

My Dear Seminarians:

The book “Pastoral Spanish” will prove to be your faithful companion not only during the Seminary days but for many years to come. It aims at imparting to you the knowledge of Spanish necessary for priestly work in the Southwest of the United States. It is here, in the Southwest, that you want to work as a Priest of God, as a friend of the poor and abandoned.

You are preparing yourself for the great day when you shall be able to take your place with the hundreds of priests who are working in that portion of the vineyard of the Lord that is found in the great Southwest of the United States. The laborers are few indeed, and many, many are the souls that can be saved by you if you leave the Seminary well prepared for the work peculiar to that vast field of labor, especially dear to our Savior and our Blessed Mother, a field perhaps much vaster and of much more importance than you may realize.

I am referring to the Mexicans, or the Spanish-speaking Catholics, as they are now so frequently called, who are living in the Southwest. Do you realize that these are by no means the minority but rather the majority in the greater number of the dioceses along the Mexican border? The Diocese of Corpus Christi, for example, is composed of 157,000 Mexican Catholics and only 15,700 of other nationalities; in the Archdiocese of San Antonio there reside 143,000 Mexican Catholics and 89,000 of other nationalities. The majority is even greater in the Diocese of El Paso, and in those of the States of Arizona, New Mexico and California. Of the three and a half million Spanish-speaking people living in the United States, over two million are to be found in the Southwest, the rest being divided among many other States (New York 133,000, Illinois 34,000, Michigan 15,000, Pennsylvania 9,000, Missouri 7,000, Nebraska 7,000, Louisiana 6,000, Minnesota 4,000, etc.).

More than two million souls in the Southwest, souls that need the help of zealous, self-sacrificing priests, souls that are in need of your help, dear seminarians! Yes, indeed, a vast, and immense field of labor where conditions are rather sad and disheartening. We priest who are working among Mexicans realize the deplorable conditions existing among them here in the Southwest. We know that the greater majority of men attend church and receive the Sacraments very infrequently; we know and deplore the fact that about half the marriage among our Mexicans begin without the Blessing of our Holy Mother the Church; we know that only a small percentage of them are making their Easter duty. It saddens our heart when we see the Protestants gaining ground and their churches becoming more and more numerous. It grieves us to see that more and more of our Mexicans are joining the vast number of those who have given up all religion, who have become indifferent, and who are thus becoming an easy prey for communistic and socialistic teachings.

We mention all these facts not in disparagement of the Mexican people but rather in the belief that you would like to help them. They are essentially a good people possessed of a deep
religious spirit. In the past they have been the victims of circumstances which would, in all probability, have crushed a less virile faith. Yours, dear seminarians, is the glorious task of keeping this faith alive where it still remains and of enkindling it anew where it has died out.

But you may ask: “WHY IS IT THAT OUR MEXICANS ARE SO REMISS IN THE PRACTICE OF THEIR FAITH COMING AS THEY DO FROM A CATHOLIC COUNTRY?”

There are many reasons to explain this sad fact. First, let us consider the original homeland of the greater part of our Mexicans. Most of them come from the northern part of Mexico. From the very beginning the population in those parts was small and scattered. The work of the Spanish missionaries had already begun in the interior of Mexico in the year 1525, while it was not until the year 1700 that it was extended to that region from which the majority of our Mexicans come. On account of the vast territory over which this comparatively small population was scattered, the development of the Church was a slow and difficult task. Even when they did come, missionaries in northern Mexico were too few in number and thus greatly handicapped in their work. It is therefore easy to see why even at that time most of these Mexicans were just baptized Catholics, and that their religious instruction was extremely inadequate, to say the least. Unfortunately religious conditions did not improve much with the passing of the years. If we add to this the fact that for the past hundred years or more the Church has been in the throes of a persecution; that even now the number of priests for each State is limited; that parishes with close to twenty thousand souls and only ONE priest are rather the rule than the exception, then we will understand why the Mexicans we have in our midst have very little knowledge of their religion. It is not this ignorance that is surprising; it is rather the fact that, despite all these adverse conditions, they have as much religious knowledge as they do. It is a fact that cannot be explained in a natural way. Indeed it must be attributed to the special protection of the great friend and protectress of the Mexicans: “La Morenita del Tepeyac,” Nuestra Señora la Virgen de Guadalupe.

To understand even better the reasons for the present condition of these people, let us consider for a moment their economic background in the country from which they have come. In the course of time haciendas came into existence, or “ranches,” just as we have them here in Texas. Belonging to the poorer class, the vast majority of our Mexicans lived and worked on those haciendas. The owner provided almost everything they needed; he planned everything and furnished the implements needed for their work. They were “peones,” living almost as slaves of the rich, receiving just enough to keep themselves clothed and fed. But in spite of it all they lived under circumstances favorable to religion. Each hacienda had its own church, provided by the owner, and visited from time to time by the priest. The proprietors were almost all Catholics, and insisted upon attendance at Mass. Theirs was a simple life, away from modern civilization and its consequent dangers to the religious life of the soul. On the other hand such a way of living did not encourage personal initiative; it did not teach them to stand on their own feet; it did not prepare them for the battle for existence or to rely on their own resourcefulness. Have they improved their condition by coming to this country? From a material point of view a few have, but most of them have not improved their condition either economically or religiously.

We should not forget that those Mexicans, who from the beginning were natives of Texas, looked upon the Americans as intruders. After the war for Texas independence the Mexicans were the vanquished, the Americans the victors. No matter how we look at this phase of the history of the State of Texas, we cannot deny that such sentiments existed both on the part of the Mexicans and of the Americans. Not only this, but to a certain extent they still exist and show
themselves in the manner in which the Mexican has been and is still being exploited in this
country. By his labor he has contributed much to the material development of this land of ours;
he has made much of its riches possible, but in return he has received a very, very small portion
of these riches. Our Mexicans do the work others cannot or do not want to do, and they receive
little in the way of compensation.

Opportunities for religious developments were, unfortunately, extremely poor. Here they had less
priests than in their own country, and hardly any churches. Naturally, religion suffered. This may
be understood more easily if we recall the fact that a great many Irish names can be found in the
registers of Methodist and Baptist Churches throughout the South. In some localities the majority
of the population has become Protestant because they had no priests who spoke their language
and no church to attend. Keeping this in mind, we cannot but admire our poor Mexicans who, in
spite of all these adverse conditions, remained Catholic at heart and faithful to their religion
though others fell away.

Then as conditions bettered, as the number of priests increased and the church buildings became
more numerous, those Mexicans living nearby found out that quite a few of the priests did not
speak their language. What is worse, they found out and are still finding out very often that they
were and are not welcome in the “white” churches. Denial of this is futile. It is a fact, a very sad
testimony of the lack of Christian Charity, of that brotherly love that should be the distinctive
mark of all Catholics. The Mexican is very sensitive; when he notices that he is not welcome, he
will stay away. This explains to a great extent the presence of a mere handful of Mexicans in
those places where there is only one church, an “American,” a “white” church.

Moreover, very great is the number of Mexicans who have lived and still do live in places where
there is no church at all, where the priest comes very seldom, if ever, and this in our days of
rapid and easy transportation. They must live where they can find bread, where they can earn
enough money to feed the many mouths that we still find in the Mexican home. It is rather
obvious that all this is not conducive to an intense religious life.

In the more populous centers, where tens of thousands of Mexicans are living, they will be found
in hovels which deserve anything but the name “sweet home.” Usually their “home” consists of
two or three rooms for the whole numerous family. The father is always away working, and there
is nothing to keep the children at home, so that they live practically in the streets. It is hardly
necessary to say that life in the streets of our modern cities does not make for better morality and
stronger religion.

Considering all these facts, it is very easy to see why we have a “Mexican problem” in the
Southwest. It is a very good thing that the seminarian know these facts because he may be the
better enabled thus to prepare himself well, to equip himself with what is necessary, so that later
on he may do his share towards bettering such sad and deplorable conditions.

In the first place, he must prepare himself to become a real leader in the community to which he
may be sent. The priest must become a real friend of the Mexicans and make their troubles and
worries his own. He must not allow himself to be influenced by the sentiments of antipathy to be
found so often in the Southwest. As a man of God, as the minister of the Most High, as shepherd
of the flock of Christ the priest must indeed become all things to all men. Now Mexicans are a
part of the flock entrusted to his care. Before God he is responsible for their souls and he must do
all in his power to take care of them. Therefore the seminarian, the priest of tomorrow, must develop a wholesome attitude towards the Mexican. He must even now try to understand those who are to be a considerable portion of the flock entrusted to his care some day in the near future. A lack of understanding may cause him to do certain things that may drive the sheep away from the fold. Poor sheep, that have a pastor who does not know them!

Now this lack of understanding of our Mexican people can in most cases be explained by an INSUFFICIENT KNOWLEDGE OF THE SPANISH LANGUAGE. In order to understand people well one must talk with them, and the best way to talk with them is in their mother tongue. Business has long ago learned the truth of this. A Connecticut firm controls the machete market of the whole of South America and has done so for a hundred years. How does this company meet the language problem? Every business letter sent from Collinsville (Conn.) to South America is in perfect Spanish or Portuguese. As Collins machetes found their way to Africa, to India, to Dutch East Indies – wherever man battles with tropical nature – the Collins staff of linguists grew. Recently they even managed to answer a letter in Hindustani, but they confess it took a bit of doing. As shrewd C.L. Taylor, president of the company says: “WHY SHOULD WE EXPECT THEM TO STRIVE WITH ENGLISH? WE’RE THE ONES WHO ARE DOING THE SELLING.” (Saturday Evening Post, Oct. 10, 1942.) If business men are willing to go to that trouble for the sake of their business, how much more willing should the Priest be to do as much in order to spread our holy religion among these Mexicans?

Some have the idea that Mexicans living in the Southwest know enough English, and consequently that it is no longer necessary to know Spanish. Experience contradicts this opinion. Many of them know enough English to get along with the American as far as business is concerned, or in as much as it may be needed for their work. But how happy they are, how their eyes light up when they discover that one can speak Spanish with them! Immediately they begin to talk; they become a different people so to say. And this is quite natural. People always love to talk in their mother tongue especially when it is a question of going to confession. It is an admitted fact that naturalized Americans of German, Polish, French, or Italian origin, though they speak English, still go or prefer to go to confession in their mother tongue. Why should the Mexican be an exception? Many of these people like to listen to sermons in their mother tongue, and in many cases these are provided. Why then should it not be natural for the Mexican to like to have sermons preached to him in his mother tongue? Most Mexicans have learned their catechism in Spanish; they speak Spanish in their homes using English only when they have to. There may be a few exceptions, but they remain exceptions. The priest, therefore, who wants to get close to the Mexicans, the priest who wants to understand them and win their confidence must be anxious to learn their language.

This does not mean that no efforts should be made to teach them English. On the contrary, English should be taught in the parochial schools. Indeed, we should give the Mexicans every possible change to learn English, and this applies especially to the younger generation. But we do not think that religion should be made the means whereby they are taught English. The priest should take the position that as long as they do not know English, he must teach them the most important thing, that is, the way to salvation, in the language they know, and that language is Spanish. Once they know English, then he can teach them in English. The priest might even go a little further and use English to a certain extent in catechism class, especially in the higher grades, thus to enable them to take advantage of so many English sermons they will hear, and also to facilitate the knowledge of their religion in English in preparation for the day when
English may be their language. But the priest must be convinced that the day is still far off when he will be able to say that Spanish is no longer needed in the churches, and that sermons may be preached and confessions heard in English. Whoever really wants to take care of the Mexicans in a religious way, whoever really has the desire of administering to their religious needs will need Spanish for many years to come. The seminarian, therefore, must realize that as a future priest working in the Southwest he will absolutely need a practical knowledge of Spanish if he wants to do his share in solving the Mexican problem, so pressing here in the Southwest.

If the seminarian goes forth equipped with a workable knowledge of this beautiful language, and has thereby removed a barrier or bridged a chasm that separated him from the Mexicans, he will find them a lovable people, a people for whom he will like to work, a people in whose midst he will find joy and consolation.

In order further to understand the Mexican we must consider his historical background. Doubtless the most important fact in the history of the development of the Catholic Church in Mexico is the apparition of our Lady of Guadalupe. Up to that year, 1531, there were very few Catholics in Mexico. Then in that year the Blessed Virgin appeared to a poor Indian, Juan Diego, and left her picture painted upon his cloak (tilma). This very well known picture is to be found in practically every Mexican home. It is easy to recall the features of our Blessed Mother in the picture – they are those of a Mexican girl. This point is worth noting, because some of the enemies of the Church claim that the picture was painted by an artist of the time. But that is impossible, since at the time the picture came into existence there was not a single Mexican girl who could have served as a model for the painter, the “Mexican” having come into existence only as a result of the Spaniards inter-marrying with the Indians of the land. The interval is too short from the time of the arrival of the Spaniards to the time when the picture is known to have come into existence.

We know the beautiful words the Blessed Virgin addressed to Juan Diego: “I am thy Mother.” At that moment something happened that can rightly be compared to what occurred on Good Friday when our Lord said to John: “Behold thy Mother.” In the person of Juan Diego the Blessed Virgin adopted all the Mexicans as her special children. Mary became the Mother of the Mexicans. She put them under her special maternal care and has been watching over them ever since with the eyes of a loving, tender Mother. This is the only plausible explanation of what followed the apparition. Immediately the work of converting the Indians became easy. They entered the Church in numbers that now seem incredible. By 1536 more than five million had been baptized. And this work of the missionaries is still going on – the special maternal protection of Our Lady of Guadalupe is still evident.

A sure proof of this is found in the deep faith the Mexicans even in our day, and after a bitter and fierce persecution of over a hundred years. It is as if the devil in a rage had been trying by every means to uproot the faith of this people; but happily, in vain. Unable to accomplish this, he fanned the fire or persecution which became as bitter and fierce as that of the first centuries of the Church. But the Mexicans as a whole have kept their faith. Priests were taken away from them, but, as in the first Christian times, they had their catacombs where they practiced their religion. On a few priests went about the land, and they were always disguised and in hiding. They preached and baptized an administered to the dying, offering up the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in unbelievable places. They fled to the mountains and there lived lives of unspeakable hardship. But the Faith remained. And now that the persecution seems to be at an end their Faith
is blossoming forth, stronger than ever. Here is a wonderful exhibition of Catholic Faith and activity; from it we can learn much in our United States. We have to admire the Mexican people, their pious, zealous priests, their great apostolic Bishops. But most of all we must admit that here indeed is the hand of God, here is a miracle of grace, a palpable evidence of the powerful protection of the Blessed Mother. In spite of the most diabolical persecution, most of the Mexican people have kept the Faith; deep down in their hearts even the worst of them have remained and are Catholics. The fire may often be covered with ashes of ignorance and indifference, but it is there. The great love they have for our heavenly Mother under the affectionate title “La Morenita del Tepeyac,” has kept this smouldering flame alive.

We often hear it said: “BUT THE MEXICANS IN TEXAS ARE SO DIFFERENT.” Yes, in a way, they are. But again we must remember what has already been said, that we must take into consideration the social background of the vast majority of the Mexicans here in our land. They belong to the working classes, to the number of those who have never had the opportunities of the higher classes. They come from the northern states of the Mexican republic where, for the last eighty or ninety years Priests have been few. We must not forget that our Mexicans have come to a foreign country where everything is strange, where very often they have had to live in places far removed from the church and where they found no priest who spoke their tongue; in a word, where they lived for years, even for generations, without religious instruction. It is a wonder indeed that they have kept their faith at all; and the vast majority have kept it, for even among our Mexicans here in the Southwest, in spite of all adverse circumstances, we find that deep down in their hearts they have religion. It is indeed hard to explain this fact except by a special intervention from above, namely, the special protection of our Blessed Mother. In all truth the Mexicans are her favorite children; consequently it should be a pleasure for every priest to work for them, to intrust [instruct?] them, to bring them the consolations of religion.

Let us not allow ourselves to be influenced by what we sometimes hear about them. THEY ARE NOT FILTHY. Some are filthy, yes but no more so than many of our own poor Americans. The Mexicans are poor and often clothed in rags, but upon visiting their homes one finds that, everything considered, they are clean. To be sure, they cannot afford and cannot possess all the things to which we are accustomed. But that is not their fault. Consider the work they are doing, the pay they are receiving, their large families, and the situation is easily understood. Poor they are, and sometimes miserably, yes, but by no means filthy.

“BUT THEY SEEM TO BE SO INDIFFERENT AND UN-APPRECIATIVE.” I do not think so. To begin with, they are not very effusive; rather, by nature, they are somewhat distant. The Mexicans have received quite a few “hard knocks,” and are therefore slow to make friends with anyone. They want to know who you are and whether you really are their friend or not. Finding this out takes time. But once they know that you are their friend, that you care for them, they will open up their hearts and you will find them quite different than at first. Can you picture anything more interesting than a group of Mexican youngsters? They are a lively bunch and very intelligent; it is a pleasure to teach them their catechism, or any other subject for that matter.

“BUT WHY IS IT THAT SO FEW COME TO MASS? THAT SO MANY OF THEM MARRY BEFORE THE JUDGE?” Yes, why is it? There are many reasons for this. But the main reason is their ignorance of our religion, and surely, we cannot blame them entirely for this. They have been the victims of unfortunate circumstances over which neither they nor the priests who have worked among them in the past have had control. But work among them, instruct them, educate
them, and we will have a group of men and women who will give a splendid account of themselves. They will practice their religion and fulfill their duties as Catholics, and even be deeply religious. We can go further and say that at times they will and already do put us to shame by their sacrifices and their deep spirit of living faith. I am certain that all priests who have come into close contact with our Mexicans have had the same experience. All in all, by far the greater number of our Mexicans are a lovable people, gentle, polite, docile, obedient, respectful, grateful and appreciative. But in order to find this out we must come into close contact with them, we must work for them, take a great interest in their problems and troubles. Now all this is impossible without knowledge of their beautiful language, the lack of which will greatly hinder a priest in any priestly activity among them.

And how will he be able to hear the confessions of those who do not understand English? It is a matter of greatest importance that the penitent be given an opportunity to explain himself in the language in which he feels at ease and knows best. It is important that the priest understand each individual case well because he has to form a judgment. It is important that he give sound and profitable advice to the soul in need of it, advice therefore that will be clearly understood. How can a priest, not knowing Spanish, possibly do all this in the case of our Mexican people who do not know English at all, or who as a rule do not know enough English to go to confession? The hearing of confessions and giving the correct decision is a terrible responsibility. Each priest is responsible for the confession he hears and the decisions he gives. Therefore, the seminarian who is going to work with Mexican souls has a serious obligation to learn Spanish.

Only bring to mind the sick bed of a dying Mexican. That last confession he makes, before appearing at the feet of his Judge to give an account of his entire life, is of infinite importance to him. The poor person wishes to make a good confession, he needs help, advice, encouragement. How can a priest help those souls in that all-important moment if he does not understand and speak Spanish!

Then, too, what about the children who shall be under his care, those who go to school, but are in the first, second, third or even the fourth grade? Do they really know enough English to understand the explanations of the catechism given in English? Can they be prepared for their first Holy Communion by instructing them in English? This is utterly impossible. This brings us again to the same conclusion – if a priest wants to do his priestly work among the Mexicans in the manner in which our Lord wants it done, he must know or learn Spanish. The seminarian who is preparing himself for the ministry in the Southwest and does not wish to take the study of Spanish seriously, is not made for the ministry in those parts and, in my opinion, should not be ordained by our Bishops. More than half of the Catholics of the Southwest are Spanish-speaking. They cannot be neglected, they must be taken care of. This problem is becoming more pressing each day. It is a grave responsibility that weighs no only upon the shoulder of our Bishops and priests but also must be met squarely by our seminarians, the priest of the near future. Surely we want to do our best to attend to the spiritual needs of these people; the very first step then is to learn and to know their language to the very best of our ability.

I hope I have succeeded in convincing you of the importance of the work among our Mexicans here in the Southwest, and of the importance of the Spanish language carrying out this work. May the book I your hands be a help in acquiring a practical knowledge of Spanish, such as you will need in your work among the Mexicans. Glance through it and you will see that it contains conversations which will take place in our office, in the confessional, on sick calls, in your
parlor, with couples about to be married, and in the church where you teach the children their catechism. It aims at acquainting you with expressions you will be obliged to use day after day in your ministry. There are enough words and expressions to enable you to learn sufficient Spanish for all your ordinary dealings with Mexicans. You will find just enough rules of grammar to show you the reason why you must express a certain though in a certain manner. The verb with all its intricacies has been given special attention. The catechism explained should prove a help later on in your classes for those whom you are preparing for their first Holy Communion. Once you are acquainted with the book, you will see that in the conversations there is quite a large amount of material that can be used in short, practical sermons on Baptism, Confirmation, Penance, Holy Eucharist, Marriage and so on. It should be a handy and useful book; at least such is the hope of the one who has spent much time in its composition and arrangement. If it will help you in your study of the Spanish language, if the knowledge thus acquired will in turn help you to know and love our Mexican people, our Blessed Mother’s favorites, then the time an efforts spent on this book will have indeed been well spent and the author will consider himself more than amply rewarded.

Rev. Alphonse Simon, O.M.I.

Feast of Our Blessed Mother, Mediatrix of All Graces, May 31, 1945.
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