



Knights of Columbus  
Martyrs of Mexico

## History of the Knights of Columbus Priest Martyrs of Mexico

In the early 20th century, the Mexican government began a widespread persecution of Catholics. In 1926, priests, missionaries and members of religious orders were expelled from the country. Ignoring the right to religious freedom, the government under President Plutarco Elías Calles took control of churches, seminaries, convents and schools, thereby beginning the campaign to do away with all of the “fanatics” who professed their Catholic faith. In the face of violence and persecution, more than a million Mexicans migrated to the United States seeking refuge; others spontaneously organized to defend themselves against government oppression, some peacefully and others taking up arms under the banner of “Cristo Rey” (“Christ the King”). This was the beginning of what became known as the Cristiada or Cristero War.

For three years (1926-1929), the Mexican people lived through violent persecution, in which priests and laypeople were ordered to renounce Christ in public. To refuse to do so meant facing not only punishment, but even torture and death. Thousands of Mexican Catholics gave witness to their faith or fought to defend it. In many cases, they paid for it with their lives. Their acts of love and bravery have echoed throughout the decades, and we remember their testimony today.



Statue in memory of the Mexican Martyrs, Knights of Columbus Museum, New Haven, Conn.

Since its founding in Mexico in 1905, the Knights of Columbus had promoted and given witness to a vibrant understanding of Catholic citizenship. By the time of the 1924 Eucharistic Congress in Mexico City, there were already more than 50 K of C councils throughout the country — from Jiménez, Chihuahua, to Mérida, Yucatán. During the persecution, the Knights helped organize the League for the Defense of Religious

Liberty, which brought together and organized the country's main Catholic institutions. The League worked to raise the nation's consciousness and demanded that the Mexican government respect the rights of its citizens. In the United States, meanwhile, the Knights created a fund to aid the exiled and the migrants. In addition, they distributed five million flyers denouncing the brutality of the Mexican government toward Catholics. As a result, the Mexican government outlawed the Knights of Columbus and singled out its members for persecution.

In his encyclical 1926 *Inique Afflictisque*, Pope Pius XI singled out the testimony and work of the Knights in Mexico: "A word of very special praise is due those Catholic organizations, which during all these trying times have stood like soldiers side to side with the clergy. ... First of all We mention the Knights of Columbus, an organization which is found in all the states of the Republic and which fortunately is made up of active and industrious members who, because of their practical lives and open profession of the Faith, as well as by their zeal in assisting the Church, have brought great honor upon themselves."

In 1926, a delegation from the Order, headed by the Supreme Knight James A. Flaherty, met with U.S. President Calvin Coolidge and asked him to demand that Calles' government put an end to religious persecution in Mexico. It wasn't until 1929 that President Calles, through intervention from the U.S. ambassador Dwight Morrow, accepted the so-called agreements with Mexican bishops. The churches could go back to celebrating Mass, and those known as Cristeros, who had fought to defend their rights, surrendered their weapons. However, the government did not honor the agreements and continued to persecute Catholics in various degrees in the decades that followed. Finally in 1992, the constitution was reformed giving legal recognition to religious associations in Mexico.

Of the 25 Mexican martyrs whom Pope John Paul II canonized in 2000, six were members of the Knights of Columbus. Their stories are recounted below.

## Knights of Columbus Holy Martyrs



**Father Luis Bátis Sáinz** was a parish priest in the village of Chalchihuites, Zacatecas, and a member of Council 2367 in Durango. On Aug. 15, 1926, he and three laymen — David Roldán (who was only 19 years old), Salvador Lara and Manuel Morales — were lined up in front of a firing squad for having participated in meetings of different Catholic groups and for having violated the anti-Catholic legislation. When Father Luis Bátis asked for Manuel Morales' freedom, explaining that he had children, Manuel interrupted, saying, "I am dying for God, and God will care for my children." Smiling, Father Bátis absolved him and said, "I'll see you in heaven."



**Father José María Robles Hurtado** was a member of Council 1979 in Guadalajara, Jalisco. He was ordained a priest in 1913 and founded the Congregation of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus when he was only 25 years old. On June 25, 1927, he was arrested as he prepared to celebrate Mass. The following morning, he was brought to an oak tree to be hanged, but before his executioners could carry out the sentence, he forgave them and said a prayer for his parish. He even approached a farmer he knew well, whose task was to place the noose around Father José María's neck. He told the farmer, "Friend, do not dirty yourself," and, taking the noose, he placed it around his own neck. He was then executed.



**Father Mateo Correa Magallanes**, a member of Council 2140 in Zacatecas, was arrested and taken to Durango. While in prison, the general in charge ordered him on Feb. 5, 1927 to hear the other prisoners' confessions. After doing so, the general ordered Father Mateo Correa to tell him what the prisoners had said during confession. Father Mateo Correa answered, "I'll never do it!" When the infuriated general threatened to shoot him, Father Mateo Correa responded, "You forget, general, that a priest must keep the secrecy of confession. I am ready to die." The next day, he was brought to Durango's Panteón de Oriente and was killed in a hail of bullets.



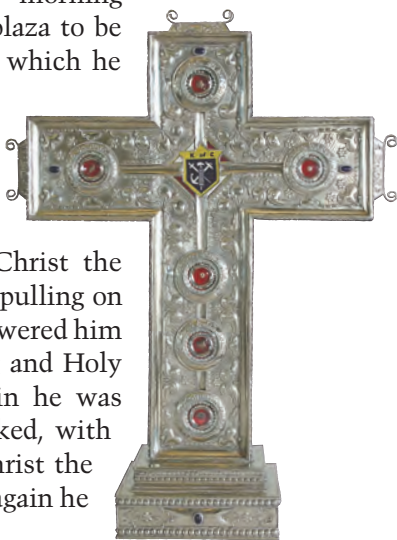
**Father Miguel de la Mora de la Mora** was also a member of Council 2140 in Zacatecas. He had been the chaplain of the Cathedral of Colima since 1918. In 1926, along with other priests, he publicly signed a manifesto rejecting the anti-religious laws. The bishop and his priests were prosecuted and many were exiled. Others, like Father Miguel de la Mora, went underground in order to continue offering the sacraments. One day, he was discovered and arrested by a general. Intending to force him to reopen the cathedral under government control, the authorities freed him on bond. On Aug. 7, 1927, Father Miguel de la Mora was able to escape the city along with his brother, but when they passed through Carmona, a farmer recognized him, arrested him and returned to Colima. When the general found out, he ordered the priest's execution, without trial. Praying with his rosary in hand, Father Miguel de la Mora was shot in the presence of his brother, whom the authorities then allowed to go free.



**Father Rodrigo Aguilar Alemán** was an interim parish priest in Unión de Tula and a member of Council 2330 in Ciudad Guzmán, Jalisco. He was wanted for arrest for being a priest and because of this left the village of Unión de Tula, taking refuge in Ejutla. On Oct. 27, 1927, some 600 federal soldiers captured the town. He was found giving a Latin exam to a seminarian, and although they attempted to flee, they were surrounded. When

asked who he was, Father Rodrigo Aguilar responded, "I am a priest."

They arrested him and during the early morning hours of Oct. 28 and brought him to the plaza to be hanged. Underneath the mango tree from which he would eventually swing, he blessed the noose, forgave his executioners and gave his rosary to one of them. Putting him to the test, one of them offered not to hang him if he shouted, "Long live the supreme government!" He answered, "Long live Christ the King and Holy Mary of Guadalupe!" After pulling on the rope and lifting him into the air, they lowered him and asked, "Who lives?" "Christ the King and Holy Mary of Guadalupe!" he responded. Again he was raised and lowered. "Who lives?" they asked, with crude taunts. In agony, he said firmly, "Christ the King and Holy Mary of Guadalupe!" Once again he was raised up, this time to heaven.



The silver reliquary contains the relics of the six Knights of Columbus priest martyrs of Mexico, whom Pope John Paul II canonized in 2000.



**Father Pedro de Jesús Maldonado Lucero** was a member of Council 2419 in the city of Chihuahua. In 1918, he was ordained a priest in El Paso, Texas. In 1924, he was named parish priest for the village of Santa Isabel in Chihuahua. He was able to exercise his ministry until 1934, the year in which he was exiled to El Paso. Despite fearing for his life, he returned to Santa Isabel. Heedless of his own precarious health, he unceasingly celebrated the sacraments. Persecuted for being a priest, he had to leave Santa Isabel and stay in a nearby town, Boquilla del Río. On Feb. 10, 1937, Ash Wednesday, he was detained and taken to Santa Isabel's town hall, where he was brutally beaten. According to witnesses, he had a broken skull and his entire body was covered in lacerations. When the bishop learned of this, he interceded on his behalf before the governor. The governor ordered the priest brought to the city of Chihuahua, where he died on Feb. 11 as a result of his injuries. His headstone describes the martyr in four words: "You are a priest."

## Knights of Columbus Blessed Martyrs

In 2005, three of the Order's members, also martyrs, were beatified by Pope Benedict XVI together with 10 other martyrs: **José Trinidad Rangel Montaño**, a diocesan priest from León and member of Council 2484 in San Felipe, Guanajuato; **Andrés Sola Molist**, a Claretian priest from Spain and member of Council 1962 in León, Guanajuato; **Leonardo Pérez Laríos**, a layman and member of Council 1962. Together, the three were executed because of their faith in April 1927, in El Rancho de San Joaquín, Mexico. Their remains are found at the foot of Cubilete Hill, at the Sanctuary of Santa María Reina de los Mártires.

In celebration of the Order's pilgrimage to Cristo Rey del Cubilete in 2011, Supreme Knight Carl Anderson, said, "The Order's history is forever linked to the history of this great nation. ... Loving God above all things and our neighbor as we love ourselves is the only response that we can give to Christ the King."



## About the Relic Pilgrimage

During his installation as supreme knight on Feb. 3, 2001, at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, Carl Anderson received a silver reliquary in the shape of a cross containing relics of the six Knights of Columbus priest martyrs of Mexico. It was at this installation that the supreme knight solemnly dedicated his administration and the entire Order to the maternal intercession and protection of Our Lady of Guadalupe. In September 2005, to mark the centennial of the founding of the Order in Mexico, the Order's Board of Directors began in Mexico City a pilgrimage of the reliquary. The reliquary traveled throughout Mexico and continued to the United States. The pilgrimage concluded in Orlando, Florida during the 124th Supreme Convention.

The 2012 relic pilgrimage seeks to make known in the United States the testimony of these Knights of Columbus priest martyrs and all those who sacrificed their lives for their faith during the time of religious persecution in Mexico.



## Prayer to the Knights of Columbus Priest Martyrs of Mexico

Almighty and Eternal God, the martyrdom of St. Mateo Correa Magallanes and his priestly companions manifests your love for the nation of Our Lady of Guadalupe and reveals that violence and hatred are only overcome by a spirit of peace and charity.

These brother Knights live on in our minds and hearts because by sacrificing their lives for the sake of the Gospel they gave witness that your love is eternal and your truth can never accept compromise. Let their faithful cry to Christ the King encourage us to be brave witnesses of faith and to remain loyal Knights of Columbus .

We pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.