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MARTYRS, FANATICS, AND PIOUS MILITANTS: *Religious Violence and the Secular State in 1930s Mexico*

ABSTRACT: This article examines the cultural and political repertoire that contributed to Catholics' understanding of violence as a legitimate means to resist the secular state in 1930s Mexico. Following the end of the Cristero War (1926-29), the Church officially and overtly rejected the use of violence by Catholics as a means to defend religious freedom. However, many Catholic militants and organizations continued to support violence as a last but necessary recourse to resist the country's so-called tyrannical government and to build a Catholic nation that would recognize the kingship of Christ on earth. Informed by noncanonical understandings of martyrdom, sacrifice, and redemptive violence, as well as by an intransigent view of politics, these Catholics regarded violence as a moral response against the injustices and dangers posed by what they considered an oppressive and blasphemous state. The article is based on the examination of a series of violent events perpetrated by Catholic militants during the 1930s, as well as on the analysis of several newspapers, official documents, and Catholic publications. Contrary to government portrayals of Catholicism as a top-down, monolithic, and unchanging set of institutions and practices that promoted recalcitrant forms of religious militancy, Catholics were in fact deeply divided regarding the legitimacy of violence along theological, moral, and practical grounds.

KEYWORDS: violence, religion, Mexico, martyrdom, Catholicism

On October 17, 1931, Catholic villagers from the town of Tlapacoyan, in Veracruz, marched toward the municipal building armed with pistols and machetes. They surrounded the structure and set fire to it, forcing the public officials that were inside to come out.[1] Most officials died in the incident, either as a result of the blaze or being shot by the group of rioters. The anger of the perpetrators was such that they decapitated some of the victims after killing them.[2] The national daily *La Prensa* described the incident

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[1] Miguel Enrique García Valladares, "Defanatización e iconoclastía, la *quema de santos* de Tlapacoyan, Veracruz, de 1931," *Signos Históricos* 20:40 (2018): 232–261.

[2] Romana Falcón and Soledad García Morales, *La semilla en el surco: Adalberto Tejeda y el radicalismo en Veracruz (1883–1960)* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1986), 266.

as an expression of the "seditious activities of some fanatics" and reported that the attack had been organized in retaliation for the burning of saints that municipal authorities carried out days earlier inside the town church.[3]

A couple of years later, another group of Catholic villagers participated in an equally violent event, this time in the neighboring state of Tlaxcala. The incident took place on May 10, 1933, when a group of neighbors from Tetla dragged a male prisoner out of the municipal jail, and tortured him for several hours. After ringing the church bells, they proceeded to hang him from a tree in the town's main plaza. The man had been imprisoned a few weeks earlier after neighbors accused him of stealing valuable religious ornaments from the local church. Distrustful of the willingness of local authorities to give the sacrilegious thief a proper punishment, villagers took justice into their own hands and killed him. According to the government's mouthpiece *El Nacional* the incident was perpetrated with "unheard-of cruelty" and reflected the "fanaticism" of Tetla villagers.[4]

Newspapers and government officials were quick to refer to these and similar examples as proof of Catholics' fanaticism, ignorance, and proclivity for violent and irrational conduct. This view, however, failed to capture the complex relationship between religion and violence in 1930s Mexico and obscured the fact that Catholics' reactions to the postrevolutionary state were not merely a result of irrationality, misinformation, or misguidance. Despite the formal end of the Cristero War (1926-29), the relationship between the Mexican state and the Catholic Church was far from peaceful.[5] Catholics continued to experience assaults on the symbolic, communal, and spiritual dimensions of their faith. The arrest and expulsion of Catholic priests, the closing down of churches, and the stealing and burning of religious images were all part of an official campaign that sought to forge a rational and secular model of citizenry, free from the "backward" influence of Catholic religion.[6]

[3] "Actividades sediciosas de algunos fanáticos," *La Prensa*, October 23, 1931.

[4] "El linchamiento ocurrido en Tetla," *El Nacional*, May 17, 1933; "El linchamiento de Fructuoso Concha, va a ser investigado," *El Nacional*, May 25, 1933. For a systematic analysis of the impact of religion in the organization of lynching, see Gema Kloppe-Santamaría, *In the Vortex of Violence: Lynching, Extralegal Justice and the State in Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 40–62.

[5] Precipitated by the anticlerical measures of President Plutarco Elías Calles, the Cristero War brought into confrontation citizens who held opposing views about the place that religion ought to have in the moral, political, economic, and social organization of their communities and the nation. See Jean Meyer, *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican People Between State and Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Matthew Butler, *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico's Cristero Rebellion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Robert Weis, *For Christ and Country: Militant Catholic Youth in Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); and Robert Curley, *Citizens and Believers: Religion and Politics in Revolutionary Jalisco, 1900–1930* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018).

[6] Adrian A. Bantjes, "Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Revolutionary Mexico: The De-Christianization Campaigns, 1929–1940," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 13:1 (1997): 87–120; Marjorie Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire:*

President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-40) promoted a relatively moderate position in regard to religion compared to his predecessors, Plutarco Elias Calles (1924-28) and the three presidents that governed the country under the so-called Maximato (1928-34).[7] However, the uneven observance of this tempered anticlericalism at the regional and local levels, along with the implementation of a socialist model of education during the second half of the 1930s, contributed to antagonizing Catholic militants.[8] Through the use of more or less organized forms of violence—including lynching, rioting, and the targeted killing of rural teachers—religious militants fiercely resisted this federal public schooling program and the threat it posed to Catholics' most valued "natural rights."[9] More so, the de-Christianization campaigns promoted by the governors of Tabasco, Veracruz, Michoacán, Sonora, Chiapas, and Guanajuato openly supported anticlerical policies and iconoclastic practices, including the burning of saints, at the local level.[10] The animosity produced by the state's assault on the political, economic, and symbolic power of Catholicism prompted Catholic militants to take up arms once again during this decade. Although La Segunda, or the Second Cristiada (c. 1934-38), lacked the ecclesiastical support of the first rebellion, and was more localized and horizontally organized, this uprising

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Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán Peasants, and the Redemption of the Mexican Revolution (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Ben Fallaw, "Varieties of Mexican Revolutionary Anticlericalism: Anticlericalism: Radicalism, Iconoclasm, and Otherwise, 1914–1935," *The Americas* 65:4 (April 2009).

[7] Cárdenas relaxed the federal government's position and policies toward the Church. The change reflected his decision to move away from Calles's anticlericalism and its antagonizing effects and to prioritize instead the government's socioeconomic agenda. Cárdenas's position has also been attributed to his childhood friendship with Luis María Martínez, also a Michoacán native and archbishop of Mexico (1937-56). See Roberto Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia católica en México: 1929–1982* (Zinacantepec, Edo. de México: Colegio Mexiquense, 1993), 48; and Randall S. Hanson, "The Day of Ideals: Catholic Social Action in the Age of the Mexican Revolution, 1867–1929" (PhD diss.: Indiana University, 1994), 484–485.

[8] I follow Atalia Omer's understanding of religious militants as those individuals whose actions are purportedly driven by a "spirit of self-denial, sacrifice, and zeal for doing 'God's will.'" See Atalia Omer, "Religious Violence: The Strong, the Weak, and the Pathological," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, R. Scott Appleby, Atalia Omer, and David Little, eds., March 2015, DOI:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199731640.013.000. Although I am aware that not all religious militants are violent, and that militants' drive to defend religious values and principles can also translate into an active defense of "radical peace," for the purpose of this article I use the term "militants" to refer to Mexican Catholics who upheld the right to use violence in the name of religion. On the multivalent nature of religious militancy, see Patrick Q. Mason, "Violent and Nonviolent Religious Militancy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion*, Appleby et al., eds.

[9] With its promotion of secularism and its overt defense of agrarian reform, Catholics saw socialist education as a threat to parents' right to provide a religious education to their children and the natural right to private property. Sex education and coeducation were also of great concern to Catholics. See Blancarte, *Historia de la Iglesia católica en México*, 50; Ben Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation in Post-Revolutionary Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 6–19; and Mary K. Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997).

[10] Bantjes, "Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Revolutionary Mexico;" García Valladares, "Defanatización e iconoclastía," 235–236. Revolutionaries' promotion of iconoclasm and anticlerical measures varied considerably through time and across regions. On this, see Fallaw, "Varieties of Mexican Revolutionary Anticlericalism;" Matthew Butler, "Sotanas Rojinegras: Catholic Anticlericalism and Mexico's Religious Schism," *The Americas* 65:4 (2009): 535–558, https://doi.org/10.1353/tam.0.0108.

signaled Catholic militants' capacity and continued willingness to resist the state's socialist and anticlerical policies through violent means.[11]

The aim of this article is to examine the cultural and political repertoire that contributed to Catholics' understanding of violence as a legitimate means to resist the secular state in 1930s Mexico.[12] To do so, I analyze Catholics' multivalent and contrasting understandings of martyrdom in relation to violence, as well as the uncompromising and radical political views that informed Catholic militants and their interactions with both state and ecclesiastical authorities during this decade. Rather than tracing the history of a particular organization or movement, I provide an overview of how Catholic militants and organizations invoked religious principles and symbols to justify violence.[13]

Recourse to violence was certainly not the only strategy adopted by Catholics in the face of the state's anticlerical measures.[14] Although the press and public officials focused for the most part on violent forms of Catholic militancy, many priests and lay Catholics opposed violence and privileged peaceful and civil forms of resistance—from the organization of underground masses and private forms of worship to letters of petition to civil authorities and the civic mobilization of women and youth.[15] More so, after the 1929 accords that brought an end to the Cristero Rebellion, the Mexican episcopate openly decried the use of violence and sought to "tame" the belligerent organizations that had supported the uprising.[16]

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[11] On the Second Cristiada, see Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation in Post-Revolutionary Mexico,* 119–128; and Salvador Salinas, "Untangling Mexico's Noodle: El Tallarín and the Revival of Zapatismo in Morelos, 1934–1938," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 46:3 (2014): 471–99, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022216x1400073x.

[12] For the purpose of this article, I define violence as any intentional act of physical injury perpetrated against another person against her or his will. Although I recognize the importance of the symbolic dimensions of violence, I follow a narrower understanding of the term here in order to examine with greater clarity the ideas or discourses that contributed to justify it. Religion, on the other hand, is defined as a distinct field that involves the belief in the holy and transcendental as well as the observation of religious rites and rituals. Catholic religion, in particular, is further understood as a set of practices and beliefs that, although primarily related to otherworldly concerns, is also deeply intertwined with material and political interests on the ground, including the defense of private property, communal autonomy, and parents' right to educate their children. On the notion of symbolic violence, see Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant (2004) "Symbolic Violence," in *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology,* Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2004), 272–274. On religion, as a "lived experience" connected to local and everyday practices, see Paul Vanderwood, "Religion: Official, Popular, and Otherwise," *Mexican Studies/ Estudios Mexicanos* 16:2 (2000): 411–441; and Jeffrey W. Rubin, David Smilde, and Benjamin Junge, "Lived Religion and Lived Citizenship in Latin America's Zones of Crisis: Introduction," *Latin American Research Review* 49 (2014): 7–26.

[13] Although it was neither less frequent nor less brutal than the violence perpetrated by Catholics, state-sponsored violence tended to be justified as legal, rational, and modern. For a critique of this false binary between religious and secular violence, see William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[14] For a broader discussion of the ambivalent relation between religion and violence, see R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation,* Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); and Mason, "Violent and Nonviolent Religious Militancy." For a reflection on this relationship in the Mexican context, see Curley, *Citizens and Believers,* 1–15.

[15] See for instance María Luisa Aspe Armella, *La formación social y política de los católicos mexicanos: la Acción Católica Mexicana y la Unión Nacional de Estudiantes Católicos, 1929–1958* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2008). For examples of both violent and nonviolent forms of religious militancy during the prior decade, see Matthew

Despite the Church's official position in regard to violence and armed rebellion, during the 1930s many Catholic militants and organizations continued to support violence as a last but necessary means to fight what in their view constituted a tyrannical and illegitimate government. Informed by noncanonical understandings of martyrdom, sacrifice, and redemptive violence, as well as by a recalcitrant and uncompromising view of politics that celebrated the virility and bravery of religious militants, these Catholics regarded violence as a legitimate and moral means to defend religion against the injustices and dangers posed by an oppressive, anticlerical, and blasphemous state. Beyond this defensive impetus, Catholic militants regarded violence as an effective instrument to restore the moral and religious foundations of Mexico as a Catholic nation. The Cristero revolt remained an important reference point for Catholic militants, and provided a key source of inspiration for those who believed that the fight against the secular state was far from over. In contrast to the years of the armed rebellion, however, Catholic militants in the 1930s were confronted with a Church hierarchy that became increasingly critical of their unruly actions and the threat they posed to the increasingly pragmatic relationship the Church sought to forge with the government.[17] Whereas the Church hierarchy had kept an ambivalent position regarding the use of violence in the 1920s, in the 1930s it overtly opposed it, at least officially and from the viewpoint of its higher authorities.

I draw my analysis from several sources, including correspondence, propaganda, poems, and reports produced by Catholic individuals and organizations that reflect on the necessity and desirability of the use of violence. I also analyze government documents and newspaper articles, most of which echoed the government's position, in order to demonstrate how the Mexican state portrayed Catholic believers as inherently fanatic, irrational, and violent. Most of the events examined in the article are situated in central Mexico, most prominently Mexico City and Puebla, and in the states of Veracruz and

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Butler, "Keeping the Faith in Revolutionary Mexico: Clerical and Lay Resistance to Religious Persecution, East Michoacán, 1926–1929," *The Americas* 59:1 (2002): 9–32; Weis, *For Christ and Country*; and Curley, *Citizens and Believers*.

[16] Jean Meyer, *La Iglesia católica en México* 1929–1965, Cuadernos de Trabajo del CIDE (Mexico City: CIDE, 2005), 16; Kristina A. Boylan, "Mexican Catholic Women's Activism, 1929–1940" (PhD diss.: University of Oxford, 2000), 361–362; Barbara Miller, "The Role of Women in the Mexican Cristero Rebellion: A New Chapter," PhD diss.: University of Notre Dame, 1980, 112–113.

[17] Boylan, "Mexican Catholic Women's Activism, 1929–1940," 361.

Jalisco.[18] As the evidence discussed in the article makes clear, Mexican officials contested Catholics' claims to martyrdom and sought to create a parallel narrative of secular martyrdom that contributed to concealing state-sponsored forms of violence against Catholics. The question of who constituted a "real martyr" not only created a confrontation between anticlericals and Catholics in 1930s Mexico; it also created divisions among Catholics who held dissimilar views regarding the legitimacy of violence. Reflecting the fact that the meanings of martyrdom were not entirely controlled by the Church, martyrdom emerged as a key battlefield where Catholics drew the lines between legitimate and illegitimate forms of religious activism.

MAIN ARGUMENTS

The article's main argument is two-fold. First, I argue that Catholic militants' understanding of the legitimacy of violence was informed by flexible and popular interpretations of martyrdom and sacrifice, as opposed to those that were institutionally sanctioned. Second, I show that this understanding was shaped by radical and uncompromising political ideologies that construed the postrevolutionary state and its representatives to be a fundamental threat to Catholics' spiritual, moral, and communal integrity. The Mexican government portrayed religious militants as fanatical individuals who were driven by religious frenzy and irrational impulses. Evidence suggests, however, that Catholics' use of violence was full of political intent.[19] The political ambitions of Catholic militants included bringing a tyrannical and godless government to an end, as well as building an alternative social and political order that would recognize, as the Cristeros from the first uprising demanded, the kingship of Christ on earth.[20]

Furthermore, contrary to official representations of Catholic religion as a top-down, monolithic, and unchanging set of institutions and practices that promoted recalcitrant and extremist forms of religious militancy, Catholics were in fact deeply divided on theological, moral, and practical grounds regarding the legitimacy and desirability of violence. These divisions were expressed not only in the bitter disagreements that surfaced between the clergy and lay organizations, but also in the tensions that existed among members of the Catholic hierarchy itself, including diocesan priests, bishops, and representatives of the Holy See.

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[18] The states of Veracruz, Puebla, and Jalisco were the sites of some of the most belligerent activities organized by Segunderos, or participants in the Second Cristiada.

[19] Postrevolutionary officials were reluctant to acknowledge Catholic militants as political actors. To regard them as such was, in the view of these political leaders, equivalent to recognizing them as legitimate political opponents. Weis, *For Christ and Country,* 151–153. On the need to recognize the intertwining of religion and politics in the history of Mexican Catholicism, see Curley's *Citizens and Believers*, 14–15, 22.

[20] I am here referring to a dimension of the political that goes beyond electoral politics. In fact, many of the militants opposed being called "political" in the narrow sense of the word, as they saw elections and party politics as a farce that would only serve to legitimate the government. As a Catholic militant wrote to Luis María Martínez, bishop of Morelia, in 1932: "We do not seek to change the current political situation, because we are neither politicians nor chauvinists (*patriotiqueros*), but men of convictions." Circular Number 7, signed by Fernando Munguía, Captain 29 of the Military Camp in Cerro 'El Perico,' Michoacán, addressed to Luis María Martínez, November 25, 1932, Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado [hereafter AHAM], Fondo Luis María Martínez, box 35, exp. 1.

BELLIGERENT CATHOLICISM IN REVOLUTIONARY AND POSTREVOLUTIONARY MEXICO

This article is built in dialogue with a growing body of literature that has tried to elucidate the reasons behind Catholics' recourse to violence and armed resistance in revolutionary and postrevolutionary Mexico. Based on regional, cross-regional, and transnational perspectives, this scholarship has acknowledged the centrality of religious motivations in Catholics' belligerent actions, as well as the complex divisions and tensions that existed within the Catholic Church, and among the faithful, regarding armed rebellion.[21] In this sense, such literature has complicated a narrative that tended to explain Catholic militancy in terms of purely material or political interests, or simply as an expression of peasants' "false consciousness."[22] This article benefits from this literature and seeks to contribute to it by placing violence, rather than armed conflict (that is, the Cristero War or the Second Cristiada) at the center of analysis. Acknowledging that violence superseded the armed conflict and recognizing that religious violence continued well beyond the 1929 accords, my aim is to bring to the fore the contradictions between Catholics' recourse to violence and their observance of core religious values such as the sanctity of human life and their pledged allegiance to the Catholic hierarchy.

The article is divided in two sections and a conclusion. The first section examines the cultural basis that contributed to shaping Catholics' understanding of the legitimacy of violence through the lenses of martyrdom. Going against canonical views centered on piety, moderation, and restraint, Catholic militants blended the figure of the martyr with that of the hero and construed the violent and belligerent actions of religious radicals as acts of martyrdom.[23] I will next examine the uncompromising political ideologies of Catholic militants as articulated in the discourse of the Liga Nacional Defensora de la Libertad Religiosa (National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty), also known as "the Liga." An analysis of the Liga's interactions with the Mexican episcopate will also illuminate the divisions that existed between the clergy and lay organizations, as well as within the clergy itself, regarding the role that violence ought to play in the defense of Catholicism during this period. In the conclusion, I reflect briefly on the need to expand our understanding of the relationship between violence and religious beliefs and practices in Mexico's post-Cristero decades.

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[21] Historian Jean Meyer was one of the first scholars to take religious beliefs seriously when studying Catholics' decision to take up arms against the Mexican state. In doing so, he went against the notion that the Cristero uprising was simply an expression of material interests or the result of landowners' manipulation. See Meyer, *The Cristero Rebellion*. Since the publication of his work, literature on the subject has developed more nuanced arguments based on the use of regional sources as well as cross-regional and comparative studies. See for instance Fernando M. González, *Matar y morir por Cristo Rey: aspectos de la Cristiada* (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés; Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, 2001); Butler, *Popular Piety and Political Identity in Mexico's Cristero Rebellion*; Benjamin T. Smith, *The Roots of Conservatism in Mexico: Catholics, Society, and Politics in the Mixteca Baja, 1750–1962* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012); Enrique Guerra Manzo. *Del fuego sagrado a la acción cívica. Los católicos frente al Estado en Michoacán (1920–1940)* (Mexico City: Colegio de Michoacán, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, ITACA, 2015); Stephen Andes, *The Vatican and Catholic Activism in Mexico and Chile: The Politics of Transnational Catholicism, 1920–1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Julia Young, *Mexican Exodus: Emigrants, Exiles, and Refugees of the Cristero War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Weis, *For Christ and Country*; Curley, *Citizens and Believers*; Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation in Post-Revolutionary Mexico*; and Salinas, "Untangling Mexico's Noodle."

[22] For a good summary and critique of this narrative, see Adrian Bantjes, "Religion and the Mexican Revolution: Toward a New Historiography," in *Religious Culture in Modern Mexico,* Martin Austin Nesvig, ed., (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 2007), 234–240.

Contentious Martyrdom

The year 1931 was marked by a series of violent events involving confrontations between Catholics and anticlerical officials in the state of Veracruz. One such event was the state-sponsored burning of saints, followed by Catholics' aforementioned attack on the municipal building in Tlapacoyan. A few months before this incident, on July 25, a young former seminarian attempted to murder Veracruz governor Adalberto Tejeda. The governors' bodyguards killed the perpetrator, Rafael Ramírez Frías, and Tejeda survived the attack with only a minor injury.[24] The same day, a group of Tejeda's supporters set fire to a number of churches, altars, and saints and attacked the Asunción Cathedral in Xalapa in retaliation for the attempted murder, even though there was no evidence that Ramírez

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[23] A martyr is generally defined as someone who suffers violence and persecution and ultimately faces death based on religious conviction, for which he or she is willing to die. In canonical terms, a martyr is someone who dies at the hands of a persecutor due to religious beliefs he or she holds, and whose actions remained true to the Catholic faith and the Catholic Church. A martyr's willingness to die is as important as the acceptance of suffering. In this sense, a martyr is neither a passive victim nor an aggressive warrior. See Marisol López Menéndez, *Miguel Pro: Martyrdom, Politics, and Society in Twentieth-Century Mexico* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), xvii-xxiii, 53–55; and Curley, *Citizens and Believers*, 22. For a good example of popular, as opposed to canonical, understandings of martyrdom among Catholics in Mexico, see Paul Vanderwood, *Juan Soldado: Rapist, Murderer, Martyr, Saint* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). On martyrdom in the Catholic tradition, see Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Robert Royal, *The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century: A Comprehensive World History* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000).

[24] Several events preceded and followed the attempted murder of Tejeda. In March of the same year, a bomb went off in the cathedral of Xalapa and several images of saints were burned in different localities. In August 1931, also in the cathedral of Xalapa, the relic of the city's patroness, St. Teodora, was dragged out of the church and burned; the remains were later examined to show they were made of nothing but cotton and wax, as opposed to human flesh, as Catholics claimed. Similar events continued during the following years. In July 1935, groups of Catholics organized an armed uprising in the towns of Coatepec, Huatusco, and Paso de Ovejas, also in Veracruz. See Félix Báez-Jorge, "El poder y los instrumentos de la fe (San Rafael Guízar y Valencia en el entramado del catolicismo social)," *Ulúa* 22 (2013): 158–159; and Falcón and García Morales, *La semilla en el surco*, 265.

Frías had acted with the support of the Church.[25] The assailants wounded two priests and killed another—in front of hundreds of children who were receiving catechism lessons.[26] The murdered priest, Darío Acosta, who had been ordained by the bishop of Veracruz, Rafael Guízar y Valencia, became a martyr in the eyes of Catholics. The Holy See canonized him in 2005.

The attempted murder of Tejeda and the incidents that followed took place in the context of the implementation of Law 197, which limited the number of priests to one per 10,000 inhabitants in Veracruz. Tejeda, who was twice governor of the state (1920-24; 1928-32), enacted some of the most stringent anticlerical policies during his second term, in clear defiance of the more moderate position promoted by the federal government after the 1929 accords.[27] Along with limiting the number of priests, Tejeda fostered the "de-fanatization" of the masses through socialist education and the desacralization and defilement of churches and places of religious worship, as well as the appropriation of references to the sacred for use in public festivals and civil ceremonies that were overtly socialist or secular—including "socialist baptisms" or "socialist sacraments" for workers.[28]

The anticlerical and iconoclastic actions promoted by Tejeda prompted the animosity of Catholics and created a climate of political instability in the state. More so, they added to Catholics' perception that nothing had changed after the 1929 accords and that, therefore, the faithful's right to challenge the legitimacy of state authorities remained unshaken. Governor Tejeda, however, downplayed the significance of Catholic believers in Veracruz. In a letter sent to President Pascual Ortiz Rubio, he presented Catholics as a minority of agitators and fanatics who did not represent the true "Veracruzano people, liberal by ancestry."[29] In the same letter, he justified the implementation of Law 197 as a necessary response to

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[25] Tejeda insinuated several times that the Catholic hierarchy was behind the attack, and that Ramírez Frías did not act on his own. In an interview with the *New York Times*, he compared the attempt against his life to that against president-elect Álvaro Obregón, who was murdered by José de León Toral. ("Governor Scores Vera Cruz Priests," *New York Times,* July 31, 1931). Moreover, in August of 1931, Tejeda denounced the activities of Catholic fanatics in Teziutlán, Puebla, who acting under the command of a number of priests had a "black list" of enemies with his name at the top. Adalberto Tejeda to the president, informing him about the activities of clerical elements in Teziutlán, Puebla, August 6, 1931, AGN, Ramo Presidentes, Pascual Ortiz Rubio [hereafter POR], exp. 248.

[26] "Vera Cruz Governor Shot in Assassination Plot," *Los Angeles Times,* July 26, 1931; "Cathedral Burned in Vera Cruz Strife," *New York Times,* July 27, 1931.

[27] President Pascual Ortiz Rubio (1930-32) openly decried the new law, stating that it could exacerbate "religious passions" and be interpreted as an act of provocation among Catholics in different states. See Falcón and García Morales, *La semilla en el surco,* 259.

[28] These so-called socialist sacraments were not only sponsored by the government but were also popular among individuals and organizations that supported Tejeda. Some pro-Tejeda workers actually identified as Catholics but, unlike "fanatics," they claimed, they were able to see the falseness of priests and to recognize that Jesus Christ was a "Socialist Christ." García Valladares, "Defanatización e iconoclastía," 244–246.

[29] Adalberto Tejeda to the president, informing him about the measures promoted by the governor of Veracruz, June 20, 1931, AGN, Ramo Presidentes, POR, exp. 248.

Catholics' multiple violations of the laws of religious worship. Such violations included the building of temples and chapels that were "useless to society," as well as the mobilization of a form of "agrarian Catholicism" that undermined the actions of what Tejeda and other Mexican officials regarded as authentic revolutionary peasants.[30] He added that surely a dozen priests would be enough to "satisfy the needs of the tiny minority of fanatics in the state."[31]

RELIGIOUS MARTYRS, REVOLUTIONARY MARTYRS

Both the attempted murder of the governor and the attack against Catholic priests that followed were the subject of a heated debate between Tejeda and Bishop Guízar y Valencia. At the heart of the debate were claims, articulated on each side of the conflict, regarding who should be considered a martyr. The debate reflected the centrality of martyrdom as a cultural and symbolic reference that allowed different actors to either question or justify the legitimacy of violence and its political significance. In a letter to the governor, Guízar y Valencia stated that he had recently received the news of the tragic events caused by "the iniquitous and tyrannical law, which you are applying against the Church."[32] He then characterized victims of Tejeda's religious persecution as martyrs who would serve to redeem and strengthen the cause of the Church:

> It would not have been possible to choose a more propitious moment to extol the Church founded by Christ by spilling the blood of two martyrs, due to the hatred you and your partisans have for God and his Church. At this moment, when I weep, wounded by the sword of grief as a result of these enormous crimes, the angels in heaven are receiving the souls of the martyrs with joy and placing them in the midst of the heroes of Christianity. . . . Señor Tejeda, Veracruz is bathed in the blood of martyrs, but it will result in the discovery that truth and justice and religion, instead of being extinguished in the diocese, will attain greater vigor, despite your tyrannical forces, which will collapse when confronted with the rock of the infinite power of God.[33]

As reflected by this quote, Guízar y Valencia saw martyrdom as a powerful symbol that could inspire and mobilize Catholics by invigorating their beliefs and exposing the injustices of the secular state. In tune with the Church's rejection of violent forms of religious activism, he referred to the assaulted priests (but not to Ramírez Frías, Tejeda's assailant) as martyrs. The priests had been targets of violence while practicing their faith and had full awareness of the dangers they faced, making their condition as martyrs irrefutable in canonical terms.[34] For the anticlerical Tejeda, however, Guízar y Valencia's celebration of these priests as martyrs was duplicitous, as it ignored the fact that many religious individuals —laity and clergy—had used violence to advance their cause, making them nothing but common criminals in the eyes of the state.

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[30] There were indeed Catholic peasants who were also *agraristas* or supporters of the agrarian reform in the state. In Tlapacoyan, for instance, the town where the "burning of saints" took place, agraristas also identified as Catholics, following the revolutionary tradition of Zapatista agrarianism. García Valladares, "Defanatización e iconoclastía," 248.

[31] Adalberto Tejeda to the president, June 20, 1931, AGN, Ramo Presidentes, POR, exp. 248.

[32] Justino de la Mora, *Apuntes biográficos del Beato Mons. Rafael Guízar y Valencia, quinto Obispo de Veracruz* (Xalapa: Ediciones Diocesanas Rafael Guizar y Valencia, Arquidiocesis de Xalapa, 1995), 146–147. Quoted in: Emilio Martínez Albesa, "El celo misionero de San Rafael Guízar Valencia, Obispo de Veracruz," *Ecclesia* 24:2-3 (2010): 245–250. The full text in English was taken from "Cathedral Burned in Vera Cruz Strife," *New York Times,* July 27, 1931.

[33] De la Mora, *Apuntes biográficos.*

In his response to the bishop, Tejeda stated:

> I am not surprised by the cynicism and hypocrisy you display in your protest regarding the deed provoked by you and other representatives of that vast organization known as the Catholic Church, the enemy of all work tending toward human redemption. . . . Your labors have resulted in a fanatic's attempt to murder me. . . . As for the two priests in question, you call them martyrs and heroes, as you style José de León Toral, who murdered former president Obregón. Indeed, you went further in León Toral's case and called him a saint, although he was nothing but a common murderer. Doubtless, had the attempt on my life been successful, as you hoped, I should also have been a martyr—such as Obregón and many other revolutionaries and true liberals, the pride of our history, whom the clergy have assassinated.[35]

Tejeda's letter reflected his scorn toward the Catholic Church, as well as his reductionist view of Catholics, including violent actors and nonbelligerent religious activists, as fanatics. The letter also exposed the governor's effort to appropriate the notion of martyrdom for the cause advanced by the postrevolutionary state, a cause centered on the secularization, defanatization, and modernization of the Mexican people.[36]

Although Tejeda's attempt to present Obregón and even himself as martyrs may come across as crude, it did not differ greatly from the attempts made by the federal government and by sympathetic organizations to memorialize the revolutionaries who had died at the hands of so-called religious fanatics. The federal government's adoption of a more moderate approach toward the religious question raised the importance of the realm of the symbolic as an arena wherein the legitimacy of the postrevolutionary project ought to be reasserted. No longer fought primarily through the use of coercion, during the 1930s, battles involving the religious question and the legitimacy of the postrevolutionary state in relation to it were defined increasingly in the realms of education, art, and visual culture.[37]

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[34] The Vatican's website dedicated to the now St. Darío Acosta, mentions how he and the other priests were fully aware of the potentially fatal consequences they confronted as a result of their priestly duties. See https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_20051120_acosta-zurita_sp.html, accessed May 28, 2020. Guízar y Valencia's understanding of martyrdom as an instrument that strengthened the shared identity of the believers is consistent with the social functions attributed to secular and religious forms of martyrdom. See López Menéndez, *Miguel Pro*, xx–xxv; and Gregory, *Salvation at Stake,* 297–298.

[35] The letter was printed by the Veracruz newspaper *El Dictamen*, August 2, 1931. See Falcón y García Morales, *La semilla en el surco,* 264. The text in English is taken from "Church is Accused by Vera Cruz Head," *New York Times,* August 2, 1931.

[36] These secular appropriations of the meanings of martyrdom can be seen as part of the "civil religion" promoted by revolutionaries to further legitimize their rule. See Bantjes, "Idolatry and Iconoclasm in Revolutionary Mexico," 90.

Socialist teachers, in particular, were repeatedly presented by state officials as committed citizens who had bravely and innocently died, at the hands of fanatics, to defend the ideals of the revolution.[38] For instance, at the end of the 1930s, the Secretaría de Educación Pública commissioned a collection of lithographs from artist Leopoldo Méndez, which vividly represented the sacrifice of teachers at the hands of Catholic mobs and groups of vigilantes.[39] While teachers were consistently presented as young and suffering citizens who died while performing their duties, Catholics were depicted as faceless mobs or wicked individuals with coarse features.[40] In one of these lithographs, titled "Professor Juan Martínez Escobar," the spirit of a young teacher is shown pointing at his murderer. The teacher is accompanied by hundreds of peasants whose eyes, wide open, offer testimony to the crime. The assassin, in turn, is shown with a malicious expression, holding a knife in his hand, and wearing the mask of a suffering Jesus Christ.[41] The underlying message could not be clearer: the teacher was the real martyr, while the deceitful Catholic assassin used the image of Christ to justify his actions.

[37] See Mary K. Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930–1940* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997); and Mary K. Vaughan and Stephen Lewis, eds. *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920–1940* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

[38] Mainstream newspapers such as *El Universal, El Nacional,* and *Excélsior* contributed to this image in their reporting of the teachers' mission and the dangers they faced at the hands of Catholics. In a representative article, an editorialist quoted a teacher who in his address to the president had stated, "[We] the revolutionary teachers are willing to sacrifice our lives to allow the legitimate government to triumph. . . . If our blood is needed, our blood will be at your orders and that of our fatherland, Mr. President." After praising the heroic attitude of teachers, the article compared the role of teachers to that of Bartolomé de las Casas who, in order to promote civilization, had to work patiently with the Indians in order to gain their trust and support. "El sacrificio de los maestros," *Excélsior*, December 27, 1935. See also "No es posible declarar si se ha logrado algo con la desfanatización de indios," *Excélsior,* September 11, 1935; "Sistemática violencia," *El Nacional*, January 3, 1935; "El linchamiento, táctica de lucha de los fanáticos," *El Nacional*, January 7, 1935; and "Los maestros rurales ante el presidente Cárdenas," *El Universal*, December 5, 1935.

[39] A member of the Taller de Gráfica Popular, Leopoldo Méndez (1902-69) was one of the most influential printmakers of the postrevolutionary period. The collection of lithographs was *En nombre de cristo. . .han asesinado a más de 200 maestros: 7 litografías de Leopoldo Méndez*. (Mexico: Centro Productor de Artes Plásticas del Departamento de Bellas Artes, 1939). A similar work of art that honored the sacrifice of teachers was Aurora Reyes's mural "Attack Against the Female Rural Teachers" (*Atentado contra las maestras rurales*).

[40] See Deborah Caplow, *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 150–151.

[41] Caplow, *Leopoldo Méndez,* 148.

The conflict and disagreement regarding who should be considered a martyr surfaced also in the case of the killings that took place in Mexico City on December 30, 1934. On that day, dozens of Red Shirts (*Camisas Rojas*) gathered in front of the San Juan Bautista church, located in the Coyoacán neighborhood.[42] The Red Shirts organization was created by Tomás Garrido Canabal, former governor of Tabasco (1919-34), while he was Secretary of Agriculture (1934-35) under President Cárdenas. Garrido Canabal shared the fervent anticlericalism of Tejeda and envisioned the Red Shirts as part of his strategy to de-Christianize Mexican society.[43] Comprised of young male anticlericals, the Red Shirts were known for their acts of religious defilement and provocation. On the day of the incident, the young men stood outside the church in their black and red uniforms shouting anti-religious harangues, while the faithful listened to their morning mass. When Catholics came out of mass, a clash between the anticlerical agitators and the churchgoers seemed inevitable. The Red Shirts were armed with pistols, while Catholics were reportedly carrying stones and daggers.[44] After the Red Shirts shot into the group of churchgoers, killing five and wounding many more, a mob of infuriated Catholics lynched Ernesto Malda, a young member of the group who arrived late to the Red Shirts' gathering.

Reporting on the incident, *El Nacional* barely mentioned the names of the Catholic victims, while it described at length the torment and suffering that Ernesto Malda had endured at the hands of a "fanaticized mob" (*muchedumbre fanatizada*).[45] It described how Malda's skull had pieces of scalp and hair missing, which had been ripped off by his assailants. The report also made note of two wounds of 20 cm, one on each side of his skull, and more than 80 cuts found on his chest, arms, and back. Other articles also emphasized the irrational conduct of the Catholic mob, and reported that the priest had incited the churchgoers to assail the young anticlericals.[46] The same newspapers acknowledged that the Red Shirts had fired at the churchgoers, but did not qualify their violent actions or their anti-religious speeches as fanatical or senseless. Even when the press reported the imprisonment of 40 Red Shirts, the emphasis was on Malda's death. A representative article reproduced the telegram that Governor Garrido Canabal sent to Malda's father, wherein he expressed his condolences, stating "when life is lost in the struggle for superior ideals, when blood is nobly spilled for the redemption of those who suffer, a virile consolation, a yearning for triumph, should suffice to fill the void left by our children."[47]

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[42] Several national and international newspapers covered the incident. See "Zafarrancho en la Villa de Coyoacán," *El Nacional*, December 31, 1934; "Responsables de crímenes en Coyoacán," *El Porvenir*, January 4, 1935; "Six Killed in Riot as Catholics and Radicals Clash," *Los Angeles Times,* December 31, 1934; "Mexico holds 40 for killing of five at church," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 4, 1935; "War on Red Shirts in Mexico Follows Catholic Slayings," *Washington Post*, January 2, 1935; "Churchgoers Shot In Clash With Reds at Mexico Suburb," *Christian Science Monitor,* December 31, 1934*;* and "62 Reds Are Held in Mexican Killing," *New York Times,* January 1, 1935.

[43] See José Alberto Moreno Chávez, "Quemando santos para iluminar conciencias. Desfanatización y resistencia al proyecto cultural garridista (1924–1935)," *Estudios e Historia Moderna y Contemporánea de México* 42 (2012): 37–74. https://doi.org/10.22201/iih.24485004e.2011.42.30389.

[44] Although they were armed with more rudimentary weapons, it is possible that Catholics anticipated or were somehow prepared for such an attack. The group of young men had arrived in Mexico City a few days before, to bring the "exemplary" fruits of Tabasco's anticlerical campaign to the country's capital. And only three days earlier, on December 27, they had vandalized and tried to set fire to the church of Santa Catarina, also in Coyoacán. See Alan M. Kirshner, "Tomás Garrido Canabal and the Mexican Red Shirt Movement" (PhD diss.: New York University, 1970), 102–103.

[45] "Zafarrancho en la Villa de Coyoacán."

[46] "El linchamiento, táctica de lucha de los fanáticos," *El Nacional*, January 7, 1935.

As suggested by this quote, Garrido Canabal's telegram reveals an understanding of violence as redemptive, in a way that resembles the narrative of sacrificial and emancipatory violence that Tejeda and other postrevolutionary leaders qualified as "irrational" when articulated by Catholics. More so, Garrido Canabal's allusion to the so-called "virile consolation" produced by Malda's death resonates with Catholic militants' continuous reference to the manliness and bravery that the faithful were expected to observe when defending their religious beliefs.[48] For instance, in a letter from 1933 a group of "Cristero survivors" harshly criticized Reinaldo Manero, president of the Catholic organization Adoración Nocturna Mexicana (ANM), for encouraging Catholics not to confront their oppressors and focusing instead on prayer and forgiveness. They questioned men like Manero who dreamed about the glory of martyrdom but actively sought to avoid death. They further condemned his poor interpretation of the Fifth Commandment ("Thou shalt not kill") for lacking virility and Christianity, and asserted "not always nor in all circumstances is it bad to kill; [killing] is an act of virtue, of abnegation, and those who have had the braveness, courage, and determination to kill deserve the good of the motherland, of the Church, and of humanity."[49]

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[47] "Responsables de crímenes en Coyoacán," *El Porvenir*, January 4, 1935.

[48] Masculinity constructs play a key role in the legitimation of violence, religious or otherwise. For an analysis of Catholic militants' support of virility and their rejection of "effeminate" forms of religious activism during the 1920s, see Weis, *For Christ and Country.* Reflecting the gendered dimensions of religious violence, women's use of belligerent forms of resistance was discouraged by Catholic militant organizations and ecclesiastical authorities alike. See Boylan, "Mexican Catholic Women's Activism, 1929–1940;" Miller, "The Role of Women in the Mexican Cristero Rebellion: A New Chapter"; and Becker, *Setting the Virgin on Fire,* 35, 100. However, women did engage in acts of violence—including rioting and lynching—during the armed conflict and in the 1930s. For some examples, see Kloppe-Santamaría, *In the Vortex of Violence*, 25, 55–57; Curley, *Citizens and Believers*, 1–2; and David Raby, "Los maestros rurales y los conflictos sociales," *Historia Mexicana* 18:2 (1968): 190–226. On masculinity constructs and their impact on violence in Mexico and elsewhere, see Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sánchez: Autobiography of a Mexican Family* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1961); Lola Romanucci-Ross, *Conflict, Violence, and Morality in a Mexican Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Mara Viveros-Vigoya, "Masculinities in the Continuum of Violence in Latin America," *Feminist Theory* 17:2 (2016): 229 237; and Adam Baird, "Becoming the 'Baddest': Masculine Trajectories of Gang Violence in Medellín," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 50:1 (2018): 183–210.

[49] Letter addressed to Reinaldo Manero, signed by "Cristero Survivors," 1933, Archivo Centro de Estudios de Historia de México Carso [hereafter ACEHMC], Manuscritos del Movimiento Cristero. Colección Antonio Rius Facius, 186.15.1454.

Beyond this shared notion of redemptive violence centered on virility and bravado, Catholics and revolutionaries had little in common when it came to whose deaths could or should be honored by designating them martyrs. During the days following the Coyoacán clashes, supporters of the Red Shirts on one hand, and Catholic activists on the other, organized public funerals for their victims and articulated a narrative of martyrdom in connection to their death. The group of young anticlericals organized a funeral for Malda in which they carried his coffin wrapped in the red and black flag, and compared his death to that of Obregón, who had been "sacrificed by the clergy."[50] They also dropped pamphlets from an airplane—Garrido Canabal's private plane—accusing Archbishop Pascual Díaz of the murder of Malda.[51]

Catholics, for their part, formed the "Club of the Assassinated of Coyoacán" and announced their plans to organize a nationwide campaign to demand the resignation of Garrido Canabal, the dismissal of the Coyoacán police delegate, and the vigorous prosecution of the Red Shirts.[52] Thousands of people attended both the funeral of Malda and those of the five Catholic victims. For anticlericals and supporters of the Red Shirts, Malda was a martyr of the revolution, a victim of religious fanaticism.[53] Catholics, in turn, honored the death of the five Catholics who had died at the hands of the anticlerical and impious Red Shirts, and considered them martyrs.[54]

Catholics were particularly keen on the story of María de la Luz Camacho, a young female member of Acción Católica Mexicana (Mexican Catholic Action, ACM) and a nun of the Third Order of Saint Francis, whose last words, as she was shot, were "¡Viva Cristo Rey!" (Long live Christ the King). Camacho became the first martyr of the ACM and Catholics saw in the story of her killing a testament of the state's continuous war against Catholicism. Founded after the 1929 accords, the ACM had the explicit aim of fostering the mobilization and disciplining of Catholics through Catholic education and indoctrination, as well as through civic and religious forms of engagement in the public sphere.[55] To pursue this aim, the Church tried to incorporate belligerent organizations such as the Liga and the Asociación Católica de la Juventud Mexicana (Catholic Association of Mexican Youth, ACJM), both of which had played an active role in the Cristero uprising, into the structure of the ACM. The fact that Camacho was part of the ACM, which embodied the Church's strategy to promote civil and nonviolent forms of resistance, made her martyrdom indisputable in the eyes of both laity and clergy.[56] Today, Camacho is considered a Cristero martyr with the status of "Servant of God," and the Church is considering her beatification.[57]

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[50] Kirshner, "Tomás Garrido Canabal and the Mexican Red Shirt Movement," 110–111.

[51] "Mexico holds 40 for killing of five at church," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 4, 1935.

[52] "War on Red Shirts in Mexico Follows Catholic Slayings," *Washington Post*, January 2, 1935.

[53] A group of young girls, for instance, carried red flowers through the streets of Mexico City, which they claimed symbolized the Malda's blood and his martyrdom. Kirshner, "Tomás Garrido Canabal and the Mexican Red Shirt Movement," 111.

[54] See Wilfrid Parsons, *Mexican Martyrdom: Firsthand Accounts of the Religious Persecution in Mexico: 1926–1935* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1936), 239; Marisol López Menéndez, "Mártires abandonados: militancia católica, memoria y olvido en México," *Sociedad y Religión: Sociología, Antropología e Historia de la Religión en el Cono Sur* 27:48 (2017): 97–129.

[55] The importance that the Mexican episcopate gave to the ACM was in tune with the Vatican's understanding of Catholic Action as a means to moderate and discipline militant Catholics, as well as an effective instrument to counter the threats posed by secularization, socialism, Protestantism, and capitalism. See Aspe Armella, *La formación social y política de*

Camacho's death embodied an understanding of martyrdom that, in accordance to canonical Catholic principles, privileged nonviolence and forbearance. She died while defending her religion, without recourse to violence, and in the context of an anticlerical assault perpetrated by an organization that acted with the complicity of state authorities.[58] Even more, according to some accounts, she attended mass that day knowing that she could encounter the Red Shirts, and thus be exposed to a violent confrontation with the group of radicals.[59] In sum, she was willing to die for her faith.

María de la Luz was certainly not the first Cristero martyr. Perhaps the most documented and publicized case of martyrdom in twentieth-century Mexico is that of Miguel Agustín Pro, the Jesuit priest who was executed by order of President Calles on November 23, 1927, in the context of the Cristero War.[60] Detained and executed without trial due to his alleged participation in a failed attempt to assassinate former president and then presidential candidate Álvaro Obregón, Pro immediately became a martyr in the view of Catholics. Not only was the evidence against him weak and biased, but Miguel Pro was widely known for his piety and his engagement in civil forms of religious activism,

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los Católicos mexicanos, 143–170; Andes, *The Vatican and Catholic Activism in Mexico and Chile,* 148–154; and Boylan, "Mexican Catholic Women's Activism, 1929–1940," 361–362.

[56] López Menéndez, "Mártires abandonados," 118–119.

[57] López Menéndez, "Mártires abandonados," 119.

[58] For Catholics, the violent actions of the Red Shirts confirmed that Mexican officials had not abandoned religious intolerance. Nonetheless, in June of 1935 and in direct response to the Coyoacán incident, President Cárdenas pushed Garrido Canabal's resignation as minister of agriculture, a move that signaled Cárdenas's decision to soften the government's anticlerical policies.

[59] Roberto ÓFarrill, "La mártir de Coyoacán. Biografía corta de María de la Luz Camacho, mártir cristera de la Ciudad de México," http://www.es.catholic.net/op/articulos/54209/cat/171/la-martir-de-coyoacan.html#modal, accessed May 30, 2020.

[60] Miguel Pro was executed together with his brother Humberto, who was a member of the Liga and the regional leader of the organization in the Santa María la Ribera neighborhood in Mexico City. He was also considered innocent, although evidence is more ambiguous regarding his potential involvement in violent activities. The other two men executed were Juan Tirado, considered responsible for the failed attempt against Obregón, and engineer Luis Segura Vilchis, who confessed to having been the sole author behind the attack. See López Menéndez, *Miguel Pro: Martyrdom, Politics, and Society in Twentieth-Century Mexico*, 143–144; and Weis, *For Christ and Country,* 118.

despite his sympathies for the Cristero uprising.[61] More so, the image of his execution, with his arms stretching in the shape of a cross, further contributed to Miguel Pro's standing as a symbol of both Catholic peaceful resistance and the immorality and unjust violence unleashed by the Mexican government. The Vatican beatified Miguel Pro in September 1988, as a martyr who had been killed in hatred of the faith.

CATHOLICS' DISAGREEMENTS OVER MARTYRDOM

Catholics agreed on the martyrdom of Miguel Agustín Pro and María de la Luz Camacho, just as they did in the case of the murdered priest of Tlapacoyan, Darío Acosta. While anticlerical voices may have challenged their martyrdom, there were no visible expressions of divisiveness among the clergy and lay members of the Church regarding the significance of their deaths or the suffering these individuals had endured, stoically and without recourse to violence, at the hands of what they considered a tyrannical government. However, Catholics were not always in agreement regarding whose deaths merited being honored as martyrs, nor did they consider all who died at the hands of the government to be martyrs. The deaths of certain religious militants, in particular, antagonized Catholics and revealed the ways in which martyrdom constituted a key arena where Catholics themselves drew the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable forms of religious activism.

One of the more controversial cases of martyrdom involved Luis Segura Vilchis, the engineer who confessed being the sole author and mastermind behind an attempt on Álvaro Obregón's life in 1927. An active member of the ACJM and of the armed struggle organized by the Liga, Segura was executed by firing squad together with Miguel Pro. Church authorities, however, did not recognize Segura as a martyr and remained for the most part silent about his death. Segura's direct involvement in a violent act disqualified him as a martyr in canonical terms and, equally important, went against the episcopate's efforts to distance itself from violent forms of religious militancy.[62]

Despite the Church authorities' position, militant Catholics did regard Segura's actions and death as evidence of his martyrdom. An undated poem written by Cristero poet Jorge Téllez, for instance, reflects an alternative understanding of martyrdom articulated by Catholic militants. The poem makes direct reference to Luis Segura as well as to Juan Tirado, also executed in connection to the attempt against Obregón.[63] The poem reads, in part:

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[61] As explained by López Menéndez, the emphasis on Miguel Pro's piety over his support of the Cristero cause and of members of the Liga, was part of an evolving narrative Catholics built around his persona to secure his path to martyrdom and eventually to sainthood. See Marisol López Menéndez, "The Holy Jester: A Story of Martyrdom in Revolutionary Mexico," *New School Psychology Bulletin* 6:2 (2009): 64.

[62] López Menéndez, "Mártires abandonados," 116–117.

> Oh, Lord, oh, Lord, for the thorns that held you without mercy,
> For your divine parables, for your august charity,
> For that blood you know is being spilled for the sake of love,
> For all those mothers alone and desolate,
> For all the teardrops, oh Lord!
> To follow your noble footsteps
> Give us your grace, oh great Good,
> Like those souls, like those who are today thunders of stars
> In the smoothness of your temple.
> Blood of the martyrs, young and pure,
> Holy victims of unjust laws,
> Liquid red that turns already purple
> The august dress of the King of Kings
> Cristero blood of Luis Segura, of Juan Tirado, of Armando Téllez!
> Holy blood that time ago was lily in the land where you fell,
> And before the heavens, a holy offer!
> . . .[64]

Infused with religious metaphors and Christian references, the poem invokes an understanding of martyrdom that celebrates the profusion of blood and the notion of sacrificial violence in the name of Christ. Toward the end of the poem, the poet refers to the "cross of the father, symbol of the sky" as "an august banner for combat," an allegory that captures the author's celebration of Catholic belligerence. Such a view of martyrdom, which celebrated the virility and courage of young men as well as their willingness to use violence, was shared by several members of the ACJM but was not welcomed by those Catholics who believed that violent forms of militancy could undermine the legitimacy of their cause.[65]

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[63] Jorge Téllez, undated poem, ACEHMC, Manuscritos del Movimiento Cristero, Colección Antonio Rius Facius 186. 13. 1245 (translation from Spanish to English is mine).

[64] Armando Téllez Vargas was also a member of the Liga and of the ACJM. He joined Luis Segura in planning the assassination of Obregón and discussed, together with other young militants, the need to act against the government even if the chances of dying were great. He was murdered by government forces together with others in an ambush near the Ajusco, in Mexico City. Luis Rivero del Val, *Entre las patas de los caballos: diario de un cristero* (Mexico City: Editorial Jus, 1954), 117; Weis, *For Christ and Country*, 88. See also Mario Ramírez Rancaño, *El asesinato de Álvaro Obregón: la conspiración y la madre Conchita (*Mexico City: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 2014), 126.

Equally controversial and divisive was the martyrdom of José de León Toral, the young militant of the ACJM who actually succeeded in his attempt to murder Obregón on July 17, 1928. Obregón, who was by then president-elect of Mexico, was celebrating his recent electoral success in a restaurant in San Ángel, Mexico City, when Toral, camouflaged as a portraitist, shot him twice in front of dozens of witnesses. Toral was not executed right away, following President Calles' attempt to avoid accusations (as was the case after Miguel Pro's execution) of being undemocratic, tyrannical, or unconcerned with the rule of law.[66] Instead, Calles decided Toral would be prosecuted and tried before a popular jury, as was customary at the time. In the mind of Calles and other postrevolutionary leaders, a trial based on due process would assert the image of the Mexican state as rational and modern, an image that could then be set against the backwardness and violent fanaticism of the defendants.[67]

Despite the "modern" character of the trial, once he was found guilty, Toral was executed by firing squad on February 9, 1929. While in prison, Toral endured torture at the hands of his interrogators, which he documented through his writings and drawings. It was the torment and the suffering he endured that constituted the basis for his martyrdom in the view of contemporary militant Catholics, particularly members of the ACJM and the Liga.[68] More so, for Toral and other members of the ACJM, the idea of an individual not only dying but also killing for Christ while exposing the tyranny of the government was a genuine manifestation of religious martyrdom.[69] This view clearly contrasted with the notion of martyrdom sanctioned by the Church's hierarchy. León Toral, like Luis Segura before him, was not recognized as a martyr by Church authorities. Instead, his actions were immediately condemned by the Mexican episcopate.[70]

The ambivalent and contested meanings of martyrdom in relation to violence would continue to surface in the following months and well into the 1930s.

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[65] Weis, *For Christ and Country*, 88–89.

[66] Pablo Piccato, *A History of Infamy: Crime, Truth, and Justice in Mexico* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 44–45.

[67] Robert Weis, "The Revolution on Trial: Assassination, Christianity, and the Rule of Law in 1920s Mexico," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 96:2 (2016): 320.

[68] López Menéndez, "Mártires abandonados," 107.

[69] Weis, *For Christ and Country*, 124–125.

[70] López Menéndez, "Mártires abandonados," 112.

Noteworthy correspondence between the Jesuit priest Césareo Alba and Andrés Barquín y Ruíz, a Catholic militant and co-founder of the ACJM, contains clear references to the tensions and contradictions between violent forms of religious militancy and orthodox interpretations of martyrdom. In one of these letters, Alba expressed to Barquín his doubts about the possibility that members of the ACJM who had supported and participated in the armed rebellion could be considered martyrs, and even less so be considered for canonization.[71] Alba and Barquín referred specifically to Joaquín Silva y Carrasco and Anacleto González Flores, members of the ACJM executed by the government in 1926 and 1927.[72]

In subsequent correspondence, Alba explained that he did not mean to deny that martyrdom consisted of defending the faith of Jesus Christ. He wished, however, to point to the theological arguments (which he did not necessarily agree with) that "say expressly that those who die with a weapon in their hand while defending the faith are not martyrs" or that "it is not decorous to call a saint he who resists with the same ferocity as the oppressor.[73] At the same time, Alba acknowledged that Barquín's reference to St. Joan of Arc, the famous Catholic warrior who was canonized by the Church, had made him "hopeful." As this exchange makes clear, the meanings of martyrdom were not constrained by theological interpretations sanctioned by the Church. Rather, militant Catholics and those who supported their use of violence reinterpreted the notion of martyrdom to accommodate and honor the actions and sacrifice of Cristeros, members of the Liga, and of the ACJM.

Similar to the Church's inability to control the meanings of martyrdom, the Mexican episcopate lacked the means to fully discipline and pacify the hundreds of Catholics who continued to resort to violence and armed resistance during the 1930s. The next section will examine Catholic militants' recalcitrant political ideology and the clashes their discourses and actions generated between Church authorities and religious militants—including some local priests—as reflected in the controversies that emerged between the Mexican episcopate and the Liga in this period.

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[71] Cesáreo Alba, S.J. to Andrés Barquín y Ruiz under the name of Eduardo Lagos, the name he used while exiled in the United States and Europe, signed April 26, 1929, ACEHMC, Manuscritos del Movimiento Cristero, Colección Antonio Rius Facius, 186.9.897. The poem by Jorge Téllez, mentioned earlier, also refers to Silva y Carrasco and Gónzalez Flores as "noble brothers who before the horrors of their torment wanted only to put their hands together . . . and died serene as Christians!" Téllez, undated poem.

[72] Anacleto González Flores represented a more traditional form of martyrdom, centered on sacrifice and nonviolent religious activism. In his writing and activism he advocated for Catholics' participation in the public sphere through newspapers, social movements, and education. Once he realized the inevitability of the armed rebellion, however, he chose the path of martyrdom as "withdrawal from the political sphere, of sacrifice, the ultimate sacrifice, as an antipolitics." See Curley, *Citizens and Believers,* 236, 250–254. González Flores was beatified as a martyr in November of 2005.

[73] Letter written by Cesáreo Alba, S.J. to Andrés Barquín y Ruiz under the name of Eduardo Lagos, ACEHMC, Manuscritos del Movimiento Cristero, Colección Antonio Rius Facius, 186. 32. 3257. The extant copy is dated August 8, 1941, but it was probably exchanged originally in 1929 or the early 1930s.

(De)Legitimizing Violence

At the end of the Cristero War, the Mexican episcopate tried to tame the activities of recalcitrant and militant Catholics by incorporating existing lay organizations under the newly created Acción Católica Mexicana.[74] Because of their ongoing support for belligerent forms of religious militancy, members of the Liga were of particular concern to the Mexican episcopate, which was trying to secure the fragile peace reached between Church and state. The thorny relationship between the Liga and the episcopate illustrates the disagreements and tensions that existed between and among clergy and Catholic militants regarding the legitimacy of violence. More so, these disagreements allow a critical examination of government representations of the Catholic Church as a top-down and monolithic entity inherently prone to supporting violent religious militancy.

THE LIGA'S RECALCITRANT POLITICS

The relation between the Liga and the episcopate had been strained from the moment the Church's hierarchy opened channels of dialogue and negotiation with the government during the late 1920s.[75] The Liga openly condemned the episcopate's strategy of negotiating with authorities who had consistently attacked their faith. In their view, Mexican Catholics could not expect a government that had declared itself an enemy of religion to behave in any way that would guarantee religious freedom or even a minimal respect for Catholics' most cherished values and traditions. The strategy was, according to Liga activists, not only ineffective but also immoral.

[74] Although many of the groups and organizations that formed it were not new, the rationale behind Acción Católica was novel. As described by Boylan, the ACM was "the first large-scale invitation to the laity to participate directly in the Church's social and educational work and assume significant responsibilities without entering religious life." Boylan, "Mexican Catholic Women's Activism, 1929–1940," 361–362, 366.

[75] From its inception, the Liga's relation to the Mexican episcopate was peculiar. The episcopate supported its creation, but only after Catholics' more intransigent groups gained greater strength and legitimacy at the onset of the Cristero uprising. In contrast to other lay organizations—such as the Unión de Damas Católicas or the Caballeros de Colón—the Liga operated with greater autonomy. This autonomy was in part a necessity as the Liga was overtly political and combative and made it clear from the beginning that its activities would not be limited to those established by the Mexican constitution. This autonomy proved both advantageous and disadvantageous to the Church. On the one hand, the Liga was always more difficult to tame. At the same time, the Church could claim plausible deniability whenever the Liga violated the law and engaged in acts of open rebellion. Hanson, "The Day of Ideals: Catholic Social Action in the Age of the Mexican Revolution," 528–542; Enrique Guerra Manzo, "Las encrucijadas del Catolicismo intransigente-demócrata (1929–1932)," *Signos Históricos* 14 (July-December 2005): 42–73.

In a long and bitter letter sent by members of the Liga to the archbishop of Mexico, Pascual Díaz, on September 12, 1931, they expressed their disappointment with the episcopate's condemnation of the Liga.[76] The authors reminded Díaz that when Catholics decided to take up arms in the face of religious persecution, the "Catholic people" (*el pueblo católico*) asked the Liga to lead the armed movement. Before the Liga accepted this role, however, it called a meeting at which the apostolic delegate Leopoldo Ruiz y Flores and Pascual Díaz (then secretary of the Mexican episcopate) had "committed to not condemn the armed movement, to lend moral support to carry out our program, and to allow those priests who requested it to serve as chaplains of the liberation army." In their view, it was only after this support was secured that "the battle to death between oppressors and oppressed" began. Next, they mentioned the outcry that the episcopate's negotiations with former president Calles had generated among faithful Catholics, and decried the episcopate's unfair condemnation and hostility toward the Liga.[77] In particular, they referred to an occasion on which Díaz had "mortally attacked the Executive Committee of the Liga . . . [stating] that we were rebels to the authority of the Pope. . . . This inexplicable hostility was a declaration of war that put us, genuine Catholics, in a very difficult and embarrassing position."[78]

This letter is revealing in many ways. It shows the Liga's inconformity with the highest religious authority in Mexico and the fact that its members' convictions did not depend on the hierarchy's approval. Surely, this type of disagreement between the Church and Catholic militants was not new, and might even be seen as an extension of the tensions that existed between ecclesiastical authorities and lay organizations during the Cristero uprising.[79] Nonetheless, what is distinctive about the divisions that emerged in this decade is the fact that they were being articulated during the so-called new *modus vivendi* between Church and state, in a period wherein ecclesiastical authorities (at least at the higher levels) rapidly abandoned their traditional ambivalence regarding the use of violence and embraced, instead, a more consistent discourse oriented toward disciplined, law-abiding, and civic forms of religious activism.[80] In this context, the actions and ideologies promoted by Catholic militants were no longer a reflection of the state-Church conflict, and their strategies to defend religious freedom became increasingly at odds with ecclesiastical authorities.

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[76] The letter was signed by the president of the Liga, Rafael Ceniceros y Villarreal, and other high-ranking members, including Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra, Jorge Núñez, and José Tello. AHAM, Fondo Pascual Díaz Barreto, Secretaría Arzobispal, caja 127, exp. 38.

[77] The negotiations took place under the presidency of Emilio Portes Gil (1928-30) during the so-called "Maximato," in which Plutarco Elías Calles retained significant political power. Hence, the reference to Calles in the letter.

[78] In the same letter, members of the Liga accused archbishop Pascual Díaz of jeopardizing and even boycotting the resources that the Liga had secured from Mexican Catholics residing in the United States. In a related letter written by Archbishop Pascual Díaz to members of the Liga, on November 23, 1933, he stated that the Mexican episcopate had not condemned the Liga but had only demanded that its members refrain from taking up arms, following the orders of the Supreme Pontiff. AHAM, Fondo Pascual Díaz Barreto, Secretaría Arzobispal, Caja 127, Expediente 38.

[79] Hanson, "The Day of Ideals," 487–488; Weis, *For Christ and Country*, 84–85.

[80] Boylan, "Mexican Catholic Women's Activism, 1929–1940," 360–361.

Whereas during the 1920s the main enemy of Catholic militants was the so-called tyrannical and godless revolutionary government, during the 1930s these recalcitrant believers increasingly saw ecclesiastical authorities as yet another source of danger for religious liberties. In a piece of propaganda published by members of the Liga, they not only condemned the episcopate but also challenged the authority of the Vatican (thus seemingly substantiating Pascual Díaz's identification of Liga members as "rebels"). The Liga produced this document in response to a series of declarations made by Leopoldo Ruíz y Flores in 1932, which were meant to convey to the Mexican faithful that the Vatican rejected the use of armed defense and instead endorsed nonviolent forms of resistance.[81] In the document, the authors criticized Ruíz y Flores's lenient attitude toward federal authorities who had regularly failed to redress Catholics' demands for justice.[82] Then, in reference to Ruíz y Flores's message on armed defense, which reflected the position of both the Mexican episcopate and the Vatican, the Liga document stated: "It is not enough for the Pope and the Bishops to prohibit this recourse [to armed defense]: because being evident, as it is before the world, that religion and the motherland are in an imminent state of ruin due to adhering to such a system of pacifism at all costs, Catholics can and should appeal to arms, despite that prohibition, since discipline is not the end of the church, but it is rather the salvation of souls."[83]

These militant Catholics from the Liga also claimed that the pope could not have condemned a natural right, such as people's right to defend themselves from an unjust and evident aggression. For them, it would be a contradiction for the Holy Father to condemn Catholics' recourse to arms in a moment when religion was being seriously threatened and when Acción Católica had done nothing to save the Church. Lastly, stating that they were neither unruly, nor schismatic, nor heretic, the Liga members articulated their final position, which reflected both their intransigence and their overt confrontation of the Church's highest authorities:

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[81] The Vatican also expressed its view on the religious question in Mexico through the encyclical Acerba Animi, issued on September 29, 1932. The encyclical was highly critical of the Mexican government and denounced the actions carried out by different state governments, including the restrictions in the number of priests implemented in Michoacán, Chiapas, and Veracruz. Despite this strong condemnation of the Mexican state, the encyclical clearly recommended that the faithful should organize through Catholic Action, and made it clear that armed resistance was not endorsed by the Holy See. See the encyclical Acerba Animi, September 29, 1932, http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_29091932_acerba-animi.html, accessed May 31, 2020. See also Aspe Armella, *La formación social y política de los Católicos mexicanos,* 132–135.

[82] En torno a la declaración del Sr. Delegado Apostólico de fecha 1 de mayo, Archivo Histórico de la UNAM, Sección Documental, Fondo Aurelio Militante Cristero, Serie Propaganda, caja 3, exp. 12, fojas 25-26.

[83] En torno a la declaración del Sr. Delegado Apostólico de fecha 1 de mayo. In the document they also criticized Ruiz y Flores' reference to the use of arms as a strategy that could be licit in principle but not in practice. On this, Ruiz y Flores echoed the position of the Vatican, which considered that given the low probabilities of success of an armed struggle (due in great part to the lack of support from the United States) the Church could not justify the use of arms. The Church's view was thus based on practical rather than on moral or theological grounds. See Andes, *The Vatican and Catholic Activism in Mexico and Chile,* 162; and Guerra Manzo, "Las encrucijadas del catolicismo intransigente-demócrata," 57–58.

> [I]t seems that the Pope and the Mexican bishops are mistaken this time. . . . Now, if this time the Pope and the Mexican Pastors have lost the path of truth and justice, are we Catholics bound to follow them? No, no way, because we would then make ourselves accomplices in this error and this injustice. Then what should we do? We should turn to God and Our Holy Mother in search of light, so we do not ourselves miss the true path. Next, in light of our holy doctrine, we shall study what shall be done in this case, putting our passions aside, and letting ourselves be guided only by reason illuminated by faith. . . . Mexican Catholics . . . have always been obedient to our Holy Mother the Church. . . . But in this case we cannot obey, because we would be failing God and our conscience.[84]

Expressive of their discontent with the Church's position, the document reveals that members of the Liga were willing to question the authority of the episcopate and to challenge the judgment of the Holy See itself. Their appeals to religious doctrine and to prayer as a source of knowledge to elucidate the path they needed to follow, reveal an understanding of religious faith and action that relied on individual judgment rather than established rules or hierarchical orders. In contrast to the government's portrayal of Catholics as blindly manipulated by the Church's hierarchy and as having no agency in their actions, this statement suggests religious militants exercised a significant degree of autonomy vis-à-vis Church authorities. It further shows that religious militants were indeed political actors and not, as government officials and mainstream newspapers claimed, mere instruments of the clergy, blinded by their so-called fanaticism. More so, this type of discourse makes it clear that Catholic militants considered the defense of religious freedom, not the defense of the institution of the Church, as essential to their struggle. Hence, if necessary, they were willing to fight ecclesiastical authorities to protect what they regarded as their sacred rights.[85]

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[84] "En torno a la declaración del Sr. Delegado Apostólico de fecha 1 de mayo."

[85] In the letter quoted earlier, signed by Fernando Munguía as "Captain 29" of a military camp in Michoacán, this point is expressed clearly. Criticizing Luis María Martínez and the Mexican episcopate's reluctance to confront the tyranny of the government through armed rebellion, he states: "What matters for us the most in the current moment, is the liberty to exercise our sacred rights and to educate our children. . . . We do not defend nor ask in this struggle for temples or ministers, as none of these will matter to us tomorrow if our children are deprived of God and their Motherland in the rationalist school." Circular No. 7, November 25, 1932, AHAM, Fondo Luis María Martínez, caja 35, exp. 1.

A CHURCH DIVIDED

Certainly, not all Catholics agreed with the Liga's intransigent position regarding the legitimacy of violence and rebellion, and less so with the organization's overt defiance of Church authorities. For instance, on March 13, 1933, Alfonso Sánchez de la Peña sent a letter to the priest Manuel J. Martínez to inform him about a meeting organized by members of the Liga in the Portales neighborhood in Mexico City.[86] As a Catholic, he explained, he had accepted the invitation to attend but was immediately offended by what he saw and heard. In his account, members of the Liga read poems of "belligerent character" and next staged a play in which they dramatized the recent religious persecution by "openly inciting an armed rebellion against the current government, under the pretext of tyranny." Even more outrageous were the Liga members' attacks against "our bishops and priests, . . . saying that the Mexican episcopate and all priests were schismatic since they opposed the wishes of Your Holiness the Pope."[87] The meeting, he explained, was attended by 600 people, a fact that in his view pointed to the dangerous influence the Liga's ideas could have among the faithful.

From the tone of the letter, we can infer that the author believed his addressee, priest Manuel J. Martínez, shared his rejection of the Liga's position and of the belligerent forms of activism more generally. However, the following statement written by a priest shows that the clergy was divided regarding the strategy of dialogue and reconciliation adopted by the Mexican episcopate. On January 24, 1934, the priest José Adolfo Arroyo wrote a statement wherein he openly criticized the *arreglos* and the work of Acción Católica, which he deemed unworthy of the respect of those Catholics who ardently defended their religion. Conversely, he praised the work of the Liga, an organization that, in his view, had been unfairly attacked by "our enemies, but also by some of our own."[88] He declared that when the arreglos came into effect, morality disappeared from the areas formally controlled by Cristeros, "the dances and

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86. Alfonso Sánchez de la Peña to the priest Manuel J. Martínez, March 13, 1933, AHAM, Fondo Pascual Díaz Barreto, Secretaría Arzobispal, caja 92, exp. 2.

87. This perspective contrasts with the piece of propaganda examined earlier, which questioned both the episcopate and the Pope. The reference to the Mexican episcopate as schismatic or dishonest regarding the true position of the Vatican was not uncommon, and reflected, once again, the Liga's resentment toward the Mexican hierarchy. As explained by Stephen Andes, the fact that the Vatican's position was communicated through pastoral letters issued by Leopoldo Ruiz y Flores and Pascual Díaz, rather than through the original communication issued by the Vatican, contributed to recalcitrant Catholics' belief that the Mexican episcopate was misrepresenting the Holy See's position. Andes, *The Vatican and Catholic Activism in Mexico and Chile*, 161–162. See also Ramírez Rancaño, *El asesinato de Álvaro Obregón,* 308.

88. José Adolfo Arroyo, "Algo sobre la persecusión religiosa, defensa armada, y religiosa," January 24, 1934, ACEHMC, Manuscritos del Movimiento Cristero, Colección Antonio Rius Facius, 186.16.1587. Born in Huejuquilla El Alto in Jalisco, Arroyo was a firm supporter of the Cristeros and had an active role in the formation of the ACJM. He was considered the spiritual leader of some of the most belligerent Cristero brigades in Zacatecas. See Gustavo

the drinking came back, and women went back to dressing and cutting their hair according to fashion. . . . And what is our situation? We are entirely under the power of our enemies."

Next, Arroyo condemned bishops and priests who showed no morality or respect for natural rights, and who, when addressing wealthy Catholics, referred to Cristeros as bandits, calling them "machete Catholics," with sarcasm and contempt. No wonder, the priest reckoned, that many believed that "a dark crime of ingratitude and, even more so, of national injustice is being committed, and this claims revenge from the heavens." The letter concluded that the clergy was responsible for the ongoing hostilities experienced by Catholics on behalf of Mexican authorities.

Aware of the fact that many priests, such as the abovementioned Arroyo, favored the continuation of armed resistance, the higher ranks of the Church made a continuous effort to assure the government that no priests were involved in acts of political agitation. A good example of such efforts was the letter sent by Alberto María Carreño, who served as mediator in the *arreglos,* to General Juan C. Cabral of the Ministry of Interior on November 14, 1934.[89] In that letter, Carreño summarized the position of the Mexican clergy and expressed that it was not the intention of Archbishop Ruiz y Flores "to provoke sedition or rebellion among Catholics against the government of the republic." The letter was accompanied by a report sent to the Ministry of Interior a few days prior, wherein Carreño documented the many instances in which the episcopate had urged members of the Liga to distance themselves from the Church and to change its name so that its involvement in the armed struggle would not tarnish the name of the Church. He further explained that even after Ruiz y Flores was forced into exile in 1932, he had demonstrated his commitment to a peaceful resolution of the conflict by urging Mexican Catholics "to caution priests and faithful against the biased and disconcerting versions . . . that argue that we must take up arms, a matter in which we cannot nor should mix ourselves" [90]

Villanueva Bazán, ed., *Memorias de un sacerdote cristero. José Adolfo Arroyo,* Cuadernos del Archivo Histórico de la UNAM 26 (Mexico City: UNAM, 2016).

[89] Alberto María Carreño to General Juan C. Cabral, November 14, 1934, AHAM, Fondo Pascual Díaz Barreto, Secretaría Arzobispal, caja 125, exp. 36. Carreño sent a copy of these files to Mexico's archbishop Pascual Díaz, S.J., to notify him of his efforts to reject the order of arrest against Ruiz y Flores due to his alleged involvement in inciting rebellion.

[90] The Liga did change its name, but only by eliminating the word "*religiosa*" from its original designation. In November 1929, it became the Liga Nacional Defensora de la Libertad (LNDL). Guerra Manzo, "Las encrucijadas del Catolicismo intransigente," 68.

In addition to informing the government about the Church's commitment to nonviolence, the Mexican episcopate monitored priests' potential involvement in armed resistance. On September 4, 1935, for instance, in the context of the Second Cristiada, the secretary of the Executive Episcopal Committee issued a summary of the points that had been agreed upon in the committee's last meeting. Following the orders of the Apostolic Delegate, the committee had investigated the possible involvement of priests in the armed movement, but was pleased to report that they had "found out that no priest is currently involved in such movement."[91] Nonetheless, at the time that this document was issued, priests were indeed involved in seditious activities. Between 1934 and 1938, in particular, several priests condoned and provided moral and religious support to Catholics who decided to oppose, through violent means, the implementation of socialist education.[92] Catholics' actions against teachers included the rape, mutilation, hanging, burning, and torture of dozens of male and female teachers, either at the hands of vigilantes or more spontaneous mobs.[93]

Letters of complaint sent by teachers and teachers' associations to state and federal authorities described in detail the moral and political role that priests had in guiding parents and neighbors' efforts to resist socialist education. In June 1935, for instance, Francisco Ramírez Villarreal addressed the governor of Guanajuato to denounce the actions of priest Flaviano de la Vega who, in complicity with the municipal authorities of San Luis de la Paz, had threatened teacher Manuel Pérez.[94] After being summoned by the town's mayor to discuss the situation of the local school, the teacher arrived at the municipal offices, where the priest, accompanied by a "*chusma de fanáticos*" (a rabble of fanatics), threatened Pérez, and warned him to stop imparting socialist education or else face retaliation.

A few months later, in November 1935, and in reference to the assassination of several teachers in Teziutlán, Puebla, the Union of Federal Rural Teachers of Puebla addressed President Cárdenas to denounce the activities of the "fanatic clergy" in the state, who jeopardized socialist education and were responsible for the violence against teachers.[95] The teachers claimed it was unjust that

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[91] AHAM, Fondo Pascual Díaz Barreto, Secretaría Arzobispal, caja 123, exp. 3.

[92] Still, their influence should not be overstated. Militant Catholics had their own reasons, both spiritual and political, to endorse these violent acts and were therefore not simply "manipulated" or "incited" by priests, as revolutionaries claimed.

[93] Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation,* 120–121.

[94] Letter addressed to the governor of Guanajuato, signed by Francisco Ramírez, June 11, 1935, AGN, Dirección General de Gobierno, Serie Asesinatos. 2. 340 (8) 10400, caja 39, exp. 6.

[95] Letter addressed to President Lázaro Cárdenas on behalf of the Union of Federal Rural Teachers of Puebla, AGN, DGG, Serie Asesinatos, 2/012.2(18), caja 53, exp. 62.

"while the enemies of the Revolution and in particular the fanatical clerics are armed to the teeth, we the rural teachers, lack arms for our personal defense."[96] Similarly, a teacher from Tonalá, Jalisco, wrote to the Minister of Interior in May 1938 and accused priests of threatening parents with excommunication if they sent their children to school, adding: "Here the priests have organized absolutely all the people in the society called 'Acción Católica.' Children have their association, as do young ladies, young men, fathers, mothers . . . and, what is worst, priests have made parents believe that it is better for children to enter heaven as donkeys than to enter hell in wisdom."[97]

Similar to government representations of religious militants and activists, the authors of these letters presented Catholics as monolithic, as easily manipulated by the clergy, and as having no agency in their decision to oppose public schooling.[98] Despite the bias in the teachers' accounts, it remains true that the status of priests in Catholic communities was central in shaping the sentiments of Catholics toward socialist teachers. As both spiritual leaders and influential political actors who formed alliances with local economic and political elites, parish priests could and did sway people's perceptions about the immorality of socialist education. Furthermore, in their communications and statements, Church authorities clearly conveyed to the faithful that they had the obligation to resist socialist education due to its atheistic, corrupt, and anti-Catholic nature.[99]

For instance, in his pastoral letter of April 12, 1936, the archbishop of Guadalajara, José Garibi Rivera, condemned socialist education as immoral and dangerous and a source of slander against the teachings of the Church. He encouraged laity and clergy to mobilize to make sure children would receive the proper religious education.[100] Although the official position of Garibi Rivera, and the Catholic hierarchy more generally, was to resist socialist education through nonviolent means, many priests at the local level embraced a less conciliatory and more explosive approach.[101] Surely, the hierarchy's message regarding the great danger socialist education posed for Catholics, together with the animosity of parish priests and Catholic communities toward socialist teachers, provided the necessary grounds to instigate violence against teachers.

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[96] According to the sister of one of the murdered teachers, the parish priest of Teziutlán had warned her brother, days before his death, to be "careful with socialism," stating that teachers had become "too anticlerical." See Rinde informes de la investigación practicada en la Zona de Teziutlán, Puebla, AGN, Documentación de la Administración Pública, Serie Asesinatos, caja 53, exp. 62.

[97] Letter addressed to the Minister of the Interior, signed by teacher Luis N. Rodríguez, May 20, 1938. AGN, DGG, Serie Asesinatos, 2. 340/11 10515, exp. 13. Also in reference to the state of Jalisco, Celso Ramírez Cruz wrote the Minister of Education to denounce that priests continued to have a dominant presence in the state and that they exercised their influence through private schooling and through their dominion over women, who were more prone to religious fanaticism. The signer added that it would be preferable to send men rather than women as rural teachers, since the former were less prone to being fanaticized. Letter to the Minister of Education signed by Celso Ramírez Cruz, no date, AGN, DGG, Serie Asesinatos, 2. 340/11 10515, exp. 13.

[98] Certainly, not all teachers were anticlerical. Their animosity toward the Catholic Church was shaped by local conditions, including the influence of parish priests and the religious militancy of locals, as well as the level of support they received from municipal and state authorities. See Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*.

[99] Fallaw, *Religion and State Formation in Postrevolutionary Mexico*, 19–20.

[100] Expediente sobre educación socialista, AHAM, Fondo Pascual Díaz Barreto, Secretaría Arzobispal, caja 128, exp. 34.

Beyond combating socialist education, priests supported the activities of the Liga, which, against the dictates of the Catholic hierarchy, openly promoted armed resistance and opposition to the Mexican state. The following account of a meeting organized by the Liga on February 16, 1936, in Mexico City, exemplifies both the Liga's ongoing support of belligerent and violent actions, as well as priests' involvement in this organization. In the document, the author narrates in great detail what he describes as an "extraordinary event" filled with sentiments of "sublime joy" and shared by men who wanted to "know what it feels to be free, at least for a few hours, in a nation of slaves."[102] The meeting involved around 1,200 attendees, including peasants and members of the Liga from the Estado de México, Puebla, Hidalgo, Morelos, and Mexico City, whom the author described as soldiers "prepared to offer their blood for the Cristero cause."

The meeting was held in an open space, among prayers and religious songs, facing an improvised altar where participants placed the Cristero banner and the flags of regional chapters of the Liga. The unnamed priest who inaugurated the event was described by the author as a "*sacerdote cristero de corazón,*" (a Cristero priest at heart) and was accompanied by four other priests who blessed the flags and read passages from the Bible "in which it was made evident [to us] the ineludible obligation that as Christians we have to defend our rights." The author described next how a representative of the Liga from Mexico City, on the occasion of the seventh anniversary of José de León Toral's execution, referred to the latter's heroic sacrifice, courage, and patriotism. Illustrating the endurance of Toral's image as a martyr as well as the conflation of martyrdom with heroism promoted by Catholic militants, the speaker, in the words of the author, "put before our eyes the living example of this hero so that all of us, conscious of the responsibility that weighs upon us, resolve to follow the path left by the steps of his generous blood." At the close of the event, the officiating priest blessed participants, wishing them the "willpower to fulfill them, arriving if necessary to the point of sacrificing our lives."

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[101] In the same letter, Garibi Rivera reiterated that the Holy See prohibited the involvement of the clergy in any political activity, and instead prescribed Acción Católica and religious discipline as appropriate instruments for all Catholics to fulfill their duties.

[102] Accountt of Liga meeting, February 16, 1936, ACEHMC, Manuscritos del Movimiento Cristero,Colección Antonio Rius Facius, 186.18.1852.

As this vivid description makes clear, the priests' presence and words, together with their references to heroic and sacrificial violence, infused the activities of the Liga with religious significance. The priests pointed to Catholics' obligation to defend their faith against a government that had deprived them of their religious freedom. They further contributed to a notion of martyrdom that incorporated elements of figure of the hero or the warrior as someone who is not only willing to die but also to kill for his faith. The combination of religious symbols and rituals performed by the Liga attendees, including the use of an altar, the blending of prayers, and calls for belligerent action, illustrate how Catholics used ritualistic elements of their faith to infuse their political goals (resistance toward a tyrannical state) with sacred meaning (to fulfill their mission before God).

Condemned by the Catholic hierarchy and persecuted by the Mexican government, the Liga began to lose presence and strength by the end of the 1930s.[103] The practices and ideology of this organization, however, shed light on the manifold contradictions and divisions that informed the relationship between violence and religion in 1930s Mexico. Catholics' support of violence was not rooted in a "fanatical" obedience to the Church, but in noncanonical interpretations of religious principles and an uncompromising understanding of politics that placed the state and its representatives as a threat to Catholics' moral and religious integrity.

CONCLUSION

Violence was at the center of the religious experience in both revolutionary and postrevolutionary Mexico. Be it as an expression of religious persecution or a belligerent form of religious militancy, the study of violence is central to understanding how religion has been lived and experienced by Mexican citizens, and communities more broadly. Scholarly literature has, for the most part, failed to provide a systematic analysis of the contentious and complex relationship between religion and violence in Mexico. Although there exists a rich and vast historiography dealing with the Cristero War, such literature is centered on the armed conflict and on the reasons that prompted Catholics to take up arms against the postrevolutionary state.[104] In most analyses, however, violence appears as a byproduct of the armed conflict but is not studied in its own right, or in terms of its more spontaneous manifestations such as rioting and lynching. This has precluded a deeper analysis of the tensions between

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[103] Guerra Manzo, "Las encrucijadas del Catolicismo intransigente-demócrata," 43.

[104] For a useful summary of the main thesis articulated by scholars on Catholics' decision to support armed rebellion, see Curley, *Citizens and Believers*, 259–260.

Catholics' recourse to violence and their observance of core values such as the sanctity of human life and their pledged allegiance to the Catholic Church's hierarchy.

This article has offered an examination of the cultural and political repertoire that served to justify the use of violence in the eyes of belligerent Catholics. My analysis of martyrdom, based on both widely accepted and contentious martyrs, speaks to the ways in which religious militants infused politics and their recourse to violence with sacred meanings. The so-called modus vivendi between state and Church did not defuse militant Catholicism, but instead, made the contrast between Church and intransigent lay Catholics more salient. Martyrdom served as a central battlefield where the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate forms of religious activism were drawn and redefined in the aftermath of the Cristero War. The question of who deserved to be considered a martyr concerned not only competing interpretations articulated by revolutionaries and Catholics—as would be expected—but also involved crucial disagreements among Catholics. The examination of the Liga's continuing support and justification of violent forms of religious militancy offers a window into the recalcitrant political ideologies that characterized militant organizations and individuals. The Liga's open defiance of the Mexican episcopate and even the Holy See reveals that, for these Catholic militants, the defense of their faith went well beyond the defense of the Church as an institution —it was the vindication of a religious and political project that asserted Mexico as a Catholic nation.

As has been persuasively argued by scholars such as R. Scott Appleby and William T. Cavanaugh, defenders of the modern liberal state have commonly equated religion with violent and irrational conduct.[105] Mexico's government officials reproduced a discourse centered on the so-called fanaticism, ignorance, and violent proclivities of Catholics. Nonetheless, as examined in this article, Catholics' understanding of violence was far from homogeneous. Instead, it was traversed by tensions, contradictions, and bitter disagreements among clergy, lay members, and Catholic groups and organizations regarding the legitimacy of violent forms of religious activism. The violent actions of Catholic militants, grounded as they were in noncanonical and popular interpretations of martyrdom and sacrifice, were as much religious as they were political.

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[105] Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred;* Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*.