

The Global Shift of Mission: Latin America

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Two major phenomena have marked the development of Christianity in Latin America during the twentieth century and these first decades of the twenty-first: the renewal of Roman Catholicism, and the explosive growth of Pentecostalism.

In the middle of the twentieth-century Latin American Catholicism was in crisis. It was a crisis made deeper by the reluctance of many church leaders to see it. Ever since the time of independence, there had been a strong anticlerical undercurrent in most of Latin America. From its very beginning—in fact, since 1492, when the first papal bulls to this effect were issued—the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America had been under the rule of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns, in what was called the *patronato real*—royal patronage. Needless to say, in the early nineteenth century, when the movement for independence broke out, the higher echelons of the hierarchy opposed it almost to a man. Stories abound of conspiracies thwarted and patriots killed because priests broke the secret confessional. After independence, as tension developed between the conservative landed aristocracy and the liberal merchants and traders, the Church consistently took the side of the conservatives—particularly after 1864, when the *Syllabus of Errors* of Pius IX condemned notions such as lay public education, freedom of religion, and the like.

As a result, if in the 1950s one asked about the religion of a typical Latin American, the most common answer would be, “soy católico, pero no creo en los curas” — I am a Catholic, but I don’t believe in priests. In most countries, less than 10% of the population attended mass more than once a year. And the degree of participation of those who attended was clearly indicated by the common phrase, “voy a oír misa” —I am going to hear mass—not to participate, and much less to take communion, but to “hear.”

Although there were already important movements of renewal in the Roman Catholic Church earlier in the twentieth century, these movements gained unprecedented impetus as a result of the Second Vatican Council. Among other things, that council encouraged the celebration of the mass in the language of the people and its adaptation—within bounds—to the various cultures represented among the faithful, and it also allowed regional conferences of bishops a significant voice in these and other matters.

In Latin America, the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM) took these initiatives to heart, with the result that its meeting in Medellín in 1969, four years after the closing of the council, proclaimed its commitment to a renewed Catholic church—one that would be more in tune with the aspirations as well as the culture of the people. The two most notable outcomes were liberation theology and the grassroots faith communities known as *comunidades eclesiales de base*—base communities or CEBs.

Theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez who had been one of the *periti* at Medellín, published his seminal book, *Teología de la liberación*, in 1971, that is, two years after Medellín. In a few years, Latin American theological discourse, research and debate became livelier than it had ever been before. Suddenly, Latin American theology—Catholic as well as Protestant—was studied and discussed throughout the world. After the demise of the Soviet Union, there has been much debate as to the future of liberation theology. But there is no doubt that its impact will be felt in Latin America and in the rest of the world for some time to come, if not in all its actual content, at least in much of its methodology—in such matters as the preferential option for the poor, the empowerment of the laity for reflection and action, the development of a hermeneutical circle in which action and reflection shape each other, and above all its encouragement of *comunidades eclesiales de base* or CEBs.

The creation of CEBs had been encouraged by the bishops gathered at Medellín, who declared that they were an application of the ecclesiology proposed by Vatican II. In a few years, there were tens of thousands of CEBs throughout the region gathering as small groups to pray, to support one another both in faith and in life's struggles, to study and discuss the Bible, and to relate both the Bible and their faith to the conditions in which they lived. Although normally the CEBs were part of parish life, and were originally organized with the support of the parish priest, soon there were tensions between the CEBs and many in the clergy. The CEBs, mostly lay-led, gave women and the laity at large a voice they had seldom had. Some parish priests resented this, and when they tried to regain control they were rebuffed. Where the hierarchy supported

the work of the CEBs, and particularly their call for greater freedom and justice as part of the gospel's claim on society, they became heroes. One of these, who has become a symbol for the rest, was the martyred archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Arnulfo Romero.

In more recent times, liberation theology as well as the CEBs have been discouraged, as both Rome and the CELAM have been seeking to regain a control that was challenged by liberation theology, but even more so by the CEBs. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, but then head of the Congregation of the Faith—the name now given to the former Holy Office of the Inquisition—issued two directives against liberation theology. Although these directives focused on the use of Marx for the analysis of society and its ills, what in fact was most worrisome was that not only liberation theology, but also and most importantly the CEBs, were moving and growing beyond the control of the hierarchy. At the same time, as more conservative bishops took charge of CELAM, there were numerous attempts to undo what had been done at Medellín.

Even so, there are still thousands upon thousands of CEBs, almost all under lay leadership, that gather. Most of those active in such groups are also active in their parishes, and have become what Latin American Catholicism never had: a laity that shares control of the parish with the priest. This, joined with the mass in the vernacular and other reforms, has led to a growing number of people attending mass regularly, actively participating in it, and taking communion. This is a far cry from going “to hear mass” fifty years ago. In most of Latin America church

attendance among Roman Catholics is significantly higher than it was before Vatican II and Medellín, even though both secularism and Pentecostalism have been in the uprise. The production of liturgical music with the various traditional forms and rhythms is astounding. And in several countries the Bible Societies sell more Bibles to Catholics than to Protestants.

Obviously, this is not the entire picture. While after Vatican II and Medellín there was an effort to “cleanse” the faith of believers from accretions derived mostly from aboriginal and African religions, this was a radical failure, and now there is much more of a tendency to speak of “popular religion” in positive terms, and to return to the policy of accepting it as part of the faith of the people, generally compatible with the Catholic faith. While this keeps the Church in touch with the more traditional and popular aspects of religiosity, it also provides fodder for attacks from some Protestants, particularly Pentecostals, thus increasing the tension between Catholics and Protestants.

Also, while the immediate result of Vatican II was an upsurge in ecumenical relations, these seldom went beyond ecumenical services, a few joint declarations, and some close friendships between Catholic and Protestant individuals. Hardly ever did the new ecumenical spirit crystalize in actual joint action, and in any case it is rapidly waning mostly for two reasons: on the one hand, the explosive growth of Pentecostalism, and its sometimes virulent attack on Catholicism; and, on the other, the tendency of Rome in recent years to name ultraconservative priests to the episcopacy and other positions of authority. This was clear to me when a few

years ago Catherine and I attended mass in Mexico on the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity. We heard the bishop give a very eloquent sermon on the importance of Christian unity—as long as it was with far-away Greeks and Russian Orthodox!

In brief, while not being overly optimistic about it, one must acknowledge that in the last fifty years Latin American Roman Catholicism has undergone a significant renewal, at least among a goodly part of its membership. While aspects of this renewal may be opposed by some among the hierarchy, it gives no sign of abating.

The second major phenomenon within Latin American Christianity in the last hundred years is the explosive growth of Pentecostalism. In 1902 the Rev. Willis Hoover, pastor of the Methodist Church in Valparaíso, Chile, organized prayer meetings asking God for a revival. When he learned of the Azusa Street Revival in 1906, he established connections with that movement. Finally, in 1909, he led his congregation in leaving the Methodist Church in order to form the Iglesia Metodista Pentecostal de Chile. This was the beginning of a wave that would soon involve millions. Today, the Methodist Church of Chile, which Hoover left, has 17,000 members, while the Iglesia Metodista Pentecostal has well over half a million—and, since there have been repeated divisions within the Iglesia Metodista Pentecostal the total number of Hoover's spiritual descendants, in Chile alone, are some several million. But these events in Chile were just the beginning of a movement that swept the continent. Today, it is estimated that 36% of the population of Chile are either members or “adherents” of Pentecostal churches. Similar

figures for other countries are: 46% for Brazil, 20% for Guatemala, and 13% in Mexico. Some years ago, I was invited to go to Mexico City to speak to a pastors' study session of the Mexican Assemblies of God. The organizers told me they were disappointed because there were less than 3,000 pastors present!

What are the causes of this explosive growth is a matter still debated among sociologists of religion. But there are at least three such causes that are undeniable...

The first is that Pentecostalism provides its members with an immediate sense of dignity and self-worth. People who last year would not dare speak up even in a small meeting, people whose opinion was never asked, now find themselves standing before hundreds and witnessing to what God has done for them, while the congregation expresses their support with amens, hallelujahs, and "gloria a Dios!" They may be illiterate. Their grammar may be wanting. But they are heard! They are somebody!

The second is the counterpart of the first: precisely because Pentecostals are willing to give positions of leadership to people with little learning, they do not have the shortage of pastoral leadership that is typical of the Catholic Church in Latin America. It is not unusual for a Catholic priest to be expected to serve a total of 10,000, and sometimes even 25,000. This means that in truth most people have no access to the organized ministry of the church. But there are always Pentecostal pastors available. If you have a question, a crisis, or a motive for prayer, most likely

the Catholic priest is not available. But there is a Pentecostal pastor at hand.

Thirdly, the growth of the Pentecostal movement can also be attributed to the manner in which it responds to the crises created by the vast displacement of people that has been taking place since the end of the Second World War. For a number of reasons, beginning in the late 1940s a great migration to urban centers took place. Today both Mexico City and São Paulo have well over 20 million inhabitants, even by the most conservative count. Rio, Lima, and Bogotá hover around 10 million. Santiago, Belo Horizonte, and Guadalajara are not far behind. And the number of cities surpassing 3 million would be difficult to list. Most of these millions upon millions of people were not originally city dwellers. They lived in rural communities where their extended families provided emotional support and a sense of belonging. Now they find themselves alone, or at best with their nuclear families, in an overwhelmingly vast metropolitan area. If at that point they connect with a church where people call them “brother” and “sister,” and often mean it, this church comes to take the place of the extended family left back home. Just as back in their native village the usual evening activity was for the extended family to get together, now in the city the usual evening activity is for the church—the new extended family—to get together for a time of sharing. And, just as back there this sharing included commenting about the day’s activities, and probably singing some favorite songs, and perhaps some dancing. Now in the new extended family this sharing includes witnessing to what God has done in their lives and praising God in song, and perhaps even some dancing!

At this point it is important to stress the fact that Latin American Pentecostalism is neither uniform nor monolithic. Organizationally, Pentecostalism includes very large bodies, such as the Assemblies of Mexico and the Iglesia Metodista Pentecostal de Chile, and an enormous number of small denominations and independent congregations. While most Pentecostal churches are quite orthodox in matters such as the Trinity and Christology, there are some that are not. In this regard, most notable are various expressions of the gospel of prosperity. One of these—and there are many—is the Brazilian Igreja Universal do Regno de Deus, whose motto is “quit suffering,” and which is said to be the largest individually owned international corporation in Brazil. There are also so-called “apostolic networks” whose members certify one another, and often boast of how prosperous they have become now that they are apostles. I have been told, but have not verified, of someone in Brazil who began as a pastor, then became a bishop, then an apostle, and finally an archangel!

But these aberrations must not be used to tar all Pentecostals with the same brush. Indeed, the preaching that takes place in most Pentecostal churches is the same as in more traditional denominations—except a bit more fiery! It is clear that Latin American Pentecostalism is here to stay, and will be an important factor in the future shape of Latin America, not only religiously, but also politically and socially.

So far I have said little of the more traditional, so-called mainline denominations. Practically all of them are growing. Some of them have attained significant growth—for instance, the

Presbyterians among the mostly Mayan people of Guatemala and Southern Mexico, and in Brazil, the Methodists in Brazil and Cuba, and the Baptists in Nicaragua and El Salvador. There are also large Lutheran and Mennonite contingents that have resulted from immigration in Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, and some of these are growing. But in no case is their growth comparable to that of Pentecostalism. These churches are trying to find their way and their mission between the two giants at either side, Catholicism and Pentecostalism. Is their mission simply to maintain and plant more churches of the same denomination? It is to contribute to the Pentecostal movement by providing published materials, theological education, and a wider perspective of the history and global outreach of Christianity? Is their task to provide a form of Christianity that is not as virulently anti-Catholic as are most Pentecostals? As Pentecostals continue to grow, not only in numbers, but also in educational resources, will there be a place for these traditional churches? In the case of immigrant churches, how much of the tradition brought generations earlier from Germany, Scotland, or Wales must be kept? All these are issues with which the more traditional denominations resulting from immigration and missionary work in the nineteenth century are struggling.

Then, all Christians in Latin America have to struggle with a number of common issues that may be too obvious to name, but must not be forgotten: poverty and unequal distribution of resources, pollution and the destruction of the environment, political unrest and demagoguery, resurgent native and African religions, etc.

But, since time is limited, allow me to move to what I believe is most important for this conference and for the churches represented here—particularly the PCUSA. Stated quite simply, Latin America is no longer south of the border. The United States is now the third or perhaps even the second Spanish-speaking country in the Western Hemisphere. There are now between 40 and 50 million Hispanics in the U.S. —and that is not counting the 4 million in Puerto Rico. While obviously, originally much of this was due to immigration, that is no longer the case. Most Latino growth is due to the birth rate in the Latino community itself. Extrapolating figures from the census of 2010, one finds that, while among the Euroamerican population there is slightly over one birth for every death, in the Latino population there are nine births for every death! Hence the projection that in 2025 (38 years from now) 30% of the total population in the U.S. will be Hispanic.

When it comes to religion, the Hispanic population has added such growth to the Roman Catholic Church, that now roughly half of all Catholics in the U.S. are Latinos and Latinas. Among Pentecostals, there is growth parallel to that in Latin America. In L.A. county alone, there are more that 1,500 Latino Protestant Churches, mostly Pentecostal. In Atlanta, there are over one hundred, and perhaps even two hundred. A very incomplete data base of Protestant Latino churches in the U.S. lists over 33,000. Among these, probably slightly more that 1,000 are Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopalian, or Lutheran.

As in Latin America, the growth of Latino Protestantism in the U.S. is due mostly to the same three reasons: the possibility of being somebody in the church no matter what one's social standing or education may be, the availability of pastors in numbers that the mainline denominations cannot match, and the function of the local church as a foster extended family for recent immigrants.

At each of these three points, the mainline churches have not even begun to realize the magnitude of the challenge. We do not even think about what it means for the church to be a single extended family, rather than a collection of independent nuclear families. We do not know how to conduct worship services in which all can really participate and even take center-stage regardless of their education or social standing. We insist on an education for our leaders that is not attainable by most Latinas and Latinos, no matter how gifted or how committed. And to top it all, we have created structures that make it unaffordable for poor people to be Methodist or Presbyterian. (A few years ago, I took the data provided by the United Methodist Church, combined it with the average income of a Latino family in New York, and came to the conclusion that for a Latino church to be "viable" as the Annual Conference said, it would need to have at least a hundred tithing families! I suspect that a similar study among Presbyterians would come to similar conclusions.) When it comes to pastoral leadership similar issues emerge. By far the majority of Latino and Latina Protestant pastors have no seminary education, and probably never will. This is not to say that they are not eager to learn. Most of them are. What is available to them are Bible institutes, some very good, some not so

good, and frankly some very bad. Since there are at least two seminaries represented here, the question is, what are we doing, what can we do, what must we do in order to provide the best theological education possible for those who for economic and cultural circumstances are barred from our existing programs?

If we are really serious about the theme of this conference, “The global shift of mission,” we must begin by acknowledging that the most urgent issues of mission for the church in the U.S. are not “out there,” at the other side of an ocean or the other side of the border, but right here, at the other side of the railroad track and the other side of the check-out counter.

In conclusion, the call to mission is clear; what may not be quite as clear is our readiness to respond to that call.

