

The Church in Bolivia

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Izara doesn't appear on the map of Bolivia. It is a tiny village of some 100 people lying in the foothills of the range of mountains that mark the edge of the Altiplano, the 14,000 foot high plateau on which most of the country's five million people live. It is just one of the 50 communities served by three priests who live in the village of Paria some 30 miles away by an unpaved dusty road. I went with one of the priests, an Englishman, Fr John Sullivan, on his quarterly visit to Izara during which he married a young couple, baptised two babies and said Mass. But the small Indian community of Izara doesn't have to wait another three months to celebrate their faith or receive instruction since every Sunday Luis, the village catechist, leads the community's liturgy.

Luis is just one of the 4,000 adult catechists who have become the leaders of the church in their traditional and isolated communities. They have grown up in the communities and they get their formation as community leaders by going away for week-long courses every few months organised for the catechists of a particular area. It is this network of catechists which has become the single most important influence in the growth of a grass-roots church in Bolivia. They are, Mr Pedro Duran, the co-ordinator of the episcopal commission on catechetics, explained to me a phenomenon in Bolivia where the church relies on foreign missionaries for 90 per cent of its clergy. For the first time Bolivians have become not just helpers of foreign missionaries but an autonomous force evangelising their own people from within their highly distinctive culture and not from outside it. They are filling a vacuum between the missionary and the local people and are going to places where the missionary could never go. In this way, "they bring a new attitude, a new sense of church," Pedro Duran said.

As important as the fact that the Bolivians are now evangelising themselves are the tools they use for doing it. Far from following prepared texts and courses they are going straight to the sources themselves and are using as well as the Bible, the documents of the two Latin American bishops conferences, Medellin and Puebla, and such documents from Rome as *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Populorum Progressio*. The content of this evangelisation therefore is one which emphasises the liberating dimensions of the Gospel, a

vital dimension for a very poor people marginalised from the money economy and for whom religion contains a strong element of placating a vengeful God. Therefore as Pedro Duran put it, "in assuming their own culture they can evangelise in terms more liberating than those of the foreign missionaries".

The beginnings of the growth of a church truly incarnated in the complex culture of the Bolivian people, some 60 per cent of whom have their roots in the pre-Spanish Aymara and Quechua cultures, has been a slower and more difficult task than elsewhere in Latin America. Partly because of their Indian culture which still imposes strong community and cultural bonds on many Bolivians, the priesthood has never taken root and even today there are only a handful of priests from Indian backgrounds. The obligation of celibacy also imposes a value which is foreign to the Indian mentality and most Bolivian priests today live with women and have families while continuing to be fully respected and even supported by the communities they serve.

The necessity of depending on foreign priests has led to foreign and paternalistic models of pastoral work being followed in Bolivia. This can be seen in two phases, pre-Medellin (1968) and post-Medellin. With the wave of European and North American clergy and religious which arrived in Bolivia responding to the calls of Pope Pius XII in the fifties and to Pope John after him came too a mentality of seeking to apply already worked-out models with little awareness of, or respect for, the local culture. Though the model varied from nationality to nationality a common denominator was the consciousness of doing things for the local people especially in the field of building an infrastructure of churches, parochial houses, convents, health centres and schools. Again in the words of Pedro Duran these missionaries had the attitude "more of implanting in the people rather than evoking from their own creativity", and so the people got the idea that the church was there to give them things. This latter attitude is still widespread among many Bolivians today. Underlying this model of pastoral action, which reached its peak in the years after Vatican II, was a developmentalist ideology which saw the development of the local culture coming through an influx of financial and human capital from the developed world.

In the immediate aftermath of Medellin came what Pedro Duran called "an impulse for more authentic evangelisation". While Medellin in one intense move changed the model from the Vatican II model of underdevelopment/development to one of dependence/liberation, it did so in the Left-wing political climate of the late sixties which hit Bolivia with its own peculiar intensity in the person of Che Guevara. The political naivité and elitism which Che

displayed in going to Bolivia in the hope that the poor campesinos in South America's poorest republic would rise up and join him was mirrored in church groups.

Two forerunners can now be seen preparing from the mid-sixties for the stage of overtly Left-wing church groups which erupted after Medellin. One was the work of US Dominicans with university students particularly in the city of Cochabamba where a Catholic university group which began in 1958 as an opposition to a Communist university front moved into a phase of co-operation with the Communist group and then into a more radical phase of setting up its own revolutionary party, the Movement of the Revolutionary Left, MIR.

The other big influence in radicalising church groups came from the mines. Tin mining is the sector on which every Bolivian government relies for the bulk of its legal export earnings (cocaine exports have replaced tin recently but this is officially illegal). The workers in these mines constitute the best organised and most militant sector of the Bolivian working class and since the early fifties a group of French and Belgian Oblates have been working in the mining towns seeking to relate the church to the conditions of these miners. In the immediate post Vatican II period and under a wave of particularly severe repression in the mines which led to mass dismissals, lowering of salaries in actual terms and the closure of the church radio stations the Oblates became increasingly radicalised. In their public denunciations of what they saw happening around them they awakened the conscience of the bishops some of whom supported a letter of 126 priests to the two military co-presidents of Bolivia protesting at the government's activities and policies in regard to the miners. By July 1969 the priests working in the mines had got to the stage of accusing capitalism for the conditions of the miners.

But it was in the immediate aftermath of Medellin that this consciousness became widespread among groups of clergy, mostly foreigners. Through pastoral courses and numerous new organisations which flourished catering for the organisation and popular education of campesinos and workers, a sophisticated political analysis of the Bolivian reality was developed. From 1968 a group called Iglesia y Sociedad en America Latina (ISAL), which grouped Catholic and Protestant clergy and lay people, became an umbrella group articulating this new consciousness through annual meetings and public statements. This reached its stage of greatest definition in 1971 when ISAL publicly pledged itself to work for a socialist society in Bolivia.

Aiding this definition was the political situation of Bolivia at the time. After General Rene Barrientos, who had been president

since 1965, was killed in a plane crash in 1969 there were two years of relatively Left-wing government, first under General Ovando Candia who nationalised Gulf Oil and gave more freedom to trade unions but who was overthrown by General Juan Torres who ruled from October 1970 to August 1971. General Torres was a man with genuine Left-wing sympathies but with little political experience and he sought to foster the growth of *Asambleas Populares* through which the workers and campesinos could take power over their own work and living situations. This was therefore a period of widespread mobilisation of the people and of defining political positions and it gave a further impulse to those church groups already engaged in this process. So much did it legitimise a Left-wing political option, which had received its symbolic expression in the death of the guerrilla and christian layman, Nestor Paz, whose diary expressing his deep spirituality was published in the Catholic daily paper *Presencia* after he was killed in early 1970, that it occasioned statements from bishops supporting the building of a socialist society. Notable among these was a statement from Archbishop Manrique of La Paz called 'The Church and Socialism'.

But of all the many statements from that period defining church positions by far the most significant was the collective pastoral letter signed by all the country's 21 bishops at the time, most of them not noted for their political radicalness, called 'The Church in Bolivia and Integral Development' and published in the immediate aftermath of Medellin on 15th August 1968. This was a remarkably far-seeing letter calling attention to the marginalised and impoverished situation in which the majority of Bolivians live and calling for "a profound change in thinking and in much of the existing social structures". As well as that it called attention to the "urgent need" for a renovation of the Church, for pastoral planning with the involvement of clergy, religious and lay people which would activate the dormant faith of the majority of Bolivians not only to a sacramental practice of the faith "but much more to the daily practice of justice and charity". Though marked to an extent by a developmentalist model for the solution of Bolivia's problems, it was an important stage in defining an official church view amid the ferment of the time.

One significant event put an end to the exciting developments in the Bolivian church in those years and overnight put the church in a completely new situation. That was the Right-wing coup of General Hugo Banzer in August 1971. It inaugurated an intense wave of repression of the popular church, the expulsion of foreign church personnel and the closing of numerous organisations which had been created by these people for the popular education and

mobilisation of the oppressed. Added to that the episcopal conference had already begun to move against such groups as ISAL which had become too vocal in their criticisms of conservative church groups and activities, including at times of bishops themselves. The coup succeeded in eradicating what the bishops had already disassociated themselves from.

The 1971 coup, then, closed a phase in the Bolivian church. Bishop Julio Terrazas, an auxiliary bishop of La Paz, evaluated for me what this phase had meant for the church. For him it was "more positive than negative" though it did involve a small elite not representative at all of the mass of christians. Its main result was "to spread a consciousness among other christians that Christianity isn't just personal – but is social too". But what it lacked for Bishop Terrazas was "a clear vision of where it was going in an ecclesial sense". It became, he thinks, too involved in one political party, the MIR, and through that its ecclesial commitment tended to be diminished. In the words of Pedro Duran, it created a 'vanguard' in the Bolivian church. As such it created a sector within the church which had a developed political awareness and which played a significant role as the seventies developed into a decade of bouts of intense repression in which this church sector played a vital role in denouncing the violation of human rights and in helping the victims of these violations.

The 1971 coup threw the Bolivian church into disarray. Faced with a determined Right-wing government the bishops as a group showed a lack of leadership and even disassociated themselves from stands they had taken in the previous years. The hopes for a pastoral renewal which they themselves had expressed in their 1968 pastoral letter came to nothing and most settled for a traditional pastoral work of simply maintaining church institutions and sacramental and devotional practices. Meanwhile in the absence of a clear leadership many priests and religious simply got down to the task of developing the christian communities under their care particularly in the sense of motivating leaders from among the communities.

This process is clearly seen in a small church group which plays a role which is much more important than its size would warrant and which among the Protestant churches of Latin America stands out for its clear commitment to the liberation of the oppressed: the Methodist church in Bolivia. Begun through the work of US missionaries in 1907 the church has now about 7,500 members, with around 60 local pastors serving some 75 communities. But the great success of the Methodists has been that they have put down their roots in Aymara Indian communities of the Altiplano and in poor areas around the cities marking them aside very clearly

from the more middle class Protestant churches in most Latin American countries. It was when they gave the schools they had developed in these communities over to the state and concentrated instead on evangelisation that their real growth began. From 1960 to 1968 they kept a seminary training local people from the communities to be pastors but since then this has become a training centre for lay leaders. With a network of local pastors they became an autonomous church in 1969 and now there are only two missionary families left in Bolivia.

Their leader now, since Bishop Mortimer Arias was expelled from the country after the July 1980 coup, is an Aymaran Indian, Bishop Zacarias Mamani Huacota. He told me that the church's task is "to accompany the historical process of the liberation of the people" and he is pleased that through the formation given to the lay leaders of the Aymara communities, they now take on leadership functions at a political level in their communities as well as organising the people to resist the traditional exploitation of the campesinos by those who buy their products from them. For the Methodist church this is "a new experience of ministry where the church leader becomes a symbol of unity between the church and the community". Particularly at times of political crisis these leaders can exercise a very important function for the whole community and not just the Methodist members.

Pastor Rolando Villena, the secretary of the Church's department of Life and Mission, explained to me the practical ecumenism which a commitment to liberation theology gives rise to. Particularly in the context of the severe repression experienced in Bolivia, the issue for Methodists and Catholics is "how to serve together our people who are being persecuted, how to give a common witness". So identified are Methodists in the work of church groups working with the victims of repression, says Rolando Villena, that "the government thinks we are priests".

The Banzer dictatorship lasted seven long years during which the quiet, unobtrusive work continued building up a grass-roots church. Meanwhile the group that had become more politically aware in the pre-1971 period found an outlet in the newly formed episcopal Justice and Peace Commission. More than simply denouncing the repression of the government, the Justice and Peace Commission developed a role for itself in supporting and strengthening trade union and political groups working in the conscientisation of workers and campesino groups. Through publishing pamphlets and organising meetings the Commission helped to make them "realise their role in the political situation" as Pedro Duran put it to me. But the lack of leadership that has been such a problem for the Bolivian church became evident again after the Commission

published a booklet in 1975 denouncing a massacre committed by troops which the government had tried to deny ever happened. With the Commission's exposure of the full facts of the massacre, in which some hundreds of people were killed, the Banzer government had had enough and put pressure on the bishops to close the Commission. The bishops agreed.

But even though Banzer had promised he would remain president for 20 years, the opposition to him was mounting and came to a head with a hunger strike by 1,500 people at the end of 1977 which won an amnesty for political prisoners and exiles and a promise to call open elections. This hunger strike had the support of the church and took place in churches throughout the country. Bolivia now entered a new political phase marked by far less political repression, the free functioning of trade unions and political parties and a series of three elections, the first two of which in July 1978 and June 1979 proved inconclusive and precipitated various coups. It was not until the June 1980 elections that a conclusive winner resulted in the person of Hernan Siles Zuazo, a Left of centre politician. Altogether since Banzer had handed over in July 1978 there were five different presidents in the space of two years.

This political opening coincided with the convening of the Puebla conference of Latin American bishops firstly for October 1978 but, after the death of Pope John Paul I, postponed until January 1979. The bishops took this opportunity to organise a detailed and searching survey which was sent to all the priests who were to discuss it with their various pastoral groups and thus gain some sense of the real position in which the Bolivian church found itself. Again in the immediate aftermath of the Puebla conference, the Bolivian bishops conducted a second survey to prepare for drawing up a national pastoral plan for the whole country which was finally published in April 1980 under the title 'General Directives for a National Pastoral Plan for Bolivia'. This publication marked a new stage of awareness for the Bolivian bishops and was, in the estimation of Pedro Duran, "a qualitative and quantitative advance for the Bolivian church". For the first time the bishops had made a serious effort to find out what the people really thought about the church and what their pastoral needs were and had done a good job in incorporating these into a broad outline of a pastoral plan.

The plan is marked by a clear commitment to the liberation of the oppressed. The general objective as stated at the outset is: "To evangelise in an integral manner the Bolivian people in their concrete situation so as to construct together, as the Church of Christ, communion with God and with one another from the standpoint

of a preferential option for the poor". This general objective is then broken down into six subsidiary objectives:

- 1) "To construct unity, as a sign of the Kingdom, through the long and difficult way of dialogue."
- 2) "To promote, orientate and accompany Basic Christian Communities as the privileged place of evangelisation'."
- 3) "To opt preferentially for the poor, following the example of Christ, the model of poverty for all people."
- 4) "To evangelise the diversity of cultures of our country."
- 5) "To revitalise the laity, giving preference to families and youth, as the builders of our Bolivian society."
- 6) "To intensify the promotion of vocations and the ministries necessary for evangelisation."

Each objective is then further elaborated and concrete steps are given for an implementation of the plan, most of them calling on the various episcopal commissions to co-ordinate their activities more and calling for concrete implementation at diocesan level. Further studies to help the implementation of the plan were promised. The Plan met with an enthusiastic reception from pastoral agents throughout the country and but for the change in the political situation in July, it promised a new impulse and co-ordination for the pastoral work of the entire church.

But already on 21 March an event had taken place which was a sign of worse to come. That night a well-known Jesuit, Fr Luis Espinal, was picked up by security agents while walking home from work and brutally tortured before being shot. His body was dumped on a lonely road the following day. The motive for the killing is thought to have been Fr Espinal's declared intention to publish a list of public figures involved in the growing trafficking in cocaine. Some of the names were known to include high ranking military officers, one of whom, Colonel Arce Gomez, then head of the secret service, had prepared a document accusing Fr Espinal and the magazine he edited, *Aqui*, of being subversive. It is thought that the Colonel gave the order for the killing.

Fr Espinal's death is now seen as the forerunner of the brutal coup which prevented the democratically elected government of Hernan Siles Zuazo taking power and which was led by men whose names were on the list to have been published by the Jesuit. In a carefully planned manoeuvre the coup first struck the isolated city of Trinidad in the north and the following day, 17th July, as opposition leaders belonging to a Committee for the Defence of Democracy met in La Paz to make plans to oppose the coup the military invaded the building and took them all prisoner. Among them was another priest, Fr Julio Tumiri, the president of the successor to the defunct Justice and Peace Commission, the Com-

mittee for Human Rights.

As with the Banzer coup nine years previously, the Garcia Meza coup struck the church badly. But unlike the earlier sporadic persecution of church personnel, the Garcia Meza regime engaged in a planned tactic to divide the church. The clearest sign of this is a document from the general commanding the army and marked 'Ultrasecret', dated 20th August 1980 and entitled "Confronting the Offensive of the Marxist clergy" which came into my possession while in Bolivia. Under the heading of 'Enemy' the document says the following: "The marxist clergy represented by Archbishop Manrique (of La Paz) is confronting the government both within the country and outside". The "Mission" listed by the document is "to annul or neutralise the marxist religious offensive all over the country, as with its international extension, in order to achieve a church favourable or allied to the process of reconstruction and its objectives".

Under the heading "Idea of Manipulation" the document advises the confronting of the "marxist clergy and all its organisations, paying special attention to the permanent council of the conference of bishops, applying suggestive, persuasive or compulsory methods to divide the clergy in defined groups of supporters and opponents of the present government, in order to back those supporters to confront with superiority the progressives and to achieve their political annihilation". The means to carry out this 'manipulation' are then listed and include "following and gathering information on all the activities of the clergy especially of Manrique . . . organising a hunger strike to protest against Manrique and his acolytes . . . provoking a demonstration and stone throwing at the nunciature . . . revising the list of military chaplains to replace Manrique's collaborators with sympathetic priests . . . organising groups of activist faithful to oppose the enemy homilies and preaching . . . attaining the expulsion of Manrique . . . writing to the Pope about the interference of Manrique and his accomplices . . . supporting and stimulating every type of activity on the part of the Committee for the Defence of the Faith". This latter, a conservative Catholic group, was finally recommended in the document to get economic help from the chancellor's office.

The church was an early target for government attack. In the early days of the coup some 20 priests and nuns were arrested and expelled, over 30 religious houses were raided and church radio stations were closed down including Radio Fides in La Paz which was also sacked by troops and equipment stolen. Among those arrested some were tortured, such as Fr Julio Tumiri who was made to eat a book he had edited on killings which had taken place during the coup of November 1979. The bishops' daily paper *Presencia*

was closed down for a week and members of its staff intimidated after it refused to disclose a source it had within the military. A statement issued by Archbishop Manrique on the day following the coup condemning "the outrages which are being committed and the attempt to silence the voice of the Bolivian people" was distorted and issued by the government in such a way as it appeared to be in their support. Furthermore the archbishop was vilified in the media and in one pro-government statement read out on radio and television he was accused of having "a lack of intellectual capacity" and of supporting "extremism and terrorism".

The permanent commission of the episcopal conference a week later called for a return "to constitutional order" and despite a government attempt to prevent it the entire bishops' conference issued a pastoral letter after their September meeting which was called 'Dignity and Liberty'. They furthermore followed this up by making public statements after their January and June meetings attacking the tortures being committed by the government, the illegal drug trafficking, the lack of freedom of expression and the severe economic conditions affecting especially the poorest.

But though the bishops took a strong stand in their statements they did so under pressure and most did little to try to make their words effective. The pressure on the bishops came from two quarters, what we might call, from above and below. Bishop Terrazas told me of a telegram received by the Nuncio from the Vatican in the immediate aftermath of the coup asking him to do everything possible in the defence of human rights. This, as well as the nuncio's own strong personal stand in helping to take people on the run into his house and secure them a safe conduct from the country put pressure on the bishops to be seen to take a stand. Their pastoral letter was afterwards praised by Pope John Paul during their 'ad limina' visit to Rome.

The other more constant pressure on the bishops came from groups within the church who were deeply opposed to the coup. Foremost among these was the conference of religious, CONFER, who, instead of speaking out on their own behalf, put pressure on the bishops to voice what should be the concern of the whole church. Many religious, together with secular clergy and lay people, were actively involved in hiding trade union and political leaders on the run, in securing safe conduct into exile both for people already arrested and for those in hiding, and in publicising the real facts about what was happening both politically and economically within the country. In a series of bulletins published by church personnel, trade unions and political parties forced underground had a mouthpiece, the deteriorating economic situation was charted

and the falsity of the strong government propaganda was shown up. These bulletins, which circulated underground, became the only regular and comprehensive source of information in the country and by the time Garcia Meza was overthrown 34 issues had appeared.

But at another level the coup affected the church in its work. As well as some of the best foreign missionaries being expelled, numerous key christian leaders in campesino communities, among student groups and in trade unions were either expelled or had to go underground. In the atmosphere of fear created by the coup it was more difficult for groups to meet and even when they did, people were more hesitant to speak their mind openly for fear of informers. Strong attempts were made to infiltrate church groups and priests told me of numerous requests by people they knew to be government agents to start up various groups for the people. It proved a severe setback to the task of implementing the pastoral plan. Just how serious the government were can be seen from the threats made to the bishops that persecution would be increased if a popularised version of the pastoral letter 'Dignity and Liberty' which was already prepared for the printers was published. It was never sent to the printers.

But the very efforts made by the government to control and use the church for its own ends is a testimony to the strength of the church as a popular force in Bolivian society, Archbishop Manrique reminded me. The many difficult times it has lived through over the last twelve years has forced it to be "preoccupied with the human situation" he said and though it has experienced numerous setbacks there is, what the archbishop called, "a slow advance".

This is particularly true at the level of young people who, for Archbishop Manrique, are "the great hope of the church". Bishop Terrazas, who is responsible for the youth pastoral in the episcopal conference, told me of a new centre which gives courses in theology to young people. Through these and through meetings for the networks of community and group leaders throughout the country they are helping young people "to see Bolivian reality, to discover a liberating Christology and so change the consciousness of youth". He is critical of those who use theology as a purely academic study which doesn't change their values and outlook. As well as that he is working with more traditional groups such as the Christian Family Movement, Marriage Encounter and the Legion of Mary in order to help them to "discover a local commitment," as he put it. Coming from outside and appealing more to middle class people it is difficult for members of these groups "to come down to earth and incarnate themselves in the concrete reality they live in," says

Bishop Terrazas. "Instead they remain an elite." Among young people on the other hand, he says, "we hope that they take a more liberating line".

In this way the Bolivian church is experiencing a new maturity of building a new consciousness at grass-roots level. Though the work is slow there are many indications that it is now more truly based in the life experience of the poor and oppressed themselves. I had a glimpse of this when I attended the family meeting of a catechesis group in a poor parish in the outskirts of La Paz. This is organised through weekly meetings in which a group of parents meets with a *guia* or guide to study a theme in their programme and then they go home and teach it to their children. In the parish I visited there are ten groups for parents with about eight people in each. Once a week the children also meet in five different groups under an *animador* and the animadores and guias, themselves parents, meet with a priest or nun to go through how to teach the other parents and children. The meeting I attended was the first one of the programme in which all the parents with their children came together for a simple liturgy and a little sharing. Large numbers of them came crowding the hall we were in, all of them poor people, some of the Indian women carrying their babies on their backs in typical fashion. They sang hearty songs which they had learned through the programme and they prayed. Some of them spoke out about what the programme meant for them and their families. As well as bringing families together more it awakens a sense of what is wrong in society and how society must change, some said. This simple parochial catechetical programme is awakening in these poor for the first time a critical awareness of how society operates and helping them pass it on to their children. It is the very opposite of the traditional role of the church which has accommodated the poor to their lot. It may occasion bouts of severe repression for Bolivian Christians but that is only a sign that the riches of the Gospel are once again being shared.