

Catholic-Backed Political Party Comes to the Fore in Puerto Rico

Christian Action Group Is Set Up After Bishop Rallies Laity—School Bill and Birth Control Are Issues

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SAN JUAN, P. R., Sept. 3—Moving against the opposition of the island's three political parties and especially against Gov. Luis Muñoz Marin's Popular Democratic party, a new political force has come into being here.

The Partido Accion Cristiana (Christian Action party) originally sponsored by Bishop James E. McManus of Ponce mobilized thousands of Roman Catholics and just before the deadline Aug. 28 filed a total of 82,027 signatures on petitions, thus registering the party island wide.

The signatures are now under scrutiny by the State Election Board. Should the signatures prove valid up to the number required by law the Partido Accion Cristiana will figure in November's ballot.

The party has nominated for Governor Dr. Salvador Perea Rosello, a scholarly professor of political science and dean of social sciences at Santa Maria University in Ponce. Dr. Perea, 63 years old, has been long known as an Independentist partisan, although he has not been active politically as such for many years.

In 1936 he founded with his late brother, Juan Augusto Perea, the Independentist party in Mayaguez. It is the forerunner of today's Independentist party of Puerto Rico.

School Bill Assailed

The Christian Action party was born out of what Catholic leaders felt was failure of the Popular Democratic party to pass laws that would benefit spiritual life of Puerto Ricans. Its formation was actually triggered when the Legislature failed to pass a bill that would enable school children to receive one hour of religious education daily. The bill, which was presented by a then Independentist

Representative, José Luis Feliu Pesquera, and continuously defended by its sponsor in at least one daily speech in the Legislature, was "ignored" by the three parties. In June the bill died in committee. Shortly afterward the Very Rev. James P. Davis, then Bishop of San Juan and now Archbishop of Puerto Rico, told a meeting of nearly 100,000 Catholics that they were free to form their own political party.

This advice was echoed by Bishop McManus, who has been feuding for years with Governor Muñoz Marin. Bishop McManus is a proponent of statehood, while Mr. Muñoz Marin believes that the commonwealth is the best thing for the island.

Church spokesmen insist that they do not seek political power as such but that they are primarily interested in questions that affect Catholic, such as religious instruction and repeal of birth control laws.

Issue of Instruction

Churchmen also insist that they would not, as their adversaries assert, give Catholic religious instruction within schools but outside the school grounds as is now legally possible in forty-three out of fifty states.

When curates and prominent Catholic laymen started the campaign to register the new party, Mr. Muñoz Marin warned that a religious party would cause serious division within Puerto Rico. Both the Governor and his wife as well as other prominent politicians, who also are practicing Catholics, warned that Catholics in politics would encourage anti-clericalism.

Only recently, in one town, Sabana Grande with a population of 25,000, a small-scale riot erupted when Popular party leaders jeered a Catholic priest who was trying to attract people to a conference in a parochial building. The police acted in time to avert more than catcalls.