

The changing Church of Latin America

By Msgr. TEODORO DE LA TORRE

The situation prevailing in Latin America and its Church during the last three centuries can be described as follows:

1. In the arid highlands of the Andean countries, Central America, and Mexico, the inhabitants, mostly Indians, were the poorest people of the whole continent. Not having much to expect from their life on earth, they placed their hope in the life of heaven. The priests played the role of intermediaries between the landlords and the masses; they were greatly revered.

2. In the tropical lowlands, in which vegetation is either parched as in Northeastern Brazil or luxuriant as in the Amazon region, the people, often black in whole or in part, were only slightly better off than in the highlands. Nevertheless, attuned to the exuberance of their environment, they tended to enjoy their earthly lives as much as possible. Their religious practices were often spirited and gay; the priests, always scarce in number, were looked upon mostly as performers of ritual ceremonies, and treated with kindness rather than with reverence.

3. In the fertile and more temperate lands of Argentina, Uruguay, Venezuela, Cuba, Southern Brazil, etc., there was a great amount of European immigration and foreign investments. Periods of prosperity alternated with others of depression. The priests,

many foreign-born, did not exercise widespread influence, but had the support of a religiously cultivated minority. There were numerous Church-related institutions, such as schools, youth centers, benefic homes, and others.

4. Finally, everywhere throughout Latin America, there were enclaves of the native bourgeoisie, mostly white and highly educated. They protected the Church as part of the *status-quo*, which they tried to maintain.

This social and religious apparatus began to crumble in the nineteen thirties. The economic depression, halting and actually reversing the outflow of foreign immigration and investments, paralyzed the development of the more advanced regions, while improved health care caused a population excess in the more destitute sections of Latin America. The result was massive emigration from the country to the slums around all the largest cities.

The Church, unprepared for the unexpected and sudden transformation of society, delayed her adjustment to the new circumstances. Communism, on the other hand, found in the resulting turmoil abundant opportunities for its activism.

Recently the Church has become fully aware of the radical changes and has been greatly affected by this recognition.¹ I refer primarily to the Catholic Church; but the situation of the Protestant Churches is very similar.²

The Church's attempt to reform her pastoral activities has taken three directions, which can be identified by the names of «development», «revolution», and «liberation», terms which I will explain later.

1. The literature on this subject is abundant: Francois Houtart and Emile Pin, *The Church in the Latin American Revolution*, trans. G. Barth (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965); Marcos McGrath, «The Signs of the Times in Latin America Today», and Eduardo F. Pironio, «Christian Interpretation of the Signs of the Times in Latin America Today», *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council*, Position Papers of the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Medellín, Colombia, 1968 (Bogotá: General Secretariat of CELAM, 1970) 1, 79-106 and 107-128. Paul E. Sigmund, «Latin American Catholicism's Opening to the Left», *The Review of Politics*, University of Notre Dame, 35, No. 1 (January, 1973), 61-76.

2. As early as 1966 various Evangelical denominations met to consider the adjustment of their Churches to the changing Latin American society: «Segunda Consulta Latinoamericana de Iglesia y Sociedad», *América hoy*, Montevideo: ISAL, 1966; on the same problem: Christian Lalive D'Epinau, «La Iglesia evangélica y la revolución latinoamericana», in *CIDOC* (Centro Inter-cultural de Documentación), No. 78, Cuernavaca, Mexico (1968). For a critical appraisal of radicalism in the Evangelical Churches of Latin America: Florencio Sáez Jr., *Entre Cristo y Che Guevara* (San Juan de Puerto Rico: Palma Real, 1972).

After presenting, as objectively as possible, some movements within each of these categories, I will end with a few personal remarks on the whole situation.

DEVELOPMENT

Recently, in the Houston Medical Center, I met a Chilean Jesuit priest who was hospitalized. He was Father José María Vélaz, founder and director of «Faith and Joy» (Fe y Alegría), a movement begun in 1955 to provide education for underprivileged children of the Caracas slums, and which today operates in seven nations: Venezuela, Ecuador, Perú, Bolivia, Panamá, El Salvador, and Colombia. More than 100,000 students attend elementary and high schools established by «Faith and Joy», as well as trade schools of commerce, agriculture, husbandry, mechanics, and even a very specialized school of tourism in Mérida, Venezuela.

Although primarily educational in intent, the movement also offers such services as free clinics, cooperatives, sport activities, leadership training. It is planning to enter the field of housing.

The program is directed by 15 Jesuits with the cooperation of 300 men and women of 50 religious communities, but is carried on mostly by its 3,000 salaried employees. Volunteers are used exclusively for promotional and fund-raising purposes.

An enterprise of this caliber requires a great amount of money, which is obtained from private donors and corporations and, in some countries, through public subsidies. These contributions the his work with the rich and the political authorities, but Father Vélaz considers this fact a lesser evil, thinking that this compromise is inevitable, unless one prefers to remain at the level of Utopian thinking.

Permit me to offer for your consideration another example.

Father Domingo Effio,³ a Peruvian-born priest, decided to open a catechetical center in a shantytown of Bogotá. Received at first with suspicion by the 300 families of the area, he gained their friendship when, changing his clerical habit for work clothes, he

3. Domingo Effio, O.P., «The Sad, Hidden Side of a Modern City», *World Campus*, Maryknoll, New York, 10, No. 5 (February, 1967). 3; Graciela Giraldo Moscoso, «El trabajo, lazo de unión entre habitantes del Barrio Juan XXIII», *La República*, Bogotá, Colombia, January 17, 1967.

began to share in their endless operation of building shacks, and keeping them from falling apart.

Once he became their leader, Father Effio undertook new projects: fixing a street, opening a drainage ditch, installing a public faucet of running water, building a chapel, a school, a clinic, and a community center, creating a voluntary service of night watchmen, and establishing an employment agency.

Although Father Effio relied mainly on the communal work of the slum dwellers—and he saw in this work a redeeming value—he searched for and obtained outside help, in the form of money, but especially through personal services. Many families of the affluent society of Bogotá, sometimes in teams of husband, wife, and children, came to participate in the work of the priest and his people.

Finally the end arrived. Most of the constructions were on private property. The owners demanded their legal right to the land, and, under police protection, bulldozers began to tear down the shaky houses. Father Effio, expelled from the country, came to Texas, where at the present he works in a Mexican-American parish.

From the point of view of the legal establishment, this second case is less orthodox than the first, because here we have a case of trespassing. Father Effio permitted it and cooperated with it, because he knew the personal problems of each of those people. Some families, for example, with six or eight children, had found shelter there, when unable to pay rent, they were evicted from the slum area South of Bogotá. But Father Effio was not a revolutionary; he actually thought that the only way of preventing revolution was to undertake generous programs of social assistance.

In these two cases, as in the many others of their kind throughout Latin America, the motivating force has been fundamentally religious; the work of those apostles of charity is a witness to the depth of their conscience. But they also had a sociological reason. They believed that there cannot be progress in Latin America unless it is preceded by the culturalization of its margined masses.

REVOLUTION

I turn now to an entirely different approach: the revolutionary attempts of some members of the clergy to transform the Latin American society.

Camilo Torres,⁴ born into an upper class Colombian family, upon his return from the University of Louvain, where he had studied sociology, was appointed chaplain of the anti-clerical National University of Bogotá in 1959. There he later became a professor of social sciences. Increasingly disenchanted with all the ongoing programs to improve the conditions of the poor, Camilo began to voice his criticism of the political authorities. Warned by Cardinal Concha of the provisions of the Colombian concordat with the Holy See, which forbids priests from entering into politics, Father Torres asked for and obtained his laicization. He immediately took a tour of the country trying to unite in a political coalition the workers, the students, and all the political groups opposed to the re-election of the ruling National Front.

Subjected to continuous harassment by the police, and having been the target of various assassination attempts, Camilo Torres joined the National Liberation Army, and after four months of fighting as a guerrilla infantryman, was killed in battle with regular Colombian soldiers, on February 15, 1966.

In July, 1968, a group of Colombian priests claiming to be the successors of Camilo, met in a farm known as «Golconda»,⁵ and issued a manifesto calling for the overthrow of the capitalist system, the abolition of all political and economic dependency on the United States, and the organization of a socialist society.

At least one of the Golconda priests, Father Domingo Laín, a Spaniard, joined the Colombian guerrillas, but the others preferred

4. Camilo Torres, *Revolutionary Writings* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969); John Gerassi, ed. *Revolutionary Priest: The Complete Writings and Messages of Camilo Torres* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971). Some books on Camilo Torres: Germán Guzmán Campos, *Camilo Torres*, trans. J. D. Ring (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969); Javier Darío Restrepo, «Priest-Guerrillas (Camilo Torres Started Something)», *Revista Familia*, Bogotá, reprinted in *LADOC*: I, 39d (November, 1970).

5. «The Golconda Statement», trans. J. E. and M. Goff, Apartado 1024, Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico, November 10, 1969. Rick Edwards, «Religion in the Revolution? A Look at Golconda», *NACLA Newsletter* (North American Congress on Latin America), New York-Berkeley, California, No. 10 (February 1970), reprinted in *LADOC*: I, 49b (January, 1971). Attached to this article there is an excerpt from the write-up which resulted from an interview with the Golconda strategist Germán Zabala by Héctor Borrat, published first as «Las rutas de Camilo» in *Marcha*, Montevideo, November 14, 1969, trans. by *NACLA* staff under the name «How Golconda Organizes»; Joseph Novitski, «Radical Priests in Colombia, Heirs to Slain Guerrilla, Have Forged an Open Marxist-Catholic Alliance», *New York Times*, February 16, 1970. From one of the main spokesmen for the movement: «Father René García Speaks to Colombian Students» (A talk at the National University in Bogotá, April 11, 1969), reprinted in *LADOC*: I, 39c (November, 1970).

to dedicate themselves to stir the revolution among students, workers, and peasants.

In further developments the Golconda group, which by that time had obtained the support of Bishop Valencia Cano of Buenaventura, increased their radicalism against American imperialism and the native bourgeoisie, asked for the separation of Church and State, rejected all developmentalist attitudes (among which they included the efforts of the Christian Democrats), accused the Church of hypocrisy and pharisaism, demanded the abolition of the national constitution and asked for the disbandment of the armed forces.

To reach the masses, still profoundly religious in Colombia, the Golconda activists used liturgical and paraliturgical devotions. For example, in the Holy Week of 1969, they prepared special skits to give revolutionary meaning to the traditional exercise of the «Seven Words of Jesus Christ on the Cross»: Jesus' exclamation «I thirst» became «I thirst for justice, for equality, for liberation from want, for education, etc.» «Why hast Thou abandoned me?» was dramatized by a child crying «I'm hungry, I'm hungry».

They do not hide their intention of turning religion upside down by transforming the classical categories of Christianity: *faith* is presented as a factor of change directed toward a more just and human society; *hope* is changed into the craving for liberation from oppressive socio-economic structures; *charity*, devoid of all sentimentalism, becomes the solidarity of men and women struggling for a better future; *incarnation* ceases to be a mystery concerning Jesus alone, and becomes the commitment to political action of the oppressed; *revelation* is the awareness of man's needs in his present historical situation, rather than God's manifestation in history *resurrection* likewise ceases to be an ancient miracle, and for Golconda is the sign of the new man being born out of the struggle to make the worldly society new.

The Golconda priests do not hesitate to sacrifice the Church itself for the sake of revolution. In the words of Father Noel Olaya, «In the last analysis we could say that the only way to save the Church is that is not important to us».⁶

Golconda has obtained wide publicity by moving the people's feelings, when the rebel priests have been tortured by the police or disciplined by their bishops.

6. Quoted by Borrat, «Rutas», see above.

It is interesting to contrast the radical social ideas of Golconda with those of their hero Camilo Torres, which look moderate by comparison. Contrary to the Golconda anti-clericalism and demythologizing of the Christian doctrine, Camilo was respectful of the Hierarchy almost to the end of his life, and remained loyal to the Catholic faith.

LIBERATION

In almost all the countries of Latin America, priests' groups have been organized to encourage the involvement of the Church in the transformation of society: «Priests of the Third World», originally from Argentina, the «Priestly Movement ONIS», of Perú, «Priests for the People», of Mexico, among others.⁷ Generally these groups, rather than engage directly in revolutionary activism, prefer to lay the ideological foundation for the revolution or, in more moderate cases, for radical social action.

The theological battle has occupied numerous Latin American theologians. *A Theology of Liberation* by the Peruvian Gustavo Gutiérrez,⁸ is an example of this kind.

According to Gutiérrez, traditional theology exalted the transcendent at the expense of the worldly, and stressed the revelation contained in the Bible more than the permanent work of the Spirit in the Church, as expressed by the scientific, anthropological and sociological knowledge of each generation. Therefore he asks for a «theology of temporal realities»; not of the kind which has been developed in the rich countries, but one in consonance with the Latin American situation of dependence.

He prefers the word «liberation» to «development» or «revolution»: Speaking of a «theology of development» implies that there

7. On these movements see: «Conclusiones del II Encuentro Nacional de ONIS», *Movimiento Sacerdotal ONIS*, Declaraciones, Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1970; Fernando Boasso, «The Third World Movement: Recent Events and What to Do Now» (Excerpts from an article published in *Revista del CIAS*, Buenos Aires (August-September, 1970) reprinted in *LADOC*: I, 42b (December, 1970); «Posición revolucionaria de Mons. Méndez Arceo y otros mexicanos» (Interview published by *Panorama*, of Argentina, on the occasion of the *First Latin American Encounter of Christians for Socialism*), *NADOC*, Lima, Perú, June 21, 1972. In the same issue is the manifesto of the movement «Priests for the People».

8. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. C. Ina and J. Eagleson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1973).

is a possible remedy for the socio-economic structures, which is not the case of Latin America; on the other hand, the name «theology of revolution» stresses the use of violence, which might be a necessary means, but is not the direct purpose of theology.

Convinced that Marxism is the best scientific and dialectical approach to Latin American problems and their solution, Gutiérrez attempts an interpretation of Christianity in the light of Marxism. He believes that he has as much right to do so, as Saint Thomas had to use the pagan philosophy of Aristotle for his theological synthesis.

Searching for those Christian ideas which apply better to the circumstances in question, the Peruvian theologian reinterprets such concepts as creation, salvation, the covenant, the eschatological promises, the building of the kingdom, the liberating mission of Christ, the ideas of hope, fraternal love, poverty, and others.

His solution to the apparent contradiction between the Christian precept of love for the enemy and the Marxist insistence on class-struggle, can serve as a sample of Gutiérrez' reasoning. Class-struggle, he says, is a fact which has not been created by Marxism, but by the ruling classes which discriminate against the poor. The Church, to be realistic, cannot ignore the existence of this struggle; and, to be loyal to her mission, she must side with the oppressed against the oppressors. Only then does the Church exercise true Christian love: When she helps the poor ransom their freedom and opposes the unjust domination of the rich (who in the process are also liberated from their sinful conduct), not when she distributes the token contributions, by which the oppressors placate their guilt-feelings, and by which the human dignity of the recipients is destroyed and their awakening to the call of salvation is hampered.

The symbiosis of Christianity and Marxism is especially diffi-

9. Other works on the theology of underdevelopment: Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, trans. J. W. Leitch (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1967); Hugo Assman, «Caraterização de uma Teologia de Revolução», *Ponte Homen*, No. 4, September-October, 1968; Richard A. McCormick, S.J., «The Theology of Revolution», *Theological Studies*, 29, No. 4 (December, 1968), 685-697; Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, trans. M. D. Meeks (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969); Consultation of Theology of Development: *In Search of a Theology of Development: A SODEPAX Report* (Lautated Bibliography) (Geneva: (Committee on Society, Development, and Peace ISODEPAX), 1970); René Laurentin, *Liberation, Development and Salvation*, trans. C. U. Quinn (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1972).

cult in the case of Gutiérrez, who does not demythologize the Christian dogmas: For him, God is a person, Christ is God made flesh, the resurrection of Christ is a historical fact, and the eternal life of the heavens is the last end of man.

The ideas and the language of the theology of liberation were favorably received and used by the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM), held in Medellín, Colombia, in August of 1968.¹⁰

Granted that the final text of the Medellín Declaration softens the Marxist tone and strengthens the Christian aspects of the liberation doctrine, still the Bishops' expressions seem to legalize an existing tendency within the Church to polarize the classes, and favor the activism of some elements in behalf of the Latin American population.

Rick Edwards believes that the Medellín documents were «prepared by theological and sociological experts rather than by the much more conservative bishops», and that the Bishops approved them «seemingly unaware of their troublesome potential».¹¹ By my own conversations with some of the signatories, I know that this assumption, partially at least, corresponds to fact.

I am going to finish my review of the various revisionist positions in the Latin American Church with a mention of Dom Helder Camara.¹²

Upon being made Archbishop of Recife, he was shocked by the conditions of the Northeast of Brazil, which the inhabitants of the richer South of the country try to ignore systematically.

Although many years have passed since he called the attention of the world to the scandal of underdevelopment, his preaching has not changed much. It sounds moderate today, because he opposes violence while supporting the liberating force of moral pres-

10. The proceedings were published by the General Secretariat of CELAM, Bogotá, 1970. For other declarations of the Latin American Bishops: *Between Honesty and Hope: Documents from and about the Church in Latin America*, issued by the Peruvian Bishops' Commission for Social Action, trans. J. Drury (Maryknoll, New York: Maryknoll Publications, 1970).

11. «Religion in the Revolution?», *NACLA Newsletter*, 1.

12. Helder Camara, *Pronunciamentos de Dom Helder*, Nordeste II, Secretariado Regional, CNBB, Recife, Brazil (several volumes); *Church and Colonialism: The Betrayal of the Third World*, trans. W. McSweeney (Denville, New Jersey: Dimension Books, 1969); *Spirale de la violence* (Paris: Desclee, de Brouwer, 1970); Ruth N. Anshen, ed., *Revolution Through Peace*, trans. A. McLean (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); «Bishop Calls for Action», *The Catholic Worker*, New York, 38, No. 9 (December, 1972) 1, 3.

sure, and he rejects with equal decision the capitalist and the socialist systems of oppression.

It is interesting to note that the conclusions of the Department of Social Action of CELAM in their meeting of Rio de Janeiro in June of 1972,¹³ took a position which resembles more the moderate doctrine of Dom Helder than that of Medellín.

In reply to the conclusions of the «First Encounter of Christians and Socialists», held in Santiago de Chile in April of 1972, the CELAM Commission warned the faithful against the tendency, existing in both capitalism and socialism, to use the Church for their own purposes which, in the case of capitalism are the increase of profits, and in socialism the consecution of political control.

Both attitudes are detrimental to the Church, and both systems result in the domination of the people under different form. Catholics should be aware of these maneuvers, abstain from supporting them, and search in the depth of the Christian doctrine for the solutions which the Latin American nations so urgently need at the present.

Some social activists consider the new position of the Church as a betrayal of the commitment to the poor, which she herself had taken at Medellín. On the other hand, for others, the new developments are a sign of maturity: The Church was shocked and paralyzed in her work, when she discovered that many of her members were living in inhuman conditions, and that she had ignored the extent of this fact; once the Church had accepted her responsibility on this massive injustice—and this happened at Medellín—she can and must renew her social action, in the new direction required by the circumstances.

CONCLUSIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

Priests joining the guerrillas or engaging in revolutionary activism, have not been common in Latin America. During the Independence period there were some. In recent history, this kind of activity is a real innovation. But now as then, they constitute the exception rather than the rule.

13. «Instrumentalización política de la Iglesia en América Latina», title under which the conclusions of the Rio de Janeiro meeting were published by *Catolicismo*, Bogotá, August 27, 1972, reprinted in *NADOC*, Lima, Perú, November 15, 1972, No. 276.

Programs of social work are not news: They began in Latin America with the missionaries in colonial times. The only novelty is that, at present, they are turning from paternalistic assistance to cooperative programs.¹⁴

Other changes are rather symbolic: Nuncios and Bishops leaving their palaces to live among the poor,¹⁵ more emphasis on the social implications of the Gospel in preaching and catechetical instruction,¹⁶ greater communication between priests and their superiors, and between priests and the people, etc.

What is entirely new is the breach in the monolithic unity of the Catholic doctrine and in its rigid discipline. I cannot foresee all the consequences of this sudden change, but I would like to point out the two I consider to be the most obvious: 1) The Church's position as a rampart against socialism has been greatly weakened; 2) The number of nominal Catholics is expected to drop.

Hopefully the Christian community will gain in quality what it loses in quantity, and the influence of the Church—with its spiritual values that materialistic socialism cannot offer—will be an important factor in the shaping of the new society which is inevitably in the making.

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14. Regional Latin American Justice and Peace Secretariats, «Cooperative Social Action Beyond Social Assistance», *Latin America Calls!* by the Division for Latin America, United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., 9, No. 8 (October, 1972), 4.

15. «Vacant Palace» in *Latin America Calls!* 9, No. 7 (August-September, 1972), 7.

16. Bernardino Piñera (Bishop of Temuco), «Chile Today and Catechesis», *World Parish*, Maryknoll, New York, 13, No. 116 (February, 1973).