

'Let Us Be'

Towards a new type of relationship between
Latin-Americans and Europeans

by Michel Peuchmaurd, O.P.

Montevideo still has old buses of 1890 vintage, 'made in England' and lovingly maintained. When Europe expanded in the nineteenth century, Latin America quickly caught the imagination of businessmen, whilst Christians were looking towards the new mission fields of Africa, Asia, Oceania. Did they really need to worry about this 'Christian continent' which had been baptized when it was colonized in the sixteenth century? But suddenly the spell broke: Latin America was in peril. Communism threatened, there were too few priests, sects menaced the integrity of the churches: all this impinged brusquely about twelve years ago. With the result that Latin America came to the forefront of pre-occupation. New organizations appeared: C.E.L.A.M. (Bishops' Council for Latin America, 1955) and the pontifical commission for Latin America at Rome in 1960. (We might note in passing that it was also in 1960 that the *Alliance for Progress* was launched, designed to show that 'free men, working within the framework of democratic institutions, are better able to satisfy human aspirations than régimes like that of Cuba': so spoke the Charter of Punto del Este, a year after Fidel Castro's seizure of power in the January of 1959.) A new channel was opened, with its source in Europe (one need think only of such West German organizations as *Adveniat*, *Misereor*, *Caritas*) and the U.S.A.: money and men, priests, lay people and religious. The Council insisted on the necessary sharing between rich and poor churches, each bishop being responsible for the whole of the Church in virtue of the principle of collegiality. 'The Church of the Poor' aspired to link its destiny with this 'Christian continent' in the process of development. Here was a new experience of the catholicity of the Church, in a world in which the inter-dependence of nations was becoming more and more evident.

Inter-dependence, or rather the *domination* of one over the other. The economists analysed this domination of the economies of the under-developed by the economies of the developed nations. Elsewhere there was talk of imperialism. 'Neo-colonialism' is what the second General Conference of the Latin-American Bishops will call it at Medellín (August-September, 1968), in accord with the encyclical *Populorum progressio* (n° 52).

This domination takes many forms. The first way it became apparent was in the economic and political field. But it is much more pervasive than this, and we have recently come to realize its true

dimensions. The cultural congress of Havana (January, 1968) drew attention to the fact 'the imperialist powers use the means of mass communication in order to effect a *cultural colonization* of the under-developed peoples'.

The work of today's conquistadors is carried on with new techniques: the cultural models which inspire the oligarchies of Latin America come from outside. The revolution itself, in its ideology and political force, comes from outside. And this form of colonialism is also resented by South American revolutionaries. 'Let us be. Leave us to find our own way', is what they feel when they hear a French lecturer tell them: 'For you the revolution must go via Descartes' . . . a certainty that only a Frenchman could possess. And some people say no less to Marxist doctrinaires, whether they come from Moscow, Peking or Havana. Historians may date the beginnings of the search for an original way for Latin America from this year, 1967-68, the year of the death of Che and Martin Luther King, the year of Prague and Bogota.

Christians too began to ask questions about the quality of the relationship that exists between Rome and the developed nations, on the one hand, and the churches of Latin America on the other. It is a matter not so much of sharing as of assistance, and of an *assistance* that is given not by way of service but of domination. For eight months I travelled through Latin America, and everywhere I felt completely lost: the Brazilian Ceara, the Quechua and Aymara lands of the Andes, the mountains of Guatemala: so many diversely rich civilizations (for there is not *one* Latin America). Then I had only to enter a church (even an admirable church in the colonial style) at the time of Mass and to look towards the sanctuary in order to find myself in a familiar world again: the same priest at the altar, the same vestments, the same form of eucharist, often in a language that was often foreign (Spanish in Indian country) and always strange. How little the Church has done to assimilate the local culture. At the Eucharistic Congress of Bogota the liturgical booklet offered twenty-five melodies: eight of Père Gélinau's and nine of Père Deiss's, two French composers. And yet the peasants who were waiting for the Pope at Mosquera sang and danced according to their own rhythms: and I who had for some time now no longer found much joy in Gélinau so much wanted to sing and dance with them.

It is not, however, only those who want to shape the political future of Latin America, but those Christians who feel responsible for the future of the Church who tell us: 'Let us be. Leave us to find our own way.' They do not, of course, want to start from scratch or to cut themselves off from the living tradition of the Church, the experience of the People of God. They absorb Rahner, Teilhard, Liégé. 'But', say the most lucid amongst them, 'Rahner, Teilhard, Liégé, or any other foreign thinker for that matter, cannot provide the categories of thought and action which are valid for us just like

that. We have to create a Christian way of thinking and a pastoral mode of action which suit *us*, here and now. Nobody from outside, not even Rome, can dictate our conduct to us. We have to create this ourselves, within the catholicity of the Church of which the universal pastor is the guarantor and the leaven.'

The originality of this stance is obvious. And already we are seeing the fruits of this quest. In this way, the international week of catechetics was held at Medellin in August—and the most novel contribution was made, not by the European participants, but by Latin American ones, who reported on efforts to promote grass-roots communities, on the value of the Paulo-Freire Method in catechetics (used in Brazil to secure elementary literacy and the awakening of sensibility on the part of the Movement for Basic Education), the positive qualities inherent in popular religion. The different sections of C.E.L.A.M. (missions, vocations, liturgy, pastoral work) had meetings in which bishops and experts worked together to open up new paths. And it was in this context that C.E.L.A.M. prepared the second general assembly of Latin-American bishops by a thorough analysis of the whole situation with a view to drawing up a plan that would really secure a true reform of the Church (v. *New Blackfriars*, November, 1968)—we shall see later what became of this report.

We Europeans must recognize the novelty of all this: the churches of Latin America do not need our 'assistance' any more. They are finding their own way, and for that they do of course need us, but in a new sort of relationship. They do need men, but men who will help them to bring their own researches to term and to the truth; and not men who arrive with their luggage packed with ready-made solutions. They need money, but without strings attached. Does such money exist, however? Is Mammon capable of such renunciation? And then we shall see that it is Latin America which enriches us: by contributing its own genius it enlarges the universality of the Church that has until now been too western, Latin, Roman. The Council was achieved in Europe, by Europeans, by westerners of the developed nations. We shall escape the stifling of the spirit of Vatican II only if we recognize this new ferment emerging outside our own world, for example, in the continent of South America. It is there that we must be on the look-out for a new generation of theologians, a new sort of Christian community. Let us allow ourselves to be enriched by their explorations instead of thinking of ourselves as the cultural masters of the world, something we have ceased to be.

These explorations to which I attach so great importance do not amount to much the way resources are shared out at present: 10 per cent, 5 per cent, this is the order of it. They can develop if they find a home and space within the Church. And it is at this point that there arises the problem of the relationship of the central government of the Church and local churches, between the centre and the

periphery (to return to Père Congar's terms: *Vraie et fausse réforme dans l'Eglise*). The journey of the Pope to Bogota and the meeting of the bishops at Medellín allow us to see the state of the problem now.

During the months which preceded his coming to Columbia, Paul VI and the bishops received many letters. Christians of Latin America wrote to explain their anxieties and hopes in the way in which one writes to a father or a brother: the mother of Camillo Torres, the staff of C.L.A.S.C. (Confederacion latinoamericana sindical cristiana), lay leaders, priests, etc. There were two themes: reform of the Church, revolution in the world. It was on this second point that the words of Paul VI and the bishops were awaited with the greatest impatience. The letters were full of it. I am thinking, for instance, of the letter to the bishops of Latin America signed by more than 1,000 priests, and which well expresses the expectation of the most lucid Christians. The signatories demand of their bishops:

1. That when considering the problem of violence in Latin America one should not identify or confuse the UNJUST VIOLENCE of the oppressors who maintain this baneful system with the JUST VIOLENCE of the oppressed who are becoming obliged to resort to violence in order to obtain their freedom.
2. That the permanent *state* of violence in which the powerful—whether individuals, groups or nations—have kept the peoples of our continent oppressed for centuries be denounced quite clearly and without ambiguity.
3. That the Christians of the continent be exhorted with clarity and firmness to choose what makes for a genuine liberation of Latin Americans and the institution of a more just and fraternal society, in close collaboration with all men of good will.
4. That these Christians be assured of a wide margin of freedom in the choice of the means which they believe to be the most appropriate for obtaining such liberation and for constructing such a society.

For its part, the working document of the Medellín Conference concluded as follows:

The foregoing analysis reveals a state of under-development 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.

We should note that this document judged 'too negative' (read: too advanced) by some of the bishops was judged too weak in its political analysis by the Seminar of Latin-American leaders of lay apostolate movements, held at Lima in June, 1968.

During this time the Holy Father was preparing his discourse in Rome. The voices that came to him with greatest force—the voices nearest to him—told him something else. They warned him against the 'theology of revolution and violence', they expressed their anxiety about the threatening flood of subversive violence. They did not say that the violence exercised by the established order, which kills the living and seizes property, bore no comparison with the violence espoused by revolutionary groups; they said nothing about the force for organized violence represented by the North American Southern Command in Panama; they did not mention the groups of Christians, in Guatemala or Venezuela, who do something other than 'theology of violence': they put it into practice, in the name of the Gospel, for the defence of the Christian civilization and the established order. Nevertheless, these are the people who carried the day with the Pope; it is they who inspired the words of the Pope at Bogota, which singularly disappointed the expectation of those who had expressed themselves in the documents mentioned above.

'Do not rely on violence and revolution', the Pope asked the campesinos—precisely those who are the victims of violence and conservatism. There is, therefore, no room for revolution; and yet that is what a good number of Latin Americans are preparing for. And for the likes of these, violence and revolution are indissolubly linked: revolution is 'a radical change of the social structures of domination *by the most appropriate means*, in order to free men reduced to social slavery and cultural alienation' (International Week of Catechetics). The means, violent or non-violent, are not specified.

For the Holy Father, however, there can be question only of reform, and of 'gradual reform that all can assimilate'—a way of putting it that draws from a tradition of Christian social thinking more concerned with stability than with movement. Is this reform, then, to be assimilated by the rich too? Must the oppressed then wait patiently until their oppressors are converted? It is a lot to ask of those in whom Paul VI recognized a real presence of Christ, 'the sacrament of Christ' (discourse to the campesinos).

The words of Paul VI did not, therefore, meet the expectations of the most committed Christians. This is for me a sign that the magisterium of Rome is not attuned to the explorations of the local churches. I have used the word 'explorations', for certainties and clarity are few and far between for men who risk their lives by their commitment—except for the certainty and clarity of seeing that it is worth risking their lives 'pour que ça change'. They expected the universal pastor to enter into their explorations in order to ensure, with the light of the Spirit, its 'entry into truth'. The Pope did decide: no violence, no revolution. But this brusque word is more wounding than healing, at a time when such revolutionary options unusual for Christians do need to be purged of their possibilities of deviation.

This is the sign under which the bishops set to work at Medellín on 26th August. They found themselves caught between their necessary fidelity to the Pope's teaching and their equally necessary fidelity to the realities of Latin America. This is why they had to be very supple-minded to make the best use of the space left to them by Paul VI. In his opening speech, Dom Avelar Brandao, president of C.E.L.A.M., and one of the three vice-presidents of the Assembly, reformulated the Pope's words like this: 'We need to change the social structures, but we must not make recourse to violence; either to *armed and bloody violence* which multiplies human problems; or to *passive violence* (read: the violence inflicted on others) which makes the structures themselves unjust and therefore, we must conclude, in need of alteration'. The fact of this 'conclusion' shows that Dom Avelar realized that he was 'glossing'—to say the least—the Pope's words. Similarly, the commission on Peace ran up against the Bogota Message in the course of its work. Whilst it vigorously reaffirmed the superiority of non-violent means—who would not?—from the first draft of its report it recalled paragraph 31 of *Populorum progressio*, which dealt with evident and prolonged tyranny 'justifying' revolutionary insurrection, and spelled out the four conditions required by traditional teaching on justifiable tyrannicide. According to theological criteria, these conditions severely restrict the possibility of cases of justifiable tyrannicide. But what should be noted is that they brought his passage of the encyclical back into the discussion whereas it had been proscribed (the working document had not mentioned it): the self-same passage that had given rise to what Paul VI thought to be the exaggerated interpretations at which he struck

at Bogota. Some of the Fathers of the General Assembly realized that they were being outflanked and sought to neutralize the force of the Bogota Message by submitting amendments which multiplied references to it.

It might of course be said that the general assembly of bishops rallied to a position short of that reached at the preparatory stage because this corresponded more with the needs of Latin America. And it is a fact that there was no two-thirds majority for the most daring passages. This fact can, however, be considered under another light, in the terms of the question put as follows by a group of priests from Medellin:

If it is true that each Pastor is or ought to sum up and represent the existential situation of the Church in his diocese under all its aspects, then the question arises whether the Bishops genuinely represent the People of God. It is possible that the mentality, the preoccupations, the problems and concrete situations (of the People of God) are not fully reflected in the Assembly.

This is to put a very grave question, but it cannot be evaded. It rests on two facts. The sort of formation that future priests (and therefore future bishops) receive is such as to tear them away from their cultural environment and to make it very difficult, if not impossible where the ordinary mass of the people is concerned, for them to fit into a normal human life. This was strongly underlined by J. Comblin in a recent study which has won general agreement.¹ The second fact concerns the role which the papal nuncios play in the nomination of the bishops—even now, three years after the Council: nor are the criteria according to which *they* are chosen necessarily a matter of their suitability for the service of the *local* Church.

Now—and this is what is disturbing—these two problems were ignored in the final Document, although they had been faced frankly in the preparatory studies for the Medellin Assembly. Judge for yourselves:

The first draft of the report had this to say about the criteria for choosing the leaders of the Christian community, which is what priests are: 'The needs of these communities centred on the eucharist are such that many priests are required, whether they are consecrated lay people or married men ordained for the service of the community or deacons or religious'. And this is what became of the draft after the first plenary meeting: 'The necessary formation of these communities entails the bringing into force of a permanent diaconate and fuller participation on the part of men and women religious and lay apostles. *Further, methods calculated to increase the number of ministers of the eucharistic communities should be studied.*' Amendments in respect of these last words were proposed, and the verdict was: 'Amendments

¹Problèmes sacerdotaux d'Amérique Latine', *Vie Spirituelle* (ed. du Cerf), March 1968, pp. 319-343. Reprinted in IDO-C, Doc. 68/68.

accepted: paragraph (i.e. the passage in italics) struck out'. Verdict, or denial of justice?

Finally, nothing was said about the role of the nuncios, or about the attempt to find a new balance between the local churches and the universal Pastor or the organs which are supposed to enlighten his decisions. Yet this is a key problem. Cardinal Samore refused to reply when interviewed by Père Gallay (of *La Croix*, Paris) who asked him, *inter alia*, about the relationship between C.E.L.A.M. and C.A.L. (Pontifical Commission for Latin America). . . .

'Let us be. Leave us to find our own ways.' This sums up what Latin Americans expect of us now. The time of domination and assistance is over. Such a demand is very congenial to the catholicity of the Church. Yet the structures that correspond to this spirit need to be built up. What is at stake is the life of the Church: living together in diversity.

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