

# CATHOLIC WOMEN AND PATRIOTISM: ACCIÓN CATÓLICA MEXICANA AND WOMEN'S ORGANIZING IN WORLD WAR II

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## **MUJERES CATÓLICAS Y PATRIOTISMO:**

ACCIÓN CATÓLICA MEXICANA Y ORGANIZACIÓN FEMENINA  
EN LA SEGUNDA GUERRA MUNDIAL

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### **Abstract**

*Mexico entered World War II in 1942 and Catholic women's lay organizations immediately organized to support the troops as they were stationed in Mexico. This article examines the women of Acción Católica and their relationship to ideas of patriotism and support for the national war effort. Despite the previous (often violent) antagonism between Catholics and the post-revolutionary government, the rapprochement between the Catholic Church and the government of the 1940s allowed Catholic women participating in lay organizations to embrace a national project. By dedicating their charity and service projects to the war effort, Catholic women were able to redefine patriotism and citizenship.*

**Keywords:** *women, Catholic, World War II, patriotism, community.*

### **Resumen**

México entró en la Segunda Guerra Mundial en 1942 a lado de los Aliados. El gobierno instituyó un reclutamiento de jóvenes. Las organizaciones laicas de mujeres católicas se organizaron para apoyar a las tropas estacionadas en México, alegando el patriotismo como su vocación religiosa. El artículo examina a las católicas y su relación con las ideas de patriotismo. A pesar del antagonismo previo (a menudo violento) entre católicos y el gobierno posrevolucionario, su acercamiento permitió a las mujeres católicas que participaban en organizaciones laicas abrazar finalmente un proyecto nacional.

**Palabras clave:** mujeres, Católico, Segunda Guerra Mundial, patriotismo, comunidad.

## Introduction

In June of 1942, Sofía del Valle, founder of Juventud Católica Femenina Mexicana (JCFM), published an editorial in *Juventud*, the organization's magazine, exhorting young women to support the country and be patriotic. The editorial, entitled, "The Country is in Danger," described patriotism as being

both a feeling and a debt: it is the love that the nation has for you and for each of its citizens. Patriotism is self-sacrifice that manifests itself in the obedience of laws and the completion of professional duties during peace, and during war it is the sacrifices that the country claims, or the spontaneous sacrifices one makes to serve and save the country (Del Valle, 1942a: 12).

She ends the editorial exhorting young Catholic women to "prepare yourself to serve Mexico!" (del Valle, 1942a: 12). This editorial shows that del Valle hoped to persuade young Catholic women to view themselves as important members of the Mexican Catholic community, and that this membership saw patriotism and service to the country as part of the sacrifices women had to make to protect the country and be a part of this group.

Questions about women and citizenship often focus on women and the vote—that is, how do women perform citizenship if they are not granted suffrage? Certainly, women fighting for suffrage in places like Mexico saw their ability to participate in politics as being very much tied to their ability to vote (Cano, 2013; Olcott, 2005). Even some Catholic women saw suffrage as key to their ability to perform citizenship. For example, some articles in the *Union Femenina Católica Mexicana's* magazine saw women's vote as central to creating a more Christian society (Espinoza Meléndez, 2020: 7-8). Many women in the newly formed Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) (García Núñez, 2017) as well as women in the conservative Sinarquista movement also viewed the vote as a way

for women to help create a more moral society (Rodríguez Bravo, 2015).

However, if one defines citizenship as being a member of a community, with membership providing reciprocal rights and obligations, we can begin to see how many Catholic women, particularly women who participated in Catholic lay organizations, conceived of their status in Mexico before the vote (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 69-70). Historian Vera Larisa García Núñez, argues that women organizing in the PAN understood their citizenship as a means through which to create a better society—that citizenship meant using the vote and other community work to improve Mexico (García Núñez, 2017: 12). She also notes that there was considerable overlap in PAN membership and women's membership in Acción Católica Mexicana (ACM) (García Núñez, 2017: 16-17). The women participating in Acción Católica Mexicana during World War II also understood their support of the troops as being a way to support the *patria*. They used the war to create a community of believers who viewed their actions as being valuable, especially in the context of the recent political exclusion of Catholics in the 1920s and 30s. They believed that Catholic women could perform service in the public sphere in a way that was socially approved—women had long used charity work as a means to appropriate space in the public sphere. Participating in the war effort, however, allowed the women of ACM to support a national political goal and help shape discourses on patriotism. They used this to create a definition of patriotism based in service and grounded in morality, the family, and faith. Women were central to this definition. Their patriotism allowed them to take their charitable work and repurpose it into labor to support the war effort.

Scholarship on World War Two in Mexico has largely focused on Mexico politically and economically. Works by historians such as Halbert Jones (2014) and Steven Niblo (1999) have looked at how the war allowed the state to consolidate itself politically, and other scholars, such as Rafael Velázquez

Flores (2007) have explored the impact of World War Two on Mexico's diplomatic relations. Others have looked at the impact of the war on Mexican public opinion (Ortiz Garza, 2007). Thomas Rath's (2013, 2019) work on the military itself does examine how reforms within the institution were gendered in particular ways, but it does not specifically look at women's relationship to the military.

Other important work has looked at Mexican Catholic women and Catholic women's lay organizations' actions during the 1940s, but they do not focus specifically on women's ideas about patriotism itself. María Luisa Aspe Armella (2008) traces the organizational features of Acción Católica, and Valentina Torres Septién (2002, 2007) has written about social relationships and ideas of beauty amongst Catholic youth. Stephen J.C. Andes (2019) touches on women's activism in his biography of Sofía del Valle, mentioning her continuing influence on the JFCM.

Historians, such as Patience Schell (1999), Ann Blum (2001), Kristina Boylan (2006), María Teresa Fernández Aceves (2014) have shown that many Catholic women have used Catholic lay organizations to push for greater autonomy in the public sphere. Social Catholicism gave women openings to maneuver in ways that could be seen as political. Social Catholicism was born out of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), which asked Catholic societies in the late nineteenth century to counter what they saw as dangerous ideologies—such as socialism, communism, and anarchism—with a Catholic social organization. In particular, the Church asked Catholic women to create private charities and other organizations, in order to combat some of the most egregious effects of urbanization and industrialization. At this time in Mexico, upper-class women founded organizations like the Unión de Damas Católicas in 1912 as well as La Casa Amiga de la Obrera (founded in 1887 by Porfirio Díaz's wife, Carmen). The hope was that, through charitable works and other programs, Catholics could under-

cut the appeal of what they considered radical ideologies (Schell, 1999).

The Damas worked throughout the Revolution and into the 1920s. The Cristero Rebellion (1926-1929), an uprising against the Revolution's anti-clerical measures, allowed some women, as Boylan (2006) has shown, to participate in the militant activities of the uprising. After the Cristero Rebellion, the Church reorganized in an attempt to calm church-state tensions and created Acción Católica Mexicana (ACM)—a lay organization based on the principles of social Catholicism. The Church created Acción Católica Mexicana with four main branches. The branches were la Unión Católica Mexicana (UCM) for men; la Unión Femenina Católica Mexicana (UFCM) for married or older women, la Juventud Católica Femenina Mexicana (JCFM) for young women and la Acción Católica de la Juventud Mexicana (ACJM) for young men (Aspe Armella, 2008). Acción Católica Mexicana was to serve as the means for Catholics to organize. The Church hierarchy did not support a Mexican Catholic political party, but rather saw civic action through the re-organized ACM as the most appropriate route for Mexican Catholics to push for change. Much of the organization in the 1930s focused on socialist education. Socialist education was the secular education mandated by the state that focused on issues like sexual and scientific education (Vaughan, 1997).

This article aims to fill the gap in these literatures by focusing on Catholic women's conceptions of patriotism through their work in the UFCM and JCFM. Their support for the Mexican government is significant because of the history of church/state relations in Mexico.

Postrevolutionary governments instituted anti-clerical measures, which resulted in the violence of the Cristero Rebellion. Even after the rebellion and the subsequent creation of ACM, tensions remained high. As mentioned, throughout the 1930s ACM fought the Mexican government over issues such as socialist education and popular culture. It was not until the election of President

Manuel Ávila Camacho that relations between the Catholic Church and the Mexican government began to improve, largely because of Ávila Camacho's declaration, "Soy creyente". The thaw in relations allowed Catholic women to back the government in its support for Mexican entry into World War Two (Andes, 2014).

### **World War II and Mexico: Public Political Support and the Catholic Church**

When Miguel Ávila Camacho became president of Mexico in 1940, he did so with a call for national unity. In particular, he sought to mend relations with the Catholic Church and with the United States (Loaeza, 2013: 252, 302). When World War II started, many in Mexico did not initially consider joining the war effort. The war seemed far away, and while some Mexican political organizations supported, or were at least sympathetic, to the fascist cause, most Mexicans viewed the conflict as being outside their interests. When the US entered the war in December 1941, pressure to support the United States grew, and Ávila Camacho would use entry into the war to further his goals for national unity (Loaeza, 2013: 256). Mexico, officially neutral when the war began, was clearly opposed to the Axis powers and sought to support and collaborate with the United States (Krauze, 1997: 503). It would not be until a German U-Boat shot the Mexican oil tanker *Potrero del Llano* in the Atlantic, killing its captain and officers on May 14, 1942 that Mexico seriously considered joining the war effort. This was not a consensus view, however, as some political groups were not enthusiastic about the war (Jones, 2014: 57).

Reactions to the sinking of the *Potrero del Llano* depended largely on ideological positions. As historian Halbert Jones has noted, while most government officials and legislators publicly expressed outrage over the sinking, they were fairly noncommittal in their recommendations for next steps—maintaining that they would support the president's decision on whether or not to

enter the war. Popular as well as political figures on the left argued for a declaration of war on the Axis powers, while those on the right generally (at least initially) did not support a declaration of war. Mexicans in general mistrusted the United States and did not want to serve as cannon fodder for a distant war for little to gain (Jones, 2014: 65). In general, public opinion, especially amongst the middle classes, and been pro-German, although that began to shift as the war progressed (Krauze, 1997: 504).

Conservative political groups initially opposed entry into the war. The conservative political party PAN initially asked Ávila Camacho to avoid participation. The PAN was not anti-American, but was concerned about the growing influence of Protestantism, and did not favor closer diplomatic ties with the United States—which serving as allies would create. According to Jones, "in the wake of the attack on the Mexican tanker, the party's central committee told Ávila Camacho that 'Mexico should not consider as a *casus bello* [*caso de guerra*] the sinking of the '*Potrero del Llano*'". In the committee's view, a declaration of war would be justified only if Mexico itself was attacked, "For reasons of justice, of true dignity, and of the supreme national interest," the committee members wrote, 'a declaration of war would only be called for to reject by force a violent, actual attack against the honor or the integrity of the Nation'" (Jones, 2014: 65). While the PAN did believe that the Mexican government should defend the honor of the patria, they did not see war as the appropriate defense. A different policy would

"strengthen the international situation of Mexico" while enjoying "the unanimous and resolved support of the Mexican people", thus contributing to the "realization of the national unity which is absolutely indispensable in the face of decisions with irrevocable consequences for the Fatherland" (Jones, 2014: 65).

The Sinarquistas, another right-wing group opposed entry into the war, arguing in favor of Mexican neutrality. The Sinarquis-

tas criticized growing diplomatic relations between the Mexican and United States governments. Conservative politicians sought to protect and defend Mexico's honor, but did not believe declaring war was necessary (Jones, 2014: 65-67).

The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, did agree to support the war effort. It was significant when the archbishop of Mexico City, Luis María Martínez, affirmed that "it falls to the Civil Government to define for a nation the attitude that it ought to adopt in international affairs and especially in conflicts with other nations" and that therefore, "we Catholics ought to put aside our personal ideas, however well founded they might seem to us, in order to comply with the dispositions issued by the Civil Authority". Martínez added that "duty and patriotism" demanded cooperation with the war effort, calling patriotism "a profoundly Christian virtue that imposes unity and harmony in these moments which are so grave for our Fatherland" (Jones, 2014: 67).

While it was not, as Jones notes, "a ringing endorsement of Mexico's entry into the war", they did clearly indicate that Mexico's Catholics should accept the government's decision to enter the war. Jones also notes that

the cleric's statement might well have come at the urging of Ávila Camacho: the president later told Ambassador Messersmith that just prior to his declaration of a state of war in May, he had held a meeting with the archbishop in which he had told the head of the Mexican church that he found too great apathy on the part of the clergy and of the Church towards the war [and that] he felt the Church was not helping itself by this lack of a clearly defined attitude (Jones, 2014: 67).

By 1943 government officials had met with the archbishop to discuss the role of the Church in the war effort. Martínez agreed, in a show of unity, to support public statements indicating that Catholics, like other Mexicans, were cooperating with government actions to support the war (Moreno, 2003: 68).

The archbishop largely agreed with Ávila Camacho both because of his own personal beliefs but also because he was pleased with the growing rapprochement between the Mexican government and the Catholic Church (Jones, 2014: 85-87). Ávila Camacho presented himself as a believer, with conservative values, who made a distinction between fanaticism and Catholicism, and therefore did not support religious persecution. He actively sought cooperation with the Catholic Church (Blancarte and Veloz Leija, 2018: 102). The Catholic Church had also supported the 1938 Oil Expropriation and had organized fundraising drives to support the cause —supporting the war effort was not the first time they had worked with the postrevolutionary government (Kiddle, 2015: 111; Pérez Flores and Cunha Filho, 2020: 682). Other members of the Catholic hierarchy seized upon the declaration of a state of war as a moment to make a subtle push for the expansion of the role of the church in public life. For example, one archbishop took the opportunity to argue for Catholic priests to play the role of army chaplains (Jones, 2014: 89). After Mexico entered the war, Acción Católica Mexicana began to organize events in support of the government. Their activities included organized prayers, material assistance and promoting patriotism (Rankin, 2010). Historian Thomas Rath also notes that the 1940s saw a gradual rapprochement between the army and the Catholic Church. The church hierarchy, along with the leaders of Acción Católica Mexicana supported the war effort in 1942, and the government allowed priests into military hospitals (Rath, 2013: 76).

Once Mexico entered the war, the government implemented a program of compulsory military service at the end of 1942, instituting a draft for eighteen-year-old men (Jones, 2014: 95). The draft was intended to expand the size of the military to defend Mexico, as well as to serve as a means to teach young men valuable skills as well as a sense of citizenship (Jones, 2014: 114). Rath notes that many continued to protest conscription, and many of these protests were



led by women. For example, in Nieves in July of 1943, a widow of a schoolteacher was shot during an earlier conscription protest, and thus protestors planned a “protest of women” if the federal army showed up to their next demonstration. In December 1942, there were also reports of women throwing stones and attempting to lynch military inspectors and the local recruitment committee in Tuxtepec, Oaxaca, in order to disrupt the first conscription lottery (Rath, 2013: 76).

Other women's groups, however, supported the war. Prominent feminists demanded that women should also be able to participate in military training. Rath notes that the military did not seriously consider these demands, as military reformers had, in part, sold the idea of conscription as a way to professionalize the military, and finally rid it of *soldaderas*, who many believed fostered “insubordination, promiscuity, and disease” (Rath, 2013: 68.) Military leaders did not support women in the military, but did not oppose Catholic women's lay organizations work to support the troops.

### Catholic Women and Patriotism

At the start of the war, popular Catholic magazines, such as *Juventud* (the official magazine of JCFM), ran at least one article or editorial most issues either discussing patriotism or outlining how women could be involved in the war effort. Sofía del Valle, as head of JCFM, used her position to encourage young Catholic women to support the war effort—she believed that “Mexico needed women of intelligence to protect Mexico for future generations” (Andes, 2019: 329). According to historian Stephen J.C. Andes, del Valle used *Juventud* throughout the war to push for an image of an intelligent feminine woman—one who was ready to serve her family, her patria and the world (Andes, 2019: 330). Del Valle believed that intelligence and professionalism were central to the definition of appropriate Catholic femininity. And while it is impossible to know how many readers concurred with these

views, it is nevertheless significant that the leadership of these organizations sought to promote a particular patriotic view.

*Juventud* editors saw themselves as part of a common community and sought to promote this view to their readers. Sofía del Valle herself wrote:

The elements of “una patria”, or of a nation, are these: the community of people of the same origin, territory, and language, we call these natural elements; and the moral elements—the community of beliefs, of customs, of habits, of laws, of a shared history [...] above all, what constitutes a nation is a shared soul. Two principal things create this soul: the past—a rich inheritance of memories in common, and in the present—the will to value this shared past and to pursue a common future. This moral unity that unifies all souls creates one soul (Del Valle, 1942b: 9).

She argued that Mexican Catholic women belonged to this community through their shared history and shared values. They would be a part of the soul of the country through their commitment to patriotic values. A common future for Catholic women intersected with the future of the country. The use of the word soul also implied that women were in intrinsic part of the body politic. While women may not have been able to vote, they nevertheless played a part in foundations of the body politic—its very essence.

Through these editorials we can see that authors saw patriotism as a reciprocal relationship between Mexican families and the nation itself. They argued that “patriotism is the moral virtue that tilts us to surrender to the country the tribute of our love and to faithfully complete our debts to her that we have” (Del Valle, 1942b: 6).

They noted that individuals and their families could not succeed in fulfilling their physical, intellectual, and moral obligations if they were not “framed in a larger permanent community more powerful than the family that will provide them with the necessary safeguards. This is precisely the ho-

meland". In exchange for providing needs, the "patria" could demand from its citizens help with defending its general interests. "Serving the country, you obey the country. It is to comply with what is ordered by the creator, it is to obey the reasonable nature and to obey God himself." These Catholic women clearly linked patriotism with morality and being part of a larger community. The larger community, the *patria*, would help the family be safe. But in return they had to comply with God's will, and serve the country (Del Valle, 1942b: 6). This was a significant shift for Catholic women. As noted previously, ACM had not supported previous nation-building projects, and had, in fact, adamantly opposed projects like socialist education. To link reciprocity to both the nation as well as god's will was a new way of understanding Catholic women's relationship to the state.

War demanded that Mexican families sacrifice,

Mexico demands from all its children in the face of the chaos in which the entire humanity seems to submerge, through the war that is destroying nations and marking its stages with tears and blood, our homeland asks for the selfless effort of each and every one of its sons (Gutiérrez de Velasco, 1942: 10).

Men would sacrifice through military service, but there was a role for women to play as well. "On behalf of the Catholic women of Mexico, we appreciate the opportunity that has been given us to cooperate to the best of our ability, in this magnificent work that has gained special significance this year due to the deficient circumstances in which our country finds itself" (Anonymous, 1942a). Women could participate through civic actions, and through their role in the family. They argued, "The family is the most important to national social life 'At the heart of the family —the intelligence and heart of a woman'" (Anonymous, 1942b). Women's position in the family allowed her to be the moral center of the patria. *Juventud* exhorted young women to be good Christian

examples, "As your beloved brothers leave, smile and let your behavior be an inspiration". Young women could also "make sure mothers comply with their Christian faith" (Gutiérrez Velasco, 1943).

Faith was at the center of their definition of patriotism. With Catholic families at the heart of the national project, they argued, women's central place in the family as its moral heart would keep Mexico on the path towards success. If women could not serve in the military, they could lead by example, and their example kept their faith centered. They would serve as models for their brothers in service, and they would preserve their Catholic faith in the family by ensuring all family members, including their mothers. Thus, according to the JCFM, their patriotic example was key to the success of the war effort.

Young JCFM women saw patriotism as a calling,

we, the members of JCFM have firmly answered the call for the patria, answering with all our vibrant purity and enthusiasm: we accept our mission. We have heard the call from our Central Committee [of the JCFM], and with our disciplined training we deeply and vibrantly answer (Gutiérrez de Velasco, 1942: 10).

Their patriotism was centered in their purity, firmly linking love for country with their discipline and religious values. Not only was it important to be but their youthful vibrancy was mentioned twice. Vibrant has the connotation of being colorful and filled with light. It can also give the sense of being active. Young women's vibrancy, their energy and purity would guide Mexico. This was their calling, again infusing patriotic activity with religious symbolism.

In addition to editorials, *Juventud* used imagery to get across their message. According to Andes, "the covers of *Juventud* used striking visuals to link femininity and intelligence" (Andes, 2019: 330). Cover art shifted from Catholic iconography to photographs of young members —ones who were conventionally attractive and dressed

in modern fashions. The goal was to promote a modern professional woman who patriotically served her country. For Sofía del Valle and other editors, this image was one that privileged middle-class and upper-class women, whose features were European and not indigenous. Thus, this particular vision of women's patriotism also had class implications (Andes, 2019: 330). This class status was not new, as women who had participated in Catholic charities had long been middle or upper class.

Charitable work was about upper-class women "helping" lower-class women. What is interesting about this is that the shift did not just include professional women in ACM; it celebrated professional women. Certainly, professional women had a certain class status—you could not be a professional without education and training. Being able to incorporate professional women reinforced both the JCFM and UFCM as middle—and upper-class organizations. But it is nevertheless significant that they moved to reflect the reality of women's work outside the home. To them, women had always had a vital role to play as guardian angels in the home, but now their work outside the home was valued as well (Porter, 2018; Sanders, 2011, French, 1992). And as historian Vera Larisa García Núñez notes, many of women organizers in the PAN and ACM were professional and well-educated women themselves (García Núñez, 2017).

Juventud and the JCFM believed young Catholic women had a role to play in the war effort. They viewed women as central to the home, and that Catholic women's faith and virtue were key to the family and the larger community. While men in their families would sacrifice with military service, women would use their training and discipline to participate in civic actions. The UFCM also helped to organize programs for the war effort. Interestingly, these efforts focused mainly on protecting and serving Mexican men, and not on providing support for foreign soldiers abroad.

## **Servicio Civil Femenina de Defensa**

Catholic women's organizations, like the UFCM, worked to promote what they considered appropriate and moral leisure activities for young soldiers. In particular, they wanted to make sure men had sufficient reading material. "In the camps where soldiers are not waiting for immediate action, the soldiers have a lot of leisure time, and it would be very helpful to fill this free time with some distraction. Loan these great services books, newspapers and magazines" (ACM, s.f.). The memo continued, asking UFCM members to form centers to collect "sensible and serious" books, newspapers, and magazines. The materials could come from families donating newspapers and magazines after they had been read. The reading material could then be made into packets and sent to the troops. UFCM also recommended asking the post office to mail the reading packets for free, since the material was "destined for those serving their country". UFCM asked women to "form groups to send a good example to troops who probably have a lot of bad influences" (ACM, s.f.). The hope was that access to appropriate entertainment would bely these bad influences by providing an alternative.

UFCM exhorted members to make sure that "mobilized priests, young seminarians, and heads of households who belong to pious organizations" have special attention "in order to procure everything for this campaign that they need for the good of their souls and physical well-being". They continued by noting that "spiritual welfare will occupy in first terms our apostolic zeal in order to make sure that everything needed for their souls, especially what priests may need to celebrate mass—everything they need (*escapularios, medallas*, etc.) that will help support their ministry (ACM, s.f.a). If priests were to be allowed to serve in the military, and to be further allowed to serve specifically as chaplains in the military, then they needed to have all the necessary supplies. UFCM women saw their support of these men as key to the war effort.



Many Catholics associated soldiering with debauchery, gambling, and prostitution, and hoped to promote measures to mitigate these vices (Campos, 2012; Rath, 2019). After the government introduced conscription, Acción Católica Mexicana, with the approval of the archbishop of Mexico, organized groups of respectable young women to invite conscripts to attend mass. The group also set up a club near Mexico City's barracks in which conscripts could safely socialize, eat, and listen to religious lectures on the weekends; the club in the Federal District had 127 official members. ACM set up clubs across the country, and according to Rath, these clubs were even attended by priests in Guadalajara (Rath, 2013: 76).

The UFCM also helped organize these clubs for young Catholic recruits. Their goal was to "to help morally and materially the young men in recruitment centers, quarters, or training camps". In order to do so, they sought to make sure soldiers were able to practice their faith, by providing for "masses, retreats, catechisms...and religious instruction." To aid this, they sought to organize and give away "collections of pious objects, like mass books, rosaries, medals, and stamps, in order to conserve piety in the young recruits". In addition to these overtly religious goals, these women also sought to organize cultural and sports centers, as well as day and night courses that would include radio transmissions of concerts and cultural events. They also saw their work as providing material aid for families of recruits, such as clothes closets, and co-ops, as well as help defraying the expense of visits. Finally, they aimed to be a center that could provide social services to recruits, learning all they could about them and their families, in order to provide services "efficiently and with familiar communication." For their UFCM members, they planned to organize a Red Cross course for emergencies and other training. These centers would provide for all the spiritual and recreational needs of Catholic soldiers (ACM, s.f.b).

In order to accomplish these goals, the UFCM created a Women's Civil Defense

Service. In order to participate, women had to complete a survey and declare the following:

"Declaración"

(Servicio Civil Femenina de Defensa)

I. I declare that, as a Mexican, or inhabitant of Mexico, I feel obligated to defend the liberty and honor of Mexico through any honest ways to achieve this.

II. I declare that as a member of the community in which I live, I am obligated to work for its welfare and prosperity.

III. I declare that as a conscientious element of humanity I am obligated to help others working for a solution to all social problems that weigh on us.

IV. I declare that as a free and conscientious human I am obligated to fight for human liberty and decorum through an adequate civic education and the acts of defense against aggressive agents wherever they may be.

Considering that the "Servicio Civil Femenina de Defensa" gives me the opportunity to work for these objectives, I accept inscribing myself in its membership and I have answered the attached questionnaire, that I will send to the Directing Committee (ACM, s.f.c).

This declaration shows that for Catholic women, patriotism was infused with notions of honor, honesty, community and faith. Interestingly, women are called on to defend notions of country's honor, which typically had been, as Amelia Kiddle convincingly argues, a male purview (Kiddle, 2015). Male diplomats often framed the defense of Mexico in terms of protecting the country's honor, much like one would protect a woman's honor. In a significant shift in roles, these Catholic women saw defense of honor to also be an obligation for women of faith. Women could also be protector and take an active role in defending the country. These women saw themselves as part of the larger community that required them to work towards solutions to social problems, and as part of humanity that required the fight against threats to liberty and decorum. Just as men served as soldiers, women also served their

country through efforts to create a community of faith.

The registration form women submitted reinforced these values of community and women's professionalism. The form asked their name, age, civil status and education, as well as the amount of time they had to commit to volunteer. The survey asked if they could travel. They were asked if they were willing to take any extra training, and if they participated in any scientific or cultural activities. Finally, they filled out a three-page survey of their interests—and asked if they needed training. Many of the areas addressed could be described as skills or training that professional women would have, fulfilling Sofía del Valle's desire for professional women to step up to help the war effort. For example, the survey asked if they were interested in using their skills as telephone operators, typists, and other office work. They were also asked if they had experience in law, medicine, nursing, translation, science and business. Auto mechanics were also requested. It is noteworthy that twice women were asked if they had any scientific experience, once on the first page of the survey, and then again later in the form. There does not appear to be a divide between the Church and science, nor does there appear to be any particular expectation that science would not be an occupation that women would avoid. The request for auto mechanics was also interesting, although women had participated as ambulance drivers in World War I, so perhaps the request was part of an overall survey of civil preparedness (ACM, s.f.d).

The survey also asked women if they had skills in domestic economy, like cooking, sewing, household budgeting and childcare. Finally, a third section asked about civil defense specifically--firefighting, emergency civil defense, and work experience setting up shelters. Again, while women were asked about the "traditional" skills of the home, the bulk of the survey asked for professional experience. And again, it also gave women an opportunity to sign up for more training if they wished (ACM, s.f.d).

While there is no record of how successful these calls to service were, it is nevertheless significant that both the JCFM and UFCM viewed civil defense as a woman's responsibility. Rather than asking women to stay in their homes, they recruited professional women, and offered training to women who might want or need professional skills. These programs pushed the boundaries of what could be considered the public sphere. Now, not only charity work could allow a virtuous Catholic woman to labor outside her home, but virtuous Catholic women could occupy roles in professional spheres, such as office work, and even be expected to pursue scientific and cultural activities. Their membership in the community of the Catholic Church and the community of the nation allowed them to perform citizenship through civil service and civil defense even without the vote.

While many feminists, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States, used war-time service to lobby for the vote, there is no indication that most of the women in Mexican Catholic lay organizations had any particular interest in voting.

Historian Kimberley Jensen, building on historian Linda Kerber's definition of citizenship, notes that American women during World War I maintained that "women who took up arms followed one strategic line of argument in the arms and citizenship debate by asserting that in armed home defense, and in potential armed military service, women engaged in the citizen's obligation to defend the state and therefore deserved the rights of citizenship in return" (Jensen, 2008: xi). Mexican women's assertion that they were qualified to participate in Mexico's war-time civil defense echoes this understanding. American women used participation in the war effort to expand citizen rights to include voting—for Mexican Catholic women participating in ACM, this was not the case. They understood, however, defense of Mexico's honor to be one of their obligations, and argued for an expanded definition of women's roles within the body politic.

Mexican Catholics' relationship to the state during World War II was unique. Other Catholic countries, such as Spain and Italy, had fascist governments that promoted specific kinds of feminine citizenship. For example, Victoria de Grazia has outlined the role that Benito Mussolini's regime played in defining women's citizenship in terms of motherhood and the home. While early in Mussolini's regime there was conflict with the Catholic Church, by the 1930s the Church supported fascist notions regarding gender norms (De Grazia, 1992: 1-4.) Historian Aurora Morcillo also notes Francisco Franco's emphasis on maternity as the appropriate role for women to play in society (Morcillo, 2010: 136). Motherhood as the most important role for women under Francoism was promoted by the Catholic Church, which supported the Franco regime. In both these countries, then, women's citizenship was defined through motherhood, and the Catholic Church supported the regime's definition of women's citizenship. Ireland, another Catholic country, was officially neutral during World War Two, but historians note that strong influence of the Catholic Church on the Irish Constitution and women's rights and roles. The Catholic Church in Ireland also believed a women should fulfill her role in society through marriage and motherhood (Beaumont, 1997).

In Mexico, on the other hand, the relationship between the Catholic Church and the government had been, since the Mexican Revolution (1911-1917) adversarial. It was not until after the Cristero Rebellion and the creation of the ACM in the 1930s that tensions began to cool, and even then, it took until the presidency of Manuel Ávila Camacho to create an atmosphere where the Catholic Church could support the war effort. Thus, it is of note that Mexican Catholic women participating in these lay organizations would use this opportunity to stake out a definition of citizenship and patriotism that pushed past standard definitions of appropriate Catholic womanhood as being bound intrinsically to marriage and motherhood. Catholic leaders, such as Sofía del Valle,

argued for a Catholic womanhood that supported the secular state and saw women's duty as key to the success of the country. They also saw professional women as integral to this success. More Mexican women moving into office and other professional work may have shaped the views of Catholic leaders, who, unlike other Catholic nations, seemingly supported women's professional work and training and sought to incorporate those skills into civil defense and patriotism. Leadership of the JCFM and UFCM viewed Catholic women's strength as her faith, and saw no distinction between a woman's Catholic faith and her citizenship. Through faith and piety lay women's citizenship, and it would be her faith that would lead Mexico to success. World War II, and Mexico's participation in the war effort, therefore allowed women to challenge notions of Catholic propriety, and doing so within the bounds of a Church-sanctioned lay organization gave women the legitimacy to do so. It was the distinctive combination of Church-state relations during a war—a period of flux—that permitted this to happen.

It is important to note that women in right-wing Catholic Sinarquista movements, on the other hand, promoted a more "traditional" notion of womanhood, although historians such as Julia Young (2019, 2017) and José Orozco (2017) have noted that women's participation in Sinarquista organizations expanded notions of appropriate women's activity even as the official Sinarquista rhetoric restricted it. Historians have also noted that some Catholic women supported suffrage, although within the context of women's maternal roles (Rodríguez Bravo, 2015; Espinosa Meléndez, 2020; García Núñez, 2017). It is also of note that while Mexican Catholic women in the JCFM and UFCM appeared to be expanding definitions of appropriate women's citizenship, secular feminists were concurrently using maternalism as an argument for suffrage in the 1940s (Lau Jaiven, 2006). Some secular feminists argued for suffrage because of women's roles as mothers, arguing for a citizenship based on women's capacity to be mothers.

While women of the UFCM and JCFM did not negate motherhood as the most important role for women, these organizations nevertheless left space for professional women to participate as well. Professional women had important skills necessary for the defense of the country, just as mothers had a central role to play in raising future citizens. Women's relationship to the state in the 1940s was complex and evolving.

## Conclusion

While Mexico's entry into World War Two was not initially supported by many Mexicans, particularly conservative Mexicans, the sinking of the *Potrero de Llano* shifted opinions. The Catholic Church, pleased with the olive branch offered by President Manuel Ávila Camacho, moved to back the Mexican declaration of war. With Church support, women involved in Catholic lay organizations organized to contribute to the war effort, and began to define their own views of citizenship in terms of patriotism. According to some, good Catholics supported the patria, and this included the government's call to war.

Many Catholic women saw this as a chance to back a national project and define their own citizenship as being part of a community. Their work would support their community, and the patria, and they took advantage of the moment to incorporate themselves into national politics when they did not have suffrage. Nira Yuval-Davis points out that "collectivities and communities are ideological and material constructions, whose boundaries, structures and norms are a result of constant processes of struggle and negotiation, or more general social developments" (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 73). For women involved in ACM, their use of a Catholic community organization to redefine their role in the national community shows how fluid definitions of community could be, and how women were central to redefining and negotiating community as a response to national and international events. They used, as Yuval-Davis states,

general social developments in order to place themselves at the center of a national project. In doing so, they both redefined Catholics' role in the body politic, but also the role that Catholic women, especially young professional women, could play. While they may not have been able to vote, they could nevertheless belong to a community that was part of a national state-building project.

Catholic women in ACM saw themselves as central to this community and defined patriotism as a reciprocal arrangement. Their community belonged to the larger patria, and since the country took care of them, they needed to repay this commitment through their virtue, discipline and faith. Catholic women, working through lay organizations, like the *Damas Católicas*, had always used charity work to claim space in the public sphere. They also used their positions in the home as guardian angels as a way to stake out moral authority. What was unique about the effort during World War II was the link to a broader national post-revolutionary political project. Catholic women in ACM took this opportunity to define themselves as not just good Catholics, but good Mexicans as well. Through their professional work in civil defense, they redefined patriotism in a way that centered their Catholic values, and highlighted their contributions as women. To be a good patriot, according to these organizers, one needed to be a woman of strong faith, dedication, and virtue. By defining their participation in politics through their participation in their faith community, they were creating a form of citizenship that privileged their faith. Their ability to tie their faith into the national project shows the extent to which relations between the Catholic Church and the Mexican government had thawed, and demonstrates the centrality of women to new ideas of Catholic citizenship.



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