



Conway's Concelebrant

A coffee-growing, dedicated Seventh-day Adventist mayor in Chiapas, Mexico, is a suspect in a forthcoming murder mystery.

by John C. Kelley

This piece is an excerpt from Conway's *Cross*, a mystery set in Mexico in the mid-1990s. It tells a story about traditional Catholics, reform Catholics, and Seventh-day Adventists in a small highland town in the southernmost state of Chiapas. This region nurtures two seemingly contradictory trends—fast growth of the Adventist Church, and a political rebellion known as the Zapatista revolt. The Zapatistas represent one response to the region's problem of rural poverty, while the Adventist Church offers another path.

The main character is Father Jacob O'Malley, also known as Padre Jake—a Jesuit priest with a past. Padre Jake, along with an American academic, a Mexican professor, and a number of other visitors, are in town for the annual

Passion Play. The other protagonists are town leaders representing various factional groups.

Father Conway, the town priest, is murdered while playing the role of Christ on the cross. One of the suspects is Don Roberto Mendez, the Seventh-day Adventist mayor of the town. What follows is Padre Jake's first interrogation of the suspect.

Iwalked back through the rectory to where Nicolás sat in the garden. "I need a guide, Nicolás."

"Where are we going?" he asked, as we walked toward the plaza.

"To visit the people from the Passion Play—Don Roberto, Don Simon, Don Mateo, and then the Lieutenant."

"The first two are in Barrio Abajo. We can cross the new bridge."

"It's finished? Last time I was here, it didn't look like they'd ever finish it."

"Pure politics, Father. They wanted to put Salinas' name on it, so they worked real fast to inaugurate it before December."

The term of office for ex-President Carlos

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Salinas de Gortari ended in December 1994, when Zedillo was inaugurated as his successor. Public works in Mexico, like public works everywhere, are monuments to the regime; bridges and highways and buildings seem to be completed on a six-year cycle.

"I guess it will be easier to get there than when you took me last time." It was a 20-minute walk from the Cathedral to Barrio Abajo, on the other side of Rio Hondo. While it was less than 300 meters as the crow flies, you had to walk down a narrow path, a switchback down one side of the ravine, and then up another switchback on the far side. Politicians had promised the bridge since the 19th century.

We approached the bridge, a small suspension span across the Rio Hondo. On the concrete pillar anchoring one of the cables, I saw a large plaque—"Puente Salinas," in large letters. Underneath, the inscription said it was built by the "H. Ayuntamiento Municipal"—the Honorable County Council—of Simon Vazquez, Mayor; below that, it acknowledged financing from the "Social Development Fund" of the federal government, under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

We started across the bridge. "So," I said, "it's the Salinas Bridge."

"Nobody calls it that," said Nicolás; "they call it Puente Conway."

"Oh?" I remarked. I stopped at the center of the bridge to take in the spectacular view. To my left, the Cerro Calaveras rose against the green backdrop of the rain forest. I leaned over the parapet and looked down at the Rio Hondo, 100 feet below. In April it's a placid mountain stream, but a month later it will be raging, swollen by the first rains of the season.

Nicolás hung back. "I get dizzy if I look down," he said.

"Why is it called Puente Conway?" I asked.

"Everybody knows that if it wasn't for the Father, the bridge never would have been built. We had promises and projects but noth-

ing ever got done. The architects and engineers finished the plans back in 1976. But Father Conway moved everything and finally got it approved for the Fund. It still wasn't started until after the Zapatistas . . ."

"The Zapatistas? What did they have to do with it?"

"Nothing, really. But the government started doing lots of things after the big revolt in January of last year. And that's when Father Lupe finally got the project approved."

A clever man, my Jesuit brother. I vaguely remembered him telling me, on my visit last year, that a bridge was essential to bring the two halves of this community together. The river dividing "Barrio Abajo" from the rest of San Marcos, he said, was a social barrier as effective as the Berlin Wall.

On the other side of the bridge we walked down a steep trail, a shortcut to Barrio Abajo. Houses on this side of the river are of recent vintage, built in the last 50 years as San Marcos outgrew the plateau.

We came to the Méndez home, a substantial house only recently completed, with a plastered front and painted cement block sides. The porch was furnished with a hammock, rocking chair, and a small table and chairs. We climbed the steps.

One doesn't knock in this kind of town. A visitor stands at the door, clearing his throat loudly. If he's not heard, he calls out the name, but not too loudly. If that doesn't work, he walks around the side and repeats the steps. If, by then, his presence is not acknowledged, he leaves. His visit is unwelcome.

Today I was spared this ritual. "Welcome, Father Jake," said Méndez, as he deftly extricated himself from the hammock.

"Pardon me, *Don* Roberto, I don't mean to interrupt your . . ."

"Father, it is a pleasure to receive you in my humble house. Please sit down." He turned his head. "Melissa!"

As he seated us around the table a young girl of about 13 years came out the front door. "Si, Papi?"

"Say hello to Father Jake."

The girl, with lustrous black hair in long braids, a gingham dress, and plastic sandals, looked at me with her big, black eyes. "*Buenas tardes*, Padre." She curtsied.

"*Buenas tardes*, Melissa."

"Tell your mama to bring some *tamarindo* punch."

"Si, Papi." She walked back inside.

Two years earlier, on a visit to San Marcos, Father Conway brought me to visit the Méndez home. We were served *tamarindo*, a very refreshing tropical fruit. I'd suffered some embarrassment, on that occasion, when Méndez asked what I wanted to drink. I asked for coffee, and he told me they didn't have any. Curious, I'd asked why the head of the coffee cooperative had no coffee. It was a matter of principle, he said. Seventh-day Adventists don't drink coffee, and he and his family were Seventh-day Adventists. So I had *tamarindo* instead.

"You've finished your house, *Don Roberto*." On my last visit, this house was a jumble of rebar and blocks.

"The coffee price was high last year. So, I had the housewarming at Christmas."

"*Don Roberto*, I'm still curious about that coffee business."

"I remember that," he laughed.

"If it's against your religion to drink it, how can you grow and sell it?"

"It's an interesting question. The answer is simple. The Bible doesn't prohibit coffee, but our prophet Ellen White wrote that we should avoid stimulants for health reasons. It's not a sin, though, so we can grow it and sell it."

A strikingly beautiful woman, classic Maya profile, came out on the porch with a pitcher and four glasses. She wore a loose blouse and designer jeans. Even after seven daughters and one son, Julieta de Méndez wore her

eldest daughter's clothes.

"Good afternoon, Father Jake. You too, Nico." She spoke to us in English, which she taught in San Marcos' secondary school. When I'd come to visit before, she and Roberto had insisted that we speak English because they had so few chances to practice. They learned the language in a parochial boarding school in the center of Chiapas called "Linda Vista." They'd finished college in the north of Mexico, at the Universidad de Morelos, then lived in Texas for three years before moving back to their home town.

Nicolás and I stood up. "It's a pleasure to see you again, *Doña Julieta*."

She poured the *tamarindo*. "Please, sit down. I am sorry for my, how do you say, my outcry this morning. Father Jake is very dear to me."

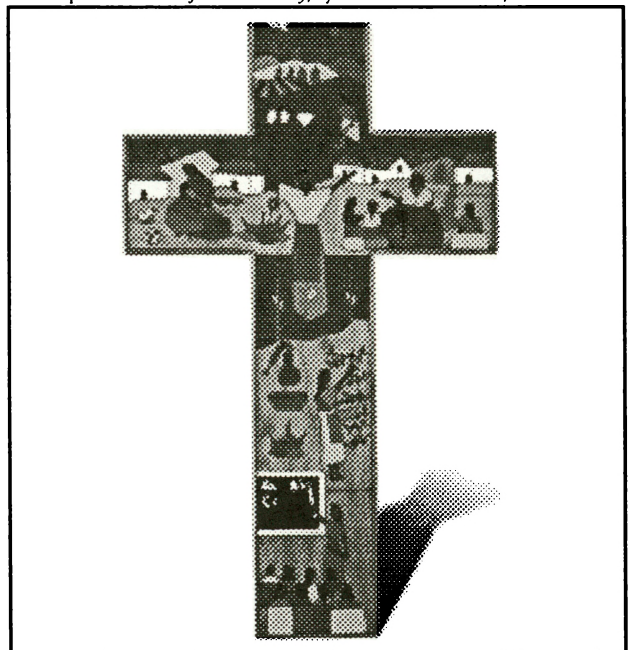
"Please, you have no need to apologize."

"My son called by telephone some few minutes ago. He is still looking for the coroner. Why does he need an autopsy?"

"He is doing the correct thing. To avoid any suspicions."

"How is feeling the Señorita Luisa Maria?" asked *Don Roberto*.

Adapted from *Cross of the Community*, by the artisans of La Palma, El Salvador



"She is a very strong woman. She is fine."

"You have a—how do you say it—a *dicho* . . ." said Julieta.

"An adage."

". . . an adage about women like her. It is something like this: 'Calm water is very deep.'"

"Still waters run deep,' *Doña* Julieta."

"What is mean that?" Nicolás asked proudly.

"Nico, *querido*, how many times have I said to you? When you make a question in English, you must use the auxiliary verb."

"Yes, Teacher. Okay. What does mean that?"

Julieta shrugged in resignation.

"It means, Nicolás, that a person looks very peaceful, but inside she may be very hot."

"That is the very truth for that woman. I have to see it with my own eyes." Nicolás beamed.

"I have seen it, Nicolás. Conjugate the verb."

"I have seen it."

"Good."

"What did you see, Nicolás?"

"Many time ago, I think it is day after she come here now, she cry very much in her room."

Julieta turned to me. "*Don* Roberto says she is, how to say it, a cold fish. I tell him no, underneath she is a real woman. And she is in love . . ."

"Julieta, *por favor*, lay off the tales, please."

Don Roberto turned to me. "*Doña* Julieta sometimes believes too much the, how do you say . . ."

"Gossip." Julieta supplied the missing word.

"Thank you, *amor*. She sometimes believe the gossip of the women in the market."

"It is no gossip. I hear it direct from *Doña* Marta."

"We should not trouble our visitor with these stories," said *Don* Roberto, with a pointed look to his wife.

"*Don* Roberto," I put in quickly, "back to our discussion about selling coffee. . . ."

"Yes. I still try to understand what means *cashewis tree*."

"Casuistry."

"What is this?" asked Julieta.

"It's a very subtle way of deciding what is right and wrong—a subtle way which is not always correct, but sounds good. Like Jesuits are good at it."

"Can you explain?" she asked.

"Let me give you an example. I see a beggar on the street. I steal a piece of meat from the supermarket to feed him. I say to myself that it is okay to steal because it is not for me, but to feed the poor and hungry. That's an example of casuistry."

"You do not believe in *Chucho el Roto*, Father?" Roberto asked, referring to Mexico's Robin Hood.

"Exactly."

"We as Adventists," said Julieta, "would not do what you say in that example." She looked at me expectantly.

"Why not?" I asked, humoring her.

"We would never steal meat." A pause. "We are vegetarians."

We laughed. "But you would raise and sell cattle, right?"

"*Nos agarro en curva*," she said. You got us there. "You remind me of the other Father."

"I do?"

"Yes. We could talk with him like a real person."

"But that's what we priests are."

"That's not what I learned when I was little," said Julieta.

"It's not?"

"My mother said priests had long tails and hoofs, like little devils. We learned in high school that the Catholic Church is Babylon. The Pope is Antichrist."

"My goodness. If that's what you were taught, how did you agree to take part in the Passion Play, this Catholic ritual?"

"Father Conway convinced me," said Julieta, as she refilled our glasses. She stood up. "I must get some more *tamarindo*."

"Could I trouble you for some coffee?" I

said.

She looked at me, not quite sure. I laughed. "I make joke."

"I am joking." The inveterate English teacher. She turned quickly, trying to hide her smile, and walked back into the house. I watched her go. I have heard men complain that Latin women lose their figures as soon as they are married; those men, I am sure, had not met Julieta de Méndez. She was as slim as any of her teenage daughters, and more graceful.

"Father Conway convinced me," *Don Roberto* reiterated. "It was simple. He say to me, first, Christ is dying for all sinners, not just Catholics. Second, every Christian believe in the death and the, uh, I say it in Spanish, *resurrección* of Jesus Christ. And, third, he talk about the Concordat. He say all Christians must unite together for to bring peace again in San Marcos." *Don Roberto* seemed proud of this long speech.

"That's all he needed to say to convince you?"

"No. Also he offer me to become a concelebrant of the mass. He say if I bring my church to the Holy Week services, he will put us to be responsible for the services on Saturday following the Adventist way."

"The Saturday mass?"

"Yes."

"So tomorrow you will do the mass?"

"We are having a church service the Adventist way in the Cathedral, for us and the Catholics. Maybe should I say we were going to, if Father Conway did not die?"

"But, my dear *Don Roberto*, I honor what he said. We must admire what Father Conway did."

"We could say he 'made an offer I couldn't refuse.'"

"*Don Roberto*, you know a lot of sayings in English. Where did you learn that one? It comes from the movies and you are forbidden to go to the movies, aren't you?"

"You are correct, Father Jake." We looked up as Julieta returned. "But we watch movies on our Betamax."

"But it's still a movie, isn't it? How can you justify it?"

"It is easy," said Julieta. "We can't go to the movies because of the bad influence of the place. You meet bad people there. Right, *Don Roberto*? That is what my mother said. She also

said guardian angels cannot go inside. You are not with protection."

"I think your mother knew what I would do if we were alone in the dark theater."

"Beto, please. Respect the Father."

"My friends," I said, "this is a perfect example of casuistry."

"What is?"

"Going to the movies is a sin, right? But

seeing a movie in your own house is not a sin because you are not exposed to bad influences."

"That's what we say."

"That's a subtle way to justify something which is not correct. I would think that the real sin in movies, according to whoever made this rule for your church, is being exposed to the bad influence of the thing you see."

Don Roberto grinned at me. "Please, Father Jake, do not say this to our pastor. Because then he will make a sermon about it and we might have to give up the Betamax." He looked at Julieta. "That makes me to remem-

Roberto pulled out The Bible Story, Vol. 1, by Arthur Maxwell. I opened it. A brightly illustrated story of the Creation, written in plain English, followed by other stories from Genesis. "We teach our children from the Bible and English at the same time," Julieta said.

ber. Did you check on them?"

"I did. No problem. But it might be a good idea if you take Father Jake. Pretend you demonstrate the equipment. That way Alejandra and Nicolás will be more scared."

I looked around. "Nicolás? I didn't notice when he left."

"He likes to visit us with any excuse. That way he can see Alejandra. He has a—what do you call it, Julieta?"

"A crush."

"I always forget that word. It does not have sense . . ."

"Make sense."

"*Si, mi amor.* It does not make sense." Roberto stood up. "Let me show you my new house, Father."

We walked inside. The living room had two couches, upholstered in dark blue velour, covered with plastic. A coffee table with a vase of paper flowers was in the center of the room, and a bookcase with four shelves of hardbacks stood in the corner.

They led me over to the books. Those on the top row had brightly colored blue backs. Roberto pulled one out—*The Bible Story*, Vol. 1, by Arthur Maxwell. I opened it. A brightly illustrated story of the Creation, written in plain English, followed by other stories from Genesis.

"We teach our children from the Bible and English at the same time," Julieta said.

"A very good idea."

"We hope they put these stories on Betamax. Then we can invite the neighbor children to see."

"And, as a bonus, no pastor can tell you to get rid of your Betamax." They laughed with me.

We went into the next room. Five girls and Nicolás watched "Beauty and the Beast" on a big screen television equipped with a Betamax.

"*Niñas, saluden al Padre Jake.*" At their mother's command, the five girls stood and said, in unison, "Good afternoon, Father Jake." The youngest one came up to me, her hand outstretched. "I'm Clarissa." She solemnly shook my hand.

"I am pleased to meet you, Clarissa."

"I am Melissa," said the next one. I went through the same ritual with Yanet, Claudia, and Alejandra.

"Please, young ladies, do not let me interrupt your movie."

"Thank you, Father Jake," they said, in unison. They sat.

We walked out to the back porch, a wide area under the overhanging roof of tile and tin. It held the family dining table. In a "sell" to the main house was the kitchen. Julieta led the way in. She proudly

displayed her possessions—a refrigerator, electric stove, and breakfast table.

"Your kitchen is very modern."

"But I cannot convince our cook to use this stove. She still uses the hearth in the old kitchen."

"What did you do with the old house?"

"My son lives there while he is performing his year of social service in Simojovel."

"I met him this morning. He took Father Conway's body down to Simojovel."

"Father," said *Don* Roberto, "he is a young doctor but he is very good. He received himself as the first in his class from the Montemorelos medical school. If it was possible to do anything to save Father Conway, my son will do it."

"Father," said Don Roberto, "he received himself first in his class from the Montemorelos medical school. If it was possible to do anything to save Father Conway, my son will do it."

"I'm sure he did, *Don* Roberto. In fact, Father Conway was very proud of him. He wrote me a few months ago about this excellent young doctor Méndez who cured his gout. He had only good things to say about him."

"Thank you, Father. We will not want you to worry what if a doctor with more experience is there."

We walked back to the rear porch. Julieta said, "Father, if you will excuse me, I must go where my cook is working. I need to help in the preparations for the Sabbath."

"Please," I said, "I have already taken too much of your time. It has been a pleasure visiting your home. I congratulate you."

Julieta smiled as she took her leave. *Don* Roberto showed me back to the front porch and motioned for me to sit down, but I repeated that I had already taken too much of his time.

"It has been an honor to receive your visit, Father. You are in your house."

"Thank you."

"Father, pardon the imprudence, but you seem to be—how do you say it?—worry. If I can do anything . . ."

"It's Father Conway; his death just does not seem right. I didn't think he was that weak."

"You can speak to my son, who has attended him."

"*Don* Roberto, can I be frank?"

"It is as you wish."

"Did Father Conway have any enemies in San Marcos?"

He looked at me, eyebrows raised. "Enemies? No. All loved Father Conway. Why you think he has enemies?"

"I'm not convinced it was a natural death."

"No, it is impossible. All loved him. Even I, the leader of a different religious group, he made himself a good friend of me."

"What if the coroner discovers in the autopsy that he was killed?" I persisted. "Do you have any idea who could do it?"

"I insist. It is not possible. Perhaps it was for

the Professor Prescott; he was supposed to be on the cross. He has many enemies."

"He does?" I was surprised.

"Many, many enemies."

"Who are these enemies?"

"Oh, his enemies are everywhere. He has argument with everybody."

I knew, from experience, Roberto would say no more. "*Don* Roberto, I won't take any more of your time."

"Nicolás," I called. A moment later, my guide came out on the back porch and we walked down the street toward the Vazquez home.

"So, Nicolás, you like the Méndez girl?" We were back to Spanish.

"Yes, very much."

"But she is of a different faith."

"Yes, Father. I already talked about it with Father Conway."

"And what did he say?"

"He was against it. I told him we were both Christians, and anyway he is in favor of ecumin . . . ecumenical . . . you know, of getting the churches together. I said that's what I was doing."

Clever boy, I thought. "And what did he say to that?"

"He asked me, Will your children go to catechism or Sabbath school?"

"And your answer?"

"Catechism, of course."

"Is that what Alejandra wants?"

"Did you talk to Father Conway about this?"

"No. Why?"

"Because he asked me the same question."

"Perhaps they are the right questions to ask."

"Well, I talked to Doctor Prescott, and he told me I was doing the right thing."

"Really? Did he say why?"

"Yes. He explained that the churches were important, but they are a thing of the past. We are in the future, he said, and we make our own future. He said I should keep on with Alejandra."

"What temple will you get married in? The Catholic one or the Adventist one?"

"Neither one."

"Neither? Where, then?"

"Doctor Prescott had a good idea. 'Get married in the temple of the future,' he said."

"Temple of the future? Where is that?"

"The temple of learning. Our school. There is the temple of the future."

Small wonder Prescott has enemies, I

thought, giving this sort of advice to an orphan, to Conway's protégé. "The important matter, Nicolás, is what Alejandra's parents think. How do they feel?"

"They are very happy we are in love, Father. They give me many chances with her. Usually a father chases boys away; you have to hide behind his back. But *Don* Roberto and *Doña* Julieta make me feel very welcome at their house."