

# The Holy Jester: A story of martyrdom in Revolutionary Mexico

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In 1927, amidst a bloody religious conflict between Catholic partisans and the Mexican state, a 36-year-old priest, Father Miguel Pro, was charged with plotting against the President-Elect at the time, Alvaro Obregon. After a hastily carried out investigation, he was executed. The present paper analyzes some of the ways in which Pro has been memorialized, linking these processes with the socio-historical conditions prevalent at different times in twentieth century Mexico. Discussion then moves to some of the modes in which a narrative of martyrdom is made to infuse death with meaning, and how it changes over time to fit different social necessities

*My appearance as a student quiets many suspicions about my profession. Sometimes with a cane in my hand, at others with a police dog which had been given me, following at my heels, at others riding my brother's bicycle (which has already given me a bruise on the left arm and a bump on the forehead) I go about everywhere day and night, doing good...*

Miguel Pro  
(cited in Parsons, 1936)

The quote belongs to a letter written by Father Miguel Agustin Pro in 1927. A few months after writing it, Father Pro faced a firing squad after being arrested for his alleged participation in an assassination attempt against President Elect Alvaro Obregon. Pro was a thirty-six year old Mexican Jesuit who had returned to his country in 1926, after studying for several years at European Jesuit seminars. There, he had been imbued with "the social question", and prepared to work with industrial workers.<sup>1</sup> He arrived back in Mexico the year previous to his death.

Three other persons died with him. His brother Roberto, regional leader of the National League for the Defense of Religious Freedom (LNDLR) in Mexico City was one of them. The other victims were Luis Segura Vilchis and Juan Tirado Arias. While Tirado seems to have been only a poor, devout Catholic worker, Luis Segura is one of the most fascinating characters of his time. He was Chief of the so-called Special Committee of the League, in charge of the war effort (Gonzalez, 2001). On November 24th, Excelsior published Pro's and Segura's obituary. Tirado, of lesser means and lesser importance for the League, had to wait until the day after for a published obituary.

In those days the country was in great turmoil.

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1 Like most Jesuits at the time, Pro was indoctrinated according to the principles contained in the papal encyclical Rerum Novarum (1892) which set the Catholic position with respect to labor and poverty and attempted to create a middle ground option between socialist and liberal nineteenth century alternatives.

President Plutarco Elias Calles' government was only the second one elected after the 1910 revolution had come to an end and a new Constitution was set in place. Several former revolutionary general had risen from time to time against the newly formed government and all of them had been mercilessly crushed.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the Mexican government was attempting to contain the so called Cristero War,<sup>3</sup> a bloody conflict between Catholics and the revolutionary government that took place between 1926 and 1929. The conflict erupted after President Calles issued a decree that prohibited churches to celebrate mass outside of

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2 Less than a month before Pro's death, General Serrano and his followers were executed in Huitzilac, near Cuernavaca City. General Gomez, another famed revolutionary leader, was taken prisoner and executed in Mexico City. The later case had broad press coverage.

3 The name Cristero was given to those fighting for Christ against the perceived evil of revolutionary government. It originally had somewhat derogatory connotations but was quickly adopted by the fighters themselves, whose battle cry was "Long life Christ the King!"

4 The "Calles Law" came into effect on July 31st, 1926. It was a reform of the Penal Code that also sanctioned the existence of civil organizations named after any kind of religious affiliation, closed convents and monastic orders considering them against individual freedom, expelled from the country all foreign priests, forbade the emission of monastic vows, prohibited religious education in both public and private schools and established prison sanctions and fines. This new law had the purpose of enforcing the article 130 of the Constitution. Although the Calles Law was the immediate cause that set the fire and provoked Mexican Episcopate to suspend all acts of public cult, the conflict between Church and State had a long lineage. It started with the creation of the Real Patronato de Indias, a board appointed by the Spanish Crown that oversaw decisions and petitions made by bishops to the Vatican. The Patronato was created in 1493, right after the Spaniards came to America. The Catholic Church conceded privileges to the Kings of Spain and Portugal in exchange for their commitment to evangelize the recently "found" souls and to incorporate those territories to the Roman Catholic religion. The Independence War of 1810-1821 vindicated the Catholic Church and aimed –among many other issues– at lessening its submission to the State and this was also at issue during the XIX-Century conflict between liberals and conservatives. Finally, after the Constitution of 1857 the Church lost most of its privileges but was granted a certain independence from the secular powers. A good account of the difficult relationship between Church and State in Mexico has been done in Jean Meyer's La Cristiada (1974)

previously designated places (Church buildings), established a governmental right to designate the number of priests to perform religious functions on each state of the Republic, set a process of mandatory registration for priests before a branch of the Ministry of Government (Secretaria de Gobernacion) and other restrictions.<sup>4</sup> As a result of these prohibitions, Catholics in many states of the Republic started organizing to fight against these limitations both by legal and violent means. The hierarchy of the Catholic Church systematically opposed the use of violence and did not support those who had decided to militarily confront the government. However, many priests chose to disobey superior orders and supported or directly participated as soldiers or chaplains, while neither the Mexican Episcopate nor the Vatican took explicit steps to sever links with those priests and bishops who had opted for armed confrontation.

Father Pro's death became an instant political issue. In *Viva Cristo Rey!* David Bailey has told the story of how the US State Department was immediately informed about it and how the death risked Ambassador Dwight Morrow's efforts to come to a peace agreement between the two parties at war (Bailey, 1974). It has also been noted that only two days after the executions, Morrow started on a trip through Mexico in Calles' Presidential train, which was seen by many as condoning Pro's death (Parsons, 1930). By then, a huge funerary procession had carried the priest's remains to a local cemetery in Mexico City, and he was starting to be revered and prayed to as a "true martyr for the Church".

This paper aims at discussing the ways in which a martyrial narrative is transformed over time to fit the necessities of social groups behind these transformations. In order to better stress them I have used the case study of Miguel Pro. The paper focuses on modes of remembrance operating along a span of several decades to mold the ways in which Pro's life and death have acquired meaning.

The article is divided into three sections. The first one discusses the term "martyr" and sets parameters to approach Father Pro's case by studying several narratives about his life and death.

The second part describes the first narrative approach that emerged soon after his demise: that of a militant for the Roman Catholic Church, while the third one provides with an account of the ways in which Pro's modes of remembrance changed over time, along with a transformation in the Church-State relation in Mexico.

In so doing the paper attempts to contribute to a discussion on the manner in which socio-political events alter the remembrance of things past by

stresssing certain facts while deemphasizing or suppressing others.

### 1. The Martyr's Narrative

A martyr is defined in most traditions as an individual who is aware of the dangers of professing her faith (i.e. death), but actively chooses to continue living in such a dangerous way, infusing his or her potential death with meaning. Both are common elements of secular and religious forms of martyrdom, where the struggle to overcome obstacles to life is fueled by belief and hope (Fields, 2004; Slane, 2004).

Self agency plays a role only in the martyr's death. The victim of murder faces no choice at all and encounters death as a passive bystander. Meanwhile, the hero attains this character by performing an extraordinary action in which his or her life is incidentally lost. These three modes of meaningful remembrance are frequently used as synonyms, although differences among them are relevant.

Accordingly, death remains a by-product both for heroes and martyrs. In his analysis of martyrdom as a modern enterprise, historian Craig Slain has linked it to the Judeo-Christian tradition by noting that the statement according to which the Christian notion of martyrdom evolved as an interpretation of death can be misleading, because it tends to overlook the fact that death, however important as the final episode of an individual life, represents precisely the completion of a life (Slane 2004). To sum up, martyrdom may or may not be something to be sought for, although it is an outcome of the choice<sup>5</sup> made by the person who aims at living in a way that pays homage to deeply felt convictions.<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, martyrdom is an object of belief that can be associated to particular types of social action which provide with meaning and coherence to the lives of those who witness it. Moreover, martyrdom, invokes the opposition between individual beliefs and an external, organized power (i.e. the state). Martyrs have been repeatedly studied by psychologists who ask why a person would choose to die. Like

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5 There are two different levels of agency: The active one of choosing death—as in many of the classic examples of martyrdom—and a passive one in which the martyr seeks only to continue living. These two levels are usually conflated in the experience of martyrdom.

6 In fact, the practice of seeking martyrdom gave way to severe lectures from Eusebius, Augustine and even Tertullian—the furious advocate for martyrdom. From second century Christians to fifth century Catholics, a current of thought restraining would-be martyrs to situations in which the act of bearing witness necessarily meant death grew up in opposition to those whose approach reconciled martyrdom with suicide, even in the name of the Christian faith.

most of the work done by sociologists, they have concentrated on defining and understanding the action of the martyr herself, analyzing it within a more or less complex framework of social interactions.

Martyrdom can also be interpreted as a form of altruistic suicide, following Emile Durkheim's line of thought. In *Suicide* the French sociologist claims that when societies are strongly integrated, they hold individuals under their control and forbid them to dispose of their lives. Alternatively, as in the case of martyrdom, weakened social ties may induce individual acts of suicide to consolidate social bonds or to maintain the cohesion of the group. For Durkheim, altruistic suicide occurs in societies where the individual personality has little value as the individual is completely absorbed in the highly integrated group (Durkheim, 1979). Altruistic suicide is performed as a duty towards the social group.

Historians have also given thought to the topic, although in a more comprehensive way. There are two main lines of inquiry derived from the seminal work of W.H. Frend (1967) and the more contemporary one of G.W. Bowersock (1995), whose interpretations were recently challenged by Daniel Boyarin (1999). Frend argued that martyrdom is a form of witnessing sacred laws which was born with Judaism and evolved to encompass Christianity. On the other hand, Bowersock attempts to ground martyrdom as a social practice in the specific context of the Roman Empire. Boyarin depicts martyrdom as a product of Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, These "twin religions" fought over and used martyrdom to strengthen group identities against each other and to separate themselves from other religious and social groups within the Roman Empire.

The early Church historian Peter Brown stated that the conversion of a victim into a martyr depends on the success of the cause. Hence, in assessing the historical significance of martyrdom, the martyrologist is often more interesting than the martyr (Brown, 1981).

Other scholars have shown that good willing people who die for a cause do not always become martyrs (Weiner & Weiner, 2002; Van Henten & Avemarie, 2002). Martyrdom is more the product of a narrative of facts (whether real, invented or a mixture of

both) rather than a factual biography. It is the martyrologist—the narrator—who creates a literary device that is later spread among the believers and gives way to socially meaningful practices.

This narrative approach does not deny the factuality of events described in the lives of martyrs but stresses the importance of studying the transformations occurred in the social location of the narrator.

Felice Lifshitz has argued that the act of memorialization of martyrs can be traced back only to the Fourth century AD, after the conversion of Constantine and the end of the wave of persecutions carried out by Roman Emperors Nero, Adriano and Diocletian. Moreover, she continues, the act of memorializing, commemorating and celebrating martyrs is not at all "natural". Even though a theology of martyrdom was elaborated early on, the fact that a cult also developed as a social practice speaks to a functionality of martyrdom that remains seldom explained (Lifshitz, 2002). Martyrdom is thus instrumental in the construction and strengthening of social identities by providing the faithful with role models.

Theologians have also acknowledged this approach. In his study on the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor and theologian who was hanged by the Nazis for his participation in a conspiracy to kill Hitler. Craig Slane notes the existence of a dialectic between the martyr's death and his life. While creating a narrative of martyrdom, facts are suppressed or stressed in order to infuse death with meaning. Thus, life and death interpret each other (Slane, 2004).

The creation of narratives of martyrdom implies the existence of a social group that claims to represent the cause of the martyr, and recognizes the disposition the group to acknowledge this interpretation. Subsequently, the narrative must rework both the facts of life and the circumstances of death to make them an *imitatio Christi*, leaving aside aspects which do not pertain to the narrative flow.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, martyrs do not exist *per se*. They arise as a narrative construction which shapes real events and real lives to make them fit into a pattern able to give meaning to social causes, and promote loyalty and obedience to social configurations and hierarchies.

In this fashion, martyrdom implies the imposition of one narrative over others. Different versions of truth are contrasted, contested and defended by social groups. The making of a martyr implies one of them is eventually considered as the truest, the most meaningful of all possible alternatives. This does not imply that the process is rationally planned and devised, but that a number of unintended consequences of social action operate to create narratives of truth.

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<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Woodward has studied the way in which the Catholic Church "processes" martyrs to define their correctness and their ability to truly represent institutional interests and function as role models. The criteria to consider someone a martyr includes not only that she has died for the Catholic Church but that no other worldly reason compelled this person to sacrifice. This is the official reason stated to avoid considering people like Oscar Romero as Church martyrs.

These narratives are historically grounded and respond both to political necessities of the agents and to culturally available patterns.

This imposition of one martyrial narrative requires the act of denial of facts or aspects of reality that are not coherent with the desired pattern and may put into question its verisimilitude. Thus, social denial operates as a parallel process that remains indispensable to build narratives of martyrdom.

By using the notion of martyrdom as a narrative form, I intend to set my argument in the context of workable versions of the past that are made according to the necessities and circumstances of different social actors. Thus, my discussion will be located in the domain of contested memories which, unlike factual deeds, are permanently open to interpretation. This narrative constitutes a culturally available model according to which facts are reworked by those believing in the cause of the martyr. Thus, martyrdom is not “found” in history, but made.

What most of the proponents of the narrative approach have failed to see is that although this narrative-making process remains at the core of martyrdom, its construction is far from being a fabrication of individual minds or a creation of symbols in the comfortable void of the postmodern understanding of culture and meaning. This project aims to look at the way in which historically grounded events nourish a martyrial narrative and make its existence possible by linking remembrance with actual political and social identities.

This train of thought opens two sets of sociological problems: memory and memorialization on the one hand and the imposition of one narrative over alter-

native views, on the other. This imposition is by no means a literary conflict, but a political one. It implies the consolidation of one particular set of truth claims linked to the social location (class, status, gender, political preferences) of the group that defends it, and the subsequent defeat of alternative claims made by different communities. Thus, one may say that narratives of martyrdom tend to crystallize by marginalizing alternative stories. Although several sociological problems can be tackled by studying martyrdom, this article will try to build up only in two theoretical directions.

a. Meaningful death. My research analyzes the several ways in which a human death can be regarded as meaningful from the standpoint of social action by investigating the process of building social meaning out of death and modes in which action is organized around a perceived meaningful death.

b. Identity formation and social cohesion. I will analyze the manners in which martyrdom operates to strengthen social bonds and helps social movements to overcome critical times by stressing the need of homogeneity while facing persecution. Only a few are regarded as martyrs, when they are thought to have died for a cause considered sacred. Thus, the cause assumes greater importance than the martyr herself.<sup>8</sup>

The action that transforms a person’s death into martyrdom only attains meaning through the construction of a narrative device, built as a cultural pattern which has been inherited from Early Christianity and remains as such in Western societies.

This pattern is typically a chain of events that begins with a legal prohibition by the State or government, continues with an act of transgression motivated

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<sup>8</sup> Here I am not referring to the Catholic concept of martyr to the faith. Sacred causes, in this sense, can be religious (to carry on with certain practices or rites, to abstain from doing forbidden things (eating, working, having sex) or social and political stances, from voting rights to the defense of habeas corpus and other human rights. Although martyrdom has been usually seen as a non-modern phenomenon, the distinction between martyrs for religious causes vs. those who die for political ones is itself modern. Also, although martyrdom has been usually defined in terms of beliefs (see Rona Fields, e.g.), it has more to do with a practice that must be social (i.e. public) in order to be recorded (martyrdom becomes such only by being witnessed by a community of people faithful to a cause, being it a religious enterprise or a secular one. However, the martyr does not attend to modify her circumstances (or those of the social group to which she belongs). That is the role played by the hero, whose life is incidentally lost while performing an extraordinary action. The victim, on the other hand, is a passive bystander who just happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

<sup>9</sup> See Weinstein and Bell 1982 p. 142 ff. to a broader discussion on the links between popular piety and officially acknowledged sainthood.

<sup>10</sup> Anticlericalism here pertains to the hostility towards the Roman Catholic Church and its representatives for its real or perceived involvement in social and political affairs, its wealth or other issues. The term is commonly associated with the French Revolution and was part of the Liberal mindset in nineteenth century and revolutionary Mexico.

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<sup>11</sup> The Encyclical’s argument is mainly that Christ has “absolute empire over all creatures committed to him by the Father, all things are in his power”, and that all political power is bound to the Catholic Church.

<sup>12</sup> National League for the Defense of Religious Freedom. The League was founded in 1926 by a group of middle class lay Catholics working with the Mexican Episcopate attempting to change the course of governmental policies regarding religious cults in the country. By 1927 the League had started funding and aiding armed groups (Cristeros) in several parts of Western and central Mexico to overthrow Plutarco Elias Calles regime.

<sup>13</sup> Political problems related to “Christ the King” actually started in 1913 when a group of Catholics asked Pope Benedict XV his permission to consecrate the country to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In 1914 a ceremonial coronation took place and by 1920 a small monument had been built in El Cubilete, Guanajuato, considered to be the geographic center of Mexico. In 1923 the prelates decided to build a new, bigger monument to be consecrated to Christ the King. Ernesto Philippi, then apostolic delegate of the Vatican in Mexico, was the main guest at the ceremony. Both the ceremonial act and Monsignor’s presence were considered to be a challenge to the Constitution of 1917 so Alvaro Obregon’s government immediately decreed Philippi’s expulsion from the country.



by faith and is followed by eventual arrest, trial and death.

During and after death the body is displayed to stress suffering and humiliation. Later on, the scattering into pieces of the corpse gives way to relics; their possession becoming a symbol of power and a method of hierarchical differentiation among the faithful (Brown 1981).

The martyr is nonetheless remembered in several ways, stressing or downplaying personality traits or facts of her life to accommodate her to cult expressions. By this, I am not intending to say that there is a consciously defined course or a master-minding effort at creating martyrial narratives (although conscious efforts may exist to direct it in “appropriate” ways). On the contrary, a set of culturally devised patterns operate to give rise to cultic figures. Cults (social practices of ceremony and rites of worship) pre exist official narratives and, even in the very formalistic approach taken by the Catholic Church, collective religious practices and beliefs predate the existence of the recognized martyr.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. The Militant

On December 11, 1925 Pope Pious XI published *Quas Primas*, an Encyclical concerning the rights of the Catholic Church. By ordaining the celebration of Christ the King the Pope expected to provide a remedy for what he saw as one of the greatest evils of the twentieth century: anticlericalism.<sup>10</sup> Two years later, the firing squad that shot Miguel Pro saw him stretching his arms in a cross like manner and waiting for the bullets that would kill him while saying “Long Live Christ the King!”

The words and the gesture traveled around the world. Considered a martyr from the moment of his demise, he became one of the Catholic icons of his century. The words he chose to be his last and the simple movement of lifting his arms had strong po-

litical resonances.

*Quas Primas*, The Encyclical Letter released on the feast of Christ the King argued against anticlericalism as one of the great evils of the century. It warned that “If, therefore, the rulers of nations wish to preserve their authority, to promote and increase the prosperity of their countries, they will not neglect the public duty of reverence and obedience to the rule of Christ” whom, the Pontiff thought, had been wrongfully deprived of authority in civil affairs.<sup>11</sup>

Drawing on his Encyclical *Ubi Arcano*, Pope Pious XI went on to assert that “With God and Jesus Christ excluded from political life, with authority derived not from God but from man, the very basis of that authority has been taken away, because the chief reason of the distinction has been eliminated. The result is that human society is tottering to its fall, because it has no longer a secure and solid foundation”.

Therefore, the festivity on Christ the King was meant to be a recordation that Christ reined over political matters and States had the duty to subordinate to the Church. The feast was to be yearly observance with the hope that it “may hasten the return of society to our loving Savior. It would be the duty of Catholics to do all they can to bring about this happy result”. When Father Pro died crying for Christ the King, he made a powerful political statement. Although most of Pro biographers have preferred to see his gesture exclusively as a religious testimony, the context in which he died makes easy to see a potent political utterance on it. Mexico was the first country to celebrate the feast. In 1925 huge popular demonstrations organized by the Liga Nacional Defensora de la Libertad Religiosa (LNDR)<sup>12</sup> went to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City and created a great deal of tension within governmental circles.

The feast of Christ the King had been celebrated for the first time the year before his death.<sup>13</sup> Catholic sources report that around 200,000 people went to

14 The New York Times, presumably an independent source with greater credibility than Mexican newspapers, did not mention the gathering. However, it did mention one on December 12th, feast day of Guadalupe Virgin. According to the paper a crowd of 100,000 concentrated in the basilica in an orderly fashion while roaring “Long Live Christ the King!” There were reports of surveillance by police and military forces that searched each and every man and car for arms. (New York Times, 12/13/1926, p. 7)

15 Antonio Dragon SJ transcribed one of Father Pro’s letters telling his experience on that day. The letter has become famous because in it the writer makes clear his desire for martyrdom: “Now one can feel the shining of resurrection precisely because the darkness of persecution is at its peak. News of abuse and retaliation come from everywhere. The victims are plenty; there are more martyrs everyday... Oh, if only I won the lottery!” (Dragon 1961, 141)

16 “...spread leaflets in defense of religion [...] Father Pro once did a little propaganda in a tramway. He got on, sat down and, unobserved, stuck a set of bills on his back. Then, like the innocent victim of a practical joke, he rose and demurely walked up and down, to let every one have a good look at the stamps...” (Dragon 1930, 156).

17 “He was once arrested in front of the house where he resided and was compelled to get into an auto. He sat near the chauffeur who was ordered to drive him to the Police Commissioner’s. Before getting there he had to empty his pockets [stuffed with propaganda] at all costs. Engaging the driver in conversation he quietly dropped the leaflets as he went along” (Dragon 1930, 99)

18 December 4, 1926. LNDR threw out 1000 balloons over Mexico City skies. They contained leaflets printed by the LNDR Mexico City’ regional delegation, headed by Humberto Pro. Originals of the leaflets can be seen in AHICA, Tomo 2, doc. 31.

19 The entire saga can be read in *Excelsior*, a newspaper published in Mexico City. There are lengthy reports on the assassination attempt on the November 14th, 15th, 22nd, 23rd and 24th issues. This particular declaration by Chief Inspector Cruz was published on November 22.

20 Attempting to find information about it I went to Galeria 2 at Archivo General de la Nacion, in Mexico. This is the place where “political and social investigations” have been kept. My visits were fruitless. No signs of persecution against Pro were to be found. However, most of the documents of the time have been destroyed so many things are lost forever

the basilica of Guadalupe on October 31st, 1926.<sup>14</sup> Among them was Father Pro<sup>15</sup> whom, according to his own testimony, kept singing religious songs until the crowd surrounding him caught the cue and sang in open defiance to Calles Law.

Early stories of Miguel Pro's life have many similarities to later ones. In all of them, the Jesuit is depicted as a deeply pious person, devoted to "saving souls" and sometimes also to helping physical bodies, through assisting the Cristero fighters and their families. However, the later is mostly stressed in early accounts, belonging to the years 1927-1932. Each account portrays Pro as a charitable and generous man, but while the early ones narrate his adventures while gathering alms to help Cristero fighters, later stories point out to his obsession to provide spiritual comfort and relate the priest to young ladies attempting to enter the cloister and respectable matrons who revere the persecuted Church. One of the best examples of this trend are the two books written by Antonio Dragon.

Father Dragon, a Canadian Jesuit close to Pro, wrote in 1929 a book called Miguel Agustin Pro of the Society of Jesus. Martyr of Christ the King. The book—published in 1930—has a great advantage over later publications about the Jesuit. It is fresh and, although it obviously attempts to cast an image of Father Pro that would put him in the track of beatification, it still gives a flavor of the man behind the saint. Within this account, the martyrial narrative has not completely taken over the historical character. Thus, oblivious of the fact that Pro would be portrayed exclusively as a martyr for the faith, Dragon pays much attention to his errands as an activist for the Cristero cause.

Father Pro was a skilled propagandist and a born actor whose abilities were put to use in lectures about the difficult situation of the Catholic Church and the need for the faithful to defend the Church rights. His audiences were composed of workers, middle class young idealistic men, peasants and governmental employees. He would lecture using the bellicose language that was the sign of the times, spread leaflets and, according to Dragon and escape once again from the police using his keen sense of humor.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, Dragon's first attempt to narrate Pro's life stresses the difficult conditions under which he lived and the persecution he faced. Pro had—Father Dragon comments—pockets full of leaflets and stamps (Dragon, 1930) and was arrested at least once.

The story about Pro's detention by the police is interesting because it was one of the episodes in which many biographers indulged later on. Although some

of them referred to multiple arrests, the most conspicuous one seemed to have occurred right after November 12th, 1926.<sup>17</sup> Dragon's nuanced description of the ways in which the Jesuit avoided his pursuers before being captured reveals what other narrators would also depict: a clever and resourceful man tricking the police and avoiding forceful confrontations.

At any rate, the "arrest" had no consequences whatsoever for the propagandist. Nevertheless, another detention is described as potentially more dangerous. In November 1926, the League set up an act of protest in which balloons were stuffed with green, white and red colored handouts which denounced governmental repression against Catholics and the systematic take-away of the possibility of legally defending their rights.<sup>18</sup>

Father Pro was detained in connection with this act. He spent the night at Santiago Tlatelolco's jail and was released the day after. Several narrators have suggested that Pro was freed because he was mistaken for someone else (i.e., Father Pro was being sought after by the police, and he was released only because governmental agents were utterly inept). The only data to support this is a single declaration made by Roberto Cruz, Chief of the Police Inspection in Mexico City, the day after Pro brothers' detention in November 1927. Then, he said that Miguel Pro had been sought after by the police, giving no further information about the Jesuit's alleged involvement on criminal activities.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, reliable information about the persecution of Father Pro is scarce. Even more so if, as his biographers claim, he was persecuted because of his Catholic devotions and not because of his participation in activities related to the League. The fact may seem irrelevant to lay eyes, but it was not to those structuring the story to give it the specific form of martyrdom, which suggests that martyrs can only arise from an environment of persecution. The creation of oppositional identities framed against those persecuting is the backbone of the martyrial narrative so that the sense of threat and danger is a constituent part of the social mobilization linked to the Church's clandestine activities during the 1920s. Whether or not Father Pro was in reality persecuted for his faith, we may never know.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, those who followed him and who believed in his abilities to help people never

21 For a discussion on the process to attain sainthood see Weinstein and Bell (1982).

22 In 2008 I visited La Sagrada Familia, the church where Pro used to preach in Mexico City. The Company of Jesus in Mexico is working at full steam to promote his canonization so they have set up a small documentation center to keep documents pertaining to Miguel Pro. A twenty-something nice lay woman helped me going through some newly released documents and kept referring to him as "Miguelito", as opposed to the canonical "Padre Miguel".

doubted it.

Persecution was an overarching theme in early accounts of Pro's death. By being persecuted and put to death by the powers that be, his character was inscribed within the narrative genre of Christian martyrdom and his death was rendered with meaning: the defense of the rights of the Roman Catholic Church.

### 3. The Jester

In 1930, Mrs. George Norman wrote a book on Miguel Pro's life called *God's Jester*. In it, she captures an additional facet that remembrance has adopted when it comes to deal with the Jesuit. Memories pertaining to Father Pro have alternatively stressed his bravery, his faith and his devotion. Some of his early biographers acknowledged his militancy for the rights of the Church. Additionally, until around 1938 his death was constantly mentioned as the ultimate sacrifice made by a man persecuted by an impious regime attacking the Catholic Church. President Calles—Father Pro's nemesis according to most of his biographers—was referred to as an emissary of Hell with a personal interest in damaging the Church. Father Pro's death, then, was seen as a punishment inflicted on a just man because he happened to be a priest.

By the end of the 1930s, Church-State relations had improved considerably. In 1929 the Roman Catholic Episcopate had signed a peace agreement with the Mexican government, withdrawing its tacit endorsement to the Cristero rebellion and the League activities. After the 1929 peace accords, Catholic radicals had been marginalized by the Church hierarchy, just as radical anticlericals had been defeated in power struggles within President Cardenas government. The resort to amparos by both clergy and laity had often negated the restrictive laws, while informal bargaining, local adjustments, and inter-organizational programs had gradually created an ecclesiastical rapprochement with the secular government. Additionally, lay Catholic associations maintained and even expanded Church public influence despite formal restrictions on the clergy. In 1940, incoming president Manuel Avila Camacho's statement, "Soy creyente" (I am a believer), reflected government recognition that Catholicism was still of great importance in Mexican life, and instituted a new era of cooperation behind the table that would end in the 1990s (Reich 1997).

These developments brought changes to the way in which Father Pro was to be remembered. Narratives about his death started underlining his

suffering: sick from his days in Europe, Father Pro underwent an ordeal dealing with several surgical procedures which only debilitated him. His health became an issue, though hardly mentioned in early accounts, depicting Pro as tormented by his infirmity. Persecution remained at the center of all narratives but its rationale shifted. Policemen and politicians were pursuing him because of his faith and constant charities, while propagandistic talks on the rights of the Church became sermons on the significance of faith and Pro's connections with the League were not mentioned anymore. Even his two brothers, Humberto and Roberto, whom certainly were "liguero" militants, underwent a sanitizing process that started by downplaying their militancy. The process went so far that Miguel Palomar y Vizcarra, Vice president of LNDLR wrote some annotations on the topic explaining the Pro's involvement with the League (Palomar, 1945).

The social and political climate had changed so much that Antonio Dragon felt the need to revisit his 1930 version of Miguel Pro's life. As a result, he produced a new book, *Intimate Life of Father Pro*. There, the life of the Jesuit was framed within different parameters, with asceticism at the forefront and repeated references to physical suffering due to illness and flagellation. Additionally, his obedience to the Jesuit hierarchy became a prominent issue, stating that he would refrain from hitting the streets even when he knew he was needed by the faithful, only because he had been ordered to do so by his superiors. This new approach coincided with the strengthening of Catholic Action groups and with a long campaign to attain Pro's beatification. Pope John Paul II beatified him in 1988. The cause had been introduced to the Vatican in 1953

Other biographers had started this new trend around 1952. Thus, he was depicted in a way necessary to become a saint .

Miguel Pro also started being portrayed as a much more appealing character to young, lay people. His sense of humor and the persistence, with which he used to make practical jokes to others, were fully incorporated into narratives that in early accounts had only underscored his bravery and faithfulness . These nuances have usually been regarded as part of the formalization of Father Pro's story, directed at his beatification and eventual canonization. However, the ways in which the Jesuit has been remembered by lay society and the religious practices surrounding his figure indicate that this explanation alone is excessively narrow.

Asceticism was followed by the underlining of Father Pro's acute sense of humor. Dealing with his

ailing body and laughing at himself and others were the two main strains exalted by Mrs. Norman, the late Dragon and other biographers. He had transformed into a holy jester, playfully waiting for death to come—preferably as martyr.

### Conclusion

The transformation of a person's death into martyrdom is attained through the elaboration of a narrative device, built as a cultural pattern which has been inherited from Early Christianity and remains as such in Western societies. The creation of these narratives implies the existence of a social group that claims to represent the cause of the martyr, and recognizes the disposition of the group to acknowledge this interpretation. Subsequently, the narrative reworks both the facts of life and the circumstances of death to model them after a pattern of persecution, confrontation with the State, humiliation and public death. Remembrance based on this pattern necessarily leaves aside aspects which do not pertain to the narrative flow.<sup>23</sup> The making of martyrial narratives shapes real events infusing them with meaning and changing with sociopolitical events. I have used the story of Miguel Pro to show how the narrative about his life changed over time to stress different modes of remembrance.

Early accounts, written during or shortly after the Cristero war, underscored the risks he faced, his bravery and his pastoral mission evangelizing industrial workers. Later on, once the Church-State relations had normalized in Mexico, his militancy gave way to a softer, more ascetic figure more tuned to the non-political Catholicism then thriving in the country.

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