

Working Paper

FROM CATHOLIC ACTION TO LIBERATION THEOLOGY:
THE HISTORICAL PROCESS OF THE LAITY IN
LATIN AMERICA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract

This paper presents the historic process of the Latin American laity in this century, taking the case of Catholic Action, especially among the university youth. The author attempts to demonstrate the role played by these movements in the process of pastoral and theological renewal in recent years in Latin America. The study consists of three parts: 1. The birth of Catholic Action as papal policy, signifying a break in the history of the Church through the participation of the laity in the apostolic hierarchy. 2. The implanting of Catholic Action in Latin America in the face of the development of social and political movements inspired by anarchism, socialism, and communism. 3. The transformation of Catholic Action and the birth of Liberation Theology.

Resumen

Este trabajo presenta el proceso histórico del laicado latinoamericano en el presente siglo, tomando el caso de la Acción Católica, especialmente a nivel de la juventud universitaria. La autora intenta mostrar el papel desempeñado por estos movimientos en el proceso de renovación pastoral y teológica en los últimos años en América Latina. 1. El trabajo consta de tres partes. El nacimiento de la Acción Católica como política papal, significando un corte en la historia de la Iglesia por la participación del laicado en el apostolado jerárquico. 2. La implantación de la Acción Católica en América Latina frente al desarrollo de movimientos sociales y políticos inspirados en el anarquismo, el socialismo y el comunismo. 3. La transformación de la Acción Católica y el nacimiento de la Teología de la Liberación.

I. CATHOLIC ACTION: A PAPAL POLICY

It is interesting to recall a remark of Pius X, reported by Mgrs. de Bazelaire, that has often been quoted. Talking one day with some the cardinals, Pius X asked them: "What is most needful today for the lasting good of society?" "To build more schools," said one; "To found more churches," said another; "To recruit more priests," said a third. Having said "No" to each in turn, the Pope finally gave his own answer: "What we need most today is a group of well-informed and virtuous laymen in each parish, full of determination, true apostles!"¹

If the end of the nineteenth century was the time of social Catholicism and of efforts which prepared the way for the encyclical Rerum Novarum, the beginning of the twentieth century was the time of the laymen and laywomen's official participation in the apostolic task through the organization Catholic Action.

Between 1848, the year when Marx published the Communist Manifesto, and 1891, the year when Leo XIII published the encyclical Rerum Novarum, almost half a century elapsed. The two dates have been contrasted to show how long it took the Church, as compared to the socialist movement, to become aware of the working class question. The majority of Catholics, including the majority of Catholics in authority, remained blind for most of the century to the necessity of "structural reform" and continued to regard attempts to improve the lot of the working class by means of institutional change as perilously close to revolution. This was due, not so much to a lack of generosity nor to ignorance of the wretched condition of workers, as to the lack of comprehension of the new problems posed by the Industrial Revolution. But the picture would be grossly over-simplified if we were to overlook the existence of a keener-sighted minority of laymen, priests and bishops who were awakened quite early to a genuine social concern in their realization that the working class question was a matter not merely of

charity but of social justice.²

In connection with this situation, we may remember the tendency among pastors to keep themselves separate from the world, an attitude systematically inculcated in the seminary and reinforced in the Latin countries by the general habit of wearing the soutane. Therefore the priests ran the risk of losing contact with the society in which they were required to exercise their ministry. As Catholicism lost political power and society began to be influenced by other ideas, the parish was thought of as a group of voluntary organizations.

The purpose of these organizations was to create artificial environments in which spiritual life could develop freely. In the later years of Leo XIII's pontificate many of the new organizations were socially oriented to educate people in temporal affairs. But in most of these organizations it was the priest who took the lead and held the authority, leaving the laymen with the role of docile auxiliaries, since the Church's pastoral didn't have an answer to the social and political problems caused by the Industrial Revolution and Liberalism.

Catholics began to be conscious of this situation, and some of them decided it was time to re-catholicize society, with the ultimate objective of making it possible for Catholics to capture political power. Paradoxically, many of these reactionary figures were also the pioneers of Social Catholicism. This may be easily explained. In the first place, many of them belonged by birth to the landed aristocracy. Less involved than liberal Catholics in business affairs, they were therefore less sensitive to the famous imperative of the iron law of competition. But, above all, the socially aware Catholics of the period from 1860 to 1890 regarded social action – conceived mostly from a highly paternalistic perspective – as a means of rallying the masses of people to their cause. That is to say, persuading the masses to join their struggle against the anti-clerical

bourgeois oligarchy, which they detested on two counts: first, for being anticlerical, and second, for presuming to substitute the power of money for the old social sanctions. This at once makes it clear why the projects of socially aware Catholics were so often inspired by a nostalgic vision of returning to the patriarchal and corporative past rather than by a desire for realistic accommodation to the new and irreversible situation created by the Industrial Revolution.³

These ideas inspired many of the originators of different movements in Belgium, Italy, Germany and France. This was true, for example, of the beginnings of the Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Francaise (A.C.J.F.), founded in 1886 by Albert de Mun with the aim of enabling young people to cooperate in the rebuilding of a Christian social order, and equally true for the Italian movement. Some of these organizations moved gradually towards closer involvement with modern society along the lines suggested by Leo XIII. But the problem for the Vatican wasn't an ideological or theological problem. Organizational problems were the most important and these were the points that greatly exercised Pius X when he wrote the encyclical *Il Fermo Proposito* (1905), the purpose of which was to check the growing tendency of a section of the Italian Catholic movement to assert its independence from hierarchial authority and organize an autonomous Catholic party. "Voluntary associations which directly supplement the Church's spiritual and pastoral ministry must be subordinate in every detail to the Church's authority. But even associations of the other type, whose purpose was to restore in Christ a truly Christian civilization, and which constituted Catholic Action in the sense given above, can in no way conceive themselves as independent from the advice and superior direction of ecclesiastical authority." In this passage Pius X clearly envisioned Catholic Action almost exclusively as an extension of the action of the clergy. Nevertheless, in order to be effective, laymen were obliged to take joint action, not merely for evangelistic purposes but also for the defence of their interests as workers, for the running of newspapers and even to

prepare for political elections. Although they needed to work in the parochial and diocesan framework, they were deprived of all freedom to act independently from the episcopate which, in turn, was narrowly subjected to instruction from Rome. In Catholic Action Pius X put together all the Catholic associations and provided the framework for three bodies: The Popular Union whose purpose was to bring together all classes with a view to preparing them to take part as Catholics in public life; The Economic and Social Union whose purpose was participation in economic and social life; and The Electoral Union whose purpose was participation in political life.

It should be remarked that Pius XI trusted the nobility and upper social classes to assume the direction of these different bodies.⁴

The specific experience of Catholic Action was most clearly defined by Pius XI in the encyclical *Ubi Arcano Dei* (1922) as a mandate. Laymen and laywomen received the Bishop's recognition, and this is the difference between Catholic Action and any other organization of the laity. The importance assumed by laymen and laywomen in the life of the Catholic Church was one of the most characteristic features of its development during the pontificates of Pius XI and Pius XII. Whereas Pius X had still seen Catholic laymen as little more than adjuncts of the clergy, assisting the latter to carry out their apostolic task, after the First World War people began increasingly to realise that the laity had their own specific influence to exert which was complementary to that of the clergy. This was only possible to them in their capacity as laymen and the task was not merely something to be entrusted to small select groups but a universal mission devolving on all the baptised, no longer as a privilege but as a duty.

Although aware of the role of mass movements in contemporary society, Pius XI was much less confident than Leo XIII of the efficacy of confessional political parties. What he wanted to see formed in each

country, under the auspices of the hierarchy's authority, was a band of militants taking their stand on religious grounds and rallying the faithful, under the banner of Christ as Universal King, to work for the reintroduction of Christian standards into private and public life at both the national and international level. He defined Catholic Action as the participation by the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy, thus contrasting it with the Catholic Social movements that Pius X had grouped together under the heading Catholic Action, which were merely auxiliaries of the hierarchy. In the form in which it was organized, Catholic Action long remained faithful to the unitary structure inherited from the nineteenth century, which consisted of a single national movement divided into four sections, for men, women, boys and girls.⁵

Moreover the ecclesiastical authorities and Pius XI were against the idea of forming a political party as the integrists wanted, because a party is of necessity autonomous from the ecclesiastical hierarchy. It was therefore necessary to find some other instrument that would achieve the purpose of re-catholicising society under strict obedience to the hierarchy. For this reason Catholic Action was formed by Pius XI over and above the political party .

Finally, Catholic Action characterizes a new phase in Church history because new social, economic and political transformations had begun to erode Christendom. The Church was obliged to use defensive weapons to reconquer lost territory. Catholic Action was born in this re-structuring of the Church. In order to retain and to reconquer the mass of the people the Church needed to use this instrument for the struggle and the new political field created by the Liberal power. The Church couldn't use the traditional disciplinary methods that it had used during the Counter Reformation against the apostasy of the mass of the people .

Thus the Catholic Action experience is a new phase of Church history and is characterized by two essential aspects:

1. strategic: to defend ideological and practical Church privileges;
2. organizational: to create a powerful organization of the mass of the Catholic people, a real Church party (but not a political party), whose aim was to give direction to the Catholic masses and to have a kind of army to be used in defence of Church power or to gain other privileges according to the political, social and cultural struggle.

Against this authoritarian, ecclesiastical and aristocratic background, alternative ideas began to emerge within the movement. Workers, students and peasants began to form their own groups: the specialized Catholic Action. ⁶

A MARGINAL EXPERIENCE

In 1912 in a Brussels', suburb J.O.C. (Jeunesse Ouvrier Catholique) began as a new kind of Catholic Action Movement among girl and boy workers, directed by Joseph Cardijn, a visionary young priest. He was the son of a Catholic working family who were affected by the incompatibility between the working class situation and the Christian life of Catholics at the beginning of the twentieth century. All his pedagogy, theology and sociology led in this direction: to look for a synthesis between the youth worker's daily life and the God project in this life. Cardijn's objective was to reach the poorest in Belgian society at this time: the working class. The experience was a rupture from the roots with standard spirituality, and a faithful reflection of the time. The aim of Cardijn was to look for the Gospel incarnate, the sacramental life and the prayer in the militant's life and

through his apostolate into the factories and the social struggle. For this aim Cardijn and the first militant group succeeded in systematizing a pedagogical method: Revisión de Vida, Look, Evaluate and Act. This method was supposed to start with concrete facts in the lives of the militants, analyze these facts into all the possible elements and evaluate them in light of the Gospel, and to act in accordance with the analysis and evaluation. That is to say that, at the same time, they would look for the working class evangelization among them, by them and for them. It was essential to struggle for the defence of the interests of their own class.

Thus the concern for the religious formation of young people could not be separated from the reality of their family, work and social situation. It was important to improve the methodology in order to better understand the working class reality, taking into account all the relevant factors.

They took polls and the young workers took the information that they needed to understand the social conflict and the reality in its entirety in which they must live their own faith. In accordance with this analysis and their conclusions the J.O.C. militants made an effort to change personally and above all they engaged themselves to transform the social reality at the same time as preaching the Gospel. Another new element in the JOC experience was the organization. The militants formed small communities (between eight and twelve workers, students or peasants) by areas, parishes, places of work, factories etc.

Pius XI encouraged the J.O.C. from the outset, ignoring the objections of those who accused it of introducing the class struggle into the Church and of "rending the body of Christ". The pastoral perspective of the specialized Catholic Action was entirely new and missionary. It contrasted with the defensive and conservative experience that we saw before and which nourished the integrist and conservative proposal in the Latin American Church in the twentieth century. The specialized Catholic Action experience

was the beginning of all of the theological pastoral renovation that went into the preparation of Vatican II and the transformation of the Latin American Church after the 1960s.

II. CATHOLIC ACTION IN LATIN AMERICA

After the Independence War came to an end in the nineteenth century, the temporal strength and intellectual influence of the Catholic Church underwent a remarkable decline, with the exception of the Church in Colombia. But by 1900 there was a real revival of Catholic influence that some authors attribute to the fact that, despite surface appearances indicating otherwise, the spiritual values generally associated with Latin American Catholicism were not as weak as its friends feared and its enemies hoped. Others see the Plenary Council of Latin American Prelates, convoked in Rome by Pope Leo XIII in 1899, as an effort to reinvigorate the Church in Latin America and to improve its channels of communication with the Vatican. The idea was to reorganize the National Catholic Church in Latin America within the framework of Vatican I. As in Europe, the Church in Latin America must confront the Liberal State. The Industrial Revolution in Europe and the U.S.A. also had enormous repercussions in Latin America, causing a complete transformation of social conditions. The Latin American bishops were especially perturbed by heightened social tension and the dissemination of such radical ideologies as anarchism, socialism and communism. As in Europe, even though there were differences between the different countries, in general the national churches tried to improve a new Christendom framework to recover their power in society. Among other organizations and institutions the Latin American episcopacy, taking into account the Papacy's recommendation, began to form the laity into Catholic Associations like those in Europe at the end of the last century and at the beginning of the twentieth. Later, following the line of Pius X, they organised some Catholic Action groups. The purpose of these was to awaken the social conscience of the upper classes and to induce them,

under Church direction, to take paternalistic measures aimed at mitigating the material suffering of the masses so that social solidarity might be re-established. In some countries where workers' immigration did not take place and so anarco-syndicalism and socialism did not influence the first trade union movements, the first organizations among the workers were Catholic. For example, the first recognized trade union in Colombia in 1909 was organised by the clergy. Also the Pastoral Letter from Sebastiano Leme in 1916, often quoted as the first call for laity organization, was in agreement with the Papacy's views.

But it was the social tensions and the conflict in the Church-State relationship in the twenties and thirties which pushed the Vatican to devise a common strategy for Latin America and to organise Catholic Action groups. Pius XI wrote several letters to the Latin American episcopacy⁷ and ordered the nuncios to help local churches to organize Catholic Action and also to send important propaganda. One interesting case in the thirties is the several trips made by Miss De Hemptinne to South American Countries to give Catholic Action courses and to form the first National Organisation for Catholic Action Girls and Women. The Vatican also sent important theologians and pastoralists such as the Jesuit Paul Dabin.⁸

But perhaps the most interesting experience was the Catholic University Movement which flourished in a changing intellectual environment. With the "Generation of 1900" and the University Reform Movement that began at Córdoba, Argentina, in 1918, Latin American intellectuals joined in a humanistic and Latinoamericanist reaction against positivist and utilitarian concepts, as well as against North American imperialism. More and more they began to stress the higher human values, by which they meant cultural, moral, aesthetic and spiritual values. This reaction against positivism and capitalist materialism and this discovery of the Latin American Unity became popular largely among Catholics and for this reason some of the leaders of spiritual reaction began to return to the Catholic

Church. The Catholic students organized in Catholic Action groups in accordance with this proposal met in Mexico in 1931 with Vatican and Jesuit help and founded SÍDEC (Secretariado Iberoamericano de Estudiantes Católicos), whose aim was to diffuse the Church's social teaching as a political alternative for Latin American countries. Later in December 1934, thirty-four Latin American students met at the Colegio Pio Latinoamericano in Rome. The principal aim of this meeting was to make an action and organizative plan for the Confederación Iberoamericana de Estudiantes Católicos in order to form a real Catholic, intellectual, and leadership class throughout Iberoamerica.

Prominent Catholic leaders and intellectuals from Europe gave lectures on Church social teaching to this group during the Congress. At the end of the Congress Manuel Garretón and Eduardo Frei Montalva from Chile were elected President and General Secretary respectively, and the new organization made contact with Pax Romana, an international organization of students and intellectuals (MIEC, Movimiento Internacional de Estudiantes Católicos - and MII, Movimiento Internacional de Intelectuales Católicos).

The conservative political parties came to be viewed as the Church's parties, and their militant wings were furnished by these Catholic Action groups. In some countries they formed the corporatist forces like the A.I.B. (Acción Integralista Brasileira) in Brazil. In Chile the same Catholic Action leaders formed the Falange Nacional which later became the Christian Democratic Party influenced by J. Maritain and E. Mounier.

In 1939 under Roman instigation, the Latin American students met again in Lima. Obviously political debate was the focus of the meeting. They disagreed on which kind of political project to adopt. Some of them, like the Chileans, were Christian Democrats and others' proposals were corporatist. The Spanish Civil war had a great influence on the Latin

American political experience.

After this meeting some of the Latin American militants came to Washington for the World Pax Romana Congress. There they made contact with American and Canadian students.⁹

During the Congress the Second World War began. The only experience similar to that of JOC, was the Yocisme in Colombia. Even though the movements took hold among large parts of the peasantry and workers, the Colombian episcopacy killed the experience once it got out of their hands.¹⁰

In Latin America the student organization continued but former students became most active in politics and they founded many of the Christian Democratic Parties.¹¹ The first meeting of the Latin American Christian Democratic Parties was in Montevideo in 1949.

The war had a great influence on the international student organizations. The Belgian and French Catholic students took part in the resistance against Nazism; the Canadians and Americans also were antifascist, but the direction of Pax Romana was in the hands of the Germans and Spaniards and they organised the first meeting after the war in Spain. The other groups were in disagreement about politics and also about the pedagogic methods that they used. Pax Romana continued with the traditional method of congresses and study groups, and other groups, specially the Canadien Québécois and the American students from Notre Dame and Chicago directed by the Holy Cross fathers, were in line with specialized Catholic Action. Then they formed a new coordination, the JECI (Juventud Estudiantil Católica Internacional). The French students, with Claude Julien as director, coordinated the new experience. The Canadians and Americans supported them and they made contact with Latin American students who in turn had contacts with Pax Romana. Gerard Pelletier from

Canada made a trip throughout Latin America, making contact with the Catholic students' groups and the Holy Cross fathers who had arrived in Brazil and Cuba in 1942.¹² In San Pablo the Archbishop asked them to organize a JEC and JOC. Then they and some students who came from France and Canada, such as Fernand Cadieux, and some workers from Belgium, such as the worker Jacques Jerome, helped the Brazilian people to organize and diffuse specialised Catholic Action among all of the Brazilian groups of Catholic Action.¹³ At this time Helder Camara was named National Assistant for Catholic Action. He took the experience of workers and students and organized a national team formed by national leaders from JUC, JEC, JOC and later JAC. Showing this experience he proposed to Pope Pius XII that the CNBB should be formed, and later with Bishop Manuel Larrain from Chile, they proposed to organize CELAM.¹⁴

At the same time Pax Romana started a Latin American Secretariat in Fribourg, Switzerland and coordinated all the Latin American federations. During this time of the Cold War the Catholic students were in disagreement over the pedagogies used in the movements and also over politics.¹⁵ For Pax Romana leaders stopping communism was the number one problem; the JECI groups, even though they were anticommunist, were more worried about the social situation of the Latin American countries. During the 1950s Pax Romana organizations were frequently infiltrated and used by the CIA through the organizations COSEC and WAY. That was one of the reasons why North American organizations later broke off their relations with the Latin American federations. At the same time, the KGB supported the UIE. The Latin American student organizations were important to both sides because future political leaders were often formed here.¹⁶

III. FROM CATHOLIC ACTION TO LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Thus, after the Second World War there were two Latin American coordinations. One, along the lines of Pax Romana, was more politically conservative and more oriented toward a former Catholic elite. Its headquarters were in Fribourg, Switzerland, from 1952 until 1954, with Pax Romana's international secretariat. In 1954 the Latin American Secretariat moved to Chile and Pax Romana's group in Paraguay, SEDAC, published the B.I.D.I. (Boletín Iberoamericano de Información). In the '60s they moved to Medellín in Colombia. They had federations in almost all the Latin American countries. The other Latin American coordination was in relation with J.E.C.I. They worked with a pedagogy in small communities and with the Revisión de Vida, the JOC'S method. They were more open politically in regard to nationalism, populism, and they were anti-imperialist. The center of this coordination was Brazil with relations basically with the Southern Cone countries and Cuba.¹⁷

The militants (Pax Romana as well as J.E.C.I.) were influenced by such thinkers as Maritain, E. Mounier and Louis Lebreton. Maritain proposed an open view toward the modern world and asked for liberal pluralism and social concern. E. Mounier with his personalisme opened the way to the communitarian socialist perspective and prepared the way for the dialogue between Marxism and Christianity, and Lebreton deepened the social concern for the economic and political dependence of the Third World.

The effort of being faithful to the Gospel in the Latin American reality called many militants to political action because Catholic Action was in a relation of ecclesiastical dependence with ecclesiastical authority, and also because many of the European theologians such as I. Congar and even Pius XII argued for a political commitment from the laity, with responsibility and free from dependence on any Church authority. They spoke about the

independence of the temporal order.¹⁸ Thus they understood that Catholic Action was an organization whose aims, among other things, were to help the laity be committed to the temporal order.

At the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s they were very strong in student organizations. At that time the university was seen as the fundamental basis of society. It was at that time the repository of the truth, the place providing the opportunity for investigative work and for the direction of solutions to problems. ("Que la Universidad tiene un papel fundamental dentro de la sociedad. Ella es la depositaria de la verdad, aportando a través de investigaciones y planificación una orientación hacia la solución de los problemas.")¹⁹

Generally speaking in the '60s when a Latin American student arrived at the University he was expected to participate in trade union life and then, through this activity, he would become more sensitive on political, social and economic situations in general. Later on the student would tend to become more politically committed.

Vatican II, especially the encyclicals *Lumen Gentium*, nov. 21, '64, *Gaudium et Spes* from 1965, *Mater et Magistra* from 1961, *Pacem in Terris* and *Populorum Progressio*, from 1967 and the Third World Bishop's message from August 1967, gave a teaching that was important not only for theological and pastoral renewal but especially because it recognized the pastoral experiences that the Latin American laity had been developing in these latter years, with an open view and a new world comprehension unknown before in the Church.

At the same time the European theologians such as Schillebeeckx, Rahner, Metz, Moltman, and Bultman were well known by Catholic Action's

dirigents. That may be appreciated in the report of the various National and Latin American meetings and in the movement's publications.²⁰

The Latin American reading of the authors quoted above, and the social and political situation in the '60s, especially the Cuban revolution and the difficulties of some Latin American Christian Democratic parties in power, and the beginning of authoritarianism, demanded from the Catholic Action militants a deep political commitment.

Some of them, at this time, joined the Christian Democratic parties, but very soon they became quite critical of these parties, because when the Christian Democrats were in power they did not resolve the structural problems in Latin America. Really, formal democracy in Latin America was always weak, because the political life of the time did not permit such a possibility. The coup d'état with the help of the American government was the normal situation. Some militants formed new political parties as Mapu in Chile, Acción Popular in Brazil, Mapu in Uruguay. Others entered even more radical political parties or went the way of the guerrilla movements. (Camilo Torres in Colombia, who was a student chaplain, for example. He was not the first nor the only Christian to join the guerrilla movement). In general the young people wanted to build a new social and economic order with social justice, political independence and cultural autonomy.²¹

If some militants joined the political parties, others were influenced by the Brazilian experience in the MEB (Movimento de Educação de Base).²² They argued that "we must go to the poor". They were inspired by the Freire proposal, Education for Liberation, and Hernani Fiori's reflections on the same subject.

Also, at the same time, the Catholic Action militants as well other Christians were influenced by the theory of marginalization. They began a

process of consciousness raising, conceived as a collective effort to achieve the common good and a better life-style for the whole of society. They did a lot of work in consciousness raising, catechesis, education, and sometimes political organizations, in the popular areas in almost all the Latin American countries .

At the same time as these projects deepened, the militants began to have a better grasp of the popular reality. The militants as well as the priests who worked in these projects were surprised by the popular religiosity. The recognition of the popular religiosity became one of the most important concerns in theological reflection.²³ Also the populist experience in Argentina where many workers, students, peasants and also many priests and monks and nuns joined Peronism, influenced theological reflection. The experience of *Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo*, from Argentina, *Onix* (priest's group) from Peru, *Golconda* from Colombia, revealed new problems in pastoral works in the Latin American reality and in the life of the priests.

A great discussion began in the movement between "vanguardistas" (those who went the guerrilla's way) and "populistas" (those who wanted a process of consciousness raising),²⁴ even if they were in agreement that the Christian must be committed to the poorest of the Continent. Generally speaking we can say that the changing social, political and economic attitudes inherent in the concept of consciousness raising originate in the changing emphasis in theological reflection in the Latin American Catholic Action's Movements and especially among the "asesores" (the priests of the movements, some of them later very well known as Liberation Theologians such as G. Gutierrez, J. L. Segundo), whose aims were to help the militants in reflection in the light of the Faith.

Two other aspects are important to remember: 1) This theological and pastoral perspective was also taken by Protestant students and laymen's Protestant organizations which had similar radicalization. Among them also was born a liberation theology and a new concept of ecumenism.²⁵ 2) In all this there was also a change in the position of women in the Church, more in the practice than in the theoretical position. We cannot find any document on the situation of women or the relation between men and women but in many Latin American countries women were the national presidents of the movements and they also took part in the Latin American coordination. Indeed the first Latin American in the International Secretariat of Pax Romana in 1952 was a woman, Maria de Lourdes Figueredo.

At this time almost all national groups were aligned with Pax Romana and J.E.C.I. In general they used the Revision of Life²⁶ as their method. They decided to put aside their anterior differences and begin a new experience through the Latin American Secretariat MIEC (Pax Romana) J.E.C.I. In 1967 this settled in Montevideo with Luis Meyer from Paraguay as Pax Romana Latin American Secretary and Louciano Dourado from Brazil as J.E.C.I. Latin American Secretary, and the fathers Bosco Salvia and Uberfil Monzon as Latin American "asesores". The new Secretariat (S.L.A. Secretariado Latino Americano) began an intense effort of reflections, coordination and publications.

They continued with both experiences through conferences, workshops and the revision of life, the J.O.C.'s method. As we explained before, in this evangelization experience concern for the religious formation of young people could not be separated from the reality of their families, studies, work and social situation. The method demanded that the reality in which they must live their own faith be better understood. To this end they made use of the social sciences and Marxism. The "Teoria de la dependencia," a Third World look at the Third World and especially Latin American history,

was the most common approach used to understand the economic and social reality.

It was also the time of the pacific coexistence and the dialogue between Marxism and Christianity. Thus, the use of Marxism was very common even among the European Catholic authors as well as in all the analysis of the Latin American reality done by the scholars in the universities. Furthermore, the militants and Catholics in general were very committed to political parties and, Marxist or not, they knew all about Marxism.

In accordance with the analysis done in the Revision of Life, and their conclusions, the militants tried to change personally; over all they were committed to transforming the social reality at the same time that they preached the Gospel.

This pastoral perspective was really new and missionary. It contrasted with the defensive and conservative experience born in the nineteenth century and (alimento) all the conservative and integrist proposals in the Church in the twentieth century. The Revision of Life experience was the base of the theological pastoral renovation which prepared the way for Vatican II and all the transformation in the Latin American Church in the last twenty five years.

As we also explained before, the specialized Catholic Action movements formed small communities among students, workers and peasants. In these small communities they used the Revision of Life.

Thus this experience later influenced the bishops when, in accord with Vatican II and the Medellín Bishops' meeting in 1968, they organized their dioceses in the manner of pastoral de conjunto and the ecclesial basic communities. Many militants helped them, joined the parishes and, in many

dioceses, former Catholic Action dirigents coordinated this new experience with bishops and priests. The militants and especially the former "asesores", helped with their experience to form small basic communities and practice the Revision of Life. More and more their commitment to the poor deepened. The reflection gained through the Revision of Life in the communities prepared the way of Liberation Theology. We can even say that the first Liberation Theology was a systematization of this Christian experience.

To put together the reflections on the militants' praxis done by them and among them was one of the most important tasks undertaken by the Latin American secretariat. In order to do this they had national, regional and Latin American meetings. They had the help of the "asesores". In general these were the priests whose pastoral works served the student communities. We can quote the names Gustavo Gutierrez from Peru, Gilberto Gimenez from Paraguay, Luis de Sena and Henrique Pereira Neto from Brazil, Buenaventura Pelegri and, earlier, Camilo Torres, from Colombia, Pablo Fontaine from Chile, Pablo Dabezies, and, earlier, Juan Luis Segundo from Uruguay. Some scholars also participated in the workshops and meetings. They were called "los expertos". Sometimes they were former Catholic Action militants such as Luis Alberto Gomez de Souza, Javier Iguinez, Enrique Dussel, or they were in relation with the movements through different national experiences -- Hernani Fiori and Paulo Freire, for example.

The publications such as Servicio de Documentación, with differing analyses of the political, economic, social, cultural and religious situations, pastoral experience, theological reflection, written by militants, experts, and "asesores", helped the militants and other Christians to find the sense of being Christian in Latin America. For example, Gustavo Gutierrez, Lucio Gera, Hugo Asman, Ronaldo Munoz wrote the first outlines of their theologies in the Servicio de Documentación.²⁷ Likewise an

important document in the life of the Church was the report of the first meeting of Comunidades de Base in Victoria, Brazil written by Carlos Mesters, and published by the Secretariat as "Una Iglesia que nace del Pueblo".²⁸

Another publication was *Spes*, the movement's bulletin, with further analyses of the news and experiences of the militants and national groups, or the experiences of other groups as JOC or Mijarc.

But it was their magazine *Vispera* that most influenced the Church's life. Its Comité de Redacción was formed by (among others) Hector Borrat, Alberto Methol Ferre (today CELAM staff), Guzman Carriquiri (today a member of the Concilium dei Laicis in the Vatican), José Luis Rodriguez (later in Justicia y Paz), Lucio Gera, Cesar Aguiar, Luis Carriquiri, Brian Palmer and Carlos Urán. In each country militants and "asesores" wrote articles and "informes" for each issue.

At the same time other groups in the Church (for example religious and priests' organizations) became interested in the same problems, especially during the preparation and the process for the Medellín Conference of bishops in 1968. Throughout this process the Servicio de Documentación and *Vispera* were well appreciated as were the student militants like the progressistas in the Church. The Secretariat and its Centro de Documentación became real information centers for all Latin American Christians, both Catholic and Protestant. The publications became known in the United State and in Europe. It is important to say that the Latin American experience was a big influence on all the movements of the world, in their international coordinations.

The ecclesial experience grew but the political and social commitment deepened and grew faster.

Between 1968 and 1973 there were hard social struggles and political repression in almost all Latin American countries. These years were also times of martyrdom there. Many laymen and laywomen, monks and nuns, priests and even bishops were killed because of their commitment to the poor. Many others learned the ways of prison or exile. Even the Secretariat was expelled from Uruguay because of the coup d'état in 1973 and moved to Lima in Peru where it is now.

This whole situation took the Church by surprise. The "asesores" in the Catholic Action movements began a big effort of reflection in order to form their groups and to help them. It was in this confused, hard, distressing and hopeful time and context that Liberation Theology was born. Thus we can say that Liberation Theology is a systematization of the different Christian practices in all Latin American countries. It is over all a reflection in the light of faith on the social, political and economic realities in which Christians must live in Latin America.

To understand and interpret this reality, Christians have borrowed from many social sciences but Liberation Theology is much more complex. European theology basically attempted to dialogue with non-Christian philosophies and ideologies and either tried to reconcile philosophy and science with the dogma or simply to refute them. In Latin America, theology grew in contact with the people and their experience and therefore did not try to dialogue with social science or philosophy. Liberation Theology is a reflection on Latin American reality. It is a dialogue with reality: it came from the urgent necessity for Christians to transform the social reality of the poor of the continent. Thus the methodology of liberation theology is seen to be quite different from traditional theological methodology.

That is the reason why there are different Liberation Theologies. In Brazil we have above all a "Teologia del Cautiverio" because of the political

situation after the coup d'état in 1964. In Argentina the experience of Peronism and populism influenced theologians such as Lucio Gera. The first Liberation Theology from Gustavo Gutierrez was quite influenced by the political commitment of Christians in Peru and the Southern Cone at the end of the '60s. In Central America the political experiences of el Salvador and Nicaragua give another theological reflection.

One of the problems that we must explain is that in the '70s, with the political repression and the transformation in the Church (especially in CELAM's direction), the students', workers' and peasants' Catholic Action organizations suffered greatly. Also the militants realised that there were compromises between the Church and the powerful on many occasions. Liberation Theology appeared very late for some of them and the crisis in the movement was very strong. Nevertheless the experience continued in different ways and those who had before been part of Catholic Action as militants, the "asesores" and experts, in many cases are now joining the popular organizations and continue to be faithful to the Gospel and to the poor.

Several times Catholic Action has been criticized on the assumption that it is composed of minorities and therefore an elite. Often those who use this criticism make a sociological reduction: giving sociological meaning to theological reality. They forget that in the history of the Church there have been many small minorities who interpreted prophetically the global history and the will of God to the larger community. The critics do not seem to be aware of the Latin American Church context in which the Catholic Action movements took place. From its beginnings the movement has always been aware of the Latin American political realities and has advocated social transformation. These prophetic minorities were able to interpret the Latin American realities to the whole Church community. It is that context that gave birth to Liberation Theology, Basic Christian Communities, Medellin and all the pastoral experiences of the Latin American Church in the last twenty years.

Endnotes

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- 2 R. AUBERT, op.cit. Part I, Chap 8, "The Beginings of Social Catholicism", pp. 144-145.
- 3 There is a large bibliography on the Church at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. A first impression may be gained from R. AUBERT, Le Christianisme social, Moscow, 1970 (Report presented at the Thirteenth International Congress of Historical Sciences) and R. AUBERT, Le Pontificat de Pie IX (vol XXI of Histoire de l'Eglise, E. Fliche et V. Martin), 2nd ed., Paris, 1963.

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- 5 On Catholic Associations and Catholic Action see:

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- 10 A. M. BIDEGAIN DE URAN, Iglesia, Pueblo y Política: Un caso de Conflicto de Intereses Colombia 1930 - 1955, (Bogotá, 1985).

- 11 R. POCHON, Pax Romana 1921-1961, Fribourg, Switzerland, 1961.

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- 13 O. BEOZZO, Les mouvements des Universitaires Catholiques au Brasil, Mémoire en Sociologie, Sect.II, Chap. I, p. 47, Louvain, 1968.

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- 16 T. KERSTIENS. Interview May 20, 1976, Brussels.

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T. Kerstiens, E. Fracchia and M. de L. Figueredo were Pax Romana's international leaders in the 1950s.

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- 19 J. L. SEGUNDO, La política, el Cambio social y la universidad, B.I.D.I. mayo junio 1962, pp. 14-26.
- 20 See Servicio de documentación Serie I, Green Collection Example: The Documento 29 Teología política. Comments on J. B. Metz's theology Dic. 1968. Also the seminar organized in the M.C.U. and published by the Servicio de documentación Serie I, Documentos 26 y 27. Over all, the better examples are in the readings done by the militants during seminars, workshops, and meetings. For example, Session de Estudios del M.I.E.C. From January 23 to February 10, in Montevideo 1967 or "Seminario de Estudios," Lima, August 1973. Pax Romana Archives.
- 21 The B.I.D.I (Boletín Iberoamericano de Información) from Pax Romana may be a good presentation of this evolution in the Movements's thought.
- 22 M.E.B. Movimento de Educação de Base is a church-sponsored government-financed organization which from early 1961 has been active in the rural areas of Brazil's less developed states. The earliest emphasis in its educational programs, which are transmitted by radio, was on literacy training and various forms of peasant self improvement. Gradually it became more interested in the social structure which had led to and perpetuated the peasant's plight, and its main thrust came to be specifically directed to changing that structure. E. de KADT Catholic Radicals in Brazil, London - New York 1970, p. 2.

- 23 The collection of Servicio de Documentación Serie I is a good example of the thought evolution of the militants.
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- J. COMBLIN, La Iglesia y la Ideología de la Seguridad Nacional, Documento 19, December, 1976.
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