

Mexico—The Essentials



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THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE AGAIN

After 1940, at the official level of government leaders and Church prelates, the religious controversy subsided when newly inaugurated president Manuel Avila Camacho responded to a question about the church with the simple answer, “*Yo soy creyente*” (“I am a believer”). This comment relieved the formal relationships, but brought next to no change in the informal, popular religious attitudes, especially those related to the Virgin of Guadalupe. The national obsession with Guadalupe did not require that believers also be regular churchgoers, so that an incident like the announcement by the priest in charge of the Basilica to the Virgin declared that he did not believe in her miraculous appearance resulted in general outrage that climaxed in his removal from the shrine. Another example came in 2007, when Mexico’s entry in the Miss Universe contest prepared for the



Figure 3.5 Cristero Rebels.

requirement to wear a national costume. Before her official appearance, Rosa Maria Ojeda debuted the dress in public. She wore a modified version of the folkloric China Poblana costume that had a skirt decorated with images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Cristero martyrs, rebels hanging from telegraph posts, and a man facing a firing squad (see Figs. 3.5, 3.6, and 3.7).

The Cristero images resulted in widespread criticism and in numerous cartoons and commentaries against their inclusion. Cartoonists used the opportunity to make satirical comments about sanctimonious church leaders. In this example, Gonzalo Rocha added this caption to his drawing: "There is even more! Underneath I am wearing a thong that Serrano Limon gave me." It referred to Jorge Serrano Limon, who directed Pro Vida, an anti-abortion group, and who embezzled over 2 million pesos of the organization's money. With the money he bought, among other things, expensive, provocative lingerie [*una tanga*, as the cartoon says] for various women, despite his ties to fundamentalist Catholicism groups.

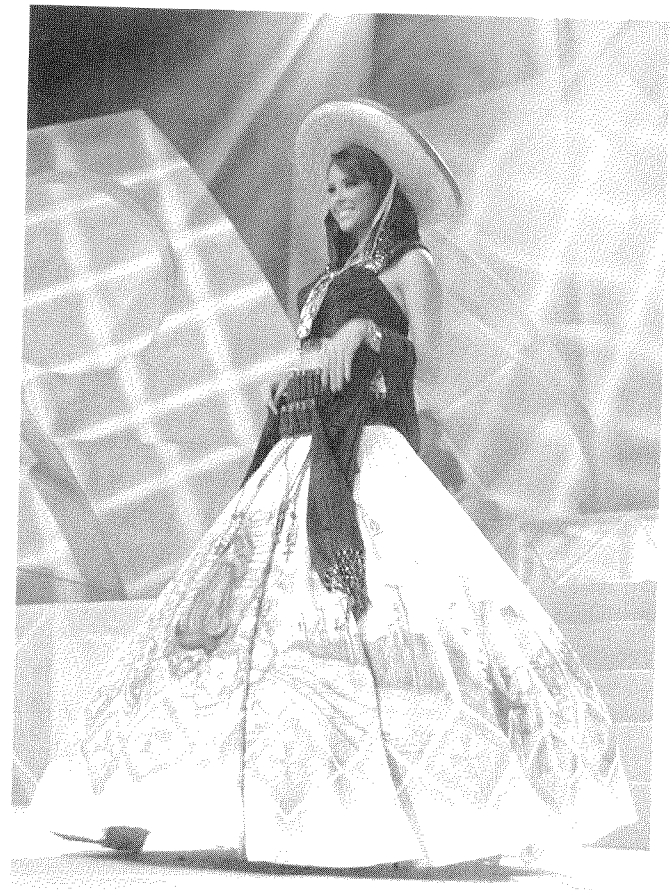


Figure 3.6 Miss Mexico dress.

In another typical example from the borderlands, Dan Lancy drew the Faithmouse and Miss Mexico cartoon.¹⁴ Of course, the comment that the costume did not show any cleavage captured the general conservative criticism of all the other costumes in beauty pageants.

Other critics specifically decried the gown with the Cristero images as inappropriate and absolutely in poor taste. In her defense, the dress designer, Maria del Rayo Macias, told a reporter from *La Jornada*, "We are descendants of Cristeros. Whether we like it or not, it's a part of who we are." Carlos Monsiváis, voice of cultural commentary, responded to the designer, asking, "... if we Mexicans, all of us, descend from beauty contests?" He called the skirt, "Horrible," and wondered if "fashion" had been the goal of the Cristero rebellion. *La Jornada* columnist Jorge Camil, responded: "It would be like Miss USA wearing a dress showing images of the Ku Klux Klan in the Deep South, with their hoods, their burning crosses and beer cans."



Figure 3.7 Miss Mexico cartoon.

Other cartoonists also used satire to comment on the dress. One cartoonist, Jaime Hernández, placed Francisco Ramírez Acuña, the former mayor of Guadalajara and governor of Jalisco as a member of the PAN party in 2007, in the heart of Cristero country, looking at Benito Juárez, the national hero, who led the struggle to separate church and state. With his back to Miss Mexico, he asks, “why is there such a fuss about a dress?” In the minds of many, praise for Cristeros represented no slight to the national mythology of the great revolutionaries and the Virgin of Guadalupe, so they could not understand the commotion. But cultural mavens and public intellectuals opposed the popularization of the Cristeros. The disaffection reached various columnists who attacked “Miss Cristera” and her dress. Television commentator and newspaper columnist Lorenzo Meyer called the episode the revenge of the right-wing politicians, with the conservative president and owners of the mass media (he was referring to Televisa, the major television network) even attempting to express their viewpoint on skirts.

He expressed his outrage, saying that using the images was the same “...as if

Israel on its typical costumes put photographs of Auschwitz.”¹⁵

Monsignor Felipe Arizmendi Esquivel summarized the conflict for *La Jornada* with the comment that the “traditional outfit alludes to events that opened deep wounds.” The uproar reached the point that the official beauty pageant delegation decided to modify the skirt. The new design for the pageant showed women who participated in the revolution and, most important, it preserved the skirt’s main feature, the Virgin of Guadalupe.¹⁶

In the current millennium, Mexicans now live in a society that has been visited twice by popes—John Paul II in 1993 and Benedict XVI in 2012. The first papal visit renewed Vatican–Mexican diplomatic relations that had been broken for 130 years and recognized changes in the national constitution that restored political rights to the clergy and allowed foreign priests; the second papal visit came to inspire the Church, shaken by the numerous departures for evangelical and Mormon congregations. Both visits resulted in a massive outpouring of support for the Catholic Church, with the pope in his car (called the popemobile) barely able to move through the streets jammed with the faithful and the curious. Papal visits and evangelical evangelization did not replace the devotion by all Mexicans to their local community’s religious practices that include the Virgin of Guadalupe. The everyday forms of religion have, in many respects, been secularized so that the Virgin of Guadalupe can represent both faith and nation. A ski mask that features the Virgin can cover the face of a smalltime holdup gangster or the identity of revolutionary on the Internet, and yet still represent the most Mexican aspects of religion in everyday life.