

# THE CHURCH ON THE MARCH IN LATIN AMERICA

An interview with  
**Rev. John J. Considine, M.M., director  
of the Latin America Bureau of the  
National Catholic Welfare Conference.**

BY HARRY W. FLANNERY

The reform movement is under way,  
and the Church is leading it.

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*Papal Volunteer nurse Virginia Jackson comforts a child.*



Q. *Father Considine, as we all know, the Bishops of Latin America, in co-operation with the hierarchy in the United States, Canada, Germany and elsewhere, are seeking to improve the spiritual, educational, health, housing and other conditions in Latin America. I understand, Father, that two groups in Latin America take different approaches to this problem. One group emphasizes paternalism, charity. The other welcomes the open society, the social philosophy of Jacques Maritain. If this difference exists, how great an obstacle would it be to the Church's accomplishment of social justice in Latin America?*

A. I don't think this is a serious obstacle. The extreme right and extreme left took their positions many years ago. The great modern phenomenon is the growth of the forces of moderation, which in Europe would be called the centrist position, a term not in use in Latin America.

Q. *How strong are the centrists becoming, Father? Is their position, as you see it, best for bringing about reforms in Latin America?*

A. Let me remark, before we go much further, that Latin America has to be recognized as heterogeneous in the same sense as Europe. It includes a score of nations, each with a distinct character of its own, and each with a strong desire for individual identity. Any generalization is, therefore, dangerous.

However, all Latin America has progressed from what remained of medieval feudalism to an era in which the extreme right and left have been facing up to each other. The growth of an intermediate position, the centrist, or moderate, has been slow but constant. However, the center has reached a point, for instance, where the Christian Democrats won 23 per cent of the total vote in recent municipal elections in Chile.

These forces of moderation, as I prefer to call them, to avoid the use of a purely political tag, have grown considerably in countries where a modern economy has developed and a middle class has resulted. In these countries, education, legislation, sociology and religious thought have moved to the centrist position as an answer to, not a refuge from, the two extremes.

Q. *Father, you said the situation varies from one country to another. Can you be more specific about some of these countries?*

A. I mentioned Chile. There the Christian Democrats describe themselves as the moderate left. The leftist extremists in Chile represent the hard-core Communists, who have been organized in Chile for 25 years or more. The extreme right has been losing ground in Chile to various groups, including the moderate left.

In Argentina, the situation is complicated by the Peronistas, who stand for nonrightist principles but end up with dictatorship.

In Uruguay, the position of the moderate forces has been strong for a considerable length of time. The victory a year or two ago of a party that had not been in power for almost 50 years was one for moderation.

In Paraguay, we still have an old-fashioned dictatorship. In Bolivia, there is a struggle between the left and center. The right cannot be considered a great force there. In Peru, there are rightist propensities, but again the moderates are gaining strength. Even the followers of Haya de la Torre, the leftist organization that was looked upon as extreme 25 years ago, is today pale pink compared with international communism.

In Brazil, the situation is much more complex. Here

is a country of 65 million people, one-third of all Latin America, 40 per cent of South America, in an area larger than that of the continental United States. Recent headlines have made the situation look very bad, even hopeless. However, this is not necessarily the case. The major quarrel is between moderate leftists and moderate rightists. The victory could conceivably go to the extreme left by a *coup d'etat*, but it now seems unlikely that the country will go to the Communists as was threatened some years ago.

Q. *What you have been saying, Father, suggests that the patron, who took care of all the needs of his people — food, clothing, housing, even religion, in a kind of feudalism — is passing out.*

A. The patron continues to hold sway in many sections. The dominance of one important man over, let us say, 300 unimportant men remains in some places. The major difference lies in the fact that this paternalism finds it more difficult to gain control of entire nations.

Q. *Aren't these patrons the government in some countries?*

A. Yes, in a few countries. This has been true, for instance, in Paraguay and Haiti. The dictator's strength usually stems from a combination of such old-fashioned strong men. There is a segment of such thinking in every country.

Q. *What about the influence of Castro?*

A. The 18 months following the rise of Castro saw him win a following among 15 to 45 per cent of the common people in practically every country of Latin America. It shouldn't be said that these people were Communists. They were desperate men looking for a

**“. . . paternalism finds it more and more difficult to control entire nations.”**

way out. When Castro declared himself categorically for communism, many of these people no longer saw Castroism as a solution for their needs. Some people continued, however, to look toward Castro, because they were at a loss to find any other place to go.

The rise of Castroism had an effect on the right. Good men in Latin America, whose families had been on the right back through many generations, were jolted by the effect of Castroism. They began to gather together quietly in groups of six, 10 or 12 and talk. They realized the old ways were gone. They said to each other, “We must join the forces of moderation, or we lose everything.” Some did not agree, of course. There were those who nailed their flags to the mast and said, “I am not giving an inch.” But these are fewer and fewer as time passes.

The Communists continue, of course, to try to exploit the poor, the hungry, those who have no social philosophy, but want a solution to their problems. To what degree they are successful, one cannot be sure, since the situation is complex and varies from one country to another. But the forces of moderation have made large gains recently, and the real question for the next 40 years is whether these forces can continue to

gain. The resurgence of the Catholic Church in Latin America is probably the key factor in this struggle.

Q. *Are the forces of moderation the Christian Democrats?*

A. No, I hesitate to use a political tag because they have a broader base. Certainly, the Christian Democrats are one of the largest organized forces of moderation, and I think they will continue to gain strength provided they continue the high idealism that has characterized them. In some countries of Latin America, they are still only splinter parties.

The forces of moderation are people not necessarily connected with a definite political party. They are people who believe in the social encyclicals, people who have a social philosophy. Some of them have no stomach for politics, which has not always been good business. However, they realize they must resort to politics if they are to build a political structure that represents the new day.

Q. *What about anticlericalism in Latin America, Father? We recall there was a clash between church and state during Peron's last days in Argentina, that the official government party in Mexico, the IRA, was recently aroused by Church criticism of social injustice in that country, and that the Liberal Party in Chile indignantly attacked as rank interference in political matters the Chilean hierarchy's pastoral letter of September 18, 1962, condemning social injustice.*

A. This struggle goes back to the days of the French Revolution. There are still people today, of course, who want to keep the Church in the sacristy. However, the Church cannot remain silent about its social doctrines. In modern days, these have been given voice by the Popes and the Bishops ever since Leo XIII. They are being heard today by more people as Pope John XXIII enunciates the international and social ideas of the Church in the marvelous *Mater et Magistra* and the noble document *Pacem in Terris*. All of the Popes, including John, have made it clear that their position is not political, but moral. You remember how John in *Pacem in Terris* stressed the natural or, as he called it, the moral order. He stated universal principles.

Of course, there will always be those who attack the Church for their own reasons, but the sociological principles set forth by the Popes are beyond attack. In the light of the reception given the words of the venerable and wise Pope John, there is less danger of a recurrence of the old-fashioned cleavages. The situation is no longer a contest between anticlerical and proclerical as it was in the 19th century following the French Revolution.

Q. *In a recent paper presented at Ohio State University, Professor John J. Kennedy — formerly of Notre Dame and now at the University of Virginia — suggested that Latin-American churchmen have often been reluctant to admit that although 95 to 98 per cent of the Latin-American population is nominally Catholic, only 20 to 30 per cent are active church members. He feels that the reluctance to admit this situation has often led Latin Church leaders into unrealistic attitudes toward public policy. He says that were these Church people to acknowledge that not all Latin Americans are practicing Catholics, a valuable first step would be taken toward an atmosphere in which the Church's legitimate interests in social reform could be exercised in conjunction with other reform interests with a minimum of conflict.*

A. That's easy to go along with, because there is no strong body of the hierarchy in Latin America today which would deny what Professor Kennedy proposes. This is an accepted fact. Ever since the birth of this new period of resurgence in 1955, when the continental conference of Bishops was held at Rio, there has been a strong drive in Catholic circles to provide active leadership for the long unreached Catholic millions. There are those even in Latin America who don't yet appreciate what far-reaching changes have been instituted.

Just to take one little fact: After the Rio conference, there was a total of 372 ecclesiastical divisions in Latin America. Today there are 531, over 150 more. Thus almost one-third of all the Bishops of Latin America head dioceses that are less than eight years old. Most of these are young men, vigorous and enlightened men with a drive that makes you want to stand up and cheer. These men are not telling you that everybody in Latin America is a good Catholic. There are celebrated instances of a few of the older Bishops who were accustomed to saying, "We are all good Catholics here," and who have today made an about-face that is absolutely astounding. The Church in Latin America today recognizes fully that it has to be on the march.

Q. *What's this going to mean for the future of the people of Latin America?*

A. Well, it is too much to say that this suddenly re-born Church can stop communism dead in its tracks. The Communists have been building up for a good many years, and their continued capacity to do ill cannot and must not be underestimated. It may be said, however, that the difference between the Church of yesterday and the current resurgent Church of today is going to represent the difference between continental success and failure for the Communist forces.

Q. *I'm interested in these new young Bishops.*

A. Many are now in areas of South America that have long suffered from a complete absence of organized Catholic life. Many of them have only five, 10 or 12 priests to take care of a quarter of a million souls. Their first efforts must therefore be directed to the most elementary needs. They recognize that the social and economic situation is dire and must receive their primary consideration.

Q. *Has there been any increase in vocations in Latin America, Father?*

A. To a surprising degree. However, it is still not by any sense adequate. Not at all. The important fact is that the spiritual pump has been primed. Great portions of Latin America represent a domestic area, so far as the spiritual is concerned, but often with rich soil that has lacked water. Let the water of spiritual servicing flow over this desert and it blossoms with surprising rapidity. Let us be careful not to exaggerate. There is no marvelous blooming yet, but there is evidence of tender shoots that hold hope and promise.

Q. *What's the situation in regard to the separation of church and state?*

A. Each country has its own situation. A country like Colombia, for instance, maintains a position for the established church that Chile has long abandoned. Chile has had separation of church and state since 1924, or 1925. In Colombia, great numbers see society as monolithic and live quietly with the assumption that it will continue so.

Q. *Some observers have said that the Church was not concerned about the Latin-American masses until Protestantism and communism rose.*

A. This is false. It is not a matter of lack of concern but of elementary strength to face the needs. We can't take time here for a review of 150 years of history, but it must be realized the Church was stripped of the bone of staff at the time of the revolutions of the early 19th century. At that time Spain and the Spaniards moved out of the picture and left no prepared clergy in many of the countries, a clergy that could immediately take its place in the main stream of society.

Q. *I recognize, Father, that the situation in Latin America has been complicated by history. Due to the revolutions against Spain, as you say, and the lack of priests, there have not been clergy who could serve Catholic society and get to the people to encourage vocations. Further, many of these people lacked the education or means to an education to train for the priesthood.*

A. All that is true. But I would say, in all fairness, that other psychological factors were involved. There was in certain places a disdain for the clergy.

Q. *Not long ago, Bishop Bernardo Pinera of Temuco, Chile, was quoted as making the following statement: "Communists fight with tenacity and determination for and with the working poor to better their lot. If Bishops or priests forthrightly condemn the Communists, who seemingly are trying to help the poor, the workers will distrust the clergy and bracket them with the rich classes and impersonal rich countries like the United States." The clergy, in other words, face a dilemma.*

A. Yes they do. But headway is now being made. We see what has happened as a result of the leadership of Cardinal Silva in Chile. The fresh vigor of Christian social thinking has stirred large portions of the Chilean population. In the Brazilian northeast, one of the most miserable sections of the entire continent, 25 million people have been sitting ducks for communism; but they are getting a quality of leadership from Dom Eugenio Sales of Natal and the Bishops of the northeast which is astounding. They have launched a full-fledged social program which is Christian to the core, rich in human values, modern and most effective.

Q. *Might it not be said that this is the old story: What needs to be done is not so much to denounce communism as to provide an answer in action?*

A. Definitely. The Church has a positive answer to the dream of the wretched.

Q. *Emilio Willems, the sociologist, has said that the rise of Protestantism in such countries as Chile and Brazil reflects the disillusionment of people with what they consider the lack of attention from the Catholic Church to their social problems.*

A. It might be better to say that many persons in Latin America have lived without clergy in a spiritual vacuum, and when they encountered good Protestant leaders, they have said: "This is what I have been hungry for all my life, a chance to worship God!" They have accepted this opportunity to worship without necessarily making a decision that Catholicism is false.

Q. *Also, as you know, Father Considine, Douglas Hyde, former editor of the London Communist Daily Worker, says many Catholic actionists turned toward communism because too many leading Latin Catholics*

not only failed to bring social justice to the people but even opposed it.

A. There's no question about that. There was a time when in certain places the image of the Church was that of unreconstructed rightism of the extreme sort.

Q. *Jorge Ivan Hübner Gallo, an influential Latin-American conservative intellectual, maintains that communism can never be contained by an attempt to raise the material standards of living of the masses, that such an effort would only lead to their having an increased materialism with a Communist takeover then more likely. Hübner Gallo feels that the approach to communism must therefore be purely spiritual and that the Church's present concern with raising lower-class living standards is dangerous and misguided.*

A. I would certainly say that Hübner is correct in saying that the mystique of Latin America must be given proper consideration. But to say that there should be no social reform would be thinking of the soul without the body. The Church has realized and the Popes have continually stressed that the soul of Christianity must possess the body as well; we must see a God to be worshiped and a neighbor to be loved.

Q. *Is there in Latin America, as far as Church-oriented leaders are concerned, considerable opposition to capitalism, but haziness about the economic system they themselves would prefer? Might this explain why economic pronouncements by Castro found so much favor among churchmen?*

A. It could be. Many nonprofessionals have been hazy in their social philosophy; there has been a tendency to talk from too little knowledge. People desperately hungry for solutions often grasp at the first straw, as in the case of Castroism.

Q. *Along this same line, some Christian Democrats in Latin America talk about the need to replace the lust for profit that vitiates brotherly love. This is all well and good; but if social justice is to be achieved it must rest upon sound economic institutions.*

A. I wouldn't attempt to go into the specifics of what the economic philosophy of Latin America should be, but I would say that you offer here a further instance of the point raised by your last question. There is no

### **The Church's image: ". . . unreconstructed rightism of the extreme sort."**

question but that our country has been looked upon not only as capitalistic, the Colossus of the North, but as a country in which many men operate without concern for the human person. The sad reason for this reaction is that we have too often given the impression that we are not concerned about the finer things of life. We are accused of thinking more about refrigerators, television sets, shiny new automobiles, comfort, than about culture or about the spiritual.

Q. *The rate of annual economic expansion envisioned by optimistic Alliance for Progress planners is 2.5 per cent. In some countries, on the other hand, notably Mexico and Venezuela, the annual increase in population is far beyond that. The result is that many non-Catholic experts are saying that no notable increase in*

Harry W. Flannery, radio co-ordinator for the AFL-CIO, has written many articles for AVE MARIA.

*economic and social standards can be anticipated south of the Rio Grande unless they are accompanied by birth-control measures.*

A. It is true that the problem of population increase in Latin America is more critical than in almost any other part of the world. The answer lies in a thoroughgoing study of the population question, and enlightened Catholics everywhere are seeking to create study centers that will deal with this common concern of leaders. Of course, so far as we are concerned, the moral requisite must be present in every solution offered, not only in Latin America but elsewhere.

Q. *Have you encountered signs of extreme nationalism among Latin-American clergy that might lead them to resist the presence in their countries of large contingents of United States missionaries?*

A. As you put the question, the answer is easy. We only wish that a large invasion of our people were possible to the point that it might represent a threat. The fact is that, even at our best, we shall contribute only a paltry few hundred toward the improvement of the personnel situation in the vast areas of Latin America.

Q. *What about the Papal Volunteers?*

A. The situation in their regard is about the same as in the case of the clergy. Let's keep in mind that no Catholic group is going to move into Latin America anywhere except on the invitation of the local hierarchy and under local Catholic leaders. The contribution can be considerable. Technicians, carpenters, nurses, teachers can be catalysts giving the people new hope and vision. These people from the United States will make their contribution not because of the inability of the Latins to accomplish good themselves, but because of the *de facto* absence in many areas of the means to organize a dynamic society. Too often in rural areas and city slums people have grown up without hope and without the vision that prompts them to draw the best from within themselves. A spark from the outside works wonders.

Q. *The Papal Volunteers, unlike the Peace Corps, are to come from many countries. It is potentially a worldwide movement. How many have gone from this and other countries to Latin America so far?*

A. Our Papal Volunteers in the field now total 180. Lay volunteers are coming in numbers from Europe. These purely religious volunteers do not compare in quantity with the Peace Corps, but there is a steady growth.

Their role is different from that of the Corps. The Peace Corps promises to number 6,000 in Latin America alone within a few years, according to Mr. Shriver, their dynamic leader. These young men and women will enter in strong contingents, some of them from Catholic universities, into the life of normal society, in education, in enterprise in general. It is true that the Papal Volunteers will fill certain roles in social and economic life, in co-operatives, credit unions and other such fields; but specifically they will work to strengthen the hand of the Bishops and priests in the task of building the Church.

Q. *And I would think, Father, from what you have said, that the outlook in Latin America has improved considerably in the last few years.*

A. That is true. However, our task has just gotten under way. Latin Americans ask a great deal more from us than we are as yet giving. Keep us and the people of Latin America in your prayers. ●