

Mexican Situation

Letters Released for Publication

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"DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON.

March 20, 1915.

Father Francis C. Kelley,
President of The Catholic Church Extension Society,
750 McCormick Building, Chicago, Ill.

"My dear Father Kelley:

The President has referred to me your important letter of the twenty-third of February concerning the present distressing situation in Mexico, with the request that I tell you very definitely what the attitude and acts of the Administration have been in the matter of the protection of the rights of conscience and of worship there, a matter in which the Administration is, I need not say, deeply interested, as all true Americans must be.

"The question which has bulked largest in political discussion in connection with the present revolution in Mexico, and in connection with the revolution which preceded it, is the land question, because upon a people's economic relations to the land everything else, it would seem, that is to determine its institutions and secure its freedom must depend. There can be no permanent pacification in Mexico, no stable settlement of her political troubles, until the land question is justly and wisely settled and the land made the basis of the independence of her citizens, rank and file, and the foundation of her family life.

"But of course economic questions are settled, if the matter be thought through to its real heart, only in order to give leave to the deeper things that are spiritual. A democracy must be sustained by education, by the education of the people, and her schools will be as valuable to Mexico as her acres of fertile land. It will be as necessary that she have them as that she break the monopoly that has controlled her land.

"And, above and beyond all, the full flower of democracy, lies religious freedom, the principle which the builders of our own Republic made the crown of the whole structure. To this freedom political liberty has seemed, at many of the most important crisis of history, to be only the handmaiden and servant. There can be no doubt in the minds of Americans about these things.

"The Administration has not felt at liberty to play any part in the internal affairs of Mexico except that of friend and adviser. It realizes that, by reason of geographical proximity and many historical circumstances known to all the world, it is in some peculiar degree charged with the duty of safeguarding, so far as it may within the limits of international privilege, the lives and rights of foreigners in Mexico, and it has again and again made the strongest possible representations with regard to such matters to those who have from time to time assumed responsibility for affairs in Mexico during the troubled months through which that country has been passing. At every turn of affairs there, moreover, and upon every report of persecution, it has advised and warned those who were exercising authority of the fatal effect any disregard for the lives or rights of those who represented religion or an attack upon liberty of conscience or of worship would have upon the opinion of the people of the United States and of the world.

"On the 23rd of July, 1914, for instance, the following message was sent for presentation to General Villa and to General Carranza:

"Not only the United States, but all the world, will watch with the greatest interest and concern the course now to be pursued by the leaders of the Constitutionalist cause in effecting a transfer of power at Mexico City. This government feels that the critical time has come when the choice which is now to be made by the Constitutionalist leaders will practically determine the success or failure of the government they mean to set up and the reforms they hope to effect.

"We venture to say this because of our earnest sympathy with the main purposes of the Constitutionalist and our desire to be of permanent service to them in bringing Mexico out of her troubles. We have been forced by circumstances into a position in which we must practically speak for the rest of the world. It is evident that the United States is the only first-class power that can be expected to take the initiative in recognizing the new government. It will in effect act as the representative of the other powers of the world in this matter and will unquestionably be held responsible by them for the consequences. Every step taken by the Constitutionalist leaders from this moment on and everything which indicates the spirit in which they mean to proceed and to consummate their triumph must of necessity, therefore, play a very important part in determining whether it will be possible for the United States to recognize the government now being planned for.

"In the most earnest spirit of friendship, therefore, this government wishes to call attention to the following matters of critical consequences:

"First, the treatment of foreigners, foreign lives, foreign property, foreign rights, and particularly the delicate matter of the financial obligations, the legitimate financial obligations, of the government now superseded. Unless the utmost care, fairness and liberality are shown in these matters the most dangerous complications may arise.

"Second, the treatment of political and military opponents. Unless there is to be a most generous amnesty it is certain that the sympathy of the whole world, including the people of the United States, now the real friends of the Constitutionalist, will be hopelessly alienated and the situation become impossible.

"Third, the treatment of the Roman Catholic Church and of those who represent it. Nothing will shock the civilized world more than punitive or vindictive action towards priests or ministers of any church, whether Catholic or Protestant; and the Government of the United States ventures most respectfully but most earnestly to caution the leaders of the Mexican people on this delicate and vital matter. The treatment already said to have been accorded priests has had a most unfortunate effect upon opinion outside of Mexico.

"You cannot too earnestly urge these matters upon the attention of those now in the counsels of the Constitutionalist. It is obvious to us that the whole future of what the Constitutionalist are attempting will depend upon the way and the spirit in which they deal with these questions. Nothing ought to be overlooked or dealt with hastily which may result in our being obliged to withhold the recognition of this government from the new government

to be created in Mexico City as we withheld it from General Huerta. Our ability or inability to serve them they must now determine."

"On the 16th of December, 1914, the following message was sent to the Brazilian Minister representing American interests at Mexico City for delivery to General Gutierrez:

"Please convey unofficially to General Gutierrez yourself or through the proper channel the following message: "On the twenty-third of July last this Department sent identical messages to General Carranza and to General Villa which are quoted below. In view of the fact that the situation remains unchanged the same representations are made to you in order that you may know the President's earnest desire in the premises. The term Constitutionalist was used when the followers of both General Carranza and General Villa called themselves 'Constitutionalists.' In referring to those connected with religious orders you will of course understand that the language includes both sexes, nuns and sisters as well as priests, and also teachers and preachers of other denominations."

(Here followed the message of July 23, 1914, as above quoted.)

"When General Gutierrez left the capital and General Garza was made provisional president by the conventionalists, the same representations were on January 21, 1915, made to him.

"When information reached the Department that a large number of priests had been imprisoned in the City of Mexico, the following despatch was sent February 20, 1915:

"Department is informed from Mexico City that about one hundred eighty priests have been imprisoned by General Obregon for failure to produce half million pesos. So far as we know no American priest has been included and we are not sure that any foreign priests have been included. Please see General Carranza at once and secure from him instructions which will prevent the arrest of any American priests who may be in his jurisdiction and also every possible assurance of protection for any foreign priests. You will then use the good offices of this Government with him to secure the release of the native priests. Say to him that the employment of such methods for the collection of money are so unusual and so unjustifiable that they will arouse worldwide disapproval. We are sure that General Carranza will, upon investigation, give the necessary instructions for the protection of all members of religious orders. Present this matter with all possible earnestness for it is a very grievous mistake and will be sure to arouse resentment in Mexico as well as here and in other countries. It is possible that the necessary instructions have already been given to General Obregon for the release of these priests but the matter is so serious that we are sending this telegram."

"These despatches, selected from those sent, illustrate the spirit in which the President and those associated with him have dealt with the Mexican situation in so far as it affects the subject of religion.

"This Administration is of course the servant of the American people. It seeks to be governed by their convictions and by the principles which have governed their political life. It has felt it to be its duty to urge upon the leaders of Mexico, whenever an opportunity offered, the principles and methods of action which must underlie all real democracies, as they have supported ours. These principles will, in the same way, govern the Administration in handling the Mexican situation that affects its relations with Mexico, including the final question of the recognition of any government that may issue out of the present revolution and give promise of stability and justice. It cannot dictate laws or forms of government to Mexico; but it can, and will, bring to bear upon Mexican affairs, wherever it may legitimately do so, the pressure of American opinion and American example. The Mexican leaders will certainly know that in order to command the sympathy and moral support of America Mexico must have, when her reconstruction comes, just land tenure, free schools, and true freedom of conscience and worship. We know of no other foundation stones upon which to build the economic and spiritual life that makes political freedom a reality and a blessing.

"I am, my dear Father Kelley,

"Very truly yours,

"(Signed) W. J. BRYAN."

The Answer

April 17, 1915.

The Hon. William J. Bryan,
Secretary of State,
Washington, D. C.

"My dear Mr. Bryan:

"A formal reply to your very interesting and very important letter of the 20th ultimo should have been sent you some weeks ago; but, I am sure you will understand that, in a matter of such great moment, it was necessary for me to take counsel and thought before writing at any length. Since I sent you my telegram of acknowledgment and the short letter of the same kind later, I have not only been considering and studying the situation, but have taken advantage of every opportunity to discuss your communication with those who are wiser than myself or better informed, and who also have a very deep interest in the welfare of Mexico.

"The first thought of those whom I consulted, like my own, was of thanks for the consideration the Administration gave to my request, and of appreciation for the pledge that religious liberty in Mexico would be safeguarded, as far as it is possible to do so, before any government will be recognized for that unhappy country. I feel, however, as do others, that the ideas of the Revolutionists as to what constitutes religious liberty may clash with your own, as they certainly must clash with the ideas of a majority of the people of the United States. For that reason I rather regret the fact that your letter, in referring to religious liberty, did not use the words: 'as it exists in the United States.' The interpretation of religious liberty given during the past fifty years by the governmental authorities of Mexico is as far from the construction our own country gives to it as the moon is from the earth.

"In this connection I desire to call to your attention a pamphlet issued by the Washington agency of General Villa, and which just this morning has come to my desk, in which are quoted laws inimical to religious liberty. This pamphlet declares that: 'the enforcement of these provisions of the Constitution, prohibiting the presence of religious orders within the Republic, has been and is one of the foremost demands of the Revolution.' The pamphlet, more-

over, contains a series of unsupported statements which clearly indicate that, so far as General Villa is concerned, there is no relief to be expected from the unjust and tyrannical laws which have made liberty of conscience a thing unknown for over fifty years in Mexico. The Carranzista leaders had already spoken out plainly to the same effect.

"I do not know how far the good will of the Administration can go in urging on Mexican leaders the necessity for reorganizing their country as a juster basis; but I feel confident that it will go a long way. I know that you must lament the fact that even your very strong telegrams urging that the persecution of the clergy and of others should be stopped, had no effect thus far upon the Revolutionists, who committed outrages in Zacatecas almost immediately after the receipt of them; and who, even in the month of March, repeated these outrages in the City of Mexico itself. The flagrant disregard of the wishes of the government which, as you state, was friendly to the Constitutionalists, and the insult and manifest ingratitude which accompanied it, give little confidence that any change will be made in the conduct of any of the Revolutionary leaders, until the time comes for them to apply for formal recognition.

"It is a hard thing to contemplate the continuation of these outrages in the face of the strong protests of your Department, as well as the protests of foreign governments and of millions of people—citizens of the United States who have been horrified by the happenings in Mexico. It is pleasant, however, to know that you, with the full sympathy of the President, have made such strong representations; though anything but reassuring for those so interested in poor Mexico, that the benefactors of your friendship and counsel have seen fit to accept one and throw aside the other, in their mad desire for destruction and their efforts to make of their country the sad spectacle she is today. I say this with a full appreciation of your efforts and regretting, as you do, that they have been ineffectual.

"How deeply this question of religious liberty in Mexico goes into the causes that brought the country into its present unhappy condition, you may realize by reverting to your reference to the land question. It may seem difficult to believe that this question is a direct result of the anti-religious laws of Mexico; yet such is the fact. A very large majority of the people of Mexico are Indians. Under the wise laws made by Spain for the protection of the aboriginal people, they were wards of the State just as our Indians are. The pueblos held lands for their Indian population in common, and these lands were worked in common. The law which dissolved communities—aimed chiefly at religious communities—dissolved also the Indian communities, and did away with the Spanish community lands. These lands were divided amongst the Indians as individuals, but long before all were ready to assume responsibilities. As a consequence, most of the new Indian proprietors sold or bartered them off for what they could get. It was chiefly through this bartering that the lands fell into the hands of large proprietors, and the Indians became their employees. Had the same course been followed in the United States, we all know that the same result could have been expected. The problem in Mexico, on account of the large Indian population, was a larger one than ours, but it was the same problem. Mexico took the wrong solution. No student of the Mexican situation believes today that the redistribution of the lands, unless safeguards are thrown about the right to sell, would bring about a different result. If the land question is all important for a settlement of Mexico's troubles, the utmost care alone can prevent it coming again later to inaugurate a new reign of terror. But the point I wish to emphasize is, that it was the anti-religious laws, which in reality were responsible for the land question upon which you very justly put so much stress.

"Your knowledge of Mexican affairs must have given you the information that already, under the laws of that country, provision has been made for any Mexican citizen who desires to take up land. There are millions and millions of acres of most fertile unoccupied land in Mexico—enough for its entire population for long years to come. On the payment of a small registration fee, this land can be 'denounced' and pass to the ownership of the person so claiming it. Unfortunately, transportation facilities are wanting in Mexico just as they were in our own country; yet our early settlers went ahead of the railroads into the wilderness to secure property rights. Any Mexican citizen can do likewise to secure similar rights for himself and his family; and should the government of Mexico give its attention to the development of transportation—the building of railroads into the rich unsettled territories—and systematically encourage and promote the colonization of these territories by such of its citizens as desire farms for themselves, such action would go a long way toward solving the land question. The land question cannot be settled justly by the method advocated by many of the Revolutionists, namely, confiscation of property of others; and it cannot be settled wisely if, in the wake of whatever action is taken, there are left disagreements and feelings of injustices perpetrated.

"In this connection I must point out to you that a very large number of the Revolutionists advocate confiscation. Dr. Atl, speaking in the 'Theatro Principal' of Vera Cruz on December 4th last, is reported to have said: 'The best solution is the one that a social revolution should propose to carry out, and that is: the nationalization of the land. . . . All the land, from Bravo to Yucatan, should be confiscated in the name of the people and this regardless of individual rights or foreigners' properties. . . . International complications should not deter us . . . at present the European nations are sufficiently occupied in settling their complicated and somewhat dubious affairs to attempt to interfere with us.'" This light in the camp of the Revolution evidently thinks that the United States can be ignored, or that the American people would applaud spoilation. Such action would either bring this nation into a terrible war with European powers, or end forever the Monroe Doctrine. Your use of the word 'just' in your reference to the necessity for a settlement of the land question, should impress upon the Revolutionists the fact that, neither the American people, nor the government which represents them, could for an instant consider giving sympathy to wholesale robbery.

"Your mention of the need of education in Mexico is as interesting as your reference to a just and wise solution of the land question. There is no doubt whatever but that Mexico needs education; but again I desire to point out to you the fact, easily verified from the knowledge of those who are acquainted with Mexico's

history, that the anti-religious laws have been chiefly responsible for the sad condition of education in Mexico today. Previous to the passing of these laws, Mexico had many schools for higher, secondary and primary education; and, even in the country districts and amongst the Indian tribes, schools existed, generously supported by offerings on the part of Catholic Spaniards, and the wealthier Mexicans. The driving out of religious communities, whose one object was the conversion and the uplifting of the Indians, closed the missions and the mission schools, for their foundations were confiscated to the States, or by 'denunciation' bought by private individuals for practically nothing, the State benefiting little by the sale. A case in point comes to mind, the records of which, I believe, are in our government archives. I refer to the Mexican Pious Funds, a portion of which was claimed for the Catholic missions of Upper California from the Republic of Mexico. This case was tried at The Hague. The decision forced the Republic of Mexico to acknowledge its debt for having confiscated the Pious Funds destined for that part of the two Californias which had passed to the jurisdiction of the American flag. It is scarcely necessary for me to say that the portion which belonged to Lower California never passed out of the hands of the Mexican government, and that the missions of Lower California today are practically destroyed, while the Indians, who once showed great promise, left without the means of education, are dying out or returning to barbarism.

"What Mexico needs for the enlightenment of its vast Indian population could better be called 'freedom of education' than 'free schools.' Schools, supported by the taxes of the people, are in reality never 'free' in the full sense of the word. They must be paid for, directly or indirectly; but wise freedom of education encourages those who have the interests of God and religion at heart to make sacrifices which result in the State being aided to an enormous extent in its efforts in promoting instruction amongst the people. I need only cite the fact that Catholic and Lutheran citizens of this country are saving to municipalities millions and millions of dollars every year, through their zeal for the establishment of schools where religion and morality are taught in addition to the subjects desired by the State. Moreover, religious denominations in the United States, by the establishment of so many colleges and universities, have really done more for higher education than has been done by the State. I need only cite the fact that so many of our largest and most efficient universities and colleges have been founded and fostered by religious denominations. If we took out of the United States the educational results achieved by private initiative, especially through religious organizations, we certainly would have no such record to show the world as that which is a source of pride to us today. Mexico's anti-religious laws cut away from the country practically all of this great assistance, and stood as a direct barrier to the adoption, in that country, of Washington's counsel to us: 'that religion and the means of education should forever be encouraged.'

"I mention these things not at all in a spirit of criticism of your most interesting and thoughtful communication, but rather in the hope that I may be able to give you some of the information, which those more intimately in touch with the history of Mexico than either of us, have been kind enough to give to me.

"It is reassuring to note your promise, that the principles which have governed the political life of the American people will 'govern the Administration in handling every question that affects its relations with Mexico, including the final question of the recognition of any government that may issue out of the present revolution and give promise of stability and justice.' For those who represent religion there has hitherto been no justice; and stability can scarcely be expected while fellow-countrymen are busy cutting each other's throats. But your declaration of policy may, and I hope will, force upon Revolutionary leaders in Mexico a knowledge of the fact that there can be neither stability nor justice in any country where there are basic injustices in its laws; where men and women are persecuted and where individual liberty is trampled upon. Our own republic could not exist as a democracy under such laws, how then could we expect that any other democracy can exist with them?

"Permit me, then, in thanking you for your assurances, to express the hope that Mexican leaders will yet come to see that no democracy can exist which, to satisfy the tyrannical prejudices of two per cent of its population, tramples on the dearest rights of ninety-eight percent, as is being done in Mexico now. We all look forward with hope to the day when those who aspire to lead a government for Mexico, shall realize that their country can count on American recognition and American sympathy, only when their actions conform to the principles of justice and morality.

Faithfully yours,

FRANCIS C. KELLEY.

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Another Constitutionalist Trick

The pressure that is being brought to bear upon the Mexican Revolutionists through the action of American Catholics in favor of liberty of conscience, is being felt by both the Carranza and Villa parties. Three very eloquent signs of this have appeared lately; one, a statement from a so-called Mexican Catholic, blaming the Church for assisting the Villistas; another, a statement from Llorente, Villa's agent in Washington, charging the Church with interference in politics; and now a third from the priests who are prisoners of Carranza in Vera Cruz, protesting against the action of the Mexican Bishops and their representatives here, as well as the action of American Catholics. The fact that the gentlemen who signed this petition are prisoners may excuse them to a certain extent, but we venture to say that American priests, under the same circumstances, would have died before signing such a document. It is much to be regretted that, amongst the signatures, is that of the Very Rev. Antonio J. Paredes, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Mexico; but when it is known that this priest was nominated Vicar General by Carranza and the appointment accepted only to avoid scandal, that he has been a friend of the revolution from the beginning and that his Vicar Generalship will not last ten minutes after the present conditions come to an end, the surprise will disappear. The letter is nothing more than an imposed obligation upon the prisoners and bears all the earmarks of the work of Paredes, who evidently is willing to sell even the liberty of the Church for the sake of his influence with Carranza. "We trust," the petition says, "without resorting to any foreign power, to succeed in obtaining all the guarantees and rights consistent with the laws that govern us." In other words, Carranza and Paredes have forced the unfortunate priest-prisoners to sign a document, upholding the Laws of Reform, under which the Church has suffered for over fifty years.