Marisol López-Menéndez

Miguel Pro: Martyrdom, Politics, and Society in Twentieth-Century Mexico. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016. Pp. 220. Hb, \$85.

Reading this book, I could not help but think of that old joke about Jesuits: “If you’ve met one Jesuit [...] you’ve met one Jesuit.” So too, it seems, with Jesuit martyr Miguel Pro (1891–1927). One single interpretation of Miguel Pro, argues López-Menéndez, does not do justice to the complexity of meanings surrounding his life and subsequent death by firing squad on November 23, 1927. In other words, “if you’ve met one interpretation of Miguel Pro [...] you’ve met one interpretation of Miguel Pro.” López-Menéndez’s book persuasively reveals that interpretations of Pro are many, are changing, and will continue to do so if veneration to this Mexican *beato* is to continue. Pro, she reveals, is a martyr because the faithful, generation after generation, believe him to be. One Pro simply will not do.

The first Pro we meet is the *Cristero* Pro, “the militant.” The militant Pro, according to López-Menéndez, is the Pro emerging from the immediate historical drama surrounding his life and death. The author here takes the reader to the era of the Mexican Revolution and its aftermath (c.1910–40). The anticlericalism of the revolution, the presidency of Plutarco Elías Calles (1924–28) and the religious conflict he incited through anti-church legislation are discussed. López-Menéndez further describes the armed uprisings of Catholics led by the League for the Defense of Religious Liberty. Pro emerges here as friendly to the League, with brothers active in the resistance, and with his own (unproven) role in a foiled plot to kill the Mexican president-elect. Pro, therefore, was a martyr for Christ the King, representing for the faithful, an iconic embodiment of the church–state conflict. Here Pro’s similarity to early Christian martyrs was invoked constantly (President Calles being called a modern Nero and other such names). López-Menéndez shows that Pro the Militant held sway among Catholics while the conflict burned hottest, or from 1927 (the year of his execution) to 1938 (the year when the conflict abated precipitously).

Next, we meet Pro the Ascetic Jester. Pro was recast here to fit the emerging church–state conciliation struck by Archbishop Luis María Martínez. The *Cristero* Pro was not erased completely, the author shows, but sanitized. Pro’s ascetic longing, his quest to become a victim soul—dying for the salvation of God and the Motherland—was preferred by the faithful *and* the institutional church. Pro the Ascetic Jester held firm especially in an era of Catholic Action (1938–58). The sanitization of Pro’s *Cristero* militancy was played down by an ecclesiastical hierarchy eager to regain its footing after the sacramental and authoritative laxness of the 1920s rebellion. It was precisely in the early 1950s

that Pro's process for beatification was put forward to Rome. We learn of the miracles attributed to Pro—everything from jobs to physical healing, with a consistent penchant for healing cures to bolster Pro's cause for sainthood.

Finally, Pro the Icon for Human Rights is introduced. López-Menéndez leads us through the process of changes to Pro's cult wrought by the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). The decline of devotionism in the worldwide church matched an increase in social activism. Pro's social Catholicism comes to the fore. His ministry to miners and workers in Mexico City before his death became ever more popular. Once again, the social conditions in Mexico and, indeed, in the global church, are covered. Democratization in Mexico and the jarring continuance of impunity and state violence produced a Pro that died as a human rights victim. He had no trial. President Calles simply commanded his execution. The rule of law was subverted. All these elements spoke loudly to Mexicans in 1988. It was the year of a controversial presidential election, where the candidate for the Institutional Revolutionary Party was viewed by many to have won by fraud. 1988 was also the year Pro was beatified. Human Rights centers were named after Pro. He became increasingly a symbol for the search for a just state.

The thread linking all these "Pros" makes for the book's most compelling argument. Miguel Pro is a modern martyr. Classical martyrs, López-Menéndez argues, die at the hands of tyrants whose system is morally at odds with the standards of justice held by the martyr and his or her community. In contrast, Pro like other modern martyrs, are embodied critiques of a legal and moral system shared by all citizens and believers. Modern martyrs are made when shared legal and moral systems have been corrupted. The revolutionary impulse, as the author calls it, as well as ineffective mechanisms to obtain substantive justice, are two important elements in the corruption. Modern martyrs are *both* religious and political. Within Pro's story, then, is a travesty of justice. Pro's death was eminently political because it reveals the search for a just state by all citizens, whether believer or not.

All these "Pros" make sense. The author does a good job articulating how the many faces of Pro overlap. The Militant, the Ascetic Jester, the Human Rights Icon all blend into one another because they are all based on discrete elements of "facts" about Pro. Also clear is that one sanitization in particular had a clear purpose: softening his pro-Cristero credentials and links to violence was essential in institutional support from the Catholic hierarchy.

The reader looking for the *historical* Pro might be disappointed. López-Menéndez's book is not a quest to debunk myths or prove miracles. The author rightly takes as a given that religious beliefs are entities to take seriously because they have real social import. The book is an investigation of the social

ground, ever shifting, behind the beliefs. That said, the book leaves room for further investigation into Pro as a Jesuit, as a Mexican priest under persecution, and as a saint from the Global South. But López-Menéndez's book will surely be required reading for subsequent research.

The many visages of Pro tell us something about the historical enterprise itself. The author only alludes to this connection, but more could have been said on the subject. Pro's guises did not come from nowhere. They are not simply pious fabrications. There are real "facts" involved—testimonies, police reports, photographs, letters—that are available for investigation. What she shows is that the images of the communities venerating Pro shade the very picture of him. This is not a process reserved exclusively for martyrs. All historical figures are open to this process. One needs only see the success of Alexander Hamilton, now cast as Broadway star—complete with rap battles and hip-hop beat—to see how "facts" and "society" often shape each other. This is not a critique of the author's fine book. It only suggests that martyrs, like all unforgotten historical figures, are remembered when they speak loudly to the present. Emphasizing this would have only strengthened López-Menéndez's argument that saints and martyrs are every bit as political as they are religious.

Theoretical and learned, this book would be difficult for undergraduates and the lay reader. However, it would also be well worth their time.

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