

REVOLUTION, CHRISTIANITY AND LATIN AMERICA

There is increasing public recognition that Latin America is a land in ferment. The magnitude of the problems of Latin American countries make the various programs and proposals designed to meet those problems appear highly inadequate. Yet a clearer understanding of the problems should lead not toward despair or withdrawal but toward increased participation.

*The two selections which follow complement each other in the insights which they offer. The selection by Father J. Segundo, a priest from Uruguay, which first appeared in *LETTRE*, is taken from the translation which *CROSS CURRENTS* prepared for its Summer 1963 issue. The selection by Emilio Castro, a pastor of a Methodist Church in Uruguay, first appeared in the September 16th issue of *CHRISTIANITY & CRISIS*.*

"Latin America is a world on the move. The speed of its movement can only be measured from within. Unfortunately, what the visitor sees and what is printed abroad about Latin America is usually 'local color'—precisely that aspect of our society which is not changing. The swiftness of social change in a continent without the traditions which are the strength of Western civilization in Europe is not easy to understand.

"Nevertheless, Latin America is a *Western* world on the move; here again the view of a foreigner may be distorted by exotic local color associated with the area. It is part of the West that is evolving; our people participate in Western culture; they have read the same books and have been brought up in the same way. Despite some variations of temperament or character, as from one region to another in any country, basically they are not very different. This is the Western world; it is the culture of the West that is changing in Latin America—and changing at great speed.

"Finally, Latin America is a *Christian* world on the move. . . . And it is precisely the speed and depth of this movement changing Latin America that pose very difficult problems for the Christian—deeper problems, or at least more obvious problems than those posed elsewhere. Change calls for a reaction; one has to respond with a clear vision of what he

wants. There is change elsewhere, but it is slower; in Latin America we are obliged to reflect on how to impress Christian concepts on new institutions, on the freshly-minted realities of this new world.

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"This movement confronts Christians with three obvious and basic problems that must be carefully solved:

1. The breakdown of closed societies—the impossibility of maintaining Christian ghettos, or of preserving the 'Christian environment.'

2. The compromised relationship between Christian institutions and the social relationships of an existing system; this is something that is inevitably bound up with the task of maintaining, not Church institutions as such (parishes, dioceses, etc.), but civic institutions in which Christians will feel at home, with a mentality and program that is apparently Christian (religious schools, Christian parties and trade unions, Catholic universities and newspapers).

3. Christian action in a pluralistic world. Christians are not alone; change touches everyone in these countries. The Christian must know how to act alongside other men who have other ideologies, other ways of thinking. Since our continent is going through a revolutionary process at breakneck speed, Christians must consciously face the problem of how they will work with others and to what point they should collaborate.

"Obviously, these problems are not peculiar to Latin America; they are the same as those posed elsewhere. After I spoke in these terms to some North Americans going to work in Latin America, a surprised Canadian exclaimed, 'But that's the problem in Quebec.' Yes, and in many other places; it is the situation of Christianity as it faces the modern world. That is why I located Latin America in a larger Western and Christian world process. Local differences in dress and custom matter little; the problems we face are the same ones that concern Christians everywhere—at least everywhere a Christian spirit has been incarnated in a specific culture to the point of being identified with it. The problem of Christendom challenged by the evolution of history is especially acute in Latin America mainly be-

cause of the rate of change. . . .

"For the first time in history the Christian faces the reality that if he is going to collaborate in the building of a world in the making, he must do so as a member of a minority. Unfortunately, too many Christians are not prepared to collaborate in a world where they are not the dominant group. If they cannot govern, many withdraw, assuming that they are the majority, and if this Christian majority is not heard, the world will fall apart. But today Christians cannot control the world in this way; if they withdraw, the world will simply do without them. Is the Christian prepared to live in such a society? Can he act with loyalty as a minority in the construction of a new order that will not be built according to Christian principles?"

"All this is quite relevant to conditions in Latin America, where a social revolution is under way. It is inconceivable that this revolution should take place without the participation of the people most interested in it—Socialists, Communists, atheists, and others—who do not have the same ideas as Christians. Latin America today is already a pluralistic world, even if some 90% of the population in most countries have been baptized. Will Latin-American Christians, formed in the mentality of a dominant

Christendom, be able to adjust quickly enough in this moment of rapid change? . . .

"We have lost the force of early Christians. Our words do not express Christianity, but merely express the fact that our social structures have Christian trimmings. And in Latin America, the very words we use in evangelization have been corrupted; try to speak of charity, poverty, or the afterlife, and you will be told, 'Go away; we know all about your Christianity!'"

"Unfortunately, they do know. Every word of the Christian message has been used to support the status quo of Christendom, but Christianity itself has been compromised by this attempt to maintain control of the masses, preserving Christian institutions by political means or through alliances with social conservatism. All this is justified on the basis that without this economic power and political influence it would be impossible to preach Christianity to the masses, but this only means that it would be impossible to maintain the social machine as a 'machine to make Christians.' How can we talk of Christianity with words that will reach men, with words that are not betrayed by these realities. In Latin America more than elsewhere, the concern to guard Catholic institutions by every possible means has compromised the very words by which Christianity must be expressed. . . ."

J. Segundo

"Do you believe that Christianity can be the solution to the problems of Latin America? We speak of 'the Christian answer' as if it were a form of salvation offered to this continent. But is this a logical question? After all Christianity, which has been on the continent for the last 400 years, cannot now act as though it had had nothing to do with the problems that the present revolutionary mood wishes to solve.

"When the Spanish Crown established the system of *encomiendas* by which the Indians had to work for their Spanish bosses, a fundamental concern was to help with the Christianizing of the Indian masses. It was understood that this was the responsibility of the *encomendero*. In practice this led to a patriarchal system by which the Christian religion remained definitively tied to the governing elite.

"Teaching the catechism was seen as the duty of the powerful; therefore the Church was allied with the powerful. The cross and the sword worked together for a long time so that it is now difficult for the masses to understand that in the name of the cross it is possible to defy the sword of the oppres-

ing classes.

"But the Christian presence in the Latin American drama did not end there. The pious fervor of the dominant elite led them to will property to the Church, thereby converting the Roman Catholic Church into a powerful landowner, allied with the great landowners. The tragic history of revolutionary Mexico clearly illustrates the role of a propertied church in the preservation of the Latin American *status quo*.

"If we add that the revolutionary manifestations of this century are not expressed in pious language and do not hesitate to attack the Church's spiritual and economic interests, we can understand the Church's initially conservative attitude and its mistrust of change that can lead to chaos. . . .

"All this confusion is especially real in two existential anxieties: whether to cooperate with movements that seek social changes but do not cloak their hatred of the Church, and whether to participate in the violence that seems inherent in the process of rapid social change in which we find ourselves. . . .

"'Worldly holiness' is being explored in all its

dimensions, with particular reference to the political vocation of Christians. For a Catholicism that is traditionally priestly and conservative and a Protestantism that is pietistic, a confrontation of the revolutionary situation with the new theology of the laity is a sign of divine providence.

"This Christian response is characterized by two attitudes that can be described only briefly. The first is a *fierce nationalism*. For centuries Latin America has been dominated by Europe and the United States. During the colonial period the Spanish commercial monopoly predominated. Under 19th century British imperialism, the economy was oriented toward the ports in order to favor commerce with Great Britain. And even today we suffer from single-crop economies as a result of nearly total dependence on the U.S.

"Our national development cannot come from outside. Such development would inevitably involve economic and national independence that would hurt foreign interests. Therefore a responsible Christian attitude requires in our day an economic nationalism that may seem egotistical but is nothing more than an attempt to assure effective national independence and equalitarian international treatment. At the same time this nationalism seeks to stand apart from the communism-capitalism dispute and East-West tensions.

"The dilemma of world power is not our first problem, and we cannot tolerate that those who call themselves our friends place military and strategic considerations before the necessities of our development. For example, it is difficult for us to understand why for many years the aid given to Yugoslavia by the U.S. Government has been more substantial than that given to the entire Latin American continent. We must create our own national political life, and in this process we will discover our real friends.

"We should add that communism is not an im-

mediate alternative for Latin America. The workers are conscious of the fact that the Communist Party serves a foreign power. They remember Hungary. But, as in Cuba, communism can be the final result if national Leftist groups—where Christian youth more and more congregate—fail in accelerating the revolutionary process, or are unable to consolidate it.

"Secondly, the *need for economic planning*. It would be difficult in Latin America to find intelligent defenders of a system of total free enterprise. When the starting points are so unequal and when the elite is so identified with international monopolies, every serious effort toward development and distribution of wealth requires state planning. All foreign aid is useless as long as Latin American capital flees the continent. Therefore exchange controls are necessary. Development of national capital is impossible as long as our commercial balances are constantly in deficit. For this reason control of imports and exports is essential to avoid purchasing whatever Hollywood sells us instead of purchasing the machinery that will really help to create our own wealth. Also, all justice is theoretical and illusory as long as land ownership is in the hands of a minute group. Thus land reform and taxation are fundamental.

"Logically, the aspirations of a Christian conscience are much broader, including programs of education, culture, health, Latin American integration, etc., but we think that the two factors mentioned above indicate the general orientation. It is probable that this orientation is not in line with 'Christian' solutions for other regions. But these are the lines of action toward which Latin American youth, guided by Christian conscience, feel led. The situation is polarizing rapidly in Latin America. This polarization will show whether the Church has a word of justice to speak along with its reconciling activity."

Emilio Castro

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