Vol. LXXVI, No. 1194, pp. 265–292
Review article
UDC 272:343.9.02(72)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.18485/iipe_ria.2025.76.1194.5
Biblid 0543-3657, 76 (2025)

WHO'S AFRAID OF ROBIN HOOD? THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S MEDIATION ATTEMPTS IN THE MEXICAN DRUG WAR

Milan VESELICA[1]

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the potential role of the Catholic Church in mediating Mexico's drug war, particularly in light of the 2024 proposal from the leader of the Mexican Episcopal Conference. While the concept of faith-based mediation has been extensively explored in political science, this specific case is noteworthy due to the involvement of drug cartels in an internal armed conflict. Utilising the theoretical framework established by Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana, the author investigates the Church's identity, resources, challenges, strategies, and motivations as a mediator. The study sheds light on the complex dynamics between the Church and drug cartels, which encompass everything from parallel social activities to instances of victimisation. Despite these challenges, the context in Mexico offers the Church a unique opportunity to confront issues related to drug cartels, including the rise of "narco-religion". As a result, three potential approaches emerge – religious, social, and political – that could mitigate the influence of drug cartels and enhance the mediating power of the Catholic Church.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received:
6.2.2025

Revised:
1.6.2025

Accepted:
26.6.2025

KEYWORDS

Catholic Church; drug cartels; war; mediation; religious actor.

Cite this article as: Veselica, Milan. 2025. "Who's Afraid of Robin Hood? The Catholic Church's Mediation Attempts in the Mexican Drug War". *The Review of International Affairs* LXXVI (1194): 265–292. https://doi.org/10.18485/iipe_ria.2025.76.1194.5

[1] Research Assistant, Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, Serbia. E-mail: milan.veselica@diplomacy.bg.ac.rs, https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1608-3678.

Introduction

The legend of Robin Hood tells of a knight and outlaw from Sherwood Forest who rebels against local and central authorities and the church hierarchy. He aids the poor against oppressive feudal lords, embodying a mediaeval hero who fights inequality through violence. This story has inspired political groups, guerrillas, and insurgents, though some use it as a façade to justify their actions. A modern example is Mexican drug cartels, which present themselves as Robin Hood-like organisations while being an unwelcome force in society.

In a Robin Hood framework of conflict, the main adversaries consist of central and local authorities. In Mexico, their power is undermined by drug cartels that effectively control various territories. This situation arises from a federal system that centralises power, often neglecting regional diversity (Krstić 2014a, 185). Cartels, closely linked to local socio-economic groups, function as parastatal entities, fulfilling community needs without genuinely representing the populace (Flanigan 2014). Despite some democratic advancements since the 1917 Constitution, Mexico experienced a period described as a "stabilocracy" under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which forged alliances with cartels (Krstić 2014b, 45). The declaration of the drug war in 2006 transformed Mexico into what is now referred to as a "narco-democracy" (Kos-Stanišić 2011). Additionally, US influence and instability in Central America (Dujić 2020), coupled with a glorified drug culture—characterised as "pornography of violence" (Grillo 2016)—have further weakened state authorities in their efforts to combat drug cartels.

However, the church constitutes the second branch within Robin Hood's classification of enmity. In Mexico, the relationship between the church and state has transitioned from one of hostility to a state of ambivalence (cf. Blancarte 2006; Peralta 2012). However, the interactions between drug cartels and the Catholic Church have received comparatively little scholarly attention. A notable exception is Dennis P. Petri's (2021) study on the regulation of religion by organised crime. While the Catholic Church does not formally participate as a direct actor in the conflict, it plays a crucial role in the broader struggle against drug cartels. This role became particularly pronounced in 2024 when the leadership of the Catholic Church in Mexico offered to act as a mediator in the ongoing Mexican drug war (Sheridan and Rios 2024). Therefore, this paper seeks to explore this potential mediation through the theoretical lens of faith-based mediation.

Theoretical Framework

Since the dawn of the 21st century, religious actors have been increasingly recognised as significant international actors. These actors—whether individuals,

groups, or organisations—espouse religious beliefs and articulate "a reasonably consistent and coherent message about the relationship of religion to politics" (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011, 23). Their influence, while global in scope, often manifests at the national level as well. Jeffrey Haynes (2001, 147) notes, "There is no doubt that religion and religious movements can directly affect the internal politics of states and thus qualify state power, as conventionally understood". The Catholic Church exemplifies this phenomenon. Established as one of the most influential transnational actors (Ryall 2001; Troy 2008; Vallier 1971), the Catholic Church operates on both internal and international fronts, effectively leveraging various layers of its structure—from the "smallest level of sub-parochial units through to missionary religious orders, such as the Jesuits, that can claim to be prototypes of globalisation" (Ryall 2001, 41).

Religious actors in the global arena engage with various transnational entities and phenomena, including terrorism, human rights issues, and protecting sacred sites (Fox 2018, 200-201). Addressing negative transnational phenomena, such as terrorism and organised crime, requires a counterforce with an equally transnational reach. To enhance effectiveness, states must collaborate with neighbouring countries facing similar challenges. This necessity was underscored by the United Nations Security Council in its 2023 Presidential Statement on Transnational Organised Crime: "The Security Council calls on all Member States to improve border management and international cooperation to effectively constrain the spread of transnational threats" (UNSC 2023). However, given the multifaceted nature of transnational threats, state-led efforts alone are often insufficient. In this context, faith-based mediation emerges as a crucial complement, facilitating collaboration between state and non-state actors to more effectively address these challenges.

In their case study on transnational faith-based diplomacy, Lehmann and McLarren (2023, 256-259) highlight the Catholic Church's pivotal role in resolving the civil wars in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mozambique, as well as during Mexico's Zapatista uprising. This involvement is grounded in the Church's evolving social teaching, beginning with Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical Rerum Novarum and culminating in Pope Francis's 2020 Fratelli Tutti. The 2004 Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church emphasises the Church's obligation to engage in social issues due to the relevance of the Gospel and "the corrupting effects of injustice, that is, of sin" (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, § 71). This doctrinal foundation explicitly applies to transnational issues that necessitate "mediation between state and non-state delegations by a religious actor in changing locations, over long durations, and under varying political conditions" (Lehmann and McLarren 2023, 259).

The effectiveness of faith-based mediation in internal armed conflicts has been examined in research by Johnstone and Svensson (2013). Their extensive

global dataset reveals that faith-based mediation successfully resolves roughly half of the cases analysed, which Jonathan Fox (2018, 125) describes as a "good success rate for violent conflicts". A significant finding from their study is that "faith-based mediation primarily occurs in contexts where religion does not play a role in the conflict itself" (Johnstone and Svensson 2013, 557). Nonetheless, it does not preclude religious actors from mediating these disputes. Furthermore, Zachary R. Calo (2025, 159) notes, "Because of their ability to incorporate 'moral and spiritual resources' into the mediation, faith-based actors are particularly effective at moving parties towards an agreement". Moreover, mediation by religious actors represents "a direct, discernible, and often dramatic form of religious influence—and one in which much is at stake" (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011, 186).

There is no universal methodology for faith-based mediation, prompting the authors to focus primarily on the factors contributing to its potential success (e.g., Calo 2025; Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana 2009; Johnstone and Svensson 2013). Thus, Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana (2009) identified several key elements that enhance the effectiveness of mediation.

First, the mediator's identity plays a crucial role in achieving the primary objective of mediation: peace. They note that "mediators who enjoy the trust of the parties and are perceived as legitimate and credible are often the more successful mediators" (Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana 2009, 180).

Second, the mediator's resources refer to their leverage or "ability to become a relevant actor in conflict management". For non-state actors, this entails utilising intangible resources such as credibility, legitimacy, trust, moral standing, and persuasive power as sources of leverage (Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009, pp. 180-181). Given that religious actors possess specific moral and spiritual leverage, it becomes essential to explore "how religion shapes identity, behaviour, and belief in ways that inform the conflict and its potential resolution" (Calo 2025, 159).

Third, the mediator's motivation is critical. If the parties perceive that the mediator is genuinely invested in reducing violence and resolving the conflict, they are more likely to trust the mediator (Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana 2009, 181).

Finally, mediation strategies and approaches can be classified into three main categories: communication-facilitation strategies (which involve relaying messages between disputants and providing unbiased information), procedural strategies (which focus on creating conducive environments for negotiation, such as arranging suitable times and locations), and directive/manipulative strategies (which aim to persuade disputants to accept proposals put forth by mediators who hold considerable authority) (Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana 2009, 181).

The Mexican drug war may conform to the traditional definition of an intrastate armed conflict—defined as "a conflict between a government and a non-governmental party, with no interference from other countries" (Uppsala University 2024). Its prolonged duration (since 2006) and considerable lethality highlight the necessity for a powerful mediator to facilitate its resolution. The involvement of the Catholic Church in the Mexican drug war is notably justified by its expressed willingness to mediate. The leadership of the Catholic Church in Mexico has made several attempts to position itself as a mediator in the conflict between the state and drug cartels, particularly in 2024 (Sheridan and Rios 2024). Therefore, the paper will explore, following Berkovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana's methodology, the potential for the Catholic Church to really take that role.

The next sections will be organised as follows. First, I will present the identity of the Catholic Church in Mexico. Next, I will delve into its resources—such as religiosity, individual insecurity, public trust, and social activity—while also addressing the challenges posed by drug cartels, including narco-religion, parallel social activity, paternalism, and victimisation. In the third part, I will discuss the motivations of the Catholic Church to act as a mediator. Lastly, I will briefly outline potential strategies and approaches.

Identity

The Catholic Church has been a vital part of Mexican identity since colonial times, existing alongside the state and military. Figures like Father Miguel Hidalgo, a Catholic priest, were key in the independence movement against Spanish rule. Father Hidalgo raised the flag featuring Our Lady of Guadalupe, a symbol that came to represent the independence movement (Schwaller 2011, 117-118). Following this wave of sentiment, the Declaration of Sovereignty and Independence was adopted in Apatzingán in 1814, proclaiming Catholicism as the state religion. Although Mexicans may express concerns about their political leaders and the church hierarchy, they tend to maintain deep reverence for Our Lady of Guadalupe (Agren 2016).

Following Mexico's independence in 1821, the Church became a privileged institution, as citizenship was exclusively granted to Catholics. It continued to advocate for the indigenous population that had converted to Christianity. The mid-19th century saw the rise of liberal ideas in Mexico, coinciding with a period of social and national upheaval in Europe. Benito Juárez, a president of indigenous descent and a fierce opponent of the Church, championed agrarian reforms that targeted large church estates, resulting in considerable losses for the Church. Ironically, the promotion of religious freedom led to the suppression of religious orders, a ban on religious symbols in public spaces, and the secularisation of weddings and funerals. In response, the clergy and

conservative factions appealed to Maximilian of Habsburg to seize power in Mexico. However, after the restoration of the republic, the anti-clerical campaign continued unabated (Schwaller 2011, 144-151).

The concerns regarding the church hierarchy persisted throughout the Revolution (1910-1920). Until 1910, the Church held significant power, owning 50% of the total arable land in the country (Paligorić 2002, 80). However, ten years later, the Church's economic and political influence had diminished due to the loss of its estates and voting rights, the confiscation of property, and the imposition of constitutional control over its activities (Paligorić 2002, 221). Article 24 of the 1917 Constitution stipulated that "every religious act of public worship must be conducted strictly within a designated place of worship, which shall always be under government supervision" (Constitution of Mexico 1917, Art. 24). Article 27 stated that churches are prohibited from acquiring, holding, or managing property or taking out mortgages. Any church property acquired prior to this will be returned to the Nation (Constitution of Mexico 1917, Art. 27(II)).

The anti-Church campaign escalated during President Plutarco Elias Calles's administration, leading to a rebellion against anti-clerical laws and secular policies, culminating in the Cristero War (1926-1929). Approximately 50,000 Cristeros rose in defence of Christianity. The outcome of this conflict led to a renewed recognition of the Catholic Church. However, it was not until 1992 that the Law on Religious Communities was enacted, permitting the Church to purchase, own, or manage real estate or capital, but only to the extent necessary for its functions (Blancarte 2006, 427).

The Catholic Church is currently witnessing a decline in the number of adherents in Mexico. According to the 2020 Mexican population census, approximately 78% of the population identifies as Catholic, a decrease from 83% in 2010 (Office of International Religious Freedom 2023, 1). In contrast, there has been a notable increase in followers of Protestant denominations (4.29% in 2020), as well as among independents, Christians without formal affiliation, and agnostics (ARDA n.d.). However, this decline does not suggest that the Catholic Church has lost its social and political influence, which remains shaped by a complex interplay of historical, demographic, and institutional resources that will be explored further below.

Resources and Challenges

Religiosity

The situation becomes more intricate when examining personal religious practices and beliefs. The 2017–2022 World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 (Haerpfer et al. 2022) reveals that 74.6% of Mexicans regard religion as

important to varying degrees, a figure that exceeds the percentage of individuals identifying as Catholics. Furthermore, about 87% of respondents indicated that God holds a significant or very significant place in their lives (Table 1).

Table 1: Importance of religion and God in personal life

	Very important (%)	Rather important (%)	Not very important (%)	Not at all important (%)	N
Importance of religion	50.891	23.749	15.009	10.351	1,739
Importance of God[2]	79.126	8.568	7.188	5.118	1,739

Source: Author, extracted from the 2017–2022 WVS Wave 7 (Haerpfer et al. 2022).

A significant two-thirds of respondents indicate a belief in God, life after death, and heaven, while belief in hell tends to be less prevalent across nearly all countries surveyed. Notably, about 95% of respondents in Mexico express their faith in God (Table 2).

Table 2: Religious beliefs on an individual level

	Yes (%)	No (%)	N
Belief in God	95.975	4.025	1,739
Belief in life after death	71.736	28.264	1,716
Belief in hell	61.111	38.889	1,728
Belief in heaven	78.316	21.684	1,734

Source: Author, extracted from the 2017–2022 WVS Wave 7 (Haerpfer et al. 2022).

In terms of religious practices, personal prayer aligns with the broader trend of religiosity, with approximately 70 to 80% of individuals engaging in frequent individual prayer. In contrast, church attendance shows a relatively low engagement level; fewer than 50% of respondents attend religious services on

[2] The importance of God is assessed using a 10-point scale that gauges individual importance. To facilitate comparison of results, we have divided this scale into four categories. Responses 1, 2, and 3 fall under the "Not at all important" category, while answers 4 and 5 are classified as "Not very important." Conversely, responses 6 and 7 are categorised as "Rather important," and those who answered 8, 9, or 10 are placed in the "Very important" category.

a weekly basis. This indicates that nearly half of those surveyed in Mexico do not participate in Sunday mass, which is considered the most significant religious service in the Catholic Church (Table 3).

Table 3: Religious practices on an individual level

	Daily, once or several times a week (%)	Once a month or on special occasions (%)	Once a year (%)	Less often or never (%)	N
Attending religious services	43.416	29.385	5.750	16.273	1,739
Praying	72.743	10.293	1.898	15.066	1,739

Source: Author, extracted from the 2017–2022 WVS Wave 7 (Haerpfer et al. 2022).

Insecurity

In the 1920s, during American Prohibition, smuggling organisations thrived along the US-Mexico border, particularly in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, becoming key centres for drug trafficking. These groups exploited the availability of marijuana and opium poppy in Mexico, leading to a booming drug trade in Sinaloa, Durango, Chihuahua, and Baja California. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), in power since 1929, maintained a clientelistic relationship with drug cartels, which contributed to a relatively stable environment. However, in the 1980s, as the PRI faced electoral losses in northern states, this relationship weakened, resulting in increased drug-related violence, further fuelled by US efforts to combat trafficking (Medel and Thoumi 2014, 196-197).

During the 1970s and 1980s, the largest drug cartels in Mexico were established and consolidated, including the Valencia (Milenio) cartel (1970s–2009), the Juárez Cartel, La Familia Michoacana, the Tijuana Cartel, and the Sinaloa Cartel. Conflicts and alliances among these groups vying for control over trade routes led to the decline of older cartels and the rise of new ones in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, such as the Golfo Cartel, Beltrán Leyva, Jalisco New Generation Cartel, and Los Caballeros Templarios (cf. Kail 2015, 23-32).

The PRI experienced losses in two presidential elections, in 2000 and 2006, during which the National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN) assumed power. Under President Felipe Calderón, who served from 2006 to 2012, an extensive drug war was initiated with support from the United States (Medel and Thoumi 2014, 209-212). Although the PRI reclaimed power in 2012 with

Enrique Peña Nieto as president, he continued to deploy the armed forces to combat criminal gangs despite pledging to prioritise violence reduction over a direct confrontation with drug cartels. In 2018, Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Morena party took over and maintained the militant approach. His administration upheld the kingpin strategy, which focuses on targeting high-profile leaders of criminal organisations. This militarised approach has contributed to a cycle of violence, resulting in an increase in homicides as the drug war escalates (ICG n.d.). Since 2006, when the government launched its war against the cartels, the country has experienced over 431,000 homicides (UNODC n.d.).

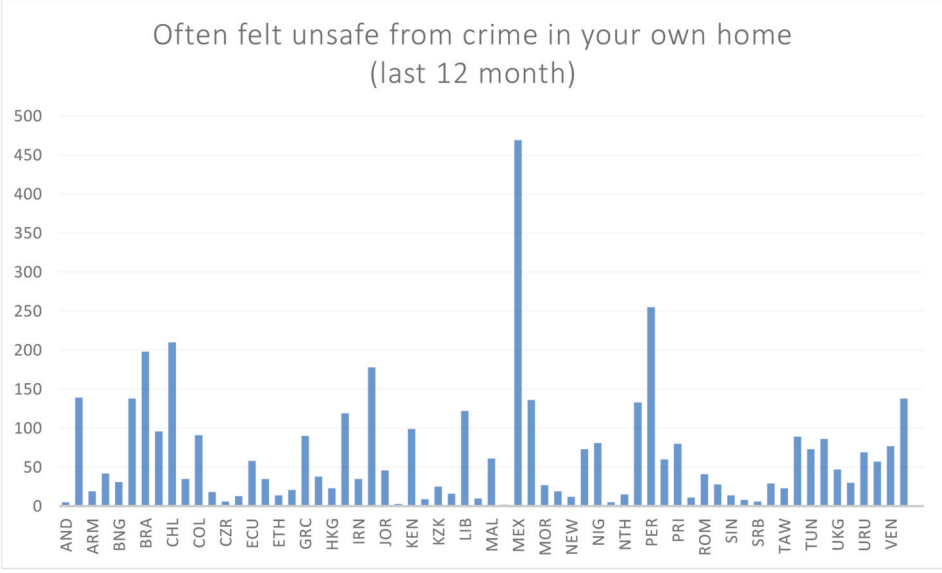
As a result, Mexico has emerged as one of the countries with the highest rates of personal insecurity stemming from crime. According to data from the 2017–2022 WVS Wave 7, approximately 50% of Mexican respondents reported feeling unsafe (either often or sometimes) in their homes (Table 4). When compared to other countries in the WVS, the percentage of individuals who frequently feel unsafe at home due to crime is the highest in the world (Graph 1). This pervasive sense of insecurity can be attributed to the activities of drug cartels and the ongoing Mexican drug war, which began in 2006.

Table 4: Frequency of feeling insecure in respondent's own home due to crime

	Often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely (%)	Never (%)	N
Frequency you/family (last 12 month) felt unsafe from crime in your own home	26.954	24.942	18.276	29.828	1,740

Source: Author, extracted from the 2017–2022 WVS Wave 7 (Haerpfer et al. 2022).

Graph 1: Frequent feeling of insecurity in one's own home due to crime in countries (N=64)



Source: Author, extracted from the 2017–2022 WVS Wave 7 (Haerpfer et al. 2022).

Public Trust

Mexican citizens largely require greater trust in state institutions. According to the 2017–2022 WVS, over 50% of respondents in Mexico indicated a lack of confidence in political parties, civil services, parliament, and the government. Additionally, approximately 45% expressed the same sentiments towards the justice system and police. In contrast, respondents demonstrated a higher level of confidence in the army and churches compared to other institutions (Table 5).

Table 5: Confidence in institutions

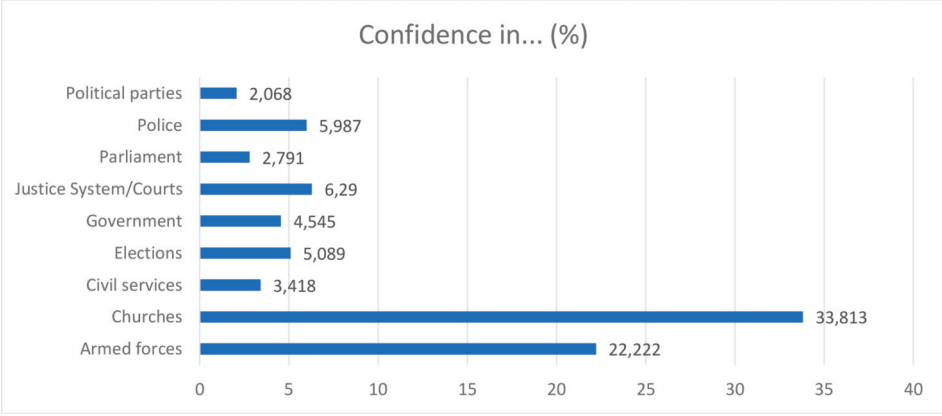
Confidence in…	A great deal (%)	Quite a lot (%)	Not very much (%)	None at all (%)	N
Armed forces	22.222	28.935	30.787	18.055	1,728
Churches	33.813	28.053	25.864	12.27	1,736
Police	5.987	15.486	32.067	46.459	1,737
Justice System/Courts	6.290	15.958	31.974	45.778	1,717
Government	4.545	12.946	28.308	54.200	1,738
Political parties	2.068	9.368	25.747	62.817	1,740
Parliament	2.791	11.802	30.756	54.651	1,720
Elections	5.089	14.633	29.844	50.434	1,729
Civil services	3.418	13.023	27.283	56.276	1,697

Source: Author, extracted from the 2017–2022 WVS Wave 7 (Haerpfer et al. 2022)

There has been a noticeable decline in institutional religiosity. However, approximately 62% of respondents expressed confidence in churches, while about 38% reported a lack of trust. According to Latinobarómetro (2023), 9% of Mexican respondents (N=1184) identify as believers who do not affiliate with any church. This general mistrust of churches, coupled with the rise of non-institutional forms of religiosity, has created a conducive environment for the emergence and practice of non-church cults. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church remains the most significant single religious institution, in contrast to the more diffusely represented Protestant communities.

When comparing the confidence in state institutions to the previously mentioned trust in churches, it becomes evident that Mexicans tend to have greater faith in churches than in state entities (Graph 2). This enduring confidence in religious institutions suggests that religion plays a significant role in Mexican society. Consequently, the Catholic Church possesses the potential to provide invaluable resources to mitigate the widespread insecurity generated by crime.

Graph 2: Comparison of Mexicans' confidence in state institutions



Source: Author, extracted from the 2017–2022 WVS Wave 7 (Haerpfer et al. 2022)

"Narco-religion"

To understand the possibility of faith-based mediation, Calo (2025, 159) suggested exploring "how religion shapes identity, behaviour, and belief in ways that inform the conflict and its potential resolution". In the case of the Mexican drug war, it is a specific form of religion that can be defined as "narco-religion". It consists, firstly, of narco-cults and folk saints and, secondly, of the co-optation of elements of Catholicism into narco-cults. Narco-cult is "an individualistic, shamanistic, communal or ecclesiastical cult that functions as a source of spiritual or psychological empowerment for individuals or organisations connected to drug production or trafficking" (Kail 2015, 46).

Narco-Cults and Folk Saints

Mexican drug cartels have evolved beyond being just violent criminal organisations. They have created a unique lifestyle often referred to as "living on the edge", which includes specific codes of conduct, socialisation processes for youth, and distinct business practices. This evolution does not diminish their criminal nature; rather, it is intensified by a unique belief system (ideology) that has taken on a quasi-religious character. Given that the existence of a cartel member is invariably tied to violence, the belief system of these drug cartels is fundamentally centred on the cult of death and ritual sacrifice.

As Mircea Eliade and Ioan P. Couliano (1991, 56) observed, "Unintelligible debris of mythologies, cosmologies, and references to divination or ritual still emerge out of the Mesoamerican imagination". These remnants reveal

themselves in the synthesis of ancient beliefs and practices with contemporary religious doctrines, giving rise to new cults that garner respect within drug cartels.

Historically, before the arrival of Christianity, humanity engaged in a dual role: participating in the creative process while simultaneously repaying the gods for the debt incurred by their species. That involved nurturing both cosmic and social existence (Paz 1961). The creative aspect of sacrifices can be seen as the ultimate manifestation of the occultation of death, where death must be generated, sustained, and directed towards adversaries. This pattern of religious behaviour has found a modern embodiment in the cult of Santa Muerte (Holy Death).

Santa Muerte is a goddess once exclusively worshipped by lonely and abandoned women. She is depicted as a skeleton dressed in formal attire, often a wedding dress, and is typically featured on candles of various sizes, wielding a sickle in her hands. The cult of Santa Muerte transitioned from private to public devotion in 2001, when a mother, grateful for her son's release from prison, opened her home to allow others to worship and pray to Santa Muerte, ultimately organising a festive city procession (Neumann 2018).

This deity is primarily revered among the poorer classes and members of drug cartels, leading to her being labelled by the American public as a "drug saint". Members of drug cartels are drawn to her due to the belief that she is "willing to honour requests that the Catholic Church's official saints will not" (Neumann 2018, 53), requests that can include release from prison, successful dealings with rival cartels, and the distribution of drugs across US borders. The role of Santa Muerte in the drug trade has often been misinterpreted by US media and law enforcement: she is not a protector of drug traffickers but rather a guardian of those enmeshed in the drug war. As Kail (2015, 181) observes, "The majority of Santa Muerte devotees are not involved in criminal activity. For many of her followers, Santa Muerte represents a saint that hears the prayers of the oppressed and the downtrodden". Consequently, she is venerated by many whose lives are closely associated with death, including lawyers, farmers, and families of drug lords (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020, 45).

Folk saints are a common phenomenon that contrasts with canonised Catholic saints. These figures, described as "spirits of the demised who have not garnered official recognition but are deemed holy for their miracle-working powers by the local populace" (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020, 28), include examples such as the Mayan deity Maximón. Additionally, individuals celebrated as saints often possess distinct traits or have overcome unique struggles. However, due to their non-Christian lifestyles, there is no intention for the Church to canonise them. National folk saints like Juan Soldado, Jesús Malverde, Dr Jose Gregorio Hernandez, Don Pedrito Jaramillo, Niño Fidencio, and Teresita Urrea are prominent in Mexico (Kail 2015, 159-175).

The Catholic Church does not acknowledge certain figures from Mexican history or various supernatural beings, leading to the emergence of distinct sects that honour them. One such sect is the Mexican-American Catholic Traditional Church (Iglesia Católica Tradicionalista Mexicana-Estadounidense), which venerates Santa Muerte. This sect was officially recognised in Mexico in 2003, although this recognition was revoked two years later. In 2011, Archbishop David Romo Guillén, the leader of this sect, was arrested on criminal charges (Latin America News Dispatch 2011).

One strategy implemented by the state to counteract drug cartels is to reduce the harmful influence of the Santa Muerte cult. In 2009, the army dismantled around three hundred shrines dedicated to this figure along the border between California and Texas, intending to weaken the drug culture in Mexico (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020, 25-26). However, this approach did not yield the desired results.

Co-opting Elements of Conventional Religion

The drug cartel La Familia Michoacana/Los Caballeros Templarios (LFM/LCT) is notable for integrating elements of conventional religion into its operations. Anthony T. C. Cowden (2011, 10) identifies several religious components associated with this cartel, including moral justification of its activities, a sacred character, rituals, sacred texts, and the previously mentioned cults of folk saints and heroes. These aspects are categorised as an ecclesiastical cult:

> The groups recognise the office of a full-time clergy and professional religious specialists. (…) Members of the clergy are responsible for performing rituals and ceremonies for individuals, groups, and the whole community. There is a clear distinction between clergy and laymen in these groups. La Familia Michoacana is an example of a narco-cult that observes various offices of spiritual leadership that serve the organisation on a full-time basis (Kail 2015, 45-46).

The moral justification for their actions is exemplified in a message left by cartel members following a nightclub massacre: "La Familia does not kill for money, does not kill women, and does not kill innocents. Those who die deserve to die. Let everyone know, this is divine justice" (Cowden 2011, 9). This illustrates how acts of violence are frequently framed within a moral context. Additionally, these drug cartels engage in social activities to cultivate followers, build public trust, and establish a network of dependencies, thus attempting to offset their detrimental impact on society.

The sacred identity of the Knights Templars cartel (Los Caballeros Templarios, LFM) gained prominence following the assassination of LFM leader

Nazario Moreno Gonzáles in 2014. Initially a faction of the LFM, they evolved into an independent drug cartel until 2017, when their leader, Pablo Toscano Padilla, was killed. A notable aspect of their existence is the message directed to Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to Mexico in 2012: "The Knights Templar cartel will not take part in any war activity; we are not murderers. Welcome, Pope" (Voz de América 2012). The choice of their name and the iconography associated with the mediaeval Catholic knightly order, along with the direct communication to the head of the Catholic Church, underscore the unique sacred character of this drug cartel. Drawing inspiration from the Templars, they vowed to "avoid robberies, kidnapping, and extortion, and to shield the state from rival organisations" (Cowden 2011, 9).

Rituals within this drug cartel are categorised into initiation rites and ritual sacrifices. The initiation rites of the LFM/LCT incorporate elements associated with the Templar order, including the iconic white cloak adorned with a red cross, a sword, and similar artefacts that evoke the order itself rather than any transcendent being through whom justice is purportedly established. In contrast, ritual sacrifices are often linked to Santa Muerte (Neumann 2018, 51-52).

The sacred texts possess a programmatic-doctrinal nature and are frequently regarded within the community as "a new Bible". In this context, the LFM/LCT cartel has released a Code of Conduct, a pamphlet that outlines the religious foundation for a campaign aimed at defending "the values of a society based on ethics" (Cowden 2011, 10).

Cults centred on folk saints and heroes, alongside the aforementioned worship of transcendent beings, relate closely to findings from the Pew Research Centre (2011), which indicate that 51% of Catholics in Mexico believe there are alternative paths to salvation (eternal life) beyond those offered by the Church. Among these alternative beliefs is the veneration of the narco-saint Jesús Malverde, a figure of dubious historical verification who is remembered by the people as a bandit and a fighter against the regime of Porfirio Díaz, allegedly killed by Mexican police in 1909. The narrative surrounding him as a "Robin Hood-like folk hero" (Cowden 2011, 10) diverges from traditional social banditry through its religious undertones. Malverdian piety exemplifies a distinct type of religious folk practice in Mexico, encompassing the veneration of folk saints, spiritualism, and curanderismo (the practice of supernatural healing) (Creechan and Herrán Garcia 2005, 5). The primary chapel dedicated to Jesús Malverde is situated next to the government building in Culiacán, Sinaloa, a city emblematic of both the geographic and symbolic epicentre of Mexico's drug trade (Creechan and Herrán Garcia 2005, 5).

Social Activities

The Catholic Church is distinguished in every society by its social engagement. While both the Catholic Church and drug cartels undertake forms of social activity that may sometimes intersect, their underlying motives for such actions differ significantly. The very existence of a drug cartel represents a form of social corruption. In contrast, the Catholic Church's social initiatives are rooted in the principles that oppose such perversions. It is summarised in its Social Teaching, "Because of the public relevance of the Gospel and faith, because of the corrupting effects of injustice, that is, of sin, the Church cannot remain indifferent to social matters" (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, §71).

The utilitarian factor pertains to the establishment of a relationship marked by dependence. Violent political groups are driven by both utilitarian and ideological motives. From a utilitarian perspective, "service provision can serve as a utilitarian tool used to create dependence within the local population and/or generate goodwill among the local population" (Flanigan 2014, 65). Both facets of this relationship—dependence and goodwill—stem from the inherent nature of power, which both constrains and empowers those under its influence. It "allows the organisation to demand tolerance of or active participation in its less desirable activities by the local population" (Flanigan 2014, 65). The dependence on services provided by drug cartels hampers the state's ability to deliver public services, perpetuating a high level of poverty within the region.

Héctor Gómez Peralta (2012, 18) identifies four distinct periods in the relationship between the Church and the Mexican state. The first period, from the late 19th to the early 20th century, is characterised by Catholic social teaching, particularly as articulated in Pope Leo XIII's encyclical Rerum Novarum (1891). This social doctrine, conceived as a third way between laissez-faire capitalism and socialist collectivism, is built upon three foundational pillars: private property, social justice, and unionism (Peralta 2012, 19). In Mexico, these principles were realised through the efforts of the Social-Catholic Congress. When applied to the Mexican context, Catholic social teaching is referred to in the literature as integral intransigence. This concept embodies the "rejection of individualism, defence of organicism and family, the dream of an alliance between the clergy and the people against the ruling classes, a model of society based on small communities or regions with a high grade of autonomy contrasting with central government (judged as an oppressor power), the search for a third way between capitalism and socialism, anti-industrialism, anti-capitalism and anti-semitism" (Peralta 2012, 20).

The Mexican drug cartels exemplify a distinct pattern of social activity. First, their pronounced hierarchical structure and organised functionality highlight a clear rejection of individualism. Second, albeit paradoxically, the cartels often claim to uphold family values and assert their efforts to foster a sense of community among the youth, even going so far as to declare that they aim to protect young people from drugs (Cowden 2011, 9).

Thirdly, the vision of an alliance between the clergy and the people, aimed at challenging the ruling classes, has manifested in a distorted manner as an alliance between drug cartels and the populace pursuing a similar objective. This phenomenon is exacerbated by a pervasive distrust of the state among the people, as illustrated by the words of a Mexican woman:

> The heavy deployment of troops and federal police in the area had forced La Familia to lie low. So, who would look after the poor now? The government? (...) No, it would not… Local police were poorly paid and, therefore, incompetent and corrupt. When La Familia was in charge, nobody stepped out of line. You did not even need to lock your door at night (Flanigan 2014, 72).

Fourth, the model of small communities and self-governing regions serves as a framework for the territorial organisation of drug cartels. In the article "Who are we?", the LFM cartel states, "Workers from the Tierra Caliente region in the state of Michoacán, organised by the need to end the oppression, the humiliation to which we have constantly been subjected by people who have always had power" (Flanigan 2014, 74). This struggle is fundamentally against both the central government and the local authorities who are subordinate to it, particularly when they do not serve the interests of the cartels. Furthermore, drug cartels construct a unique alternative that bridges capitalism and socialism. They actively participate in the "free market" as the primary suppliers of narcotics—mainly methamphetamine—to the US. Concurrently, they reduce the prices of essential food items in their regions, framing this action as a means to support the socially vulnerable population (Flanigan 2014, 73).

The socially orientated activities that align with this social teaching represent a significant intersection between the operations of drug cartels and the Church in Mexico. The primary areas in which Mexican drug cartels engage in social initiatives include short-term relief efforts (such as emergency food aid, housing, and medication), health services (including drug rehabilitation clinics specifically for LFM/LCT cartel, along with the ad hoc purchasing of health services and medications), infrastructure development (involving the construction and repair of churches, homes, roads, and schools), provision of utilities (with one-time payments or improvements enabling access to water and electricity), agricultural support (offering agricultural loans and assistance in applying for

federal agricultural aid from the Mexican government), low-interest loans (for personal and business purposes), and justice administration and dispute resolution (Flanigan 2014, 66-67).

Even in the realm of drug rehabilitation, where the Church is positioned to provide immediate assistance to individuals struggling with addiction, drug cartels have exploited this opportunity for their own mobilisation efforts. In treatment centres established by the LFM/LCT drug cartel, individuals undergoing rehabilitation partake in a two-month programme of Christian evangelisation. Upon successfully passing the final scriptural examination, these individuals become integrated into the cartel, effectively transforming into a reliable labour force for the spread of narcotics (Flanigan 2014, 73).

Paternalism and Victimisation

Petri (2021, 124) observed that the threats made by drug cartels against religious groups can be interpreted as a form of "religious policy". This encompasses various actions, including "interventions in the appointment of religious ministers, the targeting of ministers who are critical of the drug trade, censorship of sermon content, imposition of curfews, implementation of 'taxes' through protection rackets, and restrictions on charitable activities" (Petri 2021, 124).

Serious allegations have surfaced against certain church dignitaries, suggesting their involvement in paternalistic relationships with drug cartels. Members of various drug cartels portray themselves as devout individuals; they regularly attend religious services, interact with the Holy Scriptures, and distribute them to local government offices. Notably, Nazario Moreno, the spiritual leader and head of the Knights Templar cartel (LCT), advocated for a "muscular" form of Christianity and authored a book on such a subject (Flanigan 2014, 75).

A significant controversy arose in September 2005 when Ramón Godínez Flores, Bishop of Aguascalientes, admitted that certain drug traffickers were donating substantial sums of money to his diocese. He claimed these traffickers were motivated by a desire for purification (LADB 2005, 1). Bishop Godínez justified that by asserting that the Church should overlook the origins of the funds, much like Christ did not question Mary when she anointed his feet with precious ointment. "Bad money should not be burnt; it should be transformed," declared Bishop Godínez (LADB 2005, 1).

In response, the Mexican Episcopal Conference dismissed the accusations against the Church as baseless, with Godínez later indicating that his comments had been misinterpreted (LADB 2005, 1). Nevertheless, three years later, Bishop

Carlos Aguiar Retes, then President of the Mexican Episcopal Conference, acknowledged that drug trafficking organisations had indeed provided financial support for churches and other public projects (COHA 2011).

There is an alternative perspective regarding the motives of drug cartels that diverges from the typical notion of "money laundering". Specifically, the funds invested in church facilities do not return to their donors. As noted by Shawn T. Flanigan (2014, 67), renovating or constructing churches can be viewed as a "form of throwing some money around". Drug cartels such as the Gulf, Los Zetas, or Sinaloa aim not only to provide less visible, short-term, or routine services but also to make a more significant impact by renovating schools and churches, building parks, repairing sidewalks, and providing electricity or drinking water (Flanigan 2014, 67).

However, Flanigan does not explain why a drug cartel would seek such public affirmation. A potential answer can be found in Mauricio Rubio's (1997) distinction between productive and perverted social capital. Productive social capital, characterised by its institutional framework and network of relationships, fosters economic growth and social change. In contrast, perverted social capital refers to "networks, the contacts, the power relations, the legal system, the informal norms of behaviour, the political activities, and the reward systems established in this society that inspire rent-seeking, or criminal behaviour, to the detriment of productive activities and technological innovation" (Rubio 1997, 815). Thus, while social capital has the potential to reduce violence by empowering the community to act in the collective interest, perverted social capital exploits strong connections and networks within the community to facilitate drug trafficking (Baily 2018, 6-7).

However, the Church stands not only as an indirect actor but also as a victim in the ongoing drug war. Historically, it has faced severe challenges from both the state and the PRI, and currently, it has become a target for drug cartels. Ted Galen Carpenter (2012) recognises it as a casualty of the drug war, noting that "the Catholic Church has always had a murky and, at times, somewhat ambivalent relationship with drug traffickers. Officially, of course, the church condemns their illicit activities, and many church leaders do seem to genuinely detest the drug trade and the people who profit from it" (Carpenter 2012, 79). However, Carpenter (2012, 79) also observes that whether out of fear of retribution or a desire for financial support, "the condemnation lacks intensity".

On the other hand, the Catholic Church became a target for drug cartels primarily due to its perceived influence in Mexico. Since the onset of the drug war until 2022, there have been between 45 and 50 recorded murders of priests linked to narco-related violence (Luévano 2022). Particularly notable are the killings of a priest and two seminarians in 2009, as well as the murders of two

senior priests in 2022. The motivation behind these attacks is not to extract concessions from the Church but rather to serve as a form of punishment. A notable example is the still unsolved murder of Cardinal Juan Jesús Posadas Ocampo, the Archbishop of Guadalajara, who was allegedly killed by a member of the Tijuana Cartel in 1993, mistaken for the head of the Sinaloa Cartel, 'El Chapo' Guzmán. In 2006, the US Department of Justice announced the arrest of Mexican drug lord Francisco Javier Arellano Félix, the leader of the Tijuana cartel, who was also charged in Mexico in connection with the conspiracy to murder Posadas in 1993 (Teinhauer and McKinley Jr 2006).

Motivation for Mediation

In a situation marked by daily violence and loss of life, the Church's engagement in dialogue with individuals involved in this violence represents a crucial step for affected communities. Bishop Salvador Rangel Mendoza of Chilpancingo-Chilapa, whose diocese experiences considerable impacts from conflicts involving drug cartels, highlights his ability to communicate with these groups. He recounts that they have indicated, "We are narcotics traffickers, not hitmen", and notes a conversation in which he suggested, "Perhaps try killing less", to which the response was, "When it is not necessary" (Agren 2018). Bishop Rangel highlights his pastoral work with drug addicts and admits to feeling more fear from them than from narco-traffickers. When he reached out to certain politicians for assistance, they responded that they could not get involved (Agren 2018). This situation illustrates how the Church's connections with the community also bring it closer to drug cartels, potentially increasing its mediation capacity beyond that of the state.

Bishop Ramón Castro, the new leader of the Mexican Episcopal Conference, discusses the Church's actions following numerous complaints from parishioners regarding extortion, robbery, and disappearances. He notes, "We are witnessing shocking violence against our people", which has prompted pastors to take action rather than remain passive (Sheridan and Rios 2024). In February 2024, bishops in Guerrero facilitated a ceasefire between the La Familia Michoacana and Tlacos criminal organisations, addressing escalating territorial clashes that had resulted in a massacre in San Miguel Totolapan, where 17 individuals were killed. While the Church acted as a mediator during the Zapatista uprising in 1994, those negotiations did not include the state. The 2024 proposal by Mexican Catholic bishops to mediate between the state and drug cartels represents a notable development, as observed by Roberto Blancarte, who states that the bishops "are intervening where they see a state incapable of doing so, a state that is practically failed" (Sheridan and Rios 2024).

Possible Strategies and Approaches

The situation requires a comprehensive approach. In this context, Cowden (2011, 15-16) proposed several strategies for the Catholic Church to tackle this issue. I categorised and expanded upon them into religious, social, and political approaches.

Religious approach. The Church should actively combat the harmful fusion of Catholicism and folk cults by denouncing them as anti-theological and criminal. That can be achieved by building cults of drug war victims. The Catholic Church in Mexico has endured the terror initiated by the state during the "perfect dictatorship"—especially following the Mexican Revolution and during the Cristero War—only to face continued violence from drug cartels in the democratic era. To date, over 38 victims of the Cristero War have been beatified and canonised (McCleary and Barro 2020, 94). In 2017, Pope Francis introduced a novel means of obtaining canonisation through his apostolic letter, termed "oblatio vitae". This concept recognises "a single act of Christian heroism in an otherwise routine life by those who were not martyred in the strict sense—killed in hatred of the faith—but who made an 'offering of their life' that led to their death" (McCleary and Barro 2020, 97). The priests murdered in the drug war have emerged as "people's saints" (Luévano 2022). Their cases for canonisation are currently under consideration by the Pope, based on the oblatio vitae martyrdom, presenting a direct strategy for the Catholic Church in its confrontation with narco saints.

Social approach. Cowden (2011, 15) refers to this as the "soft power" method. The Church should leverage its influential voice in public discourse to condemn the actions of drug cartels based on moral grounds. The notable condemnation of drug cartels came from the Vatican. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who served as Secretary of State of the Holy See during the papacy of Benedict XVI, asserted that drug trafficking represents "the most hypocritical and terrible way of murdering the dignity and personality of today's youth" (Wilkinson 2009). In response, he proposed the Church's most drastic measure: excommunication. Individuals involved in the drug cartel would be barred from receiving the Holy Sacraments and participating in services. However, this stance did not gain active support from the Mexican Episcopal Conference, which stated that "excommunication is a punishment that touches only those who have some form of ecclesiastical conscience, an ecclesiastical education" (Wilkinson 2009). However, that cannot be dismissed as a way to enhance the Catholic Church's influence in Mexico, as membership in this Church remains a significant aspect of social identity.

Political approach. It plays a crucial role in shaping global response. It is important to recognise that "while not an arm of government, organised religion

is at least aligned with the rule of law" (Cowden 2011, 16). Recently, Pope Francis extended a letter of encouragement to the Catholic community in Mexico's Terra Caliente region, which is grappling with one of the most violent conflicts involving drug cartels (Ernst 2022). This correspondence is significant in the context of former President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's approach, which emphasises "hugs, not bullets" (Montes 2024). In a letter dated June 2021, the Pope conveyed, "The climate of terror and insecurity that afflicts the population is against God's will" (Agren 2021). He called for the establishment of "dignified work" to help individuals "escape poverty ... and avoid the temptations of narcotics trafficking and violence" (Agren 2021). However, he did not revisit more confrontational stances, such as the excommunication recommended by Cardinal Bertone. As this strategy incorporates appeals to human rights, it can primarily function within the global arena, where the Pope wields considerable political influence.

These approaches can be classified as directive and manipulative strategies that aim to persuade disputants to accept proposals made by mediators who possess significant authority (Bercovitch and Kadayifci-Orellana 2009, 181).

Conclusion

As a longstanding institution in the context of Mexican intrastate conflict, the Catholic Church has maintained a significant capacity for mediation. It possesses a historical and social depth that surpasses that of drug cartels; however, this does not guarantee success in a mediation of conflict that extends beyond religious boundaries and is, in some cases, motivated by religious ideologies. Drug cartels utilise religion as both a mobilising force and an ideological foundation. By presenting themselves as modern-day Robin Hoods, these groups aim to defend the poor against the powerful, all while masking their underlying cognitive dissonance. Such portrayals allow their social initiatives aimed at marginalised communities, as well as their financial support for the Church's silence, to gain traction.

However, this research indicates that the Catholic Church possesses essential leverage derived from its identity, resources, strategies, and motivations for the mediation process. The Catholic Church still holds significant influence as a religious actor in Mexico. As an institution that commands considerable trust from the populace, it stands in stark contrast to the uncertainty generated by drug cartel activities. The relationship between the Church and drug cartels encompasses various dimensions, from social engagement to instances where the Church itself has been victimised. Throughout the 20th century, the Church in Mexico faced challenges from both state and non-state actors. This context allows the global Church to assume a

unique role in mediating the drug war, potentially addressing the complex issues posed by drug cartels, such as "narco-religion", through a tripartite strategy—spanning religious, social, and political dimensions. This distinctive case enriches our understanding of the Catholic Church's role on a global scale.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: The paper presents findings of a study developed as a part of the research project "Serbia and Challenges in International Relations in 2025", financed by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia and conducted by the Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, during the year 2025.

References

[ARDA] The Association of Religion Data Archives. n.d. "National / Regional Profiles: Mexico". Accessed January 23, 2025. https://www.thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=149c#IRFDEMOG.

Agren, David. 2016. "Separation of Catholics and state: Mexico's divisive religious history", *The Guardian*, February 12, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/12/mexico-catholicism-politics-religious-history-pope-francis.

Agren, David. 2018. "They Still Respect Their Priest': The Mexican Bishop Who Negotiates With Cartel Bosses", *The Guardian*, February 18, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/18/mexico-guerrero-drug-cartels-bishop-salvador-rangel-mendoza.

Agren, David. 2021. "Pope Offers His Solidarity in Letter to Cartel-afflicted Mexican Diocese", *National Catholic Reporter*, July 20, 2021. https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-offers-his-solidarity-letter-cartel-afflicted-mexican-diocese .

Baily, Lauren. 2018. *In what ways have Mexican cartels used religion and popular culture for the purpose of legitimising the drug trade?*. Master thesis. University of Kent.

Bercovitch, Jacob, and S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana. 2009. "Religion and Mediation: The Role of Faith-Based Actors in International Conflict Resolution". *International Negotiation* 14 (1): 175-204. https://doi.org/10.1163/157180609X406562.

Blancarte, Roberto. 2006. "Religion, Church, and State in Contemporary Mexico". In: *Changing structure of Mexico: political, social, and economic*

prospects, edited by Laura Randall, 424–437. Armonk and London: M.E.Sharpe.

[COHA] Council on Hemispheric Affairs. 2011. "'A Shepherd Must Tend His Flock': Examining the Complications between Cartels and Catholicism", Council on Hemispheric Affairs, October 31, 2011. https://coha.org/a-shepherd-must-tend-his-flock-examining-the-complications-between-cartels-and-catholicism/.

Calo, Zachary R. 2025. "Religion, Mediation, and Political Conflict." In: *When Politics Meets Religion: Navigating Old Challenges and New Perspectives*, edited by Marko Veković and Miroljub Jevtić, 152-165. London and New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003422976-11.

Carpenter, Ted Galen. 2012. *The Fire Next Door: Mexico's Drug Violence and the Danger to America*. Washington, DC: CATO Institute.

Constitution of Mexico. 1917. "Constitution of Mexico". https://ecnl.org/sites/default/files/files/2021/MexicoConstitution.pdf.

Cowden, Anthony T. C. 2011. "The Role of Religion in the Mexican Drug War". Newport: Newport Naval War College.

Creechan, James H., and Jorge de la Herrán Garcia. 2005. "Without God or Law: Narcoculture and belief in Jesús Malverde". *Religious Studies and Theology* 24 (2): 5–57.

Dujić, Ivan. 2020. "Politička (ne)stabilnost država Srednje Amerike". *Međunarodni problemi* 72 (4): 733–752. https://doi.org/10.2298/MEDJP2004733D

Eliade, Mircea, and Ioan P. Couliano. 1991. *The Eliade Guide to World Religions.* San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.

Ernst, Falko. 2022. "On the front lines in the Tierra Caliente: Mexico's incessant conflict", *Mexico News Daily*, April 28, 2022. https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/front-lines-in-the-tierra-caliente/

Flanigan, Shawn T. 2014. "Motivations and Implications of Community Service Provision by La Familia Michoacána/Knights Templar and other Mexican Drug Cartels". *Journal of Strategic Security* 7 (3): 63-83.

Fox, Jonathan. 2018. *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice*. Second Edition. London and New York: Routledge.

Grillo, Ioan. 2016. "In Mexico, Narco Films vs. Narco Reality", *The New York Times*, July 23, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/24/opinion/sunday/in- mexico-narco-films-vs-narco-reality.html.

Haerpfer, Christian, Ronald Inglehart, Alejandro Moreno, Christian Welzel, Kseniya Kizilova, Jaime Diez-Medrano, Marta Lagos, Pippa Norris, Eduard

Ponarin, and Bi Puranen, eds. 2022. *World Values Survey: Round Seven – Country-Pooled Datafile Version 6.0.* Madrid and Vienna: JD Systems Institute and WVSA Secretariat. https://doi.org/10.14281/18241.24.

Haynes, Jeffrey. 2001. "Transnational religious actors and international politics". *Third World Quarterly* 22 (2): 143-158. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590120037009

[ICG] International Crisis Group. n.d. "Crime in Pieces: The Effects of Mexico's 'War on Drugs', Explained". Accessed January, 20 2025. https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/crime-pieces-effects-mexicos-war-drugs-explained.

Johnstone, Naomi and Isak Svensson. 2013. "Belligerents and Believers: Exploring Faith-Based Mediation in Internal Armed Conflicts". *Politics, Religion, & Ideology* 14 (4): 557-579. https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2013.829046.

Kail, Tony M. 2015. *Narco-cults: Understanding the Use of Afro-Caribbean and Mexican Religious Cultures in the Drug Wars.* London and New York: CRC Press.

Kingsbury, Kate, and Andrew Chesnut. 2020. "Not Just a Narcosaint: Santa Muerte as Matron Saint of the Mexican Drug War". *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 4: 25-47.

Kos-Stanišić, Lidija. 2011. „Meksiko – nova narkodemokracija u Latinskoj Americi?". *Anali Hrvatskog politološkog društva* VIII: 107-122.

Krstić, Zoran. 2014a. *Latinska Amerika – izazovi i prepreke demokratizacije*. Beograd: Univerzitet u Beogradu – Fakultet političkih nauka.

Krstić, Zoran. 2014b. „Savremeni, bezbednosti izazovi u Meksiku: sprega države sa narkokartelima". *Žurnal za kriminalistiku i parvo* 19 (2): 41–56.

[LADB] Latin America Data Base. 2005. "Catholic Church Embroiled in Controversy Regarding Drug-Cartel Donations", *Latin America Data Base*, September 28, 2005. https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/4910.

Latin America News Dispatch. 2011. "Mexico Detains Leader of Santa Muerte Cult on Kidnapping Charges", *Latin America News Dispatch*, January 6, 2011. https://latindispatch.com/2011/01/06/mexico-detains-leader-of-santa-muerte-cult-on-kidnapping-charges/.

Latinobarómetro. 2023. "México: Religión". https://www.latinobarometro.org/latOnline.jsp.

Lehmann, Joshua, and Katharina McLarren. 2023. "Faith-Based Diplomacy as a New (and Old) Practice in Foreign Policy: Concepts and Cases". In: *The Palgrave Handbook of Diplomatic Thought and Practice in the Digital Age*, edited by Francis Onditi, Katharina McLarren, Gilad Ben-Nun, Yannis A. Stivachtis and Pontian G. Okoth, 243-264. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Luévano, Rafael. 2022. "Why Priests Keep Getting Murdered in Mexico", *America: The Jesuit Review*, June 23, 2022. https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/06/23/mexico-priest-killings-narcos-243231.

McCleary, Rachel M., and Robert J. Barro. 2020. "Opening the Fifth Seal Catholic Martyrs and Forces of Religious Competition". *Journal of Religion and Demography* 7 (1): 92-122. https://doi.org/10.1163/2589742X-12347102.

Medel, Monica, and Francisco E. Thoumi. 2014. "Mexican Drug 'Cartels'." In: *The Oxford Handbook of Organised Crime*, edited by Letizia Paoli, 196-218. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Montes, Juan. 2024. "Mexico's 'Hugs, Not Bullets' Crime Policy Spreads Grief, Murder and Extortion", *The Wall Street Journal*, February 25, 2024. https://www.wsj.com/world/americas/drug-cartels-expand-murder-extortion-trafficking-146ede54.

Neumann, Ann. 2018. "The Narco Saint: How a Mexican folk idol got conscripted into the drug wars". *The Baffler* 38: 50-59.

Office of International Religious Freedom. 2023. "2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Mexico". *U.S. Department of State*. May 2023. https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/mexico/.

Paligorić, Ljubomir. 2002. *Istorija Latinske Amerike.* Beograd: Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu, Jugoslovensko udruženje latinoamerikanista.

Paz, Octavio. 1961. *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*. New York and London: Grove Press, Inc. and Evergreen Books Ltd.

Peralta, Héctor Gómez. 2012. "The Role of the Catholic Church in Mexico's Political Development". *Politics and Religion Journal* 6 (1): 17-35. https://doi.org/10.54561/prj0601017p.

Petri, Dennis P. 2021. "The regulation of religion by organised crime: Conceptualization of an underexplored phenomenon through a case study in Northeast Mexico". *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 14 (1-2): 123-141.

Pew Research Center. 2011. "Crime and Drug Cartels Top Concerns in Mexico", *Pew Research Center*, August 31, 2011. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2011/08/31/crime-and-drug-cartels-top-concerns-in-mexico/.

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. 2004. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Washington, DC: USCCB Publishing.

Rubio, Mauricio. 1997. "Perverse Social Capital—Some Evidence from Colombia". *Journal of Economic Issues* 31 (3): 805-816. https://doi.org/10.1080/00213624.1997.11505966.

Ryall, David. 2001. "The Catholic Church as a Transnational Actor". In: *Non-state Actors in World Politics*, edited by Daphné Josselin and William Wallace, 41-58. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org./10.1057/9781403900906_3.

Schwaller, John Frederick. 2011. *The history of the Catholic Church in Latin America: from conquest to revolution and beyond*. New York and London: New York University Press.

Sheridan, Mary Beth, and Lorena Rios. 2024. "Catholic bishops mediate truce with Mexican cartel bosses", *The Washington Post*, April 3, 2024. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/04/03/mexico-catholic-church-cartels-security/.

Teinhauer, Jennifer, and James C. McKinley Jr. 2006. "U.S. Officials Arrest Suspect in Top Mexican Drug Gang", *The New York Times*, August 17, 2006. https://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/17/us/17drug.html?_r=1&ref=us&oref=.

Toft, Monica, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Shah. 2011. *God's Century, Resurgent Religion and Global Politics.* New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company.

Troy, Jodok. 2008. "The Catholic Church: An Underestimated and Necessary Actor in International Affairs". *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 9 (1): 65-73. https://doi.org./10.2307/43134169

[UNODC] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes. n.d. "dataUNODC: Intentional homicide". Accessed January 12, 2025. https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-intentional-homicide-victims.

[UNSC] UN Security Council. 2023. Statement by the President of the Security Council, S/PRST/2023/6. December 7, 2023. https://docs.un.org/en/S/PRST/2023/6.

Uppsala University. 2024. "UCDP Definitions". Last modified May 29, 2024. https://www.uu.se/en/department/peace-and-conflict-research/research/ucdp/ucdp-definitions.

Vallier, Ivan. 1971. "The Roman Catholic Church: A Transnational Actor". *International Organization* 25 (3): 479-502. https://doi.org./10.1017/S0020818300026278

Voz de América. 2012. "Visita de Papa genera reacciones", Voz de América, March 18, 2012. https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/visita-papa-genera-reacciones-benedicto-143296446/109108.html.

Wilkinson, Tracy. 2009. "Pray for drug traffickers, Vatican urges", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 14, 2009. https://www.smh.com.au/world/pray-for-drug-traffickers-vatican-urges-20090114-gdt9p7.html.

KO SE PLAŠI ROBINA HUDA? POKUŠAJI POSREDOVANJA RIMOKATOLIČKE CRKVE U MEKSIČKOM RATU PROTIV DROGE

Apstrakt: U radu se ispituje potencijalna uloga Rimokatoličke crkve u posredovanju u meksičkom ratu protiv droge, posebno u svetlu predloga iz 2024. godine koji je izneo lider Meksičke biskupske konferencije. Iako je koncept posredovanja zasnovanog na veri proučavan u političkim naukama, ovaj specifičan slučaj je značajan zbog umešanosti narko-kartela u unutrašnji oružani sukob. Koristeći teorijski okvir koji su uspostavili Berković i Kadajfči-Oreljana, autor istražuje identitet, resurse, izazove, strategije i motive Crkve kao posrednika. Studija osvetljava složenu dinamiku između Crkve i narko-kartela, koja obuhvata sve – od paralelnih društvenih aktivnosti do slučajeva viktimizacije. Uprkos ovim izazovima, kontekst u Meksiku pruža Crkvi jedinstvenu priliku da se suoči s pitanjima vezanim za narko-kartele, uključujući i porast „narko-religije". Kao rezultat toga, izdvajaju se tri potencijalna pristupa – religijski, društveni i politički – koji bi mogli umanjiti uticaj narko-kartela i ojačati posredničku moć Katoličke crkve.

Ključne reči: Rimokatolička crkva; narko-karteli; rat; posredovanje; verski akter.