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Religious Education for Latin American Youth

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A PLAN FOR CATHOLIC COOPERATION BETWEEN THE TWO AMERICAS

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"THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH FACES THE POSSIBILITY OF LOSING ONE MILLION CATHOLICS A YEAR IN LATIN AMERICA." Richard Cardinal Cushing

THE PROBLEM

The Catholic Church of Latin America is in trouble! When we speak of Latin America, we are talking about 16 percent of the land surface of the world and about 200,000,000 people in 21 nations, 90 percent of whom are Catholic. Within 35 or 40 years, half of all Catholics may be found there, an incredible total of 600,000,000, or before most Church members now alive are dead; there will be few, if any, Latin Americans left in the Church. These two wildly extreme possibilities are accepted with complete conviction by the Latin American Catholic hierarchy. Witness the statement of Archbishop Dom Helder Camara of Recife, Brazil, vice president of the Ecumenical Council of Latin American Bishops:

The problems facing the Church in Latin America must have priority over all others. It is indispensable for the sake of all Christianity. A continent that is Catholic in name must be made Catholic in fact. There is a grave danger that the people of Latin America may cease to be Catholic or even Christian.

Two Popes have spoken out positively concerning this tragic situation. Our beloved late Pope John stated, "Latin America is the number one concern of my pontificate." Our Holy Father Pope Paul reiterated, "The Church in Latin America must overcome or be overcome. It is not necessary for us to speak to you of Latin America, of its needs, its dangers, its reawakening and its hopes. You know by now of the religious conditions in that immense continent..."

SPIRITUAL CONDITIONS

Spiritually, the Church has largely failed in its mission to make what it would consider "good" Catholics out of the residents of Latin American countries. A report of Argentine Catholic Actionists states:

They cannot be considered "good" Catholics because they are ignorant of the fundamental truths of their religion; they do not practice what they say they believe; they actually deny certain defined dogmas of the Church such as the infallibility of the Pope and the reality of Hell; they do not recognize the indissolubility of marriage and the general teaching power of the Church; an almost fanatical concern for the Sacrament of Baptism is joined to a profoundly cynical view of the Sacrament of Matrimony.

There are many reasons for this deplorable spiritual condition. Foremost is the lack of priests. Of the 484,000,000 Catholics in the world, about 167,000,000 live in Latin America, or about 34 percent of the total number of Catholics. Yet, of the 379,000 priests in the world, Latin America has only 35,000, or about 9.5 percent. Therefore, 34 percent of the world's Catholic population is cared for by less than 10 percent of the world's priests. About half of these Latin American priests are teachers, chaplains, or office workers, which means that only 4 percent of the world's priests have the responsibility of taking care of 34 percent of the world's Catholics. It is not hard to find city parishes with 50,000

or even 70,000 inhabitants per parish. In the rural areas, with medieval means of transportation, a priest may have a parish as large as New York State. There are 40,000 towns and villages without any priest.

The deficit of priests is going to increase. According to official figures, there is at present a deficit of 122,000 priests for the entire continent. At the present yearly rate of increase of priests, the deficit in 1980 will be 244,000, or twice the figure it is now. At the present time, there is an annual increase of about 1,000 priests, yet there is needed a yearly increase of 10,000 to arrive at 200,000 by the year 1980. Alongside of this condition is the startling fact that the Protestant sects have more students studying for the ministry in Latin America than the Catholic Church has for the diocesan priesthood. This is happening in a continent that is traditionally Catholic.

Because of the lack of priests, Mass and the Sacraments are unavailable to the vast majority. In Peru and Venezuela, only 3 to 5 percent of baptized Catholics are within reach of Mass on Sunday. In the diocese of Santiago in Panama, 60 percent cannot assist at Mass because there is no Mass for them to attend. In some Latin American countries, it is estimated that only 14 percent fulfill their Easter duty, and only about one-third make their First Communion. As many as 70 percent of the people are not married by a priest, and 85 percent to 90 percent die without the Sacraments and also without medical attention.

ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Economic conditions are also as bad as the religious conditions. Income from properties, bequeathed the Church by individual Catholics, had been used to finance Church works and, in effect, to sustain the Church. Today, such income is generally so meager that most dioceses would quickly cease to function without additional help.

LATIN AMERICAN CHURCHES PRODUCE ALMOST NO INCOME! A Peruvian city planner said: "In spite of being a very large property owner, the Church would be rich only if she could sell all or part of that property. From the rent she receives, she is a very poor person." Frozen rentals, regulations prohibiting evictions of tenants and redevelopment, and severe conditions imposed by donors account for this situation. The President of the Council of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) has a salary of \$40 a month. His diocese of Talca, Chile, has annual expenses totaling \$27,500. The annual income of his diocese is \$13,750.

Joined to the poverty of the Church is the appalling social and economic blight of the people. Millions exist with an annual income of less than \$100 in countries such as Paraguay, Haiti and Bolivia. As production lags behind population growth, the problem will get worse. The gross national product per capita is only \$366, and in the agricultural areas it is \$200, while in the United States it is eight times that figure, \$2,976. In many Latin American countries, one tenth of the population earns one-half of the national income. The population is nearly four times larger than it was in 1900. But housing construction is far behind that rate of increase. In large metropolitan areas, 45 percent of the people do not have homes suitable for human habitation. In the rural areas, the percentage of people in this condition is 80 percent.

In Latin America, the number of illiterate persons is more than 70,000,000, or 40 percent of the population over 15 years of age. In Guatemala, the illiteracy rate is 70 percent. In most Latin American countries, the grade school child averages less than three years in the classroom before dropping out to work on a farm or elsewhere. Only 20 out of every 100 finish grade school. The result is a stifling cultural and religious ignorance.

The majority of the people are undernourished. Daily calory consumption per person, which, in developed countries, goes above 3,000 is way below 2,000 in Latin America. Of the 3,000,000 Indians in Mexico, for example, their diet is corn bread, and an alcoholic beverage, tequila, made from cactus, their only stimulant to keep them going. Meat once every two months is a luxury. The infant mortality rate is a shocking 80 percent. Only one child in a family lives past its fifth birthday. For adults, the person who lives past 45 is a rarity. Medical assistance, particularly in the country districts, is sparse. For example, in Columbia, there is one doctor for every 2,000 people, but two-thirds of the doctors are located in the capitals of the various regions, so that the remaining one-third cares for 88 percent of the population.

REASONS FOR SPIRITUAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Why did the Church in Latin America not advance more vigorously? When Spain conquered the New World, it brought with it a Church that it, more than Rome, controlled. When the Latin Americans overthrew Spanish rule, in the early 1800's, they were also, in effect, overthrowing the Spanish Church. Then, after revolutions brought forth about 21 independent nations, the king of Spain refused to recognize the independence of the countries and using his right of "patronate" refused also to designate new bishops. For this reason several countries remained for years without an episcopacy. In Mexico and in Columbia, this condition lasted for about 20 years and in other countries 30 years. In most instances, the new states seized the properties of the Church. The Church has never quite recovered. All the universities were secularized and so the formation and recruiting of clergy were very difficult. In some countries, it was only after 20 or even 30 years that a seminary was opened because of the difficulties raised by civilian authorities. In Central America, for example, the major seminary of Guatemala is only two years old. Missionaries from Europe were not admitted to the countries, so that there was no recruiting from that source.

This was a tremendous contrast to the first four centuries since the first conversions by Spanish missionaries. Then, the traditional means for evangelization were generally effective. There was a time when it seemed that all of the institutions of society, like the family, school and authority in general usually reinforced the doctrine of the parish priest. Everyone seemed to be a Catholic and followed the Church's moral code, or ran the risk of being labeled a social or religious rebel.

Today, this is no longer true. Religious rites have lost their meaning and vast numbers of Catholics are ignorant of their Faith. They are ignorant not because of any one factor but because of a whole series of social and religious changes. Today in the new Latin America, a pluralistic society has evolved. There are different values emanating from secularism and communism. Today, institutions in society are often in competition with each other and opposed to the ideas communicated by the Church.

The way the people look at the Church is vividly illustrated by a recent article in Informations Catholiques:

Many Bishops, priests and laity have been tied to the established order, to feudal and colonial institutions, compromised by their silence and passivity. Very often silence has been the only response of the Church to all kinds of dictatorships engaged in blotting out personal liberties. To the realistic and practical mind of the masses, this silence has meant approval. In the face of the image of the Church's historic compromises with money, power and privilege, the working classes developed a hostility not only to the unjust economic and social situation, but also to the Church which, in their eyes, has been systematically and relentlessly supporting the established order...

This has stirred a deep-seated anticlerism, drawing the masses away from faith in Christianity and pushing them towards faith in Communism.

The dependence upon the privileged few is causing the Church to lose the masses. However, when she tries to move away from the wealthy, they refuse to support her. As an example, in Columbia, a village priest enthusiastically cooperated with Peace Corps Volunteers who went there recently. Then one Sunday, landowners who disapproved of the priest's activities put a few centavos into the collection plate instead of the large donation the priest had relied on to pay for his food. When the practice continued, the priest had to ask for another assignment. In Lima, the Cardinal was commanded to stop a series of sermons he had ordered to be preached on social problems. Wealthy Catholics are reported to have said to him, "We admit you are right, but the situation is so delicate, we can't risk exploding the bomb." The Bishop of Natal in Brazil was warned, "You should be praying, not raising ferment." The Church, so often described as omnipotent, must actually pick her way with great care through the secular world of Latin America. As one Church official explains it, "We can't antagonize too much certain classes of people. We have to do what we can not to produce a vacuum."

History proves that underdeveloped people follow those who give them better human conditions. If the Church gives them, they will follow the Christian creed; if Communism gives them, they will follow the red creed.

REVOLUTION

The huge majority of Latin Americans are determined not to accept any longer the present social order with its injustices caused by the imbalance of the few and the many, the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots. As a result, Latin America today is in the center of one of the major revolutions in history. The revolution is social and spiritual.

In the socio-economic area, Latin Americans are becoming aware of their rights: the Peasant Leagues, the urban and rural unions, the preaching in favor of land reform, the breaking down of the old style relationship between employers and employees in discussions to settle new wages and new work contracts. In many areas where until recently agriculture was carried out with ancient methods, new industries are arising and

new influences are being felt, and people are giving evident signs of dissatisfaction, after knowing the existence of other, better standards of living. The people are abandoning the fatalistic attitude and are demanding their share of the riches.

The revolution is also ecclesiastical because in the throes of crisis not only are the old structures being changed rapidly, but also the educational, administrative and social attitudes of the Church are being supplanted by the new look in Catholic theology.

No revolution can change the Church herself. The Church's mission is unchanged and unchanging; but the way the Church approaches her mission requires continual adaptation. The doctrine is the same, but the approach is now being made more modern. The passing of the old order does not mean that the Church is going to perish as part of the old order. The Church is going to lead Catholics in the reforms they so desperately need. She is adapting to modern social conditions, so that she will not be left behind. This is true of the present challenges the Church faces in all parts of the world, especially in Latin America today.

The hierarchy agrees that the renewal of Christian society will depend on the layman. This renewal in Latin America calls for participation of the laity in: the propagation of the Faith, the liturgical apostolate, charitable works, and assistance in the administration of the affairs of the parish. Obviously, the Latin-American Church will never get the 100,000 more priests she needs to meet the growing number of Catholics that is predicted for the future. Many foreign priests, Brothers and Sisters are already helping out in Latin America. However, this type of assistance by outsiders will never really solve the basic needs of the Latin Catholics, as there would not be more than 5,000 available within the next five years.

Not only is it a fact that there are not enough priests in the world to remedy these conditions, but also is it a fact that the problem is aggravated because too many priests are occupied with work that laymen could do. As a result, only one out of every five priests is engaged in direct apostolic work. Bishop Mark McGrath of Santiago, Panama, stated that the urbanization of Latin America is concentrating the work of the Church in the cities, which, while understandable because of the greater numbers it is possible to reach, is very dangerous for the future of the Church. He went on to point out that the Communists are very active and very effective in rural areas. "The Church has never ceased to be a missionary Church but we have ceased our missionary efforts. We have, and we are neglecting the rural areas." He cited as proof that of the 200 priests in Panama, 100 are in the capital city which has only a quarter of the population of the entire country. Many of these priests in the city are teaching secular subjects in Catholic schools because the schools cannot exist without them in the present situation. What is really called for is a full commitment by the layman in his Church, and the exercise of the mission he was given at Baptism with a share in the priesthood of the laity.

On the whole, for the past 150 years, North America has enjoyed political stability and economic progress to a degree unmatched in any part of the globe. The Church in the United States as a spiritual body has been supported and nourished by the natural life of the affluent society. Quite the opposite is the case in Latin America. The Church has been battered and weakened by ideological and political strife, by social and economic fossilization. In her human manifestations, the Church has shared the ills of the civic body whose outmoded feudal structures have at last collapsed

to produce the crises of our generation.

We Catholics in North America are warned not to be blind to the misery of Latin Americans or their determination to live with the dignity of human beings as Sons of God. We live in a time when it is necessary to make progress at faster rates and with greater generosity, for it is a Holy Revolution against the revolution of paganism; every minute is decisive. Now, we are in a situation similar to that of our Savior at the wedding feast of Cana after Mary had presented the problem: "They have no wine." We are expected to respond. This effort will be meaningless, will have been a waste if we North Americans listen and go away, if we do not ponder our own role, if we do not ask ourselves what WE should be doing, what WE can do, what WE are required to do in the way of cooperation with our Latin American neighbors....because we are Christians....and because we are humans, members of one global village and one world-wide family. What is needed more than anything is sympathy for the conditions of others and the confidence that we can win this fight against poverty and religious ignorance which has stifled human dignity. It calls for understanding and sympathy and a deep sense of brotherhood.

REMEDY

The Christian Revolution is now beginning to get underway with a series of pastoral plans in various parts of Latin America cutting across traditional diocesan and parish boundaries. These plans assign priests and Sisters where they can best be utilized to alleviate the greatest needs. Lay participation has made possible widespread catechetical projects, many using the highly successful radio-school techniques and audiovisual materials. The Church is investing its resources now in formation and education.

The Church leadership in Latin America today is extremely progressive because of the great crises confronting it. For example, three years ago, the Bishops of Chile issued a pastoral letter about the necessity of land reform. They stated that one-third of the population was without proper housing and that 400,000 new houses were needed. They asked for better distribution of the national income. They condemned the luxury industries and the practice of many rich Chileans of sending their money out of a country which sorely needed development capital. They concluded:

In the present emergency, it would be anti-Christian to maintain that wealth in an unproductive state by transfer to a foreign country, and it would be equally anti-Christian to apply it to the production of articles or services which satisfy the needs of small sectors of the population while the basic needs of our national economy remain unsatisfied.

Not only are the Bishops of Latin America speaking out about the need for land reform, but also they are dividing the lands of the Church and distributing them to the people. Since the Bishops themselves are very poor, it is a sacrifice, but they hope it will serve as an example for others to follow. As a result of receiving the land, the people are acquiring a new sense of responsibility, of hope, of work and of dignity. The hierarchy is setting up labor union schools, credit unions and cooperatives.

As an example of the work of the hierarchy, Bishop Botero in Columbia moved out of his residence and turned it into a school to train labor leaders. All his personal possessions were donated to constitute a foundation to help the workers of Columbia. He is now living in a poor working class district.

The practical means to carry out this Christian revolution are now being worked out and diffused. The Latin American Bishops have founded an institution that is unique in the Church: namely, the Consejo Episcopal Latino Americana (CELAM). The members of CELAM are the Episcopal Delegates, one from each Latin American country, an entity unmatched by any similar institution in the Church. As authorized by the Holy See in 1955, CELAM, through its secretariate in Bogota, has assumed tasks that resemble the functions of the National Catholic Welfare Conference in the United States. CELAM now coordinates Catholic activities in Latin America in the promotion of the Faith, the development of clergy and religious, the education of youth, the lay apostolate, and social action. To North Americans, this program may seem undramatic since we have grown up to accept these areas of action as normal. However, in Latin America, where, in some cases, whole nations exist in which the Church possessed no such ordered programs, this is a thrilling innovation.

OUR COOPERATION

The cooperation of all Catholics begins in Rome itself. In April 1958, His Holiness established the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, a new Curial institution uniting some eight Roman congregations for action in favor of Latin America. The President is Cardinal Confalonieri and the Vice President is Archbishop Samoré. The function of the commission is to study the fundamental problems of Catholics living in Latin America, and to stir the Church throughout the world to contribute personnel and material aid to Latin America's anemic Church structure and poverty stricken masses. Religious superiors of North America and certain countries of Europe were asked to plan to send 10 percent of their personnel within the next five years to Latin America.

Systematic participation of Canada and the United States dates from a conference held in Washington, D. C. in 1959. Committees of Bishops representing the two countries met with a committee from CELAM. From this conference resulted the establishment of the office for Latin American Affairs in Ottawa, as a center for Canadian activities, and the Latin America Bureau in Washington, D. C. to serve the Church in the United States. The Latin America Bureau is an officially constituted department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC), is under the leadership of Richard Cardinal Cushing and directed by Rev. John Considine of Maryknoll.

The Latin America Bureau gives assistance to United States priests, Brothers and Sisters working in Latin America. It is spearheading a drive to send 5,000 of these workers to Latin America during the 1960's. The Bureau also recruits United States lay personnel for service in Latin America. It has organized the Papal Volunteers for Latin America (PAVLA), a group of apostolic short-term lay workers who will total over 1,000 during this decade. The Bureau promotes understanding and friendship between United States Catholics and Latin Americans through its Catholic Inter-American Cooperative Program (CICOP).

Recently a new office for catechetical aid was established in the Latin America Bureau under the direction of Rev. Michael Mullen, C.M. of St. John's University, New York. The purpose of the new agency is to enlist the aid of American Catholics in the removal of religious illiteracy especially among the 48,000,000 children in the rural areas of Latin America. The activities of this newly created office will function under the title of Religious Education for Latin American Youth (RELAY). The aims of RELAY are twofold: 1. To educate United States Catholics to the religious needs of Latin America, and 2. To enlist their support in supplying these needs.

The Bishops of Latin America are now organizing a corps of 100,000 lay catechists in their countries to take the place of the 100,000 non-available priests needed. These men will work primarily in the rural areas where, at the present time, millions of children are without religious instruction. These lay catechists will work under an organized structure for religious education. CELAM has set up a bureau called the Commission for the Promotion of the Faith (CLAF) to direct preaching, catechizing, religious education, liturgy, defense of the Faith and its mass diffusion through press, radio, cinema and television. In each of the 21 countries, a national CCD Director is being appointed; moreover, each of the 540 dioceses will have a diocesan CCD Director. These diocesan directors will be assisted by committees of catechetical Sisters. A continental training center for the development of these key people has been set up at Santiago, Chile.

Under this organizational structure, responsible laymen are being chosen as catechists. Each one will be selected on the basis of education (he must have completed at least high school), leadership ability and apostolic motivation. For the sake of permanency, these catechists will be on a salary basis. From this group of 100,000 catechists will possibly be selected the members of the newly revived order of Deaconate. Since they will already be catechizing, if appointed Deacons, they would have the authority of the Church and the grace of office for preaching. In the absence of parish priests, they would be able to conduct Sunday paraliturgical services, which involves leading the people in hymns, giving instructions in the Scripture, officiating at marriages, baptizing, and bringing Holy Communion to the faithful.

These paid catechists will be trained to be experts in both Christian doctrine and in the socio-economic areas. In addition to teaching religion, they will be trained to direct parish cooperatives and credit unions. To them will be sent volunteers from many remote villages so they may be trained to go back to their villages to teach their people.

Two types of materials will be used for training: visual aids and catechetical manuals. In the centers where the teachers will be trained, an audiovisual sound filmstrip Catechism, produced in the United States and adapted for use in Latin America, will be used. This Catechism, produced by St. John's University, New York, is entitled "The St. John's Catechism" and consists of 30 ten-minute units. This audiovisual Catechism is in use in three-fourths of the United States parishes. Bishop Greco, Episcopal Moderator of the CCD in the United States, presented a set of these filmstrips to Pope John. Commending the American material, the late Pope asked that it be developed for Latin America, where the need was so very great. It was then translated into Spanish and Portuguese and later adapted to the

various dialects of the Indians. Pope Paul reiterated the sentiments of his predecessor when Bishop Greco presented the material to him. During the first session of the Council, more than 500 Latin American Bishops viewed the material and stated that it would be of inestimable value for the training of key personnel.

With regard to catechetical manuals, the Latin American Bishops, working through CLAF, are presently engaged in producing various types geared to the understanding of the people. These will be inexpensive paper-back editions and hundreds of thousands will be needed by the catechists in the villages. In addition to these articles, holy pictures, rosaries, and other supplemental materials will be needed.

The new role of the Church in Latin America is that of the champion of the oppressed and the promoter of basic economic, social and religious reforms. No Catholic can consider himself alien to the suffering of the Church, a mother to all. More than ever, we can see how appropriate in our times are the words of St. John Chrysostom, "We cannot place the obligation of every activity of the Church upon the priests; the burden falls upon each one of us in the Church because we are members of that one body." Unless we have the help of lay Catholics around the world, the situation in Latin America is made to order for Communist take-over. All the classic situations are there: extreme poverty, unequal land distribution, exploitation of the workers and abysmal religious ignorance. Latin America is a boiling pit that will burn many fingers: Cuba, Panama, Venezuela, Bolivia and Argentina are recent and vivid examples.

The role of RELAY is to pull two armies of the laity together and to launch an objective which is to win souls for Christ. Whereas the two armies speak a different language, yet they are tied together by one faith. The field troops are the Latin American lay catechists, who will fight to remove religious ignorance and give Christ His rightful place in the thoughts and affections of His people. The supply troops are the United States Catholic laity, who will maintain those troops in the field.

RELAY is marching - a two-pronged attack! First, it will reach the Catholic child of the United States through the Sisters and the parish priests, and second, it will reach the Catholic adult through the existing parish organizations. A team of the clergy will reach into the Convents to acquaint the Sisters with this program, so that they, in turn, will make the children aware of their responsibility for their brethren south of the border. Approximately 5,000,000 children in the United States with the advantage of a Catholic education might be willing to help 48,000,000 Latin American children, many of whom do not know God.

RELAY is backed by an Advisory Board consisting of prominent laymen, including the leaders of most of the Catholic lay organizations in this country. Its Speakers' Bureau will consist of lay faculty and selected students from various Catholic colleges throughout the country. The first unit is being developed at St. John's University where a drive is underway to enlist the help of 100 members of the faculty and student body. RELAY teams will visit parish organizations to present to the laity the staggering problem of the Church in Latin America. Each team will be composed of a speaker and two audiovisual projectionists. The speaker will give a fifteen-minute talk outlining the problems, to be followed by a ten-minute

showing of an excerpt from the audiovisual Catechism both in English and Spanish. The talk will be preceded by a motivation film on the Crucifixion. For follow-up purposes, a series of films produced by the Columbia Broadcasting System on the Church in Latin America is also available.

In view of the staggering problem, the help asked is indeed modest. The amount requested of each organization is the cost of maintaining one catechist for a period of two weeks at \$1.00 a day, or, roughly, \$15; one lesson of the filmed Catechism at a cost of \$15, which the publisher will match with an additional lesson as a contribution to Latin America, and an additional \$5.00 for the purchase of rosaries, holy pictures, etc., a total of \$35.

RELAY places the emphasis on LAY. It is a project which enlists the efforts of the laity in both Americas. The Council has already spoken about the role of the lay person in the New Church. The New Church recognizes the potential of the laity. The function of the layman is his active participation in the liturgy and in the religious apostolate; the call of all Christians to sanctity; the community of all Christians around the Bishops and their Supreme Pontiff - the visible reminders of Christ in the one Living Mystical Body. These are all doctrines packed with power for a world desirous of ideals, of progress, of unity and of human wellbeing. The overflow of the lay movement into the temporal order is envisaged already in the Council's constitution on the Church. A recent statement from the Council stating that the Church must now depend even more on the laity is a further emphasis of the same fact.

RELAY is also involved in the doctrine that the whole world is in mission. No longer can the Church designate "mission territory," for the Church is one and Christ died for all men. No longer can one think of just his family, his parish, his children to grow up and find a career for themselves and take care of only themselves. This was emphasized in the Council where the Bishops of the world went on record as stating that each has an obligation in conscience to send personnel and money to the areas of undeveloped Catholicism. No longer can the child in Latin America be considered merely as an orphan to be thrown crumbs after one's own family is taken care of. For that child is everyone's own flesh and blood in Christ!

