

## La Luz del Mundo: A Short History

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**ABSTRACT:** La Luz del Mundo is one of the fastest-growing religious movements in the world. It seems to have experienced no decline even after his current leader, Naasón Joaquín García, was arrested and detained in California on charges of sexual abuse in 2019. The article reconstructs the origins of La Luz del Mundo in 1920s Mexico, and its growth under three subsequent leaders who have been recognized as God’s Apostles for our times, Aarón Joaquín González, Samuel Joaquín Flores, and Naasón Joaquín García. At the time of this writing, Apostle Naasón continues to direct from his prison cell in California a church that becomes, from Mexican, increasingly globalized and international.

**KEYWORDS:** La Luz del Mundo, Light of the World, Aarón Joaquín González, Samuel Joaquín Flores, Naasón Joaquín García, Mexican New Religious Movements.

### *Mexico 1926: The Social Context*

It was December 12, 1926. Catholics in Guadalajara were celebrating the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe in a tense, contradictory mood. The statue of the *Guadalupeana* toured the city in procession, the churches were full, and for some the feast was the opportunity for drinking, dancing, and even visiting the local brothels (Dormady 2007, 128). On the other hand, the city was well aware that a Catholic rebellion against the anticlerical government of President Plutarco Elías Calles (1877–1945) was about to erupt. Calles had emerged as a fierce opponent of the Catholic Church, and spared no effort to impose in Mexico his own brand of Jacobin secularism. On August 3, some 400 Catholics had occupied the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Guadalajara and exchanged gunfire with federal troops, in a battle that had left 18 dead. Northeast of the city, armed Catholic rebels were quietly organizing. The bloody Cristero War will start on

January 1, 1927, last until June 1929, and cost an estimated number of 250,000 victims (Meyer 1997).

That day, a ragged non-Catholic preacher arrived in Guadalajara with his wife, having walked his way there from the faraway city of Monterrey. His name was Eusebio Joaquín González (1896–1964), but he had just adopted that year the religious name Aarón. While he was scandalized by the disorderly conduct of some Catholics, the city largely ignored him. Unbeknownst to the citizens of Guadalajara, and the authorities, the destitute Aarón carried with him what will prove to be the most viable alternative to Catholicism in Mexico. Fellow Mexicans, however, will discover it only several years later.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was fashionable to depict the Cristero War as a social rebellion of impoverished peasants disappointed by a Mexican Revolution that had not kept its promises of social justice (Purnell 1999). Since the 1970s, French-Mexican historian Jean Meyer had advanced the theory that the religious factor was not peripheral, but central. In what was later called the *Cristiada* (see e.g. Meyer 1997). The term, *Cristiada*, had in fact been coined by Meyer himself and was never applied to the rebellion before him (Butler 2004, 5). Meyer's works, well-documented as they were, were dismissed by some as excessively favorable to the Cristeros.

In 2004, historian Matthew Butler published a revised edition of his 2000 Oxford doctoral dissertation, where he argued that both the dominant historiographical position and Meyer's revisionism were inaccurate. Neither the Catholics nor their opponents constituted monolithic blocks in 1926. There were anti-Cristero Catholics, and supporters of Calles somewhat "soft" on Catholicism. Nor can the war be interpreted as a struggle between the rich and the poor. Some Cristeros were rich, and some supporters of Calles were very much poor (Butler 2004). The Cristero War had multiple causes, yet, Butler concluded, the religious motivation was never unimportant and for some was crucial—nor was the attitude of the Catholic clergy as irrelevant as some maintained (Butler 2004; Butler and Powell 2018).

Obviously, religion is never the single factor causing wars. All "religious" wars and insurrections are *also* social and political. The risk exists that a new unilateral interpretation, looking only at the religious causes, may replace the old one ignoring them. The fact that the Catholic Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has beatified and canonized more than thirty Catholic victims of the war, something that was

criticized by Mexicans with a different view of the Cristeros, including members of the church founded by Aarón, certainly contributed to focusing the attention on the religious factor. To this, the international success should be added of the 2012 Hollywood movie *For Greater Glory*, which told the story of the war from the point of view of the Cristeros and starred such well-known actors as Andy García, Eva Longoria, and Peter O'Toole (1932–2013).

Another risk of these developments is that the attention may focus on Catholics only, ignoring their opponents. They were not all ruthless torturers motivated by personal gain to serve an oppressive regime. As Butler noticed, the opposition to the Catholic Church and the defense of the principle of separation of church and state were also genuinely popular ideas, with deep and complicated roots dating back to the Colonial period (Butler 2004, 15–49). And the opposition, in turn, was not united. There were atheists and Marxists, but most of those harboring grievances against the Catholic Church did believe in God.

The history of Protestantism in Mexico is another controversial theme. Several Protestant denominations are present in Mexico from the 19<sup>th</sup> century but, even today, the percentage of Protestants in the total Mexican population is only around 7% (to which one million Mormons and 1.7 million Jehovah's Witnesses should be added: see Puckett 2017, 15, for references to the statistical sources). There is no doubt that Protestants are, and were, a significant minority, but those anti-Catholic revolutionary thinkers who believed that Protestantism might soon replace Catholicism in Mexico were simply deluded.

Protestantism was dismissed by Catholic propaganda as “foreign” (often “American,” which also applied to the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses), and derived from schisms that walked away from the only and one apostolic continuity of the Roman Catholic Church. And Catholics liked to repeat that, if not all Mexicans are Catholics, all are *Guadalupanos*. They said this half-jokingly, but to the annoyance of non-Catholics, who offered themselves as evidence that the statement was not true. However, the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, believed to have revealed herself in 1531 to the native Mexican Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin (1474–1548), had created a unique claim of Mexicanness for the Catholic Church. The divine had manifested itself directly in Mexico only once, Catholics claimed, and it had happened in a Catholic context.

Calles was so much aware of these problems that he favored the creation in the 1920s of a schismatic Iglesia Católica Apostólica Mexicana (ICAM, Mexican

Catholic Apostolic Church) loyal to his government. Not unlike similar experiments in other countries, the ICAM met with a very limited success. Given the choice, Catholics preferred the original item (Butler 2009).

The divine, or so Aarón and his followers firmly believed, had in fact already manifested himself to a non-Catholic in Mexico that same year, on April 6, 1926. Only, not many Mexicans were aware of it.

### *The Making of an Apostle: Aarón Joaquín González*

Eusebio Joaquín González was born in Colotlán, in the Mexican state of Jalisco, on August 14, 1896, in a family of peasants. Like Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin, he was *moreno* (dark-skinned), which will later be mentioned as evidence of his genuine Mexicanness. Colotlán was not a safe place in a time of armed uprisings, and the family, which included three other children, relocated in Tlaltenango, in the state of Zacatecas. There, Eusebio was at least able to receive some schooling, and later to serve himself as a teacher for the younger children of his school (Rentería Solís 1997, 36).

Like many other young Mexicans of his time, Eusebio felt called to participate in the Mexican Revolution, seeking freedom and social justice. Sometimes in the early 1910s, he joined the militias of Francisco “Pancho” Villa (1878–1923), only to discover that his army practiced the very indiscriminated violence against the peasants Villa had promised to fight. Eusebio thus left Villa in 1913, and joined the Constitutionalist Army of the future Mexican President Venustiano Carranza (1859–1920). He found the *constitucionalistas* much more disciplined than the *villistas*, yet something in the military life failed to satisfy him (Rentería Solís 2015, 16).

While on leave from Carranza’s army in the early 1920s, he visited his parents, who had moved to Guadalajara, and met a young woman who, like his family, had relatives in Colotlán, Elisa Flores (1902–1985). They got married in 1925, and Elisa followed her husband to his new military posts, first in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and then in San Pedro de las Colonias, Coahuila. It was in the latter town that Elisa, in late 1925, while visiting the local market, met a merchant, Rosa Murillo (as for other characters in the early history of the movement, I was not able to identify her years of life and death). Rosa was part of the Pentecostal

branch in Mexico that had started with Romanita Carbajal de Valenzuela, a woman from the state of Chihuahua who had personally participated in the revival that started in 1906 in Azusa Street in Los Angeles, one of the founding events of international Pentecostalism (Sánchez Walsh 2003, 19).

Although the branch directly connected with Romanita was the Iglesia Apostólica de la Fe en Cristo Jesús, a oneness Pentecostal group (i.e. one denying the traditional notion of the Trinity and baptizing in the name of Jesus Christ only), which still exists today with roughly one million members throughout Latin America, the church Elisa came in touch with was the Iglesia Cristiana Espiritual (I.C.E.). The I.C.E. later merged with the followers of independent Irish missionary to Mexico, Joseph Stewart (1871–1926), into the Iglesia Evangélica Cristiana Espiritual, I.E.C.E., which is also still active in both North and South America. The Iglesia Cristiana Espiritual was led at that time by Francisco Borrego Martínez (1898–1978), a former member of the Iglesia Apostólica de la Fe en Cristo Jesús, and was also part of Oneness Pentecostalism (I.E.C.E. 2015).

Elisa, and later Eusebio as well, met with Borrego and with two curious characters, Antonio Muñoz (d. 1935) and Francisco Flores, who went under the name of Saulo and Silas (I.E.C.E. 2016; other sources claim Silas' real name was José Perales: Rentería Solís 2015, 19). Eusebio may have also met Stewart during one of his visits to the area (Rentería Solís 2015, 22). Saulo and Silas claimed to have received the gift of prophecy, and to be guided by dreams and visions. At least, they looked very much like Biblical prophets, with their sandals, long tunics, and equally long beards and hair. They opposed their charismatic authority to the institutional authority of the pastors, and created considerable trouble along the different branches of the Pentecostal network, in different Mexican states (I.E.C.E. 2016).

Eusebio was baptized by Silas at the end of 1925. His conversion put him at odds with his fellow soldiers and his commander, particularly after he refused to participate in the execution of a man, claiming this was against the Bible. Eusebio decided to leave the army, and he and Elisa followed Saulo and Silas to Monterrey. As Eusebio later discovered, the two prophets' morality and sexual escapades were not exactly what one would expect from men of God. They welcomed Eusebio and Elisa in their home in Monterrey, but expected them to work as the prophets' unpaid servants (Rentería Solís 2015, 19–28).

He and Elisa stayed with Saulo and Silas, until the fateful dawn of April 6, 1926. What happened then is the foundational event of La Luz del Mundo. According to his report, while he was sleeping, Eusebio was awakened by a thunderous noise, and heard a voice telling him, “Here is a man whose name will be Aarón. I will make this name known around all the world, and it will be a blessing.” He tried to dismiss this as a dream, but was awakened again by the voice. An enormous hand pointed at him, and the voice shouted, “Your name is Aarón.” Eusebio then noticed that a hole was forming in the ceiling, through which he could see the stars moving to form the words, “Your name is Aarón, and I will make it known around all the world, and it will be a blessing” (Rentería Solís 2015, 31–6).

In the subsequent decade, the two prophets’ movement will collapse under the weight of their scandals, and the Iglesia Evangélica Cristiana Espiritual will also go through several schisms. Borrego will be expelled from it and establish a new denomination, the Iglesia Cristiana Espiritual Efesios 2:20 (I.E.C.E. 2015).

But Eusebio, now Aarón, was not interested in these developments. He knew his Bible well enough to realize that Aaron, the brother of Moses, served as High Priest in Israel. He understood his experience of April 6 as going beyond a personal calling to a life of holiness and evangelization. God, he believed, had made much more. He had restored the primitive Christian Church, which had been corrupted throughout the centuries, and its key feature, the presence of apostles, and had appointed Aarón as the new and the only Apostle for the restored church. This *elección*, or *llamamiento apostólico*, i.e. the divine choice of an Apostle to lead God’s church, became a key belief for Aarón’s followers (de la Torre 2000, 73).

God, Aarón reported, had also commanded him to abandon Saulo and Silas. He left Monterrey on foot, with Elisa and a small group of followers, and started his journey to faraway Guadalajara, the city where his parents lived and where, as we have seen, he arrived on December 12, 1926, after a long and dangerous trip through a countryside where bandits and rebels roamed. Aarón’s family rejected him. They were Catholics, and would not support a non-Catholic religious enterprise (Dormady 2007, 128).

Prospects did not seem bright in Guadalajara, yet Aarón believed the voice of God had commanded him to evangelize there. He started working odd jobs to support the small community and his family, which was soon to welcome the birth

of his first son, Pablo (1928–1942). Soon the congregation started to grow, as did his family, to which another seven children will be added between 1929 and 1937.

The first meetings were in private homes, but in 1934 a small place of worship was acquired in Guadalajara's Sector Libertad, in the Calle 46, which offered the opportunity for registering the church with the municipal authorities. Aarón reported that God had revealed to him the name "Iglesia del Dios Vivo Columna y Apoyo de la Verdad La Luz del Mundo" (Church of the Living God, Pillar and Ground of the Truth, The Light of the World)—although the names mentioned in the legal documents were "Iglesia Cristiana Espiritual Evangélica" and later "Iglesia Cristiana Espiritual Evangélica La Luz del Mundo" (Evangelical Spiritual Christian Church The Light of the World) (Dormady 2011, 38–40; Torres Álvarez 2016, 27).

By that time, Aarón had already ordained his first (male) ministers, and two women as deaconesses, one of whom was his wife (Dormady 2011, 35). In 1931, he had presided over the first yearly Santa Cena (Holy Supper), the main religious event for La Luz del Mundo, whose date will later be fixed at August 14, the founder's birthday. Eventually, the Santa Cena will evolve into an international and spectacular mass religious ceremony (Fortuny 2002). In the meantime, with the end of the Cristero War, Aarón had started traveling outside the state of Jalisco, establishing several branch congregations (Rentería Solís 2015, 79–85).

In 1938, the construction of a larger place of worship started in Calle 12 de Octubre, in the south-eastern sector of Guadalajara known as Reforma. In the same year, Aarón asked to be baptized again, in the name of Jesus only, having been reminded during an evangelistic trip to Monterrey that in his first baptism a Trinitarian formula had been used by Silas, rather than the Oneness formula mentioning Jesus only (Dormady 2011, 38). By the early 1940s, La Luz del Mundo had 130 congregations in Mexico with some 2,000 followers (Morán Quiroz 1990, 124).

Several of the first members of La Luz del Mundo came from the different branches of Mexican Oneness Pentecostalism (although most were converts from Catholicism). It is not surprising that they imported into Aarón's movement the quarrelsome attitude and the inclination to schism typical of that Pentecostal milieu. Small groups of dissidents left Aarón in 1932 and 1936 (Rentería Solís

2015, 85 and 95–7), but the largest schism happened in 1942. It was led by José María González (1913–1977), who had been the first pastor ordained by Aarón.

González claimed to have been led to separate from Aarón and establish his own church, called Iglesia del Dios Vivo Columna y Apoyo de la Verdad El Buen Pastor (Church of the Living God, Pillar and Ground of the Truth, The Good Shepherd), by divine revelation (Iglesia del Dios Vivo Columna y Apoyo de la Verdad El Buen Pastor s.d., 2010), but scholars agree that the schism was largely determined by personality quarrels. The *casus belli* was the celebration by La Luz del Mundo of the anniversary of Aarón's birth, while González believed that Christians should not celebrate birthdays. The structure, style, and music of El Buen Pastor, which also organizes yearly its own Santa Cena, are largely derived from La Luz del Mundo. The schismatic group, which has a "Templo Mayor" in San Pedro Totoltepec, in the State of México, appears today as a miniature version of La Luz del Mundo, with some 11,000 members. Those who left Aarón in 1942 were around 500 (de la Torre 2000, 80).

The schism was a serious blow to Aarón. Not only had he lost 25% of his followers, including the majority of those who had joined La Luz del Mundo in Mexico City, but the schismatic group had connections in Guadalajara with the authorities and the media. They spread rumors of immoralities in La Luz del Mundo and persuaded the authorities to shut down the temple, although it was soon reopened (Dormady 2011, 42–5).

Aarón symbolically concluded this time of troubles with a baptism. Reporting he was commanded to do so by the voice of God, he re-baptized himself on July 19, 1943. The pastor who had baptized him in 1938, Lino Figueroa, had also defected to El Buen Pastor. Aarón in turn baptized the pastors, and they administered within one week new baptisms to 470 church members who had requested it (Rentería Solís 2015, 120)

Enthusiasm was restored, and the church started growing again. It also started seriously bothering the Catholic establishment, which reacted to the competition by claiming that La Luz del Mundo was simply a political tool created by Calles and reinforced by his successor as President of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas (1895–1970), to harass the Roman Catholic Church (Dormady 2007, 130–31). The argument is still repeated today, and figured prominently in the anti-Luz-del-Mundo campaigns promoted by the Catholic anti-cult priest Flaviano Amatulli Valente (1938–2018, see e.g. Amatulli Valente 1989a, 1989b). No scholar who



has studied La Luz del Mundo agrees with this theory. During the tenures of Calles and Cárdenas, Aarón, his family and his congregation were extremely poor, with no traces of lavish support from the government. While Protestant and other groups received from Calles Catholic churches confiscated by the government, La Luz del Mundo didn't (Pozos Bravo 2001, 39–40; Dormady 2007, 130–33).

Probably, Calles never even heard of La Luz del Mundo during his time in office, which ended in 1928, although La Luz del Mundo supported his anti-clerical measures. Later, the church was somewhat close (but not always nor everywhere: Fortuny 2016) to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) (Fortuny 2000). Many church members saw it as the legitimate heir of the ideals of the Mexican Revolution and of Benito Juárez (1806–1872) the liberal 19<sup>th</sup> century President of Mexico who tried to eliminate the privileges of the Catholic Church and is very much appreciated by La Luz del Mundo (Dormady 2007, 165). But neither Calles nor the PRI were crucial for the success of La Luz del Mundo, although *some* local civil authorities in Guadalajara *sometimes* protected Aarón against Catholic opposition (Fortuny 1995).

They did so because of the stated Mexicanness and patriotic attitude of La Luz del Mundo (de la Torre and Fortuny 1991), and also because the new church demonstrably improved the condition of its members. They did not drink alcohol, thus avoiding the problems of drunkenness prevailing in many poor households in the region. They believed in honesty, health, literacy, and education. It is not surprising that the city fathers in Guadalajara looked favorably to Aarón's proposal to establish a colonia in an under-developed part of the city that would be inhabited by Luz del Mundo members (Dormady 2011, 44–7).

Church members had already developed a tendency to gather together, and several has purchased homes near the temple in 12 de Octubre. But they remained a minority there, and were frequently vilified and even assaulted by their Catholic neighbors. Aarón, thus, took advantage of the City Council politics of *fraccionamientos*, acquiring land to the east of Guadalajara's city center. Obtaining the zoning authorizations to build there a full-fledged *colonia* was not easy, but a permission to start building was granted in 1954 (Dormady 2011, 44–51).

The Hermosa Provincia (Beautiful Province) was born, a “colony for the children of God” built around a new temple, and in 1957 the municipal authorities visited it for the dedication, at its entrance, of a monument to Benito Juárez celebrating the hundredth anniversary of his liberal Constitution of 1857 (Dormady 2007, 165). There were further skirmishes with city bureaucrats, reconstructed in great detail in the doctoral dissertation of Jason Dormady, to obtain further authorizations and implement the basic services in the Hermosa Provincia, but in the end Aarón’s dream became a reality (Dormady 2007, 159–83). The Hermosa Provincia was an autonomous, self-sufficient micro-city, and one where criminality and illiteracy were rarer than in other parts of Guadalajara. Illiteracy will completely disappear from the Provincia shortly after Aarón’s death (Greenway 1973, 118). On October 2, 1968, local media reported that the white flag signaling in Mexico that illiteracy has been completely eradicated in a given area had been raised in the Hermosa Provincia (“Auténtica labor alfabetizadora se ha realizado en Hermosa Provincia” 1968).

Aarón could thus devote his later years to spread La Luz del Mundo throughout Mexico and beyond, to Central America and the United States, inaugurating the *giras apostólicas* his successors will greatly develop. He died on June 9, 1964, leaving behind a church with some 12,000 members (according to Moran Quíroz 1990, 124, although Greenway 1973, 121, indicated members were more than 20,000) and communities established throughout Mexico and abroad.

Catholic opposition pursued him even after his death, opposing his burial in Guadalajara’s cemeteries. It was a testament of the good relations La Luz del Mundo had developed with the authorities that the governor of Jalisco, Juan Gil Preciado (1909–1999), personally granted the authorization for a burial in the garden in front of the temple (for which a request for use as a cemetery had already been submitted some months before), which was renamed as Gethsemane (Rentería Solís 2015, 148–51).

### *Leading an International Church: Apostle Samuel Joaquín Flores*

What happened in the aftermath of Aarón’s death was crucial for La Luz del Mundo and its identity. The Apostle of God was dead. After it was announced, a pastor commented that “the lamp of Israel was quenched” (an allusion to 2

*Samuel* 21:17). The crowd shouted that “no, it was not quenched,” and one church leader renowned for his gift of prophecy indicated that there was indeed a new living Apostle, the seventh child and second surviving male heir of Aarón, Samuel Joaquín Flores (1937–2014) (Torres Álvarez 2016, 92).

There was no pre-arranged protocol on how a new Apostle should be designated after Aarón’s death. Some early accounts insisted on signs showing that Aarón knew that his successor would be Samuel. But there is no principle of dynastic succession in La Luz del Mundo (if there was, it would have privileged Samuel’s brother Santiago [b. 1930], who was also active in the church and was almost seven years his elder). There is no democratic election either. The voice of God speaks to some church leaders, who proclaim who is called to be the new Apostle, and the crowd assembled in Guadalajara shares the same inner feelings and loudly confirms the *elección*. The procedure may seem “opaque” to some scholars (Torres Álvarez 2016, 89), but, from the point of view of La Luz del Mundo, guarantees that Apostles are designated by God rather than by humans (Ávalos Núñez and García de la Mora 2014).

Samuel was born in Guadalajara on February 14, 1937. According to La Luz del Mundo official narrative, he was stillborn and was miraculously resurrected by his father (Rentería Solís 2015, 99–100: the same source claims that Aarón had previously resurrected his daughter Rebeca (1932–1997) after she had suffered a fatal accident). The church also believes that in 1961, when he was the pastor of La Luz del Mundo community in Veracruz, the same voice of God who had spoken to Aarón recited to Samuel the passage of *Revelation 10* mentioning a “mighty angel coming down from Heaven,” and told him, “You will be this angel” (Torres Álvarez 2016, 123). One year later, in 1962, Samuel married Eva García Lopez in the Hermosa Provincia temple.

Samuel inherited a healthy organization, whose size was still limited if compared to the million-strong Catholic Church in Mexico. In order to expand the church, Samuel believed that it was essential to consolidate both its administrative organizations and the infrastructures of the Hermosa Provincia. The latter became a well-serviced part of Guadalajara, with a secondary school, a private university, and a hospital. Samuel also presided over the beautification of the main roads, and the demolition of the first temple, replaced by a larger one in 1969. This was in turn dismantled in 1982 and rebuilt in one of two satellite *colonias* inhabited by Luz del Mundo members in Guadalajara, known as Bethel.

In 1983, the construction of a magnificent new temple, inaugurated in 1992, was started. This seven-level flagship Luz del Mundo structure, with a capacity of 12,000, was designed by Mexican architect Leopoldo Fernández Font. It both symbolized the church's achievements and opened the way to several other architecturally noticeable temples built both in Mexico and abroad (de la Torre 2000, 88).

Samuel, as is typical of the second leaders in new religious organizations, also better structured the church, creating a number of "Ministries" for different fields of activities, from education to public relations, and regulated the relations between different levels of ministers, with pastors at the top, followed by deacons. In 2010, he organized a Council of Bishops, which in case of need could take decisions in the absence of the Apostle, yet remained clearly subordinated to the Apostle himself (Joaquín Flores 2014, 152). Finally, Samuel promoted the historical study of Aarón and the origins of La Luz del Mundo, at a time when the growing church had started being investigated by Mexican scholars, whose approach church members did not always appreciate (see López Maldonado 1995, which criticizes de la Torre 1990).

Armed with a stronger structure at home, Samuel multiplied the apostolic trips, increased international missionary activism, and at his death La Luz del Mundo had expanded well beyond the Americas, to fifty countries, and claimed more than four million members, as a fruit of 50 years of the second Apostle's mission.

Catholic opposition in Mexico also continued, but the most vehement reaction to an expansion that converted La Luz del Mundo into one of the fastest-growing religions in the world came from Protestant anti-cultists. A bizarre character, Jorge Erdely Graham, accused Samuel of sexual abuse and of preparing a mass suicide in 1997, some days after the suicides of members of the American UFO movement Heaven's Gate in Rancho Santa Fe, California (Zeller 2014). Erdely was part of the Evangelical anti-cult organization Instituto Cristiano de México, but was also being accused of leading himself a "cult," the Iglesia Cristiana Restaurada. The latter operated hostels for problematic children, from where several minors "disappeared" in 2009. Escaping prosecution, Erdely left Mexico for the United States and Canada. Nonetheless, there were media that took seriously his accusations against Samuel, supported by some ex-members of La

Luz del Mundo who filed complaints with the state prosecutor in Jalisco, who did not find there any offense to prosecute (see Torres Álvarez 2016, 38–9).

These attacks did not slow down the growth of La Luz del Mundo. At the Santa Cena of 2007, Samuel announced that he had some health problems that may make him less present in the church's future public activities. He remained a beloved figure for La Luz del Mundo community, which offered fervent prayers for his health. He died in Guadalajara on December 8, 2014.

### *Expansion and Crisis: Apostle Naasón Joaquín García*

In a dissertation defended in 2016 at the University of Guadalajara, directed by sociologist Renée de la Torre Castellanos, one of the first scholars to pay attention to La Luz del Mundo, Noé Alejandro Torres Álvarez offered a detailed reconstruction of the *llamamiento apostólico* of Samuel's successor. What for the devotees was God's choice fell on Naasón Joaquín García, the fifth of Samuel's eight children, born in Guadalajara on May 7, 1969. According to Torres Álvarez, the choice was both expected and unexpected. On the one hand, Naasón had been a close aide of his father and Naasón's son, Adoraim, in one of the sermons pronounced during Samuel's funerals, reported a dream where God gave special signs of election to both his father and himself. Torres Álvarez believes that Adoraim was thus offering a clue that Naasón may be the next Apostle—and perhaps himself will one day succeed his father (Torres Álvarez 2016, 159; Luz del Mundo members believe that this interpretation is purely conjectural).

On the other hand, Naasón himself did not have a prominent role in his father's funerals, and within the Joaquín family itself there were uncertainties about whom God may choose. Finally, one pastor, Gilberto García, on December 14 told the multitude gathered to honor the deceased Apostle that a sister from the church had a dream, where she saw Samuel rising to heaven, and told him, "Don't go, for we need an Apostle." Then she saw another man coming down from the clouds, but could not distinguish his face. Finally, she heard a voice proclaiming, "Naasón is my choice." The revelation was immediately greeted by jubilation and prayers, and accepted by Naasón himself and his siblings as genuine (Torres Álvarez 2016, 161, whose version I have supplemented through personal interviews of eyewitnesses to the event, Guadalajara, August 2019).

La Luz del Mundo insists that there are never substantial changes from one Apostle to the next, as the church is the faithful custodian of the original message God entrusted Aarón with. In a fundamental way, this is true. The church remains very much the same, including in its dressing codes, conservative for men, who more often than not wear jackets and ties, as well as for women, who display their long skirts and cover their heads with a veil in the temples (Fortuny 2001). However, La Luz del Mundo also believes that science and progress are gifts from God, and values education.

A University of Florida 2017 dissertation by Mary Puckett had the disadvantage of being based on fieldwork conducted mostly in Florida, where La Luz del Mundo communities are comparatively small, although she did go to a Santa Cena with devotees traveling from Orlando. The Florida microcosm may not be entirely representative of the larger international Luz del Mundo, yet Puckett tells a convincing tale about the globalization—or perhaps, as she prefers, “cosmopolitanization”—of La Luz del Mundo in the first years of Naasón’s apostolate. “A church that once based its identity on being Mexican is now a church with an identity that transcends national borders. Today, it is a church ‘for the world’” (Puckett 2017, 11–2).

Puckett discusses how Naasón, continuing in Samuel’s footsteps, managed to accomplish this between 2014 and 2017. He was successful in mobilizing the church’s youth, both in Mexico and abroad, particularly in the United States, where La Luz del Mundo had experienced a spectacular growth. Youth members enthusiastically joined the “battalions” taking the faith to new cities and new countries. New churches were mushrooming in the U.S. and Central America, and several new countries were reached. By 2019, La Luz del Mundo was present in some 60 countries and claimed five million members internationally—although statistics about new religious movements are always a matter of controversy.

This was an Internet savvy generation, and Naasón worked with them to build an effective network of state-of-the-art web evangelism. He promoted Berea Internacional as an effective tool to broadcast church news. This resulted in further expansion and also, as Puckett argues, guaranteed that globalization would not compromise the integrity of the message. Internet communication works both ways. It allows communities throughout the world to receive messages

from the headquarters, but it also allows headquarters to check out what is going on even in the most remote branches.

This would look like an unimpeachable success story of church growth, if it was not for the fact that in 2019 La Luz del Mundo acquired overnight an international notoriety it would have gladly avoided. On June 3, 2019, Naasón was arrested when he landed at Los Angeles Airport, and detained with several accusations of sexual abuse, including of minors, together with two female associates (a third escaped arrest). At the time of this writing, Naasón is still detained in California. It would be inappropriate to comment on a pending case, and one where so far the prosecutors have not revealed the exact extent of the accusations, who the alleged victims are, and what evidence corroborates their allegations. I attended the Santa Cena in both 2018 and 2019, and noticed both that the number of participants actually grew from one year to the next and that in the enormous crowd of 600,000 everybody was ready to proclaim that the Apostle was innocent. This was a moving testimony of a solid church, confronted with horrific accusations against its leader, yet firm in its faith and trust.

Of course, old and new enemies of La Luz del Mundo painted a different portrait, but their dire predictions about a quick decline of the church after the incident in California did not come true. La Luz del Mundo, actually, continues to grow, and indicates it has no intention of replacing the Apostle, who indeed continues to write letters and take the main decisions for the church from its jail cell.

Time will tell what the fate of Naasón will be, and how the church will react to developments in California. My educated guess is that, whatever the outcome of the California case, the church will survive, and move towards his 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary with no substantial loss of members. It would not be the first case of a religious movement that has confronted and survived serious crises and ignominious accusations against its leaders.

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