Abstract: With the second largest number of Catholic believers in the world, Mexico holds great significance to the Catholic Church. Mexico also boasts the highest percentage of indigenous peoples in Latin America. Over the past few decades, Mexico’s Indians increasingly have been abandoning Catholicism, and joining evangelical groups. Pope John Paul II realizes that he must stem the exodus of Indian believers if the Catholic Church is to maintain its supremacy in Mexico. Since his inauguration in 1978, the Pope has traveled to Mexico four times, each time addressing the concerns of indigenous peoples. Over the course of his papacy, a systematic approach emerges in the Pope’s treatment of Mexico’s indigenous population. Using the Pope’s four visits to Mexico as a chronological framework, this research attempts to determine his approach to the dilemma. Papal speeches, Mexican newspapers, and Church publications provide the bulk of information. This paper shows that the Pope has responded decisively to the Indians’ growing demands for social, religious, and political equality. His staunch adherence to conservative ideals, however, often has limited the scope of his action.
Introduction

With the second largest number of Catholics in the world, Mexico is of vital importance to the Catholic Church. Mexico is also home to thirty million Amerindians, roughly thirty percent of the population. Since their subjugation by the Spanish, Mexico’s indigenous peoples have been uneasy members of the Church. For centuries, they have endured poverty and the abuse of both secular and religious authorities. Disenchanted with their economic, religious, and social situation, an increasing number of Indians have abandoned the Catholic faith.

Pope John Paul II realizes the Church’s precarious foothold among Mexico’s indigenous communities. He understands that in order for the Church to maintain its supremacy in Latin America, he must stem their exodus from Catholicism. Over time, the Indians’ awareness of past exploitation, and dismay over their present misery has grown rapidly. The Pope has responded to the their burgeoning demands and desires, in order to placate them and keep their faith in the church.

The Pope has visited Mexico four times, in 1979, 1990, 1993, and 1999. Each time he has addressed indigenous concerns. Since 1979, the Pope’s treatment of Mexico’s indigenous peoples has developed into a systematic approach. Over the course of his visits, three major themes have emerged: the struggle for human rights, the defense of Catholicism’s presence in Mexico, and the affirmation of indigenous peoples. The four papal visits to Mexico provide a convenient twenty-year timeframe within which to study the development of these themes.

There is a dearth of resources regarding Pope John Paul II’s treatment of Mexico’s Indians. This research, therefore, draws on actual papal addresses from each trip as its primary source of information. The Mexicans newspapers Excelsior and La Jornada also provide valuable information and interpretations of papal treatment of Mexico’s Amerindians. Papal
speeches to other indigenous peoples around the world provide information for the eleven-year period between the Pope’s first and second visit.

**Human Rights**

Mexico’s Indians have traditionally occupied the nation’s lowest economic and social status. The oppression and human rights violations which they endured for centuries, was often ignored by an ambivalent Church hierarchy. Their resulting disenchantment has led many of them to abandon Catholicism and seek hope in evangelical churches. The Pope understands the Indians’ desire to achieve social justice and wants to keep them in the Church; therefore, Indian rights have been a major theme in each of the four papal visits to Mexico.

**1979**

On the eve of the first papal trip, the Latin American Church was torn by disagreement regarding its role in society. Harsh human rights violations demanded justice, but Latin American clergy lacked papal guidance as to what constituted appropriate action. Numerous progressive clergy espoused Liberation Theology, which promotes active struggle against oppressive structures. Conservative clergy maintained that the Church’s role should be strictly religious. One of the Pope’s reasons for visiting Mexico in 1979 was to attend the Third General Assembly of Latin American Bishops. At this conference, he was to address the issue of human rights struggle. His conclusions would hold special portent for the thousands of clergy members involved in human rights activism on behalf of Mexico’s Amerindians.

On January 28, the Pope John Paul II opened the conference in the city of Puebla. In his address to the bishops, he used Jesus’ example as a basis for restricting clergy to a religious role. He explained that Jesus was not a political leader or a revolutionary and that Christ had rejected anything that might sway him from his redemptive mission. Jesus had rejected violence and
sought transformation through love. The Pope defined appropriate action for clergy’s human rights struggle by saying, “We shall reach man, we shall reach justice, through evangelization.” The key to changing an unjust society is evangelization, through which “the Lord may transform hearts and humanize the political and economic systems…” The Pope’s words at the Puebla conference upset some participants and sparked heated discussions. Three bishops walked out during the conference’s closing sermon which was given by a conservative El Salvadorian bishop.

Much commentary followed Pope John Paul’s treatment of Liberation Theology. Critics called his conclusions elusive, ineffective, and too conservative. The New York Times called his speech a “complex collage of thought that was difficult to grasp,” that did not clarify, but “muddied the issue.” The consensus was that the Pope had outlined the religious basis for human rights without giving specific strategies or explaining the Church’s role.

While Pope John Paul II discouraged Liberation Theology, he certainly had not abandoned the topics of human rights and social justice. Following the conference, he traveled to the impoverished town of Cuilapan to meet with a group of Indian peasant farmers. The Pope addressed the issue of human rights in his speech. He placed himself within a broader, historical context of what he sees as a long tradition of indigenous rights promoters. The first missionaries came with "…humility, to relieve suffering, to comfort the exploited and enslaved;" John Paul, following in their footsteps, reached out to the 50,000 Indians gathered in Cuilapan.

The Pope expressed his desire to be the Indians’ voice and a call to action in order to make up for lost time. He then listed the rights of Mexico’s indigenous peoples. These rights include the right to be respected, the right not to be deprived, the right for barriers of exploitation to be destroyed, and the right to effective help. It is obvious through his word usage that he saw
the Indians as passive participants in the rights struggle. The burden of action fell not on their own, but on others' shoulders.

Pope John Paul II proceeded to set out the proper scope of human rights activism. He states that in order to achieve rights, it is "necessary to effect bold transformations." The Pope expressed the need for agricultural reforms. He made it clear that action must be taken, but did not say by whom. Furthermore, he stated that action must be conducted through "adequate means." Expounding on "adequate means," he said that land expropriation should be carried out, but only if the common good requires it.

Pope John Paul II's view of Mexico's Indians as passive participants in the human rights struggle is evident again in his closing words of the Cuilapan address. He calls for action from those who "...are responsible for the welfare of nations, powerful classes... those who are most able." He issues no call to action to the Indians themselves. He does, however, admonish them "...not to harbor feelings of hate or violence, but rather gaze toward the Lord..." Indians emerge as impotent participants in the struggle for social justice. They deserve rights, but only if it meets the common good.

1980s

Within the next few years, Pope John Paul II’s views on the human rights struggle, and the Indians' role in it changed. The theme of indigenous peoples as protagonists emerges. In a 1983 address to the Guatemalan Indians, he called them to direct action saying, “Organize associations for the defense of your rights." In a speech to Peruvian Indians a year later, he stated that well-organized, cooperative action could lead to advances in human rights. This theme of indigenous peoples as active participants in the rights struggle continues throughout the 1980s.
Another trend that emerged after 1979 was the Pope’s call for recognition of positive rights for Amerindians. In an address to Canadian Indians in 1984, he proclaimed their rights to a just and equitable measure of self-determination and self-government. He also spoke of their right to a land-base and adequate resources with which to develop a viable economy. The Pope repeated these demands in later speeches, signaling a more aggressive approach, one that states that Indians deserve definite, and often unique, rights.

While the Pope took some progressive steps in the realm of social justice following his 1979 trip, his extreme reaction to the perceived Marxist elements in Latin American Liberation Theology caused him to take some drastic steps backwards. He reprimanded several liberal theologians, ordering them to take a vow of silence or leave the Church. He shut down seminaries, censured ecclesiastical texts, and promoted conservative clergy to positions of power. Within a number of years, he had effectively dismantled the efforts of thousands of clergy members who had fought tirelessly for the Indians and peasants of Latin America. The Pope’s actions created a vacuum in the struggle of social justice struggle, and the consequences of his actions became clearer in his subsequent trips to Mexico.

1990

Pope John Paul II made his second trip to Mexico in 1990. The issue of indigenous rights was again on his agenda. The new theme of activism emerged in his speech to Amerindians in the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez. After citing numerous injustices, he urged them to improve their cultural, economic, social, and political situation. He told the Indians that they themselves should be the protagonists and initiators in the struggle for justice. He stated that each person should exercise her or his own power without waiting for help from social and political institutions.
The Pope had condemned Liberation Theology eleven years earlier, but the movement still had its proponents. In 1990, he reiterated his disapproval of conflict-based human rights activism. Meeting with religious leaders in Mexico City, he admonished them not to be trapped by false theories of class struggle and violence as a vehicle of change. He urged them again to stay out of politics and to limit themselves to purely religious roles. His admonitions prompted the criticism that he had substituted Liberation Theology for “submission theology.”

1993

By Pope John Paul II’s third visit to Mexico in 1993, a heightened awareness of the indigenous plight had gripped the nation. The Mexican newspaper *Excelsior* offered numerous accounts of historical and present-day human rights violations against Amerindians and pointedly stated that immediate action had to be taken. The Indians themselves had indeed become active in the struggle for social justice. They were not asking for help as before, but demanding self-government and autonomy. On the eve of the papal visit, the indigenous peoples of Mexico awaited a message of liberation. In the words of one parish priest, “Hopefully the Pope will tell Indians that they are protagonists in their own liberation…to open their eyes, and not let themselves be used by unjust regimes!” Many people were looking to the Church to lead the way. One journalist for *Excelsior* stated that the Church should not limit itself to a religious role, but should contribute to the solutions of human problems such as injustice and underdevelopment.

In 1993, the Pope spent only one day in Mexico. He spent the entire day in Xoclan, addressing indigenous peoples and listening to their concerns. There, a representative delivered a message to the Pope on behalf of Latin America’s Indians. Addressing him in the familiar *tú*
form, the representative’s words reflect the newly adopted aggressive approach in demanding rights:

They say that you’ve helped your country to be free, and that you have helped many others to live as they want, and because of that I think that today is a good day for you to help us to say that we have the right to live peacefully, to secure food, …to tend our land…

In a later discourse with representatives of Indigenous American peoples, the Pope made human rights a central theme. He stated that he firmly supported them in their right to a cultural, and social place as individuals and ethnic groups. He stressed the Church’s historic role as a defender of social justice. He showed the Church’s continued concern by quoting a recent decision by the Latin American Bishops Conference in which they agreed to contribute effectively to the eradication of politics that marginalize Indians. The Pope also urged Amerindians to form associations to defend their legitimate rights; however, he stated that the fight for justice should not lead them to confrontation or hate.

In response to the overwhelming demand for action on the Church’s part, the Pope declared that he had set up a fund, *Populorum Progressio*, with which to help the indigenous peoples of Latin America. He also directly confronted Mexican President Salinas, asking him to take steps to alleviate the problems of the Indians. At his airport farewell, the Pope reiterated his condemnation of the abuse that the Indians had been subject to for so much of their history.

1999

Pope John Paul II made his final trip to Mexico in 1999. Significant changes had occurred since his last visit. In 1993, a journalist for *Excelsior* had stated that the Indians had tired of being either an objects of pity or tourist novelties. They had grown weary of being “phantoms” and now wanted a political and national voice. Poverty and abuse in indigenous areas had risen to disastrous levels, and neither the Church nor the Mexican government had
enacted effective changes. The human rights struggle fell into militant hands, and in 1994, a group of rural Indians declared war on the Mexican government. The rebels, calling themselves the Zapatista Liberation Movement, demanded that the government recognize Indians’ rights. This movement attracted the sympathy of many clergy who had been disempowered by the Pope’s attack on Liberation Theology in 1979. These liberal clergy began espousing Indigenous Theology which promotes indigenous power to actively transform society. On the eve of the 1999 papal trip, many were unsure how the Pope would treat this new theology or the Zapatista rebel movement.

Before the Pope’s plane even landed in Mexico, he was actively denouncing Indigenous Theology. In an interview with reporters on the plane, he condemned it as espousing Marxist ideology and said it was simply a substitution for Liberation Theology.

Pope John Paul II broached the topic of human rights once he arrived in Mexico. The Mexican government had asked him not to address the Zapatista issue. Accordingly, the Pope announced that unlike prior visits, this time he would not speak to any particular group. While not separately addressing the Indians, the Pope did mention Indian rights in the various speeches he delivered. In a homily given in a Mexico City racetrack, the Pope called on Mexico’s Indians to “…strive to achieve their own development, and work for their own promotion.” He stated that all members of Mexican society are equal and have the right to live in justice and peace. In light of the political situation, the Pope’s treatment of human rights in his various speeches remained veiled and guarded. In one address to reporters, however, he seemingly broke with his agreement and stated that there would be no solution to the conflict without the recognition that the indigenous peoples were the first owners of the land.
Conclusion on Human Rights Theme

Since 1979, the Pope has staunchly supported the Indians’ aspirations and growing demands for social justice. His stance on appropriate activism, however, has frustrated many activists. From his condemnation of Liberation Theology in 1979, to his attack on "Indian Theology" in 1999, he has voiced his displeasure for confrontational human rights struggle. He has promoted a rights struggle that is based on love and unity. Facing a repressive government, both Indians and clergy were unsure of how to conduct a “peaceful and love-based” struggle to achieve the human rights that the Pope so strongly endorsed. Such questions led the Excelsior to call his proposed method of securing rights as ineffectual as a “bell without a clapper.” Frustrated Indians eventually resorted to violence. As the guerilla movement’s leader, Subcomandante Marcos stated, “If [we] had not raised up arms….would the world ever have noticed the Indian peoples?” The Pope condemned this conflict during his last trip in 1999, yet expressed his continuing support of Indian rights.

Defense of Catholicism

Five hundred years ago, the conquering Spanish brought both the sword and the cross to Mexico. After the conquest, the Indians suffered at the hands of both the State and Church. They were forced to abandon their religion and converted en masse to their conqueror’s faith. The Church’s role in the Indians’ demise has prompted accusations of ethnocide and abuse. Mexico’s indigenous peoples have not forgotten these historical violations. Their resulting disenchantment with the Church has been another factor in their turn to Protestantism. The Pope realizes that he must defend Catholicism’s presence in Mexico if he is to keep Indians in the Church. Countering the charge of ethnocide, the Pope has proposed that Christianity is not a foreign, but a native religion. He does this by pointing to Christian precursors in indigenous cultures. He counters...
charges of historical abuse by enumerating the spiritual and physical benefits that Christianity has bestowed on the Indians.

1979

Defending Catholicism’s presence in Mexico appears to be an emergent theme in the Pope's first visit. He gave an outdoor Mass in Santo Domingo prior to visiting Mexico. There he stated that "American’s soil…[had been] prepared by its own spiritual currents to receive the Christian seed." The seeds of Christian faith were "transplanted" by the first missionaries to Latin America. The Pope proposed that the Christian faith, while not native to Latin America, was not entirely foreign either. God had prepared the Latin American peoples to receive the Christian faith. This explanation justifies Catholicism’s presence because it claims that even outside the context of the Spanish conquest, Christianity belonged in Latin America.

Pope John Paul II offers the blending of Spanish and Indian cultures as another justification for Catholicism's presence in Latin America. He sees the merging of these two cultures as having produced something higher. An example of this idea occurred in the announcement he gave of his trip to Mexico on the 24th of January. He mentioned first the magnificence of Mexico's past, then he described the "marvelous" churches and palaces built by Mexican artisans after Christianization. He explained that these buildings are a good example of the symbiosis the Indians achieved between the "best elements of their past" and the best elements of their “Christian future.”

1980s

Starting from 1984, the theme of addressing past wrongs emerges alongside Pope John Paul II’s avid defense of Catholicism’s presence in Latin America and other colonized countries. In a 1984 address to Amerindians in Canada, he speaks of the missionaries who first evangelized
the region: “Whatever were their faults or imperfections, whatever errors were committed…today efforts are being made to repair them.” He proceeds, however, to defend the very same missionaries: “But, alongside this, archived in your historical memory, is the memory, with infinite proofs, of their fraternal love.” One of these “proofs” he gives is the missionaries’ linguistic, ethnographic, and anthropological work, which has contributed to the revival of indigenous culture and traditions.

In 1986, the Pope addressed a group of aborigines in Australia. He spoke of religious workers in the past that strove for indigenous betterment although “…there were times when they did not understand you completely.” He recalled the missionaries who, “even though made mistakes,” contributed greatly to the aborigines’ welfare. Among their contributions, he listed education, social help, and defense of human rights.

In a discourse to American Indians in 1987, the Pope stated that their initial meeting with the West was a “bitter and painful reality.” He said that justice demands the recognition of the cultural oppression, injustices, and destruction that they endured. The Pope also addressed the injustice propagated by some Catholics, saying, “Unfortunately, not all the members of the Church were faithful to their Christian responsibilities.” The Pope said that in order to be objective, history should also take note of the profound positive aspects of the meeting of the Indians and the Europeans. He states that the greatest of these “positive aspects” was the Christian faith.

During the 1980s, the Pope continued the theme of defending Christianity’s presence by pointing to precursors in indigenous cultures and beliefs. In a 1985 speech to Ecuadorian Indians, he stated that the Christian faith had arrived 450 years ago, but that God had been present even before that, lighting the way. Their ancestors had “discovered the footprints of God in all his creatures: in the sun and the moon, in the…earth, in the snow, and in the volcano.” The Pope
spoke of their happiness when they discovered in the Gospel that they were worth more than all the marvels of creation.  

In Pope John Paul II’s address to Aborigines in 1986, he used traditional indigenous views of nature to draw parallels to Christianity. The silence of the forests, he said, taught them peace of soul, which puts them in contact with the “other world, the world of God’s spirit.” The aboriginal tradition of dreamtime also prepared the way for Christ because it taught them about human frailty and spiritual greatness. He expressed wonder at the ability of recent converts to find points of harmony between the Gospel and their own cultures.

1990

When the Pope made his second trip to Mexico in 1990, there was a growing awareness of the Catholic Church’s historical role in the Indians’ demise. Three hundred bishops in Mexico City had previously signed an open letter that stated that the Church should beg for pardon for its complicity in the colonization and enslavement of the native peoples. Indigenous awareness was also growing; some groups protested the Church’s view of the conquest as divine intervention for the purpose of evangelization. The Pope’s speeches reflected these concerns, yet he also continued to defend the Church’s historical role.

Using guarded and generalized terminology, the Pope admitted past errors, yet he always countered these admissions with specific examples of good done by religious figures. In the city of Veracruz, the Pope spoke of Mexico’s history in which “…conquest and evangelization occupy a decisive place – brilliant when taken together, yet not without shades of gray.” He proceeded to say that throughout this history, God’s loving intervention is evident, despite the “limitations which are a part of every human activity.” The Pope illustrated this “loving
intervention” by listing the “great successes” of historical Catholic figures including Father Vasco de Quiroga, who devoted himself to the Indians’ education and advancement.\textsuperscript{68}

1993

The year 1992 marked the 500\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the conquest of Mexico. Widespread awareness of and dismay over past injustices suffered by the Indians had grown. By the Pope’s third trip to Mexico in 1993, attacks on the Church’s historical role in Mexico had increased. Mexican news articles frequently denounced the Church and the Pope himself. An \textit{Excelsior} article stated that from the time of the conquest, “the Catholic Church was part of a brutal system of exploitation imposed in full view of all the bishops in Rome.”\textsuperscript{69} Analysts said that the purpose of the Pope’s one-day visit was to bring a message to the Indians, who indeed awaited such a message. \textit{Excelsior} quoted one Indian as saying that “the Pope’s visit is a pilgrimage of expiation towards the Indians…he is coming to ask forgiveness from those who have been mistreated and exploited.”\textsuperscript{70} The Pope, however, did not fulfill these expectations. He again admitted to mistakes made in the past, but his defense of the Church was vociferous. He attempted to extricate the action of the Church from those of the colonizers, which drew the ire of critics.

Pope John Paul II addressed a group of Indians in the city of Mérida. Opening his speech, he declared that he wanted to celebrate the arrival of the gospel to Latin America.\textsuperscript{71} Evangelization of the New World had “fertilized the seeds of the Word which were present in the cultures’ religious sentiment and opened their heart…to the true light.”\textsuperscript{72} He continued in his defense of the Church saying that in the Christian faith indigenous cultures, values, and even languages had received a new and more profound significance.\textsuperscript{73}

The Pope then contrasted the Church’s and the colonizers’ actions. He stated that from the very beginning, the Catholic Church had remained faithful to the spirit of Christ and had
tirelessly defended the Indians. He noted, however, that a “shadow of sin hangs over America.”

The colonizers had unscrupulously abused the Indians, not viewing them as brothers and sons of the same God. He then names several historical Church leaders who had been a “prophetic testimony against the abuses committed in the epoch of colonization.” The Pope referred to the Christian faith several times, calling it a “great treasure” and thanking God for its arrival in the New World.

Although the Pope listed the abuses of the Conquistadors, he finishes his speeches in Mérida without asking on behalf of the Church for the forgiveness of Mexico’s Indians. Critics immediately attacked the Pope’s speeches. Excelsior noted that he had painted a one-sided view of the Church. He had not mentioned the forced conversion of indigenous peoples, the Church land which was converted into zones of indigenous exploitation, or the Indian uprisings which were always crushed under the blessing of the cross. The Washington Post noted that the Pope had failed to acknowledge that “the colonial Church had administered torture of Indians and systematically [had] attempted to destroy centuries-old books of Mayan history.” The Pope, however, viewed his trip differently. Upon returning to Rome, he referred to the trip as an “act of atonement.” He stated, “We do not cease asking these people for forgiveness” because the “advance toward the American continent was marred by sin, injustice, and violence.”

1999

The Pope’s final trip to Mexico in 1999 occurred during a time of conflict between Indian groups and Mexican authorities. This time he did not attack the injustices of the colonizers; instead, he focused on the Church’s beneficial role in Mexico. He spoke of the missionaries who left “profound cultural footprints and prodigious works of art which are a…source of pride to all
Mexicans.\textsuperscript{81} He praised the first evangelizers from Spain who brought the “light of Christ” and whose sacrifice and self-denial produced “abundant fruits.”\textsuperscript{82}

As in prior addresses, the Pope pointed to Christian precursors in pre-Columbian cultures. At a gathering in Azteca Stadium, he spoke of Quetzalcòalt, prophet-king of the Toltecs a thousand years earlier. Quetzalcòalt had died holding a cross, which to him and his followers symbolized the convergence of all ideas in search of harmony.\textsuperscript{83} The Pope said that preparation for the Gospel is evident in such sayings of Quetzalcòalt as “The good always wins out over the bad,” and “Man is the center of all creation.”\textsuperscript{84}

**Conclusion on Defense of Catholicism Theme**

The Church has often been criticized because of its complicity in the conquering and exploitation of Mexico’s Indians. Starting from 1979, the Pope has defended Catholicism against the various accusations. He has pointed to Christian precursors in native beliefs, and has listed the benefits that the Indians have received from the Church. Over the years, a worldwide awareness of the Church’s complicity in past abuses of indigenous peoples has emerged. Amidst public clamor, the Pope officially recognized the past mistakes of Christians in the New World; however, while admitting errors, he vigorously continued his justification campaign. He has insisted that despite the occurrence of errors, the Church's presence in Mexico has been of overall benefit to the Amerindians.

**Affirmation**

Following the Conquest, both the Church and Mexican State devalued indigenous cultures, languages, and traditions. Society held Mexico’s original inhabitants in such low esteem, that the word “Indian” became an insult. Eventually both indigenous and non-indigenous people alike came to see the immense value of native cultures. Mexico’s Indians began to
embrace their heritage, and Protestant groups responded by offering services and materials in indigenous languages. Increased Protestant efforts as well as indigenous dismay at the Church’s traditionally condescending view, have led many Indians to leave the Catholic Church. Pope John Paul II realized that in order to reverse this trend he had to assure the Indians of the Church’s love and respect for them.

1979

Even before his address to Amerindians at Cuilapan, Pope John Paul II had signaled his intention to pay homage to Mexico’s Indians. He released an announcement before his trip stating that he would address the Indians in their own, native tongue. When the Pope announced his trip, he praised the splendors of Mexico’s past. He spoke of the achievements of ancient Mexico including its art, astronomical learning, pyramids, and temples.

Pope John Paul II greeted the Indians gathered in Cuilapan as “heirs of the blood and the culture of…noble ancestors.” He stated that his presence there was intended to be a living sign of the Church’s concern. The Pope, at one point donned a feathered headdress and expressed his great love for Mexico’s indigenous peoples. He told them to love themselves, their cultures, and their traditions. The Church, he stated, admires their marvelous past and encourages them in the present.

1980s

During the years following the Pope’s first visit to Mexico, he continued to affirm indigenous people. He vociferously affirmed the worth of their cultures and traditions. The Pope also continued to profess his and the Church’s love and support for indigenous peoples worldwide. In a speech to Australian aborigines in 1986, the Pope stated that their songs, painting, dances, and languages should never be abandoned, and that these traditions should be
taught to their children. In an address to American Indians in 1987, the Pope praised their love for family, their respect for human dignity and value, and their care for the earth. These values, he told the Amerindians, are beneficial not only to indigenous peoples, but also to the entire human race.

In a speech to Guatemalan Indians in 1983, Pope John Paul II praised indigenous culture saying that it is the “wealth of the nations” and that it is worthy of the utmost “respect and esteem.” The Christian Gospel, the Pope states, does not destroy, but incarnates and strengthens their indigenous values. According to the Pope, the Church’s evangelization renews cultures and combats errors. Traditions, far from being destroyed, are saved and restored in Christ.

1990

The Pope continued the theme of affirmation on his second trip to Mexico in 1990. The trip’s highlight was the beatification of a 16th century Indian peasant, Juan Diego. The Virgin of Guadalupe supposedly appeared to Juan Diego, speaking his native tongue, and leaving her image on his cloak. Mexico’s Indians have cherished this tradition for centuries. The Pope’s decision to beatify Juan Diego fell on the eve of the five hundred-year anniversary of the conquest. Many viewed his decision as special affirmation of Mexico’s indigenous peoples. Excelsior wrote, “in beatifying Juan Diego, John Paul exalts the Indians.” La Jornada noted that many Mexicans had looked down on Indians, but the beatification proves that now they must respect them.

In the address to Indians at Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the Pope repeated his words from 1979 saying, “The Pope and the Church are with you and love you: loves each one of you, your culture, your traditions.” He then told them that he understood the discouragement they felt
because of the constant attack on their traditional cultures. He delivered a message of comfort, reassuring them of God’s and the Church’s support. He closed his speech in two different indigenous languages. Speaking Tzotzil, he reassured them of Christ’s love for them. Then, speaking in Zoque, he reiterated his own love for them.

1993

The Pope’s trip of 1993 occurred at a time of growing appreciation of the indigenous world. His third visit’s main purpose was to bring a message of love and hope to Mexico’s Indians. Critics noted that his message was different from the condescending one that the Church brought 500 years ago. In the Pope’s first speech in Mérida, he announced that he had come to “pay homage to the ancient inhabitants of America.” He praised the richness of the Indians’ ancestral cultures, values, and languages. He called them the “salt of the earth” because of their power to counter the false values of contemporary society.

An indigenous representative addressed the Pope and thanked him for honoring their indigenous identity, when that is precisely the reason that many deride them. He went on to say:

Today there are many brothers who are embarrassed of being Indian, which are embarrassed to speak their languages, to wear their clothes. I do not blame them; because those who are not like us have always scorned us…they mock our traditions and think we are worth less.

The Pope responded in his next speech, expressing his love and offering words of hope. He then listed numerous Indian tribes, calling them “creators of glorious cultures.” He praised their rich heritage and knowledge, saying he had come to “affirm their cultural identity.” He assured them that the Church openly affirms their right to their own cultural patrimony. The Indians’ patrimony should be recognized and respected for its values of truth, good, and beauty. He proceeded to list praiseworthy indigenous values such as humility, the love of freedom, hospitality, and solidarity. He noted that, unfortunately, the richness of their cultures
was not always appreciated. He urged them to conserve the cultures of their ancestors, and assured them of the Church’s love of cultural diversity.

1999

On the Pope’s last visit, the conflict between the Mexican government and Indian rebels prevented him from addressing the Indians. He continued, however, to express his respect and affection for them in the various speeches he gave. At the racetrack in Mexico City, he celebrated a Mass in which parts of the liturgy were read in indigenous languages. There he sent a special message to Indians, saying he felt very close to them, and admired the values of their cultures. Departing the country, the Pope said that part of Mexico’s importance lies with its numerous indigenous peoples, who “conserve rich human and religious values and want to work together to build a better future.”

Conclusion on Affirmation Theme

Since 1973, Pope John Paul II has attempted to allay indigenous concerns over their traditionally low status in the Church and society. He openly has expressed his affection and respect for their cultures, languages, and traditions. He frequently has addressed the Indians in their native languages and even donned traditional garb in an attempt to please them. He not only has expressed his love for them, but he has encouraged them to preserve their cultural identity. He has called on Mexican society to treat the Indians with respect. He has made concrete efforts to elevate their status, including beatifying an Indian in 1990.

Paper Conclusions

Mexico’s large Catholic population has drawn the Vatican’s constant attention. Mexico’s Indians have also attracted the Church’s concern because in recent years a growing number of
them have joined evangelical groups. If the Catholic Church continues to lose members in
Mexico, it might forfeit its valuable foothold in the American continent. From the beginning of
his papacy, Pope John Paul II has struggled to shore up the Church amongst the Indians. He has
attempted to accommodate their desires and needs while not compromising his conservative
stance. He has defended the Church’s past, and supported the Indians in their quest for social
justice and renewed cultural identity. He has tried to strike a balance between taking the
progressive steps which modern-day society demands and honoring his conservative ideals.
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