

La Luz del Mundo's Social and Charitable Activities

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ABSTRACT: Before it acquired an international notoriety for the arrest of its current leader in California on charges of sexual abuse in 2019, La Luz del Mundo was well-known and respected in various quarters for its massive social and charitable activities. The article explores the origin of those activities in La Luz del Mundo's interpretation of both Christianity and the values of the Mexican Revolution, and their development in the fields of education, health care, charity, gender equality, and the prevention and relief of domestic violence, concluding with a look at possible future developments after the current crisis.

KEYWORDS: La Luz del Mundo, Light of the World, Samuel Joaquín Flores, Eva García de Joaquín, Naasón Joaquín García, Alma Zamora de Joaquín, Sàmann University of Jalisco, Hospital Siloé, Alma de Mujer y Vida.

After the arrest of its Apostle on charges of sexual abuses on June 3, 2019 in California, international media that knew nothing about it all of a sudden “discovered” La Luz del Mundo as a “sinister” organization or a “cult.” Much to their surprise, in the following days, those media that did a modicum of homework learned that La Luz del Mundo was held in high esteem by politicians and civil society leaders in different countries because of its social and charitable activities.

In August 2019, I visited Guadalajara and conducted fieldwork there among the organizers and volunteers carrying on this social work (unreferenced information in the article comes from these interviews). What follows is a short analysis, and an attempt to answer the question why both members and sympathizers, as several media noticed, continued to regard La Luz del Mundo as

an honorable organization even after the serious accusations raised against the private life of the Apostle.

Building the Hermosa Provincia

As historians have noted, most of the original members of La Luz del Mundo came from the poorest segments of Mexican society (Dormady 2007, 2011). These were the very Mexicans who had believed in the ideals of the Mexican Revolution, and had shared its criticism of the Catholic Church as an institution accused of having sided for decades with the rich and the landowners. The poor had supported the Revolution not because they shared an ideology, but in search of a social justice long denied. Those who joined La Luz del Mundo had also supported the revolutionary government against the Catholic revolt of the Cristeros during the Cristero War of 1927–29.

When the dust settled, however, they discovered that, although there had been some improvements, the revolutionary ideal of social justice had largely proved elusive. The rich remained rich, and the poor remained poor. This fueled Catholic, and at the opposite side of the spectrum, hard-line Soviet-style Communist criticism of the government. La Luz del Mundo, however, believed that in order to be good Christians their members should be good citizens. With all its shortcomings, the church considered that what was called originally National Revolutionary Party, then Party of the Mexican Revolution, and from 1946, Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ruled Mexico without interruptions from 1929 to 2000, still offered a chance to pursue the ideals of the *Revolución* and of the great liberal 19th-century President, Benito Juárez (1859–1872). Although La Luz del Mundo did not identify with a single political party (Fortuny 2016), it is fair to state that, unlike other Mexican religious bodies, it worked *within*, rather than *outside* or *against*, the PRI-centered Mexican political and social system (Dormady 2011).

La Luz del Mundo theology believes that science and progress—which were also core values of the Mexican Revolution—are God-given gifts to all humankind and eminently Christian principles. Education and freedom from diseases, violence, superstition, and ignorance should be offered to all and, by working at it, Christians also work for the Kingdom of God. However, in its first decades of existence, the struggling La Luz del Mundo community was mostly busy

promoting these values among its own members, who gathered in the new City of God the movement built in Guadalajara, the Hermosa Provincia.

When the Hermosa Provincia came into existence in 1954, most new developments in Guadalajara, outside of the city center, had no sewage, electrification, or potable water. By the 1957, the Hermosa Provincia had a monument to Benito Juárez, but it also provided its inhabitants with the basic services (de la Torre 2000, 82), although they were completed and improved in the following years (Dormady 2007, 167). The founder of La Luz del Mundo, Aarón Joaquín González (1896–1964), had been himself a schoolteacher (Rentería Solís 1997, 36) and personally took care of the basic schooling of the Provincia’s children. He also promoted the birth of private businesses ran by La Luz del Mundo members there, including bakeries, food stands, and a packing company of salsa. They were encouraged to use part of the profits they made to build an informal charity network for the poor and the elderly of the Provincia, the first embryo of the future charitable system of La Luz del Mundo (Dormady 2007, 173–74).

Although a hospital will start functioning only in the next decade, obstetrical services were already provided in the 1950s. In the Provincia the rate of stillborn children, a serious problem in Mexico, dropped from 10% in the mid-1950s to zero in 1964. By the 1960s, illiteracy, another problem the Mexican Revolution had promised (without always keeping its pledge) to eradicate, had also disappeared in the Provincia (Dormady 2007, 175).

As mentioned earlier, the “good citizens” ideal of La Luz del Mundo led members to carry on these activities within the prevailing political and social system of Mexico. President Manuel Ávila Camacho (1897–1955), who was in office between 1940 and 1946, had created a Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Populares (National Confederation of Popular Organizations, CNOP) as an umbrella organization connecting all sort of civil society groups to the PRI. There were also state branches of the CNOP, including in Jalisco, in turn federating local organizations at the city, village, and boroughs levels. One of this was Guadalajara’s Liga Municipal de Diversos no. 4, active in the sector including the Hermosa Provincia. According to American scholar Jason Dormady, not only did Apostle Aarón supported the Liga, he encouraged La Luz del Mundo members to devote time and energies to it. Aarón’s own son, Samuel Joaquín Flores (1937–2014), later to become La Luz del Mundo’s second Apostle,

served as chief financial officer of the Liga no. 4 (Dormady 2007, 177–78). But, if they were there, they acted as individual Mexican citizens, not as representatives of the church.

Educational Institutions

Apostle Samuel, who succeeded his father in 1964, completed the process of creating stable social institutions in the Provincia. Samuel was especially passionate about promoting one of La Luz del Mundo's key values, education. The first establishments for primary education in the Provincia were created during the apostolate of Aarón, but the following chronology shows the substantial impulse given by Samuel to educational institutions there:

1976. The construction of a new building for the primary public school Benito Juárez was started.

1976. The junior high school (*secundaria*) Hermosa Provincia 1 started operating in a building known as Albergue México.

1977. The junior high school Hermosa Provincia 1 moved to its own building.

1979. The kindergarten Hermosa Provincia 1 was founded.

1983. A second kindergarten, Hermosa Provincia 2, started functioning in the Colonia Bethel.

1987. Another junior high school, Hermosa Provincia 2, was inaugurated in the Colonia Bethel.

1990. The first high school (*preparatoria*) in the area, Hermosa Provincia 1, was inaugurated.

1992. The third junior high school, Hermosa Provincia 3, was inaugurated in the Colonia Aarón Joaquín.

1993. Recab de México A.C. was established as an umbrella organization supervising all the educational institutions of the Hermosa Provincia (IEHP).

1993. The University Center of Higher Education Hermosa Provincia (CUESHP) started operating.

2003. Sàmann University of Jalisco was inaugurated.

2005. An equivalency high school (*preparatoria semiescolarizada*), i.e. a high school for workers or adults seeking to complete their scholarly career, was also opened.

2009. IEHS started offering courses for a secondary education diploma with technological orientation (*bachillerato tecnológico*).

2012. A new school building was inaugurated in the Colonia Bethel (currently hosting the junior high school Hermosa Provincia 2).

2012. Sâmann University of Jalisco created a new campus in Tijuana.

Under Apostle Naasón, who succeeded his father Samuel in 2014, a significant development took place. Sâmann University and CUESHP became in 2019 different educational systems, both under the ultimate supervision of Recab, but with different “concepts” and trademarks. CUESHP emphasized its offer of a “secular education,” officially accredited by the main public university in the State of Jalisco, University of Guadalajara, while Sâmann University declared its Christian orientation. It is important to note that today between 80% and 85% of the students in the global IEHS system and Sâmann University are *not* members of La Luz del Mundo.

Health Services: The Siloé Hospital

Apostle Samuel also organized the various activities of La Luz del Mundo into departments known as Ministries, including a Ministry of Health and Welfare. Apostle Aarón had started building a health institution later known as Instituto Fraternal Maestro Aarón Joaquín in the Hermosa Provincia’s Calle Esteban Alatorre, but it was not completed at the time of his death in 1964. Apostle Samuel continued its construction and inaugurated it on April 6, 1965. However, he had more ambitious projects for the health services offered by La Luz del Mundo, and dreamed of building a state-of-the-art hospital.

The project for Hospital Siloé was started in February 1987, and the institution was inaugurated in June 2001. It was named after Jerusalem’s pool of Siloam, where Jesus according to *John 9* sent the man born blind to wash his eyes after he had spread mud over them. The blind man went to Siloam, washed his eyes, and was healed.

Siloé became a fully structured hospital, with several divisions and an Administrative Council presiding over four departments: medical, building and projects, planning and quality control, and administration. Quite appropriately for an institution named after the story of the healing of a blind man in the Gospel, it was later supplemented by a cutting-edge Institute of Ophthalmology, named after Apostle Samuel himself. The Institute is specialized in the prevention and cure of glaucoma and cataract, which are widespread problems in the region. Siloé also includes an accredited college, the Instituto Siloé Jalisco de Ciencias de la Salud, offering a license in Optometry as well as professional certificates for nurses and paramedics.

My visit to the Siloé Hospital in 2019 evidenced three points that are typical of La Luz del Mundo's mature approach to social activities in general. First, La Luz del Mundo believes in science and is critical of other religious organizations that maintain anti-scientific prejudices. The hospital is proud of its high quality and advanced services. At the same time, Apostle Samuel believed that too many hospitals lack the human touch that is also needed to make the patients comfortable. He wanted Siloé to look less like an hospital and more as a home away from home for the patients. He advised the doctors that there is no substitute for love, and patients should feel loved there.

Second, Siloé is clearly a Christian institution, and does not hide its ties with La Luz del Mundo. The portraits of the Apostles are proudly displayed. Medical and administrative personnel are told that the hospital believes in Christian values, and they are expected to abide by them.

Third, as interpreted by La Luz del Mundo, Christian values imply that services—after the early years when resources allowed only to provide for the members of the religious community—should now be offered to everybody, without distinction of religion or belief. Siloé is a private hospital and is not free, although it is cheaper than most other hospitals in the area, and there are plans to help those in need. That non-members of La Luz del Mundo benefit of the same services offered to members is a key point and, as mentioned earlier, also applies to education. It explains why, for all the theological controversy denouncing the church as “heretic,” La Luz del Mundo is popular among many Mexicans (and, increasingly, non-Mexicans, as parallel or branch institutions have been created abroad) who experience the quality and care of its social services. This is also true for fields other than the medical one.

Lengthening the Stride of Charity: The Fundación Eva García de Joaquín

Eva García Lopez was born on September 15, 1945, and married the future Apostle Samuel on May 17, 1962. The main religious festival of La Luz del Mundo is known as Santa Cena (Holy Supper). It was first celebrated in 1931, and grew to become a massive international event (Fortuny 2002). Not all those who come to Guadalajara for the Santa Cena from all over the world are well off. Many are poor. Eva García conceived the idea of offering at least free meals to them, and on November 8, 1986, founded for this purpose the Grupo Tabita, named after Tabitha, the Christian woman resurrected by Apostle Peter in *Acts* 9:36–42.

Eva realized that Tabita could not be active only during the Santa Cena or immediately before it. It needed to work all year round to raise the funds needed to feed an increasing number of pilgrims in need. Its activities, and the number of volunteers, kept growing, and on January 9, 1992, it was reorganized as Grupo Elisa. The name honored the late mother-in-law of Eva, and Apostle Aarón's loyal wife of sixty years, Elisa Flores (1902–1985).

On January 11, 1999, the former Grupo Elisa was legally incorporated as the Fundación Elisa A.C. On September 18, 2000, it inaugurated the Casa Hogar Betesda, a nursing home offering spiritual as well as material assistance to the elderly. On November 4, 2011, the name of the foundation was changed to Fundación Eva García de Joaquín A.C., honoring its indefatigable founder.

Following a pattern common to several La Luz del Mundo social institutions, the foundation expanded into three directions. First, it broadened its activities, from feeding those in need coming for the Santa Cena to assisting the poor and the elderly all year round. Second, it grew geographically, outside Guadalajara and then outside Mexico. Third, it became part of an international network of charitable organizations and services extending its help to non-members of La Luz del Mundo as well, including in different parts of the world in situations of emergency and disaster. We noted a similar expansive pattern when discussing the schools and the hospital. Critics of La Luz del Mundo have accused its charitable institutions to help undocumented migrants in the United States. But the same assistance is offered by other Christian churches, and La Luz del Mundo's willingness to help without looking at the religion, ethnicity, or legal status of those in need seem worthy of praise rather than criticism.

Protecting Women in Danger: Alma de Mujer y Vida A.C.

Alma de Mujer y Vida (Soul of a Woman and Life) is the most recent social institution of La Luz del Mundo, and the most moving I visited. It also offers a window on how La Luz del Mundo answers certain forms of criticism.

La Luz del Mundo women are immediately recognized for their long skirts and the veil they keep during the religious services, where they seat separately from men (Fortuny 2001). Outside observers, and the first scholars who studied La Luz del Mundo, suspected that these external signs were the mark of a patriarchal culture discriminating against women (see de la Torre 2000). The church resented these comments as offensive (López Maldonado 1995), as it sincerely believed to have contributed significantly to the improvement of the condition of its women through health care and education. As late as 2019, one of La Luz del Mundo's leading female intellectuals, Sara Pozos Bravo, wrote an op-ed in a Guadalajara daily newspaper explaining that stretching skirts never meant cutting rights shorter for the church's women (Pozos Bravo 2019a).

It is certainly true that La Luz del Mundo is not feminist, and only men serve as pastors there. An outside observer can perhaps comment that this is part of Mexican culture: after all, there are no women priests in the Catholic Church either. On the other hand, the fact that they cannot become pastors (and dress conservatively) does not prevent La Luz del Mundo women from pursuing academic degrees or serving in leading positions in church-sponsored activities such as health care, education, and journalism. The church's main charities are led by women.

La Luz del Mundo is headquartered in Mexico, a country which became notorious for the prevalence of violence against women, including domestic violence. Even apart from hundreds of unsolved homicides of young women in Ciudad Juárez, an obscure set of horrific events that was popularized internationally by the 2006 Hollywood movie *Bordertown*, starring Jennifer Lopez and Antonio Banderas, women are more often victims of violence in Mexico than in most other countries. In 2016, the national institute for statistics INEGI reported that 66,1% of Mexican women had been victims of violence at least once in life, and 43,9% had been physically assaulted by their husbands or partners (INEGI 2016). An often quoted article published in 1996 by the

Journal of the American Medical Association claimed that the most dangerous place for a Mexican woman is her home (Díaz Olavarrieta and Sotelo 1996).

La Luz del Mundo women insists on the paradox that they are criticized for their long skirts, yet the church's teachings on familial harmony, and the prohibitions against alcohol and drugs, a main cause of violence in Mexico, protect them against incidents all too common in their country. They are not above discriminations in the workplace and other forms of gender inequality, though. One person who felt these problems should be addressed urgently, in Mexico and beyond, was Alma Zamora Espinoza, the wife of La Luz del Mundo's third Apostle, Naasón Joaquín García (they married on June 14, 1992).

On March 8, 2016, Alma Zamora founded the association Alma de Mujer y Vida. Perhaps not coincidentally, the name of the association included her own first name, Alma. It offers a large and indeed impressive range of services to women, from free legal and psychological services to courses on how to prevent domestic violence and resist discrimination in the workplace. It also offers free courses to improve the women's employment skills, in order to help their careers, and several kind of health care services, including nutritional advise in a country where obesity is a social plague.

Thousands of women went through the programs of Alma de Mujer y Vida, most of them not members of La Luz del Mundo, where domestic violence issues are *less* prevailing than in Mexican society at large. The strategical aim is also clear: to those who accuse La Luz del Mundo of perpetuating a patriarchal culture, the church answers than in fact it operates one of the leading charities in Mexico promoting gender equality and fighting discrimination and domestic violence.

All this is advanced within the framework of a broader interest for human rights. If the theme of separation of church and state—which in Mexico traditionally means containing the power of the Catholic Church—is part of the values of the Mexican Revolution La Luz del Mundo has promoted since its very beginning, under Apostle Naasón the church has become more active in participating in global human rights initiatives, including at the United Nations (Pozos Bravo 2019b).

Conclusion

Christians in general believe in the Kingdom of God, and that a better world will one day come. As American scholar Catherine Wessinger has noted, the parts of the Book of Revelation in the Bible that announce what many Christians call the Millennium, a kingdom of peace that will last for a thousand years, are interpreted differently by Christian denominations and movements. Some believe that Christians should simply wait for Jesus to appear again and inaugurate the Millennium, and perhaps try to find in the Bible words mysteriously indicating the date for the end of the world as we know it. Others practice what Wessinger calls “progressive millennialism,” i.e. they believe that God asks for our cooperation, and the Millennium will only come after a certain number of women and men will have prepared it with sincere heart and manifested their love and care for their fellow human beings in need (Wessinger 1997).

La Luz del Mundo is a progressive group, and tries to build a model Christian society where nobody is left behind or forgotten. Its members do believe in the supernatural, but do not wait for miracles when they felt called to demonstrate their Christian attitude in practice, by helping every day those in need.

During my fieldwork in Mexico, what surprised and deeply moved me was the obvious sincerity, selflessness, purity of heart, and humility of thousands of volunteers performing their daily tasks for the practical greater good of the others. They did not believe they were doing something exceptional, and in fact needed to be told by me that their commitment to a wide-ranging humanitarian work was simply outstanding. Instead of praising themselves, they kept praising God and their Apostles who, according to them, have been their main inspiration and guidance.

La Luz del Mundo humanitarian work has a global scope. It extends to all the communities where the church is present, to the benefit of both church members and non-members who live nearby. Nor is their work limited by ethnicity. As I was able to confirm by visiting La Luz del Mundo communities in the United States, it is true that many recipients of their benevolence are Mexican immigrants, but non-Mexicans and non-Latinos are helped as well.

All stages of human life are taken care of by La Luz del Mundo volunteers. For children, not only does the church promote education, but in the neighborhoods where there is a significant La Luz del Mundo presence, there are in principle no

abandoned children. If their parents die or are not able to take care of them, La Luz del Mundo families in the neighborhood will be ready to adopt the children. As we have seen, women are helped to develop professional skills and to avoid being abused in the family and elsewhere. I also observed family consultancy courses where both partners learned new communication skills, and rescued their marriages when they were at the verge of separation. I met several young couples who had been helped to solve their problems and rebuild a renewed and solid relationship. La Luz del Mundo believes in the simple principle that a strong and happy family makes for a strong and healthy society.

Hospitals care for the sick, and there are no abandoned senior citizens where La Luz del Mundo has a significant presence. I saw myself how, in foster homes, senior citizens are often surrounded by young people and children. They are included into social life and there is a sustained effort to make them feel loved, not only taken care of. It was particularly moving to see several generations spending time and energy together, something which is becoming uncommon in our society.

A casual or perhaps hostile reader may ask at this point how it is possible to discuss the charitable activities of La Luz del Mundo as if the court case pending in California against Apostle Naasón for multiple charges of sexual abuse did not exist. Isn't it contradictory that the church has established a large organization for combating the very abuse of women its leader is now accused of?

As it often happens, the question has two sides. Critics may maintain that it is hypocritical for church members to help a good number of victimized women and at the same time defend their Apostle from serious accusations of having victimized other women himself. For La Luz del Mundo devotees persuaded that the Apostle is innocent, however, precisely his honorable activities in the field of charity, education, and human rights make the idea that he has committed the kind of crimes he is accused of unbelievable. Instead, those I interviewed consider that through the trial of the Apostle, God is telling something important to them and is testing their faith.

I am not in a position to offer any comment, much less conclusions, on the California case, but I believe that there is one aspect worth considering. Whatever one may think, or the U.S. judges may rule, about Apostle Naasón, nothing and nobody can cancel the massive amount of good works performed by thousands of La Luz del Mundo volunteers to help the women, the immigrants,

the poor, the sick, the elderly, lending their helping hands to both members and non-members of their church. Tens of thousands who have been helped throughout the world will remain grateful to La Luz del Mundo, no matter what they may hear about the Apostle. This is a human and social capital La Luz del Mundo has accumulated through its members' benevolence. It will help it in the difficult times ahead, and I believe it will assure to La Luz del Mundo a stability lasting much beyond the present crisis.

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