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FROM THE COLONIAL CHURCH TO MEDELLIN

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Introduction to the topic:

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To help our discussion, let us make a brief synopsis of the principal points made in the two papers: "From the Colonial Church to Medellin" and "Notes for a Theology of Liberation."

1. Vatican II reminds us that the Church is service to the world. The Latin American world is a world in a process of revolution, where violence is present in various ways. The root of all the violence lies in the serious situation of injustice and alienation affecting life in Latin America. Medellin speaks of it as "institutionalized violence" and calls it a "situation of sin."

2. This is not the moment to paint a mere picture of the reality that exists but to inquire about its profound causes. The peoples of Latin America today see their underdevelopment as a historical by-product of the development of the rich countries. They consider themselves as dominated peoples, especially by that powerful country, the United States. More profoundly, Latin American man is aware that he is not the maker of his own destiny or creator of his own history. That brings him to speak not of a colorless, antiseptic "development," but of "liberation."

3. The Church, service to the world and witness of God's love for men, will have to define its mission toward this situation of violence, these dominated peoples and the incipient process of liberation.

If, during a long time the colonial and dependent situation in which the Church existed impeded its perception of the ample and profound movement of liberation that germinated in the Latin American people, today its growing commitment to this movement makes the People of God in

Latin America begin to affirm their personality. Despite all its ambiguities, Medellin represents--or should represent--the beginning of an adult stage for the Latin American Church. Only a Church as an expression of a people, up to now without a voice, could renovate its fidelity to the Lord and enrich the Universal Church.

4. But in facing this task, the Church is profoundly divided. The bulk of the Christian community is still tied, consciously or unconsciously, to the established order; the polarization of the options and the hardening of the situation put some Christians among the oppressor and persecutors; some among the tortured and others among those who torture. In these conditions, life in the center of the present day Christian community becomes particularly difficult and conflictive.

5. What we are talking about in this process of liberation is the creation of a new man, a man facing the future. We must find out the meaning of this in the light of faith. We need a theology of liberation. The Bible (and Populorum Progressio) reminds us that salvation embraces the whole man.

Building the temporal city is not a mere step in "humanizing," in "pre-evangelizing," as theologians used to say a few years back. Rather it means participating fully in the salvific process that affects the whole man.

6. The Latin American Church will have to put into effect this theological vision. The Church will purify itself of the ambiguous social prestige it now enjoys, will make the message of love it bears credible, only if it lines up clearly on the side of the oppressed peoples

of this oppressed continent. If it can see in them a privileged presence of the Lord, if it ceases preaching an abstract and lulling fraternity, if it takes account of the concrete conditions of building a just society, it is in those conditions that the Church today must live and celebrate its eschatological hope.

7. The Latin American Christian community finds itself on a poor continent. But the image which she herself offers, taken globally, is not that of a poor Church. Thus it is loyally recognized by the final document of Medellin, and thus whoever is interested can conform it by finding out the impression of the middle class Latin American. In the projection of this image, without a doubt, prejudices and generalizations intervene, but no one can deny its basic validity. We often confuse the possession of the necessary with a comfortable installation in this world, the liberty to preach the Gospel with the protection of the powerful groups, the instruments of service with the means of power. But the Church accepts poverty out of solidarity with the poor and as a protest against the end that poverty represents. The poor man today is the oppressed, the marginal, the proletarian man. The Church will be poor only when it links its destiny to that of the oppressed peoples of Latin America.

8. Medellin has not resolved everything. It is only a clarion call. We are barely beginning to make our reply. There is today in Latin America a serious gap between the written texts and concrete

commitments, between words and deeds. Medellin cannot avoid this risk. What is even worse, it can easily soothe its conscience. Rather than protect Medellin from "erroneous" or "exaggerated" interpretations, now is the moment for explaining the text's meaning by the example of our actions.