

LATIN AMERICA: INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES




ROMAN VIRTUES

The Education of Latin American Clergy
in Rome, 1858–1962



LISA M. EDWARDS

The background of the page features a stylized map of Latin America and the Caribbean, rendered in a light tan color. This map is overlaid on a grid of thin, light tan lines that cover the entire page. The map shows the outlines of the continents and major islands in the region.

Over the last half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, rising secular liberalism led many Catholic Church leaders in Latin America and Rome to believe that the Church was in a state of crisis. As a solution, they focused on improving clerical education by reforming Latin American seminaries and by sending the best students to the Colegio Pío Latino Americano in Rome. This book examines the experiences of young clerics in Rome and the effects of their Roman education on their home dioceses after their return. *Roman Virtues* contributes to our understanding of the role of the Catholic Church in Latin American society and the relationships between local Latin American churches and the papacy during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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ROMAN VIRTUES



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PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
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INTRODUCTION

Between 1858 and 1962, more than two thousand young men from Latin America traveled to Rome to attend the *Colegio Pío Latino Americano*, a residential college for seminarians from the region attending the Pontifical Gregorian University. They studied philosophy, theology, and canon law; interacted with their peers, clergy, and bishops from other parts of the region and around the world; and became imbued with clerical culture “in the Capital of the Christian World and under the watch of the Roman Pontiffs.”¹ Clergy educated in Rome were expected by Church leaders to acquire a superior level of both knowledge and virtue. Often placed in powerful positions in seminaries and diocesan administration once they returned home, graduates of the Latin American College, known as *piolatinos*, have had an influence much greater than their numbers might suggest. They have played critical roles in shaping the modern Latin American Church in both its internal organization and in its relations with the papacy and the faithful. Their education and later careers have served as a critical part of a broader strategy to modernize and Romanize the Latin American Catholic Church in the face of rising secularism.

Although the Catholic Church had enjoyed high status and privileges in colonial Latin America, its position after independence in the early nineteenth century became less secure in most of the region. While the majority

of the population remained Catholic, secular liberalism gained in popularity, especially among intellectuals and policymakers. Many believed that ensuring religious freedom would encourage American and British investment and immigration, deemed highly desirable for economic growth and national progress. Protestant immigrants, entrepreneurs, and missionaries began arriving in many parts of Latin America shortly after independence. Some liberal laws guaranteeing freedom of religion were reversed when conservatives periodically returned to power but, overall, the Church's political and social influence gradually weakened over the course of the nineteenth century in nearly every Latin American nation. In many cases, education was secularized and seminaries were closed. Governments seeking to increase tax revenue or maximize the free transfer of property sometimes confiscated ecclesiastical buildings and landholdings. The severity of the Catholic Church's resulting crisis in different countries depended on both the vicissitudes of local politics and the colonial infrastructure that remained as a basis for further development. In Mexico and Peru, for example, the colonial Church had been institutionally robust. Even after losses to secularization, the infrastructure allowed for a recovery that was easier than in other nations such as Argentina where "the Church was less developed and the crisis of the clergy [in numbers and education] correspondingly greater."² Nonetheless, a sense of urgency to implement reform and restore the Church to its previous glory prevailed throughout the region.

The necessity of negotiating a place for the Catholic Church in a changing political climate was not limited to Latin America. Anti-clericalism and calls for secularization were increasingly strident in Europe as well, particularly after the revolutions of 1848. The papacy's moral and political authority was especially affected by the *Risorgimento* beginning in the 1840s. The *Risorgimento* was the process of Italian unification and, for its secular political leaders, required the dissolution of the Papal States and their incorporation into the new Italian nation-state. As Pope Pius IX (1846–1878) tried to avoid losing his territory permanently, he worked to strengthen Roman authority in the Church, "determin[ed] to bolster his spiritual authority as his temporal power was progressively undermined."³ The new Italian state, consolidated in 1870, left the papacy with not much more than St. Peter's Basilica and some adjoining buildings, however. Although Pius IX and Leo XIII (1878–1903) continued to insist that the Italian state should restore the papacy's temporal authority, the so-called Roman Question remained unresolved until the Lateran Agreements of 1929, which granted the Holy See sovereignty over a very small territory (108.7 acres); partially compensated the papacy for its

losses during Italian unification; and regulated Church-State relations in Italy. From the late nineteenth century, however, its own situation in Italy and the uncertain status of the Catholic Church in many other parts of Europe (and, for that matter, Latin America) made the papacy especially concerned with ensuring the Church's internal strength to lessen the effects of political attacks meant to corrode its moral influence.⁴

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the situation the Church faced in Latin America seemed only to be worsening. The "social question," a catch-all term for the social and economic problems associated with industrialization and urbanization, had emerged and introduced new challenges in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that contributed to the Church's concerns. Migrants from rural areas flocked to cities seeking work and often lived on low wages in marginal housing. Marxist political activists and labor organizers promised to improve the quality of life for the working poor if they would join the class struggle, but this was antithetical to Catholic doctrine. Growing anti-clericalism and calls for agrarian reform in the name of equality also continued to erode Church property and prestige. The Mexican Revolution, beginning in 1910, was the most extreme example of how these trends affected the institutional Church (and, for that matter, devout Catholics) in Latin America. Revolutionary laws prohibited religious education and public expressions of religion like processions; forbade the use of clerical garments in public; and even allowed state governments to set limits on the number of clergy in their states. In a few cases, only a few priests were allowed to serve the spiritual needs of tens of thousands of Catholics. Many Mexican priests and bishops were forced into exile during the early twentieth century, and new priests were educated in secret, in the United States, or in Rome, not knowing whether or not they would ever be able to minister freely to their parishioners. In other Latin American nations, including Chile, Church leaders worried about the ramifications of allying with political parties or individual political leaders. Political alliances could provide support for Church programs and priorities, but also carried the risk of unfavorable associations when circumstances changed. Many bishops came to believe that institutional independence was more valuable than the potential benefits of political support. Few either sought or sanctioned open political alliances by the 1930s, although tacit preferences for one political party or another continued, especially to maintain Catholic principles in public morality (preventing divorce and maintaining religious education in public schools, for example).⁵

To strengthen the Catholic Church and to address the threats it faced, the papacy and bishops implemented strategies to modernize and Romanize the institution's structure and professionalize her clergy beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century. Historians have only recently begun to consider modernization separately from the nineteenth-century conviction that it necessarily meant secularization.⁶ In fact, despite liberals' insistence that one needed to choose between modernization and Catholicism, many Church leaders rejected that interpretation. This was certainly true in Latin America. As John Lynch stated,

Gradually, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Church emerged from the age of privilege and persecution, adjusted itself to the secular state, and began a process of independent development. This took the form of modernizing its institutions and resources, increasing the number and improving the training of its priests and demanding a greater commitment from the laity. The movement of internal reform can be dated from approximately 1870 and lasted to 1930 and beyond.⁷

The modernizing internal reform process that the Catholic Church undertook in the late nineteenth century focused in large part on reinforcing papal authority and rationalizing the institution's bureaucratic structure. The former was especially clear after the decree of papal infallibility was proclaimed at the First Vatican Council (1869–1870). Although the principle of papal infallibility only applied to the pope's teachings *ex cathedra* ("from the chair [of Peter];" in practice, in a special solemn manner) on doctrines of faith and morals, the decree reflected a new, narrower sense of papal authority over Catholics. It can be seen as the first step in the process of Romanization, which focused on tying the regional and national Churches in Latin America and around the world more closely to the papacy.

During this process, administrative changes tightened the hierarchical power structure within the Church. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, new dioceses were created where earlier diocesan boundaries were too extensive or populations had exploded as a result of industrialization and urbanization. In Latin America, for example, Mexico had gained 7 new dioceses, Peru gained 4, and Venezuela and Chile each had 2 dioceses added by 1900. Pius X (1903–1914) undertook a complete restructuring of the Roman Curia, "redistributing its responsibilities on a more rational and efficient basis."⁸ Through the Curial congregations, the papacy monitored the Church's status and instructed clergy and laity about doctrinal and disciplinary issues, so this reform increased the reach of the papal hand into Catholic

affairs. Pius X also enforced the *ad limina* requirement more strictly than his predecessors, demanding that each bishop comply with his obligation to visit the Vatican at least once every five years, reporting extensively on his diocese when he did so.⁹

In addition to more direct papal oversight throughout the Catholic world, the modernization of the Church involved considering how to maintain a significant institutional and devotional presence in societies where industrialization and liberalism had introduced new social and economic situations. Competing for the hearts and minds of workers was deemed by the papacy and other Church leaders and activists to be the most effective way to contain the Marxist threat. Beginning in the latter part of the nineteenth century, Catholic organizations and institutions in Europe and in Latin America addressed the emerging social question through charity and philanthropy. Their activities, referred to as “social Catholicism,” included projects such as building workers’ housing, providing social services for the poor to improve their life expectancy and quality of life, and fostering the formation of Catholic-oriented workers’ associations. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* encouraged social Catholicism and has been seen by many scholars as the beginning of a new era for the Church. As historian Joe Holland has noted, Leo XIII was the first pope to utilize a modern strategy to address modern problems. In contrast to his predecessors’ unconditional rejection of the changes wrought by the Enlightenment and industrial capitalism, Leo “promoted a reforming Catholic engagement with moderate liberalism in order to counter what he saw as the more serious threat of secular socialism.”¹⁰ Although Pius X unconditionally rejected the intellectual innovations known as Modernism that some theologians introduced in the early twentieth century, he was also deeply committed to ensuring that the Church spoke to the current issues of the day with a pastorally-oriented clergy and a more active laity. To that end, his encyclical *Il Fermo Proposito* (1904) laid out the principles of Catholic Action. Over the next several decades, especially with encouragement from Pius XI (1922–1939), this would become a massive network of organizations that served a wide range of Catholics’ needs through lay activism.

The Catholic Church’s internal reform process was, in many ways, a response to external conditions like its loss of political support in much of Europe and Latin America, but also occurred because many Church leaders perceived a failing in her primary resource: the clergy. They blamed priests unprepared to deal with emerging social and political trends and a shortage of new vocations for contributing to the Church’s problems. Modernizing the

Catholic Church included professionalizing her personnel, primarily through seminary reform and continuing educational and spiritual development after ordination. The creation of diocesan seminaries had been decreed by the Council of Trent in 1563; their “sole purpose was the intellectual and professional formation of clergy,” especially to prepare future priests for pastoral care.¹¹ In many dioceses, however, including in much of Latin America, seminaries remained inadequate or nonexistent even in the late nineteenth century. During the Church’s nineteenth-century crisis and subsequent internal reform process, the papacy urged bishops to reform their seminaries (or establish them) and improve clerical formation. Reinvigorated seminaries would ensure the future clergy’s understanding of their special privileges and responsibilities as leaders of the faithful, as teachers of doctrine, and as conductors of religious ceremonies; they also reinforced the clergy’s separateness from the remainder of society. Loyalty to the ecclesiastical hierarchy and celibacy rather than primarily to the State or family also identified the clergy as members of a specialized profession. After seminary, priests were expected to attend special programs to expand their knowledge and deepen their spirituality; the assumption was that a well-trained clergy would inspire the faithful and serve as the key to institutional survival. While most of these elements of clerical life had existed for centuries, they were emphasized during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries to strengthen the clergy morally and intellectually. As Archbishop of Santiago (Chile) Mariano Casanova noted in his 1893 *Pastoral Letter on the Propaganda of Irreligious and Antisocial Doctrines*, only religion could ensure social and political stability.¹²

Efforts to improve the region’s clergy were a critical part of the Romanization of the Latin American Catholic Church. Proponents of Romanization expected that bishops and clergy would look to the papacy for guidelines and a model of how the Church should function internally and in its relations with the secular world. This meant that papal priorities frequently took precedence over local ones and, at times, demanded that energy and resources be directed at issues that were not pressing or even particularly relevant in a given locale.

Historians of the Catholic Church in Latin America who have examined the process of Romanization have focused primarily on Mexico and Brazil.¹³ They have noted that its success sometimes negatively affected the national churches’ internal dynamics and development. In Mexico, it contributed to a sense of separation and, at times, even divisiveness between former students of the *Colegio Pío Latino Americano* and clergy educated domestically. Historians of Brazil have been particularly critical of Romanization’s effects on