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NORTH AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS
OF THE INFLUENCE AND INSPIRATION
OF THE POST-MEDELLIN LATIN AMERICAN CHURCH

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The Bible opens the story of man's odyssey on this globe by stating that in the beginning was the Word. But unfortunately since that time there have been so many words explaining the Word that we now suffer from "theo-speak" overkill.

We have all witnessed occasions where sincere attempts to dialogue on basic theological concepts have degenerated to the point where they became mere games of semantical one-upmanship. "Theo-speak" jargonists endlessly define and re-define terms in the mistaken belief that what they are talking about is far less important than what they are saying.

"Theo-speak" should be disregarded as a tiresome parlor game, but there are legitimate misunderstandings over terminology which can drastically impede the effectiveness of even the most sincere attempts to dialogue. It is this type of dialogic impasse which demands our attention during this conference.

The Latin American Church has succeeded in formulating valid theological perceptions and pastoral initiatives based upon its reality. This indigenous theological perspective replaces the anachronistic colonial religio-social imports which obscured that Church's prophetic vision in past decades.

Terms have been created which accurately express newly formulated concepts of Latin America's self-understanding, self-identity and

world-role set within the context of man's salvific quest. These terms adequately describe the Latin American reality and are clearly understood in the milieu to which they pertain. However, they have not gained currency in the glossary of inter-American religio-social dialogue and create confusion rather than clarity in the minds of North Americans who are unfamiliar with their true meaning.

We must therefore define these terms before we can intelligently proceed with inter-American dialogue. This is a simple process which requires only explanation and exposure to unfamiliar terminology. But there is a correlative problem which will be more difficult to solve. These terms must also be de-mythologized because they currently produce a fear-rejection syndrome in the minds of many North Americans which will prove difficult to dispell.

The Latin American Church speaks to us of the legitimate aspirations of its people for liberation and the term conjures up threatening images of rebellion, anarchy and chaos in the North American subconscious. The Latin American Church speaks of communitarianism and North Americans subconsciously envision some menacing form of welfare state which threatens our national deification of the work-and-prosper Protestant ethic. The Latin American Church speaks of educational philosophy or conscientization and North Americans subconsciously equate this with some devious form of brain-washing.

This obstructionist tendency toward subconscious knee-jerk rejection of terms with disquieting connotations is irrational but that

makes it no less real. There are other Latin American terms whose subconscious impact on North Americans is so threatening that defense mechanisms are instantaneously erected and fortified. Terms having especially high North American trauma-inducing potential include: "the imperialism of money", "social revolution", "rebel priests", "Christian-Marxist dialogue", "neo-colonialism" and any term emphasizing social restructuring rather than inch-worm evolutionary developmentalism.

North Americans feel threatened by these aggressive sounding terms and retreat behind fortresses of protectionist isolationism. The Inter-American communications gap widens and a "them-and-us" mentality is fostered which makes dialogue impossible.

The specific purpose of this CICOP conference is to shatter communications barriers by arriving at an inter-American understanding of those terms and the reality which they explain. North Americans have nothing to fear from these terms. They can gain many valuable insights into Latin America's self-understanding and Third World identity if they are willing to abandon their defense mechanisms and make this conference a true learning experience.

The Latin American Church brings to CICOP one essential message. The People of God in Latin America insist on their right to self-determination and are no longer content to be inordinately dependent on foreign personnel, foreign ideas, foreign cultural mutations, foreign theological traditions or even foreign material assistance

which neither reflect nor illuminate their indigenous reality. This is expressed as a demand for liberation through integral human promotion.

It is at this point that the break-down in communications becomes easily visible. The Latin Americans are demanding liberation and North Americans insist on talking to them about development. The Latin Americans are talking about what is owed them in justice and North Americans are talking about what we are willing to give them in charity. Latin Americans are talking about their determination to BE MORE and North Americans are talking about the possibility that they may someday EARN MORE and therefore OWN MORE.

Liberation is the dominant sign of the times. Therefore, CICOP seeks to illuminate that concept and its ramifications for both the Third World and developed countries such as the United States. In our judgment, the best way to learn about liberation within a conference framework is to utilize a technique labeled "liberating education" or conscientization by its pioneer and leading practitioner Dr. Paulo Freire.

Dr. Freire is widely regarded as Latin America's most creative educational philosopher and he has consented to help us transform CICOP into a genuine learning experience rather than a one-dimensional presentation of information. The education dynamic of this year's CICOP conference is derived from Dr. Freire's educational technique of conscientization.

Traditional educational techniques are preoccupied with the transmission of factual knowledge often by rote memorization. Conscientization stimulates and awakens individual and collective socio-economic consciousness thereby fostering self-understanding, identity realization and utilization of a corresponding critical world view which embodies those insights. Latin America will be seen as a member of the Third World exercising both critical introspection and a realistic analysis of its role in relation to developed countries.

The conscientization technique strives not only to produce a greater understanding of Latin America's reality and self-image, but also a Third World perspective which can be utilized by developed countries to better comprehend liberation in a domestic context. Developed countries may well experience extreme discomfort when they view themselves through the eyes of the Third World or disinfranchised segments of their own population.

There is much that the developed world can, should and must learn from the Third World. Developed countries such as the United States find introspection painful and prefer to talk of the world's socio-economic problems as though their producer-consumer societies were immune from such ills.

The technological revolution has greatly increased the U. S. Gross National Product but great socio-economic inequities remain which diminish the quality of life in this nation. Repeated failures to achieve inter-cultural communication with the various marginal elements of

our society has resulted in factionalism, distrust, bitterness and even violent confrontations. It is imperative for our society to hear and understand demands for liberation voiced both domestically and internationally. Conscientization is one of the required insights; but there must be a willingness to listen and respond which has been inadequate almost to the point of nonexistence.

Conscientization is a means of removing the scales from our consciousness and allowing us to see ourselves as we are viewed by oppressed peoples both domestic and international who exist outside the socio-economic mainstream. The fact is that we are seen as exploiters who smugly ignore the misery which de-humanizes the majority of mankind. The greatest indictment is that we feel no guilt and steadfastly deny any complicity in the institutionalized violence resulting from unjust socio-economic structures.

The noted theologian Karl Rahner recently analyzed the moral culpability of developed countries such as the United States which live in opulence and have so little social conscience and so much hypocrisy that they feel no guilt.

"If we are rich," Karl Rahner explained, "it is because all the rest are poor. Because the social, political and economic structures are so unjustly set up that we of the developed countries get richer and richer while those who live in the underdeveloped countries get poorer and poorer.

"We personally have not stolen anything. We haven't violated the apparently moral ground rules of society. But those structures and those rules are precisely what is immoral and unjust even though they are largely a natural almost mechanical development in society and in the course of history. If we are frank, we will admit that it is society that steals for us, keeps making us richer - and all the while our consciences are as pure as the snow."

That is precisely why developed societies such as the United States so badly need conscientization. We feel no guilt and weave endless rationalizations for our inequitable domestic and international policies and the structures they reinforce. We must bring ourselves to the point where we can see ourselves as we are seen in the Third World. Perhaps, then we can begin to understand the overwhelming hypocrisy of claiming to be a Christian nation, motivated by love for mankind, while simultaneously sustaining unjust socio-economic structures which proliferate misery.

In light of this shattering indictment what can be said of the Church in developed countries populated by such insensitive pseudo-Christians? One observation is painfully obvious. The Church has failed to stimulate a social conscience among its membership. That is a failure of great magnitude and one which must be rectified. The Church has a vast potential for exerting moral pressure to change attitudes, thereby facilitating the formation of a conscience lobby capable

of changing unjust policies and socio-economic structures. The potential exists but a conscience lobby predicated upon a broad-based Church constituency having an enlightened social awareness remains a dream unlikely to be fulfilled.

It is not enough for Church agencies to issue periodic statements criticizing a lack of social justice in the world or lamenting some atrocity or brutal act of repression directed against a progressive Third World clergyman. It is simply not adequate for our times. Without broad-based support from the People of God such formalized protests and knee-jerk responses of politely expressed indignation are ineffectual. Power to the people must become more than a slogan dismissed by the Institutional Church as mere radical rhetoric if the Church is not to be dismissed by social activists as irrelevant.

Social commitment is the basic lesson which the Church in the United States can learn from the post-Medellin Latin American Church. There have been Church-sponsored social initiatives in the United States but these have generally been spasmodic actions taken by individual advocates. What seems to be lacking is organizational credibility. The poor, oppressed peoples of this country do not identify with the Church in any meaningful way. The Church speaks OF such people but not TO them. The Church is seen as a middle class institution run by and for middle class people whose feeling for the

poor seldom transcends paternalism.

We have abundant proof that intelligent, committed people with awakened social consciousness will also not identify with a Church which they feel vacillates and equivocates on gut level issues of social justice. Being slightly relevant in these times is about as tenable a position as claiming to be slightly pregnant. The post-Medellin Church in Latin America has gained credibility among the emerging forces of its society because it is seen as a leader in the field of social action not merely a reluctant follower. The Medellin statement on Justice provides a blueprint for Churches seeking to achieve credibility in the socio-economic sphere.

"The Latin American Church has a message for all men on this continent who hunger and thirst after justice," the statement reads. "The very God who created men in his image and likeness, created the earth and all that is in it for the use of all men and all nations, in such a way that created goods can reach all in a more just manner and give them the power to transform and perfect the world in solidarity.

"The uniqueness of the Christian message does not so much consist of the affirmation of the necessity for structural change, as it does in the insistence on the conversion of men which will in turn bring about this change. We will not have a new continent without new and reformed structures, but, above all, there will be no new

continent without new men, who know how to be truly free and responsible according to the light of the Gospel. "

There we have the elements of contemporary Church credibility: a new man must be created in the light of the Gospel message and that new man must be actively assisted in transforming and perfecting the world. This is the formidable task which the post-Medellin Church has taken upon itself knowing that it will be judged against that exacting measurement of success or failure.

There were many cynical observers who claimed that the Latin American Church's Medellin promises would fade away in the harsh light of reality and that they would be exposed as little more than lofty rhetoric. The Church in the U.S. and observers throughout the world have now seen abundant proof that the Latin American Church is willing to pay the cost of credibility.

Those who have the fortitude to stimulate reforms in the name of human advancement are paying the price history has always exacted from those who would put the Gospel's social message into action. Priests, Religious and lay leaders have been murdered, tortured, beaten, kidnapped, unjustly imprisoned, held incommunicado, exiled, stripped of their civil rights and subjected to many forms of intimidation. Abundant documented proof of this brutal repression exists and several reports have been sent to the Vatican and Pope Paul personally. The price is being paid and it has bought credibility.

The dimensions of such an active confrontation present many

problems to the U. S. Church which is struggling to understand this phenomenon and hopefully draw up some applicable lessons from the experience of the Latin American Church.

One especially troublesome aspect is the emergency of the "rebel priest" which the U. S. Church generally regards as an undesirable aberration of the proper function of the priesthood. The image of Latin American priests with rifles in their hands dying as guerrilla fighters is totally alien and repulsive to the U. S. Catholic mentality.

Let me assure you that it is equally alien and repulsive to the Latin American psyche. The concept is better understood and more tolerantly accepted in Latin America but it is definitely not endorsed or advocated. Violence is seen as the least acceptable means of stimulating social change and one which should be arduously avoided. However, violence is not simplistically viewed as an overt physical manifestation: guns and bullets, knives and clubs, napalm and bacteriological warfare, etc.

In the Latin American Church there is a far more pervasive understanding of institutionalized violence in all of its insidious forms than is generally operational within the U. S. Church framework. There are many Latin American explanations of institutionalized violence, but perhaps it would be more instrumental to use a perception of that reality as it manifests itself here at home. Mrs. Coretta King, whose husband lived and died as an advocate of non-violence, recently supplied an excellent one.

"Starving a child is violence, depressing a culture is violence, neglecting school children is violence, punishing a mother and her family is violence, ignoring medical needs is violence, contempt for poverty is violence and the lack of will power to help humanity is a sick and sinister form of violence."

The rebel priests who die as guerrilla fighters in Latin America do not choose violence rather than non-violence. They choose one form of violence as a reaction against the other. This is much better understood in Latin America than it is in the United States. However it is not advocated or endorsed by the Latin American Church.

This distinction between overt and institutionalized violence is not an explanation of all those labeled as "rebel priests" in Latin America. Also it must be stressed that the majority of so-called "rebel priests" reject violence in both forms. They stress that they are not rebelling against the Church but against unjust social structures and add that they are acting in a manner which is particularly Christian and not anti-Church.

Father Rene Garcia, recently arrested rebel priest and member of Colombia's Golconda movement, offered this explanation of his theology of revolution:

"The Church takes on a morbid and conciliatory attitude of charity from the rich to the poor," Father Garcia stated. "It preaches resignation to oppression imposed by the established order, an order allegedly sanctified by God. It calls for collaboration, emphasizes

the supernatural and ignores human effort. We Buenaventura priests all authentic Christians, absolutely reject this position.

"Our only interest is to be the servants of the Colombia people in the revolutionary process. Our service required authenticity. We are convinced that it is necessary to destroy an order established to protect the few, and to help create a new order than can protect everyone. The masses must participate in their liberating movement."

Again we return to the Latin American Church's insistence on liberation as the means of fulfilling man's human potential, but dialogue is required on many aspects of implementation. There is dialogue within the Latin American Church concerning the implementation of liberation in accord with the Medellin guidelines. But priests derogatorily referred to as "rebels" in the U.S. should be more realistically recognized as one element in the many-faceted dialogic process. There is a danger that the judgment of these priests may become obscured by revolutionary romanticism, but it must be stressed that they see themselves as acting within the proper context of the priesthood.

The criteria for judgment of the post-Medellin Latin American Church should be its success or failure in creating the "new man" who can transform his society in accord with the Gospel message. The world wide influence and inspiration generated by the Latin American Church depends upon this factor.

But this is not a judgment which the U.S. Church can make in sacrosanct isolation. Those who judge are also subject to judgment. The U.S. Church is seeking credibility with both domestic and international disinfranchised people who share a Third World identity and voice a common demand for liberation. They will not be silenced and their judgment will be exceedingly harsh if the membership of the U.S. Church does not open its ears and hearts and respond in a manner befitting the Christians they claim to be.

Take this opportunity to conscientize yourselves to the Third World's legitimate demands for liberation. We cannot have a new world unless we are willing to become "new men". How many people have to choke to death on misery fostered by our avarice and apathy before we will admit our guilt. When will we start becoming "new men" willing and able to cooperate in the construction of a world society which reflects our shared identity as children of God.

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