



PROJECT MUSE®

Student Politics, National Politics: Mexico's National
Student Union, 1926-1943

David Espinosa

The Americas, Volume 62, Number 4, April 2006, pp. 533-562 (Article)

Published by Cambridge University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tam.2006.0064>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/197207>

STUDENT POLITICS, NATIONAL POLITICS: MEXICO'S NATIONAL STUDENT UNION, 1926-1943

INTRODUCTION

In 1926 students enrolled in Mexico City's exclusive Catholic preparatory schools faced a crisis that threatened to ruin their academic careers. They were in a serious quandary because officials at the government-supported National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) were placing what were viewed as unfair obstacles to their plans of matriculating into the university, thereby threatening the aspirations that these students and their parents had for their futures. Their predicament was directly related to the deteriorating political climate that would soon produce the religious civil war known as the Cristero Rebellion of 1926-1929. These students were being victimized by pro-government UNAM officials because of their Catholic Church affiliation; this at a time that the Church was locked in a bitter struggle with President Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928). The heart of the conflict was Calles's steadfast determination to enforce the anticlerical provisions contained in the Constitution of 1917. This landmark document encapsulated many of the central demands of the men and women who, like President Calles, had fought in the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920). Calles was a dedicated anticlerical who believed that the nation's social, political, economic, and educational development required a dramatic reduction in the Roman Catholic Church's influence within Mexican society.

By mid 1926 these affected students had organized themselves into a city-wide student group, the Union of Private School Students, with the goal of defending themselves from what they perceived to be the arbitrary, ideologically driven actions of university officials. However, the evolution of this nascent student organization changed dramatically when its activities drew the attention and interest of the country's most important Catholic official, the Archbishop of Mexico José Mora y del Río. This cleric saw the potential benefits of transforming this group into a dedicated Catholic student

organization that catered to the needs of young men who, thanks to their education and social standing, would in the future exercise a critical role in Mexican society. Archbishop Mora y del Río set in motion the process that transformed this unofficial, informal group into an ecclesiastically recognized student organization tasked with the responsibility of imparting to its members a thorough understanding of the Church's teachings and an obligation to defend its interests. Known from 1926-1931 as the National Catholic Student Confederation, the group was subsequently called the National Catholic Student Union (UNEC).

The Student Union played an active, but supporting role in the armed conflict of 1926-1929, for which it paid dearly in human lives lost. It would take years for this Catholic student group to revive as a functioning organization. The UNEC was able to recover because it continued to enjoy high level ecclesiastical support and because of the leadership provided by the UNEC's energetic spiritual director, the Jesuit priest Ramón Martínez Silva. The UNEC also fed off the Catholic backlash against the federal government's educational initiatives of the early 1930s whose goals, among others, was to further loosen the Church's grip on Mexican education.

The UNEC gained national notoriety during the 1933 strike at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), when it helped to defeat the adoption of a government supported, Marxist-inspired curriculum reform effort. The UNEC capitalized on this victory and assumed a leading role in national student politics, confronting the government's educational initiatives and challenging its influence over the national university student movement. By the mid 1930s the Catholic Student Union had become a highly politicized group that had all but abandoned its pedagogical function of teaching its members the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church.

The UNEC's political activism was received coolly by some elements of the Catholic Church hierarchy, who argued that the Church should publicly keep its distance from the polemical organization in order to avoid governmental reprisals. Furthermore, the UNEC's neglect of its pedagogical functions opened it up to internal criticism within the Church. The UNEC was also hamstrung by its bitter conflict with a rival lay Catholic organization, the Mexican Catholic Youth Association (ACJM), as the two organizations competed with one another for educated young men to fill out their ranks. Yet, the UNEC retained its importance within Catholic circles so long as the Church remained at odds with the government's education policies. However, Church-State relations dramatically improved under the Manuel Avila Camacho administration (1940-1946), and under these new circumstances

the Church hierarchy came to see the polemical National Catholic Student Union as an unacceptable political liability.

The solution to this internal conflict presented itself when the possibility emerged of creating a new Catholic university; for in this nation of Catholics no Catholic university had existed since the mid 1800s, when liberals suppressed the three hundred year-old Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico.¹ In a neat solution to the problem posed by the UNEC, the Church leadership stripped material and human resources from the Catholic Student Union in order to develop this university project. The school that was created in 1943 from the UNEC became the Iberoamerican University, now one of Mexico's most prestigious and important institutions of higher education. The Iberoamerican University was not, however, the UNEC's only legacy. UNEC activists played a role in the founding of one of Mexico's most important political parties, the conservative National Action Party (PAN). This political institution was created in 1939 as a coalition of businessmen, non-religious conservatives, and Catholic activists united in their opposition to the leftist policies of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). UNEC members constituted an important component of the PAN's first national executive committee and founded the party's newspaper. The Catholic ideology that the UNEC promoted, while not hegemonic within the PAN, had its adherents within the party in the years before the Vatican II Council.

CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS: 1926

The National Union of Catholic Students emerged the eve of the outbreak of the Cristero Rebellion (1926-1929), an armed movement that cost the lives of tens of thousands of people, mostly peasants, in the region known as the Bajío. This Catholic rebellion sought to overthrow the government of Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928), whose religious policies were opposed by the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy and pro-clerical lay Catholics. The focal point of Catholic anger towards Calles's administration was its determination to enforce the articles of the 1917 Constitution that limited the Roman Catholic Church's social and political role in Mexican society. This constitution had been drafted by Mexican revolutionaries who had been deeply concerned with the Roman Catholic Church's revival during the long dictatorship of General Porfirio Díaz (1876-1880, 1884-1911) and outraged at the Church's complicity with Victoriano Huerta's brutal counterrevolu-

¹ Mexico's strongman Porfirio Díaz revived the National University of Mexico in the early twentieth century as a secular, state-operated institution.

tionary regime (1913-1914). The Constitution of 1917 contained provisions that mandated state governments to regulate the internal activities of the Church by limiting the number of priests that could minister in their territories (Article 130). It also barred the establishment of privately operated religious elementary schools (Article 3) and prohibited the Church from owning or holding property.² These provisions extended the state's power over the Church first asserted in the liberal constitution of 1857.

While the Mexican Church hierarchy had opposed the new constitution from the outset, its promulgation had not immediately resulted in an all-out confrontation between federal government and the Catholic Church. This was due in large measure to the federal government's cautious implementation of many of these constitutional articles. President Venustiano Carranza (1915-1920) and Álvaro Obregón (1920-1924) both held off from implementing its most controversial provisions, including those that regulated the Catholic Church's activities in Mexico. This not to say that serious incidents did not occur during these years, but on the whole Carranza and Obregón were more concerned with pacifying their revolution-torn nation and rebuilding its shattered economy than in engaging in a bruising struggle with a weakened but defiant Church leadership.

Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-28) rejected the religious policies of his immediate predecessors and took a much harder line towards the Catholic Church. President Calles, a former public school teacher from the northern state of Sonora turned revolutionary general, had strongly held anticlerical views, perhaps due to his illegitimate birth. He was determined to make the Roman Catholic Church finally accept the reality of the Revolution's triumph by fully enforcing the constitutional articles limiting the Church's privileged position in Mexican society.³ Calles's antipathy towards the Catholic Church was heightened by the public comments made by Mexico's highest-ranking Catholic cleric, Archbishop José Mora y del Rfo, which

² Robert E. Quirk, *The Mexican Revolution and the Catholic Church, 1910-1929* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 100. From their exile in the United States the Mexican episcopal hierarchy had wasted no time in denouncing Mexico's new constitution. They issued a manifesto decrying the Constitution of 1917 as another of the "systematic abuses carried out by the revolutionaries against the Catholic Religion, its churches, its ministers, and its educational and charitable institutions. . ." (Antonio Rius Facius, *La Juventud Católica y la Revolución Mexicana 1910-1925* [Mexico City: Editorial Jus, 1963], p. 104).

³ Calles, utilizing the powers granted to the state by Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution, also carried out an extensive land reform program that doubled the amount of acreage granted to peasants by his predecessor Álvaro Obregón. Calles's presidency is also noteworthy for favoring the rise to prominence of the CROM, a pro-government labor confederation.

appeared in the pro-government newspaper *El Universal* on January 27, 1926. This Mexico City daily paper recorded Mora y del Río's steadfast rejection of key provisions of the Constitution of 1917 viewed by the Church as anticlerical.⁴

Calles responded to the archbishop's outburst by immediately implementing those constitutional provisions to which the Catholic Church most objected. Religious instruction was banned in all of the nation's elementary schools, including private Catholic institutions. Foreign-born clerics were expelled from the country and Catholic priests were ordered to register with their local state governments.⁵ State legislatures throughout the country enacted laws that strictly limited the number of priests that could minister in their territories, although the enforcement of such legislation by state officials was uneven.⁶

The Catholic Church hierarchy and its supporters chose to resist the government's initiatives and began to mobilize their forces to confront Calles's policies. Lay Catholic groups banded together in March 1925 to form the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberties (LNDLR), often-times known simply as the *Liga*.⁷ The following year the Liga, with the ecclesiastical leadership's blessing, initiated a national economic boycott in order to put pressure on the Calles administration. The Liga later attempted, unsuccessfully, to provide national leadership to the disparate regional bands of Catholic guerrillas when the Cristero Rebellion broke out in 1926.

By the mid-1920s practicing Catholics in all walks of life were feeling the repercussions of the deteriorating religious climate in Mexico. These included the Catholic school students who attended exclusive Catholic all-male *colegios* (secondary and preparatory schools) in Mexico City. For years these young men had been obligated to present their exams at official schools if they had any desire to attend government-operated schools of higher education. Now in 1926 the courses students took at these colegios were not going to be recognized by government education officials.⁸ Not surprisingly, the affected students began to organize themselves against this

⁴ John W.F. Dulles, *Yesterday in Mexico: A Chronicle of the Revolution, 1919-1936* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1961), p. 301; Quirk, *The Mexican Revolution and the Catholic Church*, p. 151.

⁵ Quirk, *The Mexican Revolution and the Catholic Church*, p. 153.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁷ The League included the Union of Catholic Ladies, the National Parents' Association, the National Confederation of Catholic Workers, the Knights of Columbus, and the Mexican Catholic Youth Association.

⁸ Luis Rivero del Val, *Entre las Patas de los Caballos* (Mexico City: Editorial Jus, 1953), p. 25.

threat to their academic future. Within a brief period of time 1500 members from four Mexico City colegios had established the Union of Private School Students.⁹

The course of this embryonic student movement's development was permanently altered thanks to the concerted actions of a number of its members who also belonged to the Mexican Catholic Youth Association. The Mexican Catholic Youth Association (ACJM), a core component of the Liga, had been founded in 1913 by the French Jesuit priest Bernardo Bergöend, S.J., for the purpose of creating an elite corps of young men dedicated to restoring the Catholic Church's once hegemonic position in Mexican society.¹⁰ Bergöend's organization, modeled on the French *Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Française* (ACJF), selected the "living forces of Mexican society" from different levels of Mexican society and trained them to be lay promoters of the Church and its doctrine in Mexican society.¹¹ These young "action leaders" would then be prepared to confront the Catholic Church's ideological enemies on both the intellectual and political arenas.¹²

Oswaldo Robles, a Catholic student and ACJM member, was the person who connected the members of the fledgling student group with the Mexican Catholic Youth Association.¹³ He secured for the student group the use of the ACJM's main hall for their meetings; however, along with the use of this building came the Catholic Youth Association's rapidly growing influence within the student organization. Robles belonged to the ACJM's Daniel O'Connell chapter, located in Mexico City's Santa María de la Ribera neighborhood. This local was noteworthy for both the elitism and the political militancy of its members and was composed primarily of university students resident in Mexico City. During the Cristero Rebellion (1926-1929) the group became notorious for the terrorist plots that some of its members hatched against the life of former president and noted revolutionary war

⁹ Untitled document, n.d., Pascual Díaz Archive, Section: Acción Católica Mexicana, File: 197, Box: 3, *Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado Primado de México*.

¹⁰ David Espinosa, "Restoring Christian Social Order: The Mexican Catholic Youth Association (1913-1932)" *The Americas* 59:4 (April 2003), p. 454.

¹¹ Benjamin F. Martin, *Count Albert de Mun: Paladin of the Third Republic* (University of North Carolina Press, 1978), p. 63.

¹² Andrés Barquín y Ruiz, *Bernardo Bergöend S.J.* (Mexico City: Editorial Jus, 1968), p. 215; Espinosa, "Restoring Christian Social Order," pp. 453-454. Bergöend asserted that the "ACJM does not have as its ultimate goal the formation of young men dedicated solely to their studies, to inaction, once they are educated. If that was the ACJM's ultimate goal then I, its creator and its ecclesiastical assistant, would truthfully declare that it would have no reason to exist."

¹³ Untitled document, n.d., Pascual Díaz Archive, Section: Acción Católica Mexicana, File: 197, Box: 3, *Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado Primado de México*.

leader Álvaro Obregón; these attempts culminated in president-elect Obregón's assassination in 1928 by the Daniel O'Connell member José de León Toral.¹⁴ The ACJM's control of the student group is clearly seen by the time of its July 30, 1926 meeting. On that date its members transformed the Union of Private School Students into the National Confederation of Catholic Students (CNECM) and Daniel O'Connell ACJM members were elected to key positions within the organization.¹⁵ Archbishop Mora y del Rio granted his official recognition to the CNECM and appointed Miguel Agustín Pro, S.J., as his representative within the student confederation.¹⁶

The CNECM's statutes defined the organization's goals as both the promotion of Catholic social action in Mexico and as a vehicle to address the specific needs of its student members. Its members were also tasked with the obligation to defend the cause of Catholic education and to establish contacts with Catholic student associations throughout Latin America and Spain.¹⁷ However, in 1926 Mexico's political environment made it impossible for the Catholic Student Confederation to begin addressing any of these ambitious goals. The country descended into civil war, with Cristero guerrillas confronting Calles's security forces in a bloody three-year conflict that left tens of thousands of Mexicans dead, wounded, or displaced.¹⁸

The Catholic Student Confederation's members played an active role in the fighting during the Cristero conflict, oftentimes with disastrous results. Luis Rivero del Val, the CNECM's president, became an active guerrilla

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Luis Calderón Vega, *Cuba 88: Memorias de la UNEC* (Mexico City: n.p., 1959), p. 12. These included the positions of president, a vice-president (one of two) and two secretaries.

¹⁶ The figure of Father Pro, S.J., represents an additional link between the ACJM's Daniel O'Connell chapter and the new Catholic Student Confederation, as his brother Humberto Pro was also a Daniel O'Connell group member.

¹⁷ *Estatutos de la Confederación Nacional de Estudiantes Católicos de México*, 1928, File 360 Box 46, Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra Collection, *Archivo Histórico de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*.

¹⁸ The Cristero Rebellion broke out in 1926 shortly after the Mexican bishops declared a strike to protest the government's religious policies. Catholic peasant guerrilla groups began to emerge in historically Catholic regions in central and western Mexico, motivated by both religious and economic considerations. The National League for the Defense of Religious Liberties, which on July 25, 1926 had initiated a nation-wide economic boycott as a means of pressuring Calles's government, moved in the Fall of 1926 towards a policy of embracing the Cristero's armed struggle. The League's dramatic decision was taken only after consulting the Mexican bishops, who agreed not to block the *Liga's* entry into Cristero Rebellion (*Programa de Boycott*, 7 July 1926, Pascual Díaz Archive, File 192 Box 5, *Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado de México*; Untitled document, 13 May 1929, Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra Collection, Section: *Organizaciones Católicas*, Series: *L.N.D.L.R.*, File 348 Box 47, *Archivo Histórico de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*).

fighter with the Cristeros.¹⁹ Oswaldo Robles, the group's vice-president, was imprisoned for a time in Mexico City's Santiago Tlatelolco prison before escaping and fleeing into exile in the United States.²⁰ A worse fate befell Miguel Agustín Pro, the Jesuit priest who had served from 1926-1927 as the CNECM's first ecclesiastical assistant. In November 1927 he was executed in retaliation for an unsuccessful attempt on Obregón's life, organized by ACJM members with whom Pro had contacts. Since Calles's government shot the conspirators without putting them on trial their culpability was never determined.²¹

The June 1929 accords between the Mexican government and the Catholic Church that ended the Cristero Rebellion ushered in a profound transformation of the relationship between the Catholic Church hierarchy and lay Catholic organizations. Moderate members of the Mexican Catholic Church hierarchy favored by Pope Pius XI had negotiated the so-called *Arreglos* and had been entrusted with key leadership positions by the Vatican. Two architects of the *Arreglos* were Pascual Díaz, the new Archbishop of Mexico, and the Archbishop of Morelia Leopoldo Ruiz y Flores, recently named as the Vatican's Apostolic Delegate to Mexico. This armistice allowed Catholic houses of worship to reopen and put an end to the military conflict, but it failed to resolve the key issues that precipitated the crisis in the first place.²² Extremists within the Liga bitterly opposed the terms of the *Arreglos*, viewing the agreement as a capitulation to the hated Calles and a betrayal of the Cristero cause.²³ While the LNDLR's executive committee officially stated

¹⁹ Luis Rivero del Val detailed his adventures as a Cristero guerrilla in his autobiography *Entre las Patas de los Caballos* (1953).

²⁰ Juan Hernández Luna, "Un diálogo con el restaurador en Mascarrones de la filosofía perrenes" in *Homenaje a Oswaldo Robles en su 25 Aniversario en Docencia* (Mexico City: Editorial Jus, 1963), p. 100.

²¹ Miguel Agustín Pro's brother Humberto Pro was also shot. The Pro brothers were dragged into the case because an automobile formerly owned by Miguel Agustín Pro was used in the assault. The late Pope John Paul II canonized Miguel Agustín Pro, S.J., as a saint and martyr of the Roman Catholic Church. Humberto Pro was yet another member of the ACJM's Daniel O'Connell local. A member of the Daniel O'Connell group eventually murdered Obregón the following year. Obregón's assassin, José de León Toral, had been Humberto Pro's best friend. Obregón was Mexico's president-elect at the time of his assassination.

²² These points of conflict included the registering of priests and government restrictions on Catholic elementary-level education.

²³ "Letter from Daniel Tello to Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra" 27 June 1929, Section: *Organizaciones Católicas*, Series: *L.N.D.L.R.*, Box 51 File 378, *Archivo Histórico de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*. League members had become increasingly alarmed over the negotiations that Díaz and Ruiz y Flores were carrying out and frustrated by their lack of input in the process. Lay Catholic militants and their allies in the Church hierarchy feared that Díaz and Ruiz y Flores were going to reach an agreement based solely on "promises of men without honor" ("Letter from Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra to Archbishop González Valencia of Durango" 1 September 1928, Section: *Organizaciones Católicas*, Series: *L.N.D.L.R.*, Box 50 File 369, *Archivo Histórico de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*).

that it had no option but to officially accept the Arreglos, conservative opposition to Archbishop Díaz and his policies remained strong.

However, Pope Pius XI had given Archbishop Pascual Díaz an instrument that allowed Díaz to bring lay Catholic hard-liners under his control: a mandate to establish Catholic Action in Mexico. This lay Catholic organization, which originated in Italy and was promoted throughout the Catholic world by Pope Pius XI, was characterized by the strict control that the ecclesiastical hierarchy exercised over its “lay apostles.”²⁴ Archbishop Díaz used Pope Pius XI’s mandate to rein in the ACJM and other lay Catholic organizations radicalized during the Cristero Rebellion and unhappy with the terms of the Arreglos.²⁵

THE CATHOLIC STUDENT UNION IN POST-ARREGLOS MEXICO

The Catholic Student Union emerged from the Cristero Rebellion in shambles. Its members were either in hiding, in exile, in jail, or had been killed by state security forces. Yet Archbishop Pascual Díaz considered the CNECM valuable enough to attempt its revival as a functioning organization. Why did Archbishop Díaz consider it a priority to rebuild the CNECM when the Church had many other urgent matters to attend? This question is answered in part by an internal Catholic Action memorandum that illuminates the concerns within the Church on the need to address the needs of the Catholic student community. The document warned that the lack of an effective Catholic student organization made public university graduates victims of ideological influences that “perverted and disoriented them.” Even Catholic school graduates became “apathetic, indifferent, and disconnected with other of the Church’s living forces” due to the absence of a national student league.²⁶ Clearly, the Church leadership was deeply concerned that

²⁴ Gianfranco Poggi, *Catholic Action in Italy: The Sociology of a Sponsored Organization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), p. 12.

²⁵ Díaz’s reforms to the A.C.J.M. stripped from it its fundamental task of creating Catholic social and political activists. In addition, the A.C.J.M.’s top leadership would no longer be elected by its members but appointed by Archbishop Díaz as head of Mexican Catholic Action. Although Archbishop Díaz’s reforms faced fierce resistance from the A.C.J.M.’s national leadership and much of its rank and file, the cleric managed to impose his will on the organization. As a consequence, many of the A.C.J.M.’s hard-line members deserted the association and created a short-lived rival organization, *Nationalist Youth*, which was ultimately doomed due to its lack of official recognition. Bergöend remained the A.C.J.M.’s spiritual director despite of his strenuous opposition to Díaz’s reforms, which he directly made known to the archbishop (“Letter from Bernardo Bergöend, S.J., to Archbishop Pascual Díaz,” 7 October 1930, Pascual Díaz Archive, Section: *Acción Católica Mexicana*, File 197 Box: 3, *Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado Primado de México*). Bergöend maintained secret ties to Nationalist Youth and hoped that it would carry on his goal of creating Catholic political activists (Barquín y Ruiz, *Bernardo Bergöend, S.J.*, pp. 214-216).

²⁶ “Circular sent by the ACM to *Junta Diocesanas* discussing the C.N.E.C.M.,” ACM, 1064 C.N.E.C. 1930-44. UIA.

Roman Catholicism was exercising a declining influence over the youths who, thanks to their education and social origins, could be expected to become the future leaders of an increasingly secular Mexican society.

Archival sources document the active role that Archbishop Díaz played in reviving the Catholic Student Confederation. For example, in 1930 Archbishop Díaz held a conference with Catholic school directors, telling them that the Catholic Student Union was “almost dead” and that their schools were crucial to its revival. He called on these Catholic schools to establish student communities that would be in regular communication with the Catholic Student Confederation’s leadership.²⁷ Archbishop Díaz also provided financial assistance to the Student Union, providing the funds that allowed it to rent an old mansion in downtown Mexico City that served as its new national headquarters.²⁸ Mexican Catholic Action, which was under Archbishop Díaz’s control, also appealed on the Student Union’s behalf to the nation’s Catholic school directors for a stipend in order to subsidize the CNECM’s organizational activities.²⁹

Ramón Martínez Silva, S.J., was the man with direct responsibility of infusing new life into the student union. Born in 1890 in the historically pro-Catholic city of Zamora, Michoacán, the young Jesuit studied and ministered in Cuba, Spain, Belgium, and France as the Mexican Revolution raged back home.³⁰ Returning to Mexico in 1925, the stocky, thirty-five year old Martínez Silva briefly served as one of several Jesuit ecclesiastical advisors to the Liga’s Executive Committee. When the ecclesiastical hierarchy grew estranged from the Liga due to policy differences Martínez Silva’s superiors ordered him to sever all contacts with that group.³¹ In 1927 Archbishop Mora y del Río assigned him to be his representative to the CNECM, replacing the ill-fated Miguel Agustín Pro. Given the chaos of this time period it is not surprising that Martínez Silva was unable to achieve anything of significance. To complicate things further his superiors sent him out of country

²⁷ ACM, File 1064, Section: C.N.E.C.M. 1930-44.

²⁸ Pascual Díaz Archive, Section: C.N.E.C. (1929), File: 192 Box: 5, *Archivo Histórico Primado de México*.

²⁹ “Circular sent by the ACM to *Junta Diocesisenas* discussing the C.N.E.C.M.,” ACM, 1064 C.N.E.C. 1930-44, UIA. However, it is unclear whether any funds were obtained from this source.

³⁰ Manuel Ulloa Ortíz, *Don Ramón Martínez Silva: Semblanzas de un Maestro* (Mexico City: Editorial Jus, 1974), p. 8.

³¹ “Informe del Sr. Bustos al Comité Directivo de la Liga,” 12 August 1927, Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra Collection, Section: L.N.D.L.R., Series: *Organizaciones Católicas*, File: 356 Box: 48, *Archivo Histórico de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*; “Memorandum from Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra to Luis Bustos,” 8 October 1927, Section: L.N.D.L.R. Series: *Organizaciones Católicas*, File: 356 Box: 48, *Archivo Histórico de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*.

in October 1928 for reasons that are unclear, although the issue of his personal security was likely a major factor, since prominent Church figures were at risk from government-inspired violence.

Returning to Mexico the following year, Martínez Silva was shocked to learn that there were plans well underway to liquidate the CNECM as independent organization. Eduardo Iglesias, a Jesuit priest left behind as the Catholic Student Union's caretaker, and the ACJM's leader Bernardo Bergöend (likely under his superiors' orders) had agreed to disband the Student Union in order to "avoid possible problems that could have arisen" between the two organizations.³² However, the Student Union managed to survive thanks to the support it received from Archbishop Pascual Díaz.³³ Archbishop Díaz's support for Martínez Silva and the CNECM stood in contrast to the tough stance that the cleric assumed towards the ACJM. This no doubt was a factor in the emergence of the rivalry between the two Jesuits, Bernardo Bergöend and Ramón Martínez Silva, that blossomed into an intense antipathy that negatively affected the CNECM's development.

In 1931 the Catholic Student Union gave tangible proof of its recovered vitality when it hosted an international conference of Catholic students. This event coincided with other celebrations commemorating the IV Centennial anniversary of the Apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's most important Catholic religious icon. The 1931 Iberoamerican Conference drew delegates from Central America, South America, Spain, and the Dominican Republic. The issues and conclusions reached at this congress served to define ideological positions that the Student Union, now re-baptized as the National Catholic Student Union (UNEC), would maintain in the coming decade. At this congress delegates addressed the social and political issues facing Mexico and Latin America from a Catholic perspective.³⁴ The Roman Catholic Church's social doctrine, enunciated in Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) (that reinforced the message of the earlier encyclical), is clearly present in the congress's call for social reform in Latin America. The delegates called for an end to the exploitation of child labor, an eight-hour work

³² Calderón Vega, *Cuba* 88, p. 21.

³³ Archbishop Díaz no doubt viewed the Catholic Student Union as a potential counterweight to Bergöend's troublesome A.C.J.M. The Catholic Student Union's focus on issues surrounding higher education dovetailed with the Church's overall concern with matters relating with education and its continued apprehension of the government's educational policies. Indeed, in the 1930s education became a major source of conflict in the relationship between Mexico's revolutionary leaders and the Roman Catholic Church.

³⁴ Fernando Beluánde Terry, a future president of Peru, was one of the delegates at this congress.

day for laborers, guaranteed vacations for workers, and the establishment of profit-sharing programs.³⁵ Many of these provisions had already been adopted by Mexican revolutionaries in the 1917 Constitution, but were not regularly enforced. The Iberoamerican Congress delegates adopted paternalistic attitudes towards the issue of women in the workplace. They proposed restrictions on female employment believing that their "morality could be exposed to danger" by working with men in the factories. Mothers were also discouraged from working outside of the home for fear that it would interfere with their roles as child rearers and home makers.³⁶

The congress also examined the question of land reform, an issue central to the Mexican Revolution. The delegates' analysis of the Mexican agrarian reform program up to 1931 was surprisingly positive in tone. Although the congress decried the use of land reform as a political tool, its legitimacy as a remedy to redress social ills was not questioned:

Amongst the masses the reforms (in land-holding patterns) were inspired in a call for justice. The breaking up of the *latifundia*, the creation of small property holders, the restitution and distribution of the land became necessary.³⁷

The spread of Marxism in Latin America and the proselytizing activities of Protestant ministers in the continent were of great concern for the delegates. The latter were dismissed as the "deliberate and irresponsible" vehicles of US capitalist penetration in Latin America. Delegates rejected the Marxist doctrine of class warfare as suicidal for society and that the problems of the working class "could not be solved outside of the Church."³⁸ The proposed solution to both threats was the same: the establishment of Catholic study groups. The cadre of Catholic activists that these would produce would promote Catholic social doctrine and strengthen the Roman Catholic Church's position in Latin American society.³⁹

The Catholic Church's celebration of the IV Centenary of the Apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe (December 1931) occurred during the period of Mexico's history known as the *Maximato* (1929-1934), so named because the *jefe máximo* of the Mexican Revolution, Plutarco Elías Calles, ruled the nation

³⁵ "Convocatoria y Conclusiones de la Convención Iberoamericana de Estudiantes Católicos, 12 al 22 de diciembre 1931," in Calderón Vega, *Cuba* 88, Appendix 2, p. 26.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³⁷ Calderón Vega, *Cuba* 88, Appendix 2, p. 19.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

through a series of weak presidents whom he selected and controlled. Calles and his closest collaborators occupied key cabinet in these administrations and dictated the country's national and international policy. While the Arreglos had ended the government's military operations against the Church's supporters, it did not end the antipathy that Calles and members of his circle entertained towards the Catholic Church and its component parts. Calles was convinced that the Church's social influence was a barrier to Mexico's social, political, and economic development and these convictions manifested themselves in many of the policies adopted by the federal government during the Maximato, including those dealing with the area of education.

CATHOLICS VS. FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICIES IN THE 1930s

Narciso Bassols, Mexico's Secretary of Public Education from 1931-1934, was the main architect of federal educational policies during the Maximato. A Marxist and an engineer by training, the dynamic Bassols is associated with two highly controversial pedagogical initiatives: his attempt to introduce sex education into Mexican schools and his promotion of socialist education. Building on regional pedagogical experiments carried out in states ruled by populist governors, Bassols enacted policies that promoted a national civic culture that was critical of capitalism, in a country mired in the Great Depression, and hostile to the interests of the Roman Catholic Church, in a nation that was overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. Under Bassols the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) carried out *defanatization* campaigns designed to dramatically reduce the Catholic Church's hold over Mexican society. Federal schoolteachers also promoted notions of modern healthcare and hygiene amongst the nation's mostly impoverished rural population. In addition, Bassols mobilized schoolteachers to promote land reform and the incorporation of peasants into pro-government peasant associations; schoolteachers were also active in the efforts to promote the unionization of urban workers in government controlled labor organizations. All in all, Bassols and the SEP made important contributions to the building of the corporatist one party state that ruled Mexico until the end of the twentieth century.⁴⁰

The Roman Catholic Church hierarchy and its lay supporters found much of Education Secretary Bassols's policies threatening and objectionable. They fumed when the Mexican Congress, with Bassols's support and encouragement, voted to deny official recognition to students who graduated

⁴⁰ Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-1940* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1997), pp. 31-32.

from Catholic middle schools. These institutions had long been a stronghold of Catholic education and the launching platform for the educational careers of elite boys. This action closed the doors of higher education to Catholic school graduates. At the same time the SEP greatly expanded its own national secondary school system.

Mexican Catholics were also outraged by Bassols's sex education initiative, which emerged out of a recommendation made by the Mexican Eugenics Society. In 1932 this organization had urged the SEP to include sex education in its official plan of studies, arguing that proper sex education was fundamental in dealing effectively with such problems as out of wedlock births, venereal diseases, and sexual *perversions* (sic).⁴¹ Bassols and other supporters of sex education viewed it both as a scientific-biological matter and as a tool in undermining Roman Catholicism's lingering hold over the population; they sought to separate sexuality from any Christian notion of sin in addition to informing children on the issues surrounding sexual reproduction:

The child should know that the act of pleasure is in itself neither bad or sinful, but that like any other act can be turned into something negative under certain circumstances. . . . There is no sin, there is only crime or the usurpation of rights.⁴²

From their urban strongholds the Catholic Church affiliated *Union Nacional de Padres de Familia* (UNPF) launched a highly successful public relations campaign against Bassols's sex education proposal that fed on the fears and prejudices of Mexico's socially conservative parents.⁴³ Public pressure eventually forced the SEP to abandon its sex education program.

The uproar generated by sex education had not died down when an even more controversial educational initiative emerged: socialist education. While it was supported and promoted by Bassols, the genesis of this educa-

⁴¹ Secretaría de Educación Pública, *Algunos Datos y Opiniones sobre la Educación Sexual en México* (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1933), pp. 5-6; Ernesto Meneses Morales et al., *Tendencias Educativas Oficiales en México: 1911-1934* (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios Educativos, 1986), p. 630. The Mexican Eugenics Society proposal was inspired in a resolution in favor of sex education in public schools that had been passed in 1930 by the Sixth Pan-American Congress of the Child held in Lima, Peru (Vaughn, p. 33).

⁴² Secretaría de Educación Pública, *Algunos Datos y Opiniones sobre la Educación Sexual en México* (Mexico City: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1933), p. 34.

⁴³ *La Palabra* (Mexico City), 5 June 1933. These efforts included the holding of an informal plebiscite in Mexico City that asked parents the following question: "Do you accept that your children, and especially your daughters, are taught SEXUAL SECRETS (sic) at school?"

tional program was to be found in proposals made by the state legislatures of Tabasco and Veracruz, states ruled by populist and anticlerical governors. In 1933 the call for educational reform was embraced by Mexico's ruling party, the *Partido Nacional Revolucionario* (PNR), and General Lázaro Cárdenas, its leftist candidate in the following year's presidential elections. The PNR's educational platform called for the termination of religious instruction in all Mexican schools and the adoption of "scientific rational education based on the postulation of Mexican socialism."⁴⁴ This curriculum reform promised an intensified attack on the Roman Catholic Church's cultural influence in society; it also promoted collective action by workers and peasants in order to address the nation's grave socioeconomic problems that had been exacerbated by the onset of the Great Depression.⁴⁵ In 1934 a modified version of the PNR's educational platform was passed as an amendment to the Constitution of 1917 affecting all government and privately operated elementary, secondary, normal, and preparatory schools in the nation.

Catholic Church officials were scathing in their denunciations of socialist education. Archbishop Ruiz y Flores, Pope Pius XI's exiled Apostolic Delegate to Mexico, denounced socialist education as an effort by the state to wrest control of children from their parents and "tear away from the souls of children every religious belief."⁴⁶ Supported by the Vatican, the Roman Catholic Church engaged in a determined and multifaceted opposition campaign designed to undermine the socialist education program that also drew on the support of secular conservatives.⁴⁷ Public reaction against socialist

⁴⁴ Vaughn, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, p. 34.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Archbishop Leopoldo Ruiz y Flores, "Instrucción a los Católicos Mexicanos", 20 December 1934, Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra Collection, File: 342 Box: 43, *Archivo Histórico de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*.

⁴⁷ Cardinal Pacelli, "Instrucciones Sobre la Conducta Que el Episcopado y los Fieles les han de Observar acerca de la Enseñanza Socialista Impuesta por el Gobierno Mexicano," 20 December 1936, Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra Collection, File: 342 Box: 43, *Archivo Histórico de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*. This included the establishment of clandestine Catholic schools and the reclassifying of Catholic secondary schools as "commercial academies" free of government regulations. The latter often enjoyed the support of Mexico's conservative business community, and efforts to close them down provoked conflict between this element of the Mexican Right and the government. This situation is illustrated by the example of the Commercial Academy of Morelia, a school founded in 1936 and supported financially by Morelia's chapter of the National Chamber of Commerce and Industry. President Lázaro Cárdenas's decision to close this school led to a flood of telegrams to the president's office from angry regional chapters of the National Chamber of Commerce and Industry ("Memorandum Relativo a la Clausura de la Academia de Enseñanza Mercantil de la Cámara Nacional de Comercio e Industria de Morelia, Michoacán, que presenta a la Consideración y Resolución del Señor Presidente de la República. La Confederación de Camaras Nacionales de Comercio e Industria y la Cámara Citada", 26 January 1938, File: XIII/162.1(723.4)-1 Box: 259, *Departamento Jurídico y Revalidación de Estudios* Collection, *Archivo Histórico de la Secretaría de la Educación Pública*).

education in some quarters was so intense that it threatened to destabilize the nation and restart the terrible religious civil war of the 1920s.⁴⁸ Opposition to the government's educational policies was strongest in the countryside, where in Catholic strongholds government schoolteachers faced death or mutilation by the local population if they attempted to implement the socialist education program.⁴⁹

The Cárdenas administration eventually withdrew support for the Socialist Education program as a consequence of the opposition that it had generated within the country. It is important to note that a significant amount of this opposition came from within the ruling PNR party, where many conservative governors simply refused to allow teachers to carry out policies that they deemed as being too politically radical.⁵⁰ Cárdenas also saw that it was to his political advantage to reach out to conservative Mexicans by retreating from socialist education's most anticlerical tendencies.⁵¹ This was due to the fact that by 1935 Cárdenas had become engaged in a bitter power struggle against Mexico's strongman, Plutarco Elias Calles, who remained enemy number one in the minds of most Mexican Catholics. Under Cárdenas federal teachers downplayed the SEP's defanaticization campaign and focused on other key elements of the administration's program: land reform and the unionization of urban labor.

THE UNEC AND SOCIALIST EDUCATION

Martínez Silva's Catholic Student group's rise to national prominence was intimately tied to the events that shook the privileged world of Mexican higher education in the early 1930s. The UNEC played a major role in the broad coalition of Catholics and secular conservatives that arose to oppose the introduction of a socialist education-inspired curriculum reform at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and other regional universities. The 1933 strike that engulfed Mexico's premier institution of higher education firmly established the UNEC as a major player in the turbulent world of student politics; more importantly, the young men of the UNEC became political actors of national importance as well, as they were in the vanguard of Catholic opposition to the federal government's educational policies. The Catholic Church hierarchy, while generally supportive

⁴⁸ Vaughn, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, p. 35.

⁴⁹ David Raby, "Los Maestros Rurales y los Conflictos Sociales en México (1931-1940)," *Historia Mexicana* 18:2 (Oct.-Dec. 1968).

⁵⁰ Vaughn, *Cultural Politics in Revolution*, p. 13.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

of the UNEC's campaign against the government-supported Marxist curriculum reform in Mexico's universities, publicly maintained its distance from Student Union for fear of government reprisals.

The effort to reform the privileged world of Mexican higher education began in 1933 under the leadership of Vicente Lombardo Toledano, a prominent Marxist labor leader and intellectual with strong ties to the National University. In 1933 Lombardo Toledano served as the director of National University's National Preparatory School (EPN) and was on close terms with the college's rector. Lombardo Toledano could also count on the support of Education Secretary Narciso Bassols and that of Mexico's largest student organization, the pro-government National Student Confederation (CNE).⁵²

The advocates of curriculum reform demanded a plan of studies that would make of each student a

useful and efficient worker capable of assuming the leadership of the national economy, employing the methods of modern science with a profound consciousness of collective responsibility . . . an indispensable precondition for the coming of a state in the hands of the working classes.⁵³

Lombardo Toledano, convinced that that the Great Depression spelled the collapse of capitalism, maintained that under these circumstances the National University had the obligation to

contribute to the substitution of a capitalist order to one that socializes the means of economic production through the [ideological] orientation of faculty members. . . .⁵⁴

Lombardo Toledano and his supporters wanted faculty members who identified with the masses and not the "exploiting class" and promoted the entrance of working class youth into the elite stronghold of higher education.⁵⁵ Lombardo Toledano rejected the notion of academic freedom, the principle defended by the opponents of curriculum reform, as merely serving to produce anarchism and confusion in the minds of youth.

⁵² Donald J. Mabry, *The Mexican University and the State* (College Station, Texas: Texas A & M University Press, 1982), pp. 109-110.

⁵³ Alberto Bremauntz, *La Educación Socialista en México* (Mexico City: Imprenta Rivadeneyra, 1943), pp. 165-166.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

⁵⁵ Vicente Lombardo Toledano, *Obra Educativa* Vol. II (Mexico City: Instituto Politécnico Nacional, 1987), p. 387.

At first an effort was made on both sides of the curriculum reform question to debate the issue in a rational manner within the university community.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, the conflict degenerated into violence when on October 10, 1933 pro-and-anti Lombardo Toledano forces clashed at the National University's Law School. The politically conservative director of the law school, Rodolfo Brito Foucher, had emerged as one of Lombardo Toledano's strongest opponents within the university and on that day right-wing students carried out his decision to expel leftist students from the law school. Appalled by the deteriorating situation within the university, the UNAM's faculty members staged a mass resignation. Faced with this major crisis, the University Council held an emergency meeting where after a heated debate Brito Foucher was relieved from his post as director of the university's law school. However, Brito Foucher's ouster failed to end the conflict within the UNAM; law students loyal to Brito Foucher went on strike to protest his removal and attacked the offices of Lombardo Toledano and those of the university's rector, Roberto Medellín. Unable to reassert their authority or contain the violence, Rector Medellín and National Preparatory School director Lombardo Toledano had no choice but to resign their positions within the National University. The opponents of curriculum reform had prevailed, at least for the time being.

Martínez Silva's UNEC members were active players in this campaign against the socialist education and its advocates within the National University. From November 1932, when Vicente Lombardo Toledano was elected as the director of the UNAM's National Preparatory School, its members had engaged in a heckling campaign against him whenever he made a public appearance. The UNEC also aggressively supported Brito Foucher during the October 1933 UNAM strike and organized a raid on October 13 against the National Student Confederation's headquarters in order to oust its leftist leadership.⁵⁷

Having been purged of leftist students as a consequence of the fallout from the 1933 the UNAM strike, the National Student Confederation became the vehicle that the UNEC used to extend its influence throughout Mexico. The Catholic Student Union provided the CNE with three consecutive national presidents, beginning with Armando Chávez Camacho in May 1934.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Lombardo Toledano engaged in celebrated debate with a former mentor, philosopher and UNAM faculty member Antonio Caso on the merits of the curriculum reform program and the issue of academic freedom.

⁵⁷ Mabry, *The Mexican University and the State*, p. 119.

⁵⁸ Fellow UNEC members Daniel Kuri Breña and Manuel Pacheco Moreno succeeded Chávez Camacho as presidents of the National Student Confederation.

Claiming a national membership of 110,000 secondary, preparatory and university students throughout Mexico, the CNE under the UNEC's tutelage waged countrywide campaign against the socialist education curriculum under its different guises.⁵⁹ The National Student Confederation supported the wave of university strikes that irrupted across the country in August 1934. These actions were designed to pressure the Mexican national congress not to include higher education under the authority of the 1934 Socialist Education constitutional amendment. While this highly controversial amendment was passed by the national congress, it left higher education unaffected.⁶⁰

The National Catholic Student Union maintained generally positive relations with the rectors who led the National University following the 1933 strike. Rector Medellín's successor, Manuel Gómez Morín (1933-34) was a distinguished technocrat and lawyer who enjoyed excellent contacts in both Mexico's conservative business class and the Catholic community. However, he was not able to adequately address the fiscal crisis that plagued the National University after an angry federal government cut off the institution's subsidy following the a strong relationship with the Catholic militants of the UNEC. That these links had been forged were clearly demonstrated five years later when Manuel Gómez Morín founded the conservative National Action Party (PAN) and presented former and current UNEC members with leadership positions within his new political organization.

The UNEC also maintained close ties to Gómez Morín's successor, Fernando Ocaranza, and supported many of his initiatives. Rector Ocaranza followed Gómez Morín's policy of validating the educational achievements of students who had graduated from Catholic preparatory schools, a policy directly contradicting the Secretariat of Education's edicts. Catholic preparatory schools opposing the government's socialist education curriculum sought

⁵⁹ "Memorandum que presenta la Unión Nacional de Estudiantes Católicos de México a la consideración del Venerable Episcopado," *Archivo del Arzobispo Luis Ma. Martínez*, File: 83 Section: *Gobierno Civil, Memorandums Letra "M"* Year: 1945, *Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado Primado de México*. It is impossible to corroborate these estimates that, on the face of it, appear to be significantly exaggerated.

⁶⁰ The UNEC, as part of its crusade against its ideological adversaries, also supported anti-socialist curriculum reform efforts at the University of Guadalajara. In October 1934 a strike broke out at that institution led by secular and Catholic conservative faculty and students against a socialist curriculum reform effort endorsed by the school's rector and the state government. This time, however, the opponents of socialist education were unsuccessful. To break the strike the government sent in the federal army to seize the university's buildings and then closed the institution for an indefinite amount of time (Laura Patricia Romero, "Los estudiantes entre el socialismo y el neoconservadurismo" in *Jalisco desde la Revolución: Movimientos Sociales, 1929-1940*, edited by Laura Patricia Romero [Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1988], p. 287).

and received the National University's protection.⁶¹ In addition, the UNEC endorsed Ocaranza's project to expand the National University's Preparatory School educational cycle from two years to five. The purpose of this reform was to give the National University access to students not exposed to socialist education at government-controlled middle schools. The SEP, aware of the initiative's significance, nixed this plan. Undaunted, the National Catholic Student Union successfully lobbied Ocaranza and the University Council for the adoption of a university extension program that had the effect of establishing a de facto middle school free from the socialist education curriculum.⁶²

THE UNEC AND CATHOLIC ACTION

By the mid-1930s the UNEC was at the height of its success as an organization; however, it had not achieved its cherished goal to be an integral component of Mexican Catholic Action. This measure was essential for the UNEC's long term viability.⁶³ However, the Catholic Student Union faced two obstacles in achieving this goal: one was the feeling, widespread amongst Mexico's bishops, that granting the UNEC *fundamental* status within Catholic Action would bring down the government's wrath down upon the Roman Catholic Church as a whole; another major obstacle was the Mexican Catholic Youth Association, whose rivalry with the UNEC had grown stronger over the years. The ACJM's opposition to the UNEC's petition not only reflected self interest but also the intense personal antipathy that the ACJM's spiritual advisor Bernardo Bergöend, S.J., and the UNEC's Ramón Martínez Silva, S.J., felt towards each other. Finally, the Catholic Action's leadership expressed doubt as to the UNEC's dedication to the goals of Catholic Action and the viability of an urban university student

⁶¹ The case of the elite Mexico City Jesuit preparatory school *Instituto Patria* serves to illustrate this point. The Jesuits selected a Catholic layman, Francisco Pérez Salazar, to present the school's application for incorporation into the UNAM. The school's name was changed to *Bachilleratos* and no mention was made of its previous incarnation as a Jesuit school, although it is hard to believe that university officials would not be aware of this fact, as the *Instituto Patria* was the most prestigious Catholic preparatory school in country and was located in Mexico City. However, both sides kept up with the charade and the *Bachilleratos* was granted incorporation in August 1934 ("Letter from Francisco Pérez Salazar to Rector Manuel Gómez Morín (UNAM)," 13 April 1934, Binder: 270, *Dirección General de Incorporación y de Revalidación* Collection, *Archivo Histórico de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*; "Letter from the *Oficial Mayor* of the UNAM Antonio Armendáriz to Director Francisco Pérez Salazar of *Bachilleratos*," 15 August 1934, Document: 150.4167.150/202.2/ Binder: 270 *Dirección General de Incorporación y de Revalidación* Collection, *Archivo Histórico de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*).

⁶² José Luis Curiel, interview by author, Mexico City 27 October 1993.

⁶³ Its associate status meant that it had no voting rights within Catholic Action. More importantly, it meant that its future existence was always going to be uncertain.

organization in a primarily rural nation that was economically and socially underdeveloped. The debate over whether the UNEC would become a fundamental component of Catholic Action exposed both fissures within the Church and the ecclesiastical hierarchy's complicated relationship with this controversial organization.

In 1935 Archbishop Pascual Díaz communicated with the nation's bishops and the Catholic Action leadership asking them for their opinions on the issue of granting the UNEC full status within Catholic Action. The responses that he received demonstrated just how polemical an organization the National Catholic Student Union was perceived to be within the Church. Catholic Action's director, Luis Bustos, was unequivocal in recommending that the UNEC's petition be rejected. Bustos labeled the UNEC as an organization "dedicated solely to politics" and with a poor record in working together with other Catholic Action organizations. He also noted the "chasm" that existed between the UNEC's ecclesiastical representative, Ramón Martínez Silva, S.J., and the ACJM's Bernardo Bergöend, S.J. If the UNEC became a core organization within Catholic Action, Bustos predicted endless conflict between these two men and their rival organizations.⁶⁴ However, Bustos's reservations concerning the National Catholic Student Union extended far beyond issue of a clash of personalities between Martínez Silva and Bergöend. Philosophically, he believed that Mexico, an impoverished agrarian nation, could not sustain an elitist organization like the UNEC. Bustos noted that while in 1935 the ACJM claimed a total national membership of 20,000 young men, the National Catholic Student Union had only a "few hundred" members and could only flourish in the few cities that boasted institutions of higher learning.⁶⁵

Devastating as Luis Bustos's letter was to the UNEC's cause, the association did have its advocates within the Catholic Church hierarchy. Its position was defended by Archbishop Leopoldo Ruiz y Flores, the Vatican's representative to Mexico, who in 1935 was in government-imposed exile in the United States. He recommended to Archbishop Díaz that the UNEC be given full status within Catholic Action, but with the caveat that this not be publicly revealed under the "present circumstances" out of fear of government reprisals against the Church.⁶⁶ To avoid the UNEC-ACJM

⁶⁴ Luis G. Bustos, "Fundamentalidad de la Union Nacional de Estudiantes Católicos," December 1935, 10.65 UNEC 1935-1936, *Unidad de Acervos Históricos de la Universidad Iberoamericana*.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ "Letter from Archbishop Leopoldo Ruiz y Flores to Archbishop Pascual Díaz, 22 July 1935, 10.65 UNEC 1935-36, *Unidad de Acervos Históricos de la Universidad Iberoamericana*.

conflict that so worried Luis Bustos, Archbishop Ruiz y Flores proposed to specify that in the future the UNEC would have the exclusive right to recruit its members from Mexico's universities, preparatory schools, and technical schools.⁶⁷ Another powerful voice within the Church, the Archdiocese of Guadalajara, also threw its support behind the UNEC and defended that organization from the criticisms that Luis Bustos leveled against it. The Vicario General of the Archdiocese of Guadalajara accepted Bustos's point that UNEC members were ignorant of Catholic Action regulations, but argued that was due to the organization's marginal position within Catholic Action. Denying the UNEC full membership in Catholic Action would in fact intensify the feelings of alienation that the UNEC's members had towards Catholic Action. However, these pro-UNEC opinions were in the minority.

Archbishop Pascual Díaz rendered his decision in early 1936, shortly before his death. While recognizing that the UNEC "possessed all of the requirements" to be "immediately recognized" as a full member of Catholic Action, he decided against this measure.⁶⁸ Díaz bluntly stated that it was the UNEC's highly public activities that led him to take this decision. And he repeated the concerns expressed by clerics like the Archbishop of Monterrey⁶⁹ that publicly recognizing the UNEC as an element of Catholic Action would bring the government's wrath down on the Church.⁷⁰ To ease the blow against the Student Union, Archbishop Díaz granted to the UNEC exclusive recruiting authority in the nation's university, normal, and preparatory schools. The UNEC leadership later blamed Archbishop Díaz's decision for the sharp decline in the organization's fortunes, although their interpretation, as will be seen, was too simplistic and self-serving.⁷¹

⁶⁷ "Letter from the *Vicario General* of the Archdiocese of Guadalajara to Luis G. Bustos, President of *Acción Católica Mexicana*," 21 December 1935, 10.65 UNEC 1935-36, *Unidad de Acervos Históricos de la Universidad Iberoamericana*.

⁶⁸ "Comunicación oficial que en su caracter de Director Pontificio de la Acción Católica Mexicana, dirige el Exco. Sr. Arzobispo de México a la Junta Central y demás organos dirigentes de la ACM," N.D. 10.65 UNEC 1935-36, *Unidad de Acervos Históricos de la Universidad Iberoamericana*.

⁶⁹ "Letter from the Archbishop of Monterrey to Luis G. Bustos," 26 December 1935, 10.65 UNEC 1935-36, *Unidad de Acervos Históricos de la Universidad Iberoamericana*.

⁷⁰ "Comunicación oficial que en su caracter de Director Pontificio de la Acción Católica Mexicana, dirige el Exco. Sr. Arzobispo de México a la Junta Central y demás organos dirigentes de la Acción Católica Mexicana." N.D. 10.65 UNEC 1935-36, *Unidad de Acervos Históricos de la Universidad Iberoamericana*.

⁷¹ "Memorandum que presenta la Union Nacional de Estudiantes Católicos de México a la Consideración del Venerable Episcopado," *Archivo de Luis Ma. Martínez*, Year: 1945 File: 83 Section: *Gobierno Civil, Memorandums Letra "M,"* *Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado Primado de México*.

The UNEC's failure to win full membership within Catholic Action heralded a year of reverses for the organization. First there came a crackdown on UNEC militants within the National University by the school's new rector, Luis Chico Goerne, who was anxious to improve his university's relations with the federal government in order to reestablish the UNAM's governmental stipend; however, this goal was unlikely to be achieved so long as the UNEC retained its influence within the National University. Chico Goerne shrewdly used the continuing violence at the National University to carry forward with his goals. On June 2, 1936, the students from the UNEC controlled National Student Confederation raided the offices of a rival organization, the Mexico City based University Student Federation. Seizing the moment, Rector Chico Goerne called a meeting of faculty and students to deal with the unrest, leading eventually to the expulsion of the UNEC's most vocal activists within the UNAM: Armando Chávez Camacho, Luis Islas García, Antonio Aguirre, and Teodoro Schumacher.⁷² Chico Goerne also placed the politically sensitive University Extension Program in the hands of an official who would avoid conflicts with the Secretariat of Public Education.⁷³

The year 1936 also witnessed the establishment of a government-supported rival to the Catholic-dominated National Student Confederation (CNE). Created from left-wing students expelled from the CNE after the 1933 UNAM strike, this new organization proclaimed itself as the true National Student Confederation and declared its support for President Lázaro Cárdenas's progressive social and political policies. Cárdenas reciprocated and provided assistance for this new organization, going so far as providing the use of a naval gunboat to ferry students to the new CNE's founding congress in Mérida, Yucatán.⁷⁴ The Catholic Student Union's hold over the national student movement was broken; it retained control of only a rump CNE.

The changing nature of Church-State relations in the late 1930s was another critical factor in the UNEC's decline. The new Archbishop of Mexico, Luis María Martínez, embraced a policy of seeking better relations with the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas and that of his successor, General Manuel Avila Camacho. Although a leftist and an anti-clerical, President Cárdenas was nonetheless more of a moderate on Church related issues

⁷² Mabry, *The Mexican University and the State*, p. 158. Jesús Guisa y Acevedo, a Catholic activist and philosophy professor, was also removed from the UNAM because of his political activism.

⁷³ Julio Jiménez Rueda, *Historia Jurídica de la Universidad de México* (Mexico City: Imprenta Universita, 1955), p. 225.

⁷⁴ Mabry, *The Mexican University and the State*, p. 169.

that his political mentor, Plutarco Elías Calles.⁷⁵ The improvement in Church-State relations in the late 1930s can be seen in the Cárdenas administration's willingness to allow the Vatican Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Leopoldo Ruiz y Flores, to return to Mexico in 1937 after five years in US exile. The Church hierarchy reciprocated by publicly endorsing Cárdenas's politically courageous decision to nationalize Mexico's foreign-dominated petroleum industry in 1938, which had created a major diplomatic crisis for Mexico with the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands.

The détente in Church-State relations accelerated under Cárdenas's hand-picked successor, Manuel Avila Camacho (1940-46), who initiated a sharp turn to the political right by Mexico's ruling party. In a gesture of conciliation to Mexico's majority Catholic population, candidate Avila Camacho publicly announced to the nation his own Catholicism. As president of Mexico, Avila Camacho enacted a series of measures that won him the approval of both militant Catholics and secular conservatives. These included the purging of suspected Marxists from the Secretariat of Public Education and the eventual elimination of the hated socialist education program. To appease Mexico's conservative business community, whose cooperation he required to enact his pro-industrialization economic model, Avila Camacho clamped down on independent and militant labor unions, and reduced Vicente Lombardo Toledano's political influence and role as Mexico's main labor leader.

In order to exploit this opportunity in improving the Catholic Church's ties to the state, Archbishop Martínez needed to demobilize militant lay Catholic organizations, as these could upset the achievement of this goal. The highly politicized National Catholic Student Union was one such organization. Happily for Archbishop Martínez the UNEC's institutional weakness by the late 1930s eased his task considerably. In 1937 the controversial cleric Ramón Martínez Silva, S.J., was reassigned by his superiors to a new post in the United States. His replacement was the charismatic Jesuit priest Jaime Castiello, whose focus was to revive the UNEC's moribund pedagogical function of transmitting Catholic doctrine. Castiello breathed new life into the UNEC's atrophied study circles that Martínez Silva had neglected during the organization's peak years of involvement in student politics.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Mexican Catholics were grateful to Cárdenas who in 1936, for his own political reasons, had expelled Calles from Mexico.

⁷⁶ However, the UNEC did not retreat from the world of student politics during Castiello's tenure as its ecclesiastical representative. In an undated memorandum to Archbishop Luis Martínez Jaime Castiello, S.J., proudly reported that the UNEC's candidate to the Mexico City based FEU's Governing

However, these efforts were derailed the following year when Castiello was killed driving his Mercedes-Benz automobile on a Mexican highway.⁷⁷

Shortly after Castiello's untimely death the UNEC was torn apart by the emergence of secret cells of extreme right-wing students in its Mexico City and Guadalajara chapters. Archbishop Martínez was informed by the UNEC's new ecclesiastical representative, Julio Vértiz, S.J., and other UNEC officials that conspiratorial groups were attempting to wrest control of the organization for their own political purposes. For example, UNEC President Luis Calderón Vega accused the Catholic student activist Carlos Cuesta Gallardo of subverting the UNEC's authority over its Guadalajara chapter. Cuesta Gallardo was reportedly using his influence within the Autonomous University of Guadalajara (UAG) to achieve this goal, an institution founded in 1935 by Catholic and secular conservatives in the wake of the socialist education curriculum controversy that gripped the state-run University of Guadalajara in 1933.⁷⁸ Described by his detractors as an unabashed anti-Semite whose reading tastes included the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Cuesta Gallardo's intentions were to transform the National Catholic Student Union into a "Catholic Masonic order" that would "combat the omnipresent power . . . of the secret Jewish-Masonic organization."⁷⁹ Previously, Vértiz had informed Archbishop Martínez concerning the emergence of secret cells in the UNEC's Mexico City chapters. Vértiz singled out the activities of the student leader José Luis Curiel, whom he accused of undermining his authority over the organization and placing the UNEC's continual survival in doubt.⁸⁰ The damage that these secret groups inflicted on the Student Union's internal cohesion was seen by the UNEC's leadership as a key factor for the organization's demise.⁸¹

Board, José Campillo, had defeated a pro-government candidate by a 550 vote margin (Jaime Castiello, "Informes" *Archivo de Luis Ma. Martínez*, Year: 1938 (?) File: 82 Section: *Diplomaticos, dictámenes, iniciativas y ministros. Letra D*, *Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado Primado de México*).

⁷⁷ José Campiello, "Presencia de Jaime Castiello: Semblanza," *Corporación* 66 (January-February 1963), p. 4.

⁷⁸ For decades its detractors have associated the UAG with extreme right-wing elements in Mexico's second largest city.

⁷⁹ Calderón Vega, *Cuba* 88, p. 144. Cuesta Gallardo's activities were detailed in a report written in 1940 to Archbishop Martínez by the UNEC's president, Jesús Hernández Díaz.

⁸⁰ "Memorandum presentado al Exmo. y Rvmo. Sr. Dr. D.N. Luis María Martínez, Dignísimo Arzobispo de México por el Asistente General de la Union Nacional de Estudiantes Católicos sobre el gravísimo problema que se plantea entre los universitarios católicos," *Archivo de Luis Ma. Martínez*, Year: 1945 File: 83 Section: *Gobierno Civil, Memorandums Letra "M," Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado Primado de México*.

⁸¹ "Memorandum que presenta la Union Nacional de Estudiantes Católicos de México a la Consideración del Venerable Episcopado," *Archivo de Luis Ma. Martínez*, Year: 1945 File: 83 Section: *Gobierno Civil, Memorandums Letra "M," Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado Primado de México*.

The National Catholic Union's internal crisis provided Archbishop Martínez with the opportunity of politically neutralizing this organization, which was becoming increasingly out of step with the evolving political situation in Mexico. Using the occasion of the UNEC's 1940 national congress, Archbishop Martínez announced his decision to bar the Student Union's members from engaging in student politics in the future.⁸² This was a crippling blow to an organization that had risen to national prominence precisely because of its high profile political activism. Yet, this measure was but the first step in the ecclesiastical hierarchy's dismantling of the UNEC. The following year Archbishop Martínez stripped away from the UNEC its exclusive right to recruit university students that it had received from the late Archbishop Díaz. The ACJM was the primary beneficiary of this decision, which had already established a university student branch of its organization called the Professional-Student Movement (MEP).⁸³ By the early 1940s the UNEC was a moribund institution without a clear *raison d'être*.

THE UNEC AND THE IBEROAMERICAN UNIVERSITY

In the summer of 1942, Rodolfo Brito Foucher, the National University's newly elected rector, held a meeting in his downtown office attended by the UNAM official Oswaldo Robles and the polemical Catholic student activist José Luis Curiel. The meeting's purpose was to discuss the viability of a project long discussed in Catholic circles—the establishment of a Catholic university in Mexico. Brito Foucher's involvement in this project is curious, since although he had enjoyed close contacts with Catholic Church officials and militants although he himself was not a practicing Roman Catholic. However, his right-wing credentials were well-established, going back to his notorious participation in the 1933 UNAM strike. And he was also appreciative of the crucial support that Catholic faculty members and students had given to Brito Foucher in his quest to become the UNAM's rector.⁸⁴ Oswaldo Robles, the former CNECM vice-president, had retained his close ties to the Catholic Church hierarchy when in the 1930s he became a philosophy professor at the UNAM. Now in 1942 he was in charge of the delicate task of dealing with the Catholic preparatory schools affiliated with the UNAM and determining the qualifications and merits of students who desired to matriculate into the National University.

⁸² Calderón Vega, *Cuba* 88, pp. 171-173.

⁸³ "Memorandum que presenta la Union Nacional de Estudiantes Católicos de México a la Consideración del Venerable Episcopado," *Archivo de Luis Ma. Martínez*, Year: 1945 File: 83 Section: *Gobierno Civil, Memorandums Letra "M," Archivo Histórico del Arzobispado Primado de México*.

⁸⁴ At this time the school's faculty and students elected the rectors of the National University.

Robles and Curiel canvassed Church officials in order to determine if there was any desire by the Church hierarchy to develop a Catholic university in Mexico at that time. The report they delivered to Rector Brito Foucher threw cold water on the project. Church officials contacted by Robles and Curiel informed them that “according to canon law it was imperative that the rector of [a Catholic] university be a bishop it was premature . . . imprudent, and inconvenient to found a Catholic university as its rector as it would produce reactions in the anti-Catholic world.”⁸⁵

Undeterred, Brito Foucher refused to drop the idea of establishing a Catholic university and personally sounded out Church officials on the subject. He approached the UNEC’s current spiritual director, Enrique Torroella S.J., who professed his ignorance of the project. This proved to be a fortuitous encounter. Torroella forwarded Brito Foucher’s ideas to his superiors and there followed a series of conferences between Church officials, UNAM officials, and the directors of the Catholic preparatory schools affiliated with the National University. After much wrangling a modest institution emerged that was far removed from being a true university. Its course offerings were extremely limited, its student body and faculty were minuscule, and at first it was merely an appendage of the National University of Mexico and was thus not a true Catholic university. Nonetheless, the University Cultural Center (CCU), later renamed the Iberomexican University, had been born: the first Catholic institution of higher learning in Mexico dedicated to serving the needs of lay Catholics since anti-clerical liberals had closed down the Royal and Pontifical University during the 1800s.⁸⁶

The University Cultural Center’s emergence sealed the UNEC’s fate. The CCU addressed key concerns that the ecclesiastical hierarchy had long expressed concerning the Catholic Student Union. The CCU concentrated on the pedagogical tasks that the UNEC had at times neglected while it avoided the high-profile political activism that the Church leadership no longer saw as in line with the Catholic Church’s larger interests. In order to construct the CCU Church officials dismantled what remained of the National Catholic Student Union, extracting the material and human resources that could be used for the new project. The UNEC’s national head-

⁸⁵ Universidad Iberoamericana, “Entrevista al Dr. Rodolfo Brito Foucher” (19 December 1967) in *Historia de la UIA 1943-1956* (unpublished manuscript, 1968), p. 22.

⁸⁶ The alma mater of political figures like Mexico’s current president, Vicente Fox, the Iberomexican University (Ibero) today recruits its students to its modern campus in the exclusive Santa Fé district of Mexico from elite families who can afford to pay its high tuition rates. The institution also receives the generous patronage from Mexico’s business community.

quarters now housed the University Cultural Center and its book collection became the core of the CCU's new library.⁸⁷ The UNEC's spiritual director, Enrique Torroella, S.J., became the University Cultural Center's first director and his successor was none other than Ramón Martínez Silva, the man who had been the UNEC's driving force during its halcyon of the 1930s. Both Martínez Silva and Torroella encouraged former Catholic Student Union members to teach courses at the University Cultural Center, providing an important group of lecturers for the struggling institution.

CONCLUSIONS

The Roman Catholic Church's political differences with Mexico's revolutionary leaders, particularly on issues surrounding education, powerfully shaped the National Catholic Student Union's development. The UNEC rose to national prominence as a consequence of its opposition to the 1930s curriculum reform movement within Mexican higher education, which Catholics, secular conservatives, and liberals opposed for ideological reasons. However, its high profile role in national student politics caused unease within ecclesiastical circles, leading to the Church leadership to refrain from publicly embracing the UNEC by making it a full member within Mexican Catholic Action. This placed the Catholic Student Union at a disadvantage with its rival Catholic organization, the ACJM, with the latter eventually displacing the UNEC within Catholic Action.

President Avila Camacho's decision to normalize the government's relationship with the Catholic Church forced the ecclesiastical hierarchy to reevaluate the UNEC's future as a lay Catholic organization. The Church leadership had already criticized the Catholic Student Union for favoring political activism to the detriment of its pedagogical responsibilities; now the bishops saw the highly politicized UNEC as an impediment to improving the Church's political position within Mexico. The Church leadership's solution to this problem was to hand over the UNEC's recruitment of university students to a new branch of the ACJM, thereby making the Catholic Student Union redundant. In addition, the UNEC's pedagogical function was taken over by the Jesuit-directed University Cultural Center, the Iberoamerican University's direct ancestor.

While the National Catholic Student Union had a short existence, it left its mark on Mexican society. One contribution, of course, was in the area of

⁸⁷ José de Jesús Ledesma, *Trayectoria Histórico-Ideológica de la Universidad Iberoamericana* (Mexico City: UIA, 1985), pp. 213-219.

higher education. It played a major role in Mexico's most important university, the UNAM, at a critical time in that institution's history and it was a significant voice in the public debate over higher education during the 1930s. In an indirect manner the UNEC also contributed to the establishment of the Iberoamerican University, a pioneering institution in the development of Mexico's private university system that now includes a growing number of Catholic universities. The task of creating the Iberoamerican University would have been more difficult to accomplish without the resources that the UNEC had so painstakingly accumulated during the difficult years of its existence.

The UNEC's legacy, however, extended beyond the creation of the Iberoamerican University. Catholic Student Union members were also significant players in the founding of one of Mexico's most important political institutions: the National Action Party (PAN). This party, which for decades was had to struggle in a political system dominated the Institution Revolutionary Party (PRI), finally broke the PRI's seventy-one year hold on power during the 2000 presidential elections, which were won by its presidential candidate Vicente Fox. The PAN was founded in 1939 by a coalition of businessmen, secular conservatives, and Catholic intellectuals opposed to the Cárdenas administration's progressive labor, agrarian, social, and political policies.

The man who gathered this disparate coalition together was Manuel Gómez Morín, who had served as the UNAM's leader in the chaotic period that followed the 1933 strike. Another key leader within the PAN during its early years was Efraín González Luna, a former member of Bergöend's Mexican Catholic Student Union and a well-known Catholic intellectual and activist. Gómez Morín and González Luna recruited many UNEC members into the fledgling political party using the links they had forged with these Catholic activists over the years. UNEC members, with their extensive experience in the bruising world of university student politics, provided the fledgling institution with an important cadre of dedicated political activists. While not a Catholic party, the PAN was, especially in its early years, influenced by the presence of these Catholic activists within its ranks. For example, one-third of the PAN's first national executive committee were members of the UNEC. Catholic Student Union activists also sat on the party's important doctrine and political action committees.⁸⁸ A UNEC member was also instrumental in the founding of the PAN official newspaper *La Nación*. Carlos Séptien García, a Catholic Student Union member, created the news-

⁸⁸ Partido Acción Nacional, *Así Nació el Pan* (Mexico City: Comisión Editorial, 1990), p. 23; Mabry, *Mexico's Acción Nacional*, p. 34.

paper in 1941 and served as its editor until his untimely death in 1954; Séptien García was also credited with establishing National Action Party's school of journalism.⁸⁹ While the National Action Party has become ideologically more secular since the 1950s, the UNEC's legacy within the party can be seen in individuals like Felipe Calderón, the son of the former UNEC leader Luis Calderón Vega. Felipe Calderón served as the PAN's national president in the late 1990s and is today the PAN's presidential candidate in the 2006 elections.

Rhode Island College
Providence, Rhode Island

DAVID ESPINOSA

⁸⁹ *La Nación*, 17 October 1954. Carlos Séptien García was killed in an airplane accident while on a journalistic assignment.