

CHAPTER XI

Religion in Mexico—The early worshippers—Spanish methods of conversion—Destruction of Aztec records—First Archbishop—Early church building—Arrival of Holy Inquisition—Persecution by priests—Hatred of Benito Juarez—His war on the Church—Victory established—Defining rights of Church in Mexico—Separation of State and Church—The Protestant Church—Indian knowledge of the crucifix—Jewish congregation—Jews as citizens.

WHEN Macaulay declared that the Roman Catholic Church would still exist in undiminished vigour when some traveller from New Zealand should, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's, he knew the marvellous strength and tenacity of that institution.

In no Catholic country has a more determined attempt been made to break the power of the priests and subjugate the Church itself than in Mexico, not without having received extreme provocation, I am compelled to admit; but still with only indifferent success.

The first President who ruled over Mexico to strike a blow at the power of the Church was Benito Juarez, a man whose memory is deeply revered to-day—even by some of the most devoted adherents to Rome itself. Juarez had to go through a long and sanguinary tussle with the priests of this country, who hated and opposed him with all their great influence; but he triumphed in the end, and finally separated the Church from the State, reducing the former to a position which was little better than that of a nonentity in the eyes of the law. What Juarez commenced, Porfirio Diaz continued; and the Catholic Church, so far as the law of the land is concerned, remains unacknowledged and unsupported in Mexico.

President Benito Juarez, by his unending warfare against

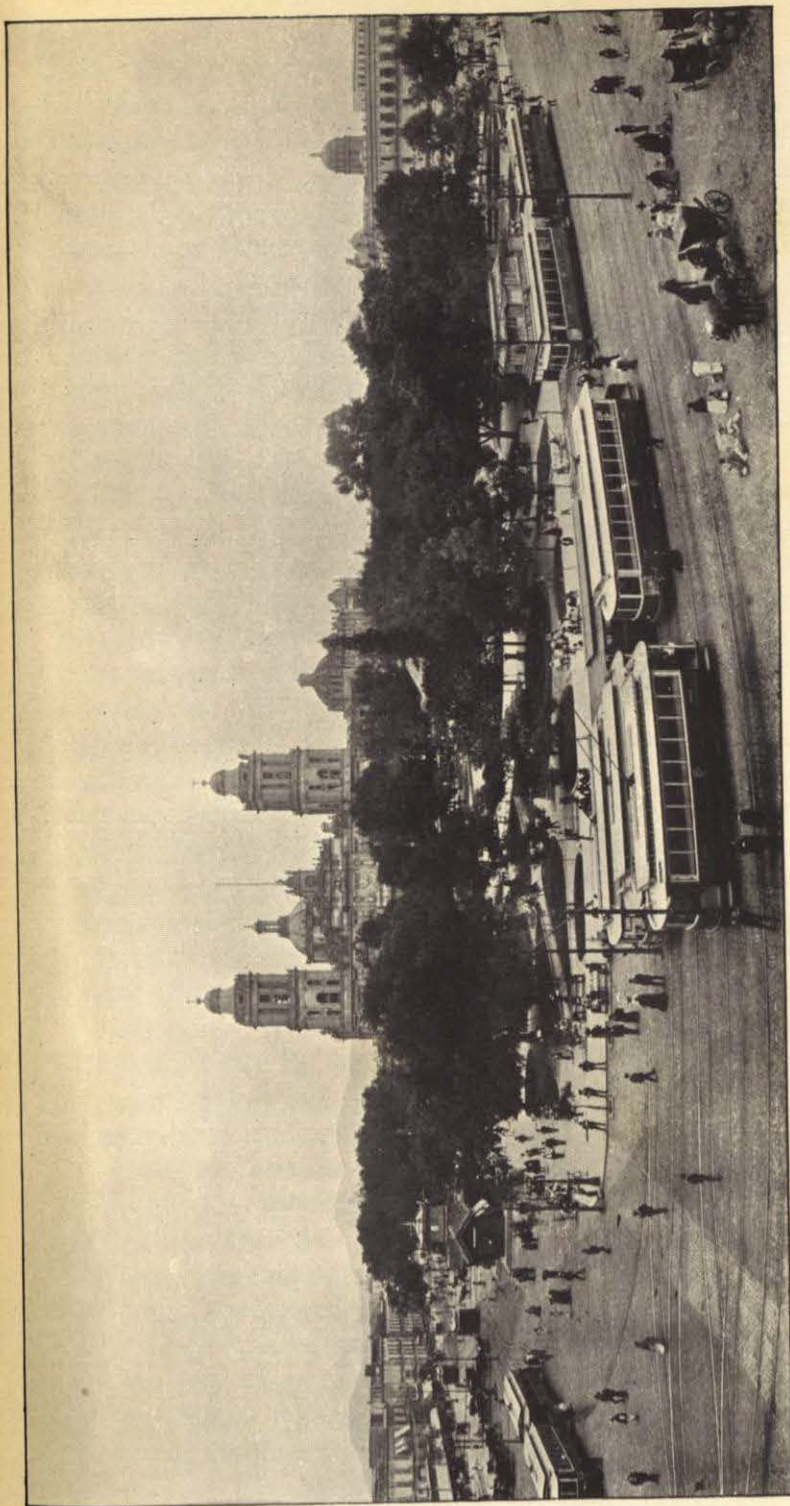


Photo P. S. Cox.

MEXICO CITY.—The Cathedral built on the site of the Teocalli of the Aztecs and the Zocalo.

the Church's pernicious influence, succeeded in completely crushing it in Mexico before he had finished. The covetousness of the religious brotherhoods—the Franciscans, the Dominicans and the Jesuits, who owned nearly all the finest land in the country—brought about their own downfall, and that of the Church. The brotherhoods were banished, the Jesuits being finally expelled in 1856, and all the remaining orders by the end of 1860, the last to go being the Sisters of Charity, in 1874. There is no doubt that the Republic would never have succeeded in advancing to its present condition of progress and prosperity had these doubtless well-meaning but decidedly dangerous orders been allowed to remain.

But the hold which the Church has upon the affections of the common people is in no way shaken, and there are probably more places of religious worship in the Republic of Mexico than in any Roman Catholic country of the world—not excepting either Spain or Italy. One great fact has been here unmistakably demonstrated, that the power of the Church over men's religious thoughts and the morality of their lives can be, as it should be, absolutely independent of and apart from the grasp of political power, which, unfortunately, the Church of Rome has ever striven for, and secured only at the cost of the safety and well-being of millions of human beings and the sacrifice of her own great good name and much of her moral influence.

It is about thirty years since the State and the Church of Mexico were forcibly divorced. Probably the supremacy of the latter over the thinking and intelligent part of the population will never be re-established, but, as I have said, the influence wielded over the minds and actions of the poorer classes of the community remains as strong as ever.

In the year 1904 the Pope sent over a special delegate in the person of Monsignor Serafini, Archbishop of Spoleto, Italy, to see what could be done to renew the old associations between Church and State, and, if possible, re-establish diplomatic relations in Mexico; for the Church of Rome will never admit that its influence is dead, though it may have somewhat waned. There are prelates in Rome to-day—his present Holiness is not, however, among them—who still cherish the belief that England will return to the fold, and the reception

of an English Princess (Ena of Battenberg) into the Church last year certainly lent colour to the idea. Monsignor Serafini was only following in the footsteps of his predecessors, the Archbishop Averardi and Monsignor Ricardo Sanz de Samper; but, like them, he entirely failed in his purpose. Even the bribe of creating a Mexican Cardinal did not prove any attraction, and President Diaz made it clearly understood that under no circumstances or conditions would the Mexican Government again enter into diplomatic relations with the Papal States, or officially recognise any Church dignitary.

The advanced Liberal thought of the country is almost fanatically opposed to the influence of the Church, an objection which has even assumed locally such forms as preventing the ringing of the church bells; while it is strictly against the law all over the Republic for a religious procession to pass through the streets. In March of 1906 a venturesome priest decided to defy the ordinance, and led a religious procession through the town; but he was promptly arrested by order of the Mayor, and taken in full vestments to prison. He was subsequently released, however, by a number of his flock, who returned with him in triumph to his church. But he led no more processions, and the lesson thus roughly administered was taken to heart by other ambitious clerics, who appreciated the fact that the Government would permit no infraction of the law.

For the rest, the position of the Catholic Church in Mexico is not such as its best friends could desire. The most perfect harmony between the various heads does not seem to prevail, and to such an extent had friction extended towards the beginning of 1905, that the Pontiff found it desirable to employ Monsignor Serafini, above mentioned, to put matters straight. Being a man of great charm of manner and strength of character, the Prelate succeeded, at least in part, in restoring harmony among the more truculent of the clergy, some of whom threatened, at one time, to emulate the example of the French bishops, Monsignori Le Nordez and Geay, in connection with which act they were deprived of their sees.

Questions of ecclesiastical policy are continually arising, and are as continuously being referred to the resident Apostolic Delegate to Mexico, Monsignor Rudolfi, who has

jurisdiction over the entire Republic. The Government views such an appointment with indifference. The Delegate is not recognised in either a political or an ecclesiastical character, and thus his power for evil can be absolutely *nil*. On the other hand, it is quite possible to appreciate how beneficial the presence of such a prelate might prove, in the maintenance of order and harmony among the clergy, who certainly require a strong hand to control them, occasionally to uphold the dignity of the venerable Church, and to secure in the eyes of the more devout among the populace the respect and reverence which have ever been the mainstay of the Ancient Faith.

Probably when all is said that can be said on the question of disunion among a certain section of the Catholic priesthood in Mexico, it does not amount to anything of consequence when compared with the continual and bitter warfare prevalent in Great Britain and the United States of America among the priests of the various denominations, who all call themselves "Christians," but decline, as do the Catholics, to recognise any one supreme Head to whom, as the last resource, they would consent to submit.

The Catholic religion was first founded in Mexico in 1517, the year that Yucatán was discovered by the wealthy Cuban merchant Francisco Hernandez de Córdoba. As is not unusual, the arrival of the "religion" was simultaneous with the merciless slaughter of numerous unfortunate natives who, knowing nothing about the "love of Christ," declined to believe in it on the simple word of a Spaniard, and suffered death as a consequence. The amiable de Córdoba celebrated his advent into Mexico as the champion of the Cross by putting to the sword some score of natives—in "the name of God." This "victory" of 110 armed men over a handful of poor, ignorant savages was celebrated by the erection of a chapel to "Our Lady of Succour," and this was probably the first Christian church established in Mexico.

In 1518, the Pope (Leo X.) created the first Bishop, Father Julian Garcés, who had come over from Cuba with the above-mentioned de Córdoba. He was made Bishop of Yucatán. As a matter of fact, however, the new prelate never took possession of this particular see, for the Spaniards themselves

abandoned Yucatán almost as soon as they arrived there, finding more attractive lands in Mexico itself. Some seven years later, Leo's successor (Pope Clement VII.) established a new bishopric, to which he appointed the same cleric (Father Garcés), giving him the title of "Bishop of Puebla, Yucatán, Chiapas and Oaxaca," a sufficiently wide diocese in all conscience, rather like that of the Anglican Bishop of the Falkland Islands of to-day, whose diocese embraces practically the whole of South America.

The first actual Bishop of Mexico, enjoying the title of "Protector of the Indians," was Father Juan de Zumárraga. He arrived in the country in 1528 or 1529, and his first act of "protection" took the form of ruthlessly destroying all the most sacred pictures of the natives, as well as their most ancient writings, so that to this fanatic the world at large is indebted for the loss of what would have proved invaluable evidences of the primitive customs and habits of one of the most interesting races on the face of the earth.

Zumárraga showed so much zeal in reforming the heathen that Rome soon created him a full Archbishop, while still later on (1571) he became Primate of New Spain. For nearly 300 years the Catholic Church in Mexico remained in much the same condition, for it was not until 1863 that the Pope (Pius IX.) divided it into three separate archdioceses—namely the eastern, or that of Mexico; the central, that of Michoacán; and the western, that of Guadalajara. All the Bishops of Mexico, of whom there are some eighteen, are suffragan to these three Archbishops.

The same year which witnessed the ennoblement of the vandal Zumárraga suitably saw the installation of the Holy Inquisition. The first Inquisitor-General was Don Pedro Moya de Contreras, who came from Guatemala with the reputation of being the finest burner of heretics in the employment of the Church! He speedily put his abilities to the test by organising an *auto-da-fé* facing the Church of San Diego in Mexico City, where to-day stands a beautiful public park known as the Alameda. "To the glory of God" some twenty-seven heretics were burned here as a commencement; but no one will ever know how many other unfortunates followed before the Spaniard was bundled out of the country

to make way for a less brutal and more enlightened form of Government. In 1820 the abominable Inquisition was abolished for ever by law; the last public *auto-da-fé* had taken place five years previously, namely on November 26th, 1815.

To-day there are some 8,765 churches and chapels, with over 1,350 vicarages, in Mexico subject to the Roman Catholic control, or, say, a total of 10,115. Their united wealth is probably incalculable, and must aggregate many millions of dollars in value, land, buildings and church ornaments included.

The present head of the Catholic Church in the Republic is Monsignor Próspero Maria Alarcon, Archbishop of Mexico, an exceedingly high-minded, liberal and enlightened cleric, although of humble Indian origin. To him many wise and necessary improvements are due, not the least of which has been the practical abandonment of senseless and often offensive demonstrations during the celebration of Holy Week, when, especially in the country churches, the most outlandish scenes have been witnessed. These have taken the form of charades and caricatures of the Saviour, Judas, Roman soldiers and Jews. For the last five years the Archbishop, by means of a pastoral letter issued annually about three weeks before the celebration of Easter, has forbidden these exhibitions, and counselled his clergy to refuse the offices of the Church to all who disobeyed his injunctions. "For no reason or circumstance whatever," wrote his Grace, "will the curas and vicars or other priests tolerate any representation in the churches or atrios in which there are dancers or imitators of the enemies and executioners of Christ, especially during the hours in which are celebrated the divine offices or other religious exercises, or whenever the faithful practise any act of piety."

Naturally, the wild excesses which are perpetrated in some ultra-religious countries during Holy Week appeal with great force to the ignorant and superstitious peasantry, notably to the Russians, who probably commit more atrocities upon one another during the days consecrated to the commemoration of the passion and death of Jesus Christ than at any other period of their crime-laden lives. The lower-class Mexicans

are not as vicious or as besotted as the Russian peasantry. I don't know any other nationality that is; but it takes very little to inflame their weak minds to acts of excess and violence, so that the timely advice of the Archbishop, issued at each recurring period of the year which is likely to draw out the people's worst qualities, is to be commended.

The attachment to the symbol of the cross is very prevalent among the Mexicans, and in no country of the world, embracing all the Roman Catholic lands of South America, Austria-Hungary, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Belgium, have I noticed so many shrines, crucifixes and holy images as in Mexico. No mine or factory is without its shrine, to which the utmost devotion of the faithful is paid at all hours of the day; while at street-corners and at cross-roads may be found the crucifix in all forms, sizes and materials.

The crucifix was undoubtedly known—but not as a sacred emblem—to the ancient Toltecs and Aztecs, as it was known to the ancient Egyptians and Gauls. The Phœnician ruins of Gigantica are in the form of a cross, while the ancient Druids used the symbol in their religious ceremonies; upon the monuments of Upper and Lower Egypt, thousands of years before Jesus of Nazareth came into the world, it was sculptured; it was known as Thor's hammer before it became Christ's gibbet; in Iceland to this day it is used as a magic sign in connection with the wind storms, and it may be found engraved upon the open palm of Buddha in many an Indian temple and in the famous Elephant Caves near Bombay. The Brahmins carried the crucifix thousands of years ago, while the worshippers of Vishnu believe in its virtues as strongly as do the most pious Catholics. The origin of the cross, while undoubtedly phallic, is common to no particular country or people, for was it not also—the *crux ansata*—the sign of Venus, and did it not appear beside Baal and Astarte?

When the pious Christian niggers of Jamaica were accused of still secretly worshipping Ojo, and of offering up sacrifices to that dread deity of their forefathers, the greatest indignation was expressed at home, and the statement was denounced as a "falsehood and a libel." Nevertheless it was true enough then and is true enough still; and if anyone were sufficiently interested and had the pluck to penetrate into certain little-

frequented fastnesses up in the Blue Mountains of that Island, he would be able to verify it for himself.

At one time it was believed that some of the lesser-known Mexican tribes indulged in living sacrifices at certain periods of the year, offering up lambs, kids, and chickens, but sometimes only flowers. In conversation with those whom I may regard as competent authorities, I failed on any occasion to find any substantiation of this statement. I think it may be taken as accurate that since the days of Moctezuma, when, as we know, the Aztecs offered up human sacrifices upon their altars, and dating from the time of the Spanish Conquest, no living sacrifices have taken place except, perhaps, in very rare instances. The old Mexican religion has had its creed and its cult, its heaven and its pantheon, as well as its temples, altars, and priesthood, its mythology and worship. It is quite certain that any attempt to revive living sacrifices would be sternly repressed by the Government, which, while it absolutely refrains from interfering with religion *qua* religion, could not countenance such proceedings as these. Moreover, it is incontestable that were any such practices in vogue, the Government would have known of them. My opinion is that no such occurrences have taken place for nearly four hundred years, nor are they likely ever to do so again.

The well-known writer Bancroft has devoted no fewer than 500 pages of a volume to the study of the religion of the Pacific Coast tribes; while nearly every monument in Mexico of the olden days—sculptured slab, decorated wall or vase—displays some manifestation of the spirit world, reminding one at every step of the ancient Egyptians and their religious memorials.

The Protestants established their first place of worship in Mexico in 1868, calling it "The Church of Jesus in Mexico." As a matter of fact, as many Roman Catholics as Protestants were found among the first adherents, there being, as I have previously intimated, a good deal of unrest and discontent among a section of the Romanists in Mexico, who manifested their feelings by joining the new church—as they themselves expressed it—"as a spontaneous movement for greater liberty of conscience, a purer worship and a better Church organization."

Apparently there was no lack of money for the new move-

ment, since, not only was a pastor engaged and brought from America (the Rev. Henry C. Riley, of the Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States), but some former Roman Catholic church buildings were acquired at the price of \$50,000 (say £5,000) and "converted"; while nearly \$100,000 (£10,000) was expended upon missions. The first congregations numbered more than 3,000 worshippers, and the movement spread rapidly. Mr. Riley became the first Protestant Bishop of the Valley of Mexico, as he was the last. The American Bishops recognised the *Cuerpo Ecclesiastico*, being composed of the clergy and lay-readers, as the ecclesiastical authority of the Mexican Church. To-day the *Cuerpo Ecclesiastico* has made way for a Synod, composed of the clergy and lay representatives from the different congregations. It has a body of canons as the governing body, and officers for the performance of baptism, confirmation, communion, marriage, burial, and the conduct of morning and evening prayer. There are only about two ordained priests and seven deacons, and no missionaries, since the Mexican Episcopal Church has now abandoned its Mission in this country.

Besides the Episcopal Church in Mexico the Protestants have the Presbyterian Church, a very prosperous and well-supported body, possessing many church buildings, schools (Sunday, day and boarding), missions and communicants.

There is also the Methodist Episcopal Church, which has existed since 1873, with three mission conferences held in Mexico City. There are over 140 congregations, 45 churches, 38 parsonages, 1 theological school, 6 high schools, and over 50 day schools. In the various establishments owned and controlled by the Methodist Episcopal Church there are engaged more than 30 missionaries, 50 native preachers, and 60 teachers. The Church further claims nearly 3,000 regular members, more than 12,000 adherents and probationers, 70 Sunday Schools, with nearly 3,000 scholars, and, in other schools managed by it, an additional 3,300 pupils. The value of its property, parsonage and other buildings may be placed at £140,000.

The Baptists have a strong organisation, or rather two organisations, each working independently of the other, viz.: the American Baptist Home Missionary Society and the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The latest available statistics respecting the work done in Mexico by the Protestant Church show that there are 210 foreign missionaries, of whom 130 are women; 547 native workers of both sexes; 21,000 communicants; 17 adherents, non-communicants; 435 substations, 148 day schools, with 7,075 pupils; 18 higher institutions, with 2,220 pupils; and 4 hospitals and dispensaries.

The Jewish community in Mexico is at present numerically but small. As is usual with this remarkable people, wherever members are to be found, they enjoy the esteem and respect of their neighbours, and live among them in perfect amity and contentment. It is said that a Hebrew never actually loses his identity, no matter among what people he may live—and this is true; for a Jew, while recollecting that patriotism and loyalty to a country under whose flag he abides are of primary importance, is content and proud to remain a Jew and to be known as such.

The number of Hebrews in Mexico are insufficient at present to possess a suitable house of worship; but probably at no distant date a handsome synagogue will be found which will be worthy of the congregation and the city in which they will worship.

The Jewish community, which, though small in itself, is well represented in the commercial and banking classes, faithfully adheres to all the great festivals of the year as they occur—the New Year, the Day of Atonement, the Passover, Tabernacles, Pentecost, and the minor feasts. There is at present no resident Jewish minister here, and the services of such ordained priests as may happen to pass through the city from time to time are eagerly availed of, and are as readily tendered, for the loyalty existing between the various members of the community and their charity to one another is too well known to need emphasis.

The English Protestant Church is in much about the same position as the Jewish, since, up till now, the number of regular attendants at Divine service on Sundays and festivals has not warranted the erection of a suitable Church building, the services at present being conducted in a hall or large assembly-room quite inadequate to their celebration.