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Pope to find mixed political messages in Mexico trip

David Agren USA Today | Mar. 22, 2012

SILAO, Mexico (RNS) Pilgrims ply a winding mountain to the summit of the Cerro del Cubilete in the western state of Guanajuato, visiting a statue of "Christ the King" erected as an act of defiance during a period of church-state conflict.

The Cristo Rey, as it is known, stands as a reminder of the Roman Catholic rebels who fought forces of an anti-clerical central government during the Cristero Rebellion of the 1920s, when churches and seminaries were shut down and the Catholic Church lost its legal standing and the right to own property.

The statue towers over a park where Pope Benedict XVI will celebrate Mass for 300,000 Catholics on Sunday (March 25).

"It offers a great platform for the vindication of the church in its confrontations with the state," said Victor Ramos Cortes, a religion expert at the University of Guadalajara. "The symbolism is perfect."

The visit and site of the Mass symbolize the extent to which church and state have reconciled in Mexico, moving from the Cristero Rebellion and decades of estrangement to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Mexico and the Vatican in 1992.

Times have changed to such a degree that politicians now seek out the pope and prelates for support. But that does not mean all is well. The hostility of some in more liberal Mexico City show how far the relationship has to go in a country defined by Catholicism for nearly 500 years.

Eighty-four percent of Mexico's population declared itself Catholic in the 2010 census. But that figure has been in decline for decades and secularism remains the national ethos.

Secularism was practiced by the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which ruled Mexico for most of the 20th century. The shunning of religion by government is promoted in political discourse and public schools. But the church has continued to press political institutions for expanded religious freedom.

The church is pushing to introduce a religious curriculum into public schools and to remove restrictions on religious groups owning TV and radio stations. Masses cannot be held outside a church without permission from the Interior Ministry, and pastors are prohibited from discussing political matters from the pulpit.

Laws approved recently in Mexico City that decriminalized abortion during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and legalized same-sex marriage were fiercely opposed by Catholic leaders. While such actions are normal for clerics in the U.S., here left-wing politicians filed complaints with the Interior Ministry alleging improper political participation from the church.

It is not just politicians who seek strict separation.

"There's a middle class that's Catholic but doesn't want the church meddling in politics," said Ilan Semo, a political historian at the Iberoamerican University in Mexico City.

Benedict arrives in Mexico seven days before campaigns kick off for the July 1 presidential elections. Such a visit would have been unthinkable a generation ago.

The visit also comes as the Mexican Senate debates constitutional changes that would guarantee the right to hold religious services outside authorized places of worship.

Catholic leaders caution against reading too much into the timing of the trip. They say the pope's agenda has nothing to do with domestic politics.

The Rev. Jorge Raul Villegas, spokesman for the Archdiocese of Leon, expects the pope's message to be "encouraging" for a country where a war on drug cartels and organized crime has claimed about 47,000 lives in five years. The crackdown has caused controversy for the church: Some parishes accept "narcolimosnas," or drug alms, from cartels for charitable work.

Semo said the pope should speak to families affected by the violence. "People are reaching out to their priests for consolation, and for justice," he said.

The Rev. Oscar Enriquez, a priest and human rights activist in the troubled city Ciudad Juarez along the U.S.-Mexico border, said the church's effort to win more rights from the government has perhaps made church leaders less likely to speak out for victims of alleged excesses committed by police and soldiers in the war on drugs.

"The church," he said, "has been very distant from the people."

[David Agren writes for USA Today. Cathy Lynn Grossman contributed to this report.]

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[4] http://ncronline.org/node/29511
[5] http://ncronline.org/node/29516
[6] http://ncronline.org/node/29515
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