

Mexican bishops mark bicentennial with call for reconciliation

MEXICO CITY - As Mexico began bicentennial celebrations of its independence from Spain, the Mexican bishops' conference issued a wide-ranging pastoral letter, calling for a national reconciliation of the centuries-old divisions over ethnicity, historical interpretations and the often-strained relationship between church and state.

"One of the great pending tasks ... is the reconciliation among all those that formed this great nation," the bishops said in their Aug. 30 letter.

Reconciliation with the past means "accepting our indigenous and European roots, especially Spanish (roots)," the bishops said. It also means "eliminating secular fundamentalism and religious intolerance of any kind."

In the letter, the bishops urged action to fight the country's rampant poverty and called for structural changes so that the country's officially secular education system "becomes a true school of respect and appreciation of the cultural and religious differences."

"The bishops of Mexico think that it would be a sin of omission to stay on the margins and keep silent about ... history," said Archbishop Alberto Suarez Inda of Morelia, president of the bishops' commission on the bicentennial. "As citizens and as Christians we consider it a duty to join in the commemoration of these significant historic acts."

The bishops published the letter as a booklet of 140 key points.

They dedicated the first points to setting the record straight on the church's complex role in the nation-shaping event, which was fomented Sept. 15, 1810, by a parish priest, Father Miguel Hidalgo Costilla, and opposed by the Catholic hierarchy. The letter acknowledged the church hierarchy's opposition to the revolution and its loyalty to Spain and made clear that Father Hidalgo and another independence hero, Father Jose Maria Morelos, were not excommunicated for their rebelliousness, despite what is taught in Mexican public schools.

Later portions of the letter expressed a desire for today's church to be an active player in national affairs. The bishops called on the political class to develop an "intellectual maturity" by putting aside personal and partisan interests for the national good.

The letter was also released in a ceremony attended by Interior Minister Jose Francisco Blake Mora and first lady Margarita Zavala.

"We Catholics have the commitment to collaborate in the construction of this grand Mexican nation," the bishops said.

"We don't want to be excluded nor much less exclude ourselves; we know we are identified with this people and this culture (as is) so clearly expressed in the mestizo face of Our Lady of Guadalupe," they said.

The bishops planned a Sept. 1 Mass to mark independence at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe with Mexico City Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera as the main celebrant. All of the country's bishops were expected to attend.

They also asked parishes throughout Mexico to offer special prayers Sept. 9-15. Special Masses were planned in each diocese Sept. 15, the day Mexicans traditionally gather after dark to take in re-enactments of Father Hidalgo's "grito," or shout, for independence made from his parish in the state of Guanajuato.