

Memorandum on:
"The Present Situation of the Church
in Puerto Rico."
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This is an attempt to evaluate the situation of the Catholic Church in Puerto Rico. It is an inadequate attempt; it is doubtful whether anyone, in view of the complicated situation, could make an adequate evaluation. What the following really amounts to is an attempt to point out the nature of certain crises which now affect the people of the Island and to interpret the relationship of these crises to the life of the Church.

Puerto Rico at the present time is going through a period of serious social and psychological distress. This is defined as a problem of identification. In other words, in the rapid social and economic development of the Island, and in the achievement of a new political status in 1952, the people feel themselves rapidly uprooted from the cultural traditions of four hundred years and have not yet succeeded in defining for themselves "Who are we; and What are we?" in the modern world.

Ideally the Catholic Church could have been the stabilizing bridge in this period of distressing tradition. For a number of reasons, it finds itself handicapped in doing so. By a strange combination of policy and decision, the Church set itself apart from and some times opposed to the dramatic social, economic and political development which was emerging from the Puerto Rican people themselves; it strongly opposed some of the men who were promoting this development. The Church found itself ambiguous in the presence of rapid cultural change; it never seemed confident how it should relate itself to the men who were guiding Puerto Rico out of the status of a colonial culture to the status of a mature and modern people. At the same time the Church was confidently pursuing a policy of uprooting in the religious sphere by drawing the people away from traditions of Latin Catholicism and forming them in characteristics of catholicism which were decidedly American.+ This has resulted in a serious tension within the life of the Church and leaves it handicapped in its effort to provide a basis for social and cultural integration for the Puerto Ricans at this difficult time. Some details may help to clarify this.

Social and Economic development

Under the leadership of Governor Muñoz Marin, a Program of social and economic development was launched in Puerto Rico in 1948,

+ The term "Americiano" is generally used in Puerto Rico to characterize people or things of the mainland United States. That is the meaning it is given in this memorandum.

which has become famous in the world. Puerto Rico is characterized today as probably the outstanding example of the rapid development of an underdeveloped area. As a consequence of this, the economic improvement of the Island is extraordinary and social improvements are impressive. The level of living has increased significantly; housing has been improved; health and medical care are widespread and relatively competent; education is extensive; a rapidly rising middle class is evident on all sides.

However, economic development has a number of inevitable consequences. The old cultural traditions on which Puerto Rican life had been based for 400 years have begun to crumble very fast. This rapid shift of values appears immediately and most directly in the family. The focus on the individual in economic development leads to the weakening of strong family ties and family loyalties, and to a pursuit of self advancement which gives the appearance of a crude interest in material satisfaction. The emergence of other impressive values is sometimes overlooked in this process: the gradual disappearance of "consensual unions;" the increase of marital fidelity on the part of the husband; the possibility of greater responsibility and fulfilment on the part of the wife in social, political, even business activities. However, to people who had the most extensive interests in the traditional society, the change appears predominately as loss, and is represented as a destruction of traditional moral values in a tendency towards secularism and materialism.

This appears also in the shift of the system of social classes. The rising middle class is a challenge to the traditional interests of the people who enjoyed the privileges of the former way of life. There is an understandable, human tendency to regent the invasion of privilege by larger numbers of people who were once considered social and economic inferiors. As always, the new middle class offers ample occasion for criticism on the part of an older and declining aristocracy. The middle class people are new and they are different. The danger is that new appearances of public difficulties, for example, delinquency, family disorganization, loss of respect for the aged etc., are easily lumped together with the new behavior patterns of the middle class and are blamed on them.

Finally, the middle class itself, insecure in its new position, has its own problems of anxiety and uncertainty. They do not have deep roots in their new status; they are not quite sure where they belong. In Puerto Rico, this anxiety manifests itself particularly in the growing problems of color. What was once simply one of many indications of lower class status, dark color, needs a new definition. There is danger that fear of color as a sign of lower class status may lead to distressing forms of discrimination in the rising middle class.

The result of this kind of rapid social and cultural change is an uprooting from a traditional way of life; and insecurity on all levels of society; and an understandable reaction of large numbers to protect themselves against this insecurity by a strong effort to reassert traditional values and revive the traditional way of life. This is what is known sociologically as a "fundamentalist"

reaction. The restoration of traditional values and behavior patterns is presented as the obvious corrective to the anxiety and distress of the present.

This has been complicated in Puerto Rico by the problem of political status. In 1952, the Constitution of Puerto Rico as a Free Associated State of the United States was ratified and enacted. The Island still remains part of the United States, subject to the Constitution of the United States, to Congress and to the decisions of the United States Supreme Court. But extensive autonomy in the government of the Island has been given to the people of Puerto Rico by their new Constitution. Since 1952, however, there have been three political orientations on the Island: one, relatively small, demanding complete independence from the United States; a second, growing in significance and strong in the rising middle class, demands admission to the United States as a State; the third and by far the majority orientation is in favor of the middle ground of the Free Associated State. The struggle over status has become more acute in recent years and is a reflection of the growing uncertainty of the people of the Island. Resistance to the Free Associated State appears to be rooted in the anxiety that the Island is neither State nor free; it is someplace in between. It has no genuine political identity. Thus the social and cultural distress of uprooting is complicated, in the lives of those pressing for Statehood or Independence, by what they call a lack of clear political identity.

This briefly is an outline of the distress which is troubling the Puerto Ricans at this moment of significant economic development. One other factor must be briefly mentioned: the arrival in Puerto Rico of a large number of Cuban refugees from Castro's Cuba. Most of these people are highly skilled business people from the middle and upper classes of Cuba. Their economic success is often dramatically more impressive than that of the native Puerto Ricans. But their concern over Communism is understandably great and often understandably exaggerated. This aggravates a situation which already has pressures toward a fundamentalist reaction to social change.

The Catholic Church and Social and Economic Development

The relationship of the Church to the development just described has been ambiguous. One of the most regrettable aspects of the Church's life during the period of development was its lack of vital and involved contact with the men responsible for the development. Although a number of outstanding Catholic men were among the leaders of the development, it was largely attributed in the minds of Catholics to Governor Muños Marin himself and to a number of his associates who were either fallen away Catholics, mild anti-clericals, or experts from the mainland United States who were indifferent to Religion or even hostile to Catholicism. Thus from the beginning, the Church found itself isolated from this significant historical development in the Island's life. Furthermore, the Church took direct and public opposition to the development focussing on two issues: the change that, in its effort toward social improvement, the Government was promoting Birth Control; and in its development of

education, the Government was guided by a secularist philosophy. This led to a severe and public conflict between one Island Bishop and the Governor Muñoz as early as the elections of 1952. As a result the Church found itself not only isolated from the development of the Island, but in direct conflict with the men who were responsible for it.

This was particularly regrettable for two reasons. It easily led to the creation of an image of the Church as opposed to serious efforts for social justice and the social welfare of the people. This was not true since the Church's leaders always professed the deepest interests in social reform. But they allowed their handling of controversial issues to maneuver them into serious opposition to the men who were the first to succeed in introducing a significant measure of justice and social welfare into the lives of the Puerto Rican people. In a situation in which the Church might have been in the forefront of significant social reform, it became associated with the opponents of social reform. This statement of the situation is so general that it runs the risk of doing injustice to the Catholic leaders involved. The situation needs more careful qualification. But, unfortunately, this was the general impression.

The Second, and possibly more serious result was that, at a time when rapid social and economic development was beginning to create serious problems of anxiety and uncertainty for the people, the Church was handicapped in any effort to be of assistance. The Church was the one institution which could have given the people confidence that essential moral and religious values were being preserved, despite the extensive social, economic and cultural changes. But this would have required that the Church should have been publicly recognized as understanding the changes, as encouraging them in their effort toward social justice and human welfare, as being vitally involved in promoting them. However, the Church allowed its attitude towards birth control and secularism in education so to dominate its judgement of the entire program of social reform that it was publicly identified with the opponents of development. This led to an overemphasis on the negative consequences of social and economic development and to the failure on the part of the Church to acknowledge the dramatic advantages of the development - advantages which were often of direct help to the Church itself. As a result, instead of helping the Puerto Ricans to integrate respectfully for traditional values with social and economic development the Church became the central core around which the fundamentalist opposition crystallized in 1960. The incongruity of a movement for the restoration of Latin traditions of Puerto Rico crystallizing around a Church dominated by American Bishops did not hinder the movement.

In the election campaign of 1960, the conflict between the Church leaders and the Government reached a point where the formation of a Political Party was proposed to challenge Governor Muñoz, and to promote social justice in a framework of moral values and religious traditions, The new Party (Partido de Acción Cristiana) was strongly supported and promoted by the Bishops of the Island, and it

became identified publicly as the Party of the Catholic Church. The controversy reached a point where the Bishops issued a Pastoral letter instructing Catholics that they could not vote for a Party which had a plank in its platform that was immoral. The implication was evident to everyone that the Bishops were forbidding the people of Puerto Rico to vote for the Party of Governor Muñoz Marin. The Governor won the election handsomely with 60% of the votes. The Catholic Party polled only 7% of the votes and ran pitifully behind in what were reputed as some of the strongest Catholic parishes of the Island.

This reinforced the two regrettable consequences mentioned above. Most of the poor people, many of them good Catholics, when faced with the choice between the party of Governor Muñoz which had been the first one to give them a measure of justice, and the instructions of the Bishops, voted in favor of the Party of Governor Muñoz. Thus in the minds of the simple and the poor, the Church appeared to be oppsing the one Political Party on which they, the poor, had come to depend on for economic and social welfare.

Secondly, the people who emerged as leaders of the Catholic Party were people whose attitude was characterized by a strong, fundamentalist opposition to social and economic change. By associating their reaction to change and their opposition to Muñoz with the Catholic Church, the Church became the sacred symbol of the tradition which they professed to be seeking to restore. Thus religion, morality, sacred values were presented as the basic factors which justified their determination to eliminate the Party of Muñoz and use the political structures for the reestablishment of the traditions of Puerto Rico.

As the symbol of the fundamentalist reaction, the Church was helpless to seek to integrate the life of Puerto Ricans with the emerging social and economic order.

II. The Orientation to American Catholicism

Since 1898 when Puerto Rico became a possession of the United States, a growing apostolic effort of Mainland Catholics had taken place to provide spiritual care and religious development of Puerto Rico.+ This has been marked by an unusual application of personnel and funds for the development of the Church on the Island, and an extremely generous service on the part of Mainland American religious.

This extraordinary effort has had significant results in the life of the Church in Puerto Rico. But, in terms of the religious development of the Island, it has one important effect. It has given to the developed Church a noticeable American character, in the conduct of Catholic life, the emphasis on the sacraments, particularly in the development of parochial school or Catholic high school on the American model. The parishes in many cases were well organized and adequately equipped, mainly with financial resources from the mainland United States. The schools likewise were financed

to a great extent from the mainland and staffed with mainland religious, many of whom never learned the Spanish language, or learned it partially and taught generally in English.

In terms of generosity of service, this was an unusual contribution to the life of the Church in Puerto Rico. But it had two unfavorable consequences. The schools for the most part found it necessary to charge tuition which meant that they were not available to the poor sectors of the population. Scholarships were available in many schools, but the number of poor students on scholarships was never enough to outbalance the major impression of the schools as educational centers for the more privileged children of the population. Along the same line, the teaching of English by native English speakers and a quality of education acceptable on the mainland, made the schools very desirable places for the rising middle class or the upper class families who wanted their children to learn English well and who were preparing for higher education in mainland colleges. This tended to pull the schools away from the poor and gave them a mainland American character.

More seriously, perhaps, in terms of these comments, the emphasis on English and the mainland American character of the schools, pulled them away from the Spanish and Latin traditions of the Island. The entire religious enterprise represented a formation of Puerto Rican Catholicism along the mainland model. This failed to exploit the potential for religious development along Latin lines which undoubtedly was present in the population. In brief, priests and religious from other countries have also been active in Puerto Rico. But the major effort has come from the mainland United States and the developing Church has been given its modern character largely by Americans. The religious formation of the Puerto Ricans by mainland American religious represented another form of uprooting, a wearing away of the population from those forms of Catholicism which might have grown spontaneously out of a Latin background, and a forming of the people according to religious expressions characteristic of the traditions of the mainland United States.

This development has characteristics which are very attractive to the growing middle class of Puerto Rico. In the long run, it may help the middle class to develop an identity with the middle class mainland Americans along the model of the middle class American Catholicism.

However at the present time it is proving to be a stumbling block. The fundamentalist reaction which crystallized around the Catholic Church in the political campaign of 1960 has now turned against the Americanization of the Church by the mainland religious. The symbol of the protest is the teaching in English which is characteristic of the Catholic schools. This is now the object of protest not simply as an emphasis on the English language, but as a symbol of the neglect even by the Catholic Church, of the sacred traditions of the Island. The argument is pressed strongly and publicly that a genuine formation in the faith can be given properly only through the medium of the native language of the child.

Thus the pendulum has come full cycle. The Church which became the focus of support for the fundamentalist reaction in 1960, now becomes itself the object of a fundamentalist attack in 1964. Even the Church is part of that complex of institutions which are destroying the traditions of the Island with which morality, religion and sacred values have been associated. Even the Americanized Church is promoting secularism by introducing American culture with its Catholicism.

This is obviously a complicated and unfortunate situation. The entire crisis now focusses on the problem of selecting an Archbishop of San Juan. It is now eight months since the See became vacant, and the long delay has been a serious blow to the morale of all the groups on the Island. The selection of a Mainland American would raise a violent protest from the ranks of the Fundamentalists, as well as from the ranks of many of those committed to the dramatic development of Puerto Rico, but who have come to think of the Church under the leadership of American Bishops, as opposed to this. The appointment of a native Puerto Rican has similar difficulties. This would mollify the protests of the fundamentalists, but it would leave misgivings in the minds of the rising middle classes whether an available Puerto Rican is capable of leading the Church in the midst of rapid social and economic development.

The situation has been complicated by two recent developments, Governor Muñoz Marin removed from the platform of his party the controversial plank which was declared immoral by the Bishops in 1960. This has led to a strong assertion of the fundamentalists that Muñoz finally had recognized that the Bishops were right. Secondly the announcement by Muñoz that he will not run for Governor in the 1964 election, and the nomination of Mr. Sanchez Vilella will create a new political context on the Island for the struggle.

It is impossible at the moment to predict what will happen. It is only possible to hope that the situation will develop more favorably for the Church and for Puerto Rico. It highlights two things: the need for Church leaders to be vitally involved in programs of social and economic development and of not allowing the overemphasis on the negative consequences of the economic development to confuse a careful evaluation of the total process of development. Second, it highlights the danger to which Americans are exposed in their apostolic activity in Latin cultures, of failing to appreciate the positive values of the Latin tradition and its possibilities for native development and overemphasizing certain religious forms which give the Church an American character.