

# Historical Insights

by Daria Sockey

*Padre Pro: Mexican Hero* (by Fanchón Royer)

Looking at the tumultuous, politically unstable history of Mexico from the time it achieved independence from Spain (1821) through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we Americans might wonder—what went wrong? Mexicans took inspiration from the successful American Revolution. Their first constitution adapted many elements from ours. Yet its first president set himself up as Emperor, was deposed, and for the next thirty years the presidency was a revolving-door office of elections, deposings, and sometimes assassinations. For all the leaders' posturing about equality, and all the schemes to appropriate and redistribute land, the poor remained landless and oppressed. Starting in 1857, the Catholic religion lost its protected status and became the major scapegoat for the unrealized ideals of equality and justice. The enforcement of restrictive laws against the Church waxed and waned for decades, but reached their peak in 1924. The events are well described in this book and do not need repeating here.

When historians compare the unhappy course of independent Mexico (and similarly, France, where revolution led to the Reign of Terror and the dictatorship of Napoleon) to the birth of the United States of America, they point out many key reasons for the startling difference. Here are a few of them:

- In its 150 years under Great Britain, American colonists enjoyed great freedom and local self-government. When King George III began to usurp their freedoms, they rose up to preserve and continue what they already had. Mexico (like France), on the contrary, sought a complete break with the past, trying to create (and impose) a new world order according to a theory.
- The American founding fathers emphasized the rights of every individual to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, rather than the rights of one aggrieved group (peasants vs. landowners, those of pure Spanish blood vs. those of mixed blood) against another. The Mexican revolution came from a coalition of competing interests that temporarily set aside their own disagreements to fight for a common goal—independence from Spain. Once that was achieved, these factions resumed their original battles for supremacy—hence the ongoing instability and/or dictatorships that made up Mexico's history for over a century.
- Furthermore, these rights of the individual were seen by our founding fathers as coming from God, not from man-made laws and customs. What law (the government) has given, the law can take away, and that is why the bright promise of so many revolutionary movements in the last two centuries faded so quickly.
- Regarding religious freedom: Most of America's founding fathers were Christians, and the few who weren't had not—despite the influence Enlightenment ideas had on them—accepted the notion that religion was the enemy of progress. They knew that the

American colonies received much of their growth and prosperity from those seeking religious freedom. Their grandparents and great grandparents were Puritans, Baptists, or Quakers escaping religious persecution in England; Huguenots escaping it in France, or Irish Catholics fleeing from British oppression. Religious freedom was at the very foundation of the American experiment. (In our own day, to the extent that our leaders are losing sight of this, we may well fear the decline of our national well-being.)

- The American system of government, enshrined in its Constitution, takes fallen human nature into account. It does not believe in the perfectibility of man. Instead, it recognizes, in the words of James Madison, that “Ambition must be made to counteract ambition.” Our system of checks and balances prevents, or at least handicaps the schemes of the corrupt and power-hungry.
- We Americans cannot underestimate the example set by the singularly virtuous George Washington, who rejected grand titles, exalted status, and a third term as president of the United States. His humble example put a considerable “lid” on the ambitions of future politicians and military leaders.

Another question—why did anti-clericalism, or hatred of the Church—rise to a point of homicidal fury during the rule of Plutarco Calles in the 1920s? (Or in 18<sup>th</sup> century France or 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia, for that matter?) There is probably a combination of causes. Of course, Enlightenment philosophy and its successor, Marxism, saw religion as a primary obstacle to human progress. On the ground level, rising leaders such as Juarez, Obregon, Calles and others must have seen the Church as historically hand-in-glove with the wealthy ruling classes. The sight of bishops, living (apparently) comfortable lives in their palaces would fuel this notion, as well as the Church’s traditional resistance to most armed rebellions, even when the cause seems just. What they ignored is the Church’s reason for this stance: order is better than disorder. Violent revolt against tyranny, says the Church, should only be undertaken when there is reason to believe that the result will be better, not worse, than what came before. (And looking at what happened to Mexico, we see in hindsight that the Church was right!)

But by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Church had little property and no political voice. It was also in the vanguard of the social justice movement, with its laity and younger clergy on fire to implement the ideals of Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (*Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor*). Bl. Miguel Pro and his concern for the miners was only one example of many priests who labored for the rights and welfare of the poor. In fact, Catholic labor unions pre-existed secular ones in Mexico and exceeded them in members. What wasn’t there for a socialist government to love?

In the end, the hatred of Calles & company for the Catholic faith wasn’t due to the existence of a fat bishop or two, nor of perceived historic wrongs. It was that the Catholic Faith, even without material or political advantages, was still firmly ingrained in the culture of Mexico, and forever written in the hearts of the people. Poor Calles! He could not see what the people saw: that despite the Church’s human failings, Jesus Christ—poor, despised and suffering with them—was incarnate there. Jesus Christ, who was granting them dignity and hope in a way that

no political leader ever could, because He, the God of Heaven, had once come to earth to be one of them. And continued to come to them in the Blessed Eucharist, so long as courageous priests like Miguel Pro were in their midst. It is no wonder that the people of Mexico, poor and powerless as they were, could endure all things until the powers that be became too tired to fight back any longer.