

Catholics and Marxists in Latin America

The dialogue between Catholics and Marxists in Latin America is the logical consequence of the deep-going crisis affecting the broad social strata, believers and non-believers. With the notable exception of Cuba, Iberoamerica is gripped in a life and death struggle in this, its second fight for independence. Unlike the nineteenth century, the national liberation movements of today are inextricably bound up with radical social and economic structural changes. Both aspects of the struggle are directed against foreign imperialism and feudalism. These mounting movements are having their repercussions in the Catholic Church, attested to by divisions and schisms and by a new orientation favoring the development of united actions despite ideological differences.

The Changes Within the Catholic Church

Here, a few observations are in order. First, the old policies of the Catholic hierarchy have inexorably created the process of its separation from the masses. But the most significant phenomenon is the powerful influence exercised by the broad masses upon the Catholic institutions, forcing changes and modifications, some even of an objectively revolutionary character as we shall indicate later. The Church has no alternative other than to modify its theology, its customs, its language and even the liturgy. Above all, in the drive to reconquer the masses, basic changes in the Church's social doctrine are necessary. On the other hand, there is the promotion of Christian-Democratic parties and programs, in most instances bearing a reformist character.

This process is not only quantitative but also qualitative. Participation in the developing battle causes believers to acquire a consciousness of their own power as the sole force capable of liberating them. The following episode may prove the point. In the village of Santo Adriano, Chile, thousands of workers' families engaged in struggles for housing and succeeded in acquiring land and a roof over their heads. The Communists were an integral part of the struggles. When a Communist delegate asked some women tenants what

they thought about the victory obtained, one of them said: "I have succeeded in settling in this new home thanks to the Virgin Mary." Another said: "I got this thanks to the Party." And a third: "That is true, we owe it to the Party and the Virgin Mary."

Secondly, the Catholic clergy as a whole is oriented toward reconquering the masses of believers and a tremendous effort is being made to achieve it. The number of clergymen is being increased, modern methods of organization are being introduced and most of all, programs are being advanced to improve the conditions of the masses. The Church is out to win the conscience of the people especially where Communists are active—in villages, factories, shops, offices and schools.

Thirdly, there is a growing number of priests and Catholic laymen who do not identify religious beliefs with resignation. They do not recommend submission but call for social responsibility and action. The Chilean Jesuit Mario Zañartu expresses this viewpoint quite forcefully, when he says that the model Christian is the one who uses all his dynamism in the service of his neighbor, through his dedication to revolutionary reforms.**

In the historic dialogue with Argentine Marxists in October 1965, Father P. Carlos Mujica raised his challenging voice:

... for no responsible and honest Christian who wants to live according to the Evangelical precepts can the Church continue to be a refuge and a pretext to evade committing himself basically to human progress, to struggling with all his might so that each man can live as a person. . . .

Today in Latin America millions are dying violently of hunger. And if we Christians do not seek to change this world, let us change the name because we would not have the right to go on using it.**

He says further that the time has arrived when

... as Christians we break once and for all with a solidarity which we repudiate as men of the Church: solidarity with capitalism and with a certain conception of private property. With the help of God, I am disposed to give my life for the Gospel but not to defend capitalist structures even if these are within the Church (ibid).

* Orlando Millas, "Adelante por el Camino del XIII congreso," *Documentos del XIII Congreso Nacional del Partido Comunista de Chile*, Folleto No. 8, p. 22.

**Tambien aquí Dialogan Catolicos y Marxistas," *Nuestra Palabra*, October 27, 1965.

The Church in the Latin-American Countries

The role of the Catholic Church in Latin America varies in each country, depending on the militancy of the people fighting oppression and poverty, the pressure exerted upon the Church and the maturing revolutionary crisis affecting all strata of the population.

In Chile, under the strong pressure of the Catholic masses, the Church, in its own way, opposes reaction while at the same time it is antagonistic to the anti-imperialist and anti-oligarchic forces bidding for power (the Popular Action Front). In Argentina, the Church opposes President Illia's program for the nationalization of oil while part of the clergy sides with the anti-imperialist struggles of the people. The hierarchy in Venezuela and its creature COPEI (Christian-Democratic Party) are props of imperialism. The leaders share the guilt of the crimes and atrocities perpetrated by the governments of Betancourt and Leoni. It is known that in the Dominican Republic the Catholic hierarchy supported the military coup that overthrew the constitutional government of Juan Bosch in 1963. Peru is undergoing a severe internal crisis aggravated by U.S. interventionist manipulations, military and otherwise. At this moment, when the Peruvian people are resisting the sell-out of petroleum fields and fighting in defense of their patrimony, Cardinal Juan Landazuri in an address at Huancayo declares that the "death penalty against atheistic Communism is justified in defense of constitutionalism."*

On the other hand, the Catholic priest Salomon Bolo Hidalgo, from San Quintin prison in Peru, where he is confined because of his support to the guerrilla fighters, issued a letter condemning the Cardinal's call to inquisition. The bloody Duvalier regime in Haiti is being more and more opposed by the clergy. The Catholic journal *La Phalange* is opposed to the dictatorship even while it points to an imaginary Communist danger. On the one hand, a group of Catholic priests deliver lectures on Communism to "prove" that Marxism is outdated. On the other hand, Fathers George and Bissainthe carry on active opposition to Duvalier.

In some countries the Catholic Church speaks of "revolution," of "anti-imperialism," but in essence advocates reformism. Typical of this trend is the article written by the Jesuit priest Gerardo Claps and Julio Barzan, leader of the Catholic Action in Chile:

The enormous weight of these capitals in national life would justify their nationalization. But if we want to be just, it is a duty

* *The Worker*, December 26, 1965.

to indemnify them. And if we want to be sensible we cannot deprive the country of necessary investments. More, it is commendable to attract them. But the profits must be shared equitably between foreign investors and the country that opens its hospitality to such capitals.*

The Catholic Church is the promoter of Christian-Democratic political parties, which play the role of reformism, striving to channel the people's movements along the road to compromises with the national oligarchies and imperialism. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to conclude that this type of reformism is wholly negative. In the concrete conditions of sharp mass struggles, sometimes the Church and the Christian-Democratic parties assume objectively a progressive and on occasion even a revolutionary character.

In Colombia, we observe two tendencies: Cardinal Concha belongs to the reactionary wing. In a document issued by the theologians of Bolivar University in Medellin, they insist on the moth-eaten dogma that the poor stay poor: "The rich," they wrote, "are the managers of God's wealth on earth."** The other tendency is expressed in the program and activities of the Christian Social-Democratic Party. It presents itself as a truly revolutionary organization whose objective is to "liquidate the capitalist system" and establish a "community society" (not a Communist society—A.M.). Its leaders claim to take a "third road."

Let us briefly examine the positive and negative features of this program as estimated by the Colombian Communists. With regard to the Colombian revolution, the Christian Social-Democratic Party, reports Alcibiades Paredes, categorically asserts the necessity of

... a revolution in the truest sense of the word, without vacillations and dissimulations. Simple and transient reforms are insufficient. It is necessary to achieve an integral, profound and rapid transformation of the present structures in accordance with a determined plan (ibid).

According to the platform of the Christian Social-Democratic Party, colonialism is repudiated, peaceful coexistence is advocated and control over the exploitation of the country's natural resources

* *Integraci del Hombre en el Proceso Economico*, *Mensaje*, October 1963. Quoted by: Orlando Millas, *Los Comunistas, los Católicos y la Libertad*, Editorial Austral, Santiago, 1964, p. 123.

** Quoted by Alcibiades Paredes in "El Partido Social-Demócrata Cristiano y la Problemática Nacional," *Documentos Politicos*, October 1965.

supported, but leaving untouched the imperialist-oligarchic setup. It projects important agrarian reforms such as land to the peasants with credit and educational facilities. However, the latifundia system which is the basis of backwardness, obscurantism and feudal relations, remains intact. These demands assuredly do not call for "structural changes."

A positive feature in political action is the opposition of the Christian Social-Democratic Party to the traditional Conservative and Liberal parties who made a mockery of the Constitution. On the whole, the platform provides a sound basis for agreement and action. The Communist Party of Colombia, the first to raise the need for structural changes and many other immediate issues, takes a positive attitude in public polemics, insisting on "testing on the anvil of practice" the demands advanced by the Christian Social-Democratic Party.

In Colombia, there is, perhaps, a third tendency arising from the Catholic clergy, whose spokesman has been Father Camilo Torres Restrepo. He maintained that the clergy must not be the instrument of the exploiting classes, that the Evangelical principles of "love thy neighbor" are impossible of realization without the majority taking power. He forcefully exposed the poison of anti-Communism that disunites the people and helps the national oligarchy and imperialism. He led the movement known as United Front, and finally joined the guerrilla fighters and was killed in combat in February 1966. It was Camilo Torres who publicly declared in September 1965:

I have said that I am a revolutionary as Colombian, sociologist, Christian and priest. I consider that the Communist Party contains authentically revolutionary elements and, therefore, as Colombian, sociologist, Christian and priest, I cannot be anti-Communist.*

Quite a number of Chilean priests have recently confessed that anti-Communism was isolating the Church from the people and that cessation of this harmful propaganda was a great relief to them. In September 18, 1965, in the Te Deum at the Cathedral of Santiago, the preacher included among the outstanding personalities of the country Luis Emilio Recabarren, the founder of the Communist Party of Chile.

Chilean Marxists greet *aggiornamento* with an open mind. Learning from past history, they note with satisfaction the abandonment of past practices of meting out excommunication to national leaders of

* Mensaje del Padre Camillo a los Comunistas," *La Voz Proletaria*, September 9, 1965.

the country who fought for independence and the separation of State and Church.

How about an "aggiornamento of the Communist Party?" some Catholics ask. Orlando Millas answers:

In the case of Chile, there are evident modifications in the conduct of the majority of the clergy. It can be said we are facing attitudes on certain matters different from those which we know and which were traditional. For this reason some of our judgments with regard to the Church have lost their validity and we must modify them. Marxism-Leninism does not need any "aggiornamento" because implicitly its very essence is constant critical reflection, the study of reality as it is and the immediate apprehension of the new. It is in this alert, open and dialectical spirit that we greet the Catholic renovation . . .

He says further:

The Communist Party of Chile has maintained a consistent Marxist-Leninist attitude on religion. There was an initial period when the Party was founded in 1912 under the name of the Socialist Workers Party, when it was influenced by the anti-clericalism of a section of the bourgeoisie and, above all, of the anarchists. It was then that Communists organized lecture tours in workers' centers . . . devoted to biting criticism of religious practices. Comrade Elias Laferte, who later became Party chairman, was sued in his youth as the editor of the satirical journal *El Bonete*, which made fun of ecclesiastic topics. A little later, however, this strident attitude was replaced by persistent ideological struggle which did not exclude but on the contrary reinforced joint action by all sectors of the working class and the people against reaction.*

Role of U.S. Imperialism

The United States foreign policy makers are by no means unmindful of the developments within the Catholic Church in Latin America. An integral part of their plans of direct and indirect intervention to subvert the movements for social progress is the use of the Church and Catholic organizations. Let us read Millas again:

In an interesting account given by Manuel Facal in the Uruguayan magazine *Estudios* in the middle of last year . . . he asserted pointedly that behind the proliferation of a new type of Catholic organizations is to be found, as one of the decisive supports, the

* Orlando Millas, "Nuevas Condiciones en la Lucha Ideológica entre Comunistas y Católicos," manuscript prepared for publication, 1966.

financial backing of North American and West European foundations. Although the alma mater of this support continues unquestionably to be the Gregorian University of Rome, since the emergence of the Alliance for Progress and in general since the "development" policy of the Catholic President Kennedy, it can be said that a second center is located in the United States. The Belgian Jesuit Roger Vekermans, the gray-haired eminence of the Christian-Democratic government of President Eduardo Frei, greeted the Alliance for Progress with the same enthusiasm as his European correligionists did the Marshall Plan. He established in Santiago the Center for Economic and Social Development of Latin America (DESAL), linked to the OAS (Organization of American States). This Center operates in collaboration with Loyola University of the South in New Orleans.

The relation between imperialism and the modern clerical current is not one of simple and unconditional subservience of the latter; to say the least it is one of reciprocal friendship. . . .

North American imperialism has extended great help to the proselytizing work of the Chilean Church through the American Caritas, in the form of foodstuffs, medicines, clothing and money. . . .

Behind a number of Catholic organizations, one can easily discover the North American financial contributions. One factor which has facilitated the phenomenon is the investment of capital by the Vatican and religious orders in certain Yankee monopoly enterprises, some of which operate in Chile and Latin America generally, and which show a willingness to make contributions to the work carried on by religious institutions. On the other hand, because of the growing scarcity of Chilean priests, there are many foreign parochial priests, especially from Spain and the United States (ibid).

But the clergy itself is a victim of imperialist plans of building up huge dossiers containing information on the thinking and activities of all leaders, including those of the Church. Such a plan was Project Camelot, engineered by the Pentagon and the State Department, which was scuttled by the White House after a roar of protests in Chile. Despite all this, the new thinking of the majority of the clergy must be disappointing to the imperialists and the hierarchy. In 1961, the Catholic University of Chile, on the initiative of Loyola University, carried out an investigation probing into the social and political thinking of the clergy in Santiago. The questionnaire was sent to 782 priests and 1500 Catholic laymen, of whom 79.4 per cent are members of social groups directed by the Church. Of the priests, 58.1 per cent rejected the concept that the Catholic Church is the implacable enemy of "atheist Communism." As to whether the principal problem in Chile is Communism, the answer was that such things

as housing and insufficient education were the main problems. Furthermore, 83.1 per cent of all answers agreed that the Communist influence was greater than that of the Church in poor communities and 94.8 per cent agreed that the Party's influence in the trade unions was greater. On economic questions, 87.4 per cent declared that the natural resources are sufficient for a comfortable life for each family; 84 per cent were for wage increases; 60.6 per cent were for a better distribution of land; 40.8 per cent believed that the revolution would be peaceful and 21.4 per cent that it would be violent.

It is important to note that the investigation preceded Vatican II and Pope John's celebrated *Pacem in Terris*.

Dialogue and Unity in Action

Thus, debates between Catholics and Communists go on in Latin America, preceded and followed by united actions. The Argentine Communists emphasize the fact that the battle today is not between atheists and believers. The real battle is for human progress, and unity is the indispensable weapon. The common objective is to block the road to those who live and intend to live at the expense of the hungry majority. The aim is to fight together against hunger, for peace and for the country; to create a new type of government that will advance democratic liberties and secure national independence.

With equal fervor, the Catholic participants in the dialogue stress the need of unity of action and mass mobilization as the road to national and social liberation. Expressing the desire that future dialogues take place with mass participation of Catholics, Marxists, Protestants, Jews, Socialists, Peronists, Progressive Radicals, the Catholic student leader Guillermo Tedeschi states that he would not want to be a Christian if this implies an exploiting-class political ideology.

Another question occupying an important place in the debates is the fear that Communists will use religious people in the struggle to achieve socialism and then abandon and even persecute them. Tedeschi expressed it thus:

. . . We cannot deceive ourselves nor do we intend to deceive ourselves. And in order that there will be no misunderstandings, we say to them that the role we want to play (in the socialist society) is that of being able to think freely, to live in freedom of religious thought which will permit us to be the shining asset in the vanguard of the proletariat and life in the new world.*

* Acción Conjunta de Creyentes y no Creyentes por un Mundo Nuevo," *Nuestra Palabra*, November 3, 1965.

The Chilean priest Gerardo Claps gave vent to a similar misgiving:

It (Marxism) wants to monopolize the revolution or at least to initiate it. As a tactic it seeks transient collaborators who later are thrown overboard.*

The Argentine Marxist Fernando Nadra answers Tedeschi:

This togetherness is for how long? We must first resolve the problems of our country . . . We must create a new type of government, radically change our country, for true democratic liberties, for an end to the high cost of living, for an end to hunger and superexploitation, for an end to emergency governments, and for our independence from imperialism. For all these we can be united for a long time. And after that we will have to build a democratic society leading toward socialism. Will we not be together, Catholics and non-Catholics, as believers and non-believers are today in the socialist countries?***

And Orlando Millas answers Father Claps:

It is not a mere Communist tactic to look for collaborators. We want the unity of all who are for the cause of the working class, of the people, of freedom, of progress and of peace. To the degree that the collaborators sincerely support this cause in its entirety, they are not transient but are collaborators for all of the tasks of our epoch . . . We do not seek monopoly of the revolution, but on the contrary, we want it to become the general patrimony of the people (ibid., pp 175-176).

In summary, let us refer once more to Millas' remarks on what he correctly calls the creative dialogue, remarks expressing deep humanistic and hopeful thoughts for struggling mankind:

Joint action of Communists and Catholics does not eliminate the ideological struggle but places it on a new terrain. It is not a question of Communists modifying their principles in order to come to an understanding with Catholics, nor of the latter ceasing to be Catholics. The terms of the dialogue are distinct from any compromise: through it there is to be sought frankness and clarity on the position of each with a view to mutual understanding, which involves a disposition to uncover the truth and, above all, to find

common ground for concerted efforts to achieve common objectives in the light of the respective positions.

Millions of Catholics have been deceived all their lives by slanders directed at us Communists. We highly appreciate the opportunity given to them to know our thoughts, our objectives and our methods of action. This will permit the definitive treatment of that devil, that cloven-hoofed devil with other animal attributes and the smell of sulfur Communists maintained was incarnation. On our part, we are ready also to lay aside prejudices and misunderstanding because we are people interested in having a positive approach to reality.

The dialogue interests us more than anybody else because of the nature of our doctrine, of the unlimited confidence we place on critical reflection and action, of the eminently scientific position which we take and of the certainty that the world advances and is taking the direction traced by us . . . Though we proceed from different premises and propose distinct objectives, what allows us to work together is that we put the accent on the happiness of man obtained through struggles against backwardness, exploitation, material misery and cultural deprivation.

Times such as these demand armed vigilance in the ideological field with alertness in seeking clarity in polemics. The least abandonment of positions of principle gives advantages to imperialism. . . .

To be effective, the ideological struggle must be waged convincingly. For this it is necessary in the first place to link it with social actions for peace, bread, freedom, progress, welfare and culture. The Communist style of ideological struggle is one that facilitates joint action of all sectors of the working class and the people and an anti-monopolist regrouping.*

*Orlando Millas, "Nuevas Condiciones en la Lucha Ideológica entre Comunistas y Católicos."

* Orlando Millas, *Los Comunistas, los Católicos y la Libertad*, p. 175.

** *Nuestra Bandera*, November 3, 1965.