

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

It seems appropriate to indicate what should be the fundamental hypotheses with which one is able to interpret the history of the Church in Latin America. We know that in general as well as in particular there are many other judgments as to the best way to interpret this history and how to evaluate the reality of the Latin American Church. The history of the Church that we know, nevertheless, appears to be partial, and we do not propose to suggest theological and pastoral conclusions.

Some say that the current defects in the Church are the result of a superficial initial evangelization. But all evangelization is limited and is beset with unavoidable mistakes. As to the Spanish evangelization of Latin America one may first object to the use of the *tabula rasa* method at the level of the ethico-mythical nucleus, which really prevented an adequate understanding of Christianity from the point of view of the Indian World. One may respond, however, that the missionaries were attempting to avoid a syncretism, and, moreover, that the Indian cultures, even the Aztec and the Inca, had not reached the stage of social and spiritual development of the Roman, Hindu, or Chinese empires. On the other hand, with respect to the indigenous clergy—which was organized with great success in the Philippine Islands but not in Latin America—one can only say that this was a fundamental mistake of the Spanish missionary effort. With the pressure of the *Patronato* the Hispano-American society—which was a numerical minority in respect to the Indians—protected its primacy by not developing an Indian clergy. Thus, as a whole, the “new Christendom” of the colonial era was one of a kind and quite distinct from European medieval Christendom.

Others contend that the current state of the Church in Latin America is the result of the fact that the Church was organized too rapidly without allowing for time to evangelize the people thoroughly, or that it spread geographically to the limits of the Americas without taking root in the islands of the Caribbean or in Mexico. The fact was, of course, that the geographical expansion of the Church was one of the demands of the conquest. But likewise, the very purpose of the mission and the conquest was to civilize and convert, according to the judgment of the Spanish, all the centers of barbarism. Evidently the effort was exhausting, but it is doubtful that the methods employed for evangelization in either Africa or India would have produced a better result in Latin America, for in both Africa and India—working from the small ports or cities—the Christian missionaries never captured the heart of those continents and their respective cultures. The distance from Europe also demanded a Latin American episcopacy, an autonomous Church, and the complete conquest of the territory. All this weakened the evangelistic effort, but, nevertheless, one can observe in time the fact that from the efforts that began so heroically there are now the fruits of more than four and a half centuries.

Still others suggest that the problems in the Latin American Church are the result of a *minus valia* in the Spanish or Latin American people themselves. This suggestion

of course, really confuses a race or a culture with a civilization. It is evident that the type of culture and temper of the Spaniards resulted in their losing control of the industrial world —on which the contemporary civilization is founded—and that they also lost the key to and the possibility of instruction, wealth, and comfort of material grandeur. But a poor illiterate Indian who lives “any old way” can be a sage, and a university graduate can be an ignoramus. “I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children” (Luke 10:21). “How happy are you who are poor: yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:21).

The cause of the situation in the Latin America Church today is directly related to the Latin American civilization by the *law of Incarnation*. The colonial structure of our culture, the Bourbon stagnation, the chaotic decadence of the nineteenth century, the systematic persecution by the Liberals purified but also impoverished and weakened the Church. Today it is impossible for the Church to continue to attempt to function as a Church of Christendom. It must now assume the attitude of a missionary Church.

Our Latin American Church is much poorer in power and goods today than it was in the colonial era, but it has encountered since the Second Vatican Council and Medellín the narrow way on which very few are traveling. Yet there are sufficient pilgrims that the way is being charted. “Traveler, there is no road. The road will be made by walking.” The new stage, that is, after 1962, is full of mature hopes. It will be seen in the future histories as an agonizing period, as a time of struggle for the liberation of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, and as a time of discovery and formation of a new being. Latin America, nevertheless, had in its dependency upon Spain a special position: it was the only colonial Christendom, oppressed since that time by a new system devised in Europe. Because of this, today the Church leaves behind Christendom, modernity, and colonial servitude, and at least the unawareness of its dependency. Neither Africa nor Asia was ever Christian even though they were colonies. Latin America has therefore in world history and in the history of the Church a *sui generis* position. Europe, the United States, and Russia—all post-Christian and postmodern¹—should look with special eyes at this area of the Third World, the only area that opposes it dialectically in its totality.

Latin America and its Church are awakening and hear more clearly the rich prophetic voice that creates the new; that which comes to move the people toward their historical and eschatological future, and that which appears to put into motion the dialectical movement of the countries which suffer from the neocolonial oppression of the North Atlantic empires. All of this is a “sign of the times” and of that beyond time. “Stand erect, hold your heads high, because your liberation is near at hand” (Luke 21:28).