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### Plutarco Elías Calles and the Mexican Revolution

By Jürgen Buchenau

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For Calles, the conflict with the church was a personal quest; one that dated back to his childhood. As he once related, “When I was an altar boy . . . I stole

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alms in order to buy candy.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, many observers who interacted with the president during his conflict with the church point to the deep-seated and even irrational nature of his opposition to organized Catholicism. Calles’s hatred of the church ran so deep that it defied structuralist explanations of his behavior, confounding historical analyses to the present day. A comparative framework that places Calles’s behavior in the context of other “statists” around the world, whether of the populist, fascist, or communist variety, cannot account for his single-minded determination to weaken the church, although it does explain his desire to centralize education under the tutelage of the state. Nor can we understand the full extent of his anticlericalism with reference to his efforts to sponsor the emergence of a national bourgeoisie loyal to his government, or even as an essential part of his reform program. The historian must therefore conceive of Calles’s attitude toward the church as behavior that can only be fully appreciated in the idiosyncratic context of his own personal life. Scholars have hypothesized that Calles’s early years served as catalysts for his opposition to the church. In particular, his origins as illegitimate child, physical abuse by his adoptive father, his positivist schooling in Hermosillo, and the association between Catholicism and Yaqui resistance all offer possible explanations for Calles’s virulent opposition to the Catholic Church.<sup>46</sup>

In addition, Calles saw himself as an heir to Juárez and other nineteenth-century Liberals who had waged a long, bloody, and only partially successful struggle to separate church and state. The Liberals had long attempted to put an end to the wealth and extralegal privileges, or *fueros*, of the church. The Bourbon Reforms of the late eighteenth century had already included an attack on the *fueros*, which exempted the clergy from secular courts. After independence, the church still enjoyed considerable economic power as the owner of almost half of the arable land in Mexico. Not surprisingly, the constitution of 1857 outlawed church ownership of land and mandated civil marriages and secular education.<sup>47</sup> After the Porfirians struck a deal with the church that included official neglect of most of the anticlerical articles in this constitution, the revolutionary Constitution of 1917 had reaffirmed these Liberal tenets. Under Articles 3 and 130, the church could not own any land, nor could its priests teach children or run for political office. The articles also outlawed outdoor religious ceremonies, as well as those directed by foreign-born priests.

Anticlericalism therefore formed part of the Callista struggle with the Old Mexico: the attempt by secular, middle-class nationalists influenced by Anglo-Saxon, Protestant ideas to impose their vision on the Catholic campesinos of the center and south. Of course, implementation of these provisions was an-

other matter. Personally opposed to anticlericalism despite the leanings of several of his governors such as Alvarado, Calles, and Diéguez, Carranza had opposed a regulatory law that would have put the constitutional provisions into practice. Although Obregón had supported the inclusion of Articles 3 and 130 in the constitution, he remained a pragmatist mindful of the need to cultivate Catholic supporters such as Cedillo and Vasconcelos. This policy of toleration continued until January 11, 1923, when the Apostolic Delegate consecrated a shrine to Christ the King on Cubilete Mountain in the state of Guanajuato. Obregón considered this open-air celebration on a mountain generally regarded as the geographic center of Mexico a public challenge of his government, and he expelled the Apostolic Delegate from the country with seventy-two hours' notice. Later that year, the de la Huerta rebellion exacerbated this conflict when insurgent commander Guadalupe Sánchez drew on Catholic support in Veracruz.<sup>48</sup> Catholic opposition to the revolution therefore factored into Calles's position as well. In particular, Calles and his supporters feared the possibility that the church might harbor a movement to overthrow the government.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, a Catholic resistance movement was well organized in many areas of Mexico, and especially in the central states of Guanajuato, Jalisco, and Michoacán.

Calles brought the conflict between church and state to a new high. During his presidential campaign, he had announced his opposition to the Catholic Church, an opposition that he contrasted with a tolerant attitude toward religion in general.

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 an enemy of the caste of priests that sees in its position a privilege rather than an evangelical mission. I am the enemy of the political priest, the scheming priest, the priest as 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.<sup>50</sup>

Calles therefore justified his anticlericalism as part of a populist agenda to redeem his country's oppressed masses. As he believed, the poor majority needed immediate help in *this* life rather than the promise of a place in heaven in the afterlife. Indeed, the church had done all it could to derail revolutionary reforms. From exile in San Antonio, Texas, Archbishop José Mora y del Río had stated his opposition to the new constitution immediately after its promulgation in 1917. Calles also noted that his social agenda applied Jesus Christ's teachings to society, while the church desired to maintain the

majority of Mexicans in ignorance and poverty. In addition, anticlericalism was an important vehicle of creating a national bourgeoisie loyal to the new leadership rather than to local allegiances or to the global reach of the papacy. His opposition to the church focused on organized Catholicism, and Calles was supportive of Protestant missionaries as well as efforts to form a national Mexican Catholic Church that would break away from the Vatican just as the Church of England had done in the late 1500s. Among the members of the national government, Secretary of Foreign Relations Aarón Sáenz was a Protestant.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, one of Calles's early efforts as president was to help the founding of a schismatic church. On February 22, 1925, a group of CROM members that included the secretary general entered the Iglesia Soledad de Santa Cruz in eastern Mexico City and drove out the priests in that church under the threat of violence. After the priests had departed, a former Catholic clergyman, Joaquín Pérez Burdar, installed himself in the church as patriarch of the "Mexican Apostolic Church," accompanied by Manuel Monge, a Spanish-born priest. The following Monday, Monge attempted to celebrate the Eucharist in this church, but his service was interrupted by a riot that included more than one thousand protesters. When Pérez appealed to the government to guarantee the freedom of his church to practice its faith, Gobernación Secretary Valenzuela censured him for his forcible takeover of government property entrusted to the Catholic Church. However, Valenzuela encouraged the patriarch to seek through legal means what he had obtained by force. Strikingly, the secretary made no reference to the fact that the constitution forbade the foreigner Monge from administering religious services. A few days later, Calles ordered both churches out of Soledad, and he awarded to Pérez the small, unoccupied Corpus Christi church in downtown Mexico City. Rather than remaining above the fray, the president had taken sides in favor of a schismatic church.<sup>52</sup> Although only five or six parishes declared their adherence to Pérez, this incident had widespread repercussions. Government support for the schismatic church, however disguised, incensed Catholics who rallied around the parishioners of La Soledad who had fought to protect their priest and faith.<sup>53</sup> It prompted Obregón to send Calles a strongly worded missive from Sonora that warned him of supporting a movement that could only divide the ruling coalition and undermine the work of the revolutionary government.<sup>54</sup>

Open conflict erupted early in the following year.