

Reclaiming Church Wealth: The Recovery of Church Property after Expropriation in the Archdiocese of Guadalajara, 1860–1911. By *José Roberto Juárez*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004. ix + 251 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, maps, tables. Cloth, \$45.00 ISBN: 0-826-33162-9.

Reviewed by Arnold J. Bauer

A fundamental difference between the European colonies in Latin America and North America was the much greater involvement of the Catholic Church in the economic and social affairs of the Southern Hemisphere. A century before the Protestant Reformation and the establishment of colonies in Virginia and Massachusetts, the Iberian Catholic Church was charged with converting the native populations and providing health, education, and welfare services to the colonial inhabitants. This, of course, required revenue. Over the course of more than 300 years after Columbus's landfall, and continuing well into the nineteenth century, the Church developed a vast fiscal network that reached into the most distant corners of the Spanish and Portuguese empires. Recognizing the enormity of the tasks the Church was required to perform, the colonial state relaxed restrictions on clerical ownership of property, encouraged missionary work, gave approval to the construction of uncounted convents, monasteries, and imposing cathedrals, backed the collection of tithes with judicial force, and, at least until the later eighteenth century, encouraged the enthusiasm that impelled the settlers and their descendents to lavish gifts and donations on the Church and to burden their properties in order to provide annuities to priests and nuns. By Independence in the early nineteenth century, the leaders of the new republics, influenced by European and North American ideas of political liberalism and free trade, were faced with the social contradictions of a conservative and opulent church thriving in the midst of an archaic agrarian system and a backward economy.

Nowhere in Latin American was the Church richer or more powerful than in Mexico. Its apparent wealth and reckless political alliance with the Conservatives led to conflict throughout the fierce Wars of the Reform (1856–59) and the ill-fated French Intervention (1862–65), which culminated in the execution, in 1867, of the faux emperor,

the Austrian archduke Maximilian, who had been installed by the French at the behest of Mexican Conservatives.

By the time the dust settled in the wake of the Liberal triumph, it was clear that the Church had been dealt a telling blow. It lost most of its rural and urban property and had to surrender the rights to annuities. The tithe—a 10 percent levy on most agricultural and livestock production—was decreed voluntary, leading to a sharp decrease in collection. Convents were turned into stables (in modern times, they became luxury hotels), seminaries for clerical training were shut tight, the wearing of clerical garb was forbidden in public, and even the ringing of church bells was outlawed. This extreme degree of anticlericalism raged in a country of Catholic believers.

Early-nineteenth-century observers, particularly Liberal critics, but also the savant Alexander von Humboldt, estimated that the Church possessed from one-third to one-half of Mexico's real estate, uncounted millions in the form of jewels, lavish clerical paraphernalia, adornments of all kinds, and capital investments. Further, the Church was suspected of serving as a kind of vast mortgage bank for the rural elite. Modern research has contradicted this idea and has produced some surprises, such as the discoveries that the Church held far more urban than rural property; that a large part of its wealth consisted of obligations imposed by landowners on their properties to guarantee annuities of 5 or 6 percent for priests and nuns (the capital value of these levies could only be foreclosed with great difficulty); and that the secular diocesan Church's reputation as a banker was exaggerated. In fact, the monasteries and convents of the regular orders were the important lenders, enabling them to develop over more than three centuries a symbiotic relationship with the landowner class. These facts, and the elements of the subsequent Liberal assault, have been firmly established by Mexican, European, and North American scholars.

José Roberto Juárez takes up the story at the point when a wounded Church came to terms with the capitalist dictatorship of don Porfirio Díaz during the period of Mexican history known as the Porfiriato (1867–1911), allowing it to recover perhaps a third of its original wealth. This subject has attracted considerably less scholarly attention than the narrative of its original losses; historians are thus fortunate to have, after a long gestation, the original and enormously detailed research presented in this book. José Juárez enlisted

his family's assistance in ordering and analyzing the massive, difficult-to-access ecclesiastical archives. Forced to be selective, he chose to focus on materials pertaining to the single archdiocese of Guadalajara, the third most important in Mexico (after Mexico City and Puebla). Armed with newly uncovered documents, the author gives an even-handed account of the fierce conflicts between Church and state that wracked Mexico throughout the nineteenth century. He demonstrates how the modernizers of the Porfirian state, recognizing the need for social peace, looked aside as clerics, by appealing to Mexicans' deep-seated religiosity, worked out arrangements for the return of its property with those who had previously collaborated in the Liberal despoliation of the Church.

Readers of this journal may be most interested in the section that details the Church's reentry, toward the end of the nineteenth-century, into the credit market. As it gradually recovered some of its former property, and as donations from the faithful trickled in, the Mexican Church—shorn now of convents and monasteries—sought out opportunities for stable investment in a national economy starved for capital and lacking either commercial or mortgage banks. By honoring the ancient precept to shun usury and charging interest rates of 5 percent to 6 percent, the Church could pick and choose among the most qualified borrowers. The amount of some loans was impressive for the times: one, for \$400,000 pesos, was made to the newly established Banco Hipotecario; another, to an industrialist, was for \$500,000 (the Mexican peso was close to the value of the U.S. dollar). The Church extended credit primarily to the new class of textile manufacturers, modernizing landowners, and the new banks themselves. The latter, in turn, extended loans at interest several times the clerical rate, "as high as 72 to 108 per cent" in the 1880s (pp. 148–56). The author's insistence on the low rates offered by the Church in the midst of an overheated credit market may raise a few eyebrows; indeed a dash of economic theory would be welcome. If the interest charged was so far below market rate, one would expect to see kickbacks, disguised payments, or special favors from the borrowers. Presumably, there is no evidence of such practices in the Church archives.

For Latin Americanists, and particularly for Mexicanists, José Juárez's diligent research, firm grasp of context, and workmanlike prose will illuminate an area that was

previously terra incognita: the resurgence of the Church in the later stages of a more accommodating liberalism.

Arnold J. Bauer, professor of history at the University of California, Davis, is the author of several articles on church and society, including "The Church and Spanish American Agrarian Structure: 1765–1865," published in The Americas (1971), and the editor of La iglesia en la economía de América Latina: siglos xvi–xx, published in 1986. His book Goods, Power, History: Latin America's Material Culture (2001) introduces his current interest.