

Poverty of the Church

Latin American Bishops

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1. Latin American Scene

1. The Latin American bishops cannot remain indifferent in the face of the tremendous social injustices existent in Latin America, which keep the majority of our peoples in dismal poverty, which in many cases becomes inhuman wretchedness.

2. A deafening cry pours from the throats of millions of men, asking their pastors for a liberation that reaches them from nowhere else. "Now you are listening to us in silence, but we hear the shout which arises from your suffering," the Pope told the 'campesinos' in Columbia.¹

And complaints that the hierarchy, the clergy, the religious, are rich and allied with the rich also come to us. On this point we must make it clear that appearance is often confused with reality. Many causes have contributed to create this impression of a rich hierarchical church. The great buildings, the rectories and religious houses that are better than those of the neighbors, the often luxurious vehicles, the attire, inherited from other eras, have been some of those causes.

The system of taxes and tuition to support clergy and maintain educational endeavors has become discredited and has led to the formation of erroneous opinions about the amount of money received.

To this has been added the exaggerated secrecy in which the finances of high schools, parishes, and dioceses have been shrouded, favoring a mysterious atmosphere which magnifies shadows to gigantic proportions and helps to create fictions. Besides, isolated cases of reprehensible opulence have been generalized.

All this has helped substantiate the argument that the Latin American church is rich.

3. The reality of the very great number of parishes and dioceses that are extremely poor, and the exceeding number of bishops, priests, and religious in complete deprivation and give themselves with great abnegation to the service of the poor, generally escapes the appreciation of many and does not succeed in dissipating the prevailing distorted image.

Within the context of the poverty and even of the wretchedness in which the great majority of the Latin American people live, we, bishops, priests and religious, have the necessities of life and a certain security while the poor lack that which is indispensable and struggle between anguish and uncertainty. And incidents are not lacking in which the poor feel that their bishops, or pastors and religious, do not really identify themselves with them, with their problems and afflictions, that they do not always support those that work with them or plead their cause.

II. Doctrinal Motivation

4. We must distinguish:

a) Poverty, as a lack of the goods of this world necessary to live worthily as men, is in itself evil. The prophets denounce it as contrary to the will of the Lord and most of the time as the fruit of the injustice and sin of man.

b) Spiritual poverty is the theme of the poor of Yahweh.² Spiritual poverty is the attitude of opening up to God, the ready disposition of one who hopes for everything from the Lord.³ Although he values the goods of this world, he does not become attached to them and he recognizes the higher value of the riches of the Kingdom.⁴

c) Poverty as a commitment, through which one assumes voluntarily and lovingly the conditions of the needy of this world in order to bear witness to the evil which it represents and to spiritual liberty in the face of material goods, follows the example of Christ who took to himself all the consequences of men's sinful condition⁵ and who "being rich became poor"⁶ in order to redeem us.

5. In this context a poor church:

--Denounces the unjust lack of this world's goods and the sin that begets it;

--Preaches and lives in spiritual poverty, as an attitude of spiritual childhood and openness to the Lord;

--Is herself bound to material poverty. The poverty of the church is, in effect, a constant factor in the history of salvation.

6. All members of the church are called to live in evangelical poverty, but not all in the same way, as there are diverse vocations to this poverty, that tolerate diverse styles of life and various modes of acting. Among religious themselves, although they all have a special mission to witness within the church, there will be differences according to personal charisms.

7. Against this background, it will be necessary to reemphasize strongly that the example and teaching of Jesus, the anguished condition of millions of poor people in Latin America, the urgent exhortations of the Pope and of the Council, place before the Latin American Church a challenge and a mission that she cannot sidestep and to which she must respond with a speed and boldness adequate to the urgency of the times.

Christ, our Savior, not only loved the poor, but rather "being rich he became poor," he lived in poverty. His mission centered on advising the poor of their liberation and he founded his Church as the sign of that poverty among men.

The church itself has always tried to fulfill that vocation, notwithstanding "very great weaknesses and flaws in the past."⁷ The Latin American Church, given the continent's conditions of poverty and underdevelopment, experiences the urgency of translating that spirit of poverty into actions, attitudes and norms that make it a more lucid and authentic sign of its Lord. The poverty of so many brothers cries out for justice, solidarity, open witness, commitment, strength, and exertion directed to the fulfillment of the redeeming mission to which it is committed by Christ.

The present situation, then, demands from bishops, priests, religious and laymen the spirit of poverty which,

"breaking the bonds of the egotistical possession of temporal goods, stimulates the Christian to order organically the power and the finances in favor of the common good."⁸

The poverty of the church and of its members in Latin America ought to be a sign and a commitment--a sign of the inestimable value of the poor in the eyes of God, an obligation of solidarity with those who suffer.

III. Pastoral Orientations

8. Because of the foregoing we wish the Latin American Church to be the evangelizer of the poor and one with them, a witness to the value of the riches of the Kingdom, and the humble servant of all our people. Its pastors and the other members of the People of God have to correlate their life and words, their attitudes and actions to the demands of the Gospel and the necessities of the men of Latin America.

PREEMINENCE AND SOLIDARITY

9. The Lord's distinct commandment to "evangelize the poor" ought to bring us to a distribution of resources and apostolic personnel that effectively gives preference to the poorest and most needy sectors and to those segregated for any cause whatsoever, animating and accelerating the initiatives and studies that or already being made with that goal in mind.

We, the bishops, wish to come closer to the poor in sincerity and brotherhood, making ourselves accessible to them.

10. We ought to sharpen the awareness of our duty of solidarity with the poor, to which charity leads us. This solidarity means that we make ours their problems and their struggles, that we know how to speak with them.

This has to be concretized in criticism of injustice and oppression, in the struggle against the intolerable situation which a poor person often has to tolerate, in the willingness to dialogue with the groups responsible for that situation in order to make them understand their obligations.

11. We express our desire to be very close always to those who work in the self-denying apostolate with the poor in order that they will always feel our encouragement and know that we will not listen to parties interested in distorting their work.

Human advancement has to be the goal of our action on behalf of the poor man and it must be carried out in such a manner that we respect his personal dignity and teach him to help himself. With that end in mind we recognize the necessity of the rational structuring of all our pastoral action and the integration of all our efforts with those of other entities.

Testimony

12. We wish our houses and style of life to be modest, our clothing simple, our works and institutions functional, without show or ostentation.

We asked priests and faithful to treat us in conformity with our mission as fathers and pastors, for we desire to renounce honorable titles belonging to another era.

13. With the help of all the People of God we hope to overcome the system of fees, replacing it with other

forms of financial cooperation not linked to the administration of the sacraments.

The administration of diocesan or parish properties has to be entrusted to competent laymen and put to better use for the welfare of the whole community.⁹

14. In our pastoral work we will trust above all in the strength of God's Word; when we have to employ a technical means we will seek those most adequate to the environment in which they will be used and will put them at the disposal of the community.¹⁰

15. We exhort the priests also to give testimony of poverty and detachment from material goods, as so many do, particularly in rural areas and poorer neighborhoods. With great diligence we will procure for them a just though modest sustenance and the necessary social security. To this end we will seek to establish a common fund among all of the parishes and the diocese itself; also among the dioceses of the same country.¹¹

We encourage those who feel themselves called to share the lot of the poor, living with them and even working with their hands, in accord with the *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*.¹²

16. The religious communities by virtue of their special vocation ought to witness to the poverty of Christ. We encourage those who feel themselves called to form from among their members small communities, truly incarnated in the poor environment; they will be a continual call to evangelical poverty for all the People of God.

We hope also that they (the religious communities) will be able more and more to effect the sharing of their goods with others, especially with the most needy, dividing among them not only superfluities, but also necessities, and disposed to put at the disposal of the human community the buildings and instruments of their work.¹³

The distinction between what belongs to the community and what pertains to the worker will facilitate this distribution. It will likewise permit the searching for new forms to accomplish those works, in whose administration or ownership other members of the Christian community will participate.

17. These authentic examples of detachment and freedom of spirit will make the other members of the People of God give a similar witness to poverty. A sincere conversion has to change the individualistic mentality into another one of social awareness and concern for the common good. The education of children and youth at all levels, beginning in the home, ought to include this fundamental aspect of the Christian life.

This feeling of love of neighbor is evinced when one studies and works above all with the intention of performing a service for the community; when one organizes power and wealth for the benefit of the community.

Service

18. No earthly ambition impels the Church, only her wish to be the humble servant of all men.¹⁴

We need to stress this spirit in Latin America.

We want our Latin American church to be free from temporalities, from intrigues and from a doubtful

reputation; to be "free in spirit as regards the chains of wealth,"¹⁵ so that her mission of service will be stronger and clearer. We want her to be present in life and in secular works, reflecting the light of Christ, present in the construction of the world.

We want to recognize all the value and legitimate autonomy of temporal works; aiding them we do not wish to take away their substance nor divert them from their distinctive ends.¹⁶ We desire sincerely to respect all men and listen to them in order to serve them in their problems and afflictions.¹⁷ Thus, the Church, carrying on the work of Christ, "who made himself poor for us, being rich in order to enrich us with his poverty,"¹⁸ will present before the world a clear and unmistakable sign of the poverty of her Lord.

NOTES

1. Paul VI, Address to the peasants, Mosquera, Colombia, August 23, 1968.
2. So 2:3; Lk 1:46-55.
3. Mt 5:3.
4. Am 2:6-7; 4:1; Jer 5:28; Mi 6:12-13; Is 10:2 et passim.
5. Phil 2:5-8.
6. 2 Cor 8:9.
7. Paul VI, *His Church*, 50.
8. Paul VI, Homily of the Mass on Development Day, Bogota, August 23, 1968.
9. Vatican II, *Decree on the Life and Ministry of Priests*, 17.
10. Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 69.
11. Vatican II, *Decree on the Life and Ministry of Priests*, 21.
12. Vatican II, *Decree on the Life and Ministry of Priests*, 8.
13. Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 69.
14. Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 3; Paul VI, closing address of Vatican II, December 7, 1965.
15. Paul VI, opening address at the 2nd General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Bogota, August 24, 1968.
16. Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 36.
17. Vatican II, Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 1-3.

18. 2 Cor 8:9.