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During the last thirty years, the processes of socio-economic change have accelerated in Latin America for a number of well-known reasons. An unprecedented revolution in attitudes have opened the eyes and minds of millions of people who before were in serf-like condition, and who now aspire for a more dignified life.

Previous routine work of Christian churches prepared the ground for this important take-off; but persistence in that routine now appears to be redundant and empty of meaning. One would expect organized Christianity to have started this humane cycle of change in that part of the world; but in effect, although there have been dedicated Christian pioneers doing some strategic work in the socio-religious realm, it cannot be fully claimed that this revolution in aspirations, secular in nature, was spearheaded by sacred bodies or ecclesiastical leaders. On the contrary, there are reasons to believe that the presentation of the Gospel has been often in the hands of aloof ministers, uncommitted to the collective this-worldly aspirations of the people.

An institutional blindness to the local changing realities has brought apart the church organizations and the people around them. The resulting vacuum is being filled by several "isms," some of which permit to ask the right questions and to perform concrete actions to satisfy the newly-acquired needs of the general population. It is important to recognize the lag in which the Christian churches find themselves in this regard, and to learn from the experience and mystique of politically active groups in Latin America that are gaining the allegiance of the humble and the poor, the marginals and the outcasts. These, after all, are nothing but products of the unbalanced, often unjust socio-economic structure of our societies, that was inherited from the seigneurial Spanish and Portuguese empires.

Protestant groups in particular have a special challenge. In the midst of a traditionally Christian community that often has paid more attention to formality than to essence in religious life, the newly-arrived Protestant denominations can easily become innovators and the champions of social change. They can make a new and dynamic presentation of Christ's message attuned to the drives of the people, a presentation that is forward-looking and independent of some of the practices now viewed as incongruent.

But this task cannot be done with ministers and missionaries that are trained or imbued in the ways of the pre-technology, provincial Church, and who by commission or omission have come to support the status quo against which react the great aspiring masses. In my opinion, the task of the Church in Latin America in this new context is clear-cut: as in primeval times, she should militantly side with the humble, the poor, and the ignorant; and this also means to stand militantly against vested interest groups and those power structures that have profited from the old and unjust state of affairs. Action, organization, and symbolism of church work should be adjusted to permit these internal and external developments.

As far as the United States is concerned, the important task of stimulating genuine development in the emerging nations should be backstopped by national churches and by the American people in general. Of course, this also implies an increasing recognition of the need of change in underdeveloped areas--both in this country and abroad--so that social and economic transformations should no longer be viewed with suspicion and fear. They may be good and necessary, even on a revolutionary basis if other outlets are obstructed by antiquated political and economic systems.

I hope that by virtue of their own dynamic tradition, the American people will be on the side of these essential changes. However, since my last residence in this country eleven years ago, I have come to sense that an increasing number of Americans are being tempted into self-righteous attitudes about their "way of life." Sadly I have taken note that with the excuse of defending the "security" or the material interests of this country which are global in scope (perhaps an overly-stretched rendition of the Calvinistic ethic), the American people may be in danger of losing the freshness of their idealistic élan that distinguished them as a leader among modern nations.

I should urge you to help in furthering on an international scale the application of the original American ideals of tolerance, risk-taking grace, and self-determination and self-fulfillment that now appear hazy or contradicted by actions. Developing nations are today in the stage of discovering themselves, much as at the time of Monroe and Jackson, when America was left alone by the great world powers. It is the irony of history that at this day and age the relatively "young" United States is taking the same ungrateful role of "defender of Western civilization" that the decrepit Austri-Hungarian empire

had in Europe vis-a-vis the democratic revolutions of the 19th century, only to be cast aside in the next century by the force of irreversible social processes unleashed by those same revolutions.

Latin American peoples have started to move toward national integration and indigenous cultural reaffirmation. We feel this process to be good and necessary. To this end we need the respectful friendship and non-interfering support of the rest of the world.