

GABRIEL GARCIA MORENO

Catholic Statesman and Martyr

by Gary Potter

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On the Feast of the Transfiguration, August 6, 1875, a statesman, whom many would call the greatest the world has known since the so-called Reformation, was cut down by Masonic assassins on the porch of the cathedral in his nation's capital. Moments before, until lured outside by a false message that he was urgently needed elsewhere, he had been adoring the Blessed Sacrament.

Fallen from the porch and lying stretched out on the ground, his head bleeding, his left arm severed and right hand cut off by blows of a machete, the illustrious victim recognized his assailants — recognized in the sense of understanding for whom they acted. Some accounts say he gasped his last words, others that he was able to cry them out defiantly. All agree on the words themselves: "Dios no muere!" "God does not die!"

Striking as they were as a summing up of the moment — they amounted to saying, "You may murder me, but you can never kill the One whom men like you really want dead" — other words voiced by the felled leader on other occasions can be compared to them for aptness. These would include, above all, the words of his political creed, one for whose realization he spent himself in life and would finally die, words that were and are a summing up of the whole of Christian doctrine when applied to the sphere of politics, the means by which the life of a society is governed: "Liberty for everyone and everything, except for evil and evil-doers."

Insofar as the man was guided by that creed in his governance of the nation, we can understand how it was that what he wrought would become, as Pope Leo XIII described it: "The model of a Christian state."

The nation was Ecuador. The man was Gabriel Garcia Moreno, twice President of the Republic and throughout most of his adult life the nation's most commanding figure as a lawyer, legislator, scholar and soldier, as well as statesman. This essay is about him — rather more about him as a man than in terms of his career.

Gabriel Garcia Moreno was certainly the kind of authoritarian ruler who would be — who is — condemned as a "strongman," as if being one of those were necessarily evil. Is it? Sometimes even the leading organs of secular liberalism seem unable quite to make up their mind on this question.

Illustrative of this curious ambiguity is the Encyclopedia Britannica's online article about Gabriel Garcia Moreno. Therein it is actually admitted, if but grudgingly, that his rule was, well, "often effective in its reformist aims." Still, it "eventually cost him his life" since it was "oppressive." That, of course, was due to his being the "initiator of a church-oriented dictatorship."

Further, "versed in political theory...he became convinced that the remedy for his nation's political and economic plight was the application of moral principles by a powerful leader." (Moral principles? Good Lord! Would they be more excusable if applied by

a weak leader or one not versed in political theory?) If it was due to them that Garcia Moreno somehow "reduced corruption, maintained relative peace, and strengthened the economy," he also "placed education under the Roman Catholic Church, signed a concordat with the Vatican, and officially dedicated Ecuador to the Sacred Heart." No wonder, then, that "he was assassinated by a group of young liberals."

Gabriel Garcia Moreno, born on Christmas Eve, 1821, was a native of Guayaquil. Once his youth was behind him, however, no one would ever accuse him of liberalism.

Gabriel Garcia Moreno would have been the ideal leader of a great united, Catholic South America. Had he been born a few decades earlier, he might even have been the man to forge it, as Simon Bolivar finally proved not to be. The small nation of Ecuador, however, would be the only theater he knew for the exercise of his very large political talents. He reached its stage none too soon.

For eight years (1822-30) the nation, as we have already heard, had been part of the confederation of Gran Colombia, the other sections being Colombia and Venezuela. Mainstream history books speak of various territorial and economic disputes leading to the break-up of the confederation, but we have just finished noting the existence of forces in the world that would favor such a development, if they did not foment it.

Whatever, the first fifteen years of Ecuadorian independence were dominated by two men, Juan Jose Flores and Vicente Rocafuerte. The former hailed from Quito and had his main support from the country's great landed families. Rocafuerte was more of an ideologue, his support coming from the wealthy bourgeois merchants who controlled Guayaquil and were influenced by 19th-century liberalism of the kind that had anti-clericalism as an integral feature. Neither man was much concerned for the welfare of ordinary Ecuadorians, including the native Indians, but kept the country fairly stable as they alternated the presidency between themselves.

In the mid-1840s a series of younger men came on the scene. None was really fit to serve as president of the fledgling nation, all aspired to do so, most proclaimed themselves liberal, and as many as did were ready to commit the vilest acts to prove it. The chaos their rivalries produced brought Ecuador very near to disintegration before Garcia Moreno finally took power for the first time in 1859.

We have said it is not necessary to detail here events and developments in Ecuadorian history in order to appreciate the achievements and personal qualities of Garcia Moreno. Accordingly, we are not going to spend time exploring the intramural squabbles of the liberals or tracing the steps taken by Garcia Moreno to overcome them, except to say two things.

The first is that he sometimes had to fight during his rise to power — not figuratively fight, but fight in battle with gun or sword in hand against one or another of the liberals. Though he was not formally trained as a military man, a willingness to risk his life and apparent inborn sense of what was strategically wise as well as tactically sound won him the victories that were necessary. So it is that we can count soldiering among his accomplishments.

The second thing to say is that when he was a young man first making a name in politics, it was as a liberal. When we go further and say that was very much to the chagrin of his mother and also his first mentor, it becomes necessary to speak briefly about his early life, and that raises the subject of sources.

Students who wish to know more about Garcia Moreno than can be told in this article but who do not read Spanish will have few directions in which to turn. Further, what little exists in English will often differ from what is read here. For instance, most of the English-language sources have Garcia Moreno assassinated on the steps of the National Palace in Quito, whereas our readers have already heard that it was on the porch of the close-by cathedral.

That is because we are drawing mainly from a biography that was written by the French Redemptorist priest, Rev. P.A. Berthe, soon after the death of Garcia Moreno. The biography, *Garcia Moreno, President of Ecuador*, was translated by Lady Herbert and published by Burns and Oates in London in 1889, and never since, making this English version a book that can now be found only in a few libraries. The late Hamish Fraser did bring out an abridgment of Lady Herbert's translation, but it is no longer available. However, Fraser's sponsorship of the book is one of two reasons for our relying on Fr. Berthe instead of other sources.

During the past half-century, the Church's authentic social doctrine has had no champion in the English-speaking world more valiant than Hamish Fraser. A former Communist Party labor organizer on the docks of London, who converted to the Faith and for a long time edited the invaluable and much-missed publication *Approaches*, Fraser was a student of the life and career of Garcia Moreno. Not simply did he hail him in print as "the greatest statesman we have had since the Reformation," his admiration was such that he named his home in Scotland for him, *Casa Garcia Moreno*. If Fr. Berthe's biography was good enough for Hamish Fraser, it's good enough for us.

The second reason for relying on it: It is Catholic; the happenings of which it speaks are viewed with the eyes of faith. This means it reports things that are ignored in other writings, especially things that relate to Garcia Moreno as a man and which attest to the thoroughness of his Catholicity. An example: Fr. Berthe quotes the rule for his daily life that Garcia Moreno wrote down in his own hand on the back page of the copy of *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis that was found in his pocket after his assassination. There could be no more eloquent testimony to the man's determination to stay close to God. (We shall soon read it for ourselves.)

As for his early life, his father, Don Gabriel Garcia Gomez, was born in Spain and became a successful merchant after emigrating to Ecuador. It was there that he married Dona Mercedes Moreno. The couple had eight children — five sons and three daughters — of whom Gabriel was the youngest. He was still a boy when his father died suddenly. Not merely was the family then bereft of its head, Don Gabriel had recently lost nearly all his money in a business reversal. This left the family, formerly quite well off, in real poverty. In fact, it was impossible for young Gabriel to continue with the schooling he had just begun.

Fortunately for him and the future of Ecuador, Dona Mercedes was as persuasive as she was pious. She was able to prevail on a local Mercedarian priest of some learning, Fr. Jose Betancourt, to take on her son as a private pupil. The boy justified the cleric's attention by mastering Latin in ten months! Before he was 15 he had learned everything the priest had to teach him.

Earlier, his mother's appeal to Fr. Betancourt had assured his basic schooling. Now it was his mentor, Fr. Betancourt, who persuaded the authorities at the University of Quito to admit young Gabriel, penurious as he was, as a student. An older, married sister living in Quito, Josepha, was able to provide him a place to stay. So it was that, still a boy, he left home for the capital in September, 1836. There he would become a young man.

He discovered science at the university. The life of his country, as well as his own, would have been profoundly different had he given in to his passion for the subject and made a career as a botanist or chemist. However, it would be with a degree in law

that he eventually left the university. Armed with his degree, he opened a legal practice and began to become politically active — as a liberal.

If he did not give in to his passion for science, he did surrender to others. In this regard, we shall continue to follow Fr. Berthe's lead. That is, if we are ignoring here the details of Ecuadorian history and Garcia Moreno's rise to power, there is less reason for us to dwell on the period during his young manhood when he drifted away from faithful religious practice and for a time was guilty, like young St. Augustine, young St. Ignatius of Loyola and other canonized saints who could be named, of personal moral failures. Fr. Berthe is quiet about this. So shall we be.

Though it will not do to dwell on the period, it needs to be noted that it corresponded to that of his political liberalism, and it must be observed that his return to religion paralleled the change in his political views, and this development would prove decisive in his taking the course he did as leader of the nation.

One historian (Frederick B. Pike) has put the matter like this: "His personal experiences seem to have influenced his attitude toward governing his country. In his own case, liberalism and religious indifference had gone hand-in-hand with personal debauchery and lack of self-control, while religious fervor had been intertwined with a life of rigorous self-control and Spartan discipline. After coming to the presidency, Garcia Moreno set out to rekindle religious fervor among Ecuadorians in the expectation that the entire country could be made to undergo a transformation paralleling his own."

Before we consider what he did with political power once he attained it, there has to be mention of two factors that mightily helped Garcia Moreno fortify within himself the personal and political transformation begun by religious conversion. One was his marriage to Dona Rosa Ascasubi, the member of an aristocratic Quito family who brought to their union a strong character as well as large fortune. The other factor was a period of exile that he spent in Paris. It was there that he actually returned to the practice of the Faith. Louis Veuillot, the very great 19th-century French Catholic journalist, would write of that in a tribute he penned for his newspaper, *l'Univers*, in September, 1875:

"Paris, Christian on the one hand and savage on the other, gives the world the spectacle of a fight between two opposing elements. It has schools for priests and martyrs, and others for anti-christs, idols, and executioners. The future President and Missioner of Ecuador had before his eyes good and evil. When he returned to his distant home, his choice was made. He knew where to find true glory, true strength, and how to become the true workman of God."

Inasmuch as it was in 1848 that Garcia Moreno lived in Europe, he also had before his eyes all of the violence and disorder of that year's revolutionary upheavals in France, Germany, Austria, Italy and elsewhere. He could see where his own country was likely headed — unless a "true workman of God" or (in the words of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*) a "powerful leader" applied the kind of "moral principles" (still quoting the *Britannica*) that could prevent it.

More specifically, what Garcia Moreno saw when he looked at his own country was one divided by regional resentments (the coast vs. the highlands), divided by class (the bourgeoisie of Guayaquil vs. the landed families of the interior), divided between whites and Indians and even blacks from the old slavery days (they are still 10 percent of the population). There was not even a single language to unite the country, many of the Indians being non-Spanish-speaking. The one thing all Ecuadorians — or nearly all — had in common was Catholicism. Even liberals who did not practice it had it in their background. Their culture was Catholic. A "true workman of God" could build on that.

Garcia Moreno did. He had a blueprint: *L'Histoire Universelle de l'Eglise Catholique*, an immense work of 29 volumes written by Rev. Rene Francois Rohrbacher that Garcia Moreno read no fewer than three times.

Fr. Berthe describes *L'Histoire*: "It sets forth in the most exhaustive form the whole history of the Church, politically and socially, proving her to be the head of the great social body, of which the State is the arms, and which both kings and people must obey. Hence there should be neither struggle nor divorce between Church and State, but the most perfect harmony, from the subordination of the State to the Church."

No reader should let himself be swept into clericalism by those words. Nothing but harmony should exist between Church and state, but the Church consists of more than clerics. She is also the body of her beliefs and teachings, and it has sometimes happened in history that rulers have had to uphold that body when clergy and episcopacy did not. King St. Louis IX of France, for instance, had to enforce corrective measures against corrupt and abusive bishops and priests (see *From the Housetops* No.45).

In regard to Ecuador, it will be remembered that religious orders had been expelled from the country. That meant there were not many priests and religious left to minister to the faithful except local ones. By the time Garcia Moreno came to power, too many of them had become — not to mince words — degenerate and even dissolute.

Not surprisingly, they criticized the President for being "fanatical" in his Catholicism. His solution was to lift the ban on foreigners so the locals could be replaced by them. Further, he basically turned over the running of the nation's schools, from the primary ones to the polytechnical training college in Quito, to the religious orders, especially the Jesuits. Liberals still have not forgiven him for that, but the fact is that probably no nation in Latin America at that time made greater strides in education than Ecuador.

His educational policy was not the only reason Garcia Moreno was labeled a "fanatic". Under his presidency, not simply was the Faith established as the religion of the state, the existence of no other being officially recognized. Citizenship, by law, depended on being a member of the Church.

Enacting such a law was nearly as extraordinary in the 19th century as it would be inconceivable in the 21st, but the Catholic scholar Christopher Dawson reminds us in his book *Understanding Europe* that "for more than a thousand years the religious sacrament of baptism which initiated a man into the Christian community was also a condition of citizenship in the political community."

The reader already knows from early in this article that under Garcia Moreno Ecuador, by an act of its congress, was dedicated as a nation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. What will come as a shock to anyone sufficiently ignorant of history as to imagine that the century or so before Vatican II was some kind of golden age for the Church is this fact: When the Papal States were overrun by the troops of Victor Emmanuel in 1870 and the pope became a virtual prisoner in the Vatican, the government of Garcia Moreno was the only one in the entire world to protest.

That was not all. Victor Emmanuel's conquest of the Papal States having deprived the Holy See of the main source of its revenues, Garcia Moreno had the Ecuadorian Congress vote a tithe of ten percent of national monies for the financial support of Bl. Pope Pius IX.

Space does not allow for enumerating all of the material works undertaken by the Martyr-President for the improvement of the lives of Ecuadorians of every class and ethnic group. Besides the schools he built, there were hospitals and roads. A railroad over the mountains between Quito and Guayaquil was begun so that the two main sections of the country, the Costa and the Sierra, would be brought together. Garcia Moreno also saw to the planting of countless eucalyptus trees from Australia to stop the soil erosion that began when poor Indians cut down ground cover for fuel.

No enumeration of such works and many others accomplished by Garcia Moreno as President of Ecuador can provide for a complete appreciation of his importance to the nation. Perhaps we can get nearer to that by citing some of what his liberal opponents had to do in order to dismantle his achievements once they eliminated him.

To cite but a few of their measures (they did complete the railroad), after proclaiming freedom of religion, they legalized civil marriage and divorce and lifted controls on the (liberal) press. It should go without saying that they abolished the tithe to the Church, removed religious orders from state schools, tore up the Concordat with Rome, and revoked the republic's dedication to the Sacred Heart. Eventually they expelled (once again) religious orders from the country. In other words, they remade Ecuador from a "model Christian state" into a typical modern one.

But what was Garcia Moreno like? Physically, he was tall, powerfully built and, judging from his portraits and word descriptions of him, strikingly handsome with a high and broad forehead. By the time of his murder his hair was white.

It was a good thing he was strong. Otherwise he could never have pushed his body the way he did in the service of his countrymen. Urged by friends and family to slow down, he would say, "When God wants me to rest, He will send me illness or death."

Such heedlessness of self would be foreign to a man who is "prideful," "ambitious," "hungry for power," "arrogant" — all words (among the more polite) used by Garcia Moreno's liberal enemies to describe him.

One word they never used: greedy. Charges of corruption would have to be backed by evidence, and they knew they could never come up with that. If only by indirection, Fr. Berthe explains why: "Garcia Moreno believed that the head of a State is simply an instrument in the hands of God for the good of the people. He was intimately convinced that the Catholic law was as binding on nations as on individuals, and that the first duty of the head of the State in this nineteenth century was to re-establish the Church in all the rights of which the Revolution had deprived her... 'Let us do everything for the people through the Church,' he would say; 'he who seeks first the Kingdom of God will have all things added to him.'"

Elsewhere, Fr. Berthe writes of Garcia Moreno that "his passionate love for justice was united to an exquisite tenderness and kindness of heart towards all who suffered. The poor knew it well, and one saw him continually, on his way home from his office, surrounded by people of every class, to whom he would listen patiently, giving advice to one, money to another, and sending all away grateful and contented. If all his deeds of charity were known, or we had space to record them, they would alone fill a volume."

Probably we should emphasize Fr. Berthe's words that Garcia Moreno's love of justice was passionate. We can see that in his reply to a man seeking clemency for a group of anarchists sentenced by the courts to die. "We have enough assassins in this country without them," he said. "Your sympathy is roused by the fate of the criminals; mine is reserved for their victims."

His reference to assassins reminds us of his own end. According to Fr. Berthe: "Not only did he not fear death, but like the martyrs he desired it for the love of God. How often did he write and utter these words: 'What a happiness and glory for me if I should be called upon to shed my blood for Jesus Christ and His Church.'"

Did he mean that? Had he been truly transformed, truly converted, when he abandoned the ways of his young manhood and returned to religion? We have heard here about some of the laws he saw enacted in favor of the Church, in favor of the Faith. Let us add to the picture that he attended Mass every day, that he recited the Rosary every day, that he spent a half-hour every day in meditation.

Was he sincere in all this, or was all of it a pose, a kind of public-relations campaign in days before PR existed? If he was seen at Mass every morning, was that simply an 1870's version of the photo-op? In short, was Garcia Moreno what he seemed, or a hypocrite? The question inevitably arises in a day like ours when belief in the moral rectitude of any political leader would seem misguided if not positively naïve or plain stupid.

It is easy to suppose that, dedicated as he was to defending the Christian social order, Garcia Moreno would readily have recognized the social utility of hypocrisy, though nowhere do we find him speaking of it. (By "social utility," all we mean is that it is more useful to a society — it is better off for it — if its members, especially its leading ones, do not parade their vices shamelessly, as is commonplace today. Of course it is far better for the individual — and society — if he has no vices to parade.)

If there is no record of Garcia Moreno speaking of the value of hypocrisy as a social lubricant, Fr. Berthe does quote him talking about hypocrisy as such. This was when he was accused of it on account of letting himself be seen practicing the Faith publicly. "Hypocrisy," he said, "consists in acting differently from what one believes. Real hypocrites, therefore, are men who have the Faith, but who, from respect, do not dare to show it in their practice."

If that were not all the answer needed as to whether Garcia Moreno was a hypocrite, it can be demonstrated in various ways that the private man and public one corresponded perfectly. No demonstration could be clearer, however, than citing the rule for himself that he wrote down in his copy of the Imitation of Christ. It was mentioned earlier.

Bearing in mind that he did not know death awaited him outside the cathedral on August 6, 1875, that he did not know the Imitation would be found in his pocket that day, and that therefore the rule would ever be read by anyone else, here it is in its entirety:

"Every morning when saying my prayers I will ask specially for the virtue of humility.

"Every day I will hear Mass, say the Rosary, and read, besides a chapter of the Imitation, this rule and the annexed instructions.

"I will take care to keep myself as much as possible in the presence of God, especially in conversation, so as not to speak useless words. I will constantly offer my heart to God, and principally before beginning any action.

"I will say to myself continually: I am worse than a demon and deserve that Hell should be my dwelling-place. When I am tempted, I will add: What shall I think of this in the hour of my last agony?"

"In my room, never to pray sitting when I can do so on my knees or standing. Practice daily little acts of humility, like kissing the ground, for example. Desire all kinds of humiliations, while taking care at the same time not to deserve them. To rejoice when my actions or my person are abused and censured.

"Never to speak of myself, unless it be to own my defects or faults.

"To make every effort, by the thought of Jesus and Mary, to restrain my impatience and contradict my natural inclinations. To be patient and amiable even with people who bore me; never to speak evil of my enemies.

"Every morning, before beginning my work, I will write down what I have to do, being very careful to distribute my time well, to give myself only to useful and necessary business and to continue it with zeal and perseverance. I will scrupulously observe the laws of justice and truth, and have no intention in all my actions save the greater glory of God.

"I will make a particular examination twice a day on my exercise of different virtues, and a general examination every evening. I will go to confession every week.

"I will avoid all familiarities, even the most innocent, as prudence requires. I will never pass more than an hour in any amusement, and in general, never before eight o'clock in the evening."

The medical examination of Garcia Moreno after he was killed showed he was shot six times and struck by a machete fourteen. One of the machete blows sliced into his brain.

Incredibly, he did not die immediately. When cathedral priests reached him, he was still breathing. He was carried back inside and laid at the foot of a statue of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows. A doctor was called, but could do nothing. One of the priests urged him to forgive his killers. He could not speak, but his eyes answered that he had already done so. Extreme Unction was administered. Fifteen minutes later he was dead, there in the cathedral.

...here is what Bl. Pope Pius IX, speaking of himself in the third person, had to say in a public address in Rome on September 20, 1875:

"In the midst of all this, the Republic of Ecuador was miraculously distinguished by the spirit of justice and the unshakeable faith of its President, who showed himself ever the submissive son of the Church, full of devotion for the Holy See, and of zeal to maintain religion and piety throughout his nation. And now the impious, in their blind fury, look, as an insult upon their pretended modern civilization, upon the existence of a Government, which, while consecrating itself to the material well-being of the people, strives at the same time to assure its moral and spiritual progress. Then, in the councils of darkness organized by the sects, these villains decreed the murder of the illustrious President. He fell under the steel of an assassin, as a victim to his faith and Christian charity.... For Pius IX, also, the death of Garcia Moreno is the death of a martyr."

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