handle its own affairs. Calles replies to all of Díaz Barreto’s arguments with the same line about making the Church abide by the law, which according to him they had not for they had incited rebellion. When told that the Church had as its mission to cooperate with his government for social advancement, he replied:

“Sadly, that cannot be seen. I am going to speak to you with full honesty, the Mexican clergy has not evolved; the mentality of our priests is very low. They have not perceived the evolutionary movement that has been developing, and not only have they not entered this movement, but they try to obstruct it and naturally they have to be crushed. That is the truth. You are losing a lot of terrain amongst the faithful, because in the worker movement that has been developed the Catholic priests have openly sided with the oppressors of the workers.”¹⁴⁷

In his characteristically blunt style, Calles attacks the Church in a number of ways. Ignoring the fact that divisions of the Church had in the post-revolutionary years been part of the worker movements and the organization of unions, Calles chooses to see the conservative faction of the Church. This is due to the fact, that because the Church

¹⁴⁵ Pascual Díaz Barreto. Transcript of interview between President Calles and Bishops Díaz Barreto and Leopoldo Ruíz August 21st 1926, Archivo Plutarco Elías Calles. Exp 137. Legajo 2/5. Foja 74-102

¹⁴⁶ Matthew 22:21

¹⁴⁷ Plutarco Elías Calles, Transcript of interview between President Calles and Bishops Díaz Barreto and Leopoldo Ruíz August 21st 1926, Archivo Plutarco Elías Calles. Exp 137. Legajo 2/5. Foja 74-102

wanted the Revolutionary Constitution to be reformed Calles viewed all clerical leaders as enemies of the Revolution and thus as reactionaries. Calles suggests that the Church had to be “crushed” because of its policy. By using this word Calles shows that deep down he wanted to make sure the Church would be in shambles. In Calles’ ideal State the Church would be no more than a crippled institution.

The interview continues in the same manner, the bishops making propositions and Calles rejecting them. Once more they ask him to intervene against congress in their favor against the new Ley Calles. He rejects this petition once more, this time not only on philosophical grounds, but also on legal grounds saying that this is something that he could not do. He tells them that they have the means to address congress directly, and that maybe through it they can reform the new law. Both Calles and the bishops knew that this was not a real alternative, for as Díaz Barreto tells him, “The Chambers [congress] are completely formed by elements addicted to your policy.”¹⁴⁸ Despite this, Calles still tells them to find someone in Congress that would speak for them and through him find a way to reform the new law.

Picking up on Calles’ advice, the episcopate addressed the Congress one more time in an effort to have the new law reformed. They asked for the same changes they had asked for in March, this time adding a repeal of the new penal code that severely punished priests for not registering themselves, that made all Church property, the property of the State and that ended religious schooling. In a word, they demanded “freedom...for all religions.”¹⁴⁹ The congress rejected the clergy’s petition. They declared, “the application for the reforms of articles 3,5, 24, 27 and 130 of the Federal

¹⁴⁸ Pascual Díaz Barreto, Interview August 21st 1926

¹⁴⁹ Address to Congress, September 1926. Archivo del Arzobispado de México. C-137, D-63

Constitution is rejected for it is inadmissible.”¹⁵⁰ This was the last formal attempt the Church made to the government before the outbreak of the war. It was met, as had become custom by that point in time, by utter rejection. Dialogue had not been and would not formulate State policy until later on. This resistance to diplomacy tells us that perhaps Calles’ government was looking for a confrontation with the Church. This does not necessarily mean that they wanted war, but that at the very least they wanted to wear out the clergy until it saw its quest to gain the status it used to have as being futile.

In August, whilst all the exchanges amongst government and clergy officials occurred, fourteen spontaneous peasant uprisings against the government exploded. Between September and December the number increased to fifty. The fact is that throughout Calles’ anticlerical campaign, he was sure of the fact that the people also viewed the Church as an oppressor. This vision came because this was true of the people he had encountered in the north and in the city. He was unaware however, that in the countryside people “felt that the Revolution had only meant destruction and insecurity, without bringing any positive effects in their lives, it is for this reason that anticlerical policies to them felt as a new insult and they decided to react.”¹⁵¹ Calles had thus overestimated the people’s animosity towards religion. This miscalculation led to an uprising that was independent of the central Church. Though many priests did mobilize their constituents this was in direct opposition to the orders they had received from the central Catholic authority. The Cristero War truly began as a people’s movement. The LNDLR was excited by the fact that the people themselves had taken to arms, and undoubtedly Calles had been shocked. “The league (LNDLR), just like the State that

¹⁵⁰ Statement by Congress on September 6th 1926 in Gastón García Cantú, 329

¹⁵¹ Lorenzo Meyer, 829

underestimated them, and just like Rome that doubted their faith, did not imagine that the people could have their own vision, their own conscience, their own plan.”¹⁵² Calles had created a vision of the State for himself, and was forming policy in accord to this vision. He had not calculated however that the people were going to need to be convinced of it, and because they were not, the Cristero War exploded.

An apparent victory for the State

Though the Cristero War began slowly and in certain localities, its outbreak caught both the political establishment and the Church off guard. We have seen that Plutarco Elías Calles had been looking to confront the Church, it is nevertheless highly improbable that he would have wanted the conflict he got. As Jean Meyer exposes, “the Cristiada is the name of the war that surprises everybody: people and institutions; the war that surprises the army and its government. The insurgents throw themselves without any more preparations than those necessary for the good death... The contradiction that exists between the stagnant political conflict between Church and State, and the sudden outburst of the popular and parochial uprising is remarkable.”¹⁵³ Calles’ anticlericalism was not an incitement to war. Rather, it was an attempt to undermine the Church as an institution that could control the population. Many Mexicans interpreted Calles’ actions, however, as a direct attack on them and their belief system. It is because of these people’s reaction that within a few months 25 thousand people, mostly peasants, were mobilized, and over one-quarter of the nation’s territory was engulfed in a military conflict.

Although some priests supported the Cristeros, the Church officially opposed the guerrilla fighters. Though Rome and the leading Mexican bishops had attempted to

¹⁵² Jean Meyer, Vol. 2., 299

¹⁵³ Jean Meyer, *La Cristiada: La Guerra de los Cristeros*. Vol 1. (Mexico City: Siglo veintiuno editores, 1997), IX

dissuade the government from pursuing strong anticlerical policies, once the war started they never turned their diplomatic opposition into support for armed confrontation of the government. The Catholic Church did not declare an official position in regards to the movement. For the most part, bishops let the Christian rebels decide their fate. “A minority [of the bishops] supported the *Cristeros*, another minority fought against them, and the majority hid in the shadow of expectations, ready to follow Roman orders.”¹⁵⁴ The reasons for this are still unclear. It is probable that a mixture of uncertainty about the rebels’ performance, combined with the fear of opposing a president who had shown no remorse in his strong anticlericalism persuaded the bishops to take a position on the sidelines of the conflict. Anxious about being accused as rebels, the countryside’s leading priests and bishops looked for refuge in the capital. With a central Catholic Church in the city who opposed them, and with abandoned parishes in the countryside, the clergy could not direct the faithful during the war.

The *Cristero* is very hard to define because he came from all areas of the country, from all socio-economic positions and different ethnicities. We cannot attribute the persistence of the fighter to conditions of poverty because, although these had existed in the countryside ever since the Mexican Revolution, none of the uprisings against the government had been able to gather as many people as *la Cristiada*. Although the majority of the fighters were peasants, the people from cities were in charge of creating propaganda and of making sure there was enough food and of arms supplies. Though the fighters were men, women were engaged by taking charge of logistical operations and some of them went on to become spies for the *Cristeros*. Most of the rebels came from

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, XII

the states of Jalisco, Michoacán and Zacatecas, so from the central-pacific states of the country.¹⁵⁵ The heterogeneity of the *Cristeros* makes it hard to assess why some people fought and others did not. The most probable reason was that individually each fighter saw the Cristero War as either a defense of religion or an attack on the Revolutionary State, a State which some perceived to be dangerous. The peasants who participated in the war believed in at least one of these ideas, those who abstained from the war, did not. There was only one element that held this army together: small towns. “The base would always be the local entities, the town or towns where the rebels gathered, where they returned after combat, in order to remain in them until the next fight.”¹⁵⁶

The lack of homogeneity of this army and the absence of leadership made it seem as if the *Cristeros* had no chance against the federal army. However, it was difficult for Calles’ troops to keep up with this group of men because of their dispersion and their guerrilla tactics. Two things can explain the heterogeneity of these fighters. The first is that the Cristero War was a reaction to the Mexican Revolution. The Revolution had changed society, and although many people, like Calles himself, greeted the promised progress with enthusiasm, there were many who felt that the changes threatened their customs and culture. Jürgen Buchenau writes, “the campesinos defended their church and their priest as a way of fighting for their way of life.”¹⁵⁷ In the concluding lines of his three volume series on the Cristero War, Jean Meyer writes, “la Cristiada was a movement of reaction or defense against... the Revolution, meaning the accelerated outcome of the modernizing process that was initiated towards the end of the nineteenth

¹⁵⁵ For tables on the demographics of the *Cristeros* turn to the appendix

¹⁵⁶ Jean Meyer, *La Cristiada. Los Cristeros*. Vol. 3 (Mexico City: Ediciones xxi, 1993), 6

¹⁵⁷ Jürgen Buchenau, 130.

century.”¹⁵⁸The people who felt that they needed to defend the country from this movement came from all over, for to be against the Revolution one did not have to pertain to a class or come from a certain place. More importantly, however, was the fact that the Cristero War was a movement of faith. Religion transcended geography and class lines and unified an unlikely army. Despite the fact that their Church and their spiritual leaders had abandoned them, these people trusted that their faith was guiding them against the government. In his memoir, Epifanio Silva, a *Cristero*, wrote:

“I have been a man of many professions, but the most beautiful thing that has happened to me is to have been a Cristero. I have kept the promise that I have made to God, I am a Cristero and I will be until the day I die. A priest told me when I was debating whether I should join or not: ‘Look Epifanio, it’s better if you die now because if you deny Christ, you will be condemned.’ But I never disappointed Him. I am a sinner, but falling and getting back up again, here we go.”¹⁵⁹

The romanticized view of war is common amongst memoirs of the *Cristeros*. The reason for this is that, although the fighting was brutal, and the war incredibly bloody, the *Cristeros* believed that they had the power of God behind them.

Throughout the war itself, the *Cristero* rebels were not able to find a unifying force to lead their efforts to victory. The lack of support of the Church was augmented by the fact that the LNDLR was not able to lead the armed movement. This organization was political in nature, and therefore remained, for the most part, outside of the military conflict. Despite their disorganization, the confidence and conviction with which the militants fought was remarkable. The French diplomat Lagarde wrote, “Exalted by the impossibility to take sacrament, the indigenous people have undertaken a sort of holy war; counting more on the supernatural than on strategy and tactic, these new soldiers of

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 319

¹⁵⁹ Epifanio Silva in Alfredo Hernández Quesada ed., *A Salto de Mata: Voces de la Cristiada*, (Mexico: Secretaría de Cultura de Jalisco, 1996), 75

Cristo Rey operate in small parties, and have not accomplished more than killing without profit.”¹⁶⁰

The rebels were aided by the fact that the war increased the economic troubles of the country. The war affected the agricultural economy for it ravaged the lands where corn and beans were produced. Farmers were left in complete distress, because the army seized their cattle and stole their crop inventory. In an effort to suppress secular teachings, the Cristeros destroyed the public schools that the Calles government had built thereby inflicting great economic damages. Most importantly, the Federalist army was taking up the greatest part of the national budget. Economic historians have had a hard time coming up with a set of data that finds exactly how much of the budget was swallowed up by the army. The most conservative estimates, however, calculate that the army took at least 25 per cent of the budget in the years from 1926-1929.

Besides the economic hardships inflicted upon the nation by the war, the army itself suffered from inner turmoil that prevented it from staging a powerful offensive. The army recruited from the unemployed and the poorest fraction of the population. It was said of the Mexican soldier that, “the job of a soldier is despicable, scorned by the Mexican population.”¹⁶¹ Made up mostly of a group of maladjusted and miserable people, the army did not have the capability to defeat even small uprisings. It had to content itself with destroying the enemy, but never gaining actual control of the land. Their efforts therefore, only worsened the situation by extending the conflict deeper into the Mexican territory. Throughout the three years of the conflict, the army’s inefficiency, the

¹⁶⁰ Ernest Lagarde in Jean Meyer, Vol 1., 117

¹⁶¹ Jean Meyer, Vol 1., 153

economic struggles inflicted by the war, and the relentless fighting of the Cristeros pushed the Federalists into a position where winning the war seemed impossible.

A policy of conciliation had been encouraged by Álvaro Obregón since 1926, and by the American government throughout the conflict. Obregón was poised to win re-election in 1928. When he did, it seemed as though the conflict was going to come to an end. His assassination right after his victory, however, delayed the peace process. It also created political instability that would push Emilio Portes Gil, the new president and Calles' hand picked successor, to move along with the peace negotiations. Realizing that the army could perhaps lose the war, that the obregonistas (supporters of Obregón) were willing to unite themselves with the Cristeros in opposition to Calles, and that the Church was willing to negotiate, Gil moved to negotiate with the Bishops. Furthermore, the Catholic Church in Rome wanted peace and was ready to make some serious concessions. Jean Meyer explains that, "Rome wanted the peace, and believed in the possibility of winning in the long term, making concessions in the short term. All of the Vatican policy of Pius XI... went like that, and was founded on a secular experience of conflict with the modern State. If the minimal was preserved – what Portes Gil called the identity of the Church – then the Church would make large concessions."¹⁶² In the end Gil did allow the Church to keep its identity, meaning that it was allowed its space as an institution. The Church, on their part, signed the peace, accepting the Ley Calles and all the anticlerical stipulations in the 1917 Constitution. It seemed that the State had won for they had not given up anything, the Church had signed the peace and the Cristeros were forced to drop their weapons. The surrender of the rebels did not come willingly, for, "the

¹⁶² Jean Meyer, Vol 2., 376

Cristeros did not want to sign the peace, given that they did not trust the government, yet at the same time they subdued to the will of the Church because they did not have many more options.”¹⁶³

The Vatican signed a peace that was completely unbeneficial to the Mexican Catholics. The fact was that this deal would only mark the end of the war and would not truly alleviate the conflict between Church and State, a conflict that was not solved until almost a decade later. As Roberto Blancarte writes, “the gradual decrease and end of the armed resistance does not mean the end of the Church State struggle, nor the end of the anticlerical persecution.”¹⁶⁴ In order to understand the reasons for such a peace process we must understand the nature of the institutions that devised it. The Vatican, an ancient institution, thought in the long term. It was confident that if it was allowed to exist as an institution, in the future it might regain its power. The government, on the other hand, being completely new, could not think in the same way as the Vatican and thus saw the diplomatic conclusion to the Cristero war as a complete victory. The Vatican appreciated a fact that the government did not: the modern State was not a foregone conclusion. The people in Rome saw that the Cristero movement was fundamentally a reaction to the progressive policies that were born out of the Mexican Revolution. They understood that it was a reaction to the values promoted by the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and embodied by the new secular Mexican State. All of which meant that ultimately, the Church believed that although the modern State had come out victorious, it did not mean that there were not elements in the country that accepted the religion of the Revolution. Calles, through Gil on the other hand, was confident in his vision of the State, and thus

¹⁶³ Ibid, 329

¹⁶⁴ Roberto Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia Católica en México 1929-1982*. (Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992), 29

saw this diplomatic end as the end to the State within a State condition of the Church in Mexico. He saw the end of the Cristero War as the conclusion to a movement that had begun with Benito Juárez almost seventy years before. By pacifying the rebels, he thought that he would be able to finally strip the clergy of all political power. He thought in the short-term and thus saw the victory over the Church as final and as the last step toward the solidification of State as the only source of institutional power.

It is impossible to think right now who was right when signing the peace, the Vatican or Calles. It is hard to imagine that the president of a very young republic would have thought that he had been able to cripple completely an ancient institution like the Church. This can be seen by the recent renewal of Catholicism in Mexican public life, which suggests that perhaps the weakening of the Church that Calles looked for was impossible. Nevertheless in the context of 1929 it is probable that they were both correct in their own way. The Church was signing the peace to stay alive, and the State was signing because it saw a deal it could not refuse. The truth is however that, as Jean Meyer writes, “when in June 1929 the Church and the State made peace... the only losers were the fighters.”¹⁶⁵ Pope Pius XI demonstrated throughout his papacy that he was willing to make compromises with even the most ruthless régimes. On February 1929 the Vatican had compromised with Mussolini’s fascist regime and had signed the Lateran Treaty. Thus, for the Church to negotiate with the Mexican government was probably not such a stretch. It is still hard to see in a positive light a Church which turned its back on its believers. The *Cristeros* were after all fighting for the survival of the Church, and they never received encouragement or support. Instead, the Vatican sought out a peace process

¹⁶⁵ Jean Meyer Vol. 3., 319

that completely ignored the desires of those that were dying for its existence. The Church is an institution that is based on hierarchy and authority, even if the *Cristeros* fought for Church's existence, they had openly disobeyed this authority. Since the Church is the body of Christ incarnate, it is the Vatican authority that determines what are Christ's wishes. Even if the *Cristeros* thought that they were fighting for Christ, the Church viewed disobedience as a clear sign of going against Christ's desires, and would not tolerate such insubordination. At the end of the war, the peace process disillusioned most fighters, for they had not seen a solution in which the Church came out on top. Perhaps in its strategic thinking the Church had made an intelligent move in signing the peace, however in terms of its actions towards its faithful the Church behaved hypocritically. On the other hand, Gil's peace seemed perfectly beneficial for the State. It is hard to applaud a government, however, for pushing its people into a military struggle. It was Calles' misinterpretation of the Mexicans' response to his anti-clericalism that led to this war. Furthermore, although the separation of Church and State is very healthy for any democracy, to push the country to war is not the healthiest way for the separation to occur. Although Calles had the noble goal of Mexican progress in mind, he was all too convinced that a powerful State was necessary for this goal. In his mind the State was the only institution that could mandate the rule of law, and thus the obedience of the Revolutionary Constitution. Had he not been so adamant in this belief, a crisis may have been averted. In reality both the State and the Church share blame for the real tragedy of the war, which was the abandonment of the Mexican population.

Institutionalizing the Revolution: The Formation of the PNR

We have seen thus far that Calles' policies were a product of his progressive education and his political formation in the midst of the Revolution. The Cristero War, was not a war that he wanted necessarily, but the confrontation with the Church was his own doing. We will now look at the formation of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (National Revolutionary Party – PNR) and see how the confrontation with the Church made sense within this other political goal: constitutionalism. Before doing that however we must clarify that there was one circumstance that allowed Calles to follow through on his plans for the PNR: the assassination of Álvaro Obregón.

Mexican historian Arnaldo Córdova describes Obregón's assassination as the, “most decisive event in the political development in the post-revolutionary era.”¹⁶⁶ Although this might be an exaggeration, it does help to illustrate the importance of this event. Calles had always held that there was no distancing between himself and Obregón, even though from early on in his presidency those who declared themselves as Obregonistas were the opposition to the Calles presidency.¹⁶⁷ In a speech made on March 12th 1925 however, Calles declared:

“Ever since the socio-political revolutionary movement consecrated its definitive victory, it left in the fundamental law of the Republic the synthesis of its postulates and aspirations. Ever since then, the unyielding enemies of the popular cause... have tried to hypocritically claim to be the upholders of the Constitution, whilst at the same time consecrate all their activities and all their ploys to obstruct the empire of the revolutionary cannons and to divide... the men of the Revolution.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Arnaldo Córdova, *La Revolución en crisis: La aventura del maximato*. (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 1995), 23

¹⁶⁷ Jürgen Buchenau, 138.

¹⁶⁸ Plutarco Elías Calles. Speech made on March 12th 1925. *Los Presidentes de México: Discursos Políticos 1910-1988 Tomo II*, 139

Here, Calles attacks those who accuse him of drifting away from Obregón. He sees the men who fought for the Revolution as being united, for they share a philosophy of government, and thus sees his goals as being no different from those of Obregón.

Even though he flirted with the idea of supporting Morones as his successor, Calles soon came to realize that he needed to support Obregón in order maintain political stability. Although Obregón's candidacy was illegal for it did not follow the precept of article 83 that prohibited reelection, he got away with it by claiming that the reelection article referred to consecutive reelection, and by asserting that his presidency would bring peace to a country ravaged by war. Once Obregón launched his candidacy, it was evident that he was going to win. In a speech in Veracruz in 1928 he said, "our campaign is developing, growing every day, the enemy already defeated...did not dare to present a new candidate and we are now playing without a rival."¹⁶⁹ In early July of that year, Obregón was elected president. On July 17th however, José de León Toral a man pretending to be an artist approached Obregón at a restaurant and asked him if he wanted to see the cartoons of the other politicians present. When the new president-elect consented, Toral advanced and shot him five times in the head. It was a traumatic moment in Mexican history, and one that would give Calles the opportunity to pursue a political path that with Obregón in power might not have been possible.

The events of July 17th might have given Calles the opportunity to eventually follow political goals that would transform the shape of the State. Obregón's assassination was also, however, the catalyst for the most intense political crisis that Calles had to go through. The Constitution of 1917 had eliminated the position of vice-

¹⁶⁹ Álvaro Obregón. Speech made in Jalapa, Veracruz on May 8th 1928, in Jürgen Buchenau, 107

president and there was therefore no clear successor in line to Obregón. By law Congress would nominate an interim president, until elections could be carried out.¹⁷⁰ Calles could do this, or he could ask Congress to do pick an interim successor or he could remain as president arguing that the stability of the nation was at risk. Both options were dangerous, because the former had the potential of political chaos whilst would see the latter as Calles' attempt to keep control of the executive and thus as a violation the no reelection tenet of the constitution. Furthermore, even though Toral was formally accused of acting under his own will, many believed that he was hired by Morones and the CROM to get rid of Obregón. All these factors combined with the strains that the Cristero War was inflicting upon the government to almost bring down the administration.

In a sense, Plutarco Elías Calles had failed, for towards the end of his presidency he had not been able to fully strengthen the State, or settle the land claims from the peasants, or even completely control the army who still saw a coup as a means of keeping the country under control. As historian Luis Javier Garrido puts it, "the Callista government had aimed to consolidate the post-revolutionary State apparatus, but it had not reached its objectives."¹⁷¹ President Calles, despite being in such a difficult position responded to the crisis brilliantly. There were many who believed he should have extended his powers for only this way would the government not crumble. Calles knew however, that this would have infuriated Revolutionaries who believed deeply in the no reelection article of the Constitution. In his last state of the union address, Calles announced that he would not seek reelection and asked Congress to recommend an

¹⁷⁰ Article 84 of the 1917 Constitution stipulated that Congress would pick an interim president and then would call upon an Electoral College that would vote and would pick a president that had to win by a 2/3 majority.

¹⁷¹ Luis Javier Garrido, *El partido de la revolución institucionalizada, la formación del Nuevo estado en México (1928-1945)*. (Mexico City: Siglo veintiuno editores, 1989), 63

interim president that would rule whilst there were new elections. Announcing this plan, Calles was able to hush those that were suspicious about him orchestrating Obregón's murder in order to gain political power. With this simple declaration, Calles paved the way for his successor, Emilio Portes Gil, to start a process of stabilization.

Perhaps more importantly than pacifying the country, in his state of the union, Calles outlined what he saw as the next political step the country should take. After praising Obregón for his service, lamenting his death and recognizing the political difficulties that were brought about by his assassination, Calles said:

“All this determines the magnitude of the issue; but the situation that Mexico faces, perhaps for the first time in its history, in which the dominating feature is the absence of caudillos, should allow us, will allow us, to definitively orient the country's politics through the ways of the true institutional life, making sure to, once and for all, pass from the historical condition of a one man country to that of a Nation of institutions and laws.”¹⁷²

By alluding to the *caudillo*, Calles was making a reference back to Obregón, but also to a history of Mexico being lead by individuals rather than political institutions. Throughout the speech he referred to making Mexico a nation of institutions and laws, in which the actions of any single man would be unimportant in comparison to the efforts of the institutions of the country. Calles was pointing to the solidification of the State. Also, with advantage of hindsight, we can see that such an emphasis on the importance of an institution that would erase individual differences had to do with the fact that Calles was about to organize a new political party. This party would try to unite all other parties and groups, erasing all the differences amongst them and unifying the political legacy of the Mexican Revolution.

¹⁷² Plutarco Elías Calles. State of the Union on September 1st 1928. *Los Presidentes de México: Discursos Políticos 1910-1988*, 169

In the same speech he sketched out a project that foresaw a fully inclusive government in which all the different groups of the nation would be represented. He said, “this temple of the law will seem more reverent and will satisfy better the national necessity when all the tendencies and legitimate interests of the country are represented in these walls.”¹⁷³ He even said, that groups of opposition would be welcome in the chamber, for after all he believed that “the new ideas have touched the consciousness of almost all Mexicans.”¹⁷⁴ The new ideas he referred to were the ideas of the Revolution. Despite the fact that the Cristero war was going on, we see Calles’ adamant faith in the progressive nature of the Mexican people. He saw the Cristeros as only a small fraction of society that did not consider the Revolution to be a positive and transformative event. Blindly believing that the people indeed considered the values of the Revolution as the values of the general will, Calles could so confidently promote the creation of a fully inclusive government. He even said,

“The presence of conservatives [in Congress] not only would not put in danger the new edifice of the ideas and legitimate revolutionary institutions, but would also impede the attempts of mutual weakening and destruction of groups of Revolutionary origin that fight amongst themselves frequently just because they don’t have an ideological enemy in the chambers.”¹⁷⁵

After seeing that the Revolution had not had one unified legacy and that it had split men like Carranza and Obregón, Calles was not naïve enough to believe that the Revolutionary line of government would simply survive. He was very aware that what put his government most in danger were not the conservatives or the *Cristeros* but the Obregonistas. The latter had the means and the ideological push to divide the people and

¹⁷³ Ibid, 174

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 175

¹⁷⁵ Ibid

thus drive the government into further instability. It is because of this that Calles said, “I would not honestly proceed if I did not insist on the dangers of every kind that can come from the breakdown of the Revolutionary family.”¹⁷⁶ Calling for unity, Calles was doing more than securing his government and that of his successor, he was laying the groundwork for the creation of a party that would bring all the Revolutionary groups together.

Calles’ last State of the Union traveled quickly across the nation and turned the Congress on his side. Although he had initially faced opposition by the president of Congress, Ricardo Topete, this divisive fraction soon died out and by 27th September 1928 a National Revolutionary Block was formed in Congress. This represented the first time since the end of the Revolution that all members of congress had declared that they were behind the political project of the government.¹⁷⁷ The president had a harder time convincing the army to back his goal. Since it did not have a strong national project it was left with no choice than to meet with the Calles and agree to a successor. The president had always opposed the rise of a military leader to power, and therefore suggested the recently appointed Secretary of the Interior, a civilian, Emilio Portes Gil. This candidate would appeal all groups for he had opposed the CROM, supported agrarian reform and he had been suggested by the army as a possibility. Thus, on September 25th 1928, Portes Gil was elected as interim president by a unanimous congress. In a little over three months, Calles had been able to save the government from the brink of collapse and, moreover, had been able to gain more support than any Revolutionary leader had ever held.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 179

¹⁷⁷ Luis Javier Garrido, 69

With a new interim president-elect in place, Calles was now ready to attend to what would become his greatest political legacy: the formation of the PNR. As we have seen, Calles had outlined in his last state of the union that he did not want Mexico to be ruled by caudillos. Garrido explains, “most of the political ‘parties’, groups, associations and syndicates had known an existence dependent on the ‘revolutionary’ chiefs, lacking a precise ideology or a solid organization.”¹⁷⁸ Appreciating this, Calles sought out to unify all the Revolutionary movements. Garrido continues, “the culminating point of Calles’ project had to lead to the integration of a great political formation of all those that had participated in the armed movement [the Mexican Revolution], of one ‘Party of the Revolution’, whose implementation should allow favorable conditions for the consolidation of the State apparatus.”¹⁷⁹ Interestingly, Calles did not see party membership as a necessary condition for employment for every civil servant. He did believe however, in making sure that every single small party, group and trade union that supported the Revolution would unite under this one party.¹⁸⁰ The importance of the formation of this party cannot be overstated, for this is the party that would rule Mexico for the next seventy years.

The historian can only infer the reasons as to why Calles decided to form this party. Calles was a man who truly believed in the values and goals promoted by the Revolution, and because of this he thought of a way to make sure that these goals were actually met. Calles sought out to stop the divisive factions within the government, which had plagued every single administration since the end of Porfirio Díaz’s administration.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 63

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 70

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 73

Maybe he saw in the new party, the prospect of an institution that could synthesize all the Revolutionary ideals, and thus rid the government of the internal disputes that were responsible for so much political instability. He had appreciated that although Mexico needed a strong State, this could not function under the leadership of one man; the failure of every president since the Revolution, and his own shortcomings were enough to prove it. In order to solve these problems, he would form a party that would control the State. The men of the Revolution would all be members of this party and thus the program of the party would be that of the Revolution. The party would ensure that his progressive political legacy would live on.

The question of why only one party also seems important. One could point out that Mexico had had a history of strong authoritarian leadership. The Spanish crown had ruled the nation for three hundred years. Since its independence, furthermore, Mexico had gone through two empires and a series of very strong political leaders: Santa Anna and Porfirio Díaz, most importantly. Finally, this legacy of authoritarian leadership had been embodied by the *caudillo* figures born after the Revolution. Now Calles looked for a new source of central control that would and could eliminate all the problems that arose from having only one figure at the top, but that could still enact uncontested policies. Garrido pushes this idea when he writes,

“The callistas seemed to believe that in an agrarian and quasifeudal country like Mexico, where there had been no democratic practices, and with an illiterate people, a multiparty system would be an obstacle for the modernization of the country. The caudillista and authoritarian tradition in Mexico was for them legitimate, and the party of the Revolution should therefore allow them to organize in the same manner both the political elites and the popular masses.”¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 72

The PNR would allow Calles, and his successors, to face the people in a unified manner, and although they would circumvent democracy, it was a necessary sacrifice for the advancement of the country.

From the outset of the formation of the PNR Calles created an organizing committee, with him as the chair, that would foresee the actual creation of the party. On December 2nd, one day after Portes Gil took power, the PNR lunched a manifesto to all newspapers inviting all those loyal to the constitution to join it.¹⁸² Calles would eventually quit the organizing committee for his position as leader proved to be problematic for many. The conflicts between different groups all ended up being diverted to Calles, and thus the party remained without any members. “In the long run, however, Calles’ gambit [to quit the committee] increased his ability to maneuver as a seemingly nonpartisan and impartial senior statesman.”¹⁸³ With Calles “out”, the committee was able to travel around the country and gain support by inviting all parties and groups to join it. The PNR advertised itself as the “organ of the Revolution’s political expression destined... to impose the norms of action to its elected representatives in public office.”¹⁸⁴ It was able to gain a following by at first advocating a populist rhetoric thereby attracting members of the Labor and Agrarian parties. By March 1st 1929, at the outset of the Party convention in Querétaro, the committee of the PNR had been able to unite almost every party except for the Labor and Communist parties. These two however would continue to lose membership and status as the PNR gained strength. In this convention, “the PNR was born officially by grouping the most important political parties... but in reality it was

¹⁸² Jürgen Buchenau, 149

¹⁸³ Ibid

¹⁸⁴ Luis Javier Garrido, 77

a creation of Calles and of his friends.”¹⁸⁵ Nevertheless, these efforts were enough for the PNR to become a reality and a full-fledged political force. It also meant that Calles was now in a position in which he could extend his control beyond his presidency.

The period that followed the formation of the PNR up until the election of Lázaro Cárdenas in 1934 has been deemed as the *Máximato* Presidencial, a period in which Calles is seen as having a *de facto* control of the presidency through the state apparatus. Although some historians have argued that in fact his power was quite limited,¹⁸⁶ most agree that Calles did in fact exert an unusual amount of control on the presidents that succeeded him. The question here is not however to analyze the ways in which the formation of the PNR extended Calles’ rule but to understand the formation of the PNR as a key element of his greater political ambitions. In order to do this, we must to look at the creation of the PNR in the context of the Cristero War and Calles’ anticlerical policies. By doing this we will see that both the new party and the old confrontation with the Church were for Calles ways of manifesting his profound respect for the Revolution and its Constitution.

In the previous chapter we looked at the ways in which Plutarco Elías Calles’ confrontation with the Church rested on his faith in the Constitution of 1917. Calles had defended his attack on the Church and the enforcement of the law in the run up to the Cristero War through the legislation of this Constitution. When the Church asked for the Constitution to be revised, he always argued that Mexico was first and foremost a country of laws and that he could not simply change these laws. He told the clergy that in order to revise the Constitution they only had the alternative of appealing to Congress. Although

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 89

¹⁸⁶ Tzvi Medin, *El minimato Presidencial: Historia Política del Máximato 1928-1935*

Calles was not ready for war, he did not view his staunch opposition to the Church as being problematic for the people, for he thought that most Mexicans shared with him a belief in the Revolutionary Constitution of 1917. We have also seen that the PNR was born out of a desire to unify all the different groups that were in a position of power so that it was easier to administer the country. The creation of the party came at a time of crisis, and some have argued that it was the result of this crisis. It is more likely, however that the crisis opened the window of opportunity for the party to be created. It is hard to imagine that a political project like the PNR could be born in three months only. In any case, one could see the PNR not only as another political party, but as the body through which Calles could ensure that the values of the Constitution be enacted. It is not that the war on the Church was the reason for the party, or that Calles' secularism needed a party to make sure it would survive. It is that both the PNR and the confrontation with the Church were products of the same ideology. They were products of Calles' vision of a Revolutionary State that would advance the rule of law as the most important element for progress and that would crush the opposition and circumvent democracy if it seemed necessary.

There is an undated document, that came from Plutarco Elías Calles' personal secretary Soledad González which has the title, "A program for the new party." Although it is undated, the text suggests that the party had been thought of before the assassination of Obregón. In it we find an analysis of the Papacy in Rome. It presents the Papacy as an autocratic régime that aims to attain political control of the whole world by having its representatives in every government and by indoctrinating children through education. It

considers the Papacy a “threat to the peace and order of our nation.”¹⁸⁷ It claims that “a Republic and an arrogant autocracy cannot function together in peace” and thus resolves to “be against the Papal system, abolish the Papal schools in our country, and that no follower of the Pope should teach in public schools.”¹⁸⁸ All this amounts to the same anticlericalism that had been shown previous to the Cristero War movement. It is highly unlikely that after Obregón’s assassination, as the Church and State gave signs of a peace negotiation, that Calles would have outlined a policy based on such anticlericalism. This document helps to advance two notions. The first is that a new party would be created, in which one of the ideological pillars would be anticlericalism. The second is that the party was thought of before the political crisis brought about by Obregon’s murder and not a result of it. Instead, the party had been thought of as one of Calles’ political goals. In this text we see how Calles frames the separation of Church and State as one of objectives of the new party. It would be the agent that would advance his other goals like the country’s modernization or the total suppression of the Catholic Church.

A statement outlining the party’s program, published on January 20th 1929 in *El Universal*, said that the main goals of the PNR were to “permanently maintain, and through the unification of the revolutionary elements of the country, an exercise of support to the *legal order created by the Mexican Revolution*,”¹⁸⁹ (my emphasis). The allusion to the constitution of 1917 is very evident. The main goal of the party was not to erase political differences, but to provide the structural framework to enforce the

¹⁸⁷ “Un programa para el nuevo partido.” Archivo Plutarco Elías Calles. Exp 108. Legajo 6/7. Foja 296-297

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ “Proyecto de Programa del Partido Nacional Revolucionario” January 20th 1929, in Luis Javier Garrido, 78

Revolutionary Constitution. If all the Revolutionary groups appeared united, then the Constitution would seem like a stronger document and its laws would be respected.

There was not a substantive ideology outlined by the PNR and this allowed it to unite a number of different groups. The ideology was simply the Revolution and its Constitution. If we think of them as manifestations of the same will, it is possible to see the connection between the PNR and the confrontation with the Catholic Church. It was the will to modernize and to progress through the tenets of the Constitution of 1917. In the case of the Catholic Church, Calles had overestimated the people's Revolutionary spirit. In the case of the PNR Calles was sacrificing democracy. He was giving over the State to a party, and thus handing authoritarian control that would be masked as representative democracy. Maybe Calles did not think this was such a bad thing, for after all it was a means to greater ends. Nonetheless miscalculation on both accounts was responsible for a bloody war in one case and a single-party rule that extended itself almost into the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Mexico is a Catholic country. Every year on December 12th, millions of people from around the country gather at the Basílica de Guadalupe to celebrate the Virgin of Guadalupe. Last year, newspapers reported that six million people went, averaging two hundred people entering every minute for an entire day.¹⁹⁰ Some of the people do the last few kilometers on their knees in order to depict their devotion to the virgin of Mexico. Political rallies pale in comparison in terms of participation and fervor. Although the separation of Church and State in Mexico is real, the piety of most of the population is unquestionable. The religiosity that is felt today is the same that was felt eighty years ago at the outset of the Cristero War. We have spoken about the insurgents as reacting against Calles' political ambitions because they did not share the secular goals of the Revolution. The main motivation for the *Cristeros*, however, was their faith. They, like modern day Mexican reenactors of the Passion, believed in their roles as martyrs, just as much as Calles believed in the ideas of progress and modernity.

We have advanced the thesis that Calles' constitutionalism was born from his participation in the Revolution. The Revolution had been his own salvation, for it had given him the opportunity to escape a life of poverty. More importantly, it was a movement which produced the document that would provide the guidelines for the success of the country. For him, to respect the Constitution was to respect the aims of the Revolution. It is with this in mind that we considered both the attack on the Catholic Church and the formation of the PNR. Calles' constitutionalism became the thread

¹⁹⁰ Liliana Cabrera y Sergio Fimbres, "Festegan 6 millones a la Virgen," *Periódico Reforma* (Mexico City), 13 December 2007

between both of these policies and helped to explain Calles' role in confronting the clergy and pushing for the unification of the Revolutionary groups.

Calles' main political ambition was the formation of a modern western nation-state. He believed that the Revolution had laid out the groundwork for this goal. He believed that the people would share his Revolutionary enthusiasm and would welcome the project of the Constitution. He was met however, with a populace that was not willing to abandon its faith and thus drove the country into a bloody conflict that claimed at least seventy thousand lives. Calles' miscalculation might have arisen because, as Jean Meyer writes, "there is a visible Mexico and an invisible Mexico. Invisible, in particular, are the Mexican peasants, people that constitute most of 'the nation' even though they are disregarded by the directives of the State... [and] by the intellectuals."¹⁹¹ Or, it could have also been caused by Calles' own blind faith: his devotion to progress. This devotion meant that Calles was fixated on the establishment of the rule of law, that would according to him lead to the creation of a healthy middle class which would govern Mexico and would leave the years of instability and widespread poverty behind.

In order to make sure that the legacy of the Constitution was respected, Calles sought to eliminate opposition. The crushing of the Catholic Church was the first step in this direction. The other very important step was the formation of the PNR. This party would serve almost as an umbrella party that would embrace all different groups that emerged from the Revolution. Although it was an awkward coalition, for many of these groups had spent the last ten years struggling amongst themselves for power, the idea of making sure that the projects of the Revolution were kept alive was enough to hold these

¹⁹¹ Jean Meyer, Vol 1., XI

groups together. It is possible that the threat of reactionary movements, embodied by the Cristero War, made those who had pushed for the Mexican Revolution settle their differences and agree on the formation of this party. It would be a party that would go uncontested and maintain central authoritative government without letting it fall into the hands of one man. The party thus addressed the concerns of those who viewed an all-inclusive democracy as dangerous, for it allowed the political elites to keep control of the country and masquerade their authoritative regime with a veil of democracy.

The end of the Cristero War marked an apparent victory for the State. The influence of the Church was put within strict boundaries, the anticlerical stipulations of the Constitution remained in the text and the Church forced the *Cristeros* to surrender. Furthermore, the government did not make any concessions. The Vatican turned its back on its people when it signed the peace. The *Cristeros* were fighting to give back the Mexican Church its status, yet the clergy in Mexico and in Rome did not recognize their efforts. We have seen that the nature of the institutions signing the peace had to do something with it. The Oxford English Dictionary defines secular as something in the world, or a generation or age.¹⁹² Calles' State, being secular, could only think of itself in the world, or as a product of a generation; whilst the Church viewed itself as eternal. It is possible that the Church saw this inconvenient peace as a product of the time, after all it had recently signed a peace with Benito Mussolini in Italy and had adopted a policy of conciliation with different countries around the world. This did not mean however, that it believed that the status quo would remain. This different temporal perspective led Calles

¹⁹² *Oxford English Dictionary*, OED Online, s.v. "Secular."

to believe that his biggest rival had been defeated, and allowed the Church to remain as an institution with the chance of regaining power in Mexico.

Calles' project was the project of modernity, in the sense that it aimed for equality and progress. Calles saw in the Church, an institution that threatened this project. Despite the fact that there had been elements of the Church that had adopted social views, in his eyes, the reactionary factions of the Church still dominated, and also the weight of history was too much for the Church to overcome. Calles was confronted however with the reality that Mexico was not ready for the new Revolutionary State he envisioned, and was pulled into a reactionary conflict. Even though Calles came out victorious, it was not because the people agreed to a peace. Also, although a party ensured that the State would be the most powerful institution, and that Revolutionaries would lead the people, the reality was that the Mexican people had never been convinced by the project of the Mexican Revolution. Although this project strove for things like equality and liberty, the Mexican people showed that they were not willing to sacrifice certain things for it. One of them was, of course, their faith.

It was not only that the people did not share Calles' political ideals, but also Calles' policies have shown to be quite ineffective. The PNR jeopardized Calles' goal to transform Mexico into a modern State, for it sacrificed democracy in the name of progress. Very little progress has been made in making Mexico a developed nation and today, not only are Mexicans suspicious of their elected leaders, but also they have a distrust of democracy as a political system in general.¹⁹³ The recent elections, showed a divisive country, in which the now president won by only a fraction of a percentage

¹⁹³ In 2007, a public opinion poll carried out by an NGO found that only 48% of the country felt that democracy was the best form of government. www.latinobarometro.org

point. Allegations of fraud were raised, and the question was never settled for the vote was not revised. Thus the current administration stands at the brink of an abyss. It is not possible to blame Calles for the dismal political situation in which Mexico is today, not only because he was not responsible for the actions of his successors, but also because the country Calles envisioned never materialized. Mexico is still not a country of the middle class, or a country in which significant efforts have been made to diminish the educational gap, or in which the rule of law prevails, or in which political leaders truly manifest the will of the people rather than their own interests, or in which everyone respects the State. It is important, nevertheless, to understand how the current Mexican State was established in order to begin to see why it is that today it stands on crumbling grounds.



Photo: Plutarco Elías Calles

Source: Enrique Krauze, *Reformar desde el origen: Plutarco Elías Calles*. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002), 38



Photo: *Cristero* Family Portrait

Source: Enrique Krauze, *Reformar desde el origen: Plutarco Elías Calles*. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002), 67



Photo: *Cristeros*

Source: Enrique Krauze, *Reformar desde el origen: Plutarco Elías Calles*. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002), 79

For his monumental work, Jean Meyer made a survey of a cross-section of survivors of the Cristero conflict. There were 378 questionnaires that were returned to him, and the statistics provided come from these. All percentages are calculated by taking number of people as a percentage of 378. This study has been the only statistical study that has up until now been done in order to determine who the Cristeros were. Here we present the most salient features of this survey. For the complete survey turn to the third volume of Jean Meyers *La Cristiada*, pp 44-50.

Geographic Origin of Insurgents

State	Number of People	State	Number of People
Aguascalientes	5	Nayarit	18
Coahuila	7	Oaxaca	9
Colima	36	Puebla	5
Durango	14	Querétaro	21
Guanajuato	21	San Luis Potosí	2
Guerrero	12	Sinaloa	2
Jalisco	110	Tlaxcala	2
México DF	8	Veracruz	4
Michoacán	54	Zacatecas	43
Morelos	11		

Age of Insurgents by Percentage

Age (in 1926)	Percentage
11-19 years old	18%
20-29 years old	37%
30-39 years old	30%
40-49 years old	15%

- The questionnaire is evidently not fully accurate, for it does not cover fighters that were over 50 years old. However it does provide us with a good idea of the age of the average insurgent.

Education

Level of Education	Percentage
Never went to school	58%
At least 1 year of elementary school	36%
At least 1 year of secondary school	5%
No answer	2%

Professional Status

Profession	Number of People
Priest	1
Great land owners (owning more than 100 hectares)	10
Hacienda administrators	3
Small landowners (Owning from 1 to 15 hectares)	51
Leaseholders	63
Peasants	79
Mule worker	51
Artisans	44
Farmhand	16
Other	60

Religious Life

Took catechism lessons	365
Took catechism lessons for more than 3 years	278
Went to Sunday Mass	326

Took the Eucharistic communion:	
Once a year	377
1-10 times a year	95
12 times a year	152
Every Sunday	78

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