

Brotherhood: The Responsibility of Bishops Today¹

by The Bishops of Brasil

The central commission of the national conference of bishops of Brasil feels obliged to clarify certain issues in public and to explain to the faithful how it conceives the mission of the hierarchy.

It should not be a matter of surprise that many of our brother bishops should have expressed themselves in public in these times, whether individually or together. It is today's conditions that make it far more necessary than formerly for authority to be exercised in constant communication with members of society. . . .

Our very first responsibility, we hold, is the furthering of brotherhood among men, as consecrated by sharing in Christ. We are in the service of love, in its fullest meaning, and that not only on behalf of members of the Church, but of all men.

It is our duty to explain our mission better. This mission is ignored by some, misunderstood by others, and deliberately falsified by certain groups who claim to be serving the Church whilst in fact furthering their own interests. Neither misunderstanding nor falsehood will make us desist from the job that is ours by divine commission and that has marked the presence of the Church in our history. . . .

We repudiate the Marxist claim that religion despoils man by consoling him with a future happiness that will compensate for frustrations inevitable on earth. And to affirm that the religious mission of the bishops must be confined to what is called the 'spiritual life' is in effect to accept the Marxist conception of religion. To proclaim the defence of 'Christian civilization' and at the same time to deny the Church's mission to defend humane values is tantamount to defending a disguised paganism. We are surprised at the curious transformation of hardened liberals and agnostics into defenders of a disembodied Christianity that is a far cry from the Gospel. . . .

The bishops cannot allow the claim of anybody to define or delimit their functions apart from the Church's legislation. These functions in no way contradict the ordering of civil society provided this latter is just and reasonable. On the contrary, by guiding the faithful to the exercise of justice and charity, they contribute to the maintenance of true social order. The Church demands the most scrupulous respect for the fundamental rights of the human person

¹This is a translation of the declaration made by the central commission of the episcopal conference of Brasil. It is made from the French, thanks to the editor of *Informations Catholiques Internationales*, to whom we are indebted for the text and for his authorization to translate and publish it here.

as well as obedience to public authority as the guardian of the common weal. Church and State enjoy autonomy and independence in their own fields, each respecting the other. . . .

Reflecting as honestly as we can on the demands made of us, we feel all the weight of our responsibility at this particular conjuncture of Brasil's history. In face of the anguished situation (of our country) we cannot evade the duty that lies upon us; this is to form the conscience of our faithful so that they wake up and undertake apostolic work truly calculated to effect the necessary changes. . . . To prepare lay people to accomplish this work with courage, as the Pope has so pressingly asked, is not to be subversive. On the contrary, it is to help towards true peace, which cannot be procured without a just social order.

We do oppose truly subversive movements, that is to say, movements designed to disturb the social order and to exploit the ensuing anarchy for factional advantage. In the same way the abuse of economic and political power for one's own particular interest is also a subversion of the social order. . . .

We are well aware that the passage from an individualistic ethic based exclusively on profit and pleasure to a community ethic based on the sharing of all in the common good will be slow and painful. We cannot however for that reason evade the effort. . . . We realize that many people at different levels of society look to the Church as one of their last hopes. We are appalled by the poverty of resources at our disposal. It is not for us to take the urgent and unavoidable decisions. . . . We have not the means to relieve misery. But we wish to collaborate in all genuine programmes of human betterment especially in association with lay people, in order to do away as soon as possible with all help that is paternalistic.

We feel obliged to express our solidarity with all our brother bishops, priests and lay people when their authentically apostolic initiatives are misunderstood or unjustly handled. We send special words of encouragement to those of our priests who have declared their anguish and disturbance to us. . . .