

FOR GREATER GLORY

Study Guide



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**KNIGHTS
OF COLUMBUS®**

❖ Introduction ❖

In the 1920s, as millions in the United States joined the resurgent Ku Klux Klan and millions of Catholics (among others) suffered its bigotry, Mexican Catholics were waging a literal civil war for their lives and the right to practice their faith. *For Greater Glory* is their story.

Amazingly, this persecution and war — which killed more than 200,000 Mexicans — were virtually suppressed in history books and education. As a result, subsequent generations learned little about the pain, struggles and triumphs — stories now told in this film.

The Cristero War began officially in 1926, when Mexican President Plutarco Elías Calles began enforcing the harsh anticlerical constitution written a decade before as a means of destroying Catholic institutions and eradicating the Catholic Church from Mexico. His animus against the Church was ideological and also practical. He hated the Church, in part, because he saw it as an impediment to his goal of government control of the central institutions of Mexican life.

His government seized Catholic churches, schools and seminaries. Religious education was outlawed. Catholic hospitals and orphanages were closed. Monastic orders were banned. Public worship was prohibited. Foreign-born seminarians and clergy were exiled; those who remained were forced to go underground. All clergy were barred from wearing religious garments, denied the right to vote, and forbidden to criticize the government or comment on public affairs. Anyone caught breaking these laws was punished severely with fines, imprisonment, exile, torture and even death.

Under the cry “¡Viva Cristo Rey! (Long live Christ the King!),” many Catholics resisted. Some, like José Anacleto González Flores, advocated for nonviolent resistance through petitions, boycotts and the press. Others took up arms against the Mexican army, earning the name *Cristeros* (from Cristo Rey).

Both in Mexico and the United States, the Knights of Columbus were affected and responded with strong advocacy on behalf of the Church. In Mexico, Calles’ anti-clerical government then targeted the Knights specifically, banning *Columbia* magazine and destroying our headquarters and records. An alternative dissident organization was founded to try to lure men away from the K of C — unsuccessfully. Just identifying as a Knight of Columbus was considered proof of one’s fidelity to the Church — and, as in the case of Yocundo Durán, was cause for immediate execution. Of the dozens who lost their lives, nine martyred Knights were later declared saints or blessed. And while councils effectively ceased, many Knights led the efforts to reclaim religious freedom.

In the United States, the Knights of Columbus engaged in refugee relief and launched a nationwide public awareness campaign that educated millions. For this, a million dollars was raised from members and non-members. The K of C leadership also urged the United States government to respond. At the same time, the Order publicly opposed the Ku Klux Klan, who targeted the Knights and also — like Margaret Sanger — explicitly supported President Calles’ oppression of the Church.

“The reality is hard to believe. Just a generation ago, not far from our borders, thousands of men, women, and even children were imprisoned, exiled, tortured, and murdered. All for the ‘crime’ of believing in Jesus Christ and wanting to live by their faith in him. So I welcome the new film For Greater Glory. It tells the dramatic story of this unknown war against religion and our Church’s heroic resistance. ... It reminds us that our religious liberties are won by blood and we can never take them for granted.”

— Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles



College Councils Department
1 Columbus Plaza, 18th Floor
New Haven, Connecticut 06510
203-752-4671 • kofc.org/college

❖ Memorable Quotes ❖

Father Christopher: Who are you if you don't stand up for what you believe? There is no greater glory than to give your life for Christ.

José Reyes Vega: They have raped and killed women in front of their children, marched them for days and days, left them to die in corrals like diseased cattle. They have taken priests —

Enrique Gorostieta: So you're here for revenge? Is that it, Padre? Is that why you're here? Because if you are, you can go home and pray to God that he may forgive you.

Enrique Gorostieta: Freedom is not a word just for writers, politicians or fancy documents. It is our wives; it is our children; it is our homes; it is our faith. Freedom is our lives. We must defend it or die trying — it's not only our duty, it's our right!

José Sánchez del Río: ¡Viva Cristo Rey! ¡Viva Cristo Rey! ¡Viva Cristo Rey!

José Reyes Vega: God allows us the freedom to choose. Some choose to be evil. But God can take even the most horrific events and use them for good.

❖ Thoughts for Discussion ❖

1. “Between light and dark / Between faith and sin / Lies only my heart / Lies God and only my heart.” *For Greater Glory* begins with this poem, which lays bare the Cristeros’ personal struggle and highlights how difficult and personal each path was.

How does the faith of these men, despite their weaknesses, affect their struggles, doubts, failures and triumphs? How does their faith affect how you view them?

2. Resistance in the film took on many forms. One example is that of the photographer, who documented the atrocities so that they would not be forgotten. In reality, after the war, the government did its best to cover up the episode and even survivors rarely spoke of it, children were not taught about it, and archives were locked even to researchers for decades.

What responsibilities are there regarding a truthful telling of history? Does obscuring the past help or hinder a nation’s healing?

3. When discussing his new role as U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Dwight Morrow speaks about the Knights of Columbus. The line refers to the Knights’ very public appeal to the U.S. government asking that it respond to Calles’ persecution.

Politically speaking, what responsibilities does a government have in terms of stopping such horrors outside its borders? Religiously speaking, what are our obligations in the face of such crimes and their victims?

4. In his 2012 film review, critic Roger Ebert stated: “[The film] has such pro-Catholic tunnel vision I

began to question its view of events. ... [If it] included all religions under the banner of religious liberty, I believe it would have been more effective.” In contrast, the postulator for the cause of José Sánchez del Río was impressed that the boy was “not only a martyr of the Christian faith, but ... a martyr of the fundamental rights of the person: the right to freedom of opinion, freedom of religion, the right to practice their religion. ... In short, he is a martyr of all the rights that were denied the totalitarian era.”

Does Ebert’s review reveal anything about the ways that secular commentators expect persecution to occur? In what ways can the American experience of a broadly pluralistic culture that is overall Christian color the view of commentators when they deal with persecution in a country that is almost entirely one faith?

5. One fact omitted from Jose’s martyrdom was how he rebuffed attractive offers to reject his faith, saying, “My faith is not for sale.” In the United States, protected by the First Amendment, threats to religious liberty tend to be qualitatively different from situations like 1920s Mexico, or even more recently, in the Middle East. But threats to religious liberty nevertheless exist. Pope Francis mentioned these in his U.S. visit and highlighted them by visiting the Little Sisters of the Poor, who were fighting the restrictive and financially-punitive HHS mandate in order to provide Catholic-compliant healthcare while serving the poor.

How do infringements of religious freedom in the past inform our experience today? What counts as courageously standing up to defend our religious freedom today? What makes it nevertheless hard or worthwhile?

6. Although the film ends with Cristero deaths, the hostilities against Catholics continued. The Mexican government didn’t honor the peace agreements and systematically murdered around 5,000 former Cristeros. In the 1930s, after the smaller “Second Cristero War,” the president announced a different strategy: He would stop closing churches but would open schools, attempting to disempower the Church through a mandated Socialist educational program.

How do you think the persecution and war experience — complete with heroes, villains and mixed examples — impacted those who survived it? How about the continued challenges? As a Catholic today, do you feel the same when standing up for religious freedom? What if your efforts are forgotten or obscured, too?