

*Martyrs in Mexico:
A Mormon Story of Revolution and Redemption*
By F. LaMond Tullis

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Reviewed by Ignacio M. Garcia and Cindy Gonzalez

While not described as such, *Martyrs in Mexico* is a continuation of the story that author F. LaMond Tullis gave us in *Mormons in Mexico*, a classic work, first published in 1987, detailing the growth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the country just south of the United States.¹ *Martyrs in Mexico*, however, has a narrower scope, focusing on one community—San Marcos, Hidalgo—from which would come well-known individuals of the Church in Mexico. Why did Tullis choose San Marcos? The obvious answer is that this community holds an important place in Church lore. San Marcos was the place of one of the Church’s most remembered (though not necessarily among American Saints) martyrdoms: that of Rafael Monroy and Vicente Morales, who were killed by a firing squad of Mexican revolutionaries for, the story goes, refusing to renounce their faith.

Tullis seeks to correct what he calls the “varying degrees of conformity to the facts” that surround the case of the martyrdom and which have been the subject of “academic treatises . . . magazine articles, newsprint, films, sound bites, diaries, journals, and family lore” (2). He begins by setting the context under which Monroy and Morales learned of and embraced the gospel and describing how that context led to their eventual death. Past studies of this event have largely focused on Monroy, who was not only the branch president in San Marcos but also a well-to-do landowner in the region. Tullis follows the same pattern, partly because we know less about Morales and partly because the Monroy family became a dynastic family in the Church in Mexico; Monroy’s

1. See F. LaMond Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico: The Dynamics of Faith and Culture* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1987).

descendants have reached the highest levels of the Church hierarchy in Mexico as well as membership in the Quorum of the Seventy.

Tullis tells us that Rafael Monroy “began to develop an interest in the Latter-day Saint missionary discussions” when he first heard about the missionaries, but it was not until he met Rey L. Pratt, president of the Mexican Mission, at a conference and Pratt visited him that Monroy was baptized, along with two of his sisters. Shortly after, their mother followed (9, 28). All this took place in 1913. Guadalupe, his wife, would take longer to embrace the gospel. Morales had joined the Church six years earlier and came to San Marcos because of his call as a part-time local missionary. A widower, Morales met Monroy in San Marcos and eventually married Monroy’s younger cousin, Eulalia Mera Martínez.

All of this was happening during the start of the second and more violent phase of the Mexican Revolution. This phase was accompanied by stronger anti-American feelings, and it forced President Pratt to abandon Mexico, but not before he ordained Rafael Monroy an elder and made him president of the San Marcos branch. Monroy then had to strengthen the members of his branch amid the war and the growing animosity of their Catholic neighbors and some of the Saints’ own extended families. All of these problems were further complicated when conflict arose among the revolutionary forces fighting the dictatorship of Victoriano Huerta. The followers of Venustiano Carranza, who would become president of Mexico, first controlled San Marcos but then gave way to those who followed Emiliano Zapata, one of Mexico’s most famous revolutionary heroes. It is no exaggeration to say that the Monroys, well-off as they were, favored the more moderate Carrancistas and interacted with them while avoiding much contact with the Zapatistas.

For the Zapatistas, the Monroys were enemies because of their wealth, their hacienda, and their ties to an American church and because Rafael was known to favor the Carranza government. Thus, it was easy for the Zapatistas to believe the Monroys’ neighbors when they said these “Mormones” were concealing weapons for the Carrancistas (58). Though repeated searches found nothing, the Zapatista soldiers and the hostile neighbors continued to disparage and distrust the Monroys and other members of the branch. What began as a distrust of Rafael’s allegiance turned into religious bigotry and eventually a reason to execute him and Vicente Morales.

Although this book centers on the killing of Rafael and Vicente, Tullis takes only about half the book to tell the story of their lives and deaths.

By page 70, they are dead, and another ninety-two pages tell of the aftermath of their murder. The story that follows has little and, at the same time, much to do with the lives of the two martyrs. The second part of the book is about the Monroy family survivors and their efforts to hang on to their faith. The Monroys, particularly Jesusita, Rafael's mother, and those connected to him by marriage or work loomed influential in the San Marcos branch for many years. Here we are introduced to Casimiro Gutiérrez, the branch president who succeeded Rafael; Bernabé Parra Gutiérrez, the next branch president and probably one of the most accomplished of the San Marcos Saints; Daniel Montoya Gutiérrez, a teacher in the branch and the first of the Montoyas to become significant in the Church in Mexico, particularly in the north; Benito Villalobos Sánchez, the fifth branch president; and even Margarito Bautista and Abel Páez, the intellectual precursors of the Third Convention movement, which eventually broke away from the main body of the Church.

In addition to these brief biographies, Tullis discusses the struggles of the San Marcos branch to establish what he terms a "gospel culture." In doing so, he discusses the "deficiencies" that these mostly uneducated branch leaders carried with them. In fact, most of the second part of the book, and particularly chapter six, is about the "chaos," "struggles," "deficits," "stumbles," "turmoil," "contention," and "fall" of the San Marcos Saints (102, 100, 96, 94, 113). Those looking for an inspirational story of the struggle for gospel fidelity among the Saints in this region will be disappointed, as will anyone wanting a more nuanced study of class, race, leadership, and institutionalization among new converts. Tullis has a specific view of how the Mexican Saints in San Marcos should have acted, and he emphasizes problems that did not escape other Saints in other parts of the world as being somehow unique to the San Marcos Saints.

Unfortunately, this book features the same kind of problematic descriptive analysis of Mexican and Latino culture that was so common in social science circles up until the late 1960s. Social scientists blamed the poverty, lack of education, social misbehavior, and an inability to assimilate into American or western ideals on the local culture that they believed promoted instant gratification, deviant sexual behavior, and a "what will be, will be" attitude toward the future. Tullis identifies a litany of deficiencies among the Mexican Saints. In so doing, he demeans the culture by consistently blaming the branch leaders and Church members for being dragged down by their "traditional Mexican culture" instead of being inspired by the "social conduct, ethics, and . . .

understanding . . . informed by a gospel culture” (119, 87). Drunkenness, fornication, gossip, and other ills are blamed solely on the Mexican culture, though American Saints and others also confronted these same problems.

It is not, according to Tullis, until the San Marcos Saints are fully institutionalized into the ways of the American Church that they begin to show fruits of conversion. He makes the mistake that others have made when writing about Saints of color, confusing righteous living with institutional loyalty and involvement in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Mexican Saints show few “fruits of the gospel” until they have become educated, economically successful, and more entrenched in the institutional structure. This view of religious fidelity through institutional lenses fails to capture the real essence of people’s faith, which they developed in spite of the challenges they faced for being Latter-day Saints. This “essence” of faith is living those gospel principles that can be practiced even when there is little institutional structure: faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, humility, charitable work, scripture reading and prayer, and living a virtuous life—all while maintaining a firm belief in Joseph Smith’s teachings.

Another of the book’s weaknesses is that, with the exception of the Monroy family, readers get only a glimpse of the actors in the story. To better understand the San Marcos Saints, it would be helpful to learn more about them and not just their leaders. And to understand them, we also need to understand the Mexican Revolution and the Zapatista movement, especially when we consider that, though the Monroys were Carrancistas, some Latter-day Saints were Zapatistas. Tullis does point out some of the complexities of the insurrection but not enough for us to understand the San Marcos Saints as Mexican citizens and not just citizens of the Church. Without a better understanding of the rank-and-file members, the larger story of the Mexican Revolution, and the lives of poor Mexicans, we might be tempted to ask, “Were Rafael and Vicente really martyrs or simply victims of communal hostilities and war?”

The value of *Martyrs in Mexico* is that it tells more than has been told before about Rafael Monroy’s life and family and how they became a dynastic family in the Church in Mexico. It also tells us more about Vicente Morales, who has been the forgotten man in this story of martyrdom. Unfortunately, the story of Morales is limited, as is that of most members of the San Marcos Church who were not leaders. This is an avoidable weakness since Tullis could have drawn more on the memoirs he refers to

in the footnotes and bibliography and done more genealogical work on the members of the branch. Thus, as a story of Mexican Saints, this book is limited in scope; we learn too little of the Mexican Saints except those of a particular community who confronted particular challenges during the years of revolution in Mexico. Given the sparsity of English-language work on Latin American Saints, however, this book is a necessary read for those wanting more information on Saints south of the border. But it should be read with the understanding that this type of Latter-day Saint history is of an era gone by.

Ignacio M. García is the Lemuel Hardison Redd Jr. Professor of Western and Latino History at Brigham Young University and the 2019–20 president of the Mormon History Association.

Cindy Gonzalez is an undergraduate student in family history.