

The Medellín Statement

by The Bishops of Latin America

On 24th August the Pope solemnly opened the general assembly of all the Bishops of Latin America in the Cathedral of Bogota, Columbia. This was the second general episcopal conference to be held on the soil of South America, and the first meeting of a local Church on a continental scale since Vatican II. This assembly had been carefully prepared for over a year by bishops, theologians and experts from the whole of South America, in accordance with an express mandate from the Episcopal Commission of Latin America, created in the wake of the first general assembly of the Bishops of Latin America held in 1955. The text which we publish below (thanks to the kind permission of the editor of 'Informations Catholiques Internationales') is the first half of the first part of the entire document, which consists of three parts in all: this description of the situation in the continent, a theological reflexion, and pastoral directions.

The general theme of the Medellín assembly was 'the Church in the present transformation of Latin America in the light of the Council'. The conclusions of the assembly have since been published, but this comprehensive diagnosis of the facts remains striking from many points of view: the catching of a historic moment of awakening on the part of a whole continent, the detail and social awareness, the sense that 'the difficult progress towards development and integration [in Latin America] could become an important catalyst in the process of unification to which the whole human race is converging today', and the vivid realization that 'the upheaval we are experiencing demands new attitudes of us so that we can carry through an urgent, global and profound reform of structures' (from the Introduction to the Statement)—all these are remarkable in an ecclesiastical document.

'The description could appear to be pessimistic, since we do not dwell on the positive factors, which do of course exist. But it is, nevertheless, a reflexion of the reality of Latin America, which is tragic, and which demands a swift and effective response.'

THE HUMAN REALITIES

The demographic situation

The increase of the population of Latin America is greater than that of any other continent. In 1900 there were 63,000,000 inhabitants; fifty years later, 163,000,000; and today, in the middle of 1968, the population is estimated to be 268,000,000. At the present rate the estimated population in 2000 will be 690,000,000.

The population is still essentially rural, except in certain countries, and there is a movement towards the big cities. This is where the

grave problem of migration fits in. The population is essentially a young one: 40 per cent consists of the under-fifteens.

This demographic growth has important repercussions on the social and ethical planes.

1. The index that is commonly used to measure in part economic development is that of the average income. In Latin America this amounts to scarcely 300 dollars a year per person. This is the present equivalent of a third of what a European receives and a seventh of what a North-American receives. During the past few years most of these countries have had a rate of economic growth much lower than that foreseen by the 'Alliance for Progress'.

It should not be forgotten that great differences exist between the various countries of Latin America and between different social groups within each country. A tiny minority receives the greater part of income. This group concentrates agricultural property and the means of production within its own hands, whilst the mass of the people have a minimal income and are exposed to the constant risk of unemployment.

Another feature of this economic situation is the subjection to foreign capital—which so often exercises domination without being controlled, tends to become more and more powerful, and has little interest in remaining within the country. What is more, Latin-American trade is threatened by its dependence on developed countries which buy their raw material cheaply in Latin America and then sell manufactured products necessary for development at prices that keep going up.

The absence of integration and solidarity on a continental scale in the face of the developed world makes the social and economic progress of our peoples more difficult.

2. On the other hand, demographic pressure stimulates a growing demand for food, clothing, homes and education. And the process of imitation accentuated by the mass media effects a qualitative change in the demand for goods and services.

The activity of powerfully organized unions in many countries reinforces the process of redistribution of incomes and strengthens the traditional demand for 'bread and work'.

The development of light industry, particularly since the Second World War, increases the demand for industrial machines and raw materials and by this fact reinforces the dependence on the outside world.

The miserable or non-existent level of agricultural technique creates difficulties in the face of increasing demands for food and does nothing to further the export of food-stuffs, which is generally precarious.

All these factors combine to make the internal rate of savings very low and to promote an inflation which makes their use to more productive ends difficult.

The social situation

1. The social situation is at once the cause and the consequence of the economic structure defined above. Social development presupposes the raising of the standard of life, the elimination of extreme poverty and the development of social services. On the other hand, it implies a radical change in the social structures so as to allow all men to take part in the common good and the service of society, as well as to determine their own destiny.

2. The standard of life of the greater part of the population is extremely low. The privileged groups of society represent about 2 per cent to 3 per cent of the population. The middle classes, including skilled and unskilled workers, have a standard of life that goes from the modest to the poor. They have access to public health and education services. They have decent clothes and food. They are able to take part in the political and cultural life of the country. Their aspirations have grown more rapidly than their possibilities. That is why they have difficulty in finding accommodation and why the social security system is far from being sufficient for their want. Inflation, alternating with periods of austerity, has contributed to a climate of social insecurity.

The disproportionate inflation of the service sector often hides forms of unemployment in the bureaucracy and in unproductive activities. Wages are generally so low that they do not allow the satisfaction of even elementary needs.

3. The marginal urban population consists largely of emigrants from the countryside who have come to the city impelled by a new hope of improving their lot, or who have been driven out of the countryside through not being able to earn a living from the land. They form whole districts inside and on the edge of the cities, made out of refuse materials. In these districts the very low standard of life, the lack of hygiene, the crowding and the very extent of the slums subject these men to sub-human lives.

The characteristic of these people is their marginal life—pre-eminently passive to the extent that they do not benefit from the services of society (medical, social, educational, etc.); to the extent that they take no part in decision-making or in the solution of problems, even those which affect them directly. This marginal character increases on account of the interior disintegration in which these men live. They lack social cohesion, so that they cannot organize themselves.

It must no doubt be recognized that in many cases the awareness of their own marginalization pushes them to master this situation by means of self-help movements and community development.

4. The rural population has many of the marginal features described above: inappropriate diet, inadequate housing, lack of services, little participation in social and political life.

The few schools are often so deficient that they do not secure even

a functional literacy. Here the importance and influence of social means of communications, like the transistor, must be underlined, since they serve to waken the appetite for goods unknown before.

The status of peasants in relation to the ownership of the land on which they live varies considerably throughout Latin America. Agricultural reform and the use of machines has begun in certain countries, but at too slow a pace or under programmes which are still incomplete. This fact, plus the frequent opposition of minority groups, makes a serious change in the system of ownership and production of the land even more difficult.

5. Indigenous population and other ethnic groups. Apart from the dominant type of western culture in Latin America, many other cultures also exist, and there is a cultural cross-breeding of Indians, black and half-caste people. The language, customs, institutions, values and aspirations of these various cultures are insufficiently known. The 'integration' of these cultures into the national life more often than not unhappily means something more like their destruction than the recognition of their rights to flourish and to enrich, and be enriched by, the cultural heritage of the nation.

6. Young people are not merely the most numerous group in Latin America but make up an independent reality within society. Cultural and social change has affected them profoundly. Formerly, they were integrated into the various social groupings: family, centres of study and work. You reached them through institutions directed by adults. Now the young are as it were a new social body with its own ideas and values, its own momentum, searching for new responsibilities and new functions within the Latin-American community. We are living through an age of crises and upheavals which set off conflicts between generations. The young reject the image of the world which their elders have constructed, because they consider that their style of life is inauthentic. This dissatisfaction is growing more and more. Young people want new solutions for a juster society.

The cultural situation

1. Education. Education is a fundamental element in social-economic development. The population of Latin America is about 50 per cent illiterate—without counting the adults who are functionally illiterate. Despite efforts to make quantitative improvements in the educational system, these are not sufficient to meet the demands of demographic development.

The lack of educational facilities, especially in the country and among the marginal populations, is alarming.

Education is not diversified, as it should be in order to satisfy the needs of national development and the cultural variety that exists. Technical and agricultural schools have recently been set up, but they do not meet the demand. A similar lack of adaptation afflicts

universities in Latin America; they are copies of universities in the developed countries and as such do not correspond to specific problems. Studies have remained traditional, there are practically no cycles of the intermediate studies which would be more necessary for socio-economic development. Little research is carried out in the universities and the inter-disciplinary exchange that is indispensable for the progress of culture and the integral development of society does not exist.

On the subject of the educational system, we must also mention the shortage of teachers, the inadequate preparation of a great number of them and, in many cases, their ideological dependence on foreign countries. The teacher's role is not yet appreciated sufficiently in society. Salaries are low. With certain exceptions, national treasuries spend more on military budgets than on education. Schools are not yet carrying out their task of renewing the social structures of Latin America. The important changes necessary to prepare men for the new world that is emerging have not yet penetrated our educational system. We are even far from an authentic democratization of the teaching system. Adult education, which is so important in a continent where practically half the adult population is still illiterate, is largely neglected. Fundamental education, which has been created recently, is not yet widely spread in our countries.

2. Cultural tendencies. Latin America is in the process of evolving rapidly from a traditional to a new society. Cultural changes impinge first of all on the large towns though they do not leave the rural sectors untouched. Existing society is characterized by a new type of social relationships, by socio-cultural pluralism, by new standards of behaviour and by new hopes and desires. This whole tendency is accelerated by the communications media which contribute powerfully to the creation of a certain mass culture and the stimulation of this desire for change.

Social Relationships. Social linkings largely based until now on the family are giving way to linkings based on contract and free association; and this serves to create further social differentiation.

The traditional family is no longer the privileged means of transmitting ideas. Already there is no longer only one way of looking at life; on the contrary, there is greater freedom to affirm one's own conceptions. The continual specialization of work brought about by technological advance brings with it an ever greater dependence of men upon each other and an acknowledgment of the complexity of inter-connected phenomena.

The Socio-cultural Pluralism. The transformation of values and standards is even more important, since it is here that religion is most closely affected. The standards or values which become most important are no longer the oldest but the most functional. A monolithic society in which the transmission of cultural values was largely due to the force of inertia is being replaced by another society

with a complex of values and standards stemming from diverse ways of looking at life. Authority is no longer accepted unquestioningly; men want to take part in the discussion of goals, and talk over problems before accepting them. A certain socio-cultural pluralism is coming to birth—and in the political as well as in the religious and social order.

The New Forms of Behaviour. All these changes involve new forms of behaviour. A growing sense of freedom is emerging, even though for the vast majority this remains at the level of desire and aspiration on account of low social and economic standards. Nor can we afford to ignore the birth of a sense of internationalism which transforms narrow regionalism or nationalism.

Man today, in the face of insecurity, and under the threat of solitude, looks anxiously towards community and integration into a group. This is why a search for community forms of life is manifesting itself by way of compensation for the anonymity that characterizes society.

New Hopes and Desires. The Latin-American, who has endured poverty in silence for so long, is suddenly waking up, and his demands outstrip the rhythm of development. What used to be unconscious poverty has become conscious misery. In this way a sense of frustration is born parallel with these new and unsatisfied desires, and this is often the basis of a revolutionary movement.

The logical consequence of these changes follows: the centre of gravity formed by religious thinking shifts, seeing that greater rationalization brings with it the loss of many values, the abolition of magic, desacralization, and the habit of centring things far more on man than on God.

The political situation

Our political systems are ill-adapted to the increasing need for the integration of the Latin-American continent. They are copies of European systems, stuck on to very different realities. Latin-American politics remains dependent on the great world powers.

One of the important features of this situation is that the Latin-American people are politically put on one side: the great mass of people take little or no part in the making of decisions that affect the common good. The disillusionment of people with politicians and the hypertrophy of politics only accentuate this fact.

Democracy is more formal than real; and in many cases genuine freedom of organization and a global plan of government go by default.

The political systems amount to various forms of oligarchy. Because there are no intermediate groups to help the process of integration into national life, such as trade unions, and university and peasant organizations, small groups govern without check.

The State for its part has not carried out its role properly, often

seeking to monopolize all human activity whilst failing to control the great sources of national riches.

There is also a lack of balance between small pressure groups, and in many countries the military group plays a quite decisive role.

It is the great popular movements born in some of the countries of Latin America which have taken the most decisive steps towards a democracy in which all take part. These movements are in themselves forces for the integration of those who have until now remained on the edge of things and, so far as the future is concerned, an instrument for the integration of the nation as a whole.

Because the evolution of the continent is where it is, there is a ferment of agitation, and Latin America is faced with the 'temptation of violence'. Integration of the nation ensures the elimination of internal violence, and some countries of Latin America want to demonstrate that it is possible to follow this way peacefully through national and popular movements. But it is clear that success will depend on the seriousness and rapidity with which they face the problems of economic development and change of social structure.

To sum up: The foregoing analysis reveals a state of underdevelopment which affects the general situation in our continent. Men see the injustice of differing social conditions and realize that they are not fated to live in such a manner for ever; and, if it should be necessary, they will seek violent methods to overcome this state of affairs.

It cannot be denied that this continent, in many regions, finds itself in a revolutionary situation; and this demands global, daring, urgent, and profoundly renovatory changes.

It is not surprising that violence is taking root, since the situations mentioned above are already violent—in that they are inconsistent with human dignity and oppress freedom. What is really more surprising is the patience of a people who for many years have borne a condition which would have been less easily tolerated given a greater awareness of the rights of man.

The lack of technical development, blind oligarchical classes, large-scale foreign capitalists, all hinder the necessary transformations, and offer active resistance to everything which might threaten their interests. This consequently creates a situation of violence. But the alternatives are not *status quo* or change, but rather peaceful or violent change.

Faced with a situation so grave, and which so dramatically affects men, we believe it is not sufficient to describe the reality giving rise to the 'temptation of violence'; we feel the duty to denounce egotistical interests, and appeal to all men of good will to unite their intellectual abilities, their energies, and their resources with the aim of constructing a society developed in justice, love, and liberty.