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CICOP Probes Ethics of Violence

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T. LOUIS (C) — Clouds met only once during the three-session on Latin America throughout the 1968 CICOP conference many of the 2,000 delegates found themselves in a quagmire. For though nature itself cooperated with the official conference sponsors — the Latin America Bureau, U.S. Catholic Conference — no force could keep the discussions out of Webster's "area of muddy ground."
 The official program theme of the meeting (Jan. 29-31) was "Cultural Factors in Inter-American Relationships: Bond and Carrier." It was previously shelved by many participants in favor of the "ethical quagmire" surrounding the idea of using violence under the banner of Christian love.
History Repeats Itself
 The shelving struck a strong chord of historical repetition.

Last year's CICOP conference had as its official theme "The Integration of Man and Society in Latin America: A Christian View." A week before that conference, "America" magazine published an article by Msgr. Ivan D. Illich, director of the Center of Inter-Cultural Documentation in Cuernavaca, Mexico, in which the priest strongly criticizes the work of the U.S. Church in Latin America. Msgr. Illich's view of U.S. missionaries as tools of U.S. foreign policy became the unofficial theme of 1967 CICOP discussion.

This year the CICOP delegates had something even more puzzling than a magazine article with which to contend. They came to St. Louis with the newspaper photos fresh in their minds of two all-American-boy-looking Catholic priests who had defied the U.S. Government and the Maryknoll mission society to risk their lives on the side of leftist guerrilla rebels in Guatemala.

Last year copies of "America" were passed throughout the Statler Hilton Hotel in Boston. This year CICOP delegates found copies of the "National Catholic Reporter" on hand and in it found more than Msgr. Illich's theoretical discussion of their faults. This time they read a report from the missing Father Thomas R. Melville, MM, who claimed, "I did what I did and will continue to do so because of the teachings of Christ and not because of Marx or Lenin."

And so, CICOP delegates talked and talked about what Father Melville and his Maryknoll colleagues in Guatemala had done. And they asked themselves whether it could have been because of the teachings of Christ.

Peaceful Revolution?

Question followed question. Is there still time for peaceful revolution against social injustice in Latin America? If peaceful revolution is impossible would Christ command violence? Who can judge when violence is necessary?

Answers were hard to come by. Even the few who gave a quick affirmative were forced to reassess their case when on the final day of the conference it was learned that Father Thomas Melville had done more than he described in his NCR letter. Those who had given a quick negative received as "true believers" the news that in addition to joining guerrillas, the man had married a nun!

But the vast majority didn't seem to have a quick answer either before or after the news of the marriage. They remained, in the words of one workshop session title, in the "Ethical Quagmire: Inevitable Concomitant of Radical Change."

As the workshop moderator — the Rev. Dana F. Green,

executive director of the Latin American Department, National Council of Churches, said following two lengthy speeches on the subject of revolutionary violence:

"If we weren't, an hour and a half ago, in an ethical quagmire, we are now."

His words were echoed by Father Jorge Mejia, editor of "Criterio," Buenos Aires, Argentina, who was billed as the official commentator on the two talks. Father Mejia confided to the workshop participants, "I'm caught in the quagmire — what can I say."

The papal speakers — Dr. Denis Goulet, associate professor of government at the University of Indiana, and the Rev. Rubem Alves, a Brazilian Presbyterian missionary — had much to say about the quagmire. But they couldn't clear away the mud and their views gave promise that the question would be around at future CICOP sessions.

According to Dr. Goulet, Christians have a real "hang-up" when facing the question of violence. They think, he said, that they must "either advocate non-violence, thereby becoming accomplices of exploiters; or justify violence and thus sanctify history's aberrations in the name of a Gospel which preaches love and respect for life."

Christians could get rid of their "hang-up" and accept violence, he asserted, if they realized that in some situations there is no other choice. Where there is no choice, he maintained, man is not free — when man is not free, his actions are neither good nor bad — there are no ethics involved.

Dr. Goulet argues that "there are no ethics of revolution; there are only ethical, that is, free and responsible, options for or against revolution. Since the old 'just war theory' and situation ethics are both powerless to untangle our perplexities, the only options left, short of heroic witness to love and human goodness, involve compromise. Each man must therefore choose the causes for which he will compromise: revolution, law and order, tradition, gradual change, reform, socialism, and so on."

He further maintained that "certain positive values are served by each of the options, but no single individual or group can fully bear witness to all these values."

The other panel speaker, Dr. Alves, asked for recognition of the need for Christian violence, asserting that non-violence as an ethic is more Platonic than Christian.

Another argument offered by Doctor Alves in favor of revolutionary violence in the Christian cause was that "violence is not the creation of the revolutionaries. Violence already exists."

The social structures of Latin America society impose violence on the poor, he said, and these structures "resist any attempt at radical change."

"The new tomorrow for men cannot be mediated by simple evolution of given structures," he said.

"I believe it is an illusion that we may opt for violence or non-violence. As historical beings we are inserted into a condition. I believe we opt either for violence or counter-violence."

Evidence that the well-publicized Maryknoll Guatemala missionaries are not the only Catholics in Latin America opting for the latter was presented the CICOP session by the principal speaker — the Rev. Dr. Richard Shaull of the Princeton Theological Seminary.

Dr. Shaull told the concluding CICOP convention

that "a new generation of Christians is now in the vanguard of the revolutionary struggle" in Latin America and Catholic youths are prominent among them.

These youths, he said, have discovered unrelenting resistance to change on the part of the leaders of the "status quo" and have also become convinced that United States power "is the major force sustaining the old order and blocking the creation of a new one."

"The end result is very clear," he said. "For an increasing number of these people, there is only one hope: the organization of armed movements of national liberation, with all the sacrifice and bloodshed that it involves."