

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menéndez

Church at a crossroads

A factional fight among Roman Catholics will play a role in determining the course of the critical next six months.

Long-time enemies of Mexico in Anglo-American intelligence circles have set a six-month deadline for fomenting civil war and chaos. The planners are counting on a deteriorating economic situation and a polarization of social forces around the recent banking nationalization to unleash such an apocalyptic scenario.

The Catholic hierarchy, with its vast influence over millions of Mexicans, will play a key role in determining whether Mexico falls victim to these plans. This is the case not only because Mexico is an overwhelmingly Catholic country, but because the Church has largely shaped the heated national debate which broke out after the government's move against the anti-growth private banks Sept. 1.

Shortly after that date, several bishops took to the front pages of the press to either spurn popular hysteria over the government's "socializing" moves or to call for giving the government measures a chance to prove themselves. An intense factional struggle had broken out inside the Church.

Rather than being divided along "left" versus "right" lines, the Church leadership is irreconcilably split between pro-growth forces identified with such papal encyclicals as Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* on the one side, and anti-industrial, feudal-minded circles long associated with the oligarchical banking families.

These latter forces are deeply committed to reversing Mexico's modernization and to a civil war if necessary to accomplish that. In state-

ments for the press Sept. 18, a bishop blasted the Mexican constitution for prohibiting priests from involvement in political agitation and criticized the secular education system established by the same constitution. It was only "in times of great tensions such as the Cristero War, that the voice of the Church was heard," he said.

The message was unmistakable. The Cristero War of the 1920s was the last bloody effort of this country's oligarchic families to destroy the nascent pro-industrial nation-state which had emerged from the 1910 Revolution. Financed by circles around the Espinoza Iglesias and other banking families, bishops and priests around the country rallied backward peasants as cannon fodder in a "holy war" against the government.

The feudal outlook has been backed by Bishop Bello Ruiz from the oligarchy's port of Acapulco, who on Oct. 24 called on workers not to demand salary increases and instead engage in a "national crusade of prayers to ask God to prevent the coming of socialism to Mexico." The bishop of Ciudad Obregón, in Sonora, made similar statements.

This agitation from the pulpit has already found some response. The city of Leon, a Cristero stronghold during the 1920s, has witnessed two "collective prayings" of thousands in the last month. Manipulated peasants and housewives have been drawn to pray the Virgin of Guadalupe "Queen of Mexico and Empress of America" to "save Mexico from communism."

Church sectors represented among

others by the president of the Mexican Episcopal Conference (CEM), Cardinal Ernesto Corripio Ahumada, are instead calling for moderation. In a speech before the CEM Nov. 16, Corripio further stated that the Church "must promote and back all truth and good promoted by the state because wherever there is a little bit of truth and good, the Lord Jesus is there in some way." Above all the Cardinal's messages have stressed the defense of workers' rights as proposed in John Paul II's recent *Laborem Exercens* encyclical.

A September document issued by the "Pastoral Committee" of the CEM went further in blasting the oligarchy's usurious credit policies as the cause for the country's economic crisis. "The exchange controls are necessary in a society lacking solidarity . . . and still underdeveloped," the document said, "the expropriation of private banks in favor of the nation . . . gives the state an instrument to finance priority sectors" of the economy.

The document then identified the anti-Christian evil the Church must fight: "the monetarist theory [of which Milton] Friedman is the main spokesman." A rather pointed remark, since for years Friedman has been the local oligarchy's favorite ideologue.

The document condemns Friedman for advocating reductions in public spending "which generally lead in the short-term to a reduction of economic growth."

Given the strict constitutional separation of Church and State in this country, the Vatican has, as usual, taken a low profile in the factional fight. The Pope's representative Jeronimo Prigione called on Sept. 17 for national reconciliation and moderation. Next February, the Pope will visit Mexico.