

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menendez

The church goes political

On the eve of a meeting of one of the highest church bodies in the land, the Interior Minister has delivered a sharp warning to the priests

For the second time in the current administration of President Jose Lopez Portillo, the Interior Minister—the most powerful member of the cabinet next to the President—has found it necessary to remind the Mexican clergy that the Constitution prohibits them from participating in politics, and will not be changed.

Two years ago it was then-Interior Minister Jesus Reyes Heróles who put a stop to promoters of the idea of a political clergy.

This week it was the current Interior Minister Enrique Olivares Santana. His condemnation, making banner headlines here, invoked Article 130 of the Constitution, which firmly prohibits the Church from taking a political role. "We will always strive to maintain this principle of the Constitution inviolable," he stated. "Priests will not have even the slightest chance of political activity."

His April 14 statements came one day before the beginning of a conference of the Mexican Episcopal Council (CEM), the highest ecclesiastical body in the country. The warning followed a particularly intense week of polemics highlighted by demands of the secretary-general of the CEM, Monsignor Genaro Alamilla, that priests can and should participate in the "social movements" of their countries, and if this is what is meant by political activity, they will do it. Alamilla is closely tied

to the faction of the "red bishop" of Cuernavaca, Sergio Mendez Arceo, who directs Mexico's so-called "Theology of Liberation" movement in conjunction with the Society of Jesus.

Here in Mexico there is no mistaking the powerful overtones set ringing by Alamillo's call. All Mexicans recall the "social movement" called the Cristero Rebellion, the period of bloody uprising in the late 1920s when priests led backward peasants in assaults on the secular, republican progress-oriented institutions of the Mexican Revolution.

What might surprise many is that the theologians of liberation have a Trojan Horse in Mexico: the Mexican Communist Party (PCM). Although the PCM's promotion of a role for clergy in politics is not new—Reyes Heróles was warning against it two years ago—it has recently reached new heights. This is particularly so with the incorporation of people educated by the Society of Jesus, such as Roger Bartra and Enrique Semo, in their national leadership. Strangely, the PCM now shares its demands with the party of the most engrained rightwing tradition in the country, the National Action Party (PAN). PAN secretary general Abel Vicencio Tovar declared April 14 that "priests should not be banned from politics; they in fact have an obligation to participate in politics."

This "dialogue" has gone so far that, in a demonstration protesting the death of Salvadorean Archbishop Romero, the PCM and the clergy marched side by side to the largest and most sacred shrine in the country, the Basilica of Guadalupe. Aghast, the rest of the left termed this a "pilgrimage."

However even more astonishing than finding the communists and the clergy together in the Basilica was finding the Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action in the front lines of the marchers, supporting the PCM's demands for "liberation."

Although this situation might seem merely humorous, what's certain is that the debate coming alive here is not one of faith against atheism, but a purely political issue: the attempt by elements seeking the destabilization of the Mexican government to reproduce an Iran-style "religious fundamentalist" base using any and all "social movements" that are at hand.

It is also, just as in the 1920s, tied into oil. At that time U.S. and British oil interests funded the Khomeini-like, Jesuit-directed, Cristero fanatics in order to force the Mexican government to repeal restrictions on foreign oil control in the country. Now it is the theologians of liberation and the "left Jesuits" in the PCM and other parties who make attacks on the Mexican oil development program and industrialization.

Jesuits Porfirio Miranda and Miguel Concha made little attempt to hide the connections, when they recently traveled to Iran, met personally with Khomeini, and returned bemoaning the "horrors" of modern life, like industrialization.