

Conclusion

A New Era: Leadership of the Latin American Church

The Latin American church is leading the worldwide church into a new era. In the first few centuries of its existence the Christian church was a Mediterranean institution, one dominated by Mediterranean cultural preferences and thought patterns. Then, imperceptibly, the church became European, its ideology sealed by the fusion of Mediterranean philosophy with European theology.

Theology and the church today are entering a new age, one in which theologians are searching for a new synthesis. It is an era similar to the eleventh and twelfth centuries when philosophers and theologians began developing new methods and new systems. Out of their efforts Scholasticism was built, best represented by Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* in the thirteenth century.

In the searching that is taking place today, many partial theories and methods are proposed. Every eighteen months or so a Robinson, Bonhoeffer, Cox, Altizer, or Moltmann flash across the theological sky. By contrast, theology of liberation has not passed away as a fad; it is a current of thought that will contribute to a larger postmodern theological synthesis.

The reaffirmation of neo-Scholasticism imposed by Cardinal Merry del Val, Vatican secretary of state, in the nineteenth century and fostered by Roman theologians in this century took place just as many European Catholics and Protestants were seeking new forms of thought and expression in the philosophies of experience and other contemporaneous philosophies. They were searching for a new synthesis that would better explain the church in the modern world. They concerned themselves with the place of the believer in the world of science and technology. They also reflected on what role the church should play in the world. Their efforts were mightily advanced by John XXIII's convocation of Vatican II and his appeal for *aggiornamento*, renewal of the church.

European bishops dominated the agenda and the discussions of Vatican II. European intellectuals provided the theology that permeated conciliar documents. But Vatican II, the greatest event in the last four centuries of Catholicism, is the last "European" council. For the church is becoming global: its interests are worldwide and include cultural ways and political questions other than West European. The questions that the church raises are now questions arising from the Second and Third Worlds. And the Latin American church is leading the way in raising these issues.(1)

But Latin America has produced answers, as well. The burst of creative activity that marked Latin America in the 1960s and '70s produced notable intellectual creations,

some of which have been accepted in other parts of the world and reshaped to mesh with local circumstances. Not all those creations were life-fostering; one, the doctrine of national security, has resulted in injury and death for thousands. Two of the creations—national security and the theology of liberation—are in direct conflict in attempting to explain and influence what should be taking place in social and political life.

The major Latin American creations were a surprise to observers in the U.S.A. and Europe, who had long been accustomed to seeing only derivative forms of thought in Latin America. Thus, at first, outside observers were slow to react to and even take seriously the theology of liberation, base Christian communities, the ideology of national security, and dependency analysis.

But the rate of interaction among intellectual creators, religious or secular, and their followers or critics is now so great that what would otherwise have taken decades to communicate and assimilate now takes only years. In the case of the church, beneath the surface activity of publishing, of teaching future leaders, and of disseminating new teachings and techniques to the masses lie networks of key diagnosticians, original thinkers, integrators, and reformers. They crisscross the skies of Latin America and beyond, bearing with them new ideas and promoting new solutions. A chief Latin American proponent of base Christian communities, José Marins, teaches clerical and lay ministers in the Philippines or the United States with almost as much frequency as he does in his native Brazil.

Center Stage in the Drama of Religion and Politics: Nicaragua

The difficulties faced by the churches of the Second and Third worlds are especially political in nature: how to relate themselves to the political environment. The inventive forces of the Latin American church have been applied in large measure to the questions of how to operate in environments that are uncertain or hostile.

The difficulties are many and the risks are great, with consequences reaching beyond national boundaries. Church leaders in Rome and in Washington are watching closely, as are groups as diverse as the CIA, the Latin American Institute in Moscow, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

The conflicts and hopes, the confusion and promise, of the contemporary Latin American church are nowhere more evident than in a tiny country that until recently contributed little creativity to the life of the church. Its lack of promise was understandable. One family with a giant guardian standing behind it dominated Nicaragua: the Somoza dynasty and the active support of the U.S. government.(2)

Some citizens, including many from the church, grew in their determination to gain freedom. The action of church leaders and the entry of many Christians into the ranks of the Sandinista liberation movement was decisive in bringing final victory over Somoza.(3) Of the three branches that came together to form the final Sandinista

coalition, the one composed of committed Christians was the largest. They were to moderate gradually, at least at the beginning of the coalition, the extreme leftist positions of the early guerrillas.(4)

The insurrection was not the problem in Nicaragua. The choice was clear: all peaceful means had been used in attempting to gain freedom. The bishops of Nicaragua agreed and said so in public in early June 1979, two days before the final general strike. Nor was there a problem of choice following the Sandinista victory. All the bishops of Nicaragua urged Christians to actively support the Sandinista government in the reconstruction of the country. Nicaragua was not only torn by war in which forty thousand had died, eighty thousand had been wounded, and multitudes left homeless (in a population of 2.5 million). The country also lay partially devastated by an earthquake. Moreover many talented Nicaraguans had fled the country over the years. All able-bodied persons, especially trained ones, were needed. Christians, lay and clerical, entered government service in large numbers.

In Nicaragua the crisis in the church was identity: how closely could it be identified with the regime? It was an old dilemma for the church, but for new reasons. The church has always been in politics in Latin America, politics being the sea in which the church has to swim. But, for the most part, it was politics of survival, of organization-maintenance. The church had no ideology to undergird further involvement. Instead the Latin American church had chosen to emphasize the otherworldly aspects of its tradition. But now the Latin American church had a new ideology that validated and promoted "building up the world." It now had movement at the grass roots, new community structures, new ways for lay persons to shoulder leadership. The church was being pushed (and drawn) into a mysterious land where the outlines of a different society were not clearly seen. Would it be capitalist, socialist, or what?

The bishops, with the encouragement of Rome and certain elements within CELAM, chose to drop back at the border of the mystery;(5) then increasingly they offered critical comments on the performance and orientation of the Sandinista government. Many sisters and priests (especially from religious orders) and many committed lay persons elected to plunge in. They would help to make the outlines of a new society clearer, they believed. ("Making the future happen" described well their feelings.) The degree of involvement with the Sandinista enterprise varied from person to person (with some sitting in ministerial chairs and others attending local FSLN [Sandinista National Liberation Front] meetings) but they hardly differed in their degree of commitment and enthusiasm for the cause. They provide the only case in Latin America of large groups of Christians actively supporting an insurrection on its way to becoming a successful revolution.

In the process the Sandinistas and their followers were creating new myths and a utopian movement to follow the myths. The Sandinistas described part of the myth in a communiqué on religion.(6) They proposed that the Christian faith, by its very nature, leads its adherents to participation in the transformation of society.

That utopian view often clashed with public performance of the Sandinista government, in the minds of a number of observers, including John Paul II. By many accounts, the Sandinistas botched the papal visit to Nicaragua in early 1983 and television watchers saw John Paul II impatiently responding to government leaders and brushing aside Father Ernesto Cardenal, minister of culture.(7)

But which way is the transformation going? Key to an interpretation is the Sandinista determination to have one political party and one labor union. For some that could only mean one of two things: the Cuban model or the Mexican model. For many it would be an ominous choice: Cuba and communism, Mexico and authoritarianism. For North American progressives or Latin American leftists either choice would be inadequate or an unacceptable disappointment. But many in Nicaragua argue that for a long phase the revolution has to consolidate itself. Moreover it needs a period of time to raise participatory consciousness at the grassroots level.

Many in and outside Nicaragua are uncomfortable with the Sandinista myth, that of creating a new society, and will work to bring down the enterprise.(8) In one scenario, observers say that in the very process of withholding support, the U.S.A. and cautious backtrackers within the country will push the Sandinista leaders toward the attractive model of Cuban socialism. But Nicaragua by itself is too poor, too lacking in resources, to have a Cubanstyle revolution. And one senses no willingness on the part of the Russians to pick up, directly or indirectly, the expense of another Cuba. Nicaragua will have to struggle to find its own way, as did Mexico more than sixty years earlier.

Models of Survival

Many other Latin American countries did not have the freedom to decide what forms of government they would prefer. Military leaders have imposed bureaucratic, authoritarian regimes. What form of political interaction will the church take in such an environment?

Because the church cannot match the military in terms of controlled violence, real or implied, how can it thrive in the shadow of a hostile state? Are there models for a church "in captivity"? Church leaders want a situation wherein the institution will not simply survive, treading water until rescue comes, but one wherein its members can flourish.

At the time of the Puebla conference discussion of models of coexistence turned to the Cuban model. Raúl Gómez Treto, president of the Cuban Association of the Laity, enthusiastically presented the Cuban model for the consideration of theologians and journalists present at the meeting during a CENCOS briefing session. He recounted the stages of evolution of church relationships with the Castro government from cooperation, confrontation, passive hostility, and then active cooperation. Likewise, Francisco Oves Fernández, archbishop of Havana, advocated at the same conference active cooperation in the revolutionary process.

Gómez Treto's presentation went largely unreported, an untypical reaction of press members present at the daily CENCOS meetings. Church leaders, for their part, react against the Cuban model not because of the stridency of Gómez Treto or other Cuban advocates. They are repelled by the relative lack of "success" of the Cuban church. Never a very religious people in terms of participation, Cuban Catholics have been decimated by a precipitous decline in clergy (from 723 in 1960 to 213 in 1980), lack of church influence upon younger Cubans, and active discrimination against practicing Christians.

By contrast, the Brazilian church follows in prominent details the model set by the Polish church: reach out to the masses, enliven their religious motivations, and encourage them to take an active part in society. Polish Catholics attempted to act by force of mass movement against the goals and the drift of the Polish Communist Party and government. Theirs was not the oldstyle revolution of waging guerrilla warfare, arming the masses, and storming the barricades. Nor did they seek direct debate with the government. Rather they acted as if they should have a labor union -- and then they went ahead and formed one, as it were, spontaneously, before the eyes of civil authorities. They acted as if they had a right to strike, and they went out on strikes that have been forbidden.

It is no accident that a number of Brazilian labor leaders developed their ideologies and leadership skills in *comunidades de base*. Nor is it an accident that wives of workers, also members of *comunidades de base*, conducted the sort of public demonstrations proscribed by the Brazilian government. Apart from speculation about resemblances between Brazilian labor unions and the Solidarity movement, one notes that motivation for public political activity derives from the experience of living as church among the masses, both in Brazil and Poland.(9)

It is not as if the Brazilian church consciously planned the strengthening of labor unions or how the unions should make demands on the political system. Rather, in reaching out to the urban and rural poor, and empowering them for activity in church and in the world, the church enlivened them for activity in an unfriendly or hostile environment. The church in Brazil has come alive in ways far exceeding the church in Cuba.

One wonders if John Paul II saw parallels between the Brazilian and Polish churches. At all events his visit to Brazil gave him twelve days to absorb at first hand what was taking place there. In clear language and through symbolic gestures (embrace of Archbishops Lorscheider and Camara, among others), John Paul ratified the direction the Brazilian church is taking. He restored hope to many who felt besieged in a hostile environment. He saw that the reaching out of the church to the people is regenerating the institution. Its efforts also are beginning to have an impact on society at large.

The struggles of the church in Latin America have pulled the church in the United States into Latin American conflicts. The U.S. Catholic Conference regularly takes stands on

behalf of the embattled Latin American church, lobbying in Congress, the White House, and the State Department, testifying in Congress, and serving as a focal point in the networks of Christian activists attempting to influence the course of foreign policy.⁽¹⁰⁾ The Catholic bishops spoke for the historical interests of Panama in the Canal debate and regularly take up positions on human rights violations. Modification of aid to the Salvadoran government resulted in part from the mobilization of political resources in the United States by many Christian groups, including the U.S. Catholic Conference, the National Council of Churches, and the Washington Office on Latin America. Thus, changes in the Latin American church have radiated beyond national boundaries, affecting political systems of other countries.

With the wounding of John Paul II and the assassination of Anwar Sadat by religious fanatics, the creation and growth of the Moral Majority, the religion and politics debate in the U.S. presidential campaign of 1984, the takeover of the Iranian regime by religious extremists, and the conflicts of the church and the military in Latin America, the question of religion and politics in our day has come center stage. And one of the dramas unfolding there for a long time to come will be that of the church in Latin America.

NOTES

1. The influence of the Latin American church can be observed not only in the spread of liberation thought, basic Christian communities (often called small Christian communities or small churches in Asia or Africa), and dependency analysis, but also in the agendas and dynamics of international church meetings. See, especially, reports from and accounts of Synod meetings of selected bishops called to Rome to discuss larger issues facing the church. See also reports of Inter-American meetings of representatives of religious orders, especially meetings of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious with their Canadian and Latin American counterparts. The influence of the Latin Americans on a foreign episcopal conference is clearest in the case of Canada; see Christopher Lind, "Ethics, Economics, and Canada's Catholic Bishops," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 8, 3 (Fall 1983)150-66.

2. See Richard Millet, *Guardians of the Dynasty* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1978), and John A. Booth, *The End and the Beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution* (Boulder: Westview, 1982).

3. See Booth, *The End*, pp. 134-37.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 143-44.

5. Details of the CELAM campaign are recounted in *Liaisons Internationales*, 24 (May 1981) 3-6.

6. Dirección Nacional del Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, "Comunicado

Oficial de la Dirección Nacional del F.S.L.N. sobre la Religión," *Barricada*, Oct. 7, 1980.

7. On Ernesto Cardenal, and two other priests in the Nicaraguan government, see Teófilo Cabestrero, *Ministers of God, Ministers of the People: Testimonies of Faith from Nicaragua* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983).

8. See NACLA Report on the Americas, 16,1 (Jan.-Feb. 1982), 1-45.

9. See *Wall Street Journal* (Sept. 21, 1982), p. 1, and Thomas G. Sanders, "Brazil's Labor Unions" *USFI Reports South America*, no. 48 (1981), pp. 1-11.

10. See, for example, U.S. Catholic Conference, *Statement of the United States Catholic Conference on Central America*, Nov. 19, 1981 (Washington, D.C.) and "USCC Testimony on Central America," *Origins* 12, 41 (March 24, 1983), 649, 651-56. See also Thomas E. Quigley, "The Catholic Church and El Salvador," *Cross Currents*, 32, 2 (Summer 1982) 179-92, and "Where the Bishops Stand," *El Salvador Report*, 1, 7 (May/June 1981) 1, and Donald T. Libby, "Listen to the Bishops," *Foreign Policy* 52 (Fall 1983) 78-95.

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