

LATIN AMERICAN

III. The prospect for the Church

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LATIN AMERICA accounts for more than a third of the world's Catholic population but for less than nine per cent of the world's priests. The disproportion between these figures is the cardinal factor in the religious situation of a vast area almost wholly Catholic in nominal allegiance but which today presents one of the most urgent of the Church's missionary problems.

The evidence of statistics is never the whole of any story, but the facts are so grave and their significance so little appreciated that this weakening of the Church's essential function in South America must be further illustrated.¹ It is usually assumed that a proportion of one priest to a thousand faithful is the barest minimum for assuring the Church's basic ministrations. (In countries predominantly Protestant the ratio is much higher. Thus England and Wales have a proportion of one priest to about 450, the United States one to 622.) For the whole of Latin America the proportion is one to 7,000, with considerable variations in the different republics. (In Chile it is one to 3,000; in Argentina one to 4,750; in Brazil one to 8,000; in Honduras one to 10,350; in Guatemala one to 28,000.)² The effective ministry of the priests there are (and in most countries many are in any case old) is hindered above all by the brute facts of geography. Thus in Venezuela a population of 4,500,000 is served by 800 priests, of whom 160 are at work in the diocese of Caracas alone. The remaining 640 are dispersed through a territory six times the size of France. In Argentina a rural diocese such as Santiago-del-Estero has an area of about 23,000 square miles (say twice the

¹ These statistics are quoted from a survey prepared by the Centre d'Information Catholique, 163 Boulevard Malesherbes, Paris 17. Additional figures have been obtained from various ecclesiastical sources and from private information. *L'Actualité* (January 1, 1954) contains a survey of the Church in Argentina, but this has appeared too late for use to made of its valuable information.

² These figures of course need further analysis for a true picture to appear. Thus in Brazil there were in 1946 altogether 6,383 priests, of whom 3,419 were regular clergy not necessarily engaged in pastoral work, and two-thirds of these were foreigners.

size of Belgium), with fifty-seven priests serving a population of 690,000. Parochial organization in the European sense is impossible where distances are so huge and the means to overcome them so inadequate.

The reasons for the shortage of priests in South America are many and complex. The Church came to the continent in the wake of the Spanish and Portuguese conquerers and her pacific work is now generally acknowledged. One has only to recall the influence of the Dominican Las Casas and the flowering of Catholic life that produced St Rose of Lima. And the Jesuit 'reservations' in Paraguay remain one of the Arcadian memories that are unhappily so rare and so impermanent in missionary history. The full splendour of a Christian culture left its mark, and the churches of Colombia, Peru and Bahia are witness to it. But the ecclesiastical organization of the Spanish Empire depended wholly on Madrid, and when revolution came the Church inevitably suffered. For the most part the clergy sided with the movement for liberation, but the bishops were nominated by the kings of Spain, and as sees became vacant (that of Buenos Aires remained so till 1832) the authority of the Church was seriously weakened. Moreover, throughout the nineteenth century (and in many republics still) the secular and anti-clerical ideas of European 'liberalism' were dominant in political life. Religious orders were suppressed, Christian education was restricted and the Church was at every point subordinated to political opportunism. The effect on recruitment to the priesthood was disastrous, for the climate of a vigorous Catholic community is essential to the growth of priestly vocations. And the effect remains, for even though religious instruction is now permitted in the state schools of some republics, it is occasional and wholly isolated from the main structure of education. Parochial schools, on the European model, are almost unknown in Latin America.

With the enormous increase in immigration (the proportion of European-born Argentinians increased from 12 per cent in 1869 to over 25 per cent in 1895) fresh problems arose. The immigrants were not accompanied by a fraction of the priests that should have been available for their spiritual needs. The position is little better today, for it is estimated that there are two million Spaniards and Italians in Argentina, while there are only three

hundred foreign priests at work in the country (and they are by no means all from Spain or Italy). Thus, apart from the penury of native vocations, there is little provision for foreign communities at the crucial time of their introduction to a new life and a new land.

Thus factors of geography, history and national origin have all affected the essential evolution of the Church's work, and one returns again and again to the shortage of priests as the root cause of the crisis that now faces Catholic life in Latin America. Hitherto the Church has had to face no opposition other than that of anti-clericalism and the mood of nationalist awakening for which 'colonial' associations are anathema. Within the last few years Protestantism, usually in exotic North American forms, has made substantial advances. The spiritual vacuum created by the weakness of Catholic life has in many places been filled by the brisk proselytism of richly endowed sects, often working through humanitarian agencies which have provided social services that have been desperately needed. In 1925 there were 708,000 Protestants in Latin America; today the figure is estimated at 4,700,000—a six-fold growth in less than thirty years.³ A large increase in the missionaries available has resulted from the expulsion of Protestant missionaries from China. Many of these are now at work in Latin America, and extreme resentment is felt in some countries (notably Colombia) that American economic aid is implicitly supposed to carry with it 'the American way of life', in which the proliferation of Protestant bodies is an essential feature.

But perhaps an even more serious threat to Catholicism comes from within and is once more due to the lack of priests and hence of adequate Catholic instruction. This is the syncretism which can include elements from pagan religions (a particular problem among Brazilians of African negro origin) or from modern superstitions (spiritism has a large following, especially in Brazil, and is often popularly regarded as compatible with Catholic belief).⁴ The Church's mission presupposes no particular culture;

3 An important article by Father Eugenio Pellegrino, S.J., which appeared in the *Osservatore Romano*, March 13, 1952, gives many details of Protestant activity in Latin America.

4 An article by Thales de Azevedo, professor of Anthropology in the University of Bahia, which appeared last year in the American Jesuit review *Thought*, is an authoritative survey of these problems in Brazilian Catholic life.

she recognizes no barriers of race or class. In Bahia in particular one sees how completely the exuberance and colour of native Indian and African tradition can find their fulfilment within a Catholic setting. Yet in Bahia there are hundreds of *terreiros*, meeting-places for a *mélange* of worship, in which a superficial Catholic structure can include ritual dances and invocations which evoke a pagan past. The *candomblé* can be a fascinating study for the anthropologist, and the recent visit to England of the Brazilian ballet has revealed its brilliant vigour. But its implications are deeper than those merely of rhythm and song. And according to Arthur Ramos, an authority on popular religion in Brazil, the Christ of the enormously frequented pilgrimage centre of Bomfim, on the outskirts of Salvador, is often identified with Oxala, the principal deity of the African pantheon. The sources of confusion are manifestly real, and the *makumba* and *candomblé* cults are said to be growing, aided as they are by a growing sense of racial traditions within the national life.

In many respects Latin America presents the outward shape of Catholic allegiance. Mexico and Uruguay alone among the republics have legalized divorce. Yet the breakdown of marriage is no less real, and in fact concubinage is frequent and enjoys in many countries the tolerance of tradition and a measure of legal recognition. In Brazil, especially in the cities, many people prefer a civil to a religious ceremony, and Professor de Azevedo, basing his figures on a survey carried out in 1946-47, estimated, that among the married workers of Bahia 40 per cent had only gone through the civil form—and this in a state with a 90 per cent Catholic population. He also estimated that 38 per cent of the workers were living in concubinage. There is no need to stress the social and religious effects of such a situation, even though the figures for Bahia may be thought exceptional.

Closely connected with the decay of the sanctions of Catholic family life—and indeed largely responsible for it—is the violent transformation of Latin American society being brought about by an industrial revolution on an immense scale. The sudden growth of such cities as Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo is the outward, and all too visible, sign of a change which has had such tragic consequences for the Church in Europe. The whole organization of the Church in South America was based indeed on the towns established by the conquerors. But they were

manageable in size, and their rapid development found the Church ill-equipped to deal with a totally new situation. And within the last few years the tempo has greatly increased. The fabulous growth of São Paulo (in 1920 its population was under half a million, today it approaches three million) is the outstanding example, but throughout the continent the effect of economic nationalism (greatly hastened by the circumstances of the war of 1939-45) has been to create a vast new proletariat. The gap between wealth and poverty is extreme, and much, for instance, of the policy of the Perón regime in Argentina—however questionable on other scores—is designed to redress grave social injustice. The impact of the Church is, here again, limited by the restricted role that is hers in most republics and by the absence of an effective Catholic leadership among the laity.

For the contemporary emphasis in Catholic life on the lay apostolate has a specially urgent meaning in Latin America. At a time of tremendous change a Christian interpretation can go by default unless it is courageously stated and acted upon. As Professor Edward Sarmiento has remarked, there is everywhere in Latin America 'the conviction of the abstract notion as an instrument for the understanding of life'. But too rarely is this passion for discussing the very foundation of things related to an incarnational sense of Christianity as the only true solution for Latin American—as for every other continent's—problems. The lack of a trained Catholic laity—trained, that is, in the application of a doctrine *believed* to the whole of a life to be *lived*—is the inevitable result of an impoverished Christian education. The great majority of the universities are wholly secular, and the religious influence to be found is necessarily indirect. Such Catholic universities as exist have slender resources, and nowhere is expert technical training so esteemed as it is in Argentina and Brazil. The need for the specialized organs of the lay apostolate is in consequence imperative and there are signs that the need is at last being realized. Especially in Chile and Peru there are grounds for hope.

Last October the third inter-American Congress of Catholic Action met at Chimbo in Peru. It was frankly realized that merely to transplant the developed 'Catholic Action' of Europe to Latin America could only achieve superficial results. Where there is little tradition of an apostolic function for the laity to perform, a great deal of preliminary work must be done. The

courageous manifesto of the Congress declared that 'while we can boast that America is a continent that has received the faith, yet a profound work of renovation is necessary. It demands an apostolic attitude, one of missionary penetration, rather than an attitude of conserving a tradition that is too little understood.' And the Congress admitted the responsibility that Catholics themselves must share for the paganization of modern society: they have dwelt in 'a fictitious world' instead of working within society for its reformation.⁵

But leaders cannot be trained overnight. As with the problem of vocations to the priesthood (and the two problems are intimately linked), quality cannot be sacrificed to an immediate need, however imperative. The hope must be that increasing numbers of young priests and lay leaders will in time, through their influence in their immediate surroundings, create a new awareness of what a Catholic penetration of society must mean. And here the influence of Europe has its value. In Brazil one met young priests recently ordained in Europe who had returned with a lively sense of the urgency of the tasks that awaited them. They were not so foolish as to suppose that experiments which may be effective in France will necessarily solve the problems of Brazil, but they had at least been introduced to that mood of apostolic confidence without which no advance can be made. In particular they had realized that the liturgical revival, in its deepest implications, carries with it the sense of the community of the faithful at prayer as the indispensable condition for the building up of the Body of Christ.

It is temerarious to generalize about a whole continent, and nothing has been said of the heroic work being done by priests under such difficult conditions to assure the Church's continuity in Latin America. Yet it remains one of the paradoxes of the Church's history that a continent (the only one) that has until recently known nothing but a Catholic presentation of the Christian faith should today be so sadly weakened. The picture may seem a gloomy one, but a recognition of its true proportions is the beginning of hope.

5 Cardinal Guevara, Archbishop of Lima, in a message at the conclusion of the Congress, lamented 'the alarming proportion of those who call themselves Catholics in South America but who do not live in accordance with the teaching of Christ'. He went on to draw a contrast between the present vigour of the Church in the United States and its weakened status in South America.