



## CLERICAL IDEOLOGY IN A REVOLUTIONARY AGE: THE GUADALAJARA CHURCH AND THE IDEA OF THE MEXICAN NATION (1788-1853)

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# 4

## Towards a Reordered Church

Sermons as Discursive Testimony, 1821–53

### The Clergy Maintains its Presence

From 1810 to 1820 the clerical hierarchy generally rejected Independence, although a vociferous minority of rebel clerics supported it by military actions or in the press. By contrast, after 1821, all the Spanish and Mexican clergy of the country – except for a handful of Spanish ecclesiastics who went home in repudiation of Independence – accepted and supported separation from the metropolis and the political constitution of a new nation.<sup>1</sup>

But our vision of the clergy should not be restricted to their acceptance or rejection of national independence. The constant presence of the clergy in Mexican society at this time demands a richer and more careful treatment. Transformations of society placed pressures on the clergy. They had to respond to these pressures, lest they lose the loyalty and even the attention of the faithful.

Traditionally, the Mexican clergy had been both an arm of state and a state within the state. They had been entrusted with important aspects of the material and spiritual life of the country, a trust which largely endured even considering the noticeable secularization under the Bourbons. Independence did not produce immediate change in this respect. So the tradition of participation in and responsibility for matters of state was not easily pushed aside. Even the danger of a growing liberalism drove the Church to maintain an active political presence. We should also recall



that not only under the Empire of Iturbide but also in the 1824 Constitution, both the state and society of Mexico remained formally tied to the Catholic religion and to the Church. Thus, the clergy's adjustments to the new times were no less important than their explicit political stance, even their stance on such important matters as Independence.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, the fact that the majority of the clergy was born and raised in Mexico, in Mexican families, is of considerable importance, even if it appears insignificant. It is clear that the prosperity and well-being of Mexico could not be alien to the clergy. Neither their economic livelihood nor their family or social ties would support such a stance. Their patriotic feelings and fulfillment of their role as acting enforcers of state decisions could at times even lead them to implement modernizing policies. The Church and its parishes were key agents in the campaign for inoculation against smallpox. When new norms of hygiene dictated moving cemeteries outside city limits, the Church, responsible for cemeteries, carried out the new policy. In these cases, the Church helped execute state decisions on behalf of the populace. Of course, in these cases the political implications of the modernization policies were not particularly radical, yet popular acceptance of inoculation and cemeteries outside town – measures which went against custom and aroused understandable suspicions – depended on the support of the high clergy to a greater degree than our secular minds can easily grasp. The Church's support for reform of the clergy and for the consolidation of regional interests was not a matter of minor importance. The regionalist enthusiasm of the high clergy, in particular, must have reflected more general feelings among local clerics.<sup>3</sup>

More problematic, perhaps, was the fact that the Church was under a statute making its legal regime autonomous from the state. Although this legal autonomy had been trimmed back since the beginning of the Bourbon reforms, it had not yet completely disappeared. On the other hand, royal patronage had always enabled the state to exercise influence over ecclesiastical appointments. Even after the appearance of Bourbon reformism, accommodating state interests does not seem to have been excessively onerous. Nonetheless, it is true that the lack of papal approval of the excessively royalist decisions of the Fourth Provincial Church Council of 1771 in New Spain seemed to indicate that there were definite limits to ecclesiastical flexibility. Farriss indicates that the royalism the Crown insisted upon was



extreme, leading to the noteworthy outcome that neither the Crown nor the Papacy passed the Fourth Council. Besides insisting that royalism became a matter of debate among Spanish clerics, C. C. Noel has stressed that the Hispanic clergy's definite preference was for material or practical renewal (for example, economic or educational), and that the clergy did not identify with intellectual freedom per se as a principle. This is similar to what we see in the Mexican case; the greatest difference is due to the importance of the emergence of regionalism, and later of nationalism, in Mexico.<sup>4</sup>

We must recognize that the Church still enjoyed great power and self-determination. The consecration of new members of the clergy always remained under the direct authority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy itself. In its legal status, including inherited privileges, the Church enjoyed virtual autonomy within the state. This certainly helped the Church survive Bourbon reformism. Perhaps it was unsettled and bothered, but the Church did not lose all flexibility towards the state and towards social pressures. It found itself in a much more serious situation with the arrival of liberalism, because of the latter's principles of individualism and natural rights and its anti-traditionalist and dogmatically anti-corporatist bent. Yet there are strong indications that the other-worldly and ultimately theocratic orientation developed by the clergy in Mexico did not lead to such a dramatic dead end as it did in Spain.<sup>5</sup>

Both Bourbon reformism and liberalism clearly bound man's destiny to his secular future. If reformism questioned the value of important aspects of the Hispano-Mexican past, liberalism exacerbated this tendency. The legal status of the Church was inherited from the same past that was being questioned. Its privileged position was due to the understanding that it would watch over the spiritual goals of society. It is true that its support for the organic unity of society was a basic premise of royal absolutism and even turned out to be useful for moderate liberalism, but there was a difficulty: the setting of precise limits between Church and state could never be done with complete precision. In a time of changes directed by the state, this was undoubtedly a serious problem.<sup>6</sup>

In actual practice, the roles of Church and state overlapped along a necessarily blurry boundary. In addition to the examples already given of Church participation in activities socially important to the state, we should not forget that the clergy even handled the vital statistics of Spain and of Mexico both before and after Independence.



Virtually all of the formal education of the populace took place in Church-affiliated institutions and under the authority of mostly ecclesiastical instructors. The clergy, depending on taxes and other resources provided by the national populace, profitably channeled funds to various economic sectors through property loans. In small towns, where a functionary of the national government rarely if ever came by, some member of the clergy was always a resident, or a regular visitor. He would be the only link to extra-local authorities and the prevailing political culture of the country. On the other hand, if there was debate about some new measure, like cemeteries outside towns, it was not clear whether it was appropriate to appeal to religious principles, or secular principles, or both, to resolve the matter.<sup>7</sup>

In this light, and recognizing the prestige and general acceptance of the Church and its doctrine by the Mexican populace during the Independence period, we should reconsider the overall transformation of the relationship between society and ecclesiastical thought. The key question here is: how did the Church support its rejection of Independence at first, and its acceptance of Independence thereafter? The immediate interests of the Church were certainly decisive in both cases, since Spain was still an absolutist monarchy in 1810, and in 1821 it was a constitutional monarchy under growing liberal influence.<sup>8</sup> What were the discursive changes through which the clergy was able to guide the population to first oppose and later support Independence? The clergy had to speak the language which had the greatest chance of securing the loyalty of the population. In this sense, ecclesiastical thought produced a social and political discourse whose effectiveness could be measured by the results achieved. To exercise effective hegemony over popular loyalties, the clergy could not present its particular viewpoint without interweaving it with other legitimate values of the populace. Only by combining the particular with the general and presenting it as a coherent whole was it possible to orient public opinion on these specific questions. Declaring things anathema, or issuing excommunications, were weapons to be used only when all other means had failed.<sup>9</sup>

Chapters Two and Three have emphasized the ambivalent character of the discourse produced by the high clergy of Guadalajara. The objective of remaining present and viable within politics of progress or modernization was manifest, but the growing tension was no less so. This was produced by the opposition between certain corporatist interests and values the Church defended, and



some of the new social interests that were taking shape. The Church was unable and unwilling to reconcile itself to all the changes taking place in society, yet it accepted a number of them and was itself party to several major changes. It even willingly promoted significant changes. Cautious and circumspect when it was convenient, the high clergy kept a prudent distance from certain changes or their implications, especially when it could not guide them or influence their direction. There was an overall air of tact, diplomacy and flexibility, as well as of a disciplined thinking and behavior, to the actions of the high clergy of Guadalajara.<sup>10</sup>

## The Sermon

If edicts and pastoral letters were a blunt reflection of overall directives at the highest level of the diocese, sermons opened up a more speculative and debatable space. They usually interpreted Church teaching on some point of doctrine or discipline, making more or less direct references, as appropriate, to relevant matters of social life. If the missive from the Bishop was an ecclesiastical ruling that was binding over the flock, the sermon became – without any force of discipline at all – a means of forging a religious framework for everyday affairs.<sup>11</sup> Sermons were the responsibility of individuals of varying ranks and influence within the Church, although the role of some members of the cathedral chapter is very evident, especially before 1820. In any case, it is significant that sermons required a special Church license to be published. Even after 1820, the majority of published sermons – those which must have set the general standards for the genre – came from distinguished members of the cathedral chapter or from other institutions of lofty heritage in the major cities. Even though such documents did not represent the whole of ecclesiastical thinking, it can be said that they laid out a range of opinions of widely recognized prestige at the highest levels of the Church. In general, they can be assumed to have guided the clergy and the flock in keeping with the feelings of the Church hierarchy. Some of the characteristics and even the evolution of clerical thought during this period can be traced by examining such documents, whatever the contradictions between individual orators.

Sermons are extraordinarily useful for tracing the course of this thought after 1821. It is worth stressing that despite the general agreement on Independence from then on, the future of



the country remained to be spelled out in detail. Sermons could suggest ways of perceiving reality, could at times admonish the wayward, and could offer perfect vehicles for praising political figures and behavior worthy of praise in the eyes of the Church. Sermons did not impose obligatory commitments and they did not bear the weight and the implications of a pastoral letter or edict. For those very reasons, they represented an especially flexible discursive tool. The principles of doctrine and discipline underlying the sermon also granted immeasurable authority to the clergy, and established a basis for communication among initiates. In sermons, the establishment of a counter-discourse or a meta-discourse about secular reasoning was implicit when not explicit. While this did not give perfect internal cohesion to ecclesiastical expression, it did give overall unity to the clerical attempt to provide moral and final guidance of secular discourse and events. It is significant that only one sermon published in Guadalajara could be found from the period between late 1825 and early 1831, when Jalisco lacked a bishop.

### A Crucial Discursive Turn

Up until 1820, sermons were produced within a context that still assumed the basic viability of the Ancien Regime. Because that regime was unquestionably undergoing reform, this committed the Church to change. Despite the growing unease of the clergy, the tone of the sermons primarily revealed efforts to moderate the speed and secularizing implications of that change, but not to block it completely. True, their published sermons in 1819 and 1820 show the Mexican clergy faced an increasing dilemma. But if the Church seems to have moved significantly away from its union with the royal state immediately prior to 1821, after this date it found itself once again committed, now to an independent Mexican state. At least part of this change in events would become the subject of debate in sermons. Since the Church's orientation was not pre-set, the speculative and tentative aspects of such proposals grew stronger. The delicacy of the moment was heightened by events such as the initial resistance of Bishop Cabañas, a Peninsular Spaniard, to accept the new regime. Yet the deeper questions between the Church and state were more serious. The tension within the Church resulting from possible contradictions between social change and corporatist needs were a fundamental source of ecclesiastical anxiety.<sup>12</sup>



An exceptional example of this was the sermon José de San Martín delivered in the Guadalajara cathedral on 23 June 1821, when independence was sworn under the protection of the Army of the Three Guarantees.<sup>13</sup> It is worth stressing that the preacher was a long-standing insurgent and not a recent convert to the cause of independence. His sermon is an important document largely due to its own internal contradictions. These contradictions seem to be at least partly intentional; they surely reflect the momentary confusion everyone was experiencing, and perhaps uncertainty among the clergy themselves. The thinking of various social sectors had certainly not yet solidified. The main point of the sermon was an attempt to connect the Independence of Mexico with Saint Peter's admonition to love our brothers, fear God and give honor to the King. The doctrinal point and the political moment had to match. For his part, San Martín saw no difficulties: the Three Guarantees promised religion, union and independence with Ferdinand VII or another member of the royal family. Rather than dwelling on the conquest, San Martín held that the Spanish had no right whatsoever over America because it was absurd that "in the nineteenth century they still claim their rights of conquest and pontifical concessions." Spain was seen as an aggressor nation, which entered into Mexico by means of the unjustified conquest of a peaceful people. Americans only wanted to exercise their legitimate sovereignty, just as Spaniards themselves were then doing in Spain.<sup>14</sup>

By now, the priest was warmed up; he then turned to attack the nature of Spanish domination in terms of laws, principles and rulers. Matters of sovereignty, laws and popular participation were about to receive a radically different treatment than in previous sermons. Embracing the reasoning of Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, San Martín went back to the old argument by disciples of Saint Thomas Aquinas on behalf of the original inhabitants of the Americas. Within an overall framework of incipient popular nationalism, he downplayed the problems of opposing ethnic groups and social hierarchy in the country. He conceived of Americans as a unified people, opposed to the Peninsulars. He admitted that the latter were victims of misgovernment, although Americans had suffered from it as well, and had rebelled against it:

What comparison, what correlation can there be between their oppression and ours? From the beginning of the conquest we have been subject to barbarous laws, laws incongruous to our country,



damaging to our interests, crippling arts and industry, suffocating the production of our lands, and oppressing merit and talents. We have been under orders which expressly prohibited us from knowing the rights of man, which aimed at and attempted to promote ignorance, which have degraded us even from being rational, which have attributed to us every vice, and which have discredited us before all nations. Let us speak fully, with sincerity. Some of our laws have been useful and brilliant, but they have been overshadowed by those enforcing them. Their energy has been tripped up by the greed of some and the pride and haughtiness of others, and their precise observance has been frustrated by the multitude of contradictory rulings which interpreted them. In short, whatever Spain has done to America has had as its sole object the utility and exaltation of Spain, and our ruin and destruction. Can it be fearlessly argued that the social contract dictated by nature itself has not been destroyed? Can it be stated that all the links between a subject and his government have not been broken? Every contract is null and void when the tacitly or expressly stipulated conditions are not met. Every government is formed for the good and the happiness of the people, and therefore when that is missing....<sup>15</sup>

San Martín paused at this point, as if to suggest he realized his rhetorical excess from the pulpit was inappropriate; he apologized, only to attack once more. He immediately insinuated a dramatic parallel: Mexicans and Spaniards were brothers in many things, but the latter had behaved like true enemies. Yet our love for our brothers was demanded not only towards those who were good, but even more rightly towards those who were bad. He declaimed:

Thus let the wall of separation that has ominously been raised by our place of birth, by passions, or by the laws of the age, be knocked down forever. American and European Spaniards: work without ceasing to destroy that infamous massive work; make these be the felicitous days in which the wolf and the lamb, the panther and the goat, the calf, the lion, and the sheep live together under one roof. Let us all work of one accord so that the Spanish Lion not bloody his claws in the breast of the Mexican Eagle, and so that the Eagle not devour the Lion and tear him to pieces with his sharp and strong talons.<sup>16</sup>



So Mexican love for the Spanish under the guarantee of unity came armed with a terrible vision of the Spanish and an explicit threat of violent reprisal if the Spanish did not change their behavior. San Martín dedicated the rest of the sermon to demonstrating how the Three Guarantees fulfilled the other duties specified by Saint Peter – protection of religion and loyalty to the King – and he made no further use of the intentional ambiguity just described.

For this cleric, we should stress, the guarantee of religion was of particular importance. This was much more crucial than loyalty to the Spanish Crown. Loyalty to the King was simply achieved by offering the Spanish King the Mexican throne should he choose to move here. There was no need to go further; time would decide the exact result. Religion, however, could not be treated in the same way. San Martín set the defense of religion in Mexico against the opposing liberal tendencies in Spain. He even went so far as to state that “the war for our Independence is a war of religion.”<sup>17</sup>

In the same year, another cleric would go even further than San Martín by joining freedom for Mexicans to the consecration of Independence. He referred to Iturbide as “a new Moses” who freed Mexico from slavery and led it “towards the beautiful and fertile land of Canaan.”<sup>18</sup> The enslavement of Mexico under colonial rule had been general, he said, but religious oppression by Spanish liberalism had been the spark that aroused the Mexican people:

O Holy Independence! Without you, efforts to achieve the spreading of the Gospel were vain; possessing you, they are and will be the easiest and simplest thing. Possessing you, we will keep the apostolic colleges, whose principal institute is dedicated to spreading the Gospel, and without you, they would have succumbed to tyranny. Possessing you, the ministers of the Church will be respected, their character will be venerated, and their rights will be defended; without you, we would have been stepped upon, imprisoned and even condemned to a shameful begging due to whatever calumny was imputed to us. Because of you, customs will be reformed, and without you they would be even more corrupted by the many libertines who, frankly came from the Peninsula in these last days truly filled with the spirit of impiety. Because of you, our faith will be kept pure, and without you, it is open to being lost because of the



many unfitting writings that come from that country of darkness, and circulate everywhere causing irreparable harm to souls. Finally, possessing you, we will remain united to the Vicar of Jesus Christ, we will respect his determinations, we will obey his counsels, *since our marker is piety and religion, which will give us the glorious name of the Most Catholic Mexican Empire.*<sup>19</sup>

Guided by leaders moved by God and the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico – in the vision of this cleric – was on the verge of becoming the new people definitively chosen by God. The role of the Church in this new Mexico, triumphant and liberated, was clear. The Church would be the soul of independent Mexico.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, Independence under Iturbide offered the country the possibility of closing the breach the civil war had opened in 1810. Guerrero joined Iturbide; the insurgent mestizo of humble origin joined the royalist Creole accustomed to luxury. Both were united in their Catholicism. Both recognized the many problems that Spanish rule had caused the country, though this did not bring their opinions into agreement on a deeper level.<sup>21</sup> In 1821 and 1822 the Mexican Church tried to achieve the impossible and to bring the critical vision of colonial rule, developed first by Bourbon reformers and later by insurgents and constitutionalists, into line with a theocratic vision of national destiny. It is certainly true that flashes of a sacralizing approach towards Mexican reality had appeared since the beginning of the century,<sup>22</sup> but we have to recognize that this posture's open approach to social criticism in 1821 and 1822 represented a mighty step in national development.

This move in clerical discourse aimed to heal the aftermath of civil war between Mexicans, a war carried out in physical combat and discursive struggle. Another sermon said:

No longer are there dissenters or faithful [to the King]; there are no patriots or rebels; party distinctions no longer exist; even the names of insurgents and royalists are forgotten; each are children of the same fatherland, born and destined to form a single family; and the three guarantees, *that heavenly invention, is the great secret* [behind this].<sup>23</sup>

The Church's discursive ability to invoke a consensus view of history should not be underestimated. Suddenly, Independence could be treated not as a subversive act but as a goal always longed for and finally needed. The author of this sermon went on to say:



It is not easy to give in a few words a full detailing of the setbacks and disgraces which, over the course of eleven years, alternated with the fleeting success that our longed-for Independence achieved from time to time. But I cannot omit the noteworthy circumstance that when we least expected to shake off the yoke which tied us to the train of despotism, just then God wished to visit us in his mercy, like he did with the Israelites, raising up from among us strong and clear-minded caudillos who freed us from the oppressive hands that had reduced us to devastation and extermination....

In this way, O great God!, you wished to force us, so to speak, to recognize the true source from whence the freedom we looked for was to come. You opened our eyes to the insufficiency of our own strength to achieve a good which seemed to mock our fervent longing, retreating from us all the more as we ran to reach it.<sup>24</sup>

In this synthetic vision, the ups and downs of the movement for Mexican Independence had been the product of divine plans for Mexicans. When the Treaties of Córdoba were rejected shortly afterwards, sharpening the country's deep internal divisions, another sermon would reinforce Mexicans' duties towards this providential God:

Is this the great Mexican nation that proclaims itself religious? Is this the famous city proud of its perfect beauty, its adherence to the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman faith? Are these the illustrious sons of Zion, dressed in finest gold, who boast of dwelling in the courts of Catholicism? Then where is the concord that should rule over them, as their religion declares? Where is the love for each other so called for by the one they say is the God and Savior?<sup>25</sup>

Christian charity had to be the mortar that united the populace; otherwise, there was nothing distinctive or glorious about the independent nation. So the cleric declared.

With some differences of opinion, another sermon a year before had claimed that Mexico had justly suffered from three centuries of colonial rule.<sup>26</sup> This situation had been appropriate punishment for the human sacrifices earlier practiced by Americans. Yet the author of the sermon allowed himself to support Independence under Iturbide because it preserved nobility and the rights of the corporatist bodies (including the Church) and maintained the unity of the Throne and Altar. In this context full of contradictions and demanding some clarifications, the Church took active



part in the consummation of Mexican independence. In fact, it attempted to forge what another clerical speaker in 1821 had called the unity of "religion and the fatherland," a proper successor to what had been the ancient union of Throne and Altar.<sup>27</sup> And the efforts of the Church, while undoubtedly more comfortable with a Bourbon or an Iturbide, would prove capable of outlasting them easily.

### The Theocratic Option

It is interesting that at this moment an integral idea of independence prevailed. This can be seen as a transcendent and holistic idea, not subject to partial interpretations. That is, one was in favor of Independence, or not. Whatever had been said of Hidalgo in the past no longer mattered. For those in favor of Independence, he was a historical predecessor; there was no attempt yet to deny him that honor.<sup>28</sup> With the elevation of Hidalgo to the level of a pioneer of Independence, there was a need to give a new importance to the anti-colonial complaints that had inspired him. This could be done invoking two different facts: on the one hand, Ferdinand VII – the legitimate monarch – was no longer the undisputed ruler of the Peninsula in 1821, and on the other, Independence separated Mexicans from Spaniards, but not from the monarch per se. Spaniards could therefore be thought of as a conquering people turned libertine and anti-religious. Mexico had turned its back on that disoriented people, to offer the Crown to Ferdinand all the same. In this way, the notion of (royal) legitimacy was saved, along with the hierarchical meaning of existence it embodied. To the conquest seen as divine punishment, a new idea was counterposed, that of Mexico as a new Israel. It was a chosen people; having purified itself by means of the true religion, it was now ready to become its fortress, and to carry its banner. Independent Mexico would thus be a Holy Mexico with a divine mission in the world. For some, the Virgin of Guadalupe clearly symbolized this mission, because she had acted as intercessor in the redemption of the Mexican people.

As already suggested, the coherence of ecclesiastical discourse throughout the period under study is not to be found in its adherence to one political formula or another. In the ecclesi-



astical vision documented in the sources, any political formula was subject to otherworldly goals whose fulfillment must be governed by the values promoted by the Church. Any given political formula was evaluated in terms of its service to this ideal. Thus, neither Independence nor continued ties with Spain could be an end in itself, but only a means towards more transcendent ends. Once Independence had shaken its complacency, the Church offered a theocratic response, in keeping with its earlier concerns about the important changes taking place for decades in Hispano-Mexican society. In addition, an insistence on guiding society towards transcendental goals was the best guarantee of its other corporate interests. From this perspective, all the Church had in terms of goods and privileges was in the service of undeniably valuable goals.<sup>29</sup>

Since the Enlightenment, there had emerged a growing tendency to convert the political life of man in itself into something transcendent and close to a self-fulfilling goal. Clearly, the Church had not participated significantly in this shift in political ideas; that is why a bitter polemic about the fundamental values of man arose during the troubled period from 1810 to 1821. For some, Independence should have been at the epicenter of the determination of appropriate values for the Mexican people. For others, especially the Church, no political question could be more than a means to carry out an essentially extra-political and other-worldly task.<sup>30</sup> As long as the Independence of Mexico was interpreted as an end in itself, as long as its drive and consolidation came out of popular revolt and ignored the explicit accords between the ecclesiastical body and the new state, the Church opposed it. Only after baptizing Mexican Independence and assigning it a transcendent spiritual end and meaning, thereby re-establishing a clear hierarchical meaning for the whole process, only then – driven by its repudiation of Spanish liberalism – did the Church identify itself with Independence, giving it massive support and the full force of its capacity for legitimization. In so doing, the Church regained its role as the social guide and midwife of national transformation, a role emerging liberalism fundamentally questioned. Despite this, as the sermons indicate, the Church was able to open significant dialogue with social and political criticism.



## The Church, Constitutionality and Dissent

It should be clear that the larger context of this clerical creativity underwent far more shifts than a simple change from before Independence to after Independence might suggest. Following Independence, this complexity grows even greater. After the brief reconciliation under Iturbide (unity, religion, independence), there followed the fiscally sound and politically even-handed republic of Guadalupe Victoria. Yet politics degenerated into open conflict and growing instability in the years afterwards. The role of the Church in Mexican society, as assured in the Plan de Iguala and secured in the 1824 Constitution, began to be publicly questioned. At the same time, the political struggle unleashed would call into question not only that aspect of the status quo, but a wide range of additional matters.<sup>31</sup>

It should be stressed that the things combated often enjoyed the protection of the Constitution. This gave those elements under attack the character of legal validity, which was the basis of the Church's identification with the state. The brief rupture of the alliance between the two in 1833/1834 would be counteracted by an even stronger reaffirmation of it from 1835 on.<sup>32</sup> In fact, this alliance only declined again after the war with the United States, in connection with the rise of the liberal project of rapid colonization and its insistence on religious tolerance as a promotional measure.<sup>33</sup> In this way, up until the Reforma – although with ups and downs – the implicit or explicit basis of clerical discourse was its identification with the constitutional order, and this was the legal side of its struggle to forge an overall alternative for Mexican historical life. The polemic definition of the nation, therefore, required it to take on both eminently abstract matters and their practical and legal consequences. Protecting the corporatist interests of the clergy could be seen as the unavoidable condition for being able to carry out in practice what was proposed in theory.

A central question was who could debate the matter. In this period, the Mexican Church moved along two very different levels. Proclaiming that it alone was able to opine on matters of faith, it only opened up to dialogue on secular issues. It challenged each secular resolution to fulfill a religious role, but reserved for itself the exclusive right to legitimately evaluate how well it did so. In this way, a good portion of its polemical intervention in social discourse revolved around its own extraordinary role within the social body.<sup>34</sup>



The Church allowed itself to attack others, openly or subtly, while denying them an equivalent moral status in responding. This was done by constantly referring to ideas of eternity, which outweighed Earthly worries and relegated them to secondary importance. From this standpoint, absolute values were not defined by Earthly matters but by eternal and spiritual affairs, which only the Church could legitimately speak of or debate. In this respect, it is significant that throughout the period before the Reforma, the Church attempted to repair public perception of its moral decay. Sermons emphasized its embodiment of the values of generosity, unselfish knowledge, social charity, political loyalty, sacrifice and self-denial. Even more strongly than in earlier years, the virtues of religious life were proclaimed, along with its exemplary quality for all Christians, and the shoddiness and cheapness of contrary values. It was insinuated, or openly and simply declared, that Christian values were the fulfillment and consummation of the natural values of social man. Thus, the importance of civil life was confined to its adaptation to a providential plan. Civil life was subject to a set of concerns which were not so much alien as superior to it, and about which lay persons were not expected to speak authoritatively. The weakening and later abolition of the Inquisition, like the transition first to a constitutional monarchy and then to a republic, increased the Church's need to be assertive in all social debates. Before, the superiority of the Church's voice had been assumed; now, the Church had to persuade public opinion that it was the mandatory starting point.<sup>35</sup>

As long as the Church could seize a privileged position in public debate, it did not have to take on a vulgar role in polemics. On the contrary, it could resort to its pre-Independence role as the arbiter of social disputes. In this way, practice could confirm the theoretical assertion that the Church only watched over society to assure the fulfillment of the best natural values of man in pursuit of the kingdom of God, which only the Church could legitimately represent on Earth. A fundamental aspect of the Church's participation in debate was that it denied it was participating in and claimed it was above polemics, guiding society towards ends beyond those of social man.

By postulating its superiority over social discourse, the Church gained extraordinary flexibility for discursive interventions in the debates of the time. No longer as a mere participant, but as a supreme judge, it could in fact sanction or censure – as it saw fit – every tendency emerging in the life of the young nation. Thus



it reaffirmed the duality of civil life which ultimately went back, not only to the situation under the Catholic monarchy, but even further, to the days when the Church consecrated the Empire of Constantine. Scarred by the long series of material wounds and ideological blows it had received since the days of Charles III, the Church set out, when it took part in Mexican Independence, to renounce its confidence in the political powers, without ignoring the need and possibility of allying with them.<sup>36</sup>

### The Foundations of Heavenly Life after Independence

In this context, it is not so strange that in 1820 a cleric should affirm that faith had to be placed at the center of all human life and that the Church's teaching were the underpinnings of social existence, reason itself, and man's happiness.<sup>37</sup> Monarchies were no guarantee of human well-being.<sup>38</sup> Religion, in fact, supported political power and was in no way dependent on it. Rather it lent vitality and durability to temporal authority.<sup>39</sup>

In 1821, as already seen, the Church made important efforts to bring critical perspectives on colonial rule into line with its theocratic vision of national destiny. If one sermon from this time spoke of the Spanish "yoke" or the "train of despotism," another held forth on "Holy Independence."<sup>40</sup> In the years following, efforts to consecrate Mexican Independence and set out the exact path for its transcendence did not diminish. The clergy attacked hedonism and an excessively worldly vision of the life of man. This exposed society to "the tyranny of a world which can only produce unhappiness."<sup>41</sup>

O worldly ones! Do you wish to live happily on Earth? Piety is useful in all things, an innocent heart is the source of true pleasure: look all around, and you will find there is no peace for the impious. Enjoy every pleasure, and you will see that they cannot cure that source of sadness that stays with you everywhere.<sup>42</sup>

The search for virtue was natural to man, "but in nothing else is he more open to error, due to the illusion of his passions and the vices of our societies."<sup>43</sup>

The lovely theories the philosophers have left us, and the brilliant descriptions their blazing works have transmitted, make virtue



lovable in all situations, and the strange beauty of this respectable matron, tears veneration and respect from the most corrupted heart without any violence. But what worship is she rendered in practice? What effects do such beautiful ideas produce in the moral order?<sup>44</sup>

Human pride should shrink before this dilemma. While human sciences were impressive, they could not resolve man's situation in its deepest sense:

[They are] a praiseworthy endeavor and worthy of eternal recognition as long as their advances remain within the narrow limits of human reason, as long as they do not hope to probe with their weak light the deepest depths of divinity, and as long as they know their own incapacity and their nothingness in starting to decipher the adorable secrets of grace.<sup>45</sup>

There still were efforts to reconcile the Enlightenment legacy with new directions. This last sermon, the funeral oration following the death of Bishop Cabañas, pronounced six months later on May 20, 1825, was an indication of the new feeling of the Church on this point. In this case reconciliation, insofar as it was possible, was to be found in the terms chosen to exalt the life and works of the late priest. Of course, he had headed up the Church during its difficult discovery of the social questions which weakened its loyalty to reformism. Cabañas, according to the sermon, was "a man decorated with both an ancient and new virtue, who has been able to join the politics of our days to the good faith of our fathers." He had happened to live in an era in which some reduced virtue "to their pleasure" and others ignored "every obligation that did not come from utility or delight." Facing such a situation, he had not only freed himself from such "foolishness," but also managed to cultivate a "true virtue ... without fanaticism or impiety." He "foresaw the fatal pitfalls of ... audacious and malicious criticism on religious matters ... which begins by censuring acts of piety, advances to reform discipline, and ends up attacking doctrine." Dedicated to the useful and the solid, he devoted himself to "serious studies."<sup>46</sup>

Before becoming bishop of Guadalajara, Cabañas had already demonstrated a felicitous ability to "skillfully join the sciences of time and eternity." Since being promoted to the rank of bishop in Spain, he had been obliged to struggle against the forces of the French Revolution, "in which the shadowy spirit of discord easily



confused rights with passions, duties with interests, good causes with bad." Yet the moral strength of the Bishop did not embitter or distance him from society, because "benign, gracious, generous," he lived "apart from society without scorning it." He had the vision to support moral and intellectual reform of the Church, letting himself be guided by "the ideas and good taste of the age we live in."<sup>47</sup>

But not everything was resolved by counterposing and balancing the heavenly and the worldly. If the Bishop had turned out to be, in the preacher's words, the personification of generosity in giving all his wealth to the church and the poor, not all of society acted according to such praiseworthy principles. The priest lashed out at the rich in words recalling others spoken by the late Bishop in 1810:

You, who are overwhelmed by the pleasures of this world, gather up treasures and cares with each step so that riches rule you and fill you with bitterness, you who voluntarily let your disgraceful heart be imprisoned by the formidable chains of infamous avarice....<sup>48</sup>

The rich should follow the prelate's example to uproot unemployment, help the sick, and promote education and the economy.<sup>49</sup>

However, this call for altruistic motives in social action should not be taken as symptomatic of an excessive rigidity in the thinking of this cleric. He was immediately able to stress that, despite criticism against him, Cabañas had only vacillated about Independence while he convinced himself of "the general vote of the nation." As soon as he had grasped "the general will," he came over to the side of Independence. The preacher went on to state that the late Bishop, "always submissive and obedient of the laws, and *enclosed in the sphere of his pastoral ministry*, never wished to mix himself in political events, but always correctly obeyed constituted authorities." However incongruous this may have sounded, as well as elusive in terms of political actions, it allowed the speaker to suggest that the good Bishop had "been able to act with prudence and singular judgment in our political transitions." This would be an even more valuable skill now that the Empire of Iturbide had given way to the first Mexican federation.<sup>50</sup>

With this sermon, the high clergy of Guadalajara closed one cycle, and opened another. The ups and downs of the time had not eliminated its desire to reconcile the old and the new, and to be a participant and a guide in the new order. The double process



of closing and opening cycles took place with symbolic justice at the death of the bishop who had lived through the deepest crisis of ideological reformulation at a regional level. From an allegiance to modernization at first sketched out in confident and simple brushstrokes, the passage of time had demanded an ideological discourse of finer strokes, uncertain and tentative.

After 1810, the vacillations, growing internal complexity, and partial spread to lower-ranking individuals of clerical discourse showed how the high clergy were drawing closer to new social conditions. Their thoughts reflected both the internal course of modernization and a more conscious understanding of their place within a reordered society. Little could be assumed in this new setting, and down the road everything tended to become subject to arrogant questioning based on logic as audacious as the emerging groups themselves. Driven by self-interest, these groups wanted to make that interest the political basis of the new order.

Without the leadership of a bishop between 1825 and 1831, the Church would pass through an extremely agitated period. The Church in these years was marked by its self-defense and its debates with the forces that wished to confine it to a limited role in the social and political life of the country; the acceptance of popular sovereignty and greater freedom of the press were the greatest pitfalls. For several years, this new discursive cycle brought to the fore pamphlets rather different from the sermons. In the next three chapters, we will examine the even more difficult times this orientation meant for the Church. Yet as far as sermons go, new examples of clerical discourse are found only after 1829; by that point, the upper ranks of the Church were well on their way to recovery, joining their acceptance of the republic and popular sovereignty to an active defense of their own interests and vision.<sup>51</sup> In that year, there were opportunities to speak against the "intoxication of pride" and to recall "that the essence of kingship does not consist of commanding men, but of obeying God."<sup>52</sup> There were clarifications that the Christian God is a "King who is judge and arbiter of Kings."<sup>53</sup> The outlook was sad because man found himself in

a world where all flesh has corrupted its path, where there are very few who do not bear the mark of crime on their brow, where the praise of pleasure rings out, where candor is seen as stupidity, truth as imprudence, piety as superstition, and where there is hardly a single just man who sees the world as if he did not live in it.<sup>54</sup>



The 1820s came to a close not only with the fall of the government of Vicente Guerrero, but also with a reappearance of clerical pessimism about the human condition.<sup>55</sup> During the 1830s, the weariness of the high clergy with Mexican public life undoubtedly deepened. Sermons took on a melodramatic tone. Faced with a situation of open setbacks for the Church, more than one cleric would come down from the abstract heights to set out clearly the specifics of public life.

The celebrations of the appointment of a new bishop for Guadalajara in 1831 were an occasion to rejoice in the salvation of the Church of Jalisco from “the infernal wolves who wished to devour her.”<sup>56</sup> There was continual fear of “the explosion of a bomb being prepared against the Altar.”

Frightening shadows that hide the infamous projects of the patricidal [Masonic] lodges! Reveal unto us, yes, tell us what things are being considered against holy rents, against religious establishments, against worship, in a word, against the Church of Jesus Christ!<sup>57</sup>

The situation was already quite serious, and difficult to explain. The unity between Church and nation, between religion and the state, was endangered. Perhaps

Our Lord wishes to test our patience, to humble us, and to purify us through tribulations in order to console us later, and make us understand that we have a bishop, not by men, nor by human means, but by means of his beloved majesty.<sup>58</sup>

In 1833, the death of the recently appointed Bishop Gordoá offered the opportunity for a more measured – but no less forceful – affirmation of the viable relation between religion and society:

I know well that patriotic love is a virtue we are all obliged to cultivate; I know that obligation comes from the very nature of things, that natural law does not contradict religion, and that our Divine Savior did not come to destroy the social virtues, but to perfect them.<sup>59</sup>

Yet religion should rule over things of this world. Only it was stable and lasting, as well as absolutely transcendent of human life. “Columns crumble, triumphal arches fall down, laurels



come undone, and medals wear away,” and therefore “only virtue has the power to glorify the dead.”<sup>60</sup>

The union between the Church and state remained shaky. Another clerical speaker proclaimed in 1834, after the fall of the liberal government of Valentín Gómez Farías:

O nineteenth century! How I would like to banish from my memory your terribly baneful sorrows! America, gentlemen, America was resentful, and rightly so, of the usurpation of her rights, rights given her by nature and left intact by Holy Religion, and also convinced that nature itself now makes her able to govern herself, that the elements nature’s beneficial hand provides grant her the first place among cultured nations, and that those very elements promise her an easy and certain success in her endeavor. [Thus] she gave in to the vehemence of her patriotic love, planned to break the ties that bound her to Spain, gave a strong shove to break in a single blow the reinforced base of the chain which linked these two hemispheres, resolved at last to be free, and on the memorable day of the sixteenth of September of one thousand eight hundred and ten gave the glorious cry of independence whose echo rang from pole to pole.

Who could have conceived that liberty, the heavenly gift with which the Divine Maker ennobles man, and which religion itself protects, would serve as a pretext for destroying it?<sup>61</sup>

He could only conclude that in Mexico, an “impious and oppressive government lacking feelings of humanity” had fallen, whose greatest sin was a “crime against divine majesty.”<sup>62</sup>

If there was still anyone who did not wish to heed the Church, that was not because they had any doubts about its position. The voice of another cleric cried out in 1836:

Unfortunately, there exists among us an insolent and extremely perverse sect which has constantly declared war on the honor, fortune, rest and tranquility of citizens, on the peace and unity of families, on the success and greatness of the fatherland, on the freedoms and rights of the Church ... a sect which has professed every religious, political and moral error and ... would even dare to climb to the august throne of God on High ... you understand, gentlemen, that I speak of the sect gathered under the banner of York, the fruitful origin of all the disgrace and calamity suffered by the fatherland.<sup>63</sup>



This sect had dug a grave to bury the magnificent unity of the independent nation first founded by Iturbide. "Can the patriot observe the miserable state of the republic without horror?" Agitation and anxiety had culminated in "the final effort of the demagogues," only held back because (right) "opinion always triumphs and moral force is irresistible." But even this salvation was not enough to eliminate the sense of a world "always inconstant, always false and deceptive in its hopes, always in continuous agitation."<sup>64</sup> The true problem was clarified the next year, however, when a cleric pointed to "so many faithless and cowardly souls, who by seeking not God, but themselves" had become "hardened spirits" insensitive to the Church's guidance on Earthly life.<sup>65</sup>

During the 1830s, clerical discourse had passed into a new phase. The meta-historical, Providence-centered, and very general vision of the Independence years had given way to a difficult new period of adjustment to the implications of popular sovereignty. Now, in the midst of growing worry about the effective advance of the positions of its opponents, the Church produced a new and more specific reading from within Mexican historical life. The political arrangement chosen for the exercise of popular sovereignty should allow the practical application of the high virtues the providential interpretation had proposed for the nation. Since they had not been complied with, and had even been openly attacked in order to propose other ideals for building the nation, the Church had to discursively counterattack in order to firm up the efforts of the fatherland and set its own precise outline. Popular sovereignty should not allow a radicalized minority to set the destiny of Mexico. Facing such a clique, the Church felt itself to be a better interpreter and reflection of Mexican popular opinion. It would invoke its constitutional freedom to defend its interests, and also to make use of its voice as authentic guide of the free and sovereign Mexican people.<sup>66</sup>

This new phase would not change greatly during the period ending in 1853/1854 with the return and then the fall of General Santa Anna. Its characteristic features became still clearer. The Church confirmed and deepened its struggle against passion and violence, its search for peace, tranquility and social harmony by means of pious values. In the aftermath of the war with the United States, the Church would reaffirm the role of the priesthood in the social life of the nation, and fight desperately for the



abandonment of utopian ideals which assumed that social man was sufficient unto himself without recourse to religion. The ill the nation was lamenting, its defeat and humiliation, were due to its straying from the path of the Virgin of Guadalupe set out since Independence. If this path did promise Mexico a role as the New Israel, it also demanded – under pain of chastisement – that Mexico fully comply with this divine covenant.<sup>67</sup>

When all seemed lost, when the errors of this age ruled over the government and the highest levels of society, when the United States had wrested from Mexico more than half of the national territory, when all pride and all hope were shattered, only then would providence deign to give Mexico a new opportunity, one which demanded that the nation return to the proper path. Every social force – even the most traditional – should assume its responsibility, rectify its errors and “wanderings” with dignity, and serve the fatherland with unselfishness and loyalty. The 1850s had arrived and Mexico would have to be reformed along an authentically Catholic path, recalling its lofty mission as a chosen people. One document from 1850 denounced the “impetuous overflow of corruption and impiety which rots modern societies.” It called on “the banner raised by Catholicism” and declared that “Guadalajara justly demands the glory of being at the vanguard of this truly renewing movement, in which the lovers of order and the happiness of the fatherland have placed their hopes.”<sup>68</sup> On the death of Bishop Aranda in 1853, another speaker would expound:

O, if we could only erase from the pages of our history the disgraceful events of 1847, as shameful for the republic as they were disastrous for the Mexican Church, when the temples of other dioceses were robbed of their most precious jewels, the goods of convents and monasteries were taken away, part of Church lands were auctioned off to infamous usurers, to end it all with the sale of more than half of the republic! My God!<sup>69</sup>

The problem demanded a solution. Perhaps we should mention that the man the Church supported to politically define and carry out this mission, the man allegedly chosen by the same destiny which guided human affairs, was none other than Antonio López de Santa Anna. This would be the caudillo's last government before the liberal insurgency defeated him with the Plan de Ayutla.



An 1853 sermon celebrating the new presidency of the Mexican general spelled out a feeling then dominant throughout the Church in Guadalajara, and perhaps across the entire country:

I will speak first as a Mexican, then as a Catholic. As a Mexican I will say that the nation in its deep unease instinctively sought someone to lend a hand to raise it from its baneful collapse. And what did the nation ask for, what did it need? Three things, gentlemen, and nothing more: three things. First: someone to assure its nationality. Second: someone to preserve its worship and religion. Third: someone to organize it internally as a great and strong power. And are not all these pressing and just requirements satisfied with the wise choice the majority of the country has just made?<sup>70</sup>

When the preacher spoke as a Catholic, he said simply that

God made this change ... but he has placed on us the same conditions as on the children of Israel. If we observe the holy law of God, if we walk with the Lord in spirit and in truth, if we are faithful to his testament, we will reach the happiness born of the harmony and agreement of the magistrate with God, of the people with the law, and of the law with principles of eternal justice.”<sup>71</sup>

For this a profound reform in customs and public morality was required. The Guadalajara clergy did not dodge this commitment:

And since we should all contribute to the good of the nation, with our own oblation, we priests will begin the work, building up the people, weeping for their miseries and our own failures, between the vestibule and the altar, and showing the world with our own testimony and conduct, that we are angels of consolation, angels of peace. And in turn, the judges: administer justice rightly, without forgetting what the apostle has said – you were not given the sword in vain. And the soldier: abuse no one with your power, defame no one, live as the holy Baptist wishes and counsels, “happy with his wages and pay.” And all the other classes of society: live honestly and in perfect obedience to God, because he is God, and to Caesar, because God commands it. This conduct is so Christian and so highly worthy, that we will be rewarded with eternal happiness. Amen.<sup>72</sup>