

A Letter from Mexico

Empress Carlotta

Maximilian and his wife Carlotta arrived in Mexico in June 1864 to begin what turned out to be a dramatic and disastrous three-year attempt at ruling a Mexican Empire. They were opposed from the start by the Liberals, led by Benito Juárez, who kept up a steady armed opposition. These Liberals were joined by nationalistic Conservatives who resented foreign domination. Maximilian made the roster of his foes complete by making it clear that he was, in fact, a liberal at heart. His draft constitution upheld the reform laws attacking the nation's Catholic Church, endorsed religious freedom, decreed the equality of all Mexican citizens under the law, forbade debt peonage and corporal punishment, and protected the rights of workers. These declarations were likely intended to win the hearts and minds of the Mexican poor, but as the following selection makes clear, their more crucial impact was to cost the emperor the support of the hardline, religious Conservatives who had previously been his greatest champions. While Maximilian and Carlotta made great show of adopting the customs of the country, it was obvious that they had a limited appreciation of Mexico's cultures; the empress's letter suggests that she held the country's inhabitants in low regard, particularly Mexican liberals, who are dismissed as so many bands of brigands. Increasingly, the monarchs found themselves almost entirely dependent on the support of the French army. As the civil war in the United States wound down, Napoleon III determined that his imperial adventure was doomed and began withdrawing his troops. Maximilian, in the words of his private secretary, was stubbornly naive: "It was the Emperor's great illusion that if he could talk to Juárez he could attract him to his cause, make him his ranking minister, and aided by him, and freed of the intervention of the French, he could govern the Empire wisely and inaugurate for Mexico, in its entirety, an era of peace, progress, and well-being."¹

In the following letter to the French empress Eugenie, Empress Carlotta implores the French monarchs to reconsider withdrawing their troops and outlines her vision of Mexico's future. Carlotta would leave Mexico in July 1866 to personally plead for greater French military support. In Europe, the unmistakable signs of serious mental illness became manifest, though she lived until 1926. Maximilian and two of his top

generals were captured by the triumphant Liberals, court-martialled, and executed by firing squad on June 19, 1867.

Chapultepec, February 3, 1865

Madam and beloved sister,

I hope that the Emperor will effect no more reductions before he has heard General Douay. I think that if we are to do well this year, we shall require an effective force of forty thousand men, including all nationalities. This means that if a few thousand more could come to us from France, by continuing recruiting elsewhere, with the aid of money (though I do not know where we shall get it), we might perhaps reach this figure. It seems to me that M. Jules Favre² could not but approve of our being assisted in combating the clergy, for it is only the latter which, combined with disorder and the Juarista bands, calls for an increase of the troops. This would be far from decreasing the confidence felt in the future of Mexico even in Europe, for it is in fulfilling its duty that our Government is meeting with resistance from the elements which it is bound to destroy so as to clear the way to order, progress, and the true and brilliant future of this country—*European immigration*.

It will not be long before France reaps a rich harvest from what she has sown. The traffic between Le Havre and Vera Cruz was considerable last year, and who knows how many French will come and settle here?

As to what the good marshal said—that there are more organized bands from Vera Cruz to San Blas and from Durango to Monterey [*sic*]—Your Majesty would think I give you false reports if this were true, but nothing could be less accurate at the present moment, and General L'Hérillier is obliged to dispatch expeditions from Mexico in every direction with the greatest energy, there are so many bands.

It is also announced that a certain number of *pronunciamientos* are about to take place in favour of "*religión y fueros*" [religion and clerical privileges], at Guadalajara among other places.

It seems to me that it would be easy to send us some reinforcements from Algeria now that everything seems to be over there. Frankly, supposing that we were not supported, we should have to set aside all our projects of reform and govern as M. Gutierrez³ desired, surrounding ourselves as with a great wall of China. I quite see that this system was perfectly rational; it was also eminently Mexican and that was what was wrong with it; whereas it is our mission gently, affectionately, but none the less surely, to attract to Mexico a stream of population which shall absorb the old one, for there is nothing to be done with the existing elements. I should say it quite openly if I were

not afraid that it would be repeated here. I rely upon immigration, which will perhaps begin this year, and if I were not convinced that it would be considerable, I should be bound to admit to Your Majesty that all we are doing would be to no purpose. The affair of the clergy has been the touchstone which has confirmed me in all the ideas which I formed as soon as we arrived, and I see that I was not mistaken. However that may be, it is rather fortunate that we have found out in time that Europe alone can fitly people this Empire, and if Your Majesty's gentle influence can provide us with a few more troops, the situation will be *afianzada* (secured). I do not doubt for a moment that Your Majesties will regret the reductions when you know what is going on. I therefore rely with the utmost confidence upon the hand which pressed ours on March 12 and on April 10 traced those lines which are the expression of a great power as well as of a sovereign friendship: "Always rely upon my friendship and support."

I put my trust in that hand, in Your Majesty's heart, and in him who said: "God helps those who help themselves."

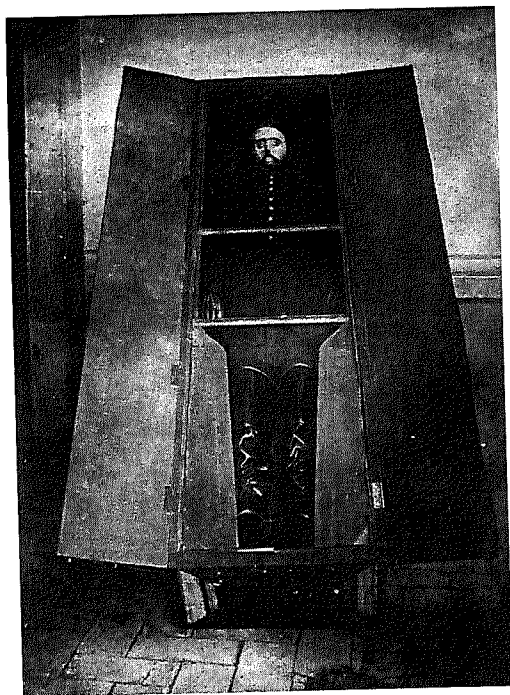
It seems to me that by all these means together, we cannot fail to triumph.

The poor Holy Father is doing us a pretty service in Europe with the encyclical.⁴ If I might allow myself a slight irreverence, I should say that if it comes from any spirit at all, I do not think it is the Holy Spirit. Our Lord gave peace to His Apostles and did not address them in any other terms; nowadays it is trouble that they are trying to disseminate.

Ah! if Bossuet⁵ were still living, it would be he and the clergy of France, who are so able and so Catholic, to whom we should owe the salvation of Europe from a schism. If it were not for the Gallican church, confusion would fall upon men's consciences in the attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. God did not make faith and reason to contradict each other, but to confirm each other. I find this very consoling. . . .

As for our costumes, we dress in Mexican fashion, I go out riding in a sombrero, our meals are in the Mexican style, we have a carriage drawn by mules with quantities of bells, we never use any wraps but sarapes, I go to mass in a mantilla; in short, if we have any secret thoughts of emigration, it does not look like it. It is not reforms that shock men, it is the way in which they are carried out; and so in all that is external and puerile we conform to all that is most Mexican, to such an extent as to amaze the very Mexicans themselves. My parties end after one o'clock. Next Monday will be the sixth. I dance a few quadrilles, one of which is regularly with General L'Hérillier. I am gradually inviting all the French officers, even the paymasters, who had a great longing to dance. . . .

Life here is almost like the Middle Ages; we are gay, contented, and calm,



The Emperor Maximilian in casket. (From Carole Naggar and Fred Ritchin, eds., *Mexico Through Foreign Eyes, 1850–1990* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1993], 163).

and yet there is nothing to prevent a band of guerrillas from falling upon us at any minute. Up here we have cannon and a system of signals for communicating with the city. But that does not prevent us from being always on the look-out. The night before last I got up on hearing cannon-fire; it was a tumultuous celebration in honour of the Virgin of Tacubaya, as if the Presentation had taken place at four in the morning; I suppose it was to allow for the difference of time between here and Jerusalem. All religious festivities take place here at night, amid an explosion of fire-crackers, as if the earth were being rent asunder. In the daytime festivals go off more quietly. There is no denying that this country has a character all its own; Gutiérrez was quite right about that too, except that he liked it, whereas we see nothing to respect in it and shall act in such a way as to change it. The masses are excessively stupid and illiberal, and it is not the *licenciados* (intelligentsia) who will stir them up; that explains the strangle-hold which the clergy have managed to obtain on them;

it does not educate the people, and so they remain as they are, and because they are as they are, the clergy has a free hand.

Your Majesty has doubtless read Marie Antoinette's charming letters published by M. d'Hunolstein? This suggests the reflection that everything comes to light one day, whether one is celebrated or not; one does not know what may happen, and when one expresses judgments that are not very charitable, it is not at all to be desired. Your Majesty will see what I am driving at. In order to be quite sure that the Mexicans do not know what I am saying about them until a new nation is in being which will say the same, I should be glad if Your Majesty would destroy all my letters. They are intended only as conversations; once the idea is expressed, my object is attained. It would be a service on your part which I should appreciate extremely.

Meanwhile, in concluding this long letter I beg Your Majesty to be assured of the unchanging attachment with which I am

Your Majesty's good sister and friend,

Carlotta

Notes

1. José Luis Blasio, *Maximilian, Emperor of Mexico: Memoirs of his Private Secretary*, translated and edited by Robert Hammond Murray (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 62. *Ed.*
2. Jules Favre (1809–1880), leader of the republican opposition to the empire of Napoleon III. *Ed.*
3. Apparently a reference to José María Gutiérrez de Estrada, a diehard Mexican monarchist who had worked since the 1840s to bring a European prince to a Mexican throne. *Ed.*
4. In 1864, Pope Pius IX (1792–1878; pope 1846–1878) angered progressive Catholics with his encyclical *Quanta cura*, which was accompanied by a so-called "Syllabus of Errors," which harshly denounced liberalism, republicanism, democracy, rationalism, and many other features of the modern world. *Ed.*
5. Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704), French priest, regarded as one of the greatest orators in French history. *Ed.*