

THE TRADITIONAL AND PRESENT ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN LATIN AMERICA

Lucia PAWLIKOVÁ

Department of Ethnology, Faculty of Arts of Comenius University,
Gondova 2, 818 01 Bratislava, Slovakia

In past few decades, that is after the Second Vatican Council the traditional role of the Roman Catholic Church in many Latin American countries has changed very considerably. Latin America originated the controversial “Theology of Liberation”, which requires the involvement of the Church in the politics and sometimes uses Marxist rhetoric. The Catholic Church lost its previous unanimity and the progressive hierarchy and clergy in some countries began to promote new trends within it. This involved pastoral and social activities, the proliferation of so-called “church base communities” and a critical stand or even resistance against the military regimes. But nowadays the Catholic Church is still facing the challenge of finding its new role and mission in contemporary Latin America.

About one half of the world’s Roman Catholics live in Latin America, and 90 percent of the people in the region claim Catholicism as their religion. Being the one major ‘Third World’ region which is officially Christian, the future development of the Latin American Church may affect very profoundly the global impact of the Universal Church.¹ In this region, religion and politics have been closely intertwined since the Conquest, providing ideological, material and institutional support and legitimation to one another. But despite this, during the past thirty years the situation of Latin America was described as one of the ‘politicization of religion’, due to the transformation and changes in religion’s political involvement.²

¹ MEDHURST, Kenneth N.: *The Latin American Church*. Euro-Latin Research Papers No. 2, Research Unit on European Latin American Relations at the University of Bradford, 1991, p. 1.

² LEVINE, Daniel H.: ‘Religion and Politics, Politics and Religion: An Introduction’ in LEVINE, Daniel H. (ed.): *Churches and Politics in Latin America*. Sage Publication, Beverly Hills–London, 1980, p. 3; LEVINE, Daniel H.: ‘The Catholic Church and Politics in Latin America: Basic Trends and Likely Futures’ in KEOGH, Dermot (ed.): *Church and Politics in Latin America*. Basingstoke, The Macmillan Press, 1990, p. 26.

Being a relatively unified body, committed to theologically and politically conservative positions, the Church has become a divided and, in many instances, a radicalized institution.³

Since the colonization of the continent, the Catholic Church has been one of the most influential institutions, exercising control over the spheres of education, birth registry, marriage etc. and being the major land owner. For more than four centuries the Roman Catholic Church lent its support to the prevailing political order and identified itself with political and socio-economic elites in order to achieve its goals which were not only aimed at the salvation of all, but also at institutional preservation and ensuring influence and resources for ecclesiastical projects. It established itself as a legitimator of imperial authority, due to the fact that, by the virtue of special papal dispensations, the imperial power exercised direct control over the Church. In exchange, the Church was officially protected against possible competitors, acquired the control over the educational system and great economic assets.

New, independent republics tried to assert the same control over it. In the mid-nineteenth century, a series of Church-State conflicts began, starting primarily with attacks on the Church by upper-class politicians, who were determined to deprive it of its property to expand their plantations, continuing with the disputes over the Church's proper social role in the established order. This resulted (in the majority of Latin American countries, with exception of Mexico) in consolidation, and the Church remained socially conservative, although an economically diminished institution, forced to confine itself primarily to religious missions, leaving economic matters to entrepreneurs and political ones to civil authorities. Its secure position depended on alliances with economically and politically dominant groups, who were only practising orthodox and regular forms of devotion. A majority of Latin Americans, however, subscribed to some form of 'popular religion', often of syncretic variety, mingling Christian symbols with pre-Columbian or African beliefs and cults, and operating largely on the official Church's margins, which revealed that the Church's missionary task was far from complete. Thus the Church emerged from colonial rule and persisted through most of the post-independence period as an overwhelmingly conservative institution, united in support of established social hierarchies and in defence of the existing highly uneven distributions of wealth and power.⁴ Such tactics tended to distance the Church from the largely poor majority of Latin Americans. In their own defence, church leaders argued that they had no choice since their earthly mission was clearly a spiritual and not a materialistic one.⁵

³ MEDHURST, Kenneth N.: op. cit., p. 1.

⁴ MEDHURST, Kenneth N.: op. cit., pp. 1–2.

⁵ WYNIA, Gary W.: *The Politics of Latin American Development*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 87; CRAHAN, Margaret E.: 'Bridge or Barrier? The Catholic Church and the Central American Crisis' in PALMA, Giuseppe di and WHITEHEAD, Laurence (eds.): *The Central American Impasse*. Croom Helm, London, 1986, p. 130.

However, in the past three decades, the Church began to disengage itself from such alliances with the elites which were accompanied by fragmentation of the Church's once relatively homogenous posture vis-a-vis political domain. Within the present Church there are the groups ranging from exponents of authoritarian rule to exponents of radical or even revolutionary political involvement. Between them are those who have abandoned traditional alliances and have pursued a general reformist line or have sought to assume an apparently apolitical position.⁶ This results from the fact that since the 1960s onwards, some of national hierarchies in Latin American countries started to pursue more progressive tendencies and adopted reformist strategies. Though this was not unanimous either within national clergy, or in the whole Latin American Church, which was represented by CELAM (The Episcopal Council of Latin America). Nevertheless, this sudden change can be traced back to several historical events in the continent's history, which have brought challenges for the Catholic Church. These changes were also linked with the wide international context, especially with the contemporary developments in the international Catholic community.

First revisions in the theology started with two encyclicals **Mater et Magistra** (1961) and **Pacem in Terris** (1963), issued by the Pope John XXIII, which stressed the universal rights to education, a decent standard of living and political participation. The Pope himself had spoken "of the Church of the poor", which later became the key word of the Latin American Church and its theology.⁷

Reformist attempts were then reinforced by the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965). It established a certain equality among the laity, priests and bishops and reassessed the changing position and attitudes of the Church. Vatican II had significant repercussions in Latin America, providing new and far reaching possibilities on how to deal with the challenges of modernization and secularization and legitimizing previous calls for a less hierarchical and more communally-based Church as well as for more just national and international structures.⁸

Meanwhile some Latin American bishops (particularly in Brazil) already have begun to promote various Church sponsored programmes undertaken in defence of peasants, workers, shantytown dwellers and Indians, e.g. they called for agrarian reforms.⁹

In 1968, a Second Conference of CELAM was held in Medellin, Colombia, with the aim of applying Vatican II's general conclusions within the specific con-

⁶ MEDHURST, Kenneth N.: op. cit., p. 2.

⁷ DUSSEL, Enrique: 'From the Second Vatican Council to the Present Day' in DUSSEL, Enrique (ed.): *The Church in Latin America 1492–1992*. CEHILA, Tunbridge Wells, Burns & Oates, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis Books, 1992, p. 153.

⁸ MEDHURST, Kenneth N.: op. cit., p. 3.

⁹ DUSSEL, Enrique: op. cit., p. 155.

text of the region and discussing new and unexpectedly radical directions of post Vatican II debates. This gathering finally concluded in its documents that Latin American problems (such as poverty and underdevelopment) are mainly caused by the structures of the international capitalist order. It is necessary to transform the relevant national and international structures, which should be regarded as an indispensable Christian commitment and an expression of the Church's concern for human welfare. "The Church is a sinful church in a sinful (unjust) society, one marked by structured inequalities. Change was obviously called for and the Church wished to take part in the change. The church chose the side of the poor. It must reach out to them and to the whole continent. This would be accomplished through evangelization and lay participation (*pastoral de conjunto*) from which grassroots communities (*comunidades de base*) would emerge".¹⁰

In the post Medellín development, many controversies emerged within the ecclesiastical hierarchy on how to carry out the Church's new mission in the real world. The ensuing debate largely centred on whether the Church should be involved actively in the social, political and economic process of change that was taking place in Latin America or whether it should limit itself only to "spiritual values". Conservative bishops insisted that the clergy confine themselves to the pulpit, whereas the reformers insisted on pastoral involvement in the mobilization of the underprivileged groups for social actions. The conflict of viewpoints was to continue for eleven years until the Puebla Conference, where attempts to resolve it were made, but the difference remained.¹¹

The most striking post-Medellin development was the spread of "liberation theology". It originated in Latin America, therefore it has understood the region's realities and was notable for its approach to traditional Latin American problems. Nevertheless, it also made a very significant contribution to international ecclesiastical development and theological discussions.

One of the major issues which liberation theology is concerned with is a 'preferential option for poor', requiring a radical political commitment. Its critics objected that liberation theology not only represents undue politicization of faith but has also imported some Marxist characteristics into theology, e.g. it emphasizes the salience of classes. Some official Church leaders, including some radicals, have been concerned that liberation theology might involve the Church in the denial of traditional claims to be available to all social sectors.¹²

But changes of the Church's position owed not only to the development within the Church itself. Actually, from the 1950s, clerical and lay leaders began to engage

¹⁰ CLEARY, Edward L.: *Crisis and Change: The Church in Latin America Today*. Maryknoll, Orbis Book, New York, 1985, p. 42.

¹¹ CLEARY, Edward L.: op. cit., p. 44.

¹² MEDHURST, Kenneth N.: op. cit., p. 6.

in wide-ranging reassessments of Church strategies, particularly in the face of increasing inroads by secular and religious competitors, such as political parties, labour unions, student groups and Protestant missionaries from the US. The initial response was to focus on revitalizing the traditional source of Catholic support, the bourgeoisie, and evangelizing those who previously had not been targeted, primarily urban slum-dwellers and the rural poor.¹³

More than the threat from the side of political parties and leftist radical movements (even within the Church, e.g. Christians for Socialism in Chile and other countries: or Movement of Priests for the Third World in Argentina) the Church perceived the increasing competition of Protestant denominations for winning more followers. When the religious freedom was permitted by law in majority of Latin American countries, the Protestant missions began to penetrate into the region which was once a religious monopoly for the Catholic Church. They were very successful in attracting parishioners, providing the converts with many benefits that the Catholic Church did not, in the form of medical clinics, literacy campaigns, community improvement projects etc. Thus for the Protestant missionaries it was relatively easy to win converts among the majority of the rural and urban poor, traditionally ignored by the Catholic Church. Facing such competition, the Church was forced to initiate programmes to retain nominal parishioners. To prevent nominal Catholics from choosing competitors, the episcopacy had advocated (or at least tolerated) innovative reforms by combining direct pastoral organization and state assistance (e.g. subsidized Catholic education or even banning of competition).¹⁴

The proliferation of “ecclesiastical base communities” (CEBs) or grassroots communities which provided very high levels of popular lay participation have been a popular method of reinvigorating Catholic participation, especially among marginal groups. Proposed by documents from the Medellin conference, they also constituted one of the aims of liberation theology creating the new form of subparochial Church organization that sought to promote a greater effort to improve the plight of the poor. Their form varied considerably from country to country, sometimes they were led by clergy, or the members of religious orders, but frequently they enjoyed a considerable autonomy and operated under wholly lay auspices. In this way, they helped to raise up a new group of locally rooted lay Catholic leaders, who made up for the Latin American traditional shortage of clergy.¹⁵ They opened the way to a new kind of practice. CEBs used to be generally small, socially homogenous groups (mostly poor people) which met regularly to read and to dis-

¹³ CRAHAN, Margaret E.: *op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹⁴ GILL, Anthony J.: ‘Rendering unto Caesar? Religious Competition and Catholic Political Strategy in Latin America, 1962–79’. *Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 38, No. 2, May 1994, pp. 404–411.

¹⁵ MEDHURST, Kenneth N.: *op. cit.*, pp. 7–8.

cuss the Bible and to reflect on community life and problems.¹⁶ Some bishops, concerned for ecclesiastical unity, perceived with suspicion the CEBs, which tended to assume democratic, pluralistic or decentralized understandings of the Church, thus challenging the traditional conceptions of authority.¹⁷

Official Catholic responses to such developments were mixed. Some of the bishops welcomed and even positively encouraged attempts to broaden the Church's social base, but others adopted ambivalent or even hostile attitudes to recent changes. Current Vatican policy supported those who sought less radical directions and claimed traditional hierarchical understandings of ecclesiastical authority. They subsequently gained control over the CELAM, which significantly marked the next continent-wide episcopal gathering in 1979, held at Puebla, Mexico. Conservatives continued to condemn the theologies of liberation that became prominent in the 1960s, claiming that theologies that relied on Marxist concepts of social class to explain the plight of the masses, interpreted the gospel as advocating communal societies, and promoted revolution were wrong. Reform-minded clergy, in contrast, insisted that revisions in thinking and behaviour were essential to serving the poorest among them and bringing justice to entire societies long denied it.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the Puebla Conference reaffirmed the Church's commitment to social justice, and the bishops proclaimed a more explicit and stronger stand for human rights.¹⁹

The Church has begun to face the new task of the defence of human rights since the onset of the military regimes in the 1960s. Almost all Latin American countries went through a phase of military dictatorship following the programme of the doctrine of national security, conceived in the USA. As a response to problems such as labour unrest, inflation, societal polarization and the growth of Marxist parties or guerrilla movement which brought them to power, these dictatorships employed severe measures to restore order and promote more stable economic growth, e.g. they fought against 'revolutionary' movements, strictly limited political participation by banning or controlling political parties, labour unions or student groups and promoted a neo-liberal economic model in order to integrate into the geopolitical scheme of the US.²⁰ As a result, the whole gamut of human right was systematically violated. Amidst the atmosphere of repression, churches have become important actors in the struggle to counter these abuses of state power. In several authoritarian regimes the Church has been the sole source of opposition, but this was not uniform all across Latin America, because several national episcopates (e.g. in Argen-

¹⁶ LEVINE, Daniel H.: (1990), *op. cit.*, p. 27.

¹⁷ MEDHURST, Kenneth N.: *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁸ WYNIA, Gary W.: *op. cit.*, p. 88.

¹⁹ CLEARY, Edward L.: *op. cit.*, p. 44.

²⁰ COMBLIN, José: 'The Church and Defense of Human Rights' in DUSSEL, Enrique (ed.): *op. cit.*, p. 435.

tina, Bolivia, Guatemala, Paraguay, Uruguay) supported or did not criticise the military regimes. Among those, who actively opposed the authoritarianism were countries like Brazil, Chile and El Salvador, where national episcopates have pursued more progressive strategies and already set up various pastoral and social activities in order to fulfil the Church's "preferential option for poor". Because authoritarian regimes have opposed organization among the lower classes, they perceived the pastoral efforts among the poor as potentially threatening, which has become a source of conflict between the Church and the military regimes. It seems very likely that the increasing growth of Protestantism has forced the bishops to adopt these positions. Where the competition has not been so strong, the institutional interest led the Church to maintain friendly relation with the regime, even if the official support for Catholicism was minimal in order to influence policy decisions and obtain the highest possible amount of state subsidies.²¹

Christian base communities have become very instrumental in the popular resistance to authoritarian military rule. They mushroomed all across the region as a response to the exigencies of life under repression, because they helped to foster high levels of local initiative and lay responsibility, and they were often the only alternative for the participation, providing the feeling of solidarity which encouraged members in continued resistance. Moreover, the members of CEBs either joined or helped to create other political or economic organizations, such as labour unions, co-operatives, or agrarian leagues and promoted various economic self-help programmes.²²

But the religious message presented by many of the CEBs often called for the changing of exploitative relationships, which with the empowerment of the poor via autonomous organizations appeared revolutionary and threatened the security of military states. But the subsequent attacks against the pastoral missions, especially against the CEBs, their leaders and members, were seen as a challenge to the institutional autonomy of the Church, leading its officials to denounce the regime.²³

The bishops' policy of promoting human rights was also stimulated by pressures from below in their churches or from outside the ecclesiastical institutions. In some cases the killing of clergy moved them to set up emergency programmes, in many situations, the response came from general public pressure, as many people had nowhere else to go for help and churches were the last remaining organizations with the relative freedom to act.

The bishops not only condemned the violations of civil, social and political rights in hundreds of their pastoral letters, but also set up various human rights

²¹ GILL, Anthony J.: *op. cit.*, pp. 404–405, 411–413.

²² CLEARY, Edward L.: *op. cit.*, p. 116.

²³ GILL, Anthony J.: *op. cit.*, pp. 411–413.

commissions such as *the Vicariate of Solidarity* in Chile²⁴ and *Peace and Justice Commission* in Brazil), which provided a wide range of services – struggle for classic civil rights – the right of habeas corpus, the right to a fair trial, the right to be protected against torture; legal aid for the persecuted; humanitarian actions, such as allowing prison visits, improving living conditions in jails, enhancing communication between those detained and their families, and providing food, clothing, and health care for families. In some instances (Chile, Brazil), they have even been able to promote some social and economic rights; e.g. the assistance to workers arbitrarily dismissed from their jobs or the establishment of small self-help projects for the unemployed. Moreover, these human rights committees have become reliable sources of information for the international institutions as they gathered well-documented evidence on human rights violation in particular countries.²⁵

For twenty years the defence of human rights gave the church a mission in the world. In almost every country, the local churches eventually resisted the repression practised by local governments. In the 1980s, the process of redemocratization in Latin America started and subsequently all the military dictatorships went through it. It happened partially due to the fact that after a couple of years, military governments run out of energy; they had ceased to receive encouragement from the metropolitan countries and finally realized that the military could achieve the same goals without the direct exercising of political power. Accordingly, the military did not ultimately oppose the return to democracy called for by the popular movements and the Church. The last military dictatorship fell in 1989 in Chile. However, the return to democracy did not lead to the hoped-for mobilization of strong popular movements and a policy of social reforms capable of reversing the serious decline in the situation of the masses. The new democracies confirmed neo-liberal models and further increased the injustices in the distribution of wealth. This has resulted in the immediate disillusionment and a massive abandonment of political activity by the popular movements.

The Church is now facing to a new challenge. Its mission of defending human rights has run out of steam. The Church is looking for a different definition in the midst of a society which is still suffering. Instead of giving the Church great opportunities for organizing itself on the popular level, the process of democratization has rather led to the weakening of its base among the people, due to the Church's criticism of base communities and liberation theology, supported by the official policy of Vatican.

²⁴ For more details see e.g. LOWDEN, Pamela: 'The Ecumenical Committee for Peace in Chile (1973–1975): the Foundation of Moral Opposition to Authoritarian Rule in Chile'. *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1993, pp. 189–203.

²⁵ SMITH, Brian H.: 'Churches and Human Rights in Latin America. Recent Trends on the Subcontinent' in LEVINE, Daniel H. (ed.): op. cit.

In this context, many base communities have gone into crisis, like the popular movements, realizing that they are unable to reach or influence the masses. The poor are increasingly turning to Pentecostal Protestantism, African religions or Indian traditions, which are able to fill the void (in expressions of spirituality, community and solidarity) – a void that the Catholic Church determined on institutional rigidity is producing in Latin America. The Catholic Church is losing the masses almost without realizing it and without doing anything about it. It is unwilling and unable to change its dated structures, so it only looks on passively while its bases disintegrate. The Vatican's conservatism and centralism is paralysing the clergy at the time they most need creativity and freedom.²⁶

The task of evangelization is carried out by various international movements, such as *Opus Dei*, the *Neo-Catechumenate movement*, the *Comunione e Liberazione movement* and the most important force in present Latin American Catholicism, the *Catholic Charismatic Renewal*. The lay movements are now the most dynamic force in the Latin American Church, because the more and more bureaucratic clergy are losing contact with real people and evangelization is left to the laity.²⁷

Under democratic regimes we may anticipate a new role for the Church in solidifying democratic norms throughout Latin American societies. But in its present crisis it remains open whether the Catholic Church could play a large role in the further promotion of the democratization and would enhance the prospects for democracy in Latin America.

REFERENCES

- CLEARY, Edward L.: *Crisis and Change: The Church in Latin America Today*. Maryknoll, Orbis Books, New York, 1985.
- PALMA, Giuseppe di and WHITEHEAD, Laurence (eds.): *The Central American Impasse*. Croom Helm, London, 1986.
- DUSSEL, Enrique (ed.): *The Church in Latin America 1492–1992*. CEHILA, Tunbridge Wells, Burns & Oates, Maryknoll, Orbis Books, New York, 1992.
- GILL, Anthony J.: 'Rendering unto Caesar? Religious Competition and Catholic Political Strategy in Latin America 1962–79'. *Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 38, No. 2, May 1994.
- KEOGH, Dermot (ed.): *Church and Politics in Latin America*. Basingstoke, Macmillan Press, 1990.
- LEVINE, Daniel H. (ed.): *Churches and Politics in Latin America*. Sage Publication, Beverly Hills–London, 1980.

²⁶ COMBLIN, José: op. cit., pp. 435–436.

²⁷ COMBLIN, José: op. cit., pp. 452–453.

- LOWDEN, Pamela: 'The Ecumenical Committee for Peace in Chile (1973–1975): the Foundation of Moral Opposition to Authoritarian Rule in Chile'. *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 1993.
- MEDHURST, Kenneth N.: *The Latin American Church*. Euro-Latin Research Papers No. 2, Research Unit on European-Latin American Relations at the University of Bradford, 1991.
- WYNIA, Gary W.: *The Politics of Latin American Development*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990.