PREFACE

While contemporary Catholic Church is a problem for politics in Latin America, the latter presents no less problem for the Church. Catholicism has been enmeshed in Latin American politics from the days of the conquest of Americas by Spain and Portugal. The conquest itself was the result of joint efforts by the Church and State. They have depended on and influenced each other for centuries. Levine writes:

From the beginning the Church as an institution depended on the State, and, in turn, its symbols, beliefs, practices, and persons have often helped to sanctify the existing social and political order. Society and religion provided mutually reinforcing symbolic and institutional structures, their common emphasis on hierarchy, authority and obedience gradually blending into a seamless whole. ¹

The role of the Church in politics was for long taken for granted by observers of Latin America so much so that it was assumed that there was nothing to write about it aside from circumstantial details. The Church was acknowledged by all as the bastion of conservatism in politics and pillar of traditional order. Drekonja echoed the opinion of other observers when he wrote: "The Church in Latin America stood to this time as the most reliable support of the traditional order, sanctifying its structures, thus fortifying the establishment against change". ²

But this assumption has been demolished by recent developments in the Church in Latin America. In the years after the Second World War there were signs of changes taking place in the Church. Developments in the Church particularly after 1960 have attracted the attention of observers of Latin America. The Rand study of Latin America acknowledged that while historically the Church had been a major pillar of conservatism in Latin America it was undoubtedly changing.\(^3\) The Rockefeller Report on the quality of life in America shared this perception about the changes taking place in the Catholic Church in Latin America and pointed out its potential for social and political change.\(^4\)

Most observers of Latin America share the perception of the Rockefeller Report. Writers such as Vallier, Smith and Turner argue that the Church is a dynamic force for social and political changes in Latin America.\(^5\) de Kadt acknowledges the changes taking place in the Church but maintains that it cannot contribute to change in society.\(^6\) There are also a few writers like Mutchler and Vekemans who contend that the Church is a serious obstacle to social and...


political change. Such diverse perceptions are possible because there are any number of contesting groups in the contemporary Latin American Church that possess an array of strategies for social and political action. Many writers attempt to explain and judge the entire range of groups and points of view from a single developmental paradigm or framework of interpretation.

The changes that have already taken place and are still taking place in the Church have a direct bearing on its relation to politics. In the past the relation between Church and State was in terms of two powers, spiritual and temporal. Conflict arose out of tussle for supremacy. In the present the relation is in terms of two societies which not only co-exist but are also co-extensive and which necessarily interfere with each other at many points affecting the entire gamut of social relationships. The weight and influence of the Church as a social reality, and inversely, the influence of the civil society on this social reality of the Church is being felt at many more points than in the past.

Conflict between Church and State is nothing new in Latin America. But these conflicts in the past were of limited nature compared to the larger conflicts that have already taken

---

shape or are taking shape in contemporary Latin America. The earlier conflicts related to the Church's privileges and wealth in general and such specific issues as secularization and control of education, regulation of marriage, divorce etc. But the present conflicts are related to the more fundamental issue of the understanding of the nature of Church itself and its relation to the world. The problem of relation of Church to politics revolves round the basic question of social change. The question is no more simply Church versus politics but rather the way in which Catholics see the meaning of their faith in terms of action in the world. As Levine writes: "There are two questions here: First, does faith have anything to say to politics or is it something restricted to Churchly practices and places; and, second, how does a religious person go about orienting him or herself in the world"?8

Vallier, Floridi and Steifold, and many others, posit this question in the traditional way, in terms of Church vs politics, and fall back too easily on the conventional wisdom of Western sociology according to which institutions should be functionally specific and distinct. By this logic preachers should preach while politicians should tend to politics; joining of these two roles would be dysfunctional.9

This neat division of the spiritual and the temporal is not acceptable to many Catholic thinkers of Latin America today.

---


9 Vallier, n.5.
They reject it as hypocritical and unrealistic because often enough abstention from politics amounts to support for the status quo, and therefore, political action in favour of the established order. They further argue that situation of poverty and oppression in contemporary Latin America is such that political action for their elimination becomes a fundamentally necessary element of Christian faith and not merely a matter of personal choice open to believers nor of providing a better environment for the diffusion of Christian faith. Writers like Vekemans start with these assumptions but in the final analysis fall back on the wisdom of traditional distinction of roles and functions and argue that politics should be left to laity, with the clergy not directly involved in political actions. The Church should assume no more than a role of generalized orientation. 10

This view is challenged by a number of contemporary Latin American theologians and social thinkers. They argue that in the present Latin American context political action in favour of profound social transformation is a necessary concomitant, even constituent of Christian faith of both the laity and the clergy. They also propose that Christians act in alliance with any group (Marxists included) seeking change. 11

10 Roger Vekemans, Caesar and God (New York, 1972); Agonia o Resurgimiento? (Bogota, 1972).

While the nuances of the debate are complex, the issue boils down to a choice between change which entails risk, or status quo, which means conformism. In the political and economic context of Latin America the former implies the use, and the risk, of the Church's institutional power to change unjust social and economic structures. The latter demands an accommodation, albeit critical, with the military regimes and rich elites which govern the majority of the Latin American countries.

Either way it is a gamble. Recent experience has shown that when the Church is too critical of the existing powers, it invites persecution of its representatives and the loss of such institutional structures as schools and radio stations on which much of its traditional power has rested and through which it communicates with the people. But if it is not sufficiently critical, the Church risks losing the mass of the people. For the first time in years, the Church is experiencing a renaissance in the life and activities of the Church, but this revival is closely related to Church's commitment to social justice.

Part of the problem in choosing between prophetic and traditional Church is that it calls into question a number of cherished beliefs, such as the ideal of a Church united in harmony that can speak to and for all people. This ideal denies the existence of class conflict, although the reality in Latin America is quite different. The difficulty in acknowledging that reality is that it immediately makes neutrality impossible--the Church either makes a critical position in favour of the poor, or silently supports the status quo.
The Latin American Church has reached the cross-roads. It is faced with the problem of choosing the right path. The path it chooses is important not only for Latin America but also for the entire Catholic world because as of now, the Latin Americans constitute nearly half the total Catholic population in the world. It is important for the Christian West and the Third World because Latin America forms the Christian sector of the Third World and the underdeveloped sector of the Christian West.

One of the premises underlying this study is that the Catholic Church is an integral element of the social myth operative in Latin America because of its tradition and its constant institutional presence. Its customs and precepts, its dogma and teachings have moulded and controlled Latin American culture and thought patterns, though with differing degrees of success, throughout its five centuries of existence. As mother and teacher it has influenced the life-style and education of millions. As interpreter and enforcer of moral precepts it has affected decision-making on any number of political and social issues. As an organization its tentacles stretch out farther among the mass of people than any other organization. In addition to its formal parish structures, it maintains control or influence over schools, family groups, community centres, mass media, etc., and affects the entire gamut of human activity - worship, education, culture, recreation, health, community organization, collective bargaining, politics etc. The range of influence extends far beyond the pale of "practicing Catholics". Hence, what transpires in the Church has a great portent for the entire society in Latin America.
It must, however, be noted that Latin America is a vast continent rich in variations from country to country and even within the same country. The same is true of the Church there. Though all the countries share the same general heritage of Catholicism the Church in each country historically evolved, to a large extent, independently of each other. Thus, for historical reasons there are variations in attitudes and postures of the Church from one country to another.

Institutionally the Church in each country is divided into archdioceses and dioceses. Until recent times, aside from a rather loose set of provincial structures administered by the archbishop, dioceses were isolated from each other. Each bishop reported directly to the Pope or for specific matters to the curia offices in the Vatican bureaucracy. The bishop of the metropolitan city in each nation was generally regarded as the primate of the nation, a first among equals, facilitating Church-State relations. But, he headed no national structure and exercised no authority over the other bishops of the nation. It is only recently that National Conferences of Bishops have been established and even more recently that the Church in Latin America has been organized regionally and on a Latin American basis. Interaction among the Churches in various nations, common plans and strategies etc. are all of recent origin. Today the Latin American Bishops' Conference with its central secretariat in Bogota, Colombia and various departments in various countries act on behalf of the entire Latin American Church. All the same each National Conference and each bishop is
free to act independently, if he so desires, within the unity of the universal Catholic Church.

The diocese is subdivided into parishes under the charge of parish priests who are effectively controlled by the bishop. Still, the attitude of priests, especially in relation to change, does not necessarily coincide with that of the bishop.

A major problem in studying an institution such as the Church is deciding which system level to use as the basis of analysis. Some scholars utilize the parish as the unit of analysis, others argue for the use of dioceses, others concentrate on the national churches, and still others on the Latin American Church as a whole. There can be arguments for and against choosing any of these system levels.

This study views the Church on the Latin American level for the purpose of discovering and analysing the emergence and co-existence in the Church of divergent and at times directly opposed tendencies, points of view and sectors in relation to politics in the context of social change. There are obvious limitations in a macro or panoramic approach such as this, all the more because of lack of uniform behaviour in the Church as well as in politics in all the countries of Latin America.

This study is partly historical and partly descriptive and analytical. An effort is made to describe the Church as it historically evolved in Latin America analysing and emphasizing the forces and events that have had significant impact on the Church and have contributed to the transformation it has already undergone or is still undergoing. Two landmarks in the history
of contemporary Latin America are the Second and Third General Conferences of the Latin American Bishops held in 1968 and 1979 respectively. Theology of liberation and Basic Christian Communities are novel and significant experiences and are typically Latin American. Christians for Socialism is one of the many movements of the Catholic left and a somewhat representative type. The Doctrine of National Security as practiced in many Latin American countries is considered a typical ideology of the Catholic right. Hence these have received considerable attention in the study.

In the analysis and description of the said events and movements attention is generally focussed on the elites at all levels in the Church, i.e., bishops, priests and laity. An attempt to categorize and describe them as they co-exist in the contemporary Latin American Church forms the final part of this study.

There are obvious limitations for any one to undertake a study of the rapidly evolving Catholic Church in Latin America from a country as far away as India. There is very little literature on the theme in India. Events taking place in that far away part of the world receive scant attention in the Indian media. These limitations were overcome to some extent, with my very brief field trip to Latin America financed by Jawaharlal Nehru University. I express my gratitude to the concerned authorities of the University for the same.

There are a number of persons and institutions that have helped me in my research and study. The person I am most indebted to is Dr. R. Narayanan, Head of Latin American Studies Division, School of International Studies, and my supervisor for his scholarly interest, painstaking guidance
support and encouragement at every stage. I express my gratitude to Professor M.S. Venkataramani, the Chairman of the Centre for American and West European Studies, for his encouragement and support, to Professor Francois Houtart, Chairman of the Centre for Socio-religious Research, Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium, with whom I have had prolonged and fruitful discussions and who guided me to many documentation centres in Europe and Latin America, to Professor Harold Eugene Davis, Latin American Studies Division, The American University, Washington D.C., who showed a keen interest in my research theme and introduced me to several Latin American scholars, and to those elites of Latin America with whom I have had interviews and enlightening discussions. I am also grateful to the many friends who helped me by typing and proof-reading the drafts and the final form of this thesis.

I express my thanks to the authorities of libraries of the following institutions and documentation centres for permission to consult materials available there: Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; Vidyajyoti, New Delhi; Jhanadeepa, Pune; Socio-Religious Research Centre, Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium; American University, Washington D.C.; Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS), University of Texas, Austin; El Colegio de Mexico, Mexico D.F.; Centre Lebret, Paris; Laisons Internationales, Paris; International Information and Documentation (IDOC International), Rome; Smithsonian Institute, Washington D.C.; Latin American Documentation Centre (LADOC), Washington D.C.; National Centre for Social Communication (CENCOS), Mexico, D.F.; Centre for Ecumenical Studies (CEE), Mexico, D.F.; Centre for Regional Information and
Studies (CRIE), Mexico, D.F.; Centre of Information and Documentation (CIDOC), Cuernavaca, Mexico; Latin American Centre for Ecumenical Service and Documentation (SELADOC) San Jose, Costa Rica; Secretariat of Latin American Bishops' Council (CELAM), Bogota, Colombia; Centre of Studies for the Development and Integration of Latin America (CEDIAL), Bogota, Colombia; Centre for Studies and Publications (CEP), Lima, Peru.

31 March 1983.

(Kuriakose K.C.)