

A Statue Gets a Fresh Coat of Paint: A Glimpse at the Catholic Church and Chicano Activists in the Rio Grande Valley in 1970

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Abstract

In December, 1969, at the end of a weekend conference, a group of Mexican American activist students painted a statue of Mary brown, causing an uproar among some priests and faithful. This reaction did not, however, cause the Church to pull back on its commitment to social justice. Indeed, some bishops, priests, and laity took strong positions and acted on issues related to farmworkers and Chicano youth projects in the face of opposition within the Church and among the public. This paper utilizes oral history interviews, newspaper accounts, and documents in archives of the Oblate School of Theology

In late December of 1969, the Mexican American Youth Organization held a regional conference at La Lomita, outside of Mission, Texas in the Rio Grande Valley. La Lomita is the site of St. Peter's Novitiate, an institute where previously men had prepared to take first vows in the religious order of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. On the night of Sunday, after a special mass, some of the conference attendees, in the process of making a bold statement of cultural pride, painted a statue of Mary, the Blessed Mother, metallic bronze, causing uproar among some Catholics in the local area and beyond.¹ In the context of the history of MAYO and of the Church's involvement in the Chicano Movement of the times, this was, to be sure, a very minor incident. However, some of the social currents swirling around this event reflect the role of faith and the Church in the Movimiento.

¹ *Corpus Christi Times*, January 1, 1970

Since the mid-1800s, La Lomita was a “mission” (that’s where the nearby city gets its name) for the horse-mounted Oblates Fathers, the “Cavalry of Christ,” who ministered to the Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the South Texas ranches. The chapel – originally an adobe hut, later a stone structure built by the Oblates themselves – got its name from its location, El Rancho La Lomita (the Little Hill Ranch, so called because of the unusual elevation in an area of flat grassy plains). It served as a central gathering place for the faithful in nearby *ranchos* and functioned as a half-way station for the priests riding the circuit between Brownsville and Roma. Later, in the early 1900s, a good-size structure was built on the site to house the order’s Southern Province novitiate, St. Peter’s. In the mid-twentieth century, the novitiate was moved elsewhere, and the Oblate Fathers found other uses for the buildings at La Lomita.²

With the transformation of the ranches into large-scale farms in the early twentieth century – thus regional Chamber of Commerce’s “Magic Valley” term – area *Mexicanos* resided mostly in the towns that sprung up to service the farms and they joined parishes in those towns. Still, La Lomita’s old chapel continued to draw worshippers who came periodically to pray for special intentions or out of devotion, celebrating the planting of the faith in the area “in olden times” by the Oblates in the 1800s and by settlers in the previous Mexican and Spanish periods. La Lomita, thus, became the area’s “mother parish.” A replica of the Fatima grotto had been constructed at St. Peter’s, and novices prayed the rosary there. Because of its location in the proximity of the old chapel and the novitiate, the grotto quickly became an extended sacred gathering space for groups of pilgrims from the Rio Grande Valley towns. On special occasions, the Oblates organized huge celebrations at La Lomita and the faithful came by the bus-load. In a word, La Lomita was a holy place that symbolized the depth and breath of the faith, and

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² Brochure on La Lomita, undated, Oblates School of Theology Archives. See also Paola G. Zinnecker, “La Lomita Mission: Past and Present,” unpublished paper, University of Texas, Pan American Library Archives, pp. 2, - 4, 6.

the first thing visitors saw upon entering the grounds was the statue of Mary (larger than the one in the crypt of the grotto) that became the center of the controversy.³

The conferees involved in that 1969 incident were pilgrims of a different sort. They were high school- and college-age Chicanos, members of a social movement that considered the condition of Mexican Americans as an internal colony subjugated by the interests of agri-business in South Texas and California and by a political system nation-wide that denied them economic access in a variety of ways. Chicanos complained that the prevailing socio-economic structures also attempted to stamp out their culture and identity while imposing a homogeneous Anglo-Saxon culture. The dominant system, according to this view, was so controlling that it was for all practical purposes impervious to the ordinary avenues of change and required a social revolution to bring a transformation to the status of Mexican Americans. Although not all Chicanos were young, *el movimiento* had a youthful look and spirit because, in proposing change, participants generally acted outside established organizations and political parties and called upon Mexican Americans to proclaim the uniqueness of the identity and culture they had developed, one that was neither principally Mexican or American but Chicano. Despite radical revolutionary rhetoric and symbols, *el movimiento* was dedicated not so much to overthrowing the system as to overhauling it so that Mexican Americans could enjoy their fair share of the pie and have the freedom to be themselves.⁴

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³ Hand-written notes in an album of photographs of La Lomita, undated, Oblate School of Theology Archives.

⁴ For a thorough but succinct description of the underlying causes of the Chicano Movement, see the Introduction, “Paradigm for the Etiology of the Chicano Movement,” pp. 1 – 8, Armando Navarro, *Mexican American Youth Organization: Avant-Garde of the Chicano Movement in Texas* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1995)

The influence of faith and of Catholic tradition in the Chicano Movement is eminently clear in the work and life of César Chávez, who dedicated himself to improve the lot farmworkers. Chávez possessed a mystic personality and even as an organizer he saw himself as doing God's work here on earth. Indeed, for many Catholic poor, Chávez was "the manifestation of the church made flesh and blood." Drawing on deep theological resources on the issues of social justice, Catholic bishops in California and across the nation supported the farmworkers demands and some offered to mediate between the different players in the strikes.⁵

In Texas and nationwide, Archbishop Robert E. Lucey had been advocating workers' rights for years, and in the Rio Grande Valley, in the mid-1960s, Bishop Thomas Drury of Corpus Christi and Bishop Humberto Medeiros of Brownsville had endorsed the unionization efforts of area farmworkers. Archbishop Lucey had brought attention to the plight of migrant workers and the poor on a national level and called for Catholic institutions to provide minimum wages to their staffs and to workers in the archdiocese's building projects. Following Lucey's lead, Bishops Drury and Medeiros organized agencies that would encourage the introduction of federal and state services to the poor.⁶

Still, the Church's role in social justice advocacy seemed ambivalent and even appeared to defend the status quo. Some priests saw their role principally – and, in some instances, only – as one of providing for the spiritual needs of the faithful. This goal seemed daunting enough, given the increasing number of Mexican immigrants since the turn of the century, leaving the Church a legacy of

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⁵ Stephen R. Lloyd-Moffett, "The Mysticism and Social Action of César Chávez," pp. 35 – 52 in Gastón Espinoza, Virgilio Elizondo, and Jesse Miranda, eds. *Latino Religions and Civic Activism in the United States* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005)

⁶ Patrick J. Sullivan, CSC, "Catholic Social Thought on Labor Management Issues, 1960 – 1980," University of Notre Dame (<http://archives.nd.edu/psl/psl022.htm>). Archbishop Robert E. Lucey's pioneering efforts are cited repeatedly; for a thorough examination, see Saul Edmund Bronder, "Robert E. Lucey: A Texas Paradox," (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1979).

seeming to ignore the economic plight of the *Mexicano* community. Additionally, in the quest for long-term institutional stability, the Church never condemned outright the corporate forces that exploited the working poor and was reluctant to encourage the public protest that would bring social and economic change. Understandably, then, some Chicano activists accused the Church of cooperating with the oppression of *Mexicanos*. In response to the outcry over the incident with the statue, Mario Compean labeled the Church as “gringo-racist oriented.”⁷

Yet changes were in the offing within the Church, and official Church support, symbols of faith, and activist priests were part of the farmworker struggles in Texas. It is in this environment that the MAYO conference took place at La Lomita, and the traditionally all-white statue of Our Lady of Fatima got painted Chicano brown. The actual spraying of the statue did not seem so outrageous to the youths who painted it. According to a MAYO spokesperson, “It was tarnished and ugly, so we painted it. It’s brown and beautiful now.” Leaving the snake at the foot of the Virgin white was “very symbolic,” as was the “Huelga” red and black flag draped on her shoulder, a “glittering symbol of hope.”⁸

According to the local papers, the incident upset area Catholics, and claiming he had been sent by the Oblates, Father Joseph O’Brien, a former prison chaplain in Huntsville now a pastor in the nearby town of McAllen, drove to La Lomita to investigate the developments. The novitiate buildings complex and grounds had been leased by the Oblate Fathers to the Colorado Migrant Council, which had a bilingual daycare center that incorporated themes of ethnic pride that had been labeled by some as “radical.” The Council’s decision to allow MAYO to hold a conference for some 600 delegates at La Lomita thus added fuel to the fire. The proximity of the grotto and the old chapel – and the fact the statue of

⁷ *Valley Morning Star*, Harlingen, January 1, 1970

⁸ *Corpus Christi Times*, December 31, 1969

Mary, placed on a good-size pedestal, sat squarely in front of the main building – made all activities there appear Church-sponsored. Additionally, the property still belonged to the Oblates, hence Father O’Brien’s involvement. When he complained about the painting of the statue, a MAYO member reportedly justified the action by claiming that the church belonged to everyone, a notion that smacked of Communism to Fr. O’Brien.⁹

A few months later, Father O’Brien claimed to have in his possession a secretly made film that showed four intoxicated MAYO members kneeling at the grotto shrine and leaving beer cans as gifts and even offering the Virgin a sip before processing to the front of the building to paint the statue.¹⁰ Fr. O’Brien was referring to a second painting of the statue, which had been scrubbed and restored to its original white after the first incident. Despite his outrage over all the developments and his very vocal opposition to decisions the Oblate Fathers related to the La Lomita property, Fr. O’Brien never released of the film.

Fr. O’Brien might have been even more infuriated had he known the details of all the events related to the famous episode. Prior to the painting of the statue Father Roberto Peña, Director, Social Action, of the Diocese of Brownsville, had celebrated mass under somewhat extraordinary circumstances.¹¹ Years later, in an interview with José Angel Gutiérrez, Fr. Peña related how he got caught up in the swirl of events at La Lomita:

I didn't know what was going to happen, Joe. I had in my car... wine, I had hosts, I had my vestments, I had everything...even a purificator and all that you need properly...for me to...(celebrate) Mass. When I got there, Joe, things changed.... Well, someone got some limbs from trees and they made a processional cross.... (out of) mesquite. And someone came in and put a... *zarape* on me and they had a table out there and that even had a serape on it too and I had never seen a *zarape* on an altar, Joe, and I was beginning to shake, you know... Inside, you know. And I say (to myself), what am I going to do? What am I going to do? This is not right. This is not right, you know. This is not a church...I never seen this happen. I

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⁹ Ibid. Zinnecker, p. 11.

¹⁰ *The Mission Times*, August 27, 1970.

¹¹ *Valley Morning Star*, Harlingen, January 1, 1970

never celebrated Mass this way and then, when they bring the tortilla, Joe, and I didn't get my hosts out and they wanted that celebration.... I celebrated Mass...

But you don't know how I felt inside. I said, "I am going to be blasted by the bishop and all that. No one is going to want me anymore as a priest in their diocese."

[But] I went ahead and did it... It was beautiful.... Yeah, all of them were young. Remember that, that *Yo soy chicano, tengo color Americano pero con honor* (I am Chicano and I have American color but with pride).... Man, that was [wonderful; it] rang out in the streets. Joe, I said I'm a Chicano too.¹²

Those events never made it into the newspapers, probably because the reporters got to La Lomita only by the next morning, when news of the painting of the statue began to circulate or possibly because what happened to the statue was more colorful or more permanent. Fr. Peña described the developments at La Lomita in this way:

“We are going to paint the statue brown. Help us, Father...”

And so then after the Mass we kept on singing and then they said we are going to paint the statue.... We are going to paint the statue brown. Help us, Father. So, we got about a, a gallon of paint and they gave me a brush and (they) said you get up there and come up with us. I got up there; we painted the statue brown...¹³

It was that simple.

Figuring he was in trouble, Father Peña went to Bishop Medeiros first thing in the morning, before word got out of the painting of the statue. The bishop chuckled and advised Fr. Peña to just wait and see what would happen. Peña also informed his Oblate superior. Neither the diocesan nor the Oblates records show any formal reprimand. In the interview years later, however, Father

¹² Oral History Interview with Roberto Peña, 1998, by José Angel Gutiérrez, CMAS, No. 98, Tejanos Voices Collection, University of Texas Arlington Library.

¹³ Ibid.

Peña did not indicate that he told his superiors about the way he celebrated Mass; he only related the story about the statue that came out in the papers.¹⁴

The Oblate superior, Father Clifford Blackburn, cautioned Fr. Peña about participating in any way in the desecration of a statue of Mary, but the admonition seemed pro forma. Fr. Peña recounted that he had replied, saying,

There was no intention of desecrating anything. We just wanted to say that we are brown and we are proud of it and so is the Virgin, so it's just this way. But we never meant any harm to anything or to anybody. It wasn't sacrilegious or anything. We just wanted to press upon them that we are brown. We are brown.¹⁵

According to Fr. Peña, “he (Fr. Blackburn) understood,” and left it at that.¹⁶ The statue was eventually removed from La Lomita and taken to San Antonio.¹⁷

In the scheme of things, painting a statue brown is not any more sacrilegious than any other depiction of Mary, who through ages has been sculpted or painted as a Greek, Roman, or medieval European Madonna. Although Fr. O’Brien and other Catholics were outraged, Bishop Medeiros and Fr. Blackburn understood the symbolism of the action and, more importantly, realized that there were more serious issues at stake. In fact, Bishop Medeiros went out of his way to align himself with the “radicals”:

“If Christ lived today, do you think He would cut Himself off from the MAYOS (Mexican-American Youth Organization) or the Black Panthers? He might not approve of everything they were doing but He wouldn’t isolate Himself from them...I’m not going to stop these contact – even if I am called a Communist.”¹⁸

From the time of his appointment to the Brownsville diocese in 1966, Bishop Medeiros saw himself as an agent of change. One of the first things he called for was the integration of parishes. The initial Church experience in ministering to the faithful was to have a single parish, usually in the “Mexican

“I must make known to them (the community) the moral principles of the Gospel of justice, peace, and love which Jesus Christ, the Founder and Head of the Church, has left as His legacy...”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *The Mission Times*, August 27, 1970.

¹⁸ Newspaper clipping, unidentified, undated, Oblate School of Theology Archives

side” of the Rio Grande Valley towns, where most Catholics, who were *Mexicanos*, resided. Anglo American Catholics attended church there and often led parish organizations. As the towns grew, particularly after World War II, Anglo American parishioners broke away and established separate parishes in their neighborhoods, and these continued to be seen as “the Anglo churches” even as Mexican Americans climbed the economic ladder, became acculturated, and moved into the “better” (meaning Anglo) neighborhoods. Bishop Medeiros quickly called an end to the trend designating some parishes as “Mexican” and others as “Anglo.”¹⁹

Bishop Medeiros also used his position as the regional leader of the Catholic Church to instruct community business and political leaders on the Church’s deep theological and philosophical thinking of social justice. In a long talk to Harlingen business leaders, Bishop Medeiros reminded them that equal opportunity was at the core of the Gospel, and it was primarily their obligation to bring it about:

I am not and cannot be alienated from the social and economic life of the people to whom I have been se(n)t as father, shepherd, and leader...I must make known to them (the community) the moral principles of the Gospel of justice, peace, and love which Jesus Christ, the Founder and Head of the Church, has left as His legacy...It is my prayer that the day is not far away when equal opportunity, which is now mostly in the books, will soon be a reality through the dynamic action of those upon whom the responsibility for the economic progress of our people primarily rests.²⁰

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Bishop Medeiros also attended to the immediate needs of the poor as well as addressing the structural causes. Besides personally appearing before county commissioners and city councils to lobby for programs such as Urban Renewal, Medeiros created a Social Action and Rural Life department at the chancery and gave that agency legal power by incorporating a Catholic Charities agency. The

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ “We Speak of Moral Order,” *The Valley Catholic Witness*, Sunday, April 30, 1968

latter's role was "to initiate, improve and extend all form(s) of charitable and social welfare programs," as well as "to coordinate all health and welfare services" for the diocese that are not met by public agencies. The incorporation status gave Catholic Charities legal standing to accept gifts and revenues (the Christmas collection) and spend funds. A survey was sent to the parishes to assess the most pressing needs. Fr. Peña was director of both agencies.²¹

Fr. Peña reported to the chancellor, Bishop Medeiros' administrative assistant, and, as has been noted, to the Oblate Provincial, Fr. Blackburn. At the time, the Oblate Fathers staffed a significant number of the parishes in the Brownsville diocese, and subsequent to the incident of the painting of the statue, Bishop Medeiros, who worked closely with Fr. Blackburn, asked the Oblates to take a risk and lease La Lomita to a group of Chicano activists looking for facilities for the Jacinto Treviño Center of Learning, a graduate extension of Antioch College of Yellow Springs, Ohio. The Valley Oblates had supported the action proposed by the Oblate Provincial Council, but not without the opposition of Fr. O'Brien, who injected himself into the issue. Fr. O'Brien alleged tuition and support grants from the Office of Economic Opportunity amounted to students receiving "\$350 a month of public money to bring their ideas and revolutionary activity to the Valley," and that the curriculum and the insecurity of that kind of funding "will defraud the poor still more" by making promises that could not be fulfilled. The Mission paper reported that Fr. O'Brien's sentiments were shared by area residents, but Fr. Blackburn's leadership in this project prevailed, because it seemed an attempt to meet the educational needs of Valley Mexican Americans. So, despite internal opposition, the Oblates leased La Lomita to Antioch College for a nominal amount. Fr. Blackburn also directed the

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²¹ *The Valley Catholic Witness*, October 15, 1967, May 13, 1969

congregation’s picking up the lease of a building in Mercedes for an outreach program for drop-out students run by the Jacinto Treviño Center.²²

The Oblates’ involvement with Chicano activists caused problems for the order with its benefactors, as suggested by an undated, hand-written memorandum, very likely from Father Paul Decker, the province’s fundraiser. The document has his name at the top as if indicating the source and is initialed “D” at the bottom. The content presents “talking points” for his staff and his fellow priests in the field. “The Oblates are interested in the salvation of all persons, even those with particular ideas. Our work with any organization does not mean our approval (of any ideology).” In fact, by cooperating with them, the Oblates would “help them do the right thing.” The learning center in Mercedes helps drop-outs among Mexican Americans, and “nobody (else) is doing anything for them.” Additionally, the memorandum explained that the chaplain at Pan American College was working with the MAYO students in order to influence future leaders; he was not formally a part of the organization. Furthermore, Fr. Decker clarified, La Lomita was not technically leased by an activist group, implying but not specifying that the Oblates’ arrangements were with Antioch College. Finally, possibly arguing with Fr. O’Brien and his sympathizers, the writer noted that while chaplains work with prisoners at Huntsville, the state penitentiary, it “does not mean we approve of their criminal activities.”²³

The memorandum suggests that there were several Oblates who were involved with Chicano activists and were supporting their causes. These priests extended that support from deep personal convictions, as indicated by Fr. Peña’s fervor and resolve:

“The Council’s decision to allow MAYO to hold a conference for some 600 delegates at La Lomita thus added fuel to the fire.”

²² Medeiros to Blackburn, May 16, 1970, Oblate School of Theology Archives. *The Mission Times*, August 27, 1970. *The Valley Catholic Witness*, July 19, 1970. Undated, hand-written draft of a memorandum from Paul Decker, OMI. Oblate School of Theology Archives.

²³ Undated, hand-written draft of a memorandum from Paul Decker, OMI. Oblate School of Theology Archives.

I read about Christ in the gospels. And he wanted to bring justice and love into the world and that always, you know, always *como se dice* (as is often said). I wanted to change the world, José, thinking that I could do something to change it for a greater [good]... the people of God to treat others justly, authentically speaking....

In fact, his quest for justice influenced Fr. Peña's decision to become a priest:

I saw the difference there. Christ influenced my life a lot. I wanted to do something, not for the sake of...profit, financial profit. But I said, "How can I bring the message of Christ, which has to do with justice and love, and compassion, and forgiveness, and peace?"...(and) my priesthood has been primarily on justice, social justice. And not only for *nuestra gente* (our people). Wherever you are, injustice shouldn't be done to you.²⁴

Fr. Peña and other fellow priests were involved in various social services in the Rio Grande Valley and with the farmworkers, and some scholarly attention has been paid to faith-based civic and social activism. But the full picture of the role of faith and of the Catholic Church in the Chicano Movement in South Texas awaits more research. For example, several priests later became staunch supporters of Valley Interfaith, a regional community organization that lobbied city, county, state and federal governments to provide poorer residents of the Rio Grande Valley sorely needed social services. Even Fr. O'Brien eventually joined those pressuring the system to provide health care for the poor and his advocacy was so much in the forefront that a clinic was named after him.²⁵ These causes and issues are obviously of far greater importance than the colorful incident of the painting of the statue of Our Lady of Fatima; still, that event brought to the fore the inspiration of Bishop Medeiros and the momentum for activism he introduced, the institutional backing of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, one of several orders that had been ministering to Mexican Americans for over a century, and the

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²⁴ Oral History Interview with Roberto Peña, 1998, by José Angel Gutiérrez, CMAS, No. 98, Tejanos Voices Collection, University of Texas Arlington Library.

²⁵ Fr. Patrick Guidon, interview, July 31, 2007

dedication of priests and religious to doing the work of God on the frontlines here on earth.

Significantly, the incident took place at La Lomita, a shrine that symbolized the presence of the Catholic faith in South Texas ranchos since the mid-1700s. The Church and its priests are not without the tarnishes of individual or institutional sins, but on occasion Church leaders, priests, and laity demonstrated personal and organizational conviction and enthusiasm for justice, and their faith shines as if it got a fresh coat of paint.