



MEXICO

San Francisco Church, Guanajuato, Mexico.
(Photo by Russ Bowling.)

Gender, Politics and the Church

by Margaret Chowning

Many historians have assumed that Mexican women have a “special affinity” for the Catholic Church and that this close relationship has always existed. My research — on changes over time in how women have related to ecclesiastical authority within key institutional contexts — suggests that only the first of these assumptions is correct. That is, Mexican women do have a special affinity for the church, but it is a historical relationship — timeful, not timeless. Women played important roles in three types of ecclesiastical institution: religious orders, schools for girls and lay associations or *cofradías*. In this brief article, I will discuss only the changing relationship between women and the church in the *cofradías*.

The story begins in 1810. Before the outbreak of the wars for independence, women in *cofradías* were more visible than cloistered nuns, but barely. They participated in public demonstrations of piety, especially the religious processions and fiestas that the *cofradías* organized, but mainly as spectators. The officers and most-active participants were always men. In short, gender hierarchies in *cofradías* aligned seamlessly with gender hierarchies in colonial society, where women were also meant to be subordinate and relatively invisible.

This picture began to change in 1810 with the collapse of the Mexican economy, at its heart a collapse of silver mining and lending. Without mining to create new wealth

and without lending to finance a recovery (since there were no banks and the church's finances were immobilized by the inability of debtors to repay their old debts), the post-1810 depression was prolonged well into the 1830s. Everywhere in Mexico, church institutions, such as *cofradías*, along with private wealthholders, suffered. But the suffering was especially painful in the center-western region of the country, where dependence on silver had been greatest. It was there that one of the most extraordinary responses to economic hardship within church institutions took place: an upending of gender hierarchies within lay associations.

In light of the financial weakness of the *cofradías*, the concomitant decline in the prestige of membership and leadership, and perhaps also the availability, after independence, of alternative and more "modern" forms of sociability, men began to drift away from the *cofradías*. By the 1830s, women throughout the Republic had come to constitute large majorities of the membership, averaging almost 75 percent. But as the economy slowly recovered in Mexico City, the archbishopric of Mexico and the bishoprics of Oaxaca and Durango, most colonial-era *cofradías* stabilized financially. While they continued to register large female majorities, financial stability meant that enough men stuck with the *cofradías* that the principle of male leadership was not questioned. In the center-west, however, in the states of Michoacán, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Zacatecas and Aguascalientes, where the post-1810 depression had been most severe, many of the old male-led confraternities were almost totally dysfunctional. Here, a whole new model of lay association emerged, one that not only permitted but required female leadership, even in mixed-gender associations, producing what one priest called the "very improper and very inconvenient" spectacle of women governing men.

The revolution in gender relations began in San Miguel de Allende, where the parish priest had first tried, and failed, to revive many of the old *cofradías*. In April 1840, 32 ladies in San Miguel delivered a letter to their parish priest, proposing the foundation of a new devotional association dedicated to "perpetual vigil" over the Blessed Sacrament, the "Vela Perpetua." Thirty-one *señoras* would be given the name of "*cabezas de día*." Each *cabeza* would be responsible for signing up two people to sit vigil for every half hour of the day, beginning at 6:00 a.m. and continuing until 6:00 p.m., for one day of the month. The *cabezas* would elect an *Hermana Mayor* and a treasurer (later most *Velas* added a secretary). Men could join. But by constitutional rule, women were to be the officers.

When the petition from San Miguel reached the offices of the bishop, no one knew quite what to do. The first to see

the petition was the bishop's chief legal advisor (*promotor fiscal*), who cautiously and rather tepidly applauded the foundation before sending the petition on to the bishop. Ordinarily, the bishop would then have approved the recommendation of his promotor, but, breaking with normal practice, he asked another legal advisor, his *provisor*, to have a look at it. This advisor was clearly nervous about approving the petition. So, invoking the usually-ignored provision that civil authorities must approve new foundations of pious associations, he required the ladies of San Miguel to re-submit their request, this time to the governor of the Department of Guanajuato. They did so. The governor appointed a special departmental *junta* to discuss the case. If the bishop's advisers had hoped that the civil authorities would bail them out of making a decision on the female-led Vela, they were disappointed. The departmental *junta* evaluated the Vela petition positively since, as they said, both the priest and the prefect, "individuals who inspire our confidence," approved; since the Vela did not mix the spiritual with the political or civil; and since it did not threaten to "disturb the peace."

This complicated set of delays and the confusion on the part of the church hierarchy confirms the obvious: that the Vela was different from anything that had come before. But once it was approved, the San Miguel Vela took on a new life as a precedent for the future. The Vela Perpetua spread quickly within the bishopric of Michoacán and by 1843 had reached the bishopric of Guadalajara, where there was another explosion of interest. By 1850, at least 50 *Velas* had been founded in these two dioceses — at an average of almost six a year — and by 1860, at least 82 were in existence. There was simply no precedent in the history of Mexican *cofradías* for the enthusiasm with which the *Velas* were received in these two bishoprics, or the rapidity with which they proliferated.

In the states of Michoacán and Guanajuato, the Vela attracted male membership that amounted to about 25 percent of the total — about what the balance between men and women had been in the old colonial confraternities. It is striking how easily the men who became members of the Vela Perpetua appear to have accepted female leadership. But the same cannot always be said of the priests. Although priests benefitted in a number of ways from the presence of a Vela Perpetua, they were not always happy to have to contend with such a popular, female-led organization.

The generally elite and middle-class women of the Vela understood how power worked and used that knowledge to defend their organization. This skill was especially important as the *Velas* began to raise significant sums of money. The more the *Velas'* funds grew, the more priests

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Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Mexican society women.

were tempted to try to dictate their use. Rafael Herrera, for example, the parish priest of San Diego del Bizcocho in Guanajuato, asked the Vela to pay some of his expenses, in light of the fact that it had accumulated so much money. The ladies responded that “their treasury is not his personal store” and accused him of abusing power and of interfering in their elections. Though after several exchanges he responded that he “desired to put an end to disputes with women,” he could not resist remarking that if he had in fact interfered in the last elections, “Doña Florentina Garate would never have been elected *Hermana Mayor*.” In 1850, the priest of Jaral, Guanajuato, José de Jesús Robledo, was locked in a similar battle with the *Hermana Mayor* of the Vela of that town. “The administration of this institution,” he fulminated, “has passed from the hands of the priest to the hands of a woman, one who functions as an arbiter of and superior to the priest. She is the one who ordains and disposes whatever she judges to be convenient to the Vela ... She has bought some items for the cult, but these are only to be used when she disposes, or if I beg and plead, so that the Host... is subject to the will of the Señora... I have reproached her for her absolutism, telling her that she has been put in charge of the *veladoras*, but she has not been put in charge of the Church...”

And in another case involving the ladies of the Pátzcuaro Vela, the socially prominent *Hermana Mayor*, Doña María

de la Luz Sierra and most of the *cabezas* and other officers threatened to resign over the issue of who controlled the Vela’s funds. Doña Luz argued her case in a lengthy and well-crafted letter to the priest, Victoriano Treviño. The Vela, she wrote, had been so successful that it was able not only to cover its costs but also to undertake the ambitious work of rebuilding the church, “rescuing it from its miserable and abandoned state and transforming it into the beautiful building we see today.” But now Treviño wanted to dictate which projects the Vela would pay for. He demanded that instead of paying for the roof of the sacristy, the Vela must finance repairs on the roof of the baptistery. As the ladies saw it, the sacristy roof repair prevented the ruination of a large part of the wall of the church, whereas the baptistery roof repair, besides being much more expensive, “only serves to protect a hallway that is of little use other than as a place for you to drink your chocolate and distract your imagination with agreeable vistas.” Beyond this specific issue, Doña Luz wrote, Treviño had offended the women of the Vela by calling them “impertinent old women.” “I do not consider myself capable of maintaining good harmony with you,” she continued, “and so I have decided to resign my task of leading the Vela.” Others joined her. Treviño backed down.

In all three of these cases, priests’ disgust with the Vela officers’ unwillingness to be submissive was expressed in obviously gendered language — Herrera’s dismissal of

“disputes with women,” Robledo’s calling the Hermana Mayor an “absolutist” and Treviño’s angry lashing out at “impertinent old women” — suggesting that the expectation of feminine docility and the ability at long last to control lay associations was a part of the initial priestly enthusiasm for the Vela. Their attitude toward defiant, educated women in leadership positions is certainly not shocking. In my research on a convent rebellion in the 1760s, the epithets directed against the leader of the dissident faction — she was a “caudillo” and a “despot” — were similar to those used by priests against the Vela ladies. But female leadership in the Vela Perpetua (and in the other female-led pious associations that followed) opened up a much broader terrain on which those strained relationships between priests and (relatively) powerful women played out than the cloistered world of the convent. Furthermore, where convent rebellion was a transgression that was put down in such a way as ultimately to reinforce the very gender hierarchy it had challenged, female leadership of the Vela Perpetua was accepted (if grudgingly) by a church that needed to make important adjustments in order to survive in a treacherous political climate. Far from reinforcing old hierarchies, it permanently opened up new spaces for women in the church.

The Vela Perpetua was not political; it did not even hold meetings until much later in the century; it was not a coffeehouse or a tavern where politics were discussed. But I argue, building on the work of students of civil society who point out that even nonpolitical organizations have political

implications (for example, Robert Putnam’s bowling leagues), that there are four ways that the Vela was political and that understanding it can help us better understand Mexican politics — indeed, that failing to understand the relationship between women and the church will prevent us from fully understanding Mexican politics.

First and most obviously, the Vela gave the mid-century clergy in the center-west a way to reconnect the laity to the church by means of novel, attractive, extra-liturgical ties. This show of power impressed, reassured and emboldened Catholic men, and it surely contributed to the change in liberal depictions of the relationship between the church and women. From the relatively benign associations of the early 19th century — when liberals gently relegated religion to a private sphere to which they had also relegated women, by calling women the natural guardians of Christian values — religion was now depicted as the business of “fanatical *beatas* and vulgar old women” and the church as “hiding behind the petticoats” of its female supporters. The very fact that liberals tried to denigrate the church by caricaturing its relationship to women strongly suggests that relationships like those forged in the foundation of the Vela Perpetua gave the church some of the power that the liberals had hoped to undermine.

Second, the Vela offered a way to appeal to and attract liberal Catholics and even religious liberals. When the Velas privileged private meditations in front of the Blessed Sacrament over participation in street processions; a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, embodied in the

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Female soldiers in the Cristero War.



Photo courtesy of StoriaLibera.

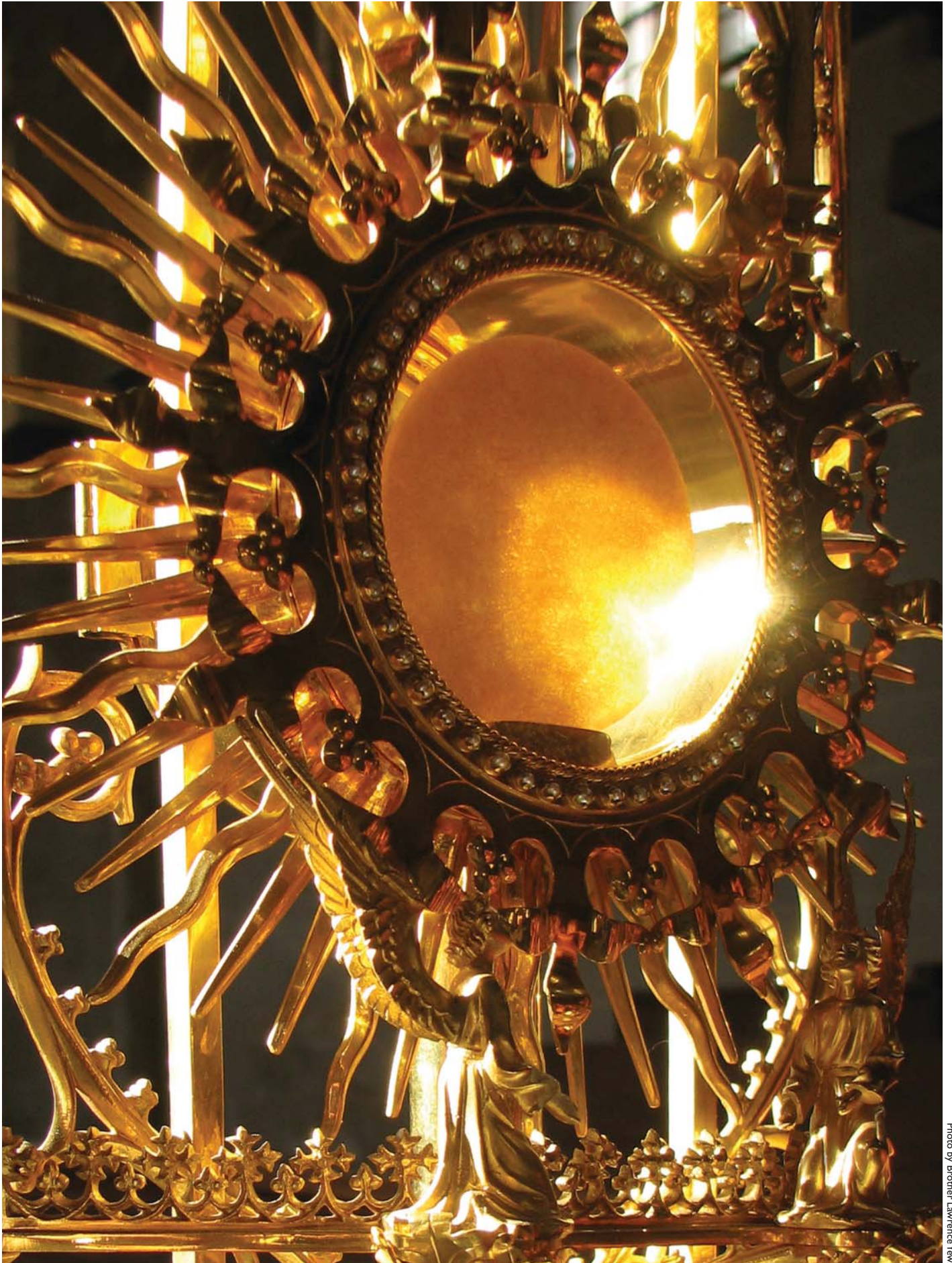


Photo by Brother Lawrence Yew.

Sacrament, over the communal relationship with fellow processants; individual responsibility for organizing and keeping to an assigned schedule over once-a-year displays of passion — the interior over the exterior, the individual over the communal, the quiet over the exuberant, the rational over the emotional — they (unselfconsciously) embodied the kind of “modern” religious culture that “modern” Catholics could embrace.

The third way was more direct. By organizing elite and middle-class women under female leadership, the Vela and other female-led religious associations made it easier for women to petition, protest and demonstrate as women. The first major entry into politics of women self-identified as women came as part of the 1850s and 1860s protests against the laws of the Reform and other anticlerical measures. For the first time that I know of, numerous petitions came from the “señoras” of X town or city. Among my still incomplete sample of female protest, women’s groups in the center-west seem to have been disproportionately represented. Over 600 women from Guadalajara, over 500 from Morelia and hundreds of women from other, smaller towns in Jalisco, Guanajuato and Michoacán signed multiple petitions. It is impossible to connect the success of the Vela in the center-west to the high degree of activism of Catholic women in that region in other than a correlative way, but even the point of a correlation is worth making.

Finally, in a similar vein, several historians, attempting to discover what distinguished the regions of Mexico where the late 1920s Cristero rebellion flourished from other parts of Mexico where it did not, have concluded that the presence or absence of a vibrant Catholic associational life was an important factor. This raises the question — unaddressed in the literature on the Cristeros — of how that especially active associational life came into existence. Devotional associations had proliferated throughout Mexico beginning in the 1890s, a part of the Vatican-inspired “devotional revolution” in defense of global Catholicism. But my research suggests that in the center-west, the long history of women’s leadership of pious associations was clearly important in producing a dense landscape of religious associationalism with deep roots where the Cristero movement could flourish.

In sum, 1810 is a key date in the history of the relationship between women, the Catholic Church and Mexican politics. In the aftermath of the wars of independence, a chain of events was set in motion that led to the establishment of pious associations governed by women, and this infusion of new religious and organizational energies helped the church survive at the grassroots level during the dark days from the Reform until 1890 or so, when the regime of Porfirio Díaz

reconciled with the church. That the Díaz regime chose the path of reconciliation may be seen as a reflection of the church’s ability to adjust, to accept the unacceptable idea of women as leaders of the laity, both male and female. The Vela Perpetua was a key part of that process. Moreover, the institutions for which it paved the way, like the highly political Damas Católicas, continued to help the church retain the political power that it seems, yet again, to have recovered since the 2000 elections, with the rise to power of the devout Felipe Calderón and the pro-Catholic Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN). In important ways, then, the story of the Vela Perpetua is a story not only of gender and church, but of gender, church and politics.

Margaret Chowning is a professor in the Department of History at UC Berkeley. She spoke at “1810~1910~2010: Mexico’s Unfinished Revolutions,” a conference convened by Berkeley’s Bancroft Library on October 22, 2010.

Facing page: A monstrance holds the consecrated host.
Below: A modern vigil at the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe.



Photo by Dionicia Ramos.