

8)
(06/1.3)
27936b
X

FROM THE COLONIAL CHURCH TO MEDELLIN

282.73
C3633w
U.2

Gustavo Gutierrez Merino
Advisor
Union Nacional de Estudiantes Catolicos

Prepared for the

1970 CICOP CONFERENCE

EL COLEGIO DE MEXICO

282.73/C3633w/y.2



3 905 0142299 F

No. to be reprinted without permission of CICOP



Published by:
Division for Latin America, U.S.C.C.
Box 6066
Washington, D. C. 20005

Additional copies at .50 per copy
may be purchased from the above
name and address.

FROM THE COLONIAL CHURCH TO MEDELLIN

The Latin American Church is experiencing a profound crisis today. Shaken by strong internal movements, it is seen from the outside with growing hostility, with greater and greater mistrust but it is also seen with expectation and even with hope.

The seriousness of the situation is such that it is uncontrollable within the traditional forms of confronting new realities. Accustomed to responding and solving (or believing that it was solving) the problems that were presented to her, staying the same herself, the Latin American Church tends to evade that which characterizes the new situation. Today, it is the Church herself that is put in doubt. The Church herself, is doubtful; not "such and such" an attitude or teaching, such and such ecclesiastic sector.

Growing minorities are becoming aware of this situation. This is expressed in commitments, deeds, texts which are beginning to give a distinct image to the Church. In many, hope and new energies are awakened; the Church changes. Medellin, in spite of its limits and ambivalence, appears as a symbol of this change. There would be reasons to look with optimism to the future of the Church. But some don't think so. Aware of the density of the resistance that has to be overcome in order to achieve the desired changes, sensitive to the lack of coherence and even to the contradiction among the texts and attitudes, there are many who have been won over by certain pessimism (which to them seems more realistic); they see with indifference that which is happening. There are even those who fear that these efforts will do nothing except perpetuate the present situation.

Hopes and limits, desires for change and inertness, generous efforts and frank or masked resistance, optimism and pessimism, the present situation of the Latin American Church is full of ambiguities.

Whatever be the final judgement merited by all this, the Church presents new questions and unique perspectives. From a stage of dependence and within a dominated continent, the Church is beginning to assume its own destiny and to contribute to the liberation of the continent.

I. - FROM DEPENDENCE TO LIBERATION. -

For a long time Latin America was unaware of herself. Today, having left behind a brief period of induced optimism of vested interest, she is becoming conscious of the harsh situation in which she lives. The most important change in this awareness of the Latin American reality rests in not limiting oneself to a simple and sweeping description of our misery, with the consequent accumulation of data and statistics, but rather in giving primary attention to its deep causes.

We now see with clarity that our underdevelopment is not more than the historical subproduct of the development of the opulent countries. We are becoming aware of our dependent situation: the centers of economic and political decisions are found outside the Latin American subcontinent. Only by breaking these ties of domination, only by liberating themselves, will the Latin American nations be able to take the reins of their own destiny. Actually, beyond an economic betterment, these nations aspire to the basic right of being authors of their own history.

The consciousness that the christian community has of itself, is historically conditioned by the world of which it forms a part. The Church, particularly in places like Latin America, plays a part in the destiny of a society. On the other

hand, if the Church is, above all, service to the world, the forms in which this attitude is expressed are, at the same time, connected with the understanding the Church has of herself. The Latin American Church is in process of liberation. This defines her situation and conditions the carrying out of her mission.

1. - "The new christianity of the Indies"

In this way, one of the Great bishops of the colonial period, Toribio de Mogrovejo archbishop of Lima, calls the Church which emerges in the 16th Century, "New Christianity", because it prolongs chronologically and geographically the christianity which survives on the Iberian Peninsula, and on which it depends.

The Church of Latin America was born alienated. From the beginning, in spite of valiant and exceptional efforts, she was not the master of her fate. The decisions were made outside the continent; in Madrid, more than in Rome, in virtue of Patronage. This has been one of the traditions best conserved by the Latin American Church. After the independence of the last Century, a kind of "ecclesiastical colonial pact" was established: Latin America provides the devout, the veneration of Mary and devotion to the Pope; Rome and the Churches of the northern hemisphere, contribute to the study of the Latin American problems (and at times to the problems themselves!) pastoral leadership, the naming of bishops (even the persons), the money for works and missions. The geographic place of the decision centers changes, the basic arrangement does not.

II - The Church in the process of liberation

The most obvious consequence of this situation is that the Latin American christian community has lived and is living largely withdrawn into its own shell. Born during the Counter Reformation period, the Latin American Church is marked by a defensive attitude. This attitude is accentuated by the attacks which she received at the beginning of the era of political independence, and more recently by the critics who see the Church as an obstacle for the social transformation of the continent. All this made the Church connect herself out of inertness or out of fear, to political power and the powerful economic groups. She thought that in this way she could stand up to eventual enemies and she would guarantee the peaceful preaching of the Gospel.

Centered outside the continent, tied to the supposed order in which it exists, with its back to the more profound and less "religious" aspirations of these nations, the Latin American Church didn't perceive (and didn't live with them), the process that was germinated in the masses: a becoming aware, and an effort to liberate themselves from their situation of misery and exploitation. The Church with some exceptions, limited herself for a long time to an aseptic proclamation to satisfy some religious necessities with a ritual without soul and a certain social paternalism to alleviate the more clamorous symptoms of despair. She thought in this way she was carrying out the spiritual mission which belonged to her; but events (by means of those through whom speaks the Lord of all history) began to overflow this uncommitted position and aroused individuals and deeds to approach reality and a renewed fidelity to the demands of the Gospel.

2. - The Church in the process of liberation. -

For some time we have been seeing a great effort on the part of the Church to get out of the narrow spiritualism in which it was enclosed and to shake off the ambiguous protection which was given her by the beneficiaries of the unjust imposed order on the continent. The individual christians and the whole Church are adopting a greater consciousness of the present Latin American reality and, in particular, of its deep causes. Even more, we have been witnesses of commitments in the liberation process that is being experienced in Latin America, which have come to be considered as bold, especially if one considers the behavior observed up to the present day.

a) The committed laymen in the Latin American revolutionary process are becoming more and more numerous. Until a few years ago apostolic lay movements, particularly those of youth, gave their best leaders to reforming, but moderate political groups: today their political options have radicalized, these options in many cases mean a commitment with clearly subversive political groups. In these conditions the political participation of the christians takes on characteristics out of the ordinary, which take the present ecclesiastic structures by surprise and put in doubt certain theological-pastoral systems.

The sector of the priesthood is presently one of the most dynamic and restless of the Latin American Church. One can observe in a considerable number of countries the creation of sacerdotal groups (of characteristics unforeseen by canon law!) channel to and to reinforce this emerging restlessness. In said groups the predominant desire is for radical changes in the

presence and action of the Church in connection with the social transformation which should take place in Latin America. These preoccupations (and other factors) have led, in some cases to frictions with local bishops and apostolic nuncios. Furthermore, one can think that, unless profound changes are accomplished, this conflict situation may extend and get worse in the next few years. There are many priests, on the other hand, who consider it their duty to take clear and committed personal positions in the political field.

The grave and new problems which are presented to the Latin American Church find many bishops badly prepared to carry out their function. There is, however, an awakening in the social dimensions of the presence of the Church and a consequent rediscovery of her prophetic mission. The bishops of the more poverty stricken and exploited regions, in particular, have most energetically denounced the injustices for which they have been witnesses. But upon bringing out their profound causes, they have confronted the great economic and political forces of their countries. At that point it is a short way to their being accused of intervening in terrain in which they don't belong and of inclining toward marxist ideas: A distance often crossed, and happily, in conservative Catholic sectors.

All this has caused frequent allegations today that many christians, laymen, priests, nuns, and bishops be considered as "subversive" elements and be watched or wanted by the police. Some are in prison and some are tortured. Others are forced out of the country, or killed by "anticommunist" groups. There is beginning to be formed a situation (not without ambivalences), that no one could have imagined a few years ago: important sectors of the Church are persecuted in a continent traditionally catholic.

b) These commitments have produced texts which clarify them and out-line a theological-pastoral reflection. We have observed in the last two years a multiplicity of public declarations coming from lay movements, from groups of priests, from bishops or all of an episcopacy. In these texts, more moderate than many concrete commitments, they insist in the urgency of a radical transformation of the Latin American society and an important role for the Church in the transformation.

In the first place, the responsibility of the Church in the present situation of injustice is recognized. She has been and largely continues to be in solidarity with the imposed order. The poverty, injustice and exploitation of man by man which are being lived in Latin America is described as a situation of institutionalized violence. Theologically this state of affairs is termed a sinful situation. Reality thus described is perceived as the result of a dependent situation, which maintains the Latin American countries in a non-colonial state. In said texts more and more talk of liberation is expressed in a new attitude about the Latin American man. This liberation will not be accomplished without passing through a profound transformation of structures; the term social revolution is presented more and more frequently and less reticently. Finally, for some, to participate in this process of liberation means to not let oneself be intimidated by the accusation of "communist" and even (more affirmatively) take the socialist path.

II. - QUESTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES. -

The growing commitment to the process of liberation that we have just seen, is beginning to give a new image to the Church. This new image supposes that she will become incarnated with courage and daring in the Latin American

reality, and that she will be less dependent and more herself. This is what the Church has begun to perceive in its renewed contact with the Latin American people and their deeper aspirations.

In this context it is necessary to include the greater fact of Medellin. In Medellin, the Latin American Church in spite of the pre-conciliar atmosphere created by the eucharistic congress of Bogota, perceives with realism the world in which she finds herself and she is oriented toward radical changes in herself. In one word: she becomes conscious of her adulthood and, consequently, begins to assume her own destiny. The Vatican (Council) II speaks of the underdevelopment of nations beginning with the developed countries and dealing with what these can and should do for those; Medellin tries to see the problem starting with the poor countries, for that reason it defines them as nations under a new kind of colonialism. The Vatican II speaks of a Church in the world; Medellin demonstrates that the world in which the Latin American Church should be present, is in total revolutionary process. The Vatican II gives great outlines for a transformation of the Church; Medellin gives the guidelines for a transformation of the Church in relation to her presence on a continent of misery and injustice.

None of this would have been possible without the processes whose stages we were holding back. The conclusions of Medellin are not fruits of a few days of improvised reflection; they are rather the expression of a new situation which has been formed slowly, with a high price and, at times, with conflict in these last years. But at the same time Medellin makes legitimate situations created in the Latin American Church which now have an unexpected support, and, above all, is new impulse for new commitments.

This situation questions, among other things, the Church of Latin America, in respect to (her) actual community, in the sense of her mission, in her social status, in her fidelity to the Gospel, in her relation with the Universal Church. Thus new problems are planted and unsuspected perspectives are opened.

a) The active participation in the process of liberation is far from being fact in all of the Latin American Christian community. The bulk of the Church continues tied, in very diverse manners (conscious or unconscious) to the established order. The worst of it is that among the christians of Latin America not only are there different political options within the framework of a free exchange of ideas; rather 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. From this results a serious and radical confrontation between both. In the presence of the liberation process, the Latin American Church is consequently found to be strongly divided. In these conditions, life in the center of the present day christian community becomes particularly difficult and conflictive. Participation in the eucharistic celebration, for example, in its present day form, is seen by many as an act which lacks support in the real human community; it takes on fictitious appearances.

It is impossible, in the future, not to face the problems which emerge from a division between christians (and) which reach these dramatic characteristics. The lyrists called to the union of all christians, without taking into account the deep causes of the present situation and the real conditions for construction of society together, are nothing but an evasion. In this way we are on the way to a new conception of the unity and communion in the Church. This doesn't deal with a fact acquired once and

for all: rather something that is always in process, something which is conquered with valour and liberty of spirit, with the price, at times, of painful severances.

It is necessary to become prepared for these severances.

b) In the Latin American world, in which the christian community should live and rejoice its escatologic hope, is that of social revolution, where violence is present in different ways. Its mission is in front of it. The choices which (with the limits already indicated) the Church is making, is putting her more and more clearly in front of the dilemma which she presently is living on the continent; reform or revolution. Faced with this polarization can the ecclesiastic authority stay on the level of generalized declarations? But can it go further without leaving that which is normally considered as its specific mission?

For the Latin American Church to be in the world without being of the world means concretely and more clearly to be in the system but not of the system. It is evident, in effect, that only a break with the unjust present order and a frank commitment for a new society, will make believable to the men of Latin America the message of love for which the christian community is carrier. This demand should take it to a profound revision of the way it preaches the Word. The so called "political theology" which assigns to the Church a social-critic function with basis in its escatologic hope, is an interesting line of thought. Especially in Latin America where the exercising of that function (in practice already initiated) has enormous repercussions. It will be necessary to avoid the difficulties which are in sight before this perspective, but it is possible that this not be really accomplished except "by trail and error". It is difficult in effect, to establish beforehand (as we have perhaps thought it for a long time) the precise patterns which

should govern the conduct of the Church. This will have to (Medellin proves it for us) answer the demands of the moment, with the light it has at hand and with the will to be faithful to the Gospel. There are chapters of theology which will only be written afterwards. . .

c) Closely related to the previous problem, this one is greatly debated: should the Church use its social weight in favor of the social transformation in Latin America? There are those who are bothered by hearing the proposal of a Church dedicated to obtaining the necessary and urgent changes. They fear that after having been tied to the ruling order, the Church might commit herself to the next one. They also fear that this effort may terminate in a noisy failure: the Latin American episcopate doesn't have a unanimous position and doesn't have the necessary means available in order to orient all the christians together into one line of social advancement.

One can't deny the pertinence of this risk. But the social influence of the Church, is a fact; and to not do something in favor of the oppressed of Latin America is to act against them. On the other hand, the best way for the Church to break her ties with the present order (and thus lose that ambiguous social prestige) is to denounce the fundamental injustices in which it is based. In order to reflect on what action pertains to the Latin American Church it is necessary to keep in mind her historical and social co-ordinates. To not do it in this way is to belong to the level of an abstract and historic theology; or perhaps more subtly, to a theology which is more careful not to repeat past errors than to see the originality of the present situation and to commit itself with the future.

d) 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 confirm 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.

It is important, however, to establish well the witness of poverty. This does not mean to make sentimental considerations about "the prominent dignity of the poor in the Church", nor to raise poverty as an "ideal", which seems a bit ironic to the nations who suffer misery. The evangelic poverty is an act to love. Thus as Christ assumed the position of sinner, not to "idealize it", rather out of love for men and to redeem them from sin; the christian assumes poverty out of solidarity with the poor and as a protest against the evil which poverty represents in as much as it is a degrading situation of man. But the term "poor" can mislead it is imprecise, intraecclesiastical and somewhat aseptic. The "poor man" today is the oppressed, the alienated by society, the proletariat that fights for more elemental rights. One tries to be in solidarity with these poor and answer to poverty. This should cause a rethinking of the meaning of the help in persons and money which is contributed by the Churches of the rich countries. Many times it (the help) isn't but a contribution to making even more scandalous the anti-witness of poverty, and the impression of power given by the whole of the Latin American Church. It is necessary besides, that the christians of the opulent nations become more and more aware that without changes in the interior of

their nations, little or nothing is done for the poor countries. The testimony of poverty inasmuch as it is solidarity with the poor nations and protest against the misery and injustice which they suffer, is just as obligatory for the Church in the rich nations, as in Latin America.

Only new ecclesiastical structures can put the Latin American Church to the height of the tasks to be undertaken. The Vatican II initiated the renovation movement which the post-conciliar period has continued on unexpected pathways. Medellin decided to place itself within this new ecclesiastical awareness. But Medellin is a call: the answer, we are barely beginning to make. The exegesis of Medellin has to be done, in concrete commitments. The validity of its teaching will be tested in the "praxis" of the christian community.

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, and take on their own physiognomy. If the Latin American Church wants to be the Church of a people who want to be agents of their own destiny, it will have to take root in this soil. It cannot be rooted on foreign shores, directed toward the outside, bridge for all kinds of imperialism: rather (directed) inland, geographically and culturally in the "sertao"; saying it with the rich and unreplaceable brasilian expression. 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.

We brought out at first, that in the face of the changes which the Church in Latin America is experiencing, she vacillates between enthusiastic optimism and aseptic pessimism. For us, it is not with either one or the other: nor with a middle way. Virtue is not in the middle except for a condescending and fearful christian. The novelty of the Gospel consists in changing points of view: "My ways are not your ways". We are before an uncertain future in which the only certainty is that the Spirit will take us toward the complete truth; it is the perspective of hope. Hope, which in Latin America perhaps means, for the moment, hope "against all hope".

Gustavo Gutierrez Merino

Published by Latin America, U.S.A.,
Washington, D.C., 20005

Additional copies at 50 per copy
may be purchased from the above
name and address.

1968 Working Paper 10/a/78