

CHAPTER IX

AN EVALUATION OF LATIN AMERICAN CATHOLICISM UNTIL 1962

In order to judge catholicism in Latin America until 1962, it is necessary to understand the word catholicism. The reality of the Latin American Catholic Church is often misunderstood because of the ambiguity of the word "catholic."

The Church has been called Catholic since antiquity for reason of its being universal (*Kata-ólon*), that is, without borders.¹ The universality of this *catholicity* is not so much geographical as it is the Christ-like grace that surpasses all limits, even those of the visible Church, by means of the Universal Spirit. Moreover, it is *catholic* to the degree that it is not circumscribed within any given limits but transcends all boundaries and confines. The Catholic Church is, in contrast, a sectarian community. It is an assembly of the "few" (*olichoi*), of the predestined, the religion of the minority, of the "saints." Conversely, catholicism is the religion of the "many" (*polloi* or the *rabim*), of the "multitude" of which only a small group, a minority, is fully aware of the demands of the faith, and only a minority truly fulfills the precept of charity, only a few await passionately the Advent of the Lord and believe that we are living in "eschatological times" and that the Parousia is imminent. Sectarian religion is by nature "closed." It is the faith of the "pure" (*Katharoi*). The catholic religion is by nature "open." It is the faith of the "sinners" who have heard the call of the Lord and have followed him step by step. As he said, "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22: 14). It is the faith of those who have not heard or who have disregarded the call. Sectarian religion is the religion of the "just." The catholic religion meanwhile is that of the "sick" who need a savior. Therefore, within catholicity there is a dialectic between the elite and the masses, between those who maturely and conscientiously live their faith and those who participate in religion as an expression of the popular understanding.

In Latin America this dialectic has a paradigmatic characteristic and *sui generis*. For the masses, the Catholic religion exists as a residue of colonial Christendom as in the case of the Indians, mestizos, and Creoles, or as a residue of European Christianity as in the case of the European immigrants. The Christian elite who began to appear in the twentieth century after the dark night of the preceding era have their own characteristics and are without any direct antecedents from the colonial period or from Europe. Hence the typical Latin Americans call themselves "Catholics" because they were baptized and they possess something of the structure of thought of the Latin American people -the "ethico-mythical nucleus" of the civilization -rather than their faith being truly Christian, that is, based on the Person of Jesus Christ and his Church. This majority (*polloi*) should not be ignored. To do so would be a mistake, theologically as well as pragmatically. Their "catholicity" should be analyzed and brought to light.

The new responsible *elite*, the university, trade union, political and religious leaders -as well as the writers and artists -do not ordinarily sense any relationship with the colonial past or with Christendom, and on the other hand they view the future with a certain optimism as they note the lack of power in other elites. This is to say that this new elite is aware of the historical task that should be fulfilled within a brief period of time.

In general, when "Latin American Catholicism" is evaluated, sufficient differentiation is not made between these two types of Catholicism. There is the desire to unify the faith and to assume that the religion of the "minority is the same as that of the masses who are not yet sufficiently evangelized. There is an attempt to unify the Catholicism of the new anticonservatives and even revolutionaries with the colonial past that this newly aware elite, more than anyone else, is attempting to overcome. Thus it is sometimes assumed that the great problems of "Latin American Catholicism" are the lack of priests, or the spread of Protestantism, spiritism, Marxism, Masonry, and secularism. All of these are issues, but they do not explain the Latin American reality nor do they point us in the direction of a solution that could be applied with success.

History, if it attempts to be a science, cannot be the manifestation of negative and incoherent aspects. Rather, it must attempt to offer an explanation of the present and ascertain its causes. It is necessary, therefore, to discover in the first place the *origins* of the actual situation and the current events that we have outlined in the description of the crisis of the nineteenth century and the reawakening in the twentieth at the level of the elites. In the second place it is essential to discover in the past the "prophetic" groups who, ahead of their time, began to see in all of their profundity the difficulties of the immediate future, and who led others to the same kind of awareness. Likewise, it is the work of the historian to discover in the present those groups who will become the foundation of the immediate future, the evolution of the apparent phenomena, and the direction of the development of these phenomena and their structures. Investigations regarding Latin America should concentrate first of all on the evolution of the elites because they will determine the immediate future. Of much greater historical importance, however, for a scientific historical work, are the Christian student movements in such educational centers as the universities of Buenos Aires, Limá, or Santiago, those student groups that can win the elections and that represent twelve to twenty-five percent of the people in these cities. The percentage of those who practice their religion is merely the "residue" of the Christendom of the past and represents a negative phenomenon. The results of student elections in the above universities, on the other hand, represent the foundation of the secular and pluralistic civilization of the immediate future. What religious practice is in fact essential? It will obviously be for those aware of their faith, for those of the living Christian community, the means by which the masses are evangelized if in the divine providential economy such evangelization is possible or necessary. We say "if" because never in history has conscious faith and efficacious charity been practiced by the majority, and probably it never will be.

I. CATHOLICISM AND THE MASSES

The Latin American masses can be schematically divided into four groups: the inhabitants of the rural areas, the inhabitants of the cities, the Indians, and the foreigners. In each of these groups the causes of Christianization and de-Christianization and the means of evangelizing them are different. Note the examples of Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil.

Percentages of Urban and Rural Populations in Three Countries²

Nation	Years	% of Urban Population	% of Rural Population
Argentina	1895	38%	62%
	1914	56%	44%
	1955	67%	33%
Mexico	1921	31%	69%
	1930	33%	67%
	1950	42%	58%
Brazil	1920	28%	72%
	1940	31%	69%
	1950	36%	64%

As a whole, the Latin American countries are economically and technologically underdeveloped. The rural "world" remains in a quasicolonial stage while the great cities, the urban "world," benefits from the advances in industry that have slowly been achieved or that have resulted from the machines and technology bought from the developed countries. These two "worlds" coexist in the same geographical territory but live in different eras. There is no contemporaneity. The rural world represents the agony of colonial Christianity -that of the Indians, mestizos, and Creoles who today are less than sixty percent of the population of Latin America.³

The urban world developed very rapidly. Note the following three examples.

Number of Inhabitants By Parishes in Three Cities

City	Years	Population	No. of Parishes	Inhabitants By Parishes
Havana	1898	125,000	12	10,420
	1919	400,000	14	28,640
	1954	1,000,000	16	61,535
Buenos Aires	1911	1,200,000	24	56,680
	1954	3,497,000	121	28,900
São Paulo	1890	60,000	10	6,000
	1920	579,000	23	25,175
	1954	3,100,000	115	22,692

The population of these cities is exclusively from the third group, that is, the Creoles, mestizos, and foreigners. From 1821 to 1932 at least fourteen immigrant missions came to Latin America. The inhabitants of the great cities were, and are, doubly uprooted: the Europeans lost the Christian structures in their respective mother countries, and the Creoles lost the rhythm of rural life. Neither group encountered an ecclesiastical structure that would permit them to rechannel their faith. One can see that the number of the faithful in the parishes tends to diminish. This is another of the signs of renewal already discussed. It is possible that by the year 2,000 as many as ninety percent of the inhabitants of Latin America will live in the cities. If the third

level (see above, pages 55ff.) was essential for the new national, independent society, the urban sector will be essential for the future secular and pluralistic civilization. The census of 1947 in Argentina revealed the following official data: of the 16.5 million inhabitants, 93.6 percent said they were Catholic, and 1.5 percent claimed to be without any religion.⁴ There were 66,099 members of Catholic Action in 1945, and 3,500 priests.⁵

Thus, the situation in Latin America can be depicted clearly. The masses who call themselves Catholic, who have been baptized and in most cases married by the Church, and who in lesser numbers receive the sacrament of extreme unction, constitute the majority of the Latin American people both in the rural areas and in the cities. The *practicing* Catholics, however, fluctuate between 12 percent and 25 percent. No country has the general practice of religion such as one finds in Germany or in the "Christianities" of the French Bretons. Neither does one find the conscious and traditional de-Christianization that has characterized the French province of Creuse. The Catholic elite is but a small minority in Latin America, yet it is growing in awareness, responsibility, and numbers.

The rural population is weighed down by the traditions of the "mediations" instilled by the practice of Catholicism—the "fiestas," the "prayers," the "devotions," and the pilgrimages to holy places—many times associated with the superstition and magic of folk Catholicism. In Brazil this takes on the character of spiritism, and in the Caribbean it resembles the African religions: it is the "chiaoscuro" that we mentioned in the conclusions of Chapter VI. Certainly faith exists, but it is an incipient, inchoate faith. Evangelization, therefore, should be continued.

Among the urban population, the ecological, economic, and social disorganization has produced a neopaganism easily recognized in Paris, Hamburg, Rome, Madrid, London, or Buenos Aires. The problem in Latin America, however, is aggravated by the lack of current missionary structures.

Surely all those who have been baptized—although questions should be raised regarding the advisability of baptizing everyone who requests it and who calls himself or herself Catholic—belong to the people whom the Church embraces in its universality, but there is a twofold defect evident. The essential defect consists of the fact that Latin American faith and charity are distorted, insufficient, or, we might say underdeveloped. In the second place, Latin America is unaware of the distance that separates it from Jesus Christ and of being ineffective participants in the Church. This in turn impedes the masses from offering themselves for evangelization, and they are not prepared "to be missionized."

We are opposed to two extreme positions. One premise is that Latin America be considered as a continent absolutely in need of mission simply because a developed faith does not yet exist among the masses. This evaluation is not only somewhat immoderate and self-serving, but it is also frequently based on insufficient knowledge of the Latin American people and on technical, erudite, European criteria. The other extreme position that we oppose is that Latin America is a Catholic continent simply because more than ninety percent of the people are baptized. This judgment confuses the value of one's freely and consciously accepting the grace offered by Jesus Christ in the sacraments and substitutes a medieval or colonial manifestation of Christendom.

We believe that the truth is otherwise, namely, that Latin America is a continent partially evangelized—Indians, mestizos, and Creoles—and de-Christianized by the perplexity that exists among the foreigners or immigrants. This is to say, Latin America is initially Catholic but is equally a continent for mission. The masses, whether they are

ignorant or learned, possess only an incipient faith. A *minority* should begin to evangelize with the signs that the times clearly demand.

II. THE CHURCH AND FAITH

Let us consider the same problem from another point of view but entering into the essential aspects of the question.

The de-Christianization is far too rapid among the masses, and it is necessary to make a decision. That is, we need to know who is truly Christian and those who are susceptible to being authentic Christians in these countries. In a certain sense we need to begin anew constructing a Christianity deeply rooted in the Christian structure. In order to do this it will be necessary to decide if we will continue to occupy ourselves with the masses with the same intensity. Also we need to decide if priests should continue to maintain superficial contacts with people in order that they come from time to time to the Church. ...This would mean that the pastoral of the Church would renounce the choice between a Christianity which would subsist as those structures of Christendom subsisted, even though these are very few in Latin America Christendom should not be evangelized. Neither should Latin America as a whole be evangelized! ...For the basic preoccupation in Latin America is to protect the Christian institutions by all possible means. This has comprised Christianity much more so than in Europe. It has corrupted the words by which Christianity should be proclaimed and which should be employed in evangelism. And now we have no words.⁶ The writer of the preceding paragraph poses with valor and clarity the pastoral decision which will decide the future of the Church in Latin America.

In 1961 there were in Latin America 186,623,042 Roman Catholics, 18,783 diocesan priest, and 20,013 religious brothers, for a total of 38,796 priests. That is, there was one priest for every 4,810 faithful⁷ In contrast, there were in the United States 38,600,000 Roman Catholics with 55,006 priests, or a total of one priest for every 701 faithful The ratio between priests and communicants in Latin America indicates the importance of the decision that was discussed above. Can the Latin American priest do the normal work of a priest in Christendom, or should his work be clearly defined allowing him to do only the essential functions, as was the case in the primitive Church? Furthermore, would this not be even more justifiable if one takes into account the number of Protestant pastors in Latin America (20,660 in 1957)?⁸

Nevertheless, one should not ignore the dialectic between the Christian minority and the masses. If we take, for example, the case of the Brazilian Northeast, of the trade union minorities, of Catholic Action in the parish, or even of the priestly life, these are the means by which the minorities become aware of and work with the masses, and their faith is developed and their charity universalized. It is evident that what should be left aside are the Christian institutions that are the ballast, or the dead weight, of Christianity -institutions such as the private school the sacrament of baptism performed without any condition or commitment, or the time lost in administrative work. But the contact with the masses, those who ..call themselves Catholics," should not be set aside, i", view of the fact that this contact is a means of evangelism.

With respect to demographic growth, the number of priests has stabilized,⁹ but the ratio is not likely to diminish between the number of priests and faithful To increase the contacts between those who have a living faith and those who practice an effective charity, to whom we have referred as the elite, it is necessary to augment the pastoral staff, that is, allow the members of this elite to participate in functions that before have been reserved exclusively for priests. There is a great need for catechists, teachers of the rosary, deacons, deaconesses, and nuns who can distribute the sacraments, a need that has been met in Brazil. Surely the dialectic between the elite and the masses

calls for new methods, new ways of relating or “mediations,” created by the hierarchies as a solution to the problems outlined in this book.

In order to evangelize effectively the incipient faith of the *masses*, it is necessary to decide resolutely the means or the ways of involving the minorities who are already active Catholics, creating at the same time as a means of expression of these communities -as the beginning of the reevangelization -the hierarchial missionary structures that are now constituted exclusively by celibate priests.

Protestantism should be seen by Latin American Catholics as 'a providential gesture' that demands that the Church be involved in the formation of authentic Christian and missionary communities in order to bring together the "elect" with the "called," that is, the elite with the masses.

Is the goal of evangelistic work the constitution of a new Christendom analogous to medieval Christendom? No, the goal of evangelism is the conversion of those who will discover the message and who will actively cooperate and participate in the work of universal salvation. The elite will always be a minority, that is, a group within a pluralistic society. Even when Catholics are authentic and are in the majority, they will be a part of a secular civilization. The religious community should always be autonomous in relation to the political community. It will not be the *umma* of Islam or Christendom where legally, intellectually, and sociologically Christianity becomes an exclusive and excluding faith. Rather, it will be a secular civilization in which the elite accepts pluralism and the majority is tolerant. This is, of course, in contrast to what the rightists or “integralists” (members of a late nineteenth-century Spanish political party that advocated the preservation of national traditions) proposed, namely, to develop a "natural Christian society." The latter is not only a *contradictio in terminis*, it is also a theological error, for it presumes to universalize as essential and nontemporal a concrete and archaic system. Catholics in many countries in Europe as well as in the United States continue to live within certain structures of Christendom. In this sense, one can say that Latin America is confronting a problem at the present that these other countries will have to face in the future.

III. FAITH AND SIGNS

The "message" of Jesus Christ is directed toward human existence, that is, it represents an understanding of humankind. The human being, however, can understand this message only by means of signs: 'This was the first of the signs (*sémeion*) given by Jesus' (John 2: 11). But in order for a sign to be understood, it must signify something to the one to whom it is directed. To be comprehensible there must be a relation between the "sign" and the "people" to whom this sign is given.¹⁰ The one giving the sign should have in mind the situation in which the people live. Otherwise, the supposed sign signifies nothing. The Church is the "sign" of Jesus Christ in Latin America. But the "sign" that is understandable by this ignorant, starving people is justice. To appreciate the sign one must be aware of the suffering and injustice on a national and international level.

Karl Marx judged the European Church as the workers judged it in their time: "Religion is the opiate of the people";¹¹ and Catholicism was allied with conservatism, monarchism, and in the final analysis with the bourgeois. Support for agrarian reform was accompanied by turning over lands that were previously held by the diocese or religious orders -as in Chile -and began to produce in the people, at least in a small number of them, and in the working classes, a reaction unknown until the present: "Perhaps we can count on the Church in our struggle for justice." It is obvious that

the bourgeois, oligarchical, urban, and liberal minorities have been discredited in the eyes of the Latin American people, and even more so the conservatives. The Church, however, has been liberated not only from its old enemies, but also from many of its previous allies. Do not believe, however, that the concepts outlined thus far have been accepted in all of Latin America. On the contrary, there are still bastions of conservatism together with a false traditionalism or desire for a *new Christendom*.

CELAM in particular, and Christian groups in general, have begun to take a position in regard to social conditions by calling for a thorough reform of the structures. The committed laymen in the trade unions, guilds, and political parties represent the real dynamic in these movements.

At the level of *civilization* -in that the problems of faith and of pluralism remain at the level of the "ethico-mythical nucleus" -the Latin American Church, much more so than the European Church, is committed to the struggle for justice.

It is certain that, beginning with the wars for independence, that is, from 1808 until 1962, Latin America passed through a crisis that we have called the "agony of Christendom." It was not, however, an agony of Christianity; rather, to a certain degree it was Christianity's *modus vivendi*. Two phases of agony were endured. The first was the growing and inevitable decadence during which time all the institutions of colonial Christendom were virtually annihilated (1808- 1930). Gradually, however, from this agony sprang new efforts for "reconstruction." We would say that if one desires to view this second phase against a medieval or colonial "model," it would be the model of a "new Christendom." Catholic Action began with the "participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy of the Church," forgetting that the laity as such have their own ecclesial apostolate because of their baptism without needing special participation. The Christian political parties, such as Christian Democracy, that arose raised several difficulties, for these parties assumed in the name of Christianity a responsibility that every citizen already had. Both institutions -the lay apostolate and Christian Democracy -attempted the conversion or a return to the past culture and to a new type of Constantinian Christianity, even though the issue was not set forth in this way. The attempt to institute a "new Christendom" resulted in a temporal renaissance between 1930 and 1962. It is possible, however, that the way chosen was not definitive, yet on the other hand it is also possible that the way chosen was the most adequate for the phase that we have begun. Only an unanticipated fact, the greatest in the history of salvation, began to end the agony of Christendom, not because there was no one still struggling for a reestablishment of the old order of things, but because of the appearance of a new horizon, a new theological, pastoral and existential way of living Christianity as it was lived before the advent of Christendom. This unanticipated fact was Vatican Council II which signified a new stage in the history of the universal Church, but was even more decisive for the history of the Church in Latin America. The events of sacred history experienced by the Christians in Latin America since 1962 to the present will be the subject of the last part of this work.

In 1962 we wrote that in Latin America there had been created a twofold attitude. On the one hand, many Christians -insufficiently developed theoretically and existentially -had become victims of the disorientation, the anarchy of a progressivism that ignored tradition and the institution. Others, in contrast, were equally unprepared to face the changing reality and suffered a kind of vertigo, opposing any kind of reform or change. The preconiliar Christian attitude should have been what Christ indicated when he said, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their dead" (Matt. 8:22).